



Social disinvestment and vulnerable groups in Europe in the aftermath of the financial crisis

The case of newly arrived immigrants in Flanders

Newcomers, documented and undocumented migrants, and study service of beweging vzw



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Executive summary

This report is prepared in the framework of the Europe H2020 project ‘Rebuilding an inclusive, value based Europe of solidarity and trust through social investments’ (RE-InVEST). The project aims to evaluate the social investment strategy of the European Commission implemented in 2013 in response to the social damage of the financial crisis in 2008. The RE-InVEST consortium assesses the social damage of the crisis from human rights and capability based approaches with an eye to those vulnerable groups affected the most by the crisis in the 12 countries (and 13 regions) covered by the consortium. The analyses are carried out by the local partners, who consist of NGOs and/or researchers.

The crisis of 2008 didn’t affected Belgium in the same way as other European countries. Belgium was one of the first countries that linked up again with growth. But this revival was temporarily. From 2012 on, the backlash hit Belgium. Economic growth became negative intensified by higher unemployment rates. This backlash was also translated into electoral choices. A conservative inspired government took form and installed a neoliberal agenda with a lot of austerity measures.

Among vulnerable people in Belgium people with a history of migration tend to be the most exposed. Poverty among them is high, much higher than among native people. Within this group undocumented migrants and newcomers are the most affected, but they are nearly invisible in statistics and official reports. Due to the harsher political climate they feel more than others the impact of the crisis and the anti-crisis measures. The harsher political climate is also translated into more restrictive policies towards people with a history of migration. For this reason the group was identified as particularly affected by the crisis.

The RE-InVEST consortium has jointly developed the PAHRCA-methodology that combines principles of Participatory Action research with Human Rights and Capability Approaches. This qualitative, participatory research does not generate representative results but rather aims at deepening the understanding of the economic, social, cultural and political impacts of the crisis on the lives of vulnerable people and giving them a voice.

The biographies of Anna and Souma illustrate the marks of the crisis on individual life courses. The situation of Anna was characterised by her struggle to integrate, to have legal papers, to find a decent job, to find a decent house, and a struggle to survive. These struggles have a negative impact on her family life. *Life became that expensive that it is very hard to survive with only one family member having a job.* She fears the future, life has become harder, and more and more people have to live on the street. Souma’s story reflects the struggle to get legal papers and to be a part of the Belgian society. Without legal papers she’s nothing, has no rights, not even her child. *It became harder to search for favours, it takes a lot of energy. It’s unfair, society asks to integrate which I did, but I do not get any chances.*

While the biographies exemplify the effects of the crisis for a newcomer with and one without legal papers, the analysis is based on contributions of all participants. A loss of trust can be detected among newcomers. Participants experienced this loss of trust at a general level but also on the personal level. They expressed vividly their distrust or loss of trust in governments and key institutions. There is also a loss in trust in people. They live quite isolated and have no friends. They were afraid that with the recent refugee crisis they will lose again. Some participants express anti-refugee sentiments.

But at the same time they have high levels of gratitude to Belgium and the institutions. They want to ‘give back’ to our society. Their gratitude is a positive stepping stone for their integration. The loss of trust undermines on the long term this stepping stone. These high levels of gratitude also apply to NGO’s and schools. There they find help and support that others, like social institutions, refuse to give. NGO’s and schools strengthen their resilience.

Our analysis confirms the erosion of social rights. This erosion, partly due to disinvestment, partly due to the neo-liberal ideology, has a tremendous impact on newcomers. Their rights are not granted anymore, they have to fight each time for their rights. The access to social protection, income security, jobs, decent housing has diminished. For undocumented migrants the erosion of social rights has an indirect impact: more than ever they are not welcome. Social services and NGO's are being forbidden to help. As a consequence of the erosion of social rights the collective capability has diminished. Their capacity to support, their capacity to choose, their resources have been diminished. The erosion of social rights has real consequences for people's individual capability. They admit that it is too late for them. They can't make any more plans, choices, progress. The only hope they have is for their children.

In conclusion while the crisis has not hit Belgium as strong as other countries, it has had effects: poverty among people and especially among people with a history of migration has risen. Austerity policies have started from 2012 on and undermined trust in politics and existing institutions. The core idea of the social investment strategy of the European Commission – “investing in people” – has not reached people with a history of migration. On the contrary, newcomers admit the loss of support, the loss of rights, and the loss of freedom. Participants have noticed the development of a culture of distrust and discrimination. They are becoming *little people*. Little people are not heard, they have no voice. Participants are concerned about rising inequality and increasing visibility of poverty. However, they also ask to invest in little people, because they want to be part of the Belgian society. *We wanted to be a part of this society, so give us a chance to be part of it.*

