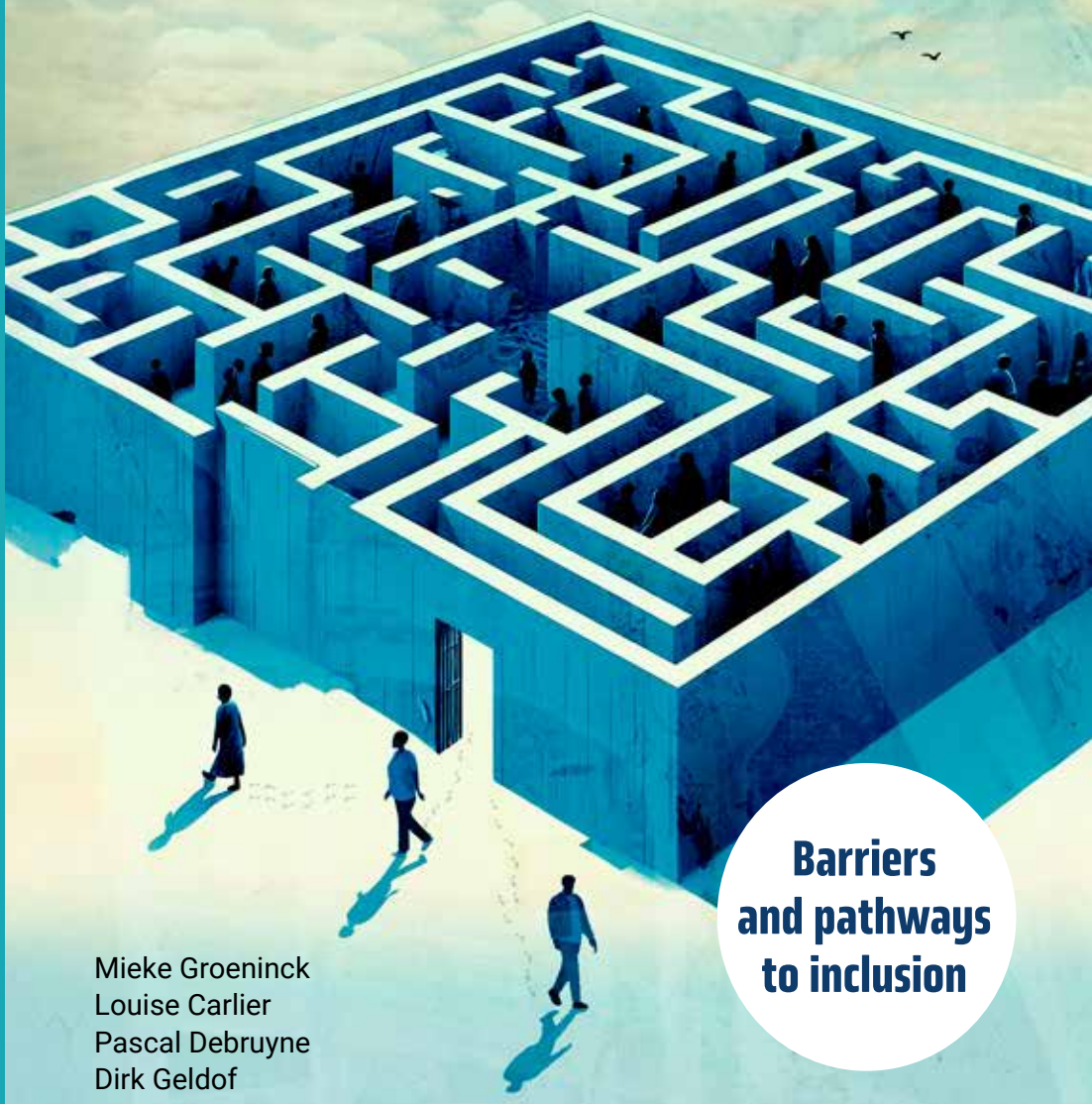
REFUGEE FAMILIES AFTER RECOGNITION



Barriers and pathways to inclusion

Mieke Groeninck
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REFUGEE FAMILIES AFTER RECOGNITION: INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

Once asylum seekers receive international protection in Belgium, they enter an intense period of rapid change. They are expected to leave the reception centre and find housing within a maximum of two months (in principle extendable by only one month, except in exceptional cases), to register in the municipality, start their civic integration programme, enrol their children in school, open a bank account, and, more generally, find out how to access the relevant public services. In addition, they need to learn the language, attend social orientation courses, follow a counselling programme to help them find work and, in Flanders, participate in a programme that fosters their social network. For the refugee families themselves, the priority is often finding housing[1] and starting to work on family reunification.[2] Due to the difficulty of finding decent, affordable housing, many refugee families move house multiple times after their recognition, which means that many of these tasks need to be done all over again, as quickly as possible. The contrast could not be much starker between these demands and the excruciatingly slow process of awaiting a decision on their asylum application.

It is astonishing that refugee families – which in this book we understand as families in which at least one person has received international protection, either as a recognised refugee or via humanitarian protection [in Dutch: subsidiaire bescherming] – receive very little support in these challenging periods of transition, just when they need it most. Public services provide little practical guidance in finding housing or starting family reunification. There is no integral case management.[3] Instead, refugee families find themselves caught between various levels of policies and different service providers, each of which have their own way of working and which, at times, work towards contradictory goals. While some policy domains try to improve newcomers' social participation (e.g. equal opportunities), others try to exclude them as long as possible from the welfare state (e.g. housing). The current Federal government agreement (2024-2029) has announced plans to extend this exclusion even further: people with humanitarian protection status in particular are at risk of long-term exclusion from a wide range of social rights.[4]

In addition, refugee families encounter major discrepancies in the quality of service and level of expertise within public service providers, between providers in the same area, and even more so between municipalities with varying local social policies. The universal support, which they should, in principle, have access to, is hidden in a maze in which even the country's most privileged citizens struggle to find their way.

In this book, we invite you to follow in the footsteps of refugee families, and enter the labyrinth of Belgian reception and integration policies. For a period of four years, an interdisciplinary team of researchers – working under the umbrella of the REFUFAM consortium – listened to the experiences of refugee families and other experts. We conducted interviews and focus groups with 98 people from refugee families, and with 99 social workers, local policy-makers, volunteers and other professionals. One of our researchers also accompanied three refugee families as a buddy through part of their journey. Our goal was simple: to better understand what it means for refugee families to live and move within the maze that policy-makers call 'integration'.

In other publications, we describe in detail how this maze is the result of an incoherent ensemble of policies in different domains and at different levels, and why 'integration' policies seem to fall short of achieving some of their major goals. In ten Policy Briefs, we put forward more than 100 recommendations on how policies and public services could be organised in a way that is both more efficient and effective.[5] In this book, however, we highlight the experiences of the refugee families themselves. What does it mean to enter this labyrinth of Belgian policies and service providers? How do refugee families negotiate access to housing, education and work? And how does this affect their sense of well-being and belonging?

1.1 ON THE WORDS WE (DO NOT) USE

In this book, we are not using 'integration' as our starting point. This may come as a surprise, as this is the most common approach, both in public and in academic debates, to describing the period that follows immediately after refugee families receive international protection. There are sound reasons behind this decision, and to understand what this book is really all about, it is worth delving into them.

When academics define 'integration', they typically think of it as a two-way process in which both newcomers and the host society undergo a process of mutual transformation.[6] In practice, however, most empirical research on integration tends to monitor the 'performances' and 'beliefs' of specific groups of newcomers – i.e. those hailing from the Global South – based on a number of formal indicators: employment levels, language proficiency, success in passing civic integration tests, educational achievements, and their cultural norms and values (e.g. views on the relationship between the state and religion, or on gender equality). In other words, as soon as integration is effectively used in policy-oriented

research, its meaning shifts from a two-way process into a unilateral one, and its gaze is narrowed to the actions and beliefs of only one set of people.

This shift is noteworthy because 'integration' originally emerged as a progressive ideal that was inspired by the American model of a nation built on immigration and diversity – what Adrian Favell describes as the paradigmatic 'integration nation'.[7] In this context, 'integration' aimed to counter the policies of racialised 'segregation'. It symbolised a modern concept that would embrace diversity once and for all.

Over the past two or three decades, however, integration has come to be used as a synonym for the one-sided assimilation of a specific group of newcomers into the host society. This reflects a general trend in West-European policies, as they moved away from models of multiculturalism, minority rights and republicanism, and turned towards neoliberal and neo-communitarian ideas.[8] It is the newcomers themselves who are almost exclusively responsible for 'integrating', and are expected to become financially self-sufficient (i.e. generate their own income instead of relying on social benefits) and to formally prove their cultural 'assimilation' (i.e. to have internalised the norms, values and language of the host society).[9]

In this context, the word 'integration' has several implications. Firstly, it renders invisible the role that the host society plays, both in terms of its policies and in terms of the structural features of its labour market and educational system, for instance.[10] As an example, in a lot of policy-oriented research, newcomers' achievements on the labour market are typically compared to the benchmark of a supposedly homogenous population of established citizens, while the labour market's flexibility and acceptance of newcomers (e.g. due to formal language requirements or the accreditation of foreign educational degrees) typically remain unexplored.

Secondly, framing the 'problem' as one of 'integration' obfuscates the question of who needs to integrate and why. On the one hand, there is a widespread assumption that only certain groups of newcomers need to 'integrate'. While, for instance, white American citizens are free from such expectations, the opposite applies to non-European immigrants from the Global South. On the other hand, 'integration' usually portrays host societies as homogeneous entities in which the average of the established population (e.g. in terms of employment levels) and the dominant cultural beliefs are conceived as an undisputed norm. This contrasts starkly with the reality of superdiversity both within and beyond the major cities.[11]

Thirdly, any failure to 'integrate' is usually ascribed to newcomers' lack of economic independence, knowledge and skills. This diverts attention from the structural inequalities and systemic racism that is still at play in West-European states. The image that emerges is not one in which the process of 'integration' leads to a society where newcomers and long-term residents live together in relative harmony, but rather the opposite: it projects a society in which the newcomers themselves are seen as a problem that needs to be fixed. If the mere presence of newcomers is construed as the main problem, their efforts are bound to be in vain. Hence it makes perfect sense that in recent years, increasing numbers of children and grandchildren of immigrants have raised the question: when will they, if ever, be considered 'integrated' enough?

Criticism of the concept of 'integration' – and the policy-oriented research conducted with it – has increasingly gained traction.[12] In the REFUFAM project, we tried to take a different approach. Rather than monitoring the performances and beliefs of newcomers, which would then be explained through their individual characteristics (such as nationality, class, gender and educational level), we set out to examine the substantive effects policies have on the lives of refugee families, which we then traced back to the choices that were made by local, regional and Federal policy-makers.

Translating such a research strategy into clear concepts is always a challenge. Every choice of words has its flaws and drawbacks. Yet some words may help us to adopt a different perspective. In this book, we chose to use 'inclusion pathways' – occasionally shortened to 'social inclusion' or 'inclusion'. This refers to the trajectories through which refugee families try to find access to decent housing, long-term work, education, well-being and social connection.

The shift is subtle but substantial: rather than measuring the performance and assessing the beliefs of refugee families, we examine the obstacles they encounter in their search for housing, education, work, and social connection. In contrast to how 'integration' is often perceived, there is very little that is 'straight' or 'predictable' about these pathways. The families we spoke to often described the time immediately after their recognition as strewn with multiple detours, interruptions and breakthroughs. Sometimes they are impeded, and sometimes they need to slow down and catch their breath.

As mentioned above, these inclusion pathways need to be perceived against the broader backdrop of policies and public services. In the REFUFAM project, we focus on gaps in policies and in support. *Policy gaps* are located between the objectives of formal integration policies and the reality that refugee families are faced with in trying to find work, housing, education and access to society at large.

While policies, for instance, may prioritise newcomers' financial self-sufficiency, the combination of factors, such as the narrow focus on quickly finding any work at all, given the strict language requirements in the labour market, in reality leads to a vicious cycle of precarious employment and unemployment.[13] Policy gaps such as these are the main subject of our Policy Briefs.

In this book, we focus primarily on gaps in support: the lack of integral and transversal guidance at crucial stages in refugee families' integration trajectories. 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 well and feel good at school, there are hardly any policies that aim to provide even temporary housing to refugee families after their recognition. In this book, we examine the effects such a lack of transversal support have on refugee families themselves, and how it obstructs their inclusion pathways.

Lastly, REFUFAM decided to focus on refugee families as a specific group of newcomers. Again, this was a conscious choice. By focusing on *families*, we wanted to gain a better understanding of the specific challenges parents and children are facing, and how the barriers to their inclusion affect the well-being of different family members. This also helped us to approach refugees and their family members from the perspective of a social role that matters to them. This contrasts with most policy-oriented research, which tends to measure and monitor the performances and beliefs of newcomers as an aggregated group level that is not necessarily meaningful to newcomers themselves (i.e. as members of a certain nationality, ethnicity, class or gender).

By focusing on *refugees*, we sought to identify gaps in support and policies that are encountered by a wider group of newcomers – and, to some extent, established citizens – yet which are arguably more pronounced in the case of this particular group. In other words, it helps to bring to light the problems that are most likely experienced by broader groups as well. Together with their families, for instance, refugees are faced with a particularly abrupt transition as subjects of different governance levels (from Federal reception during their asylum application to local and regional welfare and integration policies). In addition, refugees are typically at risk of high degrees of psychosocial stress,[14] which can be exacerbated by policies that seek to make newcomers accountable before providing them with access to basic forms of support. Furthermore, as a publicly contested group of newcomers – usually coming from the Global South and subject to negative political framing – they are more likely to face discrimination on ethnic and racial grounds.

1.2 THE STORIES WE (DO NOT) TELL

All these choices have their drawbacks. Given the criticism of 'integration', why didn't we avoid researching this process altogether? Why didn't we focus on how systemic racism continues to affect larger groups of racialised minorities? Why didn't we look into the experiences of asylum seekers during their application, now that it has apparently become commonplace for policy-makers to leave men, women and children to sleep on the streets? Or why didn't we highlight the stories of people who find themselves alone in Belgium, while their closest relatives remain stuck in conflict zones?

These are pertinent questions. It is clear that there are so many stories that need to be heard. This book invites you to read those of a particular group, at a particular moment in time: refugee families who have recently received international protection in Belgium. In five chapters, we explore how they try to navigate the labyrinth of Belgian bureaucracy (Chapter 2), the barriers they encounter when trying to access housing (Chapter 3), the ambiguous role of language (Chapter 4), how all of this affects their sense of well-being and belonging (Chapter 5), and how these gaps in policy and support render refugee families dependent on all kinds of informal support. Together, we hope that they shed some light onto what it means to weave your way into Belgian society. It is only by taking these stories seriously that we can begin to imagine how the reception of refugee families could be handled differently.

2
THE LABYRINTH OF BELGIAN BUREAUCRACY

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When I came here, I knew nothing. How do I take the bus? I didn't know how to pay a bill. (...) Unfortunately, we didn't find enough support here. (...) Our community helped us out, a little, but they all have their own lives. (...) At the OCMW/CPAS, [we communicated] with Google translate and telephone interpreters. That's it. [This lasted] for about six months to one year. (Turkish father)

INTRODUCTION

In the initial period after receiving international protection, refugee families are left without adequate support, at a time when they need it most.[15] Time seems to pass slowly during the asylum period, but when receiving international protection people often feel overwhelmed and uncertain about what to do first and most urgently. Housing and language barriers play a crucial role in this, as will be explained in Chapter 3 and 4.

In this chapter, we explore 'the administrative burden' refugee families experience in accessing the bureaucratic systems of civil affairs, health and welfare services, social security, financial accounts, education, etc.[16] This refers to the psychological and other burdens "that citizens experience when interacting with public administrations, and [which] have an impact on whether or not citizens can access and use these services."[17] This administrative burden is particularly intense during the transitional period, in between receiving international protection and their effective inclusion into Belgian society. During this period, refugee families have to take the administrative steps to re-embed themselves into a new local context and arrange essential matters within a short timeframe. However, this burden continues to make itself felt long afterwards in the official letters, the contracts, the appointments at service counters, etc.

Although scholars have long emphasised the importance of integral and accessible support for re-insertion on an administrative level,[18] various refugee families reported having to navigate bureaucracy on their own; of no longer seeing the forest for the trees in the extremely dense and complicated bureaucratic landscape they arrived into (2.1), or of falling through the cracks despite a tight administrative net (2.2). Lastly, both social professionals and families point to a structural shortage of resources providing adequate guidance throughout this bureaucratic maze (2.3).

2.1 THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

> [After leaving the reception centre], a lot of other things begin: so much paperwork, change of address, and you don't know Dutch very well yet, but you have to go to the OCMW/CPAS, and to other organisations. In the beginning, volunteers from [organisation X] helped me, and then I went to the OCMW/CPAS to register for subsistence allowance, and then I got a social worker. But I didn't get much help from them. It was always just referrals. "Here's the address, go there," but I didn't know any of that – where the town hall is, where the civic integration cours-

> es are. They write it down on a piece of paper and then say: "Here it is, go." (...) The contact was super difficult, but yeah, they have so many clients, and they're not available by phone. You have to make an appointment, but that takes months, even though you urgently need help. (...) In the beginning, every letter was important to me, even an unimportant one. I couldn't speak the language, and then you stress about what it's about. You call the social worker, and they don't pick up. (...) You use Google Translate, but the letter doesn't have clear info about whether it's urgent or not. And making an appointment takes three weeks of waiting for just one letter. (Afghan father)

This Afghan father explains how, after the significant hurdle of finding more or less stable accommodation has been cleared, he experienced a lack of in-person support in terms of tackling a comprehensive and complete bureaucratic transition – a transition that is dispersed over several services and actors.[19] To prepare them for this step, where tasks will be divided up between services, a social worker at an LOI/ILA [Local Reception Initiative] explains:

> Once people leave the LOI/ILA, my colleagues and I tell the residents: "The support I'm providing now will be split up. You'll have to do a lot yourself, but you'll probably also have a social worker from the OCMW/CPAS, someone from the Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering [Agency for Civic Integration], someone from VDAB [Flemish Employment Service], and maybe even a network coach." (Social worker LOI/ILA)

For families who are relatively new to this kind of bureaucratic landscape, it can be complicated to understand who is responsible for what and what types of support they can (or cannot) access or expect.[20] Furthermore, this support might be organised differently, depending on the municipalities in which refugee families arrive.[21] These disparities make it challenging for families to complete the administrative processes needed to re-embed themselves quickly, to exercise their rights, or to navigate the bureaucratic landscape effectively. This is also demonstrated by an Iraqi family in Brussels:

> There was an issue with registering the children at the town hall. At the reception centre, the children did not receive ID cards – only the parents did – and they were told that the children were listed on the parents' residence permits. When they moved here and went to the town hall to confirm their address, they were told: "Your children are not registered; I don't see any children with you." So, this became a problem. (...) Eventually, they sought help from Caritas through the former guardian of their son, and they assisted them. Later, the father went back to the town hall, where they said the issue was resolved. However, when they checked in the system, there was still no link between the parents and the children. (...) The real issue was that the municipality's civil affairs did not communicate with the parents. They didn't explain what the problem was or what they

> needed to do. Instead, the town hall only communicated with the reception centre, leaving the parents in the dark. (Interpreter for an Iraqi refugee family)

In this case, information went missing between different public institutions, and between the local civil affairs administration and the family. Often, part of the challenge is obtaining a correct assessment of what exact problem refugee families are facing. In a context where policies have introduced language barriers to accessing public services, it is difficult to identify obstacles to social inclusion from a purely demand-driven approach, whereby refugees have to come up with the right questions for the correct service providers. As highlighted by the next interview extract from a school liaison officer, if no demands are made nor questions uttered, no support is provided.

