French-speaking Belgians and the asylum seekers

Sonia Gsir (CEDEM-ULg), Fabienne Scandella (GERME-ULB), Marco Martiniello (CEDEM-ULg) and Andrea Rea (GERME-ULB).

The main object of this research has been to study the social relationships which do, or do not, develop between the inhabitants of towns and villages on the one hand, and asylum seekers on the other. We have sought to identify the ways in which these interactions develop, paying particular attention to the images of the asylum seekers that the inhabitants construct for themselves. The involvement of institutional agents (local authorities, police, social welfare centres, directors of refugee centres, etc.) and associations (NGOs, sports clubs, cultural associations, etc.) has been included in the study has well. The second specificity of this study resides in the choice of the context and the method. Data have been collected in six different locations in Brussels and Wallonia, and this field work has been performed in a comparative perspective. Thus, we have chosen to compare the patterns of interaction between the locals and the asylum seekers by opposing places where facilities for asylum seekers have been set up (Fraipont, Brussels/Petit-Château, Rixensart) and neighbourhoods where no open centre exists (the Sainte-Marguerite quarter in Liège, the Bockstael quarter in Brussels, Ottignies). The aim of this comparative approach being to analyse the impact of the presence or absence of an open centre and its staff on the construction of representations about asylum and on the interaction patterns between the inhabitants and asylum seekers.

In focusing on the interaction between residents and asylum seekers, both those hosted in refugee centres and those accommodated in private lodgings, this research seeks to reconstruct the processes shaping the local population's representations of, and patters of interaction with, asylum seekers present in their actual environment, i.e. the neighbourhood where they live. Through recourse to an essentially qualitative surveying instrument, i.e. individual and collective exchanges, we have sought to highlight the different viewpoints, the patterns of argumentation, the events felt to be significant in changing one's representation, and the practices of encounter or avoidance. Considering that numerous social relationships are established daily through the professionals actively engaged in the reception of asylum seekers, we have also talked to the employees paid by institutions and associations, as well as with volunteer workers and institutional authorities of the municipalities concerned. This has allowed us to take account of, on the one hand, the determining factor of the local context within which the interactions between inhabitants and asylum seekers develop, and on the other hand, to cover the spectrum of viewpoints (locals, inhabitants, shop-owners, police, asylum-seekers) on the relevant local and federal policies.

The aim of the research is dual. On the one hand, it has sought to fill in a number of gaps in the research devoted to asylum seekers in Belgium, as today most of the scientific literature on this class of foreigners belongs to the legal domain. The social relationships between asylum seekers and the local population or instituitional agents have only rarely been approached from a scientific perspective. At best, the quality of these relationships has been dealt with in a few opinion polls limited in scope, appeared in the media coverage of opposition by local inhabitants to the installation of new facilities, or in news stories about life in open and closed refugee centres. Few research projects have ventured a systematic approach to the process through which the notion of "otherness" is constructed, and how it develops and evolves in the light of real or imagined relationships between asylum seekers and the local population. A study of interaction in relations of proximity or institutional

relationships has allowed us to give an account of the manner in which social relationships develop between what Gofmann calls «normal» individuals (i.e. the locals), and «stigmatised» ones (the asylum seekers). The attempt to describe these processes and relationships is one way to study the response of local populations to the public policies worked out to deal with the issue of asylum. But it is equally important to increase our knowledge in another key domain of social studies, viz. the relationships between individuals and groups in what has been described as complex societies. In this perspective, our research has also aimed to develop a body of knowledge allowing us to voice a number of suggestions that might inform a reorientation of practices, whether institutional (federal, regional or local), professional (social workers, lawyers, administrative personnel and security staff), or even civilian (local inhabitants' organizations). The aim is not to frame ready-made, off-the-peg political recommendations in the form of laws, but rather to voice such suggestions as may guide the future reorientation of some aspects of the asylum policies.

