



Brain-be 2.0

Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks

POLICY BRIEF

Policy Brief No. 2

Re-InVEST.be

Housing policy and poverty reduction: a social investment perspective

This Policy Brief is the second in a trilogy on social investment as a strategy for poverty reduction. The theoretical framework (based on the concept of social investment and Sen and Nussbaum's capability theory) remains essentially the same, but the focus here is on housing. We begin by examining the pathways from homelessness to sustainable housing and the role of various services in this process. Next, we examine the impact of poverty on housing (in)security and (lack of) housing quality, as well as the protective role of social housing and social protection in this regard. A third section deals with the various channels through which the right to housing is realised. The Brief concludes with a series of policy recommendations.

Context and research questions

This Policy Brief summarises the main findings and recommendations of the second part of the Re-InVEST.beⁱ study. Housing is examined here as a (potential) investment in sustainable poverty reduction. The focus is on the interplay between housing, financial security and social protection. Housing is a very important part of social policy. On the one hand, the right to housing is an intrinsic goal of government policy, because in a free and equal society it is a prerequisite for personal development. On the other hand, it is also an instrument for the development of other rights, such as health, citizenship or education. Housing is a prerequisite for the development of every person's identity and the intimacy of their personality. It also offers the possibility of settling and 'being rooted' somewhere and forms a hub of connections in space, not only to workplaces, but also to green spaces and mobility. Above all, it enables the development of harmonious relationships with others, distinguishing between the familiar and the unfamiliar or the neighbour. The right to housing goes beyond the right to shelter because it encompasses these different dimensions (Demonty et al. 2021; 2025).

The importance of housing issues in the context of poverty reduction is illustrated, among other things, by the following facts: according to conservative estimates, there are at least 50,000 homeless people in Belgium (Vandewiele and Halfants 2025). In the Brussels Region, the number of homeless people has increased more than fivefold between the first census in 2008 and 2024 (Bruss'help 2024). In Flanders, the number of families on waiting lists for social housing rose to more than 200,000 in 2025, which is many times more than the number of new social housing units currently planned for the coming years. Housing costs in Belgium have risen by 175% since 2000, which is 2.33 times faster than inflation and 60% faster than average income (Eurostat & DG ECFIN 2025). In March 2025, our country (and the Flemish government in particular) was reprimanded by the European Committee of Social Rights for violating the right to housing in four areas: insufficient efforts in social housing, insufficient support in the private rental sector, insufficient efforts to solve homelessness, and a lack of sufficient data for monitoring housing policyⁱⁱ.

For the theoretical framework of this study, we combine a social investment approach with A. Sen's capability theory. Families invest in their own well-being, among other things by investing in housing. Conversely, poverty can lead to disinvestment due to housing insecurity or homelessness, or due to housing conditions that are harmful to physical and mental health. Social protection must help families to continue to meet their housing expenses in periods of decline or loss of their primary income, in order to ensure sustainable security of livelihood.

It is immediately clear that the goal of social investment must also be broadened from physical housing to the realisation of human well-being in its full multidimensional meaning, as best captured by Amartya Sen's capability theory. According to this theory, well-being can be described as '*the set of possible levels of functioning (e.g. in terms of physical and mental health, material comfort, literacy, employment, cultural experience, family and social relationships, active citizenship, etc.) that a person reasonably values*'. To this end, the person (or rather, the household) disposes of financial, material and immaterial resources (income, assets, human capital) that can be partly consumed and partly invested. The 'conversion' (in Sen's terminology) of resources into levels of functioning is determined in part by a number of environmental factors such as public services, collective action and, importantly, a legal framework that grants rights and freedoms to citizens. Freedom and participation play an important role in capability theory, because they help determine the scope of choice within which people can optimise their well-being.

