

REFUFAM

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

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Summary

In the world of ‘immigrant integration’ policies, Belgium represents a complicated case. Competences of migration (e.g. asylum and family reunification), civic integration, and other social policies that directly affect newcomers (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 gaps in policy and support. At the same time, new support practices constantly emerge in the interstices between governments’ competences, which are then, sometimes, transformed into local policies. We know surprisingly little, however, about the effects of Belgium’s complex institutional configuration on the well-being and inclusion pathways of newcomers (i.e. their access to decent housing, durable employment, education, social connections, and well-being).

The REFUFAM consortium addresses this gap by examining the effects of a wide range of government policies on the well-being and inclusion pathways of one particular group of newcomers: refugees and their family members. We conducted interviews and focus groups with 98 members of refugee families, and with 109 practitioners (incl. volunteers, social workers, coordinators of municipal policies, etc.). Our interdisciplinary research design consisted of three work packages (WPs): a legal-political WP examining the institutional configuration of Belgium’s of asylum and integration policies; a psychosocial WP analysing refugee family members’ sense of well-being and belonging; and a socio-spatial WP documenting their local inclusion pathways.

The findings provide substantial evidence of a structural 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 complicates and slows down the social inclusion of refugees and their family members.

Our main findings can be summarised along the lines of our **10 policy briefs**, which include more than 100 policy recommendations.

PB1. From international protection to inclusion: Gaps in policy and support

When applicants for International Protection receive their protected status, they and their families enter a period of transition before embarking on their integration trajectories. This corresponds to a transition between different levels of governance: reception structures are organised at the Federal level while integration is organised by the regions, the communities and the municipalities. Our research shows that this is a challenging period for refugee families as they try to navigate Belgium’s complex institutional landscape. This renders them dependent on volunteers, chance encounters and their compatriots, and often causes unnecessary setbacks in their integration trajectories. Drawing on both original and previous research, we point to innovative practices, and we make several recommendations, including the development of transit infrastructures that combine temporary housing with transversal support, and the appointment of social workers within collective reception centres who are responsible for guiding refugee families in the first steps of their integration trajectory.

PB2 and PB3. Towards integral support in Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia

‘Integration’ policies in Belgium are divided between different levels of government and different actors, and vary greatly from regional to local level. These Policy Briefs highlight various dysfunctions and institutional shortcomings in integration policies, and the lack of structural support for refugee families in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. Drawing on the perspective and experience of refugee families, we point out the consequences of these shortcomings for their integration trajectories. We then develop a number of recommendations to ensure that support for refugee families is provided in a cross-cutting and ongoing manner, such as setting up local coordination between the main players.

PB4. Lessons drawn from the reception of persons with a temporary protection status from Ukraine

In 2022, the EU activated the Temporary Protection Directive (the Directive) 1, which granted persons living in Ukraine before 24 February 2022 a temporary right of residence in EU member states. Several policies were put in place in Flanders to provide for the rights of persons who enjoyed this temporary protection status. Based on interviews with first- and second-line practitioners, in this Policy Brief we compile some insights on what we can learn from this to make the reception of other groups of refugee families more effective and efficient. We formulate several policy recommendations, including: prioritise housing and education in the first phase after a protected status is granted; facilitate and invest in temporary housing during the period when refugee families are looking for permanent housing; and apply language requirements flexibly in specific public services in the first year after recognition, so as not to waste precious time on administrative hurdles and to make it easier for refugee families to find their way to quick and sustainable employment.

PB5. Housing: the first step to inclusion?

Housing is the first step in the integration trajectories of refugee families, as well as for other groups of newcomers. Yet while having a stable home is crucial to find work, invest in education and develop a social network, there is little institutional support to find housing. Drawing on both original and existing research, this policy brief describes the consequences this struggle to find housing has for the integration trajectories of refugee families. After pointing out innovative practices, we formulate several recommendations that include, amongst others, the systematic implementation of housing support services and the provision of temporary accommodation during the period of transition.

PB6. Education. Entering and Leaving OKAN.