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Introduction

This report is prepared in the framework of the Europe H2020 project ‘Rebuilding an inclusive, value based Europe of solidarity and trust through social investments’ (RE-InVEST). The RE-InVEST project aims to contribute to an EU offering more solidarity and inclusion, through an inclusive, powerful and effective social investment strategy at the EU level. Moreover, the project itself adopts a participative approach that lends a voice to vulnerable groups and civil society organisations. The RE-InVEST consortium consists of members of the informal network ‘the Alliances to fight Poverty’, a network of civil society organisations, trade unions, policy makers and academics co-ordinated by the Flemish Christian labour movement ‘beweging.net’, and committed to a more inclusive Europe. The consortium covers a broad range of European countries, both geographically (12 countries, 13 regions) and in terms of representation of different welfare and labour market traditions. The analyses are carried out by the local partners, who consist of NGOs and/or researchers.

In particular, this report is one of the 13 national reports that make up the qualitative research of the RE-InVEST work package ‘The social damage of the crisis’. This work package focuses on the authentic experience of vulnerable people, the impact of the crisis (and crisis-related policy reform) on vulnerable groups as well as the impact of growing inequality and social vulnerability on trust. Our two key hypotheses in this regard are: 1. That growing distrust and indeed resentment among the population may be attributed to (a rejection of) the neoliberal policies employed by national as well as European elites in recent years; 2. That this integrated diagnosis can build on the idea of the erosion of/disinvestment in (individual and collective) capabilities and basic social rights in the EU. This means that experiences of insecurity, poverty and social degradation need to be re-analysed from those perspectives.

Next to the 13 qualitative case studies, this work package consists of a cross-validation with a report describing trends in selected quantitative indicators that reflect the relation between socio-economic vulnerability, human rights and capabilities. A third element consists of a statistical analysis of the dynamic relationship between vulnerability, shifts in social policies and trust: in which sections of the population has the trust in institutions declined most? Can different patterns between countries be observed, and can they be explained by differences in policy shifts and differences in resilience of civil society? A European synthesis report will combine the main findings from the three types of analyses.

The qualitative research focuses on the experience of vulnerable groups in each of the 12 countries (13 regions) participating in RE-InVEST. Mixed teams of researchers, NGO and union workers, practitioners and people from vulnerable groups jointly analysed cases where the crisis has impacted on human rights and (individual as well as collective) capabilities.

This Belgium-Flemish qualitative case study focuses on the ‘newcomers’ that arrived in Belgium within the last 12 years. It should be noted that newcomers are one of the blind spots in all quantitative and qualitative research. The newcomers arrive here full of hope to build a new life. They are still ‘resilient’ and still have the power to build a new life. What is the impact of the crisis (and crisis-related policy reform) on their life? And, more specifically, what is the impact on their resilience? The Belgian case study seeks answers to this question. Answers that can impact and refocus policies.

We would like to thank all participants and the NGO that hosted us, for their hospitality and their passion in the fight for their rights and the rights of all those who are excluded.

1. Poverty and social exclusion among people with a history of migration and the effects of the austerity measures

1.1 An overview of the evolution of poverty and social exclusion in the group of people with a history of migration in Belgium (Flanders)

1.2 Poverty and social exclusion among ‘people with a history of migration’ has only recently come to the attention of researchers. The first major study on poverty among dates from 2007: “de kleur van armoede”¹. It was the first study that identified the problem of poverty among people with a history of migration. The results of this study were breathtaking: more than half of the people with a history of migration coming from Morocco and Turkey, is living with an income below the AROP-poverty-line²

The Flemish government has been publishing the ‘Flemish Monitor of Migration and Integration’ since 2013. This monitor collects all data on participation, social cohesion, position, on integration and migration.³ The conclusion of the Flemish Monitor is stringent: poverty and social exclusion as defined by EU2020⁴ among PMH is 34 percentage point higher than for native people⁵: In 2013, 13% of people born in Belgium are poor and/or socially excluded next to 47% of people born outside the EU, but living in Belgium.

Each study exposed two blind spots. The first being the problem of poverty among ‘undocumented migrants’ (undocumented migrants). The problem is well-known, but because of their status the undocumented migrant do not show up in most of the data. The ‘Centre of Expertise on Migration’⁶ estimates the population of people living without legal papers in Belgium at 100,000 in 2007. This estimation has not been updated since then. PICUM⁷ (Platform for international cooperation on undocumented migrants) argues that due to the irregularity of their situation undocumented migrants are more vulnerable than others.

Another blind spot is the situation of newcomers. Newcomers have to follow a path to a legal status. Once they have obtained the necessary papers, they become part of the group of people with a history of migration and become invisible as a subgroup. Only one quantitative indication of the extreme vulnerability of newcomers could be found: the 2015 report of Eurostat on poverty concluded that 1 upon 7 newcomers are living in poverty⁸.