> It's also the case that many services operate on a demand-driven basis. If a service doesn't receive a request from the client, they won't follow up. This is one of the main differences with my role – I always follow up. When I visit a family, I ask questions like, "How was last week? You went there recently – what came of that?" (...) For parents that I don't see but know their situation isn't okay, (...) I automatically reach out and ask: "Hey, I just wanted to check in with you – how are things going? Is everything alright? Is there anything I can help with?" (School liaison officer for primary schools)

However, refugee families often don't know exactly what it is that they might need in a specific circumstance, let alone what they are entitled to.[22] Without automatic entitlement to rights, the complexity of the labyrinth of bureaucracy affects the accessibility of various public services,[23] as exemplified by this Palestinian mother:

> I had no one to support me [with administration] in the beginning. Sometimes a social worker, but they didn't always help. Sometimes I would ask something, and they wouldn't understand the point of my question. Or they would give a different answer. For example, regarding my children's school allowance – I didn't know about it. I didn't know we were entitled to it. It was only after two years that I happened to hear about it from another woman from Palestine. When I found out, I wondered why we didn't know about it and whether we were entitled to it or not. I went to the social worker, and (...) there was an error in our file, which is why it was delayed. It was resolved immediately. But if we don't ask, if we don't know... Imagine that there are other people who don't know either. (Palestinian mother)

Our conversations with family members revealed that, in many cases, there were people "who don't know either" – don't know which fundamental provisions they were entitled to. This was even the case when it came to basic needs such as food aid:

> My brother told me you can go to the OCMW/CPAS to make the request (...). I tell my social worker: "Is it true there's food aid?" She says: "Ah yes! Do you want it?" "Yes of course!' (Workshop with newcomers attending the integration programme)

While refugee families often could not benefit from more general public services because they were not aware that they existed or how they worked, they struggled even more to find specialist service providers:

> Last year our daughter's medical specialist asked us: "Do you receive extra child support for your daughter?" Because he explained to us that we are entitled to extra financial support. (...) He helped us, otherwise we would have never received the information. (...) He found all the information, sent a letter to Brussels and to our general practitioner to complete. (...) We waited for almost a year. Recently we got the news, she's entitled to receive additional financial support. Besides the specialist, no one else told us about it. (Palestinian mother)

For refugee families, assimilating themselves on an administrative level is a process that is strewn with 'wicked issues'[24] across various service areas and policy domains, and it is often complicated for both refugee families and the social professionals supporting them to see the forest for the trees. Irrespective of the rise in inter-organisational networks, such as the local networks[25] in the context of labour market activation which seem to be a promising practice, it often remains difficult for all street-level actors and their clients to know what exactly the problem is and which service they can turn to for what kind of support. Furthermore, it often requires a basic knowledge of migration or private international law, as well as skills in sharing this information effectively while also dealing with language barriers.[26] A lack of such knowledge or skills might greatly impact refugee families' ability to take the administrative steps for inclusion into society, as highlighted by the next account from a staff member of a non-profit organisation:

> It is true that legislation changes very quickly and services need to adapt quickly, but a lot of mistakes are made [for instance, at the counters of local authorities]. And these often have very serious consequences for refugees. For example, with nationality applications, there are cases where staff have said documents are missing that ultimately aren't necessary, but in the meantime, people have to wait, and they could lose their right to stay in Belgium. These mistakes cause people a great deal of stress. (...) There is also no neutral legal service. (...) The Agentschap voor Integratie [Agency for Civic Integration] has also reduced its legal services, and those are actually more for professionals than for citizens. (Staff member of a non-profit organisation that supports refugees on the labour market)

These are but a few of the many examples of how a lack of specific knowledge – or adequate support therein – limits refugee families' ability to access and exercise their rights. This leads to what researchers describe as the 'non-take up of their social rights': "the phenomenon that persons or households do not (fully) make use of benefits and services they are entitled to".[27] However, rather than attributing non-take up to individual responsibility, our research reconfirms the importance of unravelling the mechanisms that impede the exercise of people's rights and create barriers for specific groups.[28] We found that the structural problems of bureaucratic complexity, as well as overburdened, under-resourced and/or understaffed social work in many (sub)urban contexts, impacted by political sensitivities, undermines the transversal case management that is necessary to guide refugee families through the bureaucratic maze.

2.2 TIME AND SPACE FOR SUPPORT

> What I notice is that all these social services are understaffed and primarily focused on administrative tasks, leaving little room for actual support. "We've arranged the financial assistance and enrolled you in a work programme," and that's where it seems to stop, at least from what I've observed. I also think this often leads to frustration among social workers, as they've told me: "There's simply no capacity left to properly guide people. And newcomers really need that kind of support." (Volunteer from a non-profit organisation)

Time has become a very scarce resource for social workers, with social work now constituting a 'bottleneck profession'.[29] There is a very high staff turnover due to stringent working conditions, a heavy administrative workload, an overwhelming number of cases, and what is sometimes experienced as political pressure in municipal institutes, such as OCMW/CPAS, where long-term employees risk suffering from burn-out.[30] This undermines social workers' ability to devote the necessary time and resources to integral, transversal support.

> People often think, "Oh, this is what I can [ask the social worker from the OCMW/CPAS]", but that's simply because they don't understand the [system]. I believe it's an important task to check things like: are they registered, have they applied for rental subsidies, are they eligible for a settlement allowance? All those things. Exploring these rights is really important, especially with newcomers. (...) I think there's often a language barrier, so interpreters are frequently needed, but scheduling an interpreter can take four weeks, which means you've already lost a month. Plus, requesting an interpreter is not so easy and politically kind of sensitive. Because, actually, we are meant to speak Dutch with our clients inside an

> OCMW/CPAS, that is kind of monitored. (...) Whereas where I work, we have less political pressure, it's a different context (...) On top of that, (...) social workers have to handle a lot of administration, leaving them with less time to really guide and support clients. (...) They are sad about it themselves, they find it a pity. I also believe that working with newcomers requires a specific skill set – it's often a very different way of working, explaining things really slowly, with Google Translate, (...) it takes a lot of time. And you have to be willing and able to provide so much time; you have to have permission for it from higher up and I think that is sometimes lacking. (School liaison officer)

In these circumstances, persistence, resistance and creativity are often required on the part of both refugee families and social professionals, to navigate their way through this and to 'bricolage'[31] the kind of support and service they feel is needed in a given situation. An example of this is demonstrated in the following extract:

> Anyone can come with any kind of question [to our open contact sessions]. This ranges from applying for childcare to filling out RVA (Federal Social Security Service) paperwork or even questions like, "I want to buy a house but don't know how it works." So, it's essentially a broad access service. I determine whether I can handle the issue myself or need to find a partner with more expertise. (...) But this wasn't the original intention. The main goal of [our organisation] is to combat poverty. This includes helping people register with social rental offices and ensuring they are in compliance with the RVA and mutual health insurance. It's great that I have the space to address those needs too. (...) I'm lucky to have worked in social services before, so I have a lot of knowledge about social law and similar areas. That's often a strength, especially with newcomers. It's also a process of figuring things out together. None of it is automatic for me either, so we look for solutions together. (...) But if people here knew, I'd definitely get in trouble. My boss is very open about it, but if it became a political issue, there would be criticism. [Because] I think people are very afraid of creating a 'pull factor'. But I don't believe [that] you can just leave people to figure things out on their own when they're new here, don't know the language; they need someone to stand by them. Without that support, you can't effectively work towards inclusion. If you tell people, "Here's a card, go see this doctor." they won't feel at home. People who feel at home become bridges for others in their community. I see this often with clients who came to me first – they now help others and support their journeys. That's how it should be. Saying, "Figure it out yourself," and then accusing people of not integrating makes no sense. The real question is, "Have people been given the chance to integrate?" That's often tied to the political party in power and how they view newcomers. (Employee of a social organisation)

To overcome the many obstacles refugee families face, social workers need to have sufficient time, resources, experience, and empathy to provide adequate support.[32] This is essential not only for delivering accessible services, but also for understanding what is at stake and what kind of support is needed by whom.

In these difficult circumstances, administrative support from institutionalised social work is sometimes transferred to digital platforms. Tools such as WhatsApp provide significant advantages in terms of reachability,[33] allowing people to share pictures, translate text messages, or exchange voice messages to facilitate prompt assistance with day-to-day administrative letters, but without the constant need for individual appointments.

> Sometimes we have contact with our social assistant, every three or four months, we get an appointment. But if something comes up, we call each other. We communicate through WhatsApp as well. (...) If there is an issue, WhatsApp is convenient. We just send a message. (Formerly unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan)

However, the use of WhatsApp cannot entirely replace physical appointments, especially in the case of language barriers or where complex procedures and concepts need to be carried out or explained, as highlighted in these accounts:

> We had a day, once a week, where we could go to the OCMW/CPAS, ask anything, and discuss everything. And if we have questions, we'd send an email or a WhatsApp message. (Palestinian refugee family)

> I'm very happy about my social assistant with the OCMW/CPAS. She's always reachable via mobile phone. (...) I send pictures of letters and she sends a voice note to me about what to do or something. And if she thinks it's necessary to meet, she immediately schedules an appointment. But I cannot go there directly at any time and ask whether I can talk to her.
>
> *Interviewer*: Would you still prefer that?
>
> Yeah, but it's okay. Because I ask her on WhatsApp (...) and if many issues come together and we cannot solve them by telephone, I meet her. (Palestinian mother)

While some social workers are pleased with this option, others find it difficult to manage yet another digital channel in already overburdened circumstances. Furthermore, a lot of refugee families do not have this digital helpline connecting them to a social worker. In those instances, social workers can either help refugees with their inclusion at their own discretion – on top of their official work – or this is support provided by third actors whose job description is less delineated or administrative. Both solutions are demonstrated in the account of this unaccompanied minor who told us about the support she received from her former guardian even after her parents arrived, and from her assistant for supported living even when she moved elsewhere:

> I received support from X, who is an independent assistant for supported living, but I don't remember the name of the organisation. She found a studio apartment for me when I was 17. (...) [Previously] I learned a lot in the [asylum] centre, but I also learned a lot outside of it. In the centre, I didn't have to pay rent, water, electricity, or anything. But outside, you have to pay for everything yourself. You have to make your own doctor's appointments. In the centre, you say, "I need this," and they guide and assist you. Outside, you're on your own. I was lucky to find her [the assistant for supported living]. I met with her last week, she's such a kind lady. She still helps me to this day [even though the interviewee is no longer formally her client]. (...) Furthermore, I can also always ask Y [former guardian] for help, even though she's no longer my guardian. She's just a friend now. While the OCMW/CPAS is there, they only handle paperwork and nothing more; I have to take care of everything else myself. When I don't know how to handle something, I ask X or Y for advice. For example, if I receive a confusing letter, I'll ask, "Look, I got this, what do I do with it? How do I handle this?" Sometimes I still get letters that are hard to understand, but I can send photos of them to Y via WhatsApp and ask for help. (...) I [ask via WhatsApp], "Look, I've received this, can you help me?" (Formerly unaccompanied minor)

In other cases, volunteers or families' own networks step in to provide the prompt assistance that helps families to navigate their way through the administrative burden:

> I can understand Dutch now, but two years ago, I couldn't. When I received letters, I would go to [volunteer X]. She always helps everyone with their letters. [When people come with things like]: "We don't understand this" or "We have to pay this, but how do we do it?" [Volunteer X] is always kind and helps us. She's faster than the OCMW/CPAS. With the OCMW/CPAS, if you want an appointment, you have to wait at least a week–just to make the appointment. The response is always a bit slow. (...) There are many documents and many questions, but the process is slow. (Palestinian mother)

As we also indicate in Chapter 6, this kind of informal assistance fills in the structural gaps in support. However, this offer is not available everywhere, and if it is available, not everyone can access it. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that, in periods of transition, some families fall through the cracks of the social system.

2.3 THROUGH THE CRACKS

> Two months after we got here [as a family, applying for asylum but living in a rental apartment and husband at work], my daughter went to school. But [registering her] was really difficult. I googled 'school' and I just walked with my two-year-old daughter by the hand to the schools in the vicinity. We walked to seven or eight schools. (...) Every school told me they didn't have any places left. (...) And then I arrived at the CLB, although I didn't really know them actually, but a woman searched for all the schools on the internet and she found one where there were places left. (...) So I went there by foot, and tried to speak English there (...). But they told me I needed an appointment, which I didn't know about. (...) I called them afterwards. But yeah, I found a school by foot. (Turkish mother)

When refugee families, for whatever reason, do not have a social assistant, counsellor, or personal network to assist them throughout this transitional period, it is often difficult to know who to turn to for important needs, such as enrolling their children in a school or finding a house. As exemplified by the extract, people are rarely referred to the right service; the gaps between services are evidenced by the fact that the mother had to walk between schools in order to bridge them. Only in rare circumstances do refugee families coincidentally find their way to practical support, usually through volunteers and/or established migrants. This is highlighted in the next interview extract:

> There are also people who, for example, are not eligible for support from the OCMW/CPAS, but still need a lot of assistance. If they go to Ligo [Adult education], they can ask questions, and their teacher can refer them to us. (...) Then the teacher asks me, "Could you maybe help this woman too [even though, normally, you only work with OCMW/CPAS clients]?" And I say: yes, no problem. (...) It's not very intensive guidance, but you can still help people. (Palestinian referrer in diversity)

This account was provided by an experiential expert working as professional 'referrer in diversity' [Dutch: *'toeleider in diversiteit'*] for the local government, who is responsible for welcoming and referring socially vulnerable OCMW/CPAS clients present within the municipality. However, their availability depends on where families end up, and in reality, this might change regularly due to the struggle to find adequate housing – see Chapter 3. This is illustrated in the account below where we describe the journey of a refugee family who has been relocated eight (!) times since they arrived in Belgium.

> The family consists of a father and mother with moderate language skills; a teenage son who speaks Dutch well; and a child with severe physical and mental disabilities who occasionally attends day care. Both parents are actively looking for a job, but up to now without success, except for some short-term contracts.
>
> In municipality X, they had an OCMW/CPAS social worker despite relying solely on health insurance income. However, they were forced to move to municipality Y, across the country, due to a lack of housing in municipality X, ending up in an unsuitable home arranged through family connections.
>
> The family received no professional support for finding a new school for the teenage son. Despite repeated requests, no help was provided by the school or the OCMW/CPAS in municipality X. The son and his mother had to visit schools on foot, eventually finding one 1.5 hours away by bus after receiving minimal assistance from the CLB [Flemish counselling service for primary and secondary school students].
>
> Furthermore, there was no support in arranging new day care for the son with disabilities. This was left to the family, despite their limited language skills. A Belgian volunteer in contact with the family had to coordinate from 40 km away, as no other contact was available.
>
> In addition, the family did not receive any formal support for transferring their mutual insurance. They had to make an appointment with the health insurance office in municipality Y to ensure continuity of income during the transition. The volunteer arranged the meeting and accompanied the mother to the appointment, but inaccessible language use made the process difficult for both the volunteer – to understand the specific abbreviations, for instance – and the mother.
>
> Although the mother requested support from the OCMW/CPAS for this administrative re-embedding and for finding a school for her son nearby, they told her she had to manage on her own.
>
> Five months after the move, the volunteer on the other side of Belgium was contacted by the son's school, reporting frequent absences. With no local support, the school initiated a "one family, one plan" approach three months later. By then, it was February, and significant time and effort had been needlessly wasted.
>
> (Professional referrer in diversity)

Given the lack of comprehensive handovers if a family moves, there is a lack of continuity in the provision of services and time is wasted due to unnecessary repetitions and having to restart the administrative processes from scratch when changing municipalities.[34] In addition, the fact that families must recreate their supportive local network multiple times, while experiencing frequent rejections, has a negative impact on their level of trust and their sense of visibility (see also Chapter 5).

2.4 CONCLUSION: THE ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN SLOWS DOWN INCLUSION PATHWAYS

After recognition, refugees embark on a complex journey through the intricate labyrinth of services and procedures as part of their inclusion process. In many contexts, informal networks are the only ways for refugee families to access the intensive, hands-on, timely, and day-to-day support needed to carry out the necessary administrative processes – see Chapter 6. In this transitional period, refugee families are confronted with two types of gaps (see Chapter 1): a fragmented set of policies and service providers, and a lack of transversal support that guides them through the bureaucratic maze.[35] In turn, many service providers face a lack of time and resources, which prevents them from building up the knowledge needed to work with refugee families and other groups of newcomers. In this chapter, we have shown how this impedes refugee families' access to their social rights, and how it results in a significant loss of time, resources and energy.

3
“WHEN HOUSING GOES WRONG, EVERYTHING GOES WRONG”

Louise Carlier, Mieke Groeninck,
Dirk Geldof, Pascal Debruyne,
Luce Beeckmans

Interviewer: What is the most important thing for you to build a new life here in Belgium?