This leads to three sets of research questions at the intersection of social protection and housing policy as investments in sustainable poverty reduction:

- What can be said about the interaction between social protection and housing policy: to what extent do they contribute to sustainable poverty reduction?
- How do intermediary services (social housing companies, social renting agencies, tenants' associations, etc.) function in the implementation of housing policy?
- How effectively is the right to housing enshrined in law? Where are the gaps and how can rights be strengthened?

Main findings

Access to social housing for homeless people

Access to stable housing is a critical lever for the sustainable (re)integration of *homeless people* into society. Goubin & Heylen (2023) investigated whether the *social rental sector* can play a role as a social investment for the reintegration of this highly vulnerable social group. The study was conducted using a mixed-method design, starting with a literature review. By linking data on homeless people entering the social rental sector (in Flanders) in the period 2016-2020 with Census data from 2011, the housing and life trajectories of this group were reconstructed. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders from homeless organisations and the social rental sector in the three Belgian regions. This provided a deeper insight into the issues and the various policy options.

Quantitative analyses of inflow in Flanders show that homeless people mainly gain access through social rental agencies (*sociale verhuurkantoren* - SVK): approximately 70% of new SVK allocations in the period 2016-2020 concerned people with acute housing needs. In contrast, inflow into social housing companies (*sociale huisvestingsmaatschappijen* - SHM) remains extremely limited, mainly due to a different allocation system in which the focus is not on housing need, but on the chronology of registration and ties with the municipality. In addition, there are also long waiting lists and limited use of accelerated allocations (in which homeless people theoretically enjoy priority). Among the group of homeless people entering social housing, there is a disproportionate presence of young people, non-EU citizens, single persons and single-parent families, both at the SHM and SVK. In 2011, these households were almost exclusively in the lower income categories, were generally tenants and relatively often had a history of precarious or temporary housing situations.

In the Brussels Region, the exceptionally long waiting times and limited use of emergency allocations are confirmed, which means that homeless people have little access to regular social housing. SVKs do function as an access channel, but their operation remains heterogeneous and only partially embedded in collaborations with homeless organisations. In Wallonia, the points system of the Sociétés de Logement de Service Public (SLSP) formally gives priority to people in acute housing need, but the mismatch between supply and demand, in particular the shortage of smaller dwellings, limits the inflow.

In general, homeless people are only one of many target groups for social housing in an oversubscribed market, and are therefore given limited priority. This is despite the fact that Belgian homeless counts indicate an increase in the number of homeless people, with more than 10,000 people without a permanent place of residence in the Brussels Region alone.

Actors from the three Regions emphasise that the traditional step-by-step model for tackling homelessness, which involves first providing (emergency) shelter and social support and only then offering secure housing, is not an effective approach to homelessness. The shelter and care networks are overcrowded, while guidance, budget management and care have little effect as long as people remain in temporary or emergency solutions. As a result, the existing systems do not offer a structural solution to the problem.

In Flanders, the new social housing companies show potential to tackle housing needs more systematically, as they can use 20% of the units for acute housing needs and up to 30% for local target group policies. In all Regions, the stakeholders interviewed also indicate that a more effective approach is within reach, starting with housing security, namely '*Housing First*'. *Housing First* operationalises this logic by taking housing as the starting point and only then organising social support. Belgian evaluations show that this leads to significantly higher housing stability than traditional transition systems (approximately 90% housing retention after two years). The approach is present in all regions, but remains project-based and insufficiently embedded in regular social housing policy, limiting its structural impact.

In order to make social housing an effective springboard out of homelessness, the following steps are therefore necessary: (1) a structural approach via *Housing First*, (2) stable frameworks for cooperation between housing actors and welfare organisations, (3) an expansion of the range of housing types that match the profiles of homeless newcomers, and (4) a uniform definition of homelessness among the relevant housing actors, so that there can be no unequal treatment.