In general terms, our research has also allowed to highlight – should there still be any need – the complexity of the migratory and post-migratory situation (Martiniello, 1993), whether in an urban or a rural context. The arrival of « newcomers », here, of « new » migrants and asylum seekers, represents an intrusion of global issues into life at the local level, inasmuch as the flow of migrants and the movement of asylum seekers are closely linked to the global economy and the international geopolitical and environmental situation (Castles, 2002). The influx of people seeking asylum in Belgian towns and municipalities shows to what extent the distinction between local and global levels is an artificial one. We are immersed in a situation that has been labelled « glocalization » (Robertson 1995), where local and global concerns intertwine in extremely complex patterns. Global issues are suddenly transfigured into local ones, and it is not easy for the local political and social agents to adapt to these new unfamiliar situations which seem to disrupt the quietness of a town or neighbourhood. It is often this situation which can explain the cold welcome received by the newcomers, or even their outright rejection. In other cases, however, there are signs of solidarity with the asylum-seekers, as the suffering of fellow humans may provide a convenient outlet for the locals' «charitable feelings».

1. Not wanted and not welcome

In contrast to immigrants, the definition of whom is linked to a legitimate activity, namely work, asylum seekers seem to be regarded with an unfavourable prejudice. While migrant workers are needed but unwelcome, asylum seekers seem to be neither wanted, nor welcome. In particular in those places where they are easily spotted, i.e. in the towns where refugee centres have been set up, the inhabitants often regard the newcomers with suspicion, which not infrequently turns into an attitude of fear of the foreigner. Suspicion (as observed in Fraipont) or rejection (as seen in Rixensart) seem to be the typical attitudes initially adopted by the local population. These attitudes may, however, evolve with time, soften, or eventually limit themselves to a few people, such as the immediate neighbours of the refugee centres or owners of small shops visited by the asylum seekers. While these attitudes of suspicion and rejection are voiced less explicitly in places without refugee centres, asylum seekers nevertheless tend to be directly or indirectly represented as causes of insecurity. As vectors of incertitude, they become the epitomes of an outside threat to the public and social order. While the asylum seekers in the Sainte-Marguerite and Bockstael quarters are not the objects of permanent complaints, their presence is yet tolerated rather than welcomed.

Our research, however, allows us to qualify this observation more carefully. Not all local populations voice a systematic fear of asylum seekers. If a xenophobic discourse can be heard at times, the heterophobia which views the difference of asylum seekers as a threat is often sparked by particular events or specific instances of interaction. Also, the judgment of neighbours and locals appears to evolve with time; and finally, we have also recorded expressions of understanding, solidarity and human concern. But at the same time, the tendency to stereotype the other in essential or racial terms is far from absent. Even within the organizations and associations actively engaged in the reception of asylum seekers and new migrants, prejudices about groups of immigrants of a given national origin or from a given continent are widely prevalent. Such stereotypes may be favourable: asylum seekers from certain countries in Central and Eastern Europe are reputed to be intelligent, and likelier to adapt to their new environment, often because they hold degrees. But when these foreigners are associated to groups of organized crime (the Russian or Albanian Mafia), the favourable opinion is reversed. Negative prejudice is more frequent, for example with regard to people from subsaharian Africa, whose intellectual capacity and honesty are frequently called into question. Not infrequently, prejudices inherited from the colonial past are reactivated. Two observations clearly come to the forefront here: first of all, the marked tendency to classify and stereotype the other in ethnic or racial terms, whether in the discourse of solidarity or the discourse of rejection. And second, the fact that one group (or rather a set of people perceived as a group) is exposed to universal and systematic rejection: Roms, Gitanos or Gypsies. These populations are the object of the most negative judgments, and are perceived by many agents and observers as shrouding themselves in a veil of mystery, which makes them even more difficult to understand.

2. Contrasting situations

The conclusions of this research concern a limited number of open centres : the Red Cross centre in Fraipont, the federal refugee centre in Rixensart, and the federal centre at Le Petit Château. With the exception of the latter, the history of these facilities tends to show that their creation has always triggered the fear of the local populations and local authorities. When the centres are set up, opposition to their creation is vivid; at times this opposition is unorganized, while at others it is orchestrated by the local authorities themselves. The NIMBY syndrome (Not In My Back Yard) can be observed in all cases. With time, this opposition may abate, but will not disappear altogether. The history of the creation of these centres weighs heavily on the relationships between the centre, its vicinity, the local population and the local authorities. In those localities where the opposition was organized by the local authorities, as in Rixensart, the apparent appeasement is often no more than superficial, meaning that overt opposition has given way to more covert resistance. When initial fears are isolated, they may eventually be allayed, as in Fraipont. The situation at the Petit-Château is of a different order, as the facility constitutes more of an enclave : there is no contact between the staff of the centre and the local authorities. It is a "deterritorialized" symbol inasmuch as contact with the neighbouring population is virtually inexistent.