The most important thing is to have a good job and a house. A real house where I know I can stay, and not that when the contract ends, I have to leave. A permanent house, a real house, and a stable job. (Formerly unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan)

INTRODUCTION

When refugees are granted international protection, they need to leave the collective reception centre and find a new place to live. This is more than a matter of having a roof over their heads: they also require an official address to register with the local municipality and the OCMW/CPAS, to open a bank account, to apply for training courses, or to enrol in the compulsory civic integration programme. In other words, if they cannot find a stable anchor point, refugee families remain stuck in this transitional period of settling down, often in precarious living conditions. Even though this clearly hampers their ability to access work, education, or social networks, refugee families receive little to no support in their search for stable and decent housing. Reception infrastructures are unable to provide sufficient support in the housing search, nor do the regional governments of Flanders and Wallonia, or municipal services. Refugee families find themselves largely on their own in trying to acquire stable and adequate housing, in the context of an already oversaturated private rental market. This encompasses the largest and most critical policy gap we've encountered in the inclusion pathways of refugee families after their recognition. In the words of a social worker we spoke with: "If housing goes wrong, everything goes wrong."

3.1 ON YOUR OWN

In Belgium, when refugees are required to leave the reception centres after recognition, they have various options. Firstly, they can apply for access to a Local Reception Initiative [LOI/ILA]. While these are mostly meant to accommodate asylum seekers in vulnerable situations during their recognition procedure, refugee families can also apply for access once they have received international protection. Within these LOI/ILAs, residents are provided with temporary access to housing as well as support from a social assistant at the OCMW/CPAS to find more permanent housing. Alternatively, they can remain in the centre for a transitional period, of up to two months, in principle extendable by only one month, except in exceptional cases, until they secure accommodation on the private market themselves.[36]

However, the number of places in LOI/ILAs are very limited – which is soon to be exacerbated by the Federal government's decision to further cut back on the number of initiatives, as announced in the Federal government agreement (2025-2029). Additionally, overburdened OCMW/CPAS centres lack the resources needed to offer practical and intensive support to families in search of housing. While

Federal reception structures are tasked with assisting refugee families in their housing transition, the staff's excessive workload prevents them from offering direct support. In practice, they instead refer families to other – often voluntary – organisations that try to assist refugee families in their search for housing. However, in an institutional context where no one takes responsibility for providing housing support, such organisations are often overburdened, or simply don't exist in some places. And although regional governments are officially responsible for the general housing policy, they do not guarantee access to housing for people with international protection and their family members.[37]

Furthermore, refugee families in Flanders rarely benefit from social housing. Not only are there extensive waiting lists, but to be eligible, families are encountering an increasingly significant requirement to have a long-term local connection to a municipality.[38] In many cases, therefore, families have to find housing on their own by turning to the private (rental) market, where they often end up living in low-quality houses but paying disproportionately high prices.[39] All the families we met had to deal with the *de facto* inaccessibility of the private market immediately after leaving the asylum centre. Increasing housing shortages, a lack of income, the absence of a work contract, racial discrimination or discrimination against beneficiaries of social assistance,[40] and a refusal to rent to large families are the most frequently cited challenges refugees told us of. As this elder brother in an Afghan family reported:

> I'd like to get any flat. Because I've been looking for three months! It's not a OCMW/CPAS, it's not a refugee, it's not a lot of children. And no work contract. (Elder brother in an Afghan family)

These difficulties are particularly pronounced in large cities such as Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent, where the housing crisis is especially severe. However, many refugee families prefer to arrive in these cities due to the concentrated presence of public services, education and healthcare facilities, employment opportunities, ethnic shops, and, more generally, other established migrants or 'compatriots'. As a Burundian father says:

> A lot of things happen in Brussels! The administration is done in Brussels, whether it's at the CGRA/CGVS, or seeing the lawyer, or whatever... Ceremonies are prepared in Brussels, and everything, everything ends up in Brussels. (Burundian father)

The housing crisis, however, is widespread and affects many people, not just newcomers or refugees. While finding affordable housing in urban centres is

particularly challenging, it is also becoming difficult in smaller and mid-sized cities.[41] In the following paragraph, we explore what strategies refugee families in these circumstances follow to secure themselves decent and stable accommodation.

3.2 THE WINDING PATH TO HOUSING: DIFFERENT STRATEGIES

While all refugee families need to secure decent and stable housing, how they (try to) do so varies greatly from one family to another. Some of the families we met gained access to an LOI/ILA after obtaining international protection. While they benefited from the support of a social worker, many found themselves ending up in remote locations.[42] They described how they arrived in an environment where they knew no one, where it was difficult to get around due to limited public transportation, and where they were far away from the various services and infrastructures that are essential on their inclusion pathways – such as training centres or any locations where the civic integration programmes are provided, for example. Some emphasised the sense of social isolation and alienation they experienced in such situations. For example, a refugee from the Côte d'Ivoire who arrived alone in Belgium at the age of 18 described feeling isolated when, after leaving the centre, he was housed in an ILA in the Ardennes:

> Over there too, for someone who is alone, it's not easy. Because everyone's at home, there's not too much... It's not like in Brussels. Here I'm on my own but I can still go out and sit somewhere. Whereas over there, when you're on your own, you have no family... It's a bit complicated. Everyone's at home, everyone's with their family. It's a bit difficult... (Young refugee from Côte d'Ivoire)

Most of the people we met found their first homes by word of mouth through acquaintances, fleeting encounters, or volunteers. These volunteers often act as crucial intermediaries on the private rental market, relying on their networks of landlords who agree to rent their property to refugees and their families. Volunteers also mediate with landlords to convince them to rent their houses to these families, as exemplified by the next telling account of a formerly unaccompanied minor:

> So, when my family arrived, we slept with everyone in the small studio I was living in. It was really crazy. Such a small place for so many people. (...) But then I found a house in [municipality X]. I paid a rental deposit of 1500 euros, but later

> we found out that the house wasn't allowed to be rented by the municipality. And the landlord never returned my rental deposit. He just took my money. And then, in October, we had to leave my studio. My family and I were homeless. We were out on the street for three months. From October to January. (...) I came here to my friend's place. (...) I asked [our] community for help. But everyone also lives in such small places. They can't take anyone else in. But the connections kept going further and further, and (...) eventually, I found two different families who said, "Look, we have one bedroom, but we can't do anything with addresses, but they can come and sleep here." But not everyone, only a few people could come. (...) A part of my family went there. [The rest went to] a friend I used to stay with at the centre... He said, "Yeah, I work and live in a studio, but they can stay in the living room." I said that's really good. I'll pay for your food. Because I was getting social welfare from the OCMW/CPAS at the time. I could pay for life. But that wasn't a home. I was going crazy trying to find a house.
>
> *Interviewer*: Did you have to search for all of that on your own?
>
> Yeah. (...) The OCMW/CPAS can't help with that. The OCMW/CPAS says they don't have housing. There wasn't any social housing available for us. Yeah, I did my best. (...) But there was a man. An organisation in [municipality Z], I think. I got a connection to this man. I sent him a text, "Sir, look, my family and I are out on the street, and it's really hard to find a house. I heard from so many people that you've helped them find a home. Can you please help me?" He said, "Yeah, I'll look into it, but I can't promise anything." I said, "No problem, but if you find something, let me know." And one day, I just decided... "Look, sir, I have the number of this man. He rents his house. It really has five bedrooms. But he doesn't want too many people there. Can you talk to him?" He said, "Send me his phone number, I'll call him." He called, talked to him. And he said okay, let them come and have a look. That was on 1st January or something. I don't care if it's not perfect, but just... A home. Because they [her parents] stopped going to school. They couldn't go to school anymore. Life was nothing then. I had to go to school, I had to get my diploma, I couldn't do anything by myself. And the OCMW/CPAS from where I was living was going to stop the social welfare. Because if you don't have an address, they can't [continue social welfare]... (Formerly unaccompanied minor)

As indicated in this extract, the initial accommodation – in this case a studio – often turns out to be unfit in the long run, for instance in the case of family reunification.[43] When additional family members arrive, there is often a total lack of support for transitioning into more suitable accommodation.[44] A Burundian father we met spent a year living in a shared room, where he welcomed his family who arrived through family reunification. We also encountered a father from the Central African Republic who found himself in a similar situation, welcoming his children while living in a studio apartment that he had found in a popular neighbourhood in Brussels through someone he had met at the reception centre:

> We slept there... it wasn't easy, it was just a studio flat like that, there were five of us! There were five of us living there! Because I had a... let's say a sofa bed,

> and the two older kids slept on it, and we found a single mattress for the youngest. When the day came, we had to put everything away. (Father from the Central African Republic)

Ali, a Syrian teenager, and his family spent their first few months in Belgium in an unsanitary, overcrowded two-room flat, with just a few mattresses as furniture: "*There were seven of us in the flat for eight months, with no money, nothing, no one to help us.*"

Aïssa, a Congolese mother, also had to live in unsanitary housing:

> My children were starting to scream, they don't sleep at night with mice and rats there! (...) All the time when we go to sleep, so that we can sleep well, we always must put traps for the mice and rats... I used to put cups there... because they tell us that mice don't burp. And cockroaches don't have stomachs either, they don't burp. If you put the cola with the bicarbonate, they choke. So that's what I did. (Congolese mother)

Some of the people we spoke with simply could not find housing. Désiré, a Burundian father who had undergone surgery on his leg upon arrival and had limited mobility, searched in vain for housing that suited his situation (a ground-floor apartment) in Brussels, where he had regular medical appointments at the hospital. Despite his active search, he couldn't find anything, and for a year he and his family, who had arrived through family reunification, lived in an emergency shelter:

> It was really complicated, because it was as if my family had gone through the procedure in the centre, whereas when they arrived, they thought everything was fine. (...) It was what I would call a catastrophic situation for my family. Because we spent a whole year in this situation. (Burundian father)

Even when families do manage to find housing, their first home is rarely sustainable or adequate. The majority of the families we met had moved several times before being able to find a stable and affordable place to live. As a result, refugee families often find themselves in poor housing conditions, which have a negative impact on their ability to register their children in school, and find long-term employment.

3.3 NO INCLUSION WITHOUT HOUSING

> When housing goes wrong, everything goes wrong. (Social worker)

Access to adequate housing is crucial for facilitating refugee families' inclusion. Without officially registered housing, these families cannot undertake a whole series of administrative procedures or obligations, nor can they access certain social rights that require them to be registered with the local municipality and OCMW/CPAS. Without an address, they can't obtain an identity card, open a bank account, or enrol in education, professional training or the civic integration programme. In turn, the lack of an identity card makes landlords reluctant to rent out their properties. Désiré explains how this creates a vicious circle, in which the processes for assimilating yourself on an administrative level and finding housing are woven together in a Kafkaesque manner:

> But the very problem was that it was very difficult for us to find accommodation without an identity card. (...) Firstly, I didn't have an address, and secondly, if you don't have an address, you don't have an identity card. (Burundian father)

Additionally, searching for a house requires extensive internet access and phone credit, which is complicated if you don't have a secure income or receive subsistence allowance – both difficult to obtain without an official address. Similar to the above impossible, Kafkaesque situations, as a prerequisite to signing a lease contract, you need sufficient resources for the rental guarantee and the first rent. To cover the costs of both, you may need to rely on a subsistence allowance, which can, however, only be claimed if you already have an official address. As reported by Adam, a Nigerian father:

> It was difficult. I already had no income, so it was difficult to find accommodation. Because they ask you for your pay slips, what income you have... If you're looking and you don't even have an income, what are you going to say! At the time I didn't even have an income from OCMW/CPAS! (Nigerian father)

The absence of stable and adequate housing also affects refugee family members' ability to access and fully participate in several areas of social life. One point often raised is the impact that the lack of proper housing has on their ability to find long-term employment. In many cases, while their family members are not settled, people remain preoccupied with the search for accommodation. This prevents them from attending language courses or entering the job market. Even

for refugees who have already taken language courses or worked during their asylum application process, the demanding search for housing is so time-consuming that it disrupts their entry into the labour market:

> One of the reasons that I couldn't find a job so far is that for five months I was searching for a house. I searched more than 400 houses, I visited more than 80 houses physically and I communicated [with] more than 250 houses by telephone, by email. Eventually, I had an appointment with these 50 houses that I could see and the majority of them, almost 99% of them, didn't give us the houses because I didn't have an [employment] contract. (...) So the main reason I couldn't find a house is that if you don't have a contract, if you don't have a proper income, then people do not risk offering you a house. First, we were embarrassed, but [later] I understood the realities; a Belgian will not offer to rent a house to another Belgian if they don't have a contract, if they don't have a proper income, so this is their right. (Afghan father)

Settling in poor-quality housing can impact refugee families' ability to enter the labour market. Yaser, an Iraqi father, was evicted from his home, as it did not meet the legal requirements to be let. As a direct consequence, he found himself unable to sign an employment contract that was offered to him, because "*when you don't have a house, you don't have an address, you don't have a contract*."

Aïssa's story also illustrates how her complicated housing trajectory had an impact on her training:

> I started the training, I did the first module, the second module, the third we were going to start, but the housing problem at home was terrible, so I had to leave everything. (...) And the supervisor said to me, "I can see that it's too heavy for you, you won't be able to... it's better that you find accommodation first, because if you find accommodation, you'll be able to relax, you see these days, you can't work properly." (Congolese mother)

Prolonged and interrupted housing trajectories also negatively impact children's school careers, while living in poor housing conditions might undermine their ability to study. As reported by Ali, who attends secondary school:

> We all sleep on the floor, we don't have enough mattresses, in fact on two single mattresses we sleep four people. (...) I study on the floor, I don't have a bed, I sleep on the floor too. (Syrian teenager)

Furthermore, each change of address requires families to assimilate themselves into a new administrative context due to the transition to a different OCMW/CPAS,

municipality, health insurance offices, and other services (see also Chapter 2). Each time they move, families need to start again, and repeat a whole new set of administrative procedures for which they have little to no support.[45] This is even more challenging in an unfamiliar environment where language barriers pose further issues.

Unsurprisingly, housing conditions impact family dynamics and people's sense of well-being. A lack of decent housing is a source of anxiety, hampers a family's ability to plan for the future, and extends the sense of liminality[46] – of being stuck in between arrival and inclusion.[47] As explained by Désiré:

> When you're responsible for a family, but you're not stable, you can't look ahead in life, because you say to yourself a few months later I'm going to change; you can't even equip your house, for example, because you say, if I buy stuff, and then I move, and it's not up to standard... so there are lots of things that keep you unstable. (Burundian father)

The (in)accessibility of proper housing thus has pervasive consequences on families' inclusion pathways, within and across several areas of their life. Faced with these difficulties, some NGOs and volunteers have organised alternative support, and developed initiatives to support refugee families in their efforts to find at least temporary housing.[48] Transit housing is one such initiative.

3.4 TRANSIT HOUSING

Some of the families we met have benefited from transit housing provided by NGOs, who use this initiative to try to fill the policy gaps in access to housing.[49] This was the case for Désiré and his family who were offered temporary accommodation by an NGO:

> When we arrived here, it was as if we'd never had a house! Never had a living room! Because each time we stayed in the bedrooms but there was no living room! And here, it was a luxury! It was as if we were starting life all over again. It was a new life, really. (Burundian father)

For the families we met, access to transit accommodation served as a much needed resting point to catch their breath and plan ahead. This was made possible by NGOs who provide comprehensive support with access to a broader network of organisations.[50] In order to benefit from transit accommodation, for instance, a Nigerian father contacted this NGO which supported him in completing

his diploma equivalence and family reunification procedure. The NGO also enrolled him in the civic integration programme and informed him about a volunteer initiative for finding work, through which he found his first job. Currently, they are also assisting his spouse, who arrived recently, on her own inclusion pathway.

Similarly, the young refugee from the Côte d'Ivoire, whom we mentioned before, contacted this NGO to access transit accommodation. This support enabled him to register with the OCMW/CPAS, the local municipality, and health insurance, as well as to enrol in the civic integration programme. After he had completed a professional training programme, the NGO assisted him in securing a job with his current employer.

These stories highlight how transit accommodation, as well as the support that came with it, was crucial for these families on their pathways towards inclusion. This transit accommodation represents a source of support and guidance. The NGOs that provide transit housing, the volunteer organisations, and other key individuals in people's networks that offer families practical support in finding stable accommodation, are bridging the policy gap that emerges between Federal and regional policy responsibilities. However, these kinds of initiatives are overwhelmed by the current demand for support that should not be their responsibility in the first place.

> It's been two years now since I, as a volunteer, stopped counting how many homes I've found for refugees, but at that point, I was already at 75. Many more have been added since then. But what we're noticing now is that the need has become so great. The housing crisis is so severe; people are coming from everywhere. And yes, unfortunately, I'm still the only one handling the housing searches. I'd really love to do other things – helping children, supporting language skills, and so on. But we remain stuck dealing with all the housing problems. (...) No one helps them search. The OCMW/CPAS knows the family is coming, for instance in cases of family reunification, (...) but no one has the means to find housing. (...) I'm the only one doing it [in municipality X]. Mind you, there have been many volunteers and organisations. But everyone eventually drops out. (...) It's just too much. It's a full-time job trying to find housing for even one person. (Volunteer in an organisation that supports refugees)

3.5 CONCLUSION: HOUSING, A CRITICAL POLICY GAP

Housing is the cornerstone for families' inclusion and impacts nearly all areas of life.[51] Yet, practical support for finding suitable and stable housing receives little attention from policy actors. On the contrary: while LOIs/ILAs could play a crucial

role in addressing this gap, the current Federal government has announced plans to further reduce their numbers. This complete lack of formal support significantly hinders refugees' inclusion.

The housing trajectory of almost all participants in our research was marked by insecurity and instability. Professionals in the sector are noticing that a growing number of people with international protection are stuck in asylum centres and are at risk of becoming homeless. This was the case, for example, for Désiré and his family. NGOs that assist refugee families in finding housing or provide temporary transit accommodations are scarce. The few initiatives that do exist are overwhelmed by the high demand.

Housing is much more than just an official address needed to complete the necessary administrative processes. A stable and suitable place to live is the first prerequisite for people to find rest, process difficult experiences, and build a future. Various researchers have pointed out that having a personal space is fundamental to a sense of security and belonging, especially in a social environment often perceived as uncertain and unwelcoming.[52]

Since refugee families receive little formal support in their search for housing, the responsibility is shifted to NGOs and volunteer organisations. This places a heavy burden on these initiatives and slows down refugees' inclusion pathways. Particularly in times of an escalating housing crisis in (sub)urban areas, the lack of formal support indicates a critical policy gap, with direct consequences for the daily lives of most refugee families.

