

REFUFAM

From policy gaps to policy innovations. Strengthening the well-being and integration pathways of refugee families

DURATION
15/12/2020 - 15/03/2025

BUDGET
1.298.276€

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In the world of migration and integration governance, Belgium represents a strikingly complex case. Competences of migration (e.g. asylum and family reunification) and integration (e.g. education, work and housing) are divided between federal, regional and municipal governance levels, while support services are dispersed across a range of civil society organizations and state actors. Compared to neighbouring countries like the Netherlands, Germany or France, Belgium's lack of central coordination has created substantial 'policy gaps'. This has created both risks and opportunities: in the interstices between governments' competences, new support practices often emerge, some of which are then (partially) transformed into formal policies. We know surprisingly little, however, about the effects of Belgium's complex institutional configuration on the psychosocial well-being and integration trajectories of newcomers. This lack of knowledge is puzzling as integration continues to dominate public debates.

REFUFAM will therefore provide scientific evidence on the impact of so-called 'policy gaps' and emergent support structures on the integration process of one particular group: refugees and their family members. Our interdisciplinary research design consists of three pillars, building on different disciplines: a legal-political pillar examining the institutional configuration of Belgium's of asylum and integration policies; a psychosocial pillar analyzing refugee family members' mental well-being; and a socio-spatial pillar documenting their local integration pathways. This will enable us to identify Belgium's policy gaps, and trace their impact on refugee families' psychosocial well-being, and their integration pathways.

In analysing this multi-layered integration process, REFUFAM innovatively takes refugee families as its central analytic unit. Within the vast scholarly literature on refugees' integration, the role of family dynamics often remains out of view. Most studies on refugees road to 'work', for instance, focus exclusively on individuals, aggregated by nationality, education or legal status. Similarly, we have limited knowledge on how complex family dynamics shape individual refugees' aspirations in terms of finding a place to live, a job, or acquiring new educational degrees. Recent research in Canada, however, has convincingly shown that refugees' family lives – including individuals' gendered and generational positions within their families – are crucial to understand their complex integration process. This project builds on this innovative line of research, and applies it systematically to Belgium's peculiar policy context.

REFUFAM's impact is situated at 4 levels: government policies, practitioners, scholarly debates and the broader public. First, we will provide evidence-based recommendations on how government policies can facilitate refugee families' overall integration process. More concretely, REFUFAM will produce 6 to 8 policy briefs, targeting a broad group of policy-makers.



REFUFAM

Second, this project will strengthen the skills of practitioners supporting refugee families, from within both government actors and civil society organizations. We will involve practitioners throughout the project, by including them in the follow-up committee, and by organizing regular roundtables in which we exchange information on preliminary research results, interesting case studies and promising policy alternatives. To this end, REFUFAM will contribute to websites and magazines that are frequently consulted by practitioners.

Third, this project will have an impact on scholarly debates on refugee families' integration policies. Most studies of refugees' integration process, or of migration and integration policies remain firmly focused on one discipline, and one particular aspect of the integration process (e.g. refugee housing, or family reunification procedures). This project will be one of only a handful of studies that provide a systematic overview of the multiple dimensions of refugee families integration process, documenting how these dimensions interact. More concretely, REFUFAM will produce 8 academic articles and an edited volume targeting an academic audience.

Fourth, as integration remains a priority on the public agenda, REFUFAM will contribute to these public debates by intervening with systematic empirical evidence. This will take the form of media interventions (e.g. opinion pieces) and a book targeting a broader audience.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Coordinator

Robin Vandevoordt
Ghent University (UGent)
Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, and
Centre for the Social Study of Migration and Refugees
(CESSMIR)
robin.vandevoordt@ugent.be

Partners

Ellen Desmet
Ghent University (UGent)
Faculty of Law and Criminology, Migration Law Research
Group
ellen.desmet@ugent.be

Luce Beeckmans
Ghent University (UGent)
Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, Department of
Architecture and Urban Planning
luce.beeckmans@ugent.be

Dirk Geldof
Odisee University College
Centre for Family Studies
dirk.geldof@odisee.be

Mathieu Berger
Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL)
Centre de recherches interdisciplinaires Démocratie,
Institutions, Subjectivité ; METROLAB
m.berger@uclouvain.be