

# BBOX

## OCMW/CPAS & new migrants/refugees: opening the black box of policy in practice

**DURATION**  
15/12/2019 - 15/03/2022

**BUDGET**  
578 497 €

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The increased diversity in current societies pose a number of challenges, not in the least to public service delivery, as the diversity among the users requires a ditto response. This can be witnessed in Public Centers for Social Welfare (PCSW, or OCMW in Dutch and CPAS in French), amongst others, where the influx of immigrants led to an increasingly large share of foreigners among the beneficiaries: in 2019, over 1 in 4 beneficiaries of a 'revenu d'intégration' (public assistance) was of non-EU origin (based on data of the federal Public Planning Service Social Integration, 2019). Recognized refugees and newly arrived immigrants who have been granted subsidiary protection constitute a large share of this group. The public the OCMW's serve has partially changed; the question is how both management and social workers deal with this new reality?

The question of how PCSW's cope with the needs of an increasingly diversified public, including immigrants of different administrative and legal statuses, is even more relevant as PCSW's play a crucial role in the settling process and integration of new migrants. Moreover, for a lot of newly arrived immigrants, the contact with social workers represents one of the first or main contacts with local society. In addition, decisions taken at the PCSW can have a long term influence on the integration of newly arrived immigrants (e.g. in terms of labour market opportunities or housing).

Yet, there is a large responsibility on the shoulders of individual social workers at PCSW's, as it is known that public workers in settings such as a PCSW have a lot of discretionary power in the execution of their job. This discretionary power is valuable and necessary, as not everything can be spelled out in rules. Providing a flexible and individualized treatment, responding to varying individual needs, including to immigrants, requires room for manoeuvre on behalf of the social workers. However, this implies that actual policy and interventions towards newcomers can only be fully understood when taking the implementation, and therefore the position, motives, actions and decisions of the frontline workers into account, who should in fact be considered as policy makers (rather than merely as implementers).

Until date, little is known about practices and interventions towards newcomers in PCSW's, nor is it clear which are underlying rationales explaining practices and interventions. The current study is set up to bring more knowledge in this regard, focusing simultaneously on the perspective of the social workers, their management, and the newcomers' perspective. More specifically, the aim of this research is threefold. First, the study will map practices concerning the granting of rights and social integration interventions for newly arrived immigrants/refugees at the PCSW level. The mapping of practices will subsequently be translated into a typology, bringing insight in current policy implementation. Second, the research aims to shed light on the factors influencing choices and decisions social workers make concerning social benefits and social integration of newly arrived immigrants and refugees. Third, the study will bring insight in the accessibility of PCSW for newcomers and in the perception of service delivery from the perspective of new foreign beneficiaries. The focus lies on immigrants from non-European foreign nationality, present for less than 5 years in Belgium.

To accomplish the goals of this study, a mixed-method design is used, relying on 1) a literature review, 2) qualitative case studies in a selection of 20 PCSW's across the 3 Regions of Belgium, 3) a web survey among PCSW's in order to document the repertoire of responses offered by Belgian PCSW's to newcomers and identify possible patterns in local practices, and 4) comprehensive interviews with 90 newly arrived immigrants (across the 3 Belgian Regions).



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With this study, we aim to advance academic knowledge as well as to inform policy practice. Especially since welfare policies for immigrants are a highly politicized topic, there is a strong need of a solid evidence-base in this field. The study will result in several outputs, targeting academics, policy makers and stakeholders. An academic book will disseminate research findings among Belgian and international scholars. In addition, a (shorter) research report will ensure easy access to the findings for policy makers, and a short brochure with some key findings will spread some of the most important results to stakeholders in a way that 'sticks'.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

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