The issue of homelessness was also discussed at length in the dialogue process with associations for poverty reduction organised by the Interfederal Service for the Fight against Poverty (Demonty et al. 2025). For example, having an address as an administrative requirement is often an obstacle to accessing various other basic rights. It is therefore important to apply the system of reference addresses for homeless people more effectively and to improve it further.

Poverty, affordability and housing conditions

Ansaloni and Heylen (2023) investigated the complex relationship between *poverty on the one hand and housing affordability and housing conditions* in Belgium over a period of three years. The analysis of pooled EU-SILC data, including logistic regression models, shows a strong link between income poverty and both the quality and affordability of housing over time. The effect of poverty manifests itself over different time periods on affordability and housing quality, pointing to different mechanisms. While poverty immediately reduces the affordability of housing, its negative impact on housing quality is more gradual and cumulative. From a social investment perspective, the impact of (the generosity of) social protection on the housing situation was also investigated. The Cox regression models show that access to social protection and sufficiently high benefit amounts play a favourable role in preventing poor housing quality.

In addition, the analysis shows that social tenants in Belgium have a significantly lower risk of deterioration in terms of affordability and housing quality than private tenants. This latter result means that income-related rents and housing

quality policies in social housing, such as highly regulated quality standards for new construction and extensive renovation programmes, are effective.

In the dialogue process with associations for poverty reduction (Demonty et al. 2025), a link was also established between affordable, high-quality housing and the financial margin for other necessary expenses. The relatively low rent of social housing, for example, allows households to invest more in the realisation of other rights, such as healthy food, healthcare, education and training, social and cultural life, leisure, and so on.

Access to rights in the housing sphere

In addition to various forms of financial transfers, the legal system has a protective function and aims to ensure more equal access to housing. De Munck & Pardoën (2024) investigated how disadvantaged citizens are supported in practice to realise their rights in relation to housing. They did this on the basis of a literature study and in-depth interviews and focus groups with professionals from various public and private non-profit services. The experiences of those seeking justice vary greatly, depending on the legal system within which they operate.

The *formal legal system* gives citizens more opportunities by treating them as legal subjects who are assumed to be astute and responsible and to respect contracts and the rights of partners. However, the way in which courts and tribunals communicate tends to deter the most vulnerable individuals. This is particularly evident in the frequent failure of tenants to attend magistrates' court hearings.

To remedy this problem, other legal systems are available. The *bureaucratic system* empowers citizens by granting them rights and goods on the basis of general criteria (e.g. income) that are applied objectively. It can help to reduce the threat posed by the formal legal system, for example through a winter moratorium on evictions. It can also allocate social housing on the basis of waiting lists combined with a points system. Although all this provides access to important resources, it remains insufficient because citizens in these regimes are primarily passive subjects, subject to the law.

Negotiated legal systems can partially compensate for these shortcomings. The system of *individual mediation* in particular appears to be important in the field of housing. Mediation procedures have developed significantly over the past thirty years. They make it possible to address important factors of poverty. One example is debt, one of the main causes of poverty. Such a situation calls for individual, preventive or curative negotiations. Budget guidance, debt mediation or, in the formal legal system, collective debt settlement are procedures that give access to rights and protection of the individual. The right not to be discriminated against, particularly on the basis of wealth, social situation or origin, is guaranteed by mediation mechanisms such as those established by Unia. The right to healthy housing is better guaranteed when a mediator between the tenant and the landlord can intervene in the transaction. This mediator can bring the technical skills, legal knowledge and authority of a third party to a tenancy relationship that is otherwise often perceived as a pure power relationship.

These legal intermediaries cannot be separated from agencies whose purpose is to assist tenants. The irreplaceable contribution of these legal intermediaries, who are not necessarily lawyers themselves, to access to rights must be emphasised. Mediation functions should be further encouraged in social housing agencies, public social welfare centres and associations. For many vulnerable people, they are the face of a benevolent legal system. At the same time, the dialogue process at the Service for the Fight against Poverty raised the explicit question of investing sufficiently in the public services responsible for managing and allocating social housing, so that they can carry out their tasks adequately. In fact, responsibility for realising the right to housing must not be transferred to civil society actors, who are in fact powerless in a context where there are insufficient sustainable housing solutions for everyone (Demonty et al. 2025).