The conclusion of all reports⁹ indicates that people with a history of migration are more vulnerable than native people. There are indications that undocumented migrants and newcomers, because of their invisibility, are more vulnerable than others.

1 Translation: “The colour of poverty”. Beatrix Van Robaeys, Jan Vranken, Nathalie Perrin en Marco Martiniello. De Kleur van Armoede, armoede bij personen van buitenlandse herkomst. Acco Leuven. 2007.

2 http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Europe_2020_indicators_-_poverty_and_social_exclusion

3 Monitor.

4 This means that these people were at least in one of the following conditions: at-risk-of-poverty after social transfers (income poverty); severely materially deprived or living in households with very low work intensity.

5 Vlaamse Migratie- en Integratiemonitor, 2015. P. 208-209.

6 <http://www.kruispuntmi.be/thema/bijzondere-groepen/mensen-zonder-wettig-verblijf>

7 <http://picum.org/en/>

8 <https://www.vlaamsparlament.be/commissies/commissievergaderingen/1019576/verslag/1030778>;

9 Verschillende rapporten opsommen.

1.3 The austerity measures and their effects on poverty and social exclusion among people with a history of migration

Belgium is one of the countries that showed more resilience to the crisis than other members of the Eurozone. Yet, all governments under the guidance of the ‘Growth and Stability Pact¹⁰’ accepted adjustment plans with a view to restoring the health of public finances. The first years after the crisis, the Flemish government developed an anti crisis plan based on investment and raising the household budgets¹¹. From 2012 onwards the backlash of the crisis was felt. For the first time since the crisis a small negative growth was noted¹². Also in 2012, a new government was composed after an electoral victory of the Nationalist conservative party. This party controlled the federal and Flemish governments. New and tighter anti-crisis measures based on a more conservative and neo-liberal ideology were implemented¹³. Anti-crisis measures initially focusing on positive investment plans, gave way to austerity and adjustment.

In this chapter we give an overview of the anti-crisis measures that have had a negative impact on people with a history of migration. There are measures that have an impact on the whole population and measures with a more specific impact on people with a history of migration. These last measures are not always conceived from the viewpoint of an anti-crisis policy. A more stringent integration policy is notable from 2007/8, but it is not necessarily related to the economic crisis. The policy reflects a harsher society, that became even harsher after the crisis.

The anti-crisis measures with an overall negative impact can be grouped into four categories: more conditionality (i.e. restricted access to social housing), cuts in public services (i.e. 900 million EUR less expenditures for education), higher personal contributions for basic needs and provisions (i.e. higher personal contribution for day care centres or public transport), and restrictive policies (restricted access to unemployment allowances)¹⁴. Almost all measures have a negative effect on people, irrespective of their origin. But due to the vulnerability of people with a history of migration, the impact of the austerity measures are more severe for them than for others. Some specific measures aimed at people with a history of migration on integration were introduced, accompanied with a reform of the integration service sector as a whole.

All these recently introduced policies have a heavy impact on people living in poverty. At the end of 2015 the municipal social services (OCMWs) applied for a raise in social benefits budgets to answer the desperate need of many households.¹⁵

The impact on people with a migration background is grave. Our collaborating NGO testified how people with a history of migration became more vulnerable. They saw the number of their number increase by 30% from 2013 to 2014. They were obliged to extend the opening hours of their social grocery. In the near future they expect again an important rise due to the integration of new refugees and even more important, the present huge rise of the energy cost in Flanders.

The NGO has been obliged to shift its policy towards undocumented migrants, due to the more restrictive attitude of the municipality and its services towards undocumented migrants.

10 The Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) is a set of rules designed to ensure that countries in the European Union pursue sound public finances and coordinate their fiscal policies.

http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/economic_governance/sgp/index_en.htm

11 DE VLAAMSE BEGROTING 2009. P. 3 and 4.

http://fin.vlaanderen.be/nlapps/data/docattachments/nhoora_Vlaamse_Begroting_2009.pdf

12 The Belgium economy showed a greater resilience than the rest of the Eurozone. In 2010 and 2011 the economy grew with 2.3% and 1.8%. a gradual slowdown in activity began in the second quarter of 2011 and continue in 2012. 2012 noticed an economic growth of -0.1%. From 2013 on there is a small recovery (+0.2%). Dalila Ghailana. The impact of the crisis on fundamental rights across Member States of the EU. Country Report on Belgium. Study for the LIBE Committee. Brussels. 2015

13 <http://www.dewereldmorgen.be/artikel/2014/10/15/regering-michel-krijgt-al-meteen-een-betoging-en-vier-stakingen-op-het-bord>

14 An overview of the austerity measures of the Flemish government: <http://www.demorgen.be/binnenland/exclusief-dit-is-de-rekening-van-bourgeois-i-be6ec2f7/>. An overview of the austerity measures of the Federal government: <http://trends.knack.be/economie/beleid/waar-haalt-michel-i-1-2-miljard-euro-10-maatregelen/article-normal-443859.html>

15 Natalie Debast. Wonen en energie voor veel mensen onbetaalbaar. Brussel 2015.

<http://www.vvsg.be/nieuws/Paginas/OCMW%E2%80%99s---Wonen-en-energie-voor-veel-mensen-onbetaalbaar-in-2016%E2%80%99.aspx>

All indicators show the vulnerability of people with a migration background and especially the undocumented migrants. Because of their vulnerability, austerity measures have a tremendous negative impact. However, in all the statistics and reports undocumented migrants and newcomers stay invisible. Therefore we decided to focus on these groups in this case study.