Just like other newcomers between 12 and 18 years old, young persons with International Protection who reside in Flanders are required to register for OKAN education – Reception Classes for Non-Dutch speaking Newcomers. In line with earlier studies, our research shows that the processes of entering and leaving OKAN – either into regular education or into the labour market – are riddled with obstacles. This has a significant impact on various aspects of their integration trajectories as it leads to a sense of frustration and loss of time among pupils, to lower qualifications, and to less prospects on the labour market. This policy brief speaks to multiple ambitions of the new Flemish coalition agreement: creating equal opportunities to contribute to a prosperous Flanders, with assistance where needed; positioning children and young people at the centre of Flemish policy concerns; and supporting each individual who wishes to (further) develop their talents. In this policy brief, we formulate a number of recommendations that are relevant to both persons with international protection between 12 years and 18 years old and young newcomers. These recommendations include, amongst others: a prolongation of the 35-day ‘trial period’ for former OKAN-students in regular education; a database that synchronises waiting lists across OKAN schools; and the facilitation of flexible learning tracks.

PB7. Durable Employment

Persons with International Protection (IP) and their family members are often expected by their local Social Welfare Office (OCMW) committee to find employment as soon as possible, leading them to accept low-skilled and/or precarious jobs, even in case of over-qualification (Groeninck et al 2025; Lens et al 2018). Interviews with both experts as well as members of refugee families indicate that such

employment only provides a short-term solution. When refugees try to move on from such low-skilled employment, little assistance is available to support them towards durable employment that is in line with their capacities and ambitions. As a result, many refugees end up being stuck in a vicious cycle of precarious, low-skilled employment and unemployment. This represents a loss of human capital both for refugees and for the Belgian labour market. In this policy brief, we make several recommendations to address these barriers to more durable forms of employment for refugees and their family members.

PB8. Language and access to work

The Flemish coalition agreement regards Dutch as ‘the key to becoming a full part of our Flemish society’. Through the civic integration programme, the Flemish government is therefore strongly committed to the acquisition of the Dutch language and labour market entry for different groups of non-native-speaking newcomers. Based on original and existing and own research, this policy brief shows which obstacles hinder the language acquisition of refugee families, and how this subsequently contributes to the relatively low employment rate of this target group in Flanders. Further raising these language barriers, as announced in the current Flemish Coalition Agreement, therefore seems contrary to the goal of increasing the ‘self-reliance of every newcomer’. Therefore, we formulate recommendations that can effectively leverage language for the socio-economic integration trajectory of refugee families and other newcomers. These include reviewing the language requirements on the labour market and for training courses, and a more differentiated allocation of non-native newcomers to training courses that flexibly combine language and work.

PB9. Language and public services

The Flemish coalition agreement regards Dutch as ‘the key to becoming a full part of our Flemish society’. Given the strict application of language legislation in administrative matters, this means that public services (by local administrations, schools, or other public service providers) for refugee families and other groups of non-native newcomers are provided in Dutch. When this fails, clients are ‘informed about existing NT2 offerings’. In this way, they are encouraged to master the language as soon as possible. However, our research and the existing scientific literature show that a strict focus on Dutch at too early a stage in the integration process undermines the “self-reliance” of refugee families. In this policy brief, we point to some pragmatic tools to remove language barriers and thus increase ‘customer-centric government services’.

PB10 Family Reunification.

Family reunification procedures for persons with international protection (i.e. recognised refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection) is particularly complex, long and expensive. This creates several challenges for separated family members, both in the home country and in Belgium. For the “sponsor” (i.e. the person with international protection), deferred family reunification often leads to interrupted language pathways, precarious work and heavy financial and psychosocial pressure. If the sponsor is an unaccompanied foreign minor (NBMV), a difficult process of family reunification often amounts to a great deal of pressure on their educational trajectory, or even its cancellation. Delayed family reunification thus leads to stagnation in social and economic inclusion. Even after reunification, families face unnecessary challenges due to a lack of appropriate policies. This complicates the inclusion and well-being of refugee families. In this policy brief, we discuss two key problems: (1) the lack of housing support, (2) the lack of family support during the procedure and after reunification, leading to a dependent and vulnerable position of refugee family members. Our recommendations include structural, proactive support during and after the process of family reunification, as well as welcoming conversations for the whole family upon the arrival of family members.