Finally, the administration of justice through *joint negotiation* between owners and tenants is virtually absent in the field of housing. There is a lack of collective bargaining in this sector. This can be explained by the difficulties of collective action, both on the part of tenants and on the part of owners. However, trends in this direction can be observed. One recent example was the creation of the joint rent commission in the Brussels Region, which is

responsible for advising on the 'reasonableness' of a rent in cases where it deviates substantially from the legal norm. The introduction of such creative socio-legal instruments should be encouraged. However, an evaluation will be necessary in a few years' time (De Munck et al. 2025; Demonty et al. 2025).

Conclusion and recommendations

Our research shows the strong link between housing insecurity and poor housing quality on the one hand, and financial poverty on the other. The third part of the research will examine the cumulative impact of these two dimensions on physical and mental health (see Policy Brief No. 3). In the social sector, there is talk of a real housing crisis in Belgium. Responsibility for housing policy lies mainly with the regions, which are making great efforts, but these remain inadequate in relation to needs. Based on our own findings – supplemented with the comments of stakeholders, including associations where people experiencing poverty have a voice – the following recommendations can be formulated (Demonty et al. 2021; Demonty et al. 2025):

1. In general, the Matthew effect in housing subsidies must be further eliminated. This means that the bulk of public support, which used to be spent on encouraging private home ownership by the middle class, should be shifted to lower-income groups with a greater need for support for their housing security. This shift is already partly ongoing and should be continued.
2. The fight against homelessness is an absolute priority. The counts organised by Bruss'help in the Brussels Region suggest that the problem has increased fivefold since 2008. In 2021, our country signed the Lisbon Declaration, committing to ending homelessness by 2030. In Flanders, this is in principle the responsibility of social housing companies through quotas for accelerated allocation; in the other regions, social rental agencies remain the main gateway to regular housing. The Housing First policy should be urgently structurally embedded in all regions. In the long term, the introduction of an enforceable right to housing could even be considered, following the example of France and Scotland (Support Centre for Combating Poverty 2011). In the meantime, improving the reference address system for accessing other basic social rights remains an important focus. Ideally, the link to a (reference) address should be replaced, where possible, by a link to the registration number in the National Register. In the short term, effective access to the reference address system needs to be expanded. Other existing instruments, such as the right of municipalities to reclaim vacant properties for the rehousing of homeless people, must also be used effectively.
3. Further increase investment in social housing in order to effectively eliminate waiting lists. We have seen that, despite their weaker socio-economic profile, social tenants are slightly less vulnerable to financial shocks than private tenants, which is of course due to the income-based rents in this sector. These lower rents also offer some financial leeway for investment in other areas.
Local authorities that do not meet their minimum quota of social housing can be urged to fulfil their obligations through financial penalties.
The increased conditionality of access to social housing and the pressure on outflow in the Flemish Region seem rational at first glance, but these are interventions on the demand side of the social housing market. As long as the supply of social housing remains inadequate, this is more likely to lead to a loss of housing security and higher housing costs for this vulnerable target group.
4. Decades of underprovision of social housing have led to de facto structural discrimination between households that have and have not gained access to social housing. The compensatory rent allowance schemes that currently exist for applicants on the waiting lists are wholly inadequate. They should be expanded to ensure that social and private tenants are treated more or less equally.
At the same time, stakeholders are calling for joint consultation systems to keep rents within reasonable limits,

following the example of the Brussels Region, or even legal restrictions on rent increases for poorly insulated homes, as was the case during the energy crisis (De Munck et al. 2025; Demonty et al. 2025).