4
LANGUAGE AS A KEY TO ACCESSING HOUSING, WORK, EDUCATION AND WELL-BEING

Mieke Groeninck, Louise Carlier,
Dirk Geldof, Pascal Debruyne,
Giacomo Orsini, Robin Vandevoordt

What sometimes makes it difficult is the way people look at you. You are from abroad, but I also had a life, a good life. I have done a lot in my life. I am someone with real skills, but here you don't get the chance. Because of the language. For example, for my sisters who went to New Zealand, it was simply easier to start because they speak English. To just continue. But for me, it took another two years before I could take another step in my life, due to the language. It's not easy. And I know that many people are unable to take that step. (Palestinian mother)

INTRODUCTION

It is no surprise that language plays a crucial role in refugee families' ability to build a new life after migrating. This issue is perhaps even more relevant in linguistically divided countries such as Belgium, where language serves as an important marker of sub-state national identity. The long communitarian history of the region of Flanders has resulted in a strict 'Dutch-only policy' in its public services, with the inability to speak Dutch representing a sensitive political issue.[53]

When the Flemish government implemented its first integration policies at the end of the 1980s, it specifically identified the perceived lack of proficiency in Dutch of Turkish and Moroccan labour migrants as a social and political problem.[54] Today, the Flemish government's 'civic integration programme' includes 4 pillars: (1) a civic integration course; (2) Dutch language courses; (3) an employment trajectory; and (4) a programme to stimulate social participation and social networks.[55] This programme has become mandatory for groups such as recognised refugees, people who receive subsidiary protection, and family members of legal residents coming from non-European countries – thereby mainly preserving its original focus[56] on migrants from the Global South (see also Chapter 1).

Moreover, the minimum level of Dutch proficiency required to complete the civic integration programme has been consistently raised by consecutive governments. At present, mandatory participants have to obtain oral level B1 within a maximum of two years after receiving the civic integration attestation, except when they are able to prove that they are studying or have found employment in the meantime.[57] Furthermore, these elevated language acquisition requirements are increasingly used as conditions that need to be met before newcomers can gain access to a variety of social rights, or apply for Belgian nationality.[58]

In the Francophone community, participants in the civic integration programme are required to take language training if they do not have A2-level proficiency upon registration. However, there is no obligation to reach a specific level of French, except when applying for nationality, where A2 is required.

Since increasingly stringent language acquisition is central to 'integration policies', especially in the Flemish Community, this chapter primarily focuses on Flanders. As indicated by the opening extract, fitting with these requirements has a direct impact on the duration of families' inclusion pathways, and the resulting mental burden. In this chapter, we first explore which barriers refugee families encounter in the process of language acquisition. Next, we describe how language policies raise the barriers to work, education and well-being.

4.1 PREREQUISITES FOR LEARNING A NEW LANGUAGE

> In that studio, it was raining inside. My children got sick because of it. Every month, I had to go to the hospital with the little one. Every month. And I had to attend classes. [In the end] I studied [Dutch] for three years, but I couldn't learn properly every day because I had too many problems with my housing. And because of that, I couldn't sleep. So I went to school, but I was exhausted. (Eritrean mother)

Learning a new language is a challenging endeavour for many adults. This is further complicated by experiences of bereavement and loss, as well as by ongoing precarious living conditions for many refugee families. Earlier studies have shown that stress has a negative impact on the capacity for learning.[59] Our research indicates that the stressful context in which refugee families find themselves after receiving international protection affects their ability to study and retain a new language.[60] If, for instance, fundamental needs such as stable and adequate housing have not been met, family members find it difficult to concentrate during language courses or to study afterwards.

Furthermore, language acquisition is often interrupted due to caregiving responsibilities. We frequently encountered fathers or (formerly) unaccompanied minors who either temporarily or permanently quit language acquisition out of a need to work and to financially provide for their family members (abroad). After having obtained a minimum level of Dutch or French, they apply for low-skilled, often temporary employment, which is not in line with either previous employment experiences, educational achievements, or personal aspirations.[61] This is highlighted by the following accounts from an Eritrean father and Turkish mother:

> I followed Dutch classes for a few months. But then I decided to stop. (...) If you are without a job, it's difficult. Without work, you have a poor income. So anyway, you have to work. (Eritrean father)

> My husband attended Dutch classes, but he had to work, so he took evening classes. But he was tired during the lessons, so it became difficult for him too. Those were difficult years (...) Right now, [my husband] is following (...) an IT course in Dutch, and he's currently looking for a job. (...)
>
> *Interviewer*: Whose Dutch is better?
>
> That's a good question. Normally,(...), I speak better than him because I recently obtained a C1 diploma, and he got a B1 diploma. [That's because] I was able to attend Dutch classes longer than him. (...) [That's] not a problem for me at all, but

> it can be difficult for my husband. He really always did his best, but he didn't get the chance. He had to work, and he was tired. (Turkish mother)

While we have encountered several fathers whose language acquisition was interrupted due to the need to find employment, mothers often postponed their own language courses to care for young children due to a regional shortage in childcare availability. As a referrer in diversity in the Brussels region explains:

> The daycare centres in our region are all full, sometimes with a waiting list of up to two years. That's a problem because the [newcoming] mothers want to take Dutch classes, but they can't because there are no daycare centres. (Referrer in diversity)

One of this referrer's clients was a young Syrian mother who couldn't find daycare that was easily accessible for her on public transport or on foot. This meant she had to postpone her intensive language courses until her daughter attended school:

> It's difficult [to practise Dutch] when you have children. (...) When I became pregnant, I couldn't find daycare for my daughter, so [I couldn't follow Dutch courses]. But now my daughter is enrolled in school. (Syrian mother)

In the previous legislature, expenses such as costs for childcare and the transportation to the integration course were no longer reimbursed. This raises the thresholds for compulsory integration. The question is now what the impact of the current Flemish government agreement will be, knowing that priority is given to working parents and/or those attending work-related training.[62] For mothers of refugee families, this risks hindering their ability to learn Dutch and to enter the labour market. This goes against the recommendations put forward by a recent OECD report (2023), wherein Belgium scores poorly on the employment of women with a migratory background. According to this report, this is the result of a lack of childcare provision, as well as discrimination. These structural hurdles create a gender gap in employment, which means that "women with a migratory background who had arrived recently needed more time to integrate into the Flemish labour market than men, and that women's employment levels remained well below men's even ten years after settlement."[63]

Hence, the lack of adequate housing, (the associated) stress, and the responsibility of caring for others – whether due to financial constraints or daycare shortages – undermine the prerequisites for learning a new language. In the next section, we will show how advanced language skills are, in turn, crucial to securing

long-term employment, decent housing and a general sense of well-being. In this context, language acquisition becomes the key that locks doors rather than opening them.

4.2 LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AS A LOCKED DOOR

> [We are currently at] the OCMW/CPAS. (...) So we have €1600 from OCMW/CPAS for me and my wife and for the rest we use children's allowance [Dutch: kinderbijslag]. (...) Because at least €300 per month is for electricity and gas and the water is also a big issue as well as internet and everything; it's almost €1900. (...) When we need baby shoes, it has to be second hand. (...) We receive [this money], we highly appreciate it, but at the same time, I have to make sure to look for a job, that I find a job, so I can earn more; so I can also pave the way for other people to work. [But I ask myself] Why am I stuck like that? Because when... Everywhere I go, it's the language issue. (...) [When they ask me:] "Do you have a driving license?" No, so going by bus to work, it is not acceptable for many people because there may be a delay or maybe it doesn't come on time. (...) So that is why, as soon as possible, I have to find something to provide through work, but language is the biggest constraint. (Afghan father)

This quote from an Afghan father, who spoke English perfectly upon arrival, indicates how he nevertheless felt 'stuck' due to the fact that every other door he intended to open – like obtaining his driving licence again or finding a suitable job – was closed to him due to stringent Dutch language requirements. This is because, parallel to the elevated minimum requirement of having Dutch oral level B1 for the civic integration programme, an increasing number of job vacancies demand high levels of Dutch proficiency, without offering the corresponding language support in the workplace.[64] In Brussels, applicants for professional training, for example, must have a certain level of French, while job vacancies often also require knowledge of Dutch and/or English. All this indicates how the job market mirrors strict political policies, regardless of whether such high language requirements are actually necessary as an entry condition for the professions in question.

Proficiency in a contact language such as English, or in other languages, is rarely taken into account. The Iraqi mother in the interview extract below explains what this means for her husband, who currently works as a doctor in a hospital abroad and with whom the family reunification procedure is ongoing:

> My husband [who will join later after family reunification] currently works as a doctor in a hospital in the Middle East. (...) He worries about what he is going to do here and whether he will be able to work here, it is difficult. If you don't speak the language and know anything of Nederlands [Dutch], yeah, it is difficult. Maybe he will take an opleiding [education] in medicine, if that is available for him. (...) It is difficult to change your whole life and you come to a place and you don't know what to do and what your future here will be, that's difficult. (...) He is very good in English, but the English we learned was when we were small. But (...) the mind is not like before, it was better than this. (Iraqi mother)

This couple's underlying fear, caused by the stringent language requirements, is that there will be a mismatch between the occupations that social services will direct them towards, and their own aspirations. Furthermore, in a (racially) stratified labour market,[65] language proficiency often intersects with other features, such as skin colour and wearing a headscarf which, when combined, lead to the racialised exclusion of women from specific sectors of the labour market. This is exemplified by the next account from a Syrian mother, who fled her country four years ago after a bomb explosion injured her child.

> I have a bachelor's in communication sciences. It was partly recognised in Belgium. (...) And I learnt Dutch, but most of the levels were online. Because of corona, it was online (laughs). Online isn't good. That's just not like school. (...) Then I went to VDAB to ask if there was a training programme. And then I followed a course at a University College. (...) I passed, and I've received a message to start an internship. (...) After that, I want to work (laughs). (...) But at my last job interview (...), it was really difficult. It's not easy to find good work here as a refugee. It's especially hard for women, specifically for women with headscarves. [That's why] It's easier for men than for women. (...) I don't have any opportunities here in [municipality X]. It's a bit difficult because of my headscarf. (...) My mother [who resides in Belgium as well] has a master's in pedagogical sciences. (...) She wants to ask OCMW/CPAS for work. (...) I don't want to say it's bad work, no... halal work is good work. But they suggested cleaning jobs. (...) Like that's the only option. "You can be a cleaner in a care home..." But I told my mum: "No, you can't speak Dutch well enough, that's true. But afterwards, we could find something different for you." (...) She still really wants to work. She's 61 years old. (...) She wants something to do. Maybe in the future, she could work in a shop. She could wear her headscarf [in a shop]. (...) I told her: you need to wait a bit. Step by step. (...) Don't listen to OCMW/CPAS saying, "cleaning, cleaning." No, Mum, you have a bachelor's and a master's degree. She has significant experience in Syria, working for 25 years with people with disabilities. (...) But always here: "No, not allowed with a headscarf," and that's a bit difficult for me and for my mum... (...) But I don't know what opportunities my mum could have in the future. (Syrian mother)

As highlighted here by this powerful account, language at the intersection with gender, racial and religious discrimination significantly affects refugee family

members' ability to develop their potential on the labour market. This is true both for family members who previously enjoyed higher education, as well as for those who are less educated. The latter is illustrated by the next account of a Syrian father who went to school until the age of 14, but who has more than 20 years of experience as a bus driver.[66] In order to be able to pick up this profession again, he has to pass his driving test in Flanders. This requires specific Dutch language skills equal to a minimum level of 1.2 (or A2) to qualify for the test.[67] For non-academic learners of a certain age, however, such a threshold poses major challenges:

> He would like to work as a driver, but the tests and everything are really difficult (...) because of the language. (...) His father passed away when he was 14, and he had to start working immediately to support the family. (...) So now he is waiting until he reaches Dutch level 1.2, and then he can also get his driver's licence. (...) He's doing well, really trying his best. He used to be a bus driver and would like to do that again. (Referrer in diversity, here translating for Syrian father)

The current system assumes a timely and linear evolution from classroom-based language acquisition to employment. However, for some members of refugee families, this classroom-based mode of learning Dutch is simply not sufficient in and of itself.[68]

Furthermore, beyond language proficiency, refugees face additional hurdles that relate not only to language skills but to how they present themselves, such as in the crafting of a CV or cover letter, along with several other practical skills required to navigate the job market.

The first author of this chapter, Mieke Groeninck, also acted as an informal buddy to an Afghan family. The father is illiterate and never had the chance to go to school in his home country. He has little knowledge of Dutch, because most of the time he takes care of the children. He is only able to attend Ligo-courses [Language courses for adults] when the children are at daycare. The mother is attending courses at CVO [Education for adults] and had obtained a beginner's level of Dutch at the time we spoke to the family. Below is an account of one of the visits, when the topic of employment was discussed:

> The parents recently had an appointment at VDAB [Flemish Employment Agency], where the intermediary created an online profile for them. They are required to return in a few weeks to demonstrate that they have made the necessary efforts to search for employment. Both the mother and father are eager to find work, but it seems they are unsure of where to begin.

> The mother shows me a WhatsApp message from her sister, who has been in Belgium for a longer time. It contains a list of interim agencies in the city, which the mother plans to locate using Google Maps and visit via public transportation. I show her the VDAB website and explain how to apply for job offers. However, I only now realise how overwhelming the website is, especially with the multiple filters which are difficult to translate, making it easy to get lost in the thousands of vacancies.
>
> Furthermore, neither of them has a CV or a motivation letter yet. Together, we prepare a CV on my smartphone using an app I quickly found online. It's challenging to determine what to include, as she has no professional experience in Belgium. Previously, she worked in a bakery, and she has extensive experience caring for disabled family members. Her dream is to become a bus attendant for disabled children, but at the moment, this feels out of reach.
>
> I send the completed CV and a sample motivation letter to the family's email address. Then, we browse the VDAB website for suitable job openings and find one for cleaning early mornings or late evenings. This schedule would allow her to care for her children during the day, freeing up her husband to attend Dutch courses or find work himself.
>
> I draft a short email, attach her new CV and motivation letter, and send it to their email address. I explain how she can forward the email to the employer after removing my personal details. Additionally, I share links to resources for finding job vacancies and promise to keep an eye out for opportunities on her behalf. Because irrespective of their eagerness to find employment, the barrier for accessing the job market seems tremendously high at this point. (Buddy of an Afghan family)

These language barriers thus limit this refugee family's access to the job market in multiple ways. In this particular case, this affects the family's renewal of their legal residence permit, as explained by their daughter:

> "My mum is still stressed because her ID card [based on subsidiary protection] is only being extended for 6 months, and they say my mum has to work, and she would very much like to work. (...) The municipality says that if we want to keep those cards, we have to work. They say that at the municipality. (Afghan daughter)

The language barrier also has other implications. As a buddy, I (Mieke) frequently got the impression that the mother of this family had understood what was explained to her or what was expected from them. However, as the conversation continued, it often became clear that this wasn't the case, though service providers mistakenly assume that there was no need to explain anything further. As a result, both of us were lost in translation.

4.3 LOST IN TRANSLATION

> [When I just arrived in Belgium via family reunification], there was no one to support us in [municipality X]. (...) And now, there are other people around me who ask for help. I'm still new, but because I learned the language a bit faster, I can help them. When my mother-in-law came here, after a year I was only speaking a little Dutch, but I could read. What I didn't understand, I could translate – I could manage that – so I was able to look up information and things like that. I went with her to the OCMW/CPAS for a rental contract. I've handled all her administrative papers, everything up to now, her bills and so on. And from that point, I said, 'Yes, [I'll do that for you]', but at the time [when I first arrived], I had no one to help me. I see that there are many people who need help, and [that's why I] thought, 'Okay, I'll do it [becoming a referrer in diversity] to make their first steps in Belgium a little easier.' Based on my own experience of having no one around to help. (Referrer in diversity)

Experts by experience use their own knowledge and their personal experiences of having arrived in Belgium as an immigrant themselves to support other newcomers who have arrived recently. Sometimes, they do so in a professional capacity, as the 'referrer in diversity' from the above quote, but more often they do so on a voluntary basis. Established immigrants offer essential day-to-day support to other newcomers. In addition to translating and explaining the obtrusive language of administrative documents, they support refugee families with their administrative processes, by bridging the gaps and using their current social knowledge to navigate the new rights and expectations encountered in Flanders.[69]

Some local public services have established more accessible language policies to ease the 'administrative burden', for instance, by encouraging public servants to communicate more clearly, to use translation programmes, pictograms, a contact language, or to ask for support from professional referrers in diversity.[70] However, this remains largely a matter of goodwill from local administrators and policy-makers. Other services implement stricter language jurisdictions – backed by the overall shift towards more conservative political tendencies at the Federal and regional level, especially in Flanders.[71] The most recent Flemish Government Agreement is clear in this regard, emphasising that "those who are unable to communicate in Dutch at public service counters will be referred to the existing Dutch language acquisition offer."[72] Despite the intention to focus on a 'sufficiently flexible range' of Dutch language courses, the responsibility for overcoming language barriers is almost exclusively placed on individual newcomers, with little attention paid to the conditions required for language learning to be effective, thereby effectively postponing people's 'self-reliance'.[73]

This is especially the case for people who experience more difficulties in learning Dutch, due to various reasons, as demonstrated by the following extract:

> I've been working for two years now, and there are still families that need ongoing support. For example, there's a mother who's a bit older and a single parent with four children. She goes to school, but learning the language is difficult for her. So, she still needs support. However, she can be more independent in certain ways, like getting around. [And] she knows that if she needs to handle something, she can say, "Okay, I'll take these papers there [to those people to help me]." (...) When you're older, learning the language becomes more difficult. (Palestinian referrer in diversity)

It is by no means guaranteed that by attending Dutch or French courses, someone will automatically, let alone quickly, acquire sufficient language skills. People that are, for whatever reason, unable to do so, are then left struggling against the host country's linguistic requirements. (Classroom-based) language acquisition can be a difficult barrier to cross. A Syrian intercultural mediator explains how he encourages clients to 'climb this big mountain':

> In practice, it's not always easy [to learn Dutch]. (...) For some, it worked perfectly to teach them, but for others, it just remains difficult. I always try, because even with my colleagues [social workers from the OCMW/CPAS], we know that language makes it very hard, but [we say to our clients]: "It won't stay that way forever. Over time, it will improve. So, you do your best to learn the language, and since everything revolves around it, we climb this big mountain together step by step. To work on it, we have to start completely from the basics. Later on, you'll see a big difference as things improve, this is really just the beginning. You will notice the progress." (Syrian intercultural mediator)

Given that, especially for newcomers to Flanders, "everything revolves around [Dutch language acquisition]," it is no surprise that this 'big mountain' can be a significant source of distress for refugee families (see Chapter 5). This, in turn, can also have a significant impact on internal family dynamics.

