

Summary

« Justice in question.

After the ‘barometer of Justice’: a qualitative research »

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The present research was aimed at exploring the reasons grounding the rather negative opinions expressed in the ‘Justice barometer’¹, a quantitative survey administered to the Belgian population about their attitude towards the justice system.

For this qualitative research data have been gathered in four Belgian judicial districts: two in Wallonia (Charleroi and Marche-en-Famenne) and two in the Flemish part of the country (Antwerpen and Dendermonde). In a first step focus groups have been organised with civilians in each of these districts. Participants were selected according to a set of specific criteria (age, education level, and experience with the justice system). In a second step the results of the focus groups have been presented to professionals of the justice system (lawyers, prosecutors, magistrates, and staff at the ‘houses of justice’).

The results of the focus groups have largely validated the results of the quantitative survey (‘Justice barometer’). Participants mentioned the following major problems of the justice system: its slowness, the complexity of the judicial language, the excessive cost of a case, the inaccessibility and the distance of the judicial actors, the lack of information available about one’s own case, the lack of communication and the phenomenon of ‘class justice’. Lots of persons complained about the (non existent) role attributed to them in the judicial system. Other topics raised were the severity of sentences and the necessity to develop alternative sanctions. Participants also raised criticisms against the bar. Finally, specific attention was directed to the media and its influence on peoples’ attitude towards the justice system. We notice that civilians without experience with the justice system are more influenced by the media than people with experience. However, it remains unclear how and to which extent the media impact on peoples’ image of the justice system.

The results of this qualitative analysis are, for a large part, similar for the two parts of the country. Variations are, in fact, rather limited to nuances. For instance, only the Walloon respondents stressed the traumatic effects of contacts with the justice system.

Further, the results of the focus groups with civilians were submitted to focus groups of professionals. Their many reactions enriched the results of the focus groups with civilians. On the one hand, the attitudes of the civilian participants were confirmed, on the other hand, the justice professionals were able to correct misunderstandings expressed by the civilians.

Based on these focus groups with civilians and professionals, a list of recommendations was formulated.

¹ PARMENTIER, S., VERVAEKE, G., GOETHALS, J., DOUTRELEPONT, R., KELLENS, G., LEMAITRE A., CLOET, B., SCHOFFELEN, J., VANDERHALLEN, M., BIREN, P., SINTOBIN, M., VAN WIN, T. & VANDEKEERE, M., *Justitie doorgelicht. De resultaten van de eerste Belgische «justitiebarometer»*, Gent, Academia Press, 2004, 118p; PARMENTIER, S., VERVAEKE, G., GOETHALS, J., DOUTRELEPONT, R., KELLENS, G., LEMAITRE A., BIREN, P., CLOET, B., SCHOFFELEN, J., VANDERHALLEN, M., SINTOBIN, M., VAN WIN, T. & VANDEKEERE, M., *Une radiographie de la Justice. Les résultats du premier « baromètre de la Justice » en Belgique*, Gand, Academia Press, 2004, 118p.