5. A final avenue concerns the alternative forms of *cohousing* that low-income households use to reduce costs. When they live on social benefits, this paradoxically leads to a reduction in their income because they end up in the 'cohabiting' status, even though they only share the dwelling. At least for benefits below the EU poverty line, it would be more logical not to apply this rule, so that cohousing really becomes a means of escaping poverty (Demonty et al. 2021).

Read more

- Ansaloni, V., & Heylen, K. (2023). *The effect of poverty and social protection on housing outcomes. The case of Belgium*, Re-INVEST report 2.1.1.
- Bruss'help (2024). *Masterplan voor het uitbannen van de thuisloosheid*. Brussel: Bruss'help, 71p.
- De Munck, J., & Pardoën, L. (2024). *Droit au logement et régimes de légalité*, Re-INVEST rapport 2.2.2-2.2.3.
- De Munck J., Pardoën L., Printz A. (2025), *Droit au logement et pluralisme juridique. Rapport de synthèse*. Re-INVEST rapport 2.2.4
- Demonty, F., de Vaal, D., Stroobants, V., & Van Hootegem, H. (2021). *Logement : une approche socio-constructiviste. Eléments autour de la question du logement sur la base de concertations avec les acteurs de la lutte contre la pauvreté*, Re-INVEST.be Rapport 2.3.1, Bruxelles: Service de lutte contre la pauvreté, la précarité et l'exclusion sociale, 31 p.
- Demonty F., Stroobants V., Van Hootegem H. (2025). *Woonbeleid en armoedebestrijding: een kruising van academisch onderzoek met ervaringskennis van actoren uit het veld*. Re-INVEST.be rapport 3.3.2, Brussel: Steunpunt ter bestrijding van armoede, bestaanszekerheid en sociale uitsluiting / KU Leuven: HIVA.
- Eurostat & DG ECFIN (2025). *Data factsheet Belgium. Annex to European Commission, The European Affordable Housing Plan*, SWD (2025) 1053, 16.12.2025.
- Goubin, S., & Heylen, K. (2023). *Vinden dak- en thuislozen de weg naar sociale huisvesting in België? Een verkennende studie*. Re-INVEST.be rapport 2.1.2, Leuven: HIVA, 45 p.
- Pardoën, L., & De Munck, J. (2024). *Cadre juridique du droit au logement et politiques publiques du logement en action*, Re-INVEST rapport 2.2.1.
- Steunpunt tot bestrijding van armoede, bestaansonzekerheid en sociale uitsluiting (2011), *Naar een effectief recht op wonen: welke lessen kunnen we trekken uit de Franse en Schotse ervaringen? Verslag van het seminarie van 18 maart 2011*, Brussel, 63p., https://armoedebestrijding.be/publications/verslag_resultaatsverbintenis.pdf
- Vandewiele, M., Halfants, I. (2025), Het verzamelen en uitwisselen van gegevens. De basis voor een sterk beleid ter bestrijding van dak- en thuisloosheid, in: Coene J., Degerickx H., Dewilde C., D'Hertoghe M., Ghys T., Hubeau B., Marchal S., Remmen R., & Van Hootegem H. (red., 2025), *Armoede en ongelijkheid – Jaarboek 2025*, Acco, p.373-391

The research team

Authors

Ides Nicaise, Kristof Heylen, Valeria Ansaloni, Anna Ruelens, Silke Goubin (KU Leuven HIVA)

Jean De Munck, Léonard Pardoën, Antoine Printz (UC Louvain – CRIDIS)

Henk Van Hootegem, Veerle Stroobants, David de Vaal, François Demonty (Support Centre for Combating Poverty, Precariousness and Social Exclusion)

Contact

Nicaise, Ides

KU Leuven / HIVA

e-mail: ides.nicaise@kuleuven.be

<https://hiva.kuleuven.be/sites/reinvestbe>

ⁱ <https://hiva.kuleuven.be/sites/reinvestbe>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.woonzaak.be/>