4.4 DESTABILISING FAMILY DYNAMICS

> My biggest problem is being out of employment. Thinking night and day what to do. If you look at my photos from last year, you could imagine that I changed maybe ten years. All because of the concerns and tensions and stress. (...) I didn't really expect things to be this difficult. (...) If you have a job, 80% of your problems are solved. If you don't have a job, even at home with your wife, with your husband,

> with your children, you don't have much prestige. This is my understanding. But if you have a job, you are independent, so you have more prestige. (Afghan father)

This is an extract from the previously cited Afghan father of five, who spoke English well upon arrival in Belgium. Even though his proficiency in English eased the administrative processes, he mentions elsewhere in the interview how the search for housing takes up all of his time, which then delays his Dutch language acquisition, further postponing his chances of finding adequate employment. This is especially the case because the majority of occupations suitable for English speakers often also require knowledge of Dutch or French. In this vicious circle, he admits how, in his experience, the loss of social and cultural capital undermines his role as a father. His children, on the other hand, are immersed in the Dutch language as they have been attending school on a full-time basis since their arrival in Flanders.

This creates situations in which children must support their parents on a linguistic level, which social workers often believe poses the risk of 'parentification': "a process in which children take care of the logistical or emotional needs of the family, potentially neglecting their own needs."[74] As Van Acker et al. recently highlighted, the presence of more structural barriers to inclusion increases the risks of 'institutionalised forms of parentification'.[75] While parents are often very cautious not to expose their children too much to content that they deem unsuitable – unless no other option is available – unfortunately, this is often unavoidable. The following account of an Afghan family illustrates this dynamic. The mother and daughter were interviewed together. Seated in their living room, the daughter, fluent in Dutch, occasionally interpreted for her mother. Although the mother speaks Dutch well and understands everything being said, she sometimes finds it difficult to express nuances or depth during the emotionally charged conversation.

> *Daughter says*: I was 10 years old, I think, and I had to go to Brussels by myself to give an interview [as part of the asylum procedure]. I explained everything: why we couldn't go back (...). I explained it all, and the woman typed everything while sitting next to me. But I always felt this strange kind of stress; my mental state wasn't okay because my parents couldn't speak Dutch. So, I was considered, like, the oldest in the family even though I was only 10, and I had to translate everything. I had to understand every paper. I was just like a translator... My [older] brother wasn't good at Dutch, so when I was eight, I started learning Dutch. I didn't go to OKAN (language-oriented special classes for non-Dutch speaking minors); I went straight to a regular school. I picked up words from the people around me. I pieced together sentences in my head from the things people said, and that's how I learned Dutch, just by listening to others speak. Suddenly, I could do it. And because of that, I helped my family move forward, translating for them and solving problems. We took it step by step until we got to where we are now. (...) But actually, it was [stressful]. The procedure most of all because we worked so hard

to come to Belgium, but Belgium didn't want to accept us. That was the hardest part. We couldn't go back to Afghanistan because there was war (...).

Interviewer asks the mother: How was it for you to see her go through all of that, doing this for the family because she spoke the language?

Daughter translates for mother: My mum says she never told me, but she tried to help. She was really sad and didn't like that I had to do all of that at such a young age. (...)

Daughter adds: But now, well, I don't care anymore. I've had too much stress, and I can't handle it anymore. I just think it will work out. I stay positive, and I try hard. My mum speaks Dutch now, so she can take things forward. (...) We still feel stressed sometimes – like we might have to leave – but I stay positive. I've had this stress for seven years, so there's no point in dwelling on it.

Interviewer asks daughter: Did you ever talk to someone about it?

Daughter answers: I talked to a psychologist, but it didn't really help. (...) I just wanted to be alone and think. I was never truly happy. At school, the other kids seemed happy. I looked happy on the outside – when I was with family or friends – but at night, under the covers, I cried a lot. It was hard. I have a book where I wrote everything down...

Interviewer asks the mother: Did you know she was worrying so much?

Mother answers (and cries): Yes, but she always tried to seem happy around me and told me not to stress. But in her room, she cried a lot, she wrote stories every day...

Daughter adds: I didn't always write in a diary, sometimes on small pieces of paper. I still have them all. I had a desk with lots of papers, and I wrote a lot every night. Then, for my birthday, a friend gave me a book. (...) I told my mum recently [that I was doing this], when I felt less stressed. [Previously] they didn't know anything. I wrote a lot but never told them. Recently, I told her that I used to write a lot about the past.

Interviewer asks daughter: Why didn't you ever tell them?

Daughter replies: They were already stressed. I didn't want to add to their worries.

Interviewer reacts: She takes good care of you, and you take good care of her.

Mother and daughter laugh and react: Yes...

(Afghan mother and daughter)

Throughout this interview, it became evident how challenging it was for the mother and the father, who joined later on, to have to rely on their youngest daughter due to the language barrier and the absence of available interpreters who might have supported them in keeping their 'protective shields' as parents intact.[76] Despite their efforts to ease her burden, these were hindered by structural barriers, particularly those related to language and accessibility. For instance, the mother constantly asks civil servants and social professionals to handle matters via WhatsApp with

her, allowing her to easily use translation apps and thereby manage communications directly. However, since official processes often require an email address, which she lacks for now, she repeatedly has to rely on her daughter's email. The parents also explicitly requested administrative support from the OCMW/CPAS to navigate the administrative burden, yet their request was rejected.

Because of her fluency in Dutch, the daughter takes up several tasks on behalf of the rest of the family. This form of care towards her family came naturally to her, as she tried to reduce her parents' distress about the situation. It demonstrates how the language barrier, and everything that impacts it and is impacted by it, affects the whole family, especially in intense situations of loss and unfamiliarity.

> Everything is [about] how they are looking at me (...) I am their father, I understand it, they are looking at me and my situation. (...) Culturally, we are people that when we have someone happy at home, everybody is happy. But if someone understood that there is an issue, that someone is not happy, then everyone is not happy. (...) I am trying my best not to show them that I am struggling and in trouble and still I always encourage them: "We have a perfect life, we are good, we are safe now, we are not in danger." Just in order to encourage them, I will try my best to do this. (...) But (...) they understand [the severity of the situation and how it impacts us as parents]. (...) Even if they don't understand me, they understand how it must be for me; so they understand that their mother does not have the resistance that I have, for example. (...) She is kind of okay, but she is suffering a lot from everything we've lost and for this reason, the children don't ask us for much materially or financially, for instance. (Afghan father)

4.5 CONCLUSION: LANGUAGE AS A KEY THAT LOCKS MANY DOORS

Learning Dutch or French is often portrayed as the ultimate key that non-European newcomers need to access Belgian society. In this chapter, we explored the multiple hurdles that prevent refugee family members from obtaining this key, and how not having this key keeps so many doors closed.

The assumption that attending classroom-based language courses always leads to a sufficient acquisition of language skills in order to become 'self-reliant', leaves those unable to (rapidly) comply with language expectations unable to communicate or navigate the administrative burden. Especially in Flanders, the increasingly strong policy focus on Dutch proficiency risks raising the barriers to inclusion.

5
‘MIGRATION PAIN’, NEIGHBOURLINESS AND WELL-BEING

Mieke Groeninck, Louise Carlier, Dirk Geldof, Pascal Debruyne, Robin Vandevoordt, Ilse Derluyn

I loved Turkey, I loved Istanbul. I was sad [about having to leave]. But I told [my family]: “We died in Turkey, but were reborn here.” But without a father or mother. When you have a mother or father, they teach you languages, they teach you everything. (...) How to walk. (...) [But] when I came here, I knew nothing. (Turkish father)

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapters, we demonstrated how policies generate different barriers to the social inclusion of refugee families, who have to navigate their way through a maze of expectations and rules. But what impact do these winding, unpredictable inclusion pathways have on refugee families' general sense of well-being?

In the interviews, members of refugee families often described well-being in terms of 'being happy', 'feeling at ease' or 'feeling at home'. Conversely, some of our interviewees referred to 'migration pain'. Rather than adopting an individualised view on well-being as a 'healthy' state of mind – in contrast to trauma or other pathologies – we take an environmental approach that views psychosocial well-being as being intertwined with the material and structural conditions in which people arrive.[77] As an initial step towards such a 'systematic perspective',[78] the previous chapters mapped out some of the main policy and support gaps. In this chapter, we examine how these structural barriers influence the well-being of refugee families.

Unlike 'etic' interpretations, which analyse experiences from an external observer's perspective, we adopt an 'emic' approach that focuses on how refugee families themselves understand and interpret their experiences. In this chapter, together with refugee families, we unravel exactly which factors contribute to or hinder their well-being after their arrival.[79]

While much of this discussion focuses on the challenges, the barriers erected by integration policies, and the structural vulnerabilities faced by refugee families, it is equally important to recognise how these narratives also reveal resilient moves. In earlier research, Mieke Groeninck and colleagues[80] described these moves as all the efforts that refugee families undertake – often together with a wide range of actors, such as practitioners, volunteers and neighbours. These efforts involve both coping with structural circumstances (such as the lack of affordable housing and dealing with discrimination) and the strategies that families deploy to resist or negotiate these circumstances. In short, we will look at what refugee families do within and beyond the parameters of what government policies expect from them.

Besides documenting their experiences of pain, loss and their strategies of coping and resistance, we also delve into social situations in which refugee families have inspired Belgians and, motivated by a desire for social connectivity, sometimes actively contributed to a broader sense of neighbourliness.

5.1 FROM DISORIENTATION TO 'MINOR INTEGRATIONS'

> In April, when I arrived and got my [identity] card, there were no [language] classes – they had already started. I had to wait. No classes in the summer. So, I had to wait until September. Six months just staying at home, and that was hard. The hardest period was actually at the beginning because I didn't know anyone. It's also a small village, where you can't easily get around by yourself. And I didn't know the system, the culture, everything... (...) I didn't have a driver's license at the time. I had to use public transport if I wanted to go somewhere, but I didn't know the language. How do I go? Where should I go? So, I always had to go with my husband. That was also hard for me because I am someone who usually does everything independently. (Palestinian mother)

As this quote shows, arriving in a new, often unwelcoming and highly complicated bureaucratic context in which one does not know the local 'system' or 'culture', can lead to a profound sense of disorientation and connection. This was often narrated in terms of a lack of knowledge on *where to go* or *how to do something the right way*. They often pointed to a lack of resources with which they could orientate themselves within the complexity of daily life in this new environment.

> *Interviewer*: What do you miss the most from Turkey?
>
> Family and activities with family, doing things with family. I knew everything in Turkey, so it was easy for me to live there, but here everything is different. I miss that about Turkey too, but now I'm adjusted here, so it's not a problem anymore. But in the beginning, it was difficult for me. (...) Though [sometimes], I still feel that way. During my maternity leave, I didn't know what to do. That's why I got my salary [via health insurance] two months late. (...) So, everything is still very difficult. Even buying a house – I'm like a baby, so I need to ask about all the details. (Turkish mother)

As we showed in Chapter 4, language barriers play a crucial role in this process:

> When you're here for the first time, it's hard to understand, but you feel like a baby. (...) You want to go to Brussels, but you don't know how. (...) We tried on our own, step by step. (...) With GPS. But it wasn't easy. (...) Finding work in Dutch is another challenge. It wasn't easy. (...) We made our own CV and then prepared it in Dutch and French. But, yes, with our Dutch and French, we couldn't make a 100% correct CV or cover letter. So, you always need to find someone to help. Yes, and sometimes, I send my motivation letter to my children's teacher. "Can you check this and correct the mistakes?" Sometimes I send it to my Dutch teacher. "Can you look at my motivation letter?" (...) So, with every step, like a child, you have to ask someone for help. That's really difficult. (Turkish mother)

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu refers to this experience of being socially and personally 'out of touch' with the social context in which they have ended up as a form of 'hysteresis'.[81] Feminist author and independent scholar Sara Ahmed discusses something similar in her book, *The Promise of Happiness,* when she describes how a migrant family struggles to relate to "the national game", using football as an example.[82] However, we can use her example as a metaphor to illustrate how 'hysteresis' implies a lack of knowledge of 'the rules of the game' in a new environment – an environment that, we might add, often seems to complicate the game for certain 'new players' who might not know anyone else. A Palestinian mother, for instance, told us:

> I didn't know anyone, there was no family. I didn't know the rules in the street and in the store. Everything was difficult for the first six months. (Palestinian mother)

According to social scientists building on Bourdieu's work, such a situation of 'hysteresis' is the result of how the social environment is organised: certain skills, knowledge and achievements are recognised, while others are treated as irrelevant – think of the social skills that are needed to really connect with other people, and the ability to speak the local language.[83]

Many refugee families found this revaluation – or rather devaluation – of their skills very disorienting. While civic integration courses generally provided a foothold in this period of 'hysteresis', this was seldom sufficient. Either these courses came too late in their inclusion pathway, or the content was too far removed from refugee families' daily concerns and questions. In addition, the civic integration courses were different, depending on the municipality in which they ended up.

> I fully respect the societies, the communities and the cultural issues, because I knew this before I moved to Brussels [due to previous visits]. (...) So this is ok for me, how people live, how people work; for this I don't have a problem. My problem is (...) I don't know what to do, how to do. (...) I say these things, [and] more or less it's related to the social integration classes and activities of the government. (...) So if that was proper and appropriate, then people will not get much trouble and problems. (...) I got it after fourteen months of being in Brussels, in Belgium. I faced many difficulties [in the meantime]. (...) It would be more useful to have it at the start. But even if you think about the contents, it's just a waste of time. (...) In the integration classes only history, a quick modern history of Belgium, which can be given to the students or to the people as a reading material, not wasting time in the class for two hours to read that. Instead they need to know, they need to learn very practical things: how they work, how to find work, how does it work, how to register, how to find a house, where, how to go to OCMW/CPAS for example, how to go to VDAB [Flemish Employment Agency], ... If you face this problem with

> these people, how do you manage it? The practical things. How do you manage your waste? That is the only part that I found useful from the orientation classes! (Afghan father)

After having learned 'the rules of the game', many family members felt compelled to support other newcomers in order to ease their entry into Belgian society. This was the result of having experienced the feeling of:

> (...) having no one when I just arrived. That was one of the reasons why I chose to become a referrer in diversity. Because in my own private life, I had no one to support me. (Palestinian referrer in diversity)

These referrers in diversity offer both practical as well as social and emotional support. They support newcomers both figuratively and literally along parts of their inclusion pathway.

> [Due to our services as intercultural mediators] I've seen how the [migrant] families are relieved of some problems. They come with stress; for example, a woman has an appointment at the hospital on that day, but she doesn't know the way. So we print out the road via google maps and the first time I go with her and show that in practice. We come here and say: "You take this bus here" and this and that "to X," that's the first time. So step by step. The second time, we print that road from Google Maps on paper and she's going to do that herself as an exercise. So step by step, it's less stressful for her to go to an appointment because now she can find her way very easily. Or there was someone who had to call every time to order food for a disabled child, who only gets food through a tube. And the idea is not that we would call the supplier every time to order, because after our guidance, he has to do that himself. So the first time, I called myself, the second time also, but the third time, I wrote what he had to say and translated into Arabic. He speaks Dutch, but not fluently. So he could call, but I was sitting next to him, so in case of stress or a problem, I could help. We tried that and the first time it worked and he was very happy. The second time, he could just order food by himself over the phone, whereas before that was a problem for him. And so the stress actually decreased little by little. (Syrian intercultural intermediator)

As discussed previously, such intercultural mediators, referrers in diversity or other types of bridging figures are not present in every municipality.[84] However, even when such professional support is lacking, settled immigrants often offer voluntary support to help newly arrived families to overcome the condition of 'hysteresis':

> *Formerly unaccompanied minor*: [When my mum and sister first arrived here,] it was like a completely different planet for them. They couldn't and didn't dare to

> go outside because they didn't know their way around. It's just that all the streets look the same. If you leave one street and go to another, you can't find your way back. In Afghanistan, we have big houses, and yeah, everything here is different.
>
> *Interviewer*: And how has that changed now? How did they learn? Did you help them with that, or how did they manage?
>
> *Formerly unaccompanied minor*: Ehm, there's a big park here (...). And it's very close to us. In the summer, a lot of Afghan women come there every afternoon. They have picnics, almost every day. And they also visit each other's homes. Yes, and now [my mum and sister] know them, so they sometimes visit each other. (...) [And then] the women helped with everything else.
>
> *Interviewer*: And what about buses and trams? Do they take those too?
>
> *Formerly unaccompanied minor*: Yes, alone to school, yes. Because they know the way. They take the same route every day.
>
> *Interviewer*: And who taught them that, the way to school?
>
> *Formerly unaccompanied minor*: I did. (...) I had to go with them for the first time. (Afghan formerly unaccompanied minor)

As this fragment shows, 'hysteresis' is usually a temporary condition.[85] This condition is reduced through what researchers Karel Arnaut, Luce Beeckmans and Bruno Meeus call 'minor integrations'[86]: the gradual acquisition of specific skills and knowledge about where and how to do tasks the right way, that is, according to the rules of the game. Such 'minor integrations' take place whenever anyone enters into an unknown social context where other norms, rules or expectations apply. At the same time, these interactions can also change these social contexts.[87]

Many refugee families, however, are faced with additional barriers, such as strict language requirements, limited access to housing and all kinds of discrimination[88] (see Chapters 3 and 4). This is the result of multiple gaps in policies and support: a lack of formal support and fragmented policy that sometimes deliberately raises barriers to refugee families' social inclusion. Instead, refugee families often rely on the informal support from people in their immediate surroundings. This was particularly evident when we asked a Palestinian mother what 'integration' means to her:

> Integration happens after one year, I feel, [that's when] I know everything. (...) Afterwards, you can go to Brussels alone, you can book tickets by yourself, you can go to school to enrol yourself, to the market, to many places, to the municipality... If you can go to the municipality to do something, ... So everything happens after one year. For me, I could do things on my own after one year, so that's good integration (laughs).

Interviewer: And did someone teach you all that?

Yes. My husband, other friends, school... yeah. (...) Only the things that come with integration in Belgium. How you can use the hospital, for example. (...) The first time, [someone helps you]. Two times, three times... then after one year, you can do it yourself. (Palestinian mother)

This informal support, however, is not always sufficient. Even when refugee families fulfil all the expectations regarding their 'integration', they do not necessarily attain an overall sense of well-being. During their inclusion pathways people often also struggle with various aspects of what one of our interviewees described as 'migration pain'.

