

INCh

Integrated networks to combat child poverty: a mixed methods research on network governance and perspectives of policy makers, social workers and families in poverty

DURATION 1/12/2013 - 28/02/2018	BUDGET 675.667 €
---	----------------------------

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1. The objective of this study

There is a growing consensus on various policy levels (EU, Federal and Communities) to prioritize child poverty. One of the difficulties for policy and practice that wishes to combat child poverty is the historical and actual fragmentation of services and policies. In everyday practice, many efforts have been conducted to overcome issues of fragmentation by organizing integrated networks to provide services to the vulnerable target group of families with young children in poverty. In this proposal we investigate how networks at the local level can be deployed to combat child poverty. The central concept is 'network integration'.

We define network integration both at the system and client-level of the analysis. At the system-level network integration refers to the way service providers are connected and reach a 'unity of effort' (Buck et al., 2011). In an integrated network all service organizations have access to the resources and information in the network. Here, the role of network governance is crucial. In management literature, network governance is considered as an important instrument to improve the integrated efforts of different service providers (Provan & Kenis, 2008). At the client-level network integration refers to the extent to which the services provided by the network are responsive toward the client's multiple needs on different life domains. In the field of child poverty the issue of fragmentation and integration will become increasingly important when considering the demographic prognoses on the growing numbers of young children in poverty, especially in urban areas. In addition, networking is a necessary condition to overcome the dichotomous discussion between the need for structural, mainstream provisions and targeted provisions in a strive towards progressive universalism.

However, despite the emerging need for integrated networks to combat child poverty, few scientific research has been conducted on this matter. Few knowledge is available on how these networks must be organized to respond to the complex needs of diverse families with young children, including families in poverty. At the same time, it is widely recognized by policy representatives, service organizations and social workers that networks are an important instrument to increase the responsiveness of services that wish to include vulnerable target groups. Studies, however, show that networks not always lead to better results (Rosenheck, et al., 2002; Provan & Milward, 1995). We therefore argue that research on the functioning and perception of these networks is necessary. In this proposal we provide an in-depth approach on the integrative mechanism of these networks. The main research questions of this proposal are formulated as follows:

- 1. How are integrated networks of service organizations providing support to poor families organized?
- 2. What kind of social work practices of in- and exclusion appear within these integrated networks?
- 3. How do policy representatives and social workers perceive these networks?
- 4. How do families in poverty experience these networks?



Our answer to these research questions is based on a combination of theoretical perspectives and a mixed-method research approach:

- In a first work package, we will take a broad and *quantitative* perspective and focus on network governance and network integration at the system or organizational level. We use social network analysis to map the ties among the nodes of the network and analyze the structure of the network as a measure of network integration (Provan & Milward, 1995) (see research question 1, and 2).
- In a second work package, we apply a *qualitative* research approach on a selection of five relevant cases in the Flemish, Walloon and Brussels region aiming at gaining in-depth insights in the meaning making of policy representatives, social workers and clients. This will lead to a profound understanding of the functioning of these networks (see research question 2, 3 & 4).

2. Valorisation

Due to the complexity of these areas of inquiry, our valorisation strategy has to take into account the diversity of actors that are involved. Which activities will be developed? It should be clear from the start that, if new ideas result from the fairly continuous interaction with end-users, their inclusion in the project is given ample attention. We focus on papers and seminar as our main type of valorisation. Next we also want to focus on training packages for municipalities, in service training for parent support workers, pedagogical coaches and child care workers. We will end the project with a final report and a final conference.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Coordinator

Danielle Dierckx & Peter Raeymaeckers
Universiteit Antwerpen (UAntwerpen)
Faculty of Political and Social Sciences
danielle.dierckx@uantwerpen.be
Peter.Raeymaeckers@uantwerpen.be

Partners

Michel Vandebroeck
Universiteit Gent (UGent)
Michel.Vandebroeck@UGent.be

Didier Vrancken
Université de Liège (ULg)
Didier.Vrancken@ulg.ac.be