On the basis of the three themes that have shaped the data collection and the analysis of interaction between asylum seekers and inhabitants (viz., cohabitation, public space management and resources), different conclusions may be drawn up for each of the sites, as social relationships develop differently in locations with a centre and those without. In the former, the feeling of suspicion is more tangible because the asylum seekers, who are almost the only foreigners, are easily identified. Conversely, the threat of newcomers is less acutely

perceived in municipalities with no refugee centre. While in Fraipont, the fear of foreigners has subsided with time, thanks to a substantial effort of mediation between the local institutions (town hall, police, and the centre itself) and a strategy of decreased visibility of the asylum seekers, in Rixensart the explicit rejection sparked by the installation of the facilty has now given way to resignation. In neighbourhoods like Sainte-Marguerite and Bockstael, there exists a continuum ranging from the permanently settled foreigner, who has most likely acquired Belgian nationality, through the recently arrived immigrant, to the asylum seeker. In these situations, the different legal status among foreigners has little impact on their interaction, as social relationships are built up within a multi-cultural social environment, where (self)- identification is made with reference to real or imaginary national or ethnic identities. Occasionally, the history of the neighbourhood is called in to substantiate ethnic stratification in terms of the duration of settlement or successive waves of immigration. In a similar vein, everyday conversations abound in ethnic categorizations to qualify places (streets), groups (socializing networks) or individuals (to be frequented or avoided). In both neighbourhoods, but principally in Sainte-Marguerite, competition in an increasingly precarious environment gives rise a system of definitions that is more ethno-cultural than social. The asylum seekers, lost in the mass of multi-cultural contexts, are not exposed to any differential treatment. In Ottignies, the image of the foreigner enjoys an enhanced status, because it is benefits from the positive prestige of the foreign student; but the mere mention of the presence of Roms - gypsies - on the municipal territory triggers racist remarks which disrupt the pretty picture of multicultural status-enhancement, motivated by the threat that this group represents to the community's social cohesion.

However, both our general observations and the research results which emerge from our cross-situational analysis must remain subject to caution. Generalization is difficult in science in general, and in the social sciences in particular. The qualitative research being based on six sites, three with a refugee centre and three without, it is not without risk to extrapolate insights and results and project them onto other sites in the country which operate within different local contexts. Moreover, interaction is likely to change with time: patterns that we have observed may have evolved considerably, not least because the conditions governing the processing of applications have been changed, and because the reception process is increasingly becoming the work of professionals. And finally, one may presume some influence of the method applied -- three months of ethnographic field-work followed by collective exchanges in the presence of institutional agents may have stifled the expression of the locals, who moreover were underrepresented. But even with this proviso, the results of this research may be confronted to those of research carried out in the north of the country, albeit with a slightly different methodology. If analogical observations were to emerge from both the French and the Flemish study, the generalizability of the results would be considerably enhanced.

Our results must be evaluated with regard to the four issues broached in the cross-situational reports, that is, the construction of categories of otherness, the interaction between the local population and the « new » migrants, the social transformations revealed by the presence of the asylum seekers and « new » migrants, and the public response to the presence of asylum seekers on the neighbourhood or municipal territory. The local population may have to face either of two situations: either they deal with asylum seekers accommodated in an open centre (a situation which causes a high ratio of concentration) or, alternatively, they deal with isolated asylum seekers. The methodology chosen has allowed us to test the difference produced by the existence, or not, of an open centre with regard to the four key issues, identified through empirical obsevation carried out in the six sites chosen for the study.