5.2 MIGRATION PAIN AND PARTIAL WELL-BEING

> Migration pain lasts a very long time. [By migration pain], I mean everything that caused you pain during your migration process: leaving your family, your network, your friends, the difficulties you faced during the journey, and then the challenges in the host country, like in the reception centres. But there are also beautiful things, of course, like the new network you build, which stays with you. The people who stand by you; you never forget them. For example, in the reception centre, we met people we're still friends with. That's also part of migration pain because you share it, along with your integration process here. (...) For instance, when you hear stories from other refugees, it brings you back to your own story. That pain is something that lasts a very long time. I know people who have been here for 30 years and still feel that pain. (...) For me, it was a forced departure, and I had to leave my emotional baggage behind – my family, my friends, my home – and start from zero here. (...) Like a child. A child without a name, without parents, without a country, without an identity, nothing. It's incredibly difficult. If you're a child with parents, with an identity and a name, it's easier to live... But as a child with nothing, it's very hard. I think that's the biggest part of migration pain that stays with everyone, especially for people who come here alone, without family or friends. (Afghan father)

This dense account combined many different experiences. This Afghan refugee was a student at Kabul University, and had to leave overnight after receiving indirect death threats through his highly placed father. What he poignantly describes as 'migration pain' includes what we would call '*the migration wound*'. On the one hand, this refers to the pain caused by forced displacement, or to hardships endured during their journey,[89] which are often caused by repressive migration and border policies.[90] On the other hand, it refers to the structural problems people face after arrival, which generate a sense of having made a sacrifice. People who migrate often lose all kinds of social and cultural capital

– or, to be more precise, the social and cultural capital that they have has lost its value in the new social field they have entered.[91] An Afghan mother pointed out some of these losses:

> *Interviewer*: What has been the hardest thing for your mother to cope with?
>
> *Son translating for mother*: She says, it's a kind of homeland [that you are lacking]. That's definitely very important. But here, the language was very difficult, and everything was so different from what we had in Afghanistan. Everything was hard at the beginning. (...) She never imagined she would emigrate at the age of 55. (...) Everything happened so suddenly and on our [her children's] request. (...) It all happened right away. (Afghan family)

Many refugee families initially felt that they lacked the local knowledge and skills to root themselves in a different society. Unsurprisingly, they suffered from anxiety in this particular period. The complex policies and policy gaps put substantial mental pressure on refugee families to internalise the rules as soon as possible, without equipping them with the necessary tools to do so. In addition, this anxiety was fuelled by the sometimes rather closed, even hostile attitude of settled Belgians.[92] We encountered many accounts of a paralysing fear of making mistakes in administrative procedures, of having to move again, of losing important documents, and of communicating in a new language.

> In the beginning, people hesitate to make contact. For example, at first, I felt like I had to find the exact right word to speak with someone who is Belgian because I might say something that isn't acceptable in their culture. So, (...) I had to think carefully before I spoke, and process things in my mind... This causes a lot of anxiety and tension. But the more you stay in contact, the easier those barriers become, and eventually, you stop overthinking. Then you realise it's okay to make mistakes. People don't observe or judge you because they understand it's new for you. However, there are many misunderstandings too. For instance, if someone looks at me, I might think it's because I'm a refugee, or because I'm in Belgium, and there isn't regular contact with that person. (Afghan father)

> It's just... [daring to take] that step to communicate in Dutch and approach people. Sometimes there's doubt, like, "Will that person be friendly?" (...) For some, there's this feeling of, "They don't want us either." And that is because... you feel it. I had that feeling at the beginning when I lived in [municipality X]. At first, yes, how people look at you, their mannerisms, and so on. It's like they don't want contact either, so I'm not going to bother [approaching them]. But later, I took the step myself, by saying "hello." (Palestinian mother)

These accounts demonstrate how the sense of being 'different' and unwelcome is often the result of instances of racism and discrimination based on physical and religious features. As was the case with this Somalian daughter:

> I sort of feel at home here. But not completely. (...) Because on good days, it's okay. I have good moments. But sometimes I have difficulties with people, I feel like they resist me, or, you know, they treat me less than they treat white people, just because I'm black, because I'm Muslim, because I wear a hijab. Then I feel like "Oh my god, why am I even here?" Then sometimes you go to job interviews, and they'll hire a lot of other people but not you, and they don't have a good reason why. (...) And you really think "Ah okay, it's just my hijab, that's the problem." And others sometimes literally say: "You cannot work there with your hijab." (Formerly unaccompanied minor from Somalia)

Apart from racism and discrimination, members of refugee families also faced cultural prejudice and stereotypes. The constant need to renounce and respond to these prejudices proved to be exhausting.

> I didn't feel at home in [municipality X], because when people came to me, they would immediately start speaking French. But I'd say, "I don't speak French, sorry." "How come? You're Moroccan?" "No, I'm not Moroccan." "What?" "I'm from Palestine." "What is Palestine?" "Where is Palestine?" "Pakistan, is it Pakistan?" "No, it's another country." It's hard. What's difficult is that you always have to explain yourself, tell your story, and so on. Sometimes it's really hard to share all those details, to explain your journey. "How long have you been in Belgium?" Yeah. "You speak Dutch very well." "Thank you." That wasn't easy. (...) If I hadn't decided myself to take that step... Because I see around me so many people who just can't do it. (...) Mentally, emotionally, or they just don't have the strength to keep going. Sometimes you feel blocked by everything you see. And then, how do you step out of that circle and move forward? (...) I just thought to myself, "I can't go on like this anymore." Those first six months were really... (...) I was thinking about going back to Palestine. I couldn't do it anymore; it was too hard. But if I went back, I wouldn't have a job. And my children, by then, didn't want to go back either [the interview was prior to the war]. (Palestinian mother)

This sense of being 'different' and excluded sometimes led to a lack of self-confidence, as was the case with this Syrian refugee, who fled to Belgium as a teenager.

> You come here with the feeling of "Finally, I've made it, and now I'm going to make my dreams come true." You have a lot of faith in your dream, and then you run into the reality here of "you're not welcome, you're a burden to us." All those things like racism, discrimination, no warm welcome, make sure that in the beginning you have to fight. That was my case. I fight, I fight, I fight to find a place, but

> at some point, your energy runs out, and you start doubting yourself. Everything here is beautiful, the buildings are beautiful, the people are beautiful, everyone wears nice clothes, drives nice cars, so I don't fit here. You start questioning yourself. Because you start questioning yourself as a person, you begin to lose your self-confidence. A person with no self-confidence can mean nothing to society. (Syrian man)

In addition to feelings of loss and being 'different', 'migration pain' is also caused by factors such as the difficulties in accessing decent housing and long-term employment.[93]

> *Daughter*: [When we were in the emergency housing], we had to go every week to the OCMW/CPAS to prove we were looking for houses. We felt that stress because I always had to call those houses, saying I wanted an appointment on a particular day. I always had to go with my parents to visit the houses, and I would get home really late. Then I had to study for school because I had exams. We kept going to those houses, and I had to talk, but in the end, none of the houses worked out. So, we got hit with disappointment again. (...)
>
> *Mother*: Yes, almost a year of constantly searching, taking the train, the bus, and so on. A lot of problems, a lot of stress. (...) I always went to house visits, but then someone else got chosen. I did all the paperwork, and then others got selected. A lot of stress, yes. (...) We've been in Belgium for seven years, and it's been stress, stress, stress. (...) After I work and get Belgian nationality, then it will be better; then a little less stress. (Afghan mother and daughter)

The following account from a Turkish father illustrates the specific challenges of navigating a period of economic precarity. He describes feeling conflicted between the discomfort of financial dependency on the OCMW/CPAS – which also signified taking a step backwards, both socially and economically – and the need to work persistently to achieve a high level of Dutch proficiency.[94]

> Economically, it was difficult. (...) Many educated people don't want to finish all the courses because the OCMW/CPAS money isn't enough, so they have to work. That's why you could be a doctor or someone else, but instead of learning the language, they have to take another job, quickly do something else. (...) But we made a choice with my wife. Okay, a little patience... Be patient, yes, but after learning these languages, we can get a better job. (...) We chose this path to help us. And we found a good job. (...) [But those first two years] financially, it was hard. Maybe also... socially [limited]. (Turkish father)

All of these components of migration pain are closely intertwined. In scientific literature, this is sometimes described as 'loss caravans', a succession of mutually reinforcing experiences of loss.[95] In addition to the possible trauma of fleeing, aspects such as the hardships endured during the journey, the profound

insecurity experienced during the asylum process, and economic precarity can all lead to prolonged feelings of anxiety. These findings align with a Dutch study carried out in 2017, according to which 42% of Syrian refugees who arrived in the Netherlands in 2014 reported frequently feeling anxious, down and depressed whereas this was the case for less than 15% of Dutch people.[96] A follow-up study conducted in 2019 showed that this proportion had fallen slightly from 42% to 38%, yet remained worryingly high.[97] These are concerning figures, to say the least.

5.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY

The presence of family continues to be crucial for the well-being of refugees. Without family, the risk of psychosocial vulnerability[98] is greater, while having family nearby gives them power and energy. Parents, in particular, often feel that they have a responsibility towards their family members, and that they need to set an example. The well-being of family members is a strong motivator. As a Turkish father testifies:

> [During our first period in Belgium,] we had to find strength, we had to work, we had to support each other. Help each other forward, the whole family. If I were here alone, maybe I wouldn't be able to work, wouldn't be able to study Dutch, or anything else, maybe I couldn't do that. Family is very important [for motivation]. (...) With children, it's better. (...) You have to feel that way. My children need to grow up in a good life, so I have to do extra... (...) Extra work, extra do your best. And being an example is very important, I have to be an example too. (Turkish father)

Although the safety and proximity of family members play a crucial role in the well-being of refugees, Belgian migration policy is generating increasing barriers to family reunification. To date (spring 2025), recognised refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection are, for the first year after being granted international protection, exempt from a number of additional conditions that are imposed on other third-country nationals to initiate a family reunion procedure. These are mainly requirements governing income (120% of the living wage: € 2,131.28 net income per month today), suitable housing and health insurance.

However, research by Pascal Debruyne[99] shows that many refugee families are separated for a long time because, firstly, the application has to be made from abroad at a Belgian diplomatic post and, secondly, numerous certificates have to be 'legalised'. This entails huge financial costs.[100] The Arizona government

has announced that it wants to raise these thresholds even further, especially for people with subsidiary protection. In practice, they would have to wait up to two years after recognition before starting a family reunion procedure, and income thresholds would go up to 110% of the monthly average net income, with 10% added for each dependent child. Recognised refugees would be given a shorter exemption period of only six months to apply remotely. All this will keep family members separated for longer, affecting the well-being and social inclusion of all family members concerned.[101]

While the presence of children can be motivating, some parents also struggle with the feeling of parental sacrifice. They put aside their own well-being for the future and happiness of their children.[102] This is evident, for example, in the following story of a Palestinian mother who arrived in Belgium through a family reunification process. After living independently in Gaza for a long time as a single working mother of two, she had to adjust to living with her husband again. Due to family reunification rules, she had to live with him for five years after arriving in Belgium, or she risked losing her right of residence. This placed her in a dependent position.[103]

> A few years ago, the plan was [to get a divorce]. But for the sake of my children, I won't do that. Just moving forward, it's part of the pressure, you just have to stay a family. Yes, you're actually alone here. The feeling of loneliness sometimes... [And yet] when people from outside look at me, they say: "But you have everything" [by which they mean: a proper house, a nice job, language skills].
>
> *Interviewer*: But you don't feel that way?
>
> No. When you have the possibility to work here, it's [usually] not your [first] choice. You have to. We bought a house, and it was hard to get everything in order. It took a lot of energy from me. And later, during the renovation period. It was really hard... And then okay, it's fine now, but in the meantime, I feel dead inside. I don't feel it. When I'm home, okay, it's nice, we've done everything, but I'd rather be in my little apartment in Gaza [which has completely been destroyed in the meantime, by Israeli bombing]. But that feeling comes up occasionally. That's why I just stay busy, always. (Palestinian mother)

Although this mother could 'tick off' several requirements that the policy placed under 'integration' – such as Dutch language skills and employment – this did not automatically translate into a general sense of well-being. On the one hand, she also had the assumption that through 'affective contagion'[104] – a concept developed by Sara Ahmed – she would gradually become happy about the same things as the people from the new close environment, so as to belong to a shared 'affective community'. On the other hand, she struggles with a more complex reality and an experience of 'partial well-being': a layered and constantly changing sense

of well-being, without completely negating the dormant sense of migratory pain. Family dynamics play a crucial role in this, and are put under pressure by the tight regulations governing family reunification.[105]

5.4 FROM UNILATERAL ASSIMILATION TO THE MULTIPLE SOURCES OF HAPPINESS

Policy-makers and traditional academic research on 'integration', 'assimilation' and 'acculturation' often assume that newcomers gradually adapt to their new environment, and that the difference between newcomers and the settled population will erode over generations. The assumption is that newcomers increasingly adopt elements of 'the' local culture and leave behind those of their home country.[106] One might infer that this adaptation also applies to their well-being: that migration pain gradually fades away as one becomes part of the local society. The reality turns out to be a lot more complex.[107] An Afghan father explains this clearly:

> I think the easiest process is to bring in your [own] culture but also be open to other cultures to learn. Because if you clash with other cultures, you can come back to your own culture, because you do know that culture and from there you get back the strength to continue and do your process. But if you leave your own culture behind, then you go to other cultures and there you clash a lot... and then you have nothing to return to. (Afghan father)

"Bringing in your own culture, but also being open to the other culture," echoes Sara Ahmed's reflections on being part of several affective communities at once:

> The experience of migration makes explicit how we [each of us] always occupy more than one community; if the possibility that we occupy more than one community is structural, then even one community involves the experience of more than one.[108]

Being part of multiple 'affective communities' – which we all are, as the citation explains, also proves crucial for the well-being of refugee families. According to Ahmed, such an attitude of openness also implies that "we do not all have to place our hopes for happiness in the same things". Because adopting the rules of the local game does not necessarily lead to happiness (arriving from the same things). At the same time, this openness can also lead to the game being changed from within through the arrival of new players. In the next section, we explore how 'neighbourliness' can be an example of this.[109]

5.5 NEIGHBOURLINESS AND 'AFFECTIVE CONTAGION'

> *Interviewer*: Do you feel comfortable and 'at home' where you live right now?
>
> Yes, I feel very good. (...) I have good neighbours. (...) When my baby was born, everyone came with flowers and gifts for me. (...) At first, when I arrived in [municipality X], I wanted to talk to people. But there was no one..., and I was a bit afraid to... to talk with our neighbour, this man. Because I thought: "Maybe he doesn't want us here..." I didn't dare to talk with him. I didn't want to ask him for anything. But actually, I see now that he's a very good man. He always helps us or plays with the kids. (Palestinian mother)

During the conversations with refugee families, significant attention was given to migration pain caused by the structural issues that have been highlighted in previous chapters. As the interviews progressed, we also talked about the moments when they experienced or had experienced a sense of happiness and well-being and what that was about. We talked about the present, the past, what they remembered, or what they were striving for (again) here.

One recurring theme in this regard was the question of contentment with one's place of residence and to what extent or not this related to a sense of belonging or feeling at home. To illustrate these reflections, multiple family members emphasised the significance of a specific kind of neighbourliness. People vividly recalled how, in their former home countries, 'the social fabric' among neighbours revolved around sharing food,[110] practices of hospitality, or (material and other forms of) support, all 'without having to make an appointment'.[111] They often experience social life in Belgium as very different. When this is seen as a social loss, it can have an impact on people's well-being, and in particular their sense of feeling at home.

> I don't know my neighbours here by name, but by face. We greet each other, but [there are] cultural constraints here because even from country to country, it is... [different]. (...) In my country, people come, knock on the door, you open the door, they are having some food, for instance, when we have cooked something very special and we give some of it to our neighbour, and just you send it, knock the door and they will open; she opens the door and you give them a plate of something sweet and they receive it with thankfulness, and they keep the plate (...) for some time. When the time comes, they make something special [on their turn], they give it back to you and this is the way of working. But here it's not. Here even [when a son wants to visit his mother], they have to call, they have to make an appointment, they have to say that when you are available when you are not. (Afghan father)

Even when discussing feelings of not being welcome or being 'different', the role of neighbourliness was a recurrent topic:

> In our societies in the East and in Arab cultures, we have many warm feelings towards others. For example, I need to know my neighbours, visit them, bring them food – that's how people know each other. And they engage in many activities, like sitting outside, for instance, on chairs, everyone gathers, they laugh and talk. But here, that's not the case. In the past it was, but not anymore. (...) Here, I don't know my neighbours. Maybe we talk once or twice in two years, but that's it. (...) And I think some people can't accept this situation. They interpret it differently because they are not on the same path. So they understand it differently. (...) But I regret not knowing my neighbours. Once during COVID, we brought coffee and wine and talked. Then we met and had conversations, but after that: no. (Palestinian father)

The lack of the 'affective community' to which refugees belonged in their country of origin reinforces the feeling of 'hysteresis' (see supra),[112] of not (yet) being rooted in a new environment with different customs.