3. The construction of categories of otherness

As could be expected, the presence or absence of an open refugee centre plays an important role in understanding the process of construction of otherness to which the asylum seekers and « new » migrants are exposed at the local level. In a way, the presence of the facility makes things easier for the local population : initially, the people living in the centre are unequivocally qualified as refugees or asylum seekers. Whereas in boroughs and neighbourhoods where the asylum seekers live in ordinary houses, the local population has more difficulty distinguishing the category of refugees and asylum-seekers; all the more so if the quarter already has a long tradition of immigration, as is the case in Sainte-Marguerite and Bockstael, where the population stems from successive waves of immigration. Here, the asylum seeker can more easily go unnoticed as such, but on the other hand he will be subjected to other forms of categorization (on an ethnic, racial, national or moral basis) which will also brand him with a kind of otherness.

The first negative attribute of the asylum seeker is that he does not work. The motivation of his status as an individual who seeks hospitality because he is persecuted in his home country is not easily accepted, unless the locals can associate the asylum-seeker's predicament to a collective tragedy covered by the media (e.g. the Kosovars fleeing the war in Yugoslavia). Conversely, the illegal work carried out by a clandestine immigrant or asylum-seeker enjoys widespread tolerance, basically because a legitimate foreigner is a foreigner who works. This definition of the foreigner is, from the outset, a norm-setting one that contributes to the stigmatization of the alien. The stigmatized alien is the one burdened with the attributes of profiteer, unpleasant, boisterous, dirty, violent, dangerous, delinquent or criminal. These attributes shape the social relationships, and condition the locals' choice to seek contact or keep their distance. Depending on the context, the interaction between the locals and asylum seekers will develop differently. In non-centre sites peopled with descendants from immigrants (Sainte-Marguerite and Bockstael), the hierarchy between « old » and « new » will be constructed on the basis of social or historical proximity (a similar social origin, the same type of immigration, or the same ethnic background). This hierarchy is a horizontal one. In sites with a refugee centre, where the asylum seekers enjoy neither social nor historical proximity with the local population, the hierarchy betwen « them » and « us » is, rather, a vertical one. But it would be short-sighted to claim that the presence or absence of a facility constitutes the one and only variable explaining the different forms of categorization to which asylum seekers may be subjected. One could plausibly hypothesize that the discourse of the media and of the politicians plays an equally decisive role.

4. Social transformations

In migration sociology, the hypothesis of the « mirroring function » of immigration is well known (Allal, Buffard, Marié 1977). It claims that the study of migration in a given society reflects that society's own image and thus allows it to question itself on its own functioning. The relevance of this hypothesis for the present research is unquestionable: the study of interactions between asylum seekers and the local population has, indeed, induced us to raise the issue of social change in the localities studied. In other terms, the presence of asylum seekers is a good indicator of objective and subjective social changes in a given society.

Numerous local agents establish a clear correlation between the presence of asylum seekers, whether in a refugee centre or not, and a wider social or political movement affecting the neighbourhood or borough. Thus, within the discourse of degradation, the issues of incivility and insecurity play an important part. The term incivility designates breaches in conventional civilities in the interaction between neighbours (exchanges of greetings), degradation of street furniture, dirtying of the public environment, dumping of waste, intrusion of private spaces, etc.). The discourse on incivility is more heavily marked in sites where the local population gives strong expression to the existence of an « imaginary homogeneous community » (Fraipont and Rixensart) that might be jeopardized by the arrival of aliens. In sites without a refugee centre (Bockstael and Sainte-Marguerite), the discourse on incivility also appears, but is not associated to the asylum seekers. In the most heavily degraded social environments (Sainte- Marguerite, Petit-Château and Bockstael), incivilities are perceived as a consequence of powerlessness and unconcern on the part of the public authorities.

In the sites where a refugee centre has been set up, the opposition of the inhabitants is often based on fears of a loss of objective value and of subjective status. The arrival of asylum seekers in peri-urban residential areas (Rixensart and Fraipont) is interpreted as a likely source of objective downgrading of the inhabitants. This feeling is most strongly expressed by the immediate neighbours of the facilities. The loss of objective value is presumed to be due to the depreciation of real-estate property caused by the proximity of the facility, and a general degradation of the neighbourhood in which the centre has been set up. The subjective loss of status is rather a matter of a changing identity of the neighbourhood and its inhabitants. In this respect, the opening of a centre constitutes an external element supposed to interfere with the social ascendancy of the inhabitants. This kind of discourse is, however, not limited to sites where centres have been set up. It is also found in Ottignies; and this is a signal revealing that the presence of asylum seekers and other stigmatized aliens constitutes a hazard for the image of social sucess pursued by the inhabitants of wealthy residential quarters. In degraded social environments (Sainte-Marguerite, Bockstael and Petit-Château), the feeling of downgrading takes a different form : it manifests itself in the progressive replacement of « posh » shops by « low-status » ones and increased turnover of inhabitants. This downgrading is experienced most acutely by individuals who have their permanent residence in these transit areas, but whose faculty to move out is blocked for economic reasons.