> I only know my neighbours a little, not so much. Because I work, I don't have much time. I only get home around six or seven. On weekends, I still have things to take care of. But it will come. (...) For example, now I've moved to [municipality X]. (...) But I still don't really know my neighbours, except for 'hello', 'good day', and so on, but not really. Except for the ones next to us a little, sometimes we talk, but not much. (...) But for now, for example, I have contact with the parents of my children's friends. (...) I sometimes see those parents at their place, and they come to us as well. It's nice... Also my neighbour, she's very friendly. We've already visited each other a few times and such. But the culture is different. For instance, in our culture, it's normal that if you see your neighbour coming over, it's like, "Come in, here's some coffee," and so on. But here, you have to ask first. Can it be done? If my daughter goes to play at their house, or that girl or someone else comes to our house, it has to be planned and organised. Sometimes it's hard. After a while, in your life, you've had your friends, and starting anew... It's okay, you'll meet a lot of people, but who will really stay close to you? That will be difficult. I also think that's why some people always look for others who share the same culture... (Palestinian mother)

We also spoke to some families who had people of the same ethnic, cultural, national or linguistic background in their circle of close friends, which enabled them to (at least partially) recover old neighbourly habits. With the help of the informal support provided by these social networks, they were able to navigate Belgian society (see Chapter 6). Despite their intentions, several refugee families found it very challenging to establish contact with Belgian neighbours[113]:

> But it also depends on the neighbours. Some people are just not open or ready to engage with others. I know that we Arabs are always social. But sometimes, because of the language barrier, newcomers are hesitant to reach out. That's why we're now trying a bit to encourage people to get involved in volunteer work. (Palestinian Referrer in diversity)

> Now, we have lovely neighbours. (...) One of them is an old man, 80 years old. Belgians. (...) If I have problems, I always go to one of my neighbours. But I really struggled with it [previously]. One day I wanted to pick up my son, and I forgot my key inside. And then my husband also... the second key was with him and he wasn't at home. So, I was sitting here on the stairs waiting for him with my son. Then the neighbour saw me. I was also pregnant. And he asked, "Why are you sitting here?" He said he spoke a little Arabic. And I said I had forgotten my key. "What are you sitting here for? I am your neighbour, right? Why don't you knock on my door so you can come inside and wait?" I said I didn't know. Whether we spoke Arabic or English... I don't know how we communicated, but he said it. "Come inside." So, we went inside. He made us drinks and such. We stayed until my husband arrived. After that, I was very happy to have seen someone. A little chat. In Arabic and such. (...) It's really hard when someone doesn't start [the first move] with you. Together, you're stronger. (Eritrean mother)

These stories show how different actors contribute to maintaining and renewing the social fabric of this neighbourhood.[114] But the arrival of new players in the game can also revitalise and enrich the game itself. Their sense of neighbourliness can become 'affectively contagious'. This is illustrated by the following story of a Turkish family:

> We live in [municipality X], a bit of a chaotic place. Not chaotic, but in a big apartment building. Fifty years old. And mostly older people live here. So, we are nicely surrounded. We wanted to... We thought a bit with our mentality: "Okay, we'll make friends with our neighbours." So, at the beginning... during Christmas and later at other festive times as well, my wife – she's really good in the kitchen – prepared some special things, and I offered them to a few people [in the building]. But they were really surprised. They asked, "Why?" But it's a celebration, and we wanted to... (laughs)... And I asked my friends why those people [were surprised]... There was also a man and his wife who was blind. And they didn't understand why we were bringing something at that time [around Christmas]. They didn't know, actually. So I asked my friend why it's like this. He said: "Here it's a bit different. Maybe they thought you also wanted something from them." I don't know. But now we've understood a little. [That] It takes a bit of time. But [now] with our neighbours, we have very good contact. On the same floor, there are four of us [closely in relation]. They're really nice, Bernard and his wife Marianne. (...) It's going really well. (Turkish father)

During conversations with refugee families and (in)formal actors surrounding them, this sort of neighbourliness was considered largely absent in the Belgian context.[115] However, this Turkish father's account shows that sometimes all it takes is a single connection between two neighbours, a small opening for a spark that comes from elsewhere.

5.6 CONCLUSION: PUTTING WELL-BEING FIRST?

This book shows how all kinds of policy gaps create barriers in the inclusion pathways of refugee families. In this chapter, we illustrated the negative impact these barriers have on the well-being of refugee families, and how these families then cope with them. If the government aims to promote the 'self-reliance' and 'social participation' of newcomers, we should consider their well-being as a crucial starting point, for at least two reasons. The first is a human reason, since self-reliance and social participation remain worthless if they do not lead to better well-being. The second is a more pragmatic reason: without a basic sense of general well-being, people are unlikely to have the full mental capacity to learn a new language, find a place to live, take care of their families, and work their way through the Belgian bureaucracy. If the government expects newcomers to learn on a local, social and institutional level, then clearly the government itself should not impose further barriers to achieving this goal.

Aside from the policy gaps, building social relationships in Belgium does not come naturally to refugee families either. For people who have left more close-knit communities behind, the lack of such communities can increase or prolong their migration pain, even when all the formal requirements of 'integration' have been met. Thus, circumstances that, in policies, are seen as 'integration' do not necessarily guarantee an overall sense of well-being. Conversely, however, we see that refugee families and other newcomers can contribute to unexpected forms of 'conviviality'.[116] Good neighbourliness involved a shared desire for a caring neighbourhood, a situation that policy-makers and other actors are also striving towards. In this sense, the longing for neighbourliness and social connection that so many refugee families experience can be a means of achieving a warm society for settled Belgians too.

6
PEOPLE AND PLACES OF SUPPORT

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Badr Came from Syria in 2016. When he arrived in Belgium, he slept for two nights in the Parc Maximilien, in the Brussels North Quarter, where other migrants were occupying the space due to a lack of reception facilities.[117] The owner of a snack bar offered him something to eat. A sex worker that he encountered in the street saw that he was cold, and gave him a coat. Migrants in the park explained to him where he had to go for the asylum procedure. Once his asylum application had been registered with the Immigration Office, he was sent to the reception centre in [small town X]. There, he met volunteers, in particular one woman, who practised French with him. After obtaining international protection a year later, he, like all refugees, was given only two months to leave the centre and secure housing on his own, due to the lack of practical support. Faced with numerous obstacles in the private housing market, however, he was unable to find any accommodation. The female volunteer he met when in the asylum centre found him an apartment via one of her acquaintances. She also helped Badr with the many administrative formalities involved in settling down, such as registering with the municipality and the health insurance fund, going to the OCMW/CPAS for social allowance, registering at the training centre for the mandatory integration programme, etc.). She accompanied him to these public services for support in translating and for further follow-up. Having launched a family reunification procedure as soon as his status was recognised, his wife and three children arrived a few months later. The family stayed in the apartment for some years, although they found it too small and too expensive. But they had no other option. The female volunteer became a family friend, visiting their home every week to practise French, to help with the children's schoolwork, and to support them with the 'administrative burden' (see Chapter 4). Formerly an engineer, Badr spent several years in a series of training programmes in the hope of finding work, without success. He eventually took on an informal job in a shop but as he felt exploited, he decided to leave. Later, he was employed for two years as a gardener through a social integration programme, which earned him the necessary "points" to access public social housing. His family recently moved in with him. Now unemployed again, Badr continues to apply for job vacancies, still hopeful about achieving economic independence.

Amina arrived in Brussels from Senegal, seeking refuge after fleeing her country due to its ban on abortion. Initially, she was housed by a compatriot she connected with through another fellow countryman she had met in a marketplace in Greece during her journey. After applying for international protection, she was accommodated in a collective reception centre in Brussels for several months. There, social workers informed her of the existence of different places that could help her settle down: she attended language courses at a training centre, took part in social activities through an association for newcomers, started the formalities for diploma recognition with a specialised organisation, and began the civic integration programme, while spending weekends at the home of another compatriot who guided her around the city. However, after her application was rejected, she was evicted from the collective reception centre. From then on, she was undocumented and lived in Brussels parks, emergency shelters, and squats. She worked informally in Afro hairdressing salons, braiding hair for a few euros a day. Over time, she fell into a depression, isolating herself in her squat room for entire days. A man responsible for cooking in the squat gave her the contact information for a centre for psychological support targeting refugees. There, she began regular sessions with a psychologist who advised her to reapply for asylum. With the help of an organisation offering legal support, she connected with a lawyer who, alongside a feminist organisation, assisted her in obtaining international protection status. During the proceedings, a friend of the lawyer provided her with temporary lodging and voluntary support. While waiting for her international protection status to be granted, which she eventually obtained, she became pregnant, moved in with her partner, and was later abandoned by him, leaving her without housing, income, or family support. Her psychologist referred her to a maternity home, where she lived and received support during her pregnancy. The psychologist also contacted an association specialising in helping refugees to access housing, which provided her with transitional housing and eventually long-term accommodation. Formerly a political science teacher, she is now following an education programme to become a data analyst.

INTRODUCTION

The stories of Badr and Amina illustrate the challenges refugees face after receiving international protection. Due to the lack of formal support, refugee families risk getting stuck or experiencing disruptions in their inclusion pathways, both in terms of the necessary administrative procedures (Chapter 2) and their housing situation (Chapter 3). This has a clear impact on refugee families' sense of well-being and belonging (Chapter 5).

The fragmented policies and lack of support lead refugee families to seek support within public services, in NGOs, volunteer organisations, or in their own networks, in order to acquire information and practical assistance and to build their own pathways. To do so, they often end up making a 'bricolage' of various forms of support from a variety of actors.[118] In this period of transition, it matters a great deal where families end up after leaving the collective reception centre has a major impact on their progress.

In this study, we examined the inclusion trajectories of refugee families in both a large city like Brussels and several smaller, suburban municipalities in Flanders and Wallonia. Since the availability of formal services, organisations, and volunteer initiatives varies greatly between municipalities, this chapter starts by considering this socio-spatial context to explore how various types of support play a crucial role in every location, albeit in different ways, to fill the gaps in policy.

6.1 DIFFERENT MILIEUS, DIFFERENT FORMS OF SUPPORT

Where can people turn to when they need support? In this chapter, we focus on the people and places that play a role in supporting refugee families. We examine how families gain access to this support and illustrate how formal and informal support systems are interconnected within the various settings in which newcomers must find their place.

Scholars have used a variety of concepts to show how crucial space is in shaping the inclusion pathways of immigrants.[119] While space plays an equally significant role in small and mid-sized municipalities,[120] social scientists have mainly focused on how metropolitan cities function as 'privileged place[s] of arrival',[121] that provide many formal and informal resources and spaces for newcomers. Whether they talk about 'zones in transition'[122] where immigrants settle first, so-called "immigrant enclaves",[123] 'arrival neighbourhoods',[124] or 'arrival infrastructures',[125] the

key point is always the same: the place where immigrants arrive and settle is crucial to their inclusion.

In this chapter, we use the notion of 'reception milieus'[126] to refer to the entire set of social, economic, cultural, institutional, and infrastructural facilities and provisions that newcomers encounter upon arrival in a new environment. Long-term residents are also part of this reception milieu. All these facilities and provisions play a crucial role in shaping newcomers' inclusion trajectories. The concept is not only used in the context of migration but also extends to various other situations where the (in)hospitality of a place is examined.

Newcomers utilise both *formal* and *informal* support whenever possible or available. The availability of these forms of support can vary significantly from one municipality or city to another.

The term *formal support* refers to the professional services offered to refugees by government institutions, social welfare organisations, or subsidised NGOs. This includes public social welfare centres (OCMW/CPAS), integration programmes, language courses, and OKAN classes (special education for newcomers of 12 to 18 years). It also encompasses non-profit organisations that provide specialised services, such as housing assistance, diploma recognition, family reunification support, legal advice, or psychological counselling. Formal support is typically characterised by a 'service provision relationship', which implies equal treatment for all, a relatively impersonal interaction, a time-limited support trajectory, and a focus on addressing a predefined problem.

Informal support, on the other hand, refers to assistance provided by acquaintances, family and friends, established migrants, volunteers, or even by fleeting encounters. This form of support can take place in a wide variety of settings, ranging from locations where formal support is also provided, to public spaces, community events, shops, places of worship, or markets. Informal support often has different characteristics compared to formal support. For example, relationships with volunteers can become personal, extending beyond solving a single specific problem. Or, the provided support may last much longer than formal support trajectories. It can also arise spontaneously from coincidental encounters and remain temporary or situational. In Flanders, Schrooten, Thys, and Debruyne refer to this phenomenon as "social shadow work".[127]

As the stories of Badr and Amina illustrate, the forms of support available to refugee families strongly depend on where they settle. Amina's trajectory is characterised by support from both formal and informal actors and places, while Badr relied primarily on informal networks. Their experiences are shaped by two

different 'reception milieus': one in the context of a large city and the other in and around a smaller municipality. These two reception milieus differ significantly in terms of the availability, type, and accessibility of resources and support actors.

As a superdiverse metropolis, Brussels provides a broad and varied support network, encompassing both formal and informal assistance. The city hosts not only the main institutions for asylum procedures and integration programmes but also a diverse and complex network of non-profit organisations that are often publicly funded and specifically dedicated to assisting newcomers. Due to historical migration patterns and the superdiverse nature of the city, newcomers – regardless of their country of origin – are more likely to encounter other, established migrants who speak their language, have faced similar challenges, and therefore already know how to navigate the system.

This contrasts with smaller cities and municipalities, where refugees and asylum seekers have only begun to arrive more recently, either following the opening of an asylum centre or due to the emerging suburbanisation of superdiversity.[128] For example, at the time when an asylum centre opened in one of the smaller cities in our study, there were hardly any organisations or essential infrastructures in place to support newcomers. In response to this institutional vacuum, a volunteer organisation emerged, taking on the role of providing support to refugees.

When comparing these different reception milieus, our aim is not simply to contrast the capacity of a large city with the limited resources of smaller cities or less urbanised areas where refugee families also settle. During our research, we met families in more remote and rural reception centres who had received significant support from social workers, who actively connected them with other organisations. At the same time, we encountered people in Brussels who had struggled to navigate the complex network of both formal and informal support systems.

Nevertheless, the distinction between reception milieus helps to map out different forms of support and gain insight into the broad range of people and places involved in the inclusion trajectories of refugee families.

6.2 WHO DO FAMILIES TURN TO?

In one of our case studies in a smaller municipality, support was primarily provided by volunteers, as there were few formal infrastructures available at the local level. Most of the refugees we spoke with, who arrived in the area a few years ago, had to rely on volunteers for administrative assistance. This reliance

on volunteers was also evident in a group discussion with refugees living in this municipality:

> All foreigners go to [the volunteer premises] and volunteers say "go there!"
>
> When you have a problem with a paper, you don't know and you can't read it sometimes, they helped, phoned, made the papers, photocopies are free there.
>
> My volunteer friend told me to take an integration course, and he looked up the address, and made an appointment, because on those days, we don't have... can't speak the language... and he made an appointment.

Volunteers act as intermediaries between newcomers and local government agencies in this context. They provide translations, guidance, and follow-up to help ease the 'administrative burden' (see Chapter 2). This is particularly important because, in this case, social workers and government employees are still often relatively uninformed about migration legislation. Additionally, volunteers assist refugee families in finding a first home through their local network of private landlords, and often via their own personal contacts (see Chapter 3). They also support refugee families in learning and practising the language, help children with their homework, and assist with everyday administrative tasks and paperwork. This is demonstrated by the story of this Palestinian mother:

> Madame M. started with us as a French teacher, she stayed with my children, studied with my children to pass the exam. With the difficulties eh, and she tried to find a solution for the difficulties, with the French language... until today! She comes maybe every week, she comes to our house, if we need something, to help with the paperwork, to register my children at university... she did all of that. (Palestinian mother)

The role of volunteers appears to be crucial for newcomers in this context, but also for local public service providers. According to both volunteers and refugees, social services often refer families to volunteers for administrative support. In other words, government agencies – or their employees – who should be providing formal assistance – in practice sometimes shift their responsibilities onto informal actors.

Information about refugees' rights and the services available is often shared by word of mouth in this context. This happens, for example, during language classes, in mosques or other religious spaces, in local shops, such as halal butchers, through friends who already live in Belgium, or via social media. Refugees describe how they often have to navigate long and complicated processes before they receive help:

> I went myself to [organisation X] to ask what I could do for the recognition of diploma, and he told me to do it like this, he gave me the address in Brussels, and my language teacher helped me to make an appointment, and I went with my son, and Madame Amina did the translation. But my friend [living in Flanders] said, why do you do all this, lots of friends for advice? It's the social worker who must do everything! (...) That's the way it's done, it's a cycle, for problems it takes a long time to find a solution. (Syrian mother)

In the reception milieu of a large city, support takes on different forms. Refugee families must navigate a constantly evolving network of formal aid organisations, primarily NGOs. These organisations often have more extensive experience and a great deal of knowledge regarding the rights and needs of refugees and the support systems that have developed around them. They provide specialised and often multilingual assistance in various areas, such as legal and administrative support, entry into the labour market, mental health, and housing. In addition to these formal structures, a significant amount of informal support is also provided by volunteers and established migrants who have lived in the city for a longer period of time. They share information on where to go, what rights people have, what the expectations are, and how legal and administrative procedures work, all based on the experiential knowledge they have gained themselves. A Burundian father explained it as follows:

> When you talk to them [compatriots], they're the ones who tell you that you have to take the language course, even before the social worker who manages your file at the refugee centre tells you; they also say you have to take an integration course, which is compulsory, so you go to the social worker, you're informed, you ask the questions and that's it. (Burundian father)

In the smaller municipality we studied, refugee families have limited access to these forms of support based on experiential knowledge, simply because at the time of our research, fewer people with a recent migratory background were living there. While such support does exist, it occurs less frequently. For example, in this specific municipality, we met a halal butcher who temporarily closed his shop to accompany a family that did not speak the language to their first appointment with social services. We also observed that some families who have been living in the municipality for several years are gradually starting to play a role in supporting newcomers. We spoke with an Iraqi father who arrived ten years ago and is now helping a friend find housing. Additionally, we met a Syrian father who regularly translates documents for newcomers and occasionally accompanies them to administrative services or training centres. He told us:

> [A man] was at the door, I said 'why don't you come in', he said... I said 'Bonjour', I said in Arabic 'are you Kurdish?' (...) I met him in front of this school, I accompanied him to the volunteer premises, I introduced him to the people who work there, I accompanied him to the training centre... (Syrian father who helps other newcomers)

The same man also accompanied another family to register for social housing and to a doctor's appointment. Additionally, he went to the asylum centre to leave his contact information there:

> I told them I speak Arabic, Kurdish, French quite well too, a little English but English I can't translate... just in case there's someone who has difficulty doing anything, if I'm free, with pleasure, I like to do it. (Syrian father who helps other newcomers)

A Syrian woman who has been living in the municipality with her family since 2016 also regularly acts as an interpreter for newly arrived women. Sometimes she is even asked by a training centre involved in the integration programme to provide translations. Drawing on their experiential knowledge, these people often help newcomers navigate the maze of government services and various institutions. In doing so, they help make these spaces more accessible for newcomers who arrive several years after them.

6.3 HOW DO FAMILIES ACCESS SUPPORT?

Reception milieus thus differ considerably in terms of available support to refugee families. A crucial question is, therefore, how accessible the existing support actually is. How do families come into contact with support actors, or how do they find their way to the right places?

Initially, asylum centres often serve as places where newcomers also come into contact with volunteers and fellow nationals. In this way, they help facilitate *informal* support. In the smaller municipality from our case studies, where the asylum centre has been established more recently, volunteers organise various activities within the centre to connect with newcomers. However, these volunteers rarely provide access to *formal* support services where additional resources are available. This is because such services are often lacking, unknown, or inaccessible in this local and remote context.