Finally, for all inhabitants in all sites, this feeling of downgrading is strongly associated to a lack of willpower on the part of the state, which leads either to further pauperization of already degrading neighbourhoods, or the devalorization of peri-urban residential areas. The inhabitants of these areas feel ignored and cheated by the political powers.

5. Social Interactions

Our research allows us to advance that from the very outset the presence of absence of an open facility determines the possibilities of growth of genuine social interaction between the local population and the asylum seekers. Even if the centres are open (in contrast to the « closed » ones), and if its asylum seekers are in principle free to come and go in accordance with the centre's regulations, the centres nevertheless constitute tangible physical obstacles to the development of relationships between people living inside the centres and those outside. The buildings themselves constitute, in Weber's terms, « social closure ». In the localities with centres, the history of the opening of the institution plays a decisive role in the growth

of social relationships. In those places where hostile reactions were the strongest, social relationships are the most difficult to establish.

The discourses on incivility and insecurity foster a climate of tension which raises obstacles to interaction. When the notion of immigration comes to be fraught with connotations of criminality and delinquency (Rea, 2000), the immediate effect is one of distance-keeping. These connotations, which may be ill-founded, are fostered by gossip, which thus contributes to the raising of social barriers. Our research shows the extent to which the transgression of norms is less a matter of the transgression itself than a question of who commits them. Thus, in localities with a centre, boisterous behaviour by neighbours is more easily accepted than that of inhabitants of the centre, even when in objective terms, the latter make less noise. Given time, the fear that the presence of asylum seekers may lead to an increase in misdemeanours abates, and contacts may begin to be engaged in. In this process, the action of the local authorities is not without importance, as it may either support or thwart the discourse on insecurity. In degraded environments, the discourses on insecurity are less specifically targeted, that is, less automatically associated with asylum seekers. Incivilities are rather linked with ill-behaving individuals, and insecurity with bands of delinquents or criminal organizations. In this respect, a considerable difference is to be observed between urban and suburban districts. When, as is the case in suburban areas, the public environment (streets, paths and squares) is perceived as extensions of one's private environment (the home), the threshold of acceptability of transgression is lower, while the norm itself is raised to a higher level. Thus, the social problem in Bockstael was large clandestine garbage dumps, which sparked a vivid reaction on the part of the inhabitants, while a similar reaction was triggered in Fraipont by the mere presence of two beer cans in a path.

The interaction between inhabitants and asylum seekers can be cast into three registers : avoidance, distance-keeping, and cultural exchanges. Avoidance practices are most frequently encountered in sites with a centre and residential areas (Fraipont, Ottignies, and Rixensart). Here, asylum seekers are « made invisible » and the locals themselves reduce the possibilities of contact. Whenever contacts do occur, they are most often the result of practical necessity; this is why shopkeepers are more often in contact with the asylum seekers than the other locals, and their initial fear is sometimes transformed into sympathy for the people they see more regularly. The new conditions governing the processing of applications tend to reduce the time spent in the centres, and thus contribute to the maintenance of an attitude of suspicion, due to a higher rate of turnover of the residents. Avoidance is a risk-reduction strategy. Locals who resort to this practice maintain their distance through a process of « inferiorisation »: contact is denied because the other is perceived as inferior. Distance- keeping is more frequent in degraded social environments (Sainte-Marguerite, Bockstael and Petit-Château). In sites with no centre, asylum seekers are free to come and go as they please, and thus, opportunities to meet the local population exist in theory; but steady relationships are exceptional. In immigrant areas like Sainte-Marguerite and Bockstael , asylum seekers arrive in quarters where the cohabitation between the local population and immigrants may already be tense and problematic. Local inhabitants, especially those stemming from earlier immigration, fear being assimilated to the newcomers. Therfore they deliberately keep the newcomers, including the asylum seekers, at a distance lest their own identity should be downgraded and their social ascendancy compromised. One way of effectively maintaining this distance between « us » and « them » is the mobilisation of prejudices.

The study of the sites has also highlighted the construction of intercultural exchanges in all the localities. The motives underlying these practices are often dependent on the potential for open-mindedness in the inhabitants. In this respect, children turn out to be excellent vectors of contact. The presence, in school, of children of asylum seekers often offers opportunities to engage in social contacts. Conversely, the integration of schools within the refugee centres undercuts the opportunities for exchanges. In sites with no centres, the school functions as an indicator of the presence of asylum seekers, since it makes them « visible ». Yet a difference seems to appear as regards the enhanced value expected from these social exchanges. The social diversity of Bockstael turns cultural diversity into an asset; by contrast, in Sainte-Marguerite or Petit-Château, where social and economic conditions are more precarious, newcomers are viewed as new competitors in the race for access to resources.

In general terms, the existence of an active associative network and a favourable disposition on the part of the local political powers and the direction of the centres are factors that boost real positive interaction between asylum seekers and the local population. Moreover, the young children of asylum seekers who are subjected to compulsory education may facilitate contacts between their parents and those of their classmates.

6. Public management of the presence of asylum seekers

In this area too, a major difference must be noted between sites with a centre and those without. The presence of a facility is a visible symbol of the presence and action of the State in the domain of asylum management; whereas in the sites without a centre, it is more difficult to distinguish the management of immigration and integration in general from the particular presence of asylum seekers. In non-centre sites, public asylum management rests immediately on public institutions (public welfare, schools, etc.) as well as on individual organizations and associations.

The study of sites with a centre suggests that the acceptance of the facility depends largely on the establishment procedure, on the number of asylum seekers and on the geographical proximity of the centre. First and foremost, if the opening of a centre is perceived as a direct imposition of the central State leaving no room for negociation, the chances for acceptance by the population will be lower than when a dialogue gathers all parties involved before the centre is set up. Second, the smaller the centre, the fewer asylum seekers it contains, the more easily it will be accepted by the local population: some local agents seem to be operating with the notion of a threshold of tolerance. Centres hosting families are preferred to facilities in which there is a majority of men. Thirdly, the farther the facility is situated from the life of the locals, the more indifferent the population will be to its existence; whereas closeness of the centre will trigger the NIMBY syndrome even in citizens who are originally sensitive to the asylum issue. And finally, the manner in which the centres are managed also constitutes a major element accounting for its acceptance in the local social landscape.

In Fraipont and Rixensart, the ambition to integrate the centre in the social environment predominates, while the Petit-Château really functions as an enclave, maintaining no contact with the local population or with the town's institutions and authorities. For organizational reasons, the mode of management of the centres tends to favour autarkic self-sufficiency, which is a risk-avoiding type of management. The directions and the staff favour the well-being of the residents within their own structures rather than encourage relations with the neighbours and locals. Nevertheless, neighbourhood initiatives financed by the federal

ministry allow the development of occasional exchanges with outsiders. The public management of the centre follows a dual policy: on the one hand, a logic of action (openness of the centre towards its environment); and on the other, a logic of reaction (meeting the demands of locals or their associations).

7. Working towards « good practices »

Ever since the plan has been devised to disseminate facilities, the government has shown a clear willingness to alleviate the load of municipalities hosting many asylum seekers, and also to reduce the possible sources of tension between citizens and refugee candidates. This policy has taken the form of opening many refugee centres, managed either by the Red Cross or by other non-governmental organizations. The hosting capacity of these centres has steadily increased until 2002. Their opening, however, has not always been unproblematic. In certain localities, the installation of these facilities has sparked hostile reactions from the local population, and sometimes even from the local authorities.

In accordance with the memorandum published by the Ministries of the Interior and of Social Integration on September 24, 1999, the government's policy has been to improve the reception of refugee candidates, notably by increasing the hosting capacity of open centres and, at the same time, by reducing the reorientation of these candidates towards welfare services. This policy has been supplemented by another measure, viz., replacing subsistence benefits by material assistance. These two policies have had significant consequences for the refugee candidates themselves as well as an impact on public opinion. For the refugee candidates, the policy entails that they can no longer choose to live where they like in the municipality, but must necessarily pass through a refugee centre as part of their asylum procedure. Moreover, the procedure no longer entitles them to welfare benefits, and thus, their subsistence is dependent upon their attachment to an open centre. On the other hand, for public opinion and local authorities, the policy seeks to delineate the spaces where refugee candidates will be accommodated, and is supposed to reduce the costs supported by individual municipalities as a result of the presence of asylum seekers.