When reception centres, as seen in the Brussels case study, are strongly embedded in a local network of formal services – often due to the presence of NGOs that have developed over the years – staying in the asylum centre can also serve as a gateway to these resources. Through this connection, newcomers can start language courses, receive information about family reunification or diploma recognition, or access psychosocial support, as was the case for Amina.

In addition, public spaces and semi-public meeting places– such as places of worship, ethnic shops, barbershops, cafés, or non-profit organisations in Brussels and other cities or municipalities with a longer migration history – often serve as spaces people with a migratory background can gather. After receiving their recognition, refugee families often settle in superdiverse neighbourhoods, where they are more likely to find informal support. In their daily lives, they frequently encounter acquaintances or unfamiliar compatriots in markets or on the street. These encounters often arise through mutual recognition, for example, by sharing a common language.

> I'm chatting on the phone to my mother in dialect, on the tramway, and just like that, I've finished chatting, and someone holds out his hand, speaking to me in dialect! He says he's been listening to me talk, waiting for me to finish and introduces himself, I introduce myself, and he says, "Ah but there is this guy here, there is this relative" and like that! And that's how you meet people by word of mouth. (Father from Central African Republic)

6.4 THE BALANCE BETWEEN INFORMAL AND FORMAL SUPPORT

In the smaller municipality is, as in other places, informal initiatives partially compensate for the lack of formal support. Volunteers organise language courses and activities to help newcomers navigate their new environment. They assist in finding housing in an often discriminatory and overcrowded private rental market, follow up on administrative procedures, and regularly accompany refugee families to appointments with government services. Additionally, they play a crucial role in language learning and supporting children with their homework. In this case, informal support partially takes over the role of formal assistance,[129] proving to be essential for accessing services and guiding newcomers throughout their inclusion pathway.

The significance of volunteers and/or established migrants, as seen in our case studies, lies in the role they play in providing a form of *social shadow work*. This refers to support practices that either emerge in the shadow of a formal assignment (i.e. non-formal support, such as that provided by social workers in addition to their formal tasks), or in the actions of individuals and groups who are not embedded in government institutions (i.e. informal support, such as volunteers). In Flanders, these initiatives often involve a combination of service provision, community building and politicising work.[130] Despite the importance of such initiatives, they are often overburdened.

In this context, while the network between actors and places is developing, the refugees we spoke to in the smaller municipality are advocating for the creation of a central 'hotspot' where all essential information and services would be gathered. Such a place would make it easier for refugee families and volunteers to navigate formal service providers and other organisations. In a superdiverse reception milieu like Brussels, which has a longer history of hosting refugees and asylum seekers and offers a broad but complex and fragmented range of formal support services, a different dynamic emerges between formal and informal assistance. The trajectories of refugee families are shaped by a combination of different types of support: they rely on both formal and informal networks, which function in a more or less complementary manner. This helps refugee families to familiarise themselves with a wider range of services, and to navigate the complex social landscape of mostly non-profit organisations that assist newcomers with employment, education, housing, legal aid, and material support. In this setting, volunteers and established migrants often act as guides and referrers rather than problem-solvers. Through these networks, for instance, some families were referred to a cooperative bank to finance family reunification, or were directed to a low-cost travel agency to book the necessary tickets.

Referrals through informal contacts to the broad and complex network of formal services help recently arrived newcomers access support more easily. Often, specific expertise or practical guidance is needed to navigate these services. In other words, in this context, informal support serves to facilitate access to formal assistance rather than replacing it. As a Burundian father explains when speaking about members of his community:

> They guide you, when you talk, they tell you a bit about life here. It's easy when you speak the same language, when it's a compatriot, when you're in a country where you're alone and there's no one to talk to... here it's the same culture, it really makes it easier... Well, when I say they made it easier for me to integrate, it's not that they helped me find a job, but talking to compatriots, that's it... it helps a lot to cope. (Burundian father)

In both case studies, informal support 'works' because it helps newcomers become familiar with and inhabit a new, complex, and sometimes unwelcoming milieu, where refugee families face numerous challenges. Without this informal assistance, the inclusion trajectories of refugee families would involve even more unnecessary detours and disruptions.

However, informal support cannot replace formal assistance. When volunteers or fellow nationals help newcomers access resources and services, these are often uncertain or temporary, such as precarious or short-term employment or access to emergency housing. From the perspective of refugees, a strong formal support system remains essential for them to truly establish themselves in Belgium. This is also the case because informal support is almost inherently insufficient and incomplete.

Our case studies reveal different configurations of reception milieus. In one case, there is a complex, dense and diverse network of formal support services, with a broad but often fragmented array of actors. Access to these services depends on effective referral, ensuring that newcomers do not get lost or sent from one office to another.

In the smaller municipality from our case studies, where the first asylum centre has only been recently established, the availability of formal support is much more limited and difficult to access. Referral to these services is also challenging, as it relies primarily on a single volunteer organisation and a much smaller number of established migrants.

Despite their differences, both reception milieus highlight the crucial role of information gathering and effective referral. This is why refugees in the smaller municipality express a strong desire to have one central location that gathers as much information as possible and where they can access relevant (in)formal partners and actors.

6.5 THE NEED FOR FORMAL SUPPORT

Whether in the big city or the smaller municipalities where we conducted our research, one striking finding across our case studies is that the OCMW/CPAS often only plays a minor role.[131] Although many social workers are committed to supporting the families we spoke with, they are often forced to make do with limited resources. Due to a structural lack of personnel, time, and other resources

(see Chapter 2), they can only provide limited guidance, despite this being the core of their job.

As a result, refugees often struggle to receive sufficient practical support from the OCMW/CPAS in completing complex administrative procedures. Similarly, it is not always easy for them to access clear and understandable information about their rights, such as material or financial aid, including food assistance, the installation grant, or medical support. Yet, such support is often crucial during transitional phases. Finding a social worker who has the time – or is able and allowed to make time – to provide practical and comprehensive assistance is often perceived as a matter of chance:

> I was lucky to have my social worker who was really nice to me. (...) He was a person, I would say... who tries to respect people's rights. (Burundian father)

In a context of limited formal support, especially during transition periods, NGOs, volunteers, and acquaintances often step in to guide and support refugees. In doing so, they partially fill the gaps in integration policies.

Whether in Wallonia, Flanders or Brussels, volunteers and NGOs play a bridging role between institutions and refugee families. They translate documents, assist with administrative procedures, follow up on contacts with social workers, and inform refugees about their rights. These organisations provide services that are often missing within the institutional framework, frequently stepping in to address the needs of newcomers and those supporting them in daily life. However, such organisations are not present everywhere. They are overburdened, operate with limited resources, and in many places, their services are being scaled back.

As a result, support for refugee families remains highly uncertain and varies significantly depending on the qualities of the reception milieu in which they settle. Their inclusion pathways differ greatly, depending on whether NGOs, volunteer organisations, or migrants who have already settled in Belgium are present and available in their immediate surroundings. This disparity reveals the lack of (and need for) an institutional framework that guarantees equal access to the information and resources that are essential for fostering social inclusion. Without such an institutional framework, the inclusion of refugee families is bound to remain the result of chance encounters, welfare 'bricolage'[132] and constant improvisation.

7
CONCLUSION: TOWARDS MORE INCLUSIVE POLICIES

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Roos-Marie van den Bogaard

Our research shows that there is a large discrepancy between the discourse and reality of government policies. Whereas policy-makers constantly emphasise the importance of newcomers' rapid social inclusion, refugee families encounter numerous barriers that are generated, whether inadvertently or not, by those very policies. It is precisely when refugee families go through particularly challenging periods that they find themselves with very little formal support.

For everyone involved, migration heralds a process of change. Whoever settles into a new place has little choice but to get a grasp of the customs and expectations of the people who have already settled there. The social status one has built up in one country – whether based on age, education, profession, talent or responsibility within a family – almost always gives way to the prospect of a better future for their children. The same applies, in reverse, to countries of arrival: new people bring along different ideas, skills and dreams. These host countries face a threefold choice: continue as if nothing has changed, discourage newcomers from staying, or invest in a shared future.

The last few decades, an apparent consensus has emerged on the failures of both 'integration' and 'multiculturalism'. Regardless of how well-founded this consensus is – if only because 'multiculturalism' was only really implemented in a few countries for a short period of time[133] – it is striking that these failures are almost exclusively ascribed to two causes: the alleged laxity of liberal reception policies, and newcomers' perceived lack of effort and willingness to adapt themselves to the 'norms' and 'values' of their new home country. The solution seems simple: policies need to be tougher, stricter, and harder.

Since then, 'civic integration' policies have mushroomed across the E.U. In Belgium, as in other West-European states, consecutive governments have implemented one wave of institutional reforms after another, in which the power balance typically shifted from civil society organisations towards the state, and in which the content gradually moved towards a one-sided 'responsibilisation' of newcomers.[134] 'They' need to learn the language better and faster; 'they' need to be 'activated' on the labour market as soon as possible; and 'they' need to pass a test and formally pledge their loyalty to the apparently superior culture of their new home country.

This book adopted a different point of view: that of refugee families themselves – and, to a lesser degree, of those working with them. They tell a rather different story, in which policies fail to live up to their own aims, even after repeated waves of reforms and revisions. As soon as refugee families receive international protection, they need to find a way throughout the labyrinth of governments, administrations and obligations. Sometimes these policy 'failures' are the result of conscious choices, as governments take formal and practical steps to restrict access to the welfare state and the social protection it provides to established citizens.[135] At other times, these failures appear to be the consequence of the administrative and organisational chaos that is so characteristic of Belgium's complex institutional configuration.[136] And sometimes these failures seem to result from a lack of understanding of the challenges refugee families – and other groups of newcomers – face on a daily basis.[137]

The result is a book that bursts with examples from the daily lives of refugee families, which show how current policies often erect rather than erase barriers to their social inclusion. In Chapter 2, we saw how refugee families, once they receive protection status, find themselves racing against the clock to get their basic administration in order. In Belgium, public services are extremely dispersed, which creates significant discrepancies in resources and expertise within and between public service providers. As a result, refugee families lose lots of valuable time navigating the labyrinth of Belgian bureaucracy, as well as acquiring information about their rights and obligations. In these crucial moments of transition once international protection was granted, refugee families find themselves without coordinated support.

In Chapter 3, we showed how refugee families' search for affordable, adequate housing is marked by repeated interruptions, setbacks and, all too often, continued precarity. From the perspective of social inclusion, the fact that the housing issue is so neglected in reception and integration policies is mind-boggling. This is more than a matter of neglect: the Flemish government deliberately attempts to exempt newcomers – i.e. those without a proven 'local anchorage' – from social housing whatsoever. In addition, there is no formal guidance on how to find housing on Flanders' small private rental market. It is not difficult to imagine the consequences: a rising number of people who have been granted protected status find themselves at risk of becoming homeless, which makes them vulnerable to exploitation by dishonest landlords. Due to the precarious, often poor-quality housing conditions, parents struggle to create the space and stability their children need to thrive at school. In turn, parents devote a significant portion of their time and energy to finding more adequate housing, rather than to learning the local language, finding long-term employment, or settling into a new neighbourhood.

In Chapter 4, we scrutinised the common idea that learning the local language offers the ultimate key to entering Belgian society. In reality, refugee families encounter multiple hurdles when learning the language: the search for decent housing, the pressure to find work – both from family members and street-level bureaucrats – and their concern for family members that are stuck in dangerous conditions abroad. In the past few years, the Flemish government has consistently raised the language level required to complete the civic integration trajectory, thereby assuming that the best way to learn a language is by taking long, formal classes, rather than learning 'on the job' or in combination with practical training programmes. Because the government presumes that low degree of language proficiency is the result of newcomer's limited efforts, language is used as one of the main criteria for gaining access to public services, education and the labour

market. This one-sided view of language acquisition, coupled with a widespread distrust of newcomers' willingness, risks turning language into an obstacle that delays rather than accelerates social inclusion.

The testimonies in Chapter 5 demonstrate how these barriers to Belgian society negatively affect refugee families' well-being, as well as their sense of belonging. At the same time, meeting all the formal criteria of 'integration' – finding work, mastering the language, etc. – does not necessarily translate into an overall sense of well-being. Sometimes this is due to a lingering form of 'migration pain', sometimes due to the separation from family members, and sometimes due to the lack of social connection. The causes of refugee families' relatively low sense of well-being are complex, and difficult to remediate in the short term.[138] It is clear, however, that their most fundamental needs have to be met, before putting in further demands to 'integrate'.

In Chapter 6 we analysed how these fragmented policies cause refugee families to seek support outside of the formal public services. Immigrants who have already been settled in Belgium for a longer period, volunteer groups, and civil society organisations provide different kinds of support to refugee families. Sometimes they guide them through the maze of government agencies, they translate the obtrusive language of administrative documents, support them in their search for housing,[139] register their children in school, and/or make sure that families settle well into their new neighbourhood.[140] Much of this front-line support is voluntary or depends on temporary project funding. In spite of all the reforms in the 'integration sector', this improvised 'bricolage'[141] of formal and informal support still plays a crucial role in the actual inclusion of refugee families and other newcomers alike. While it is tempting to romanticise this informal support, the consequence is that the pace of refugee families' social inclusion strongly depends on where they happen to end up, and whom they meet.

Our research shows that there is a large discrepancy between the discourse and reality of government policies. Whereas policy-makers constantly emphasise the importance of newcomers' rapid social inclusion, refugee families encounter numerous barriers that are generated, whether inadvertently or not, by those very policies. It is precisely when refugee families go through particularly challenging periods that they find themselves with very little formal support.

This raises the question: what if policies and practitioners made it easier for refugee families to access housing, work, education and improved well-being, and hence become part of Belgian society? We can get a glimpse of what such an approach would be like by looking at the reception of temporarily displaced persons from Ukraine.[142] In response to the EU's activation of the Temporary Protection

Directive, the Flemish government prioritised people's access to accommodation and education before gradually turning towards their employment and civic integration. Information was made readily available in Ukrainian through an online helpdesk, and by employing Ukrainian staff in a wide range of public services. In addition, numerous collaborations emerged between local, regional and Federal government actors, as well as NGOs and individual citizens. While we should not idealise this exceptional set of policies, they clearly offer a vantage point from which we can rethink regular reception and integration policies. A paradigm shift seems far from impossible: if policies really seek to include refugee families as equal members of Belgian society, they should offer the right kind of support at the right time.

Apart from this book, we translated our research findings into ten policy briefs containing more than 100 recommendations to multiple policy levels and domains. For these rather technical policy briefs, we drew primarily on the experiences of practitioners to show how and why so many current policies are neither efficient nor effective in ensuring the social inclusion of refugee families. In these briefs, we also pinpointed a variety of innovative practices, most of which emerge from bottom-up collaborations between settled migrants, civil society organisations and municipal services.

In this book, we followed in the footsteps of refugee families to demonstrate the human consequences of these counterproductive policies. Their trajectories show that 'integration policies' sometimes raise, rather than remove barriers to social inclusion. If we have learned one thing from this research, it is probably this: if one wants refugee families to find long-term employment, to master the local language, become active members of their local community, and realise their full potential, policy-makers need to let go of the idea that tougher, stricter and harsher policies will do the job. We invite policy-makers to explore what really works. After four years of research, our main conclusion is simple: the reception of refugee families can be done in a more efficient, more effective and more humane way. And that would benefit everyone.

NOTES

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43. If a family reunification procedure is not initiated within the first year after the recognition of refugee status, approval also becomes dependent on having suitable housing to accommodate family members. However, until the moment of reunification, the applicant often spends his/her time compiling the required documentation and has not yet achieved financial independence or secured sufficient income to rent a family home. This situation could change in the future due to new policy proposals from the Federal Arizona government (2025-2029). According to the coalition agreement, recognised refugees would only have an unconditional period of six months to apply for family reunification. Those with subsidiary protection would no longer benefit from this exception and would only be able to apply for family reunification two years after their recognition. Additionally, they would have to meet stricter income requirements.
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46. People in liminality are understood by the anthropologist Victor Turner, who studied rituals, as "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial." Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Aldine, p. 95; Brun, C., & Fábos, A. (2015). Making homes in limbo? A conceptual framework. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, *31*(1), 5-17. https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40138
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53. On one hand, the Flemish Language Guide (Taalwetwijzer | Vlaanderen.be) states that "language use in Belgium is, in principle, free" and protected by the constitution. On the other hand, the Administrative Language Act of 16 July 1966 and the Ordinary Law of 9 August1980 stipulate that public service providers in the Dutch-speaking region are only allowed to use Dutch. For further information, see our policy brief on language in public services.
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The authors' revenues from the sale of this book will be passed on to Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen.

REFUFAM

From Policy Gaps to Policy Innovation

REFUFAM is an interdisciplinary consortium that examines the effects of government policies on the inclusion pathways of refugee families in Belgium. Between 2022 and 2024, our researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with 98 members of refugee families, and with 99 other experts such as street-level practitioners, volunteers and local policy-makers. The consortium brings together social and political scientists, pedagogues, legal and urban scholars from Ghent University (Centre for the Social Study of Migration and Refugees, the Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, and the Migration Law Research Group), Odisee University College (Kenniscentrum Gezinswetenschappen), Université Catholique du Louvain (Metrolab) and KU Leuven (Leuven Urban Studies Institute). REFUFAM is funded by Belspo Brain 2.0.

For more information, please visit our website: www.refufam.be

We also published 10 policy briefs with more than 100 recommendations here: https://refufam.be/policy-briefs/

REFUGEE FAMILIES AFTER RECOGNITION

When refugee families finally receive recognition and leave the refugee centre, they must build a new life in Belgium. This proves far more complex than finding a house, enrolling their children in school, or starting a civic integration course. Reception policies are fragmented across different levels and domains. They show numerous gaps and discrepancies that obstruct and delay the inclusion process of recognised refugees.

In this book, we highlight the experiences of the refugee families themselves. How do they cope with the opportunities and obstacles to build a new life in Belgium? How do social workers and volunteers experience the fragmented and often contradictory policies that refugees are confronted with? What happens when policies raise barriers that restrict refugees' social inclusion?

This book is the result of an ambitious REFUFAM project, in which researchers of the Belgian universities of Ghent (UGent), Leuven (KU Leuven), Louvain (Université Catholique de Louvain) and the Odisee College enter into dialogue with recognised refugees, social workers and local policymakers. It offers a unique insight into the workings of the complex integration policies in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. And especially how it could be done better.

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