Moreover, inasmuch as the possibility to open new facilities is limited both for budgetary reasons and because of the hostility that the operation may foster in the population, the government has also studied the possibility of accommodating asylum seekers in state-owned individual lodgings. This policy of dispersion, combined with the replacement of subsistence benefits by material assistance, seems to enjoy a certain degree of adhesion by a number of municipalities, who view it as a valid alternative to the potential implanting of a facility on their territory as well as a means of improving their financial situation, since federal incentives will be awarded similar to those paid out to municipalities where facilities have been set up.

Is this policy the right one to pursue ? Which « good practices » may be suggested for its improvement ? It is not possible to give a sufficiently well-founded answer on the basis of our empirical research conducted on six sites. Nor is the objective of our research to give a systematic evaluation of Belgium's asylum policy. It is not our task to take a position for or against the implanting of open centres for asylum seekers, as this would mean re-opening the debate on the fundamental reform of the asylum procedure, which was on the menu of the "Rainbow" goverment (1999-2003), but no longer on the agenda of the Verhofstadt II government. Even so, the results of our investigation allow us to suggest a few lines of

thought and action which may be worth pursuing. Some of these congrue with the work carried out by the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, which has been operational since May 2002. All these suggestions presuppose that whatever the controversies and disagreements on Belgium's asylum policy may be, all parties involved are anxious to implement a policy that respects the social cohesion and reduces the tension between the local population and the asylum seekers.

In this perspective, different suggestions will be voiced according as one is dealing with a site with a centre or a site without. In sites with a centre, the work to be done prior to the implanting of a facility proves vital. Every creation of a new centre should be preceded by a feasibility study making allowance for the history and the social, economic and residential characteristics of the location. Prior to the decision to establish and open a centre, an intense effort must be made to communicate with the local population and authorities. Different channels of communication should be activated to inform the inhabitants of the previsible impact of the presence of asylum seekers. Greater transparency should be ensured regarding the budgets allotted to the municipality to cover the expenses incurred by the opening of a centre. Issues perceived as risks (like the presence of men without families) or as potential openings (like the presence of children) should be integrated in the strategies of contact with the centre's immediate neighbours and the rest of the population.

With regard to the sites without a centre, it is important to integrate the question of asylum seekers within the local integration mechanisms. « Positive action » campaigns should be conducted to specifically inform the asylum seekers about these mechanisms and to encourage them to find a place, albeit a temporary one, within the existing associative social network. The local social welfare structures should also be supported better in their mission to assist the asylum seekers.

Suggestions like these may undoubtedly help improve social cohesion at the local level, but do not dispense with the need for a permanent evaluation of the policies governing the reception of asylum seekers, as should be the case for all other public policies as well.

Bibliography

ALLAL T., BUFFARD J.-P., MARIE M (1997), *Situations migratoires*, Paris, Editions Galilée

CASTLES S. (2002), « Migration and Community Formation under Conditions of Globalization », International Migration Review, vol. 36, n°4, pp. 1143-1168.

MARTINIELLO M. (1993), « Pour une sociologie de la situation post-migratoire en Belgique », *in* MARTINIELLO M., PONCELET M. (Dir.), *Migrations et minorités ethniques dans l'espace européen,* Bruxelles, De Boeck Université, pp. 167-185.

REA A (2000), « Immigration et délinquance : usage politique d'une association symbolique », *in* BRION F., SCHAUT Ch., TIXHON A. et REA A. (Eds)*, Mon origine, mon délit. Criminalité et criminalisation de l'immigration*, Bruxelles, De Boeck/Pol-His, pp.39-87.

ROBERTSON R. (1995), « Glocalizzation : Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity » in FEATHERSTONE M., LASCH S and ROBERTSON R. (Eds), *Global Modernities*, London, Sage, pp. 25-44.