2. The participatory research approach

2.1 Participatory Action Human Rights and Capability Approach

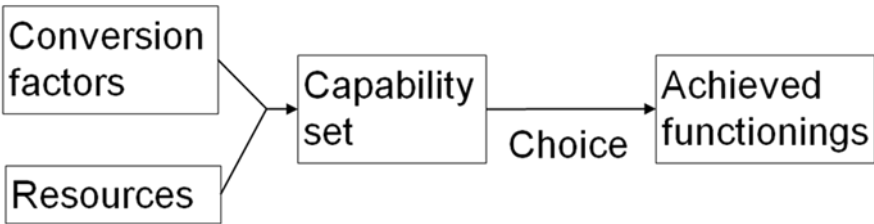
RE-InVEST aims at investigating the philosophical, institutional and empirical foundations of an inclusive Europe of solidarity and trust. To this end it draws on capability and human rights based participatory approaches. Human rights form a common European basis of values and describe at the same time core elements of what constitutes well-being and a good life. Further, human rights are transformative by empowering people.

Human rights are the basic rights and freedoms that belong to everyone. International law, including treaties, contain the provisions which give human rights legal effect. Ideas about human rights have evolved over many centuries and gained strong support after World War II when the United Nations adopted the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights - which set out for the first time the human rights and fundamental freedoms shared by all human beings without discrimination of any kind.

Human Rights are universally agreed basic standards that aim to ensure that every person is treated with dignity and respect; they are interdependent and indivisible, they belong to all people without discrimination. Usually set out in law, through international or regional treaties, or national legislation, they form a legal statement of universally accepted principles of how the state should treat its citizens and other people living within its jurisdiction. Human Rights include Civil and Political Rights, such as the right to life, the right to a fair trial and the right not to be subjected to torture; and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, such as the right to work, to join a trade union, to health, to education, and to an adequate standard of living.

Specific groups are protected in specific treaties such as women, children, and people with disabilities, minorities, and migrants. For vulnerable people the usage of a rights-terminology has proven to change their perspective by making them aware of their rights and the ways in which their current situation compromises these rights.

Figure 2.1 Resources, conversion factors, capability set and achieved functionings



The capability approach as developed by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011) defines a person’s well-being in terms of the beings and doings (the functionings) a person achieves and his capability to choose among different combinations of such functionings. For leading a life one values and has reason to value, resources and conversion factors are preconditions (Figure 2.1). Resources refer to the material conditions of a person: his income, the goods and services she disposes of. Conversion factors help him converting resources into doing and being well. There are personal conversion factors such as skills and bodily features, social conversion factors such as social norms and social institutions and environmental conversion factors such as climate and geography. In the end both the achieved functionings as well as the freedom to choose a life one values matters.

For assessing the capabilities of vulnerable people RE-InVEST aims at giving them a voice. Their participation is fostered by relying on participatory action research that directly results in policy recommendations. Participatory action research views participants as co-researchers who have special knowledge about their own situation. Hence they are not only asked or interviewed on their views, but take part in research by engaging in, examining, interpreting, and reflecting on their own social world, shaping their sense of identity.

It is a circle of knowledge generation that emerges from this method and includes the steps of knowledge production and sharing, empowerment by participation, newly generated knowledge and action that builds upon this knowledge (Figure 2.2). Crucial for this kind of knowledge generation is the “merging” or “crossing of knowledge” that comes from three parts: scientific knowledge as gained by researchers; knowledge which the poor and excluded have, from their first-hand experience, of the twin realities of poverty and the surrounding world which imposes it on them; and the knowledge of those who work among and with these victims in places of poverty and social exclusion (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 Merging of Knowledge



Those are the core elements of the ‘Participatory Action Human Rights and Capability Approach’ (PAHRCA) developed in RE-InVEST. PAHRCA proposes seven steps (Toolkit, 44-45): 1. Identify and meet partner NGO/gatekeeper, 2. Preliminary ‘meet ups’ (for trust building if necessary), 3. First meeting with participants – trust building, 4. Developmental: implement developmental human rights & capability approach, 5. Inquiry/data gathering, 6. Identifying patterns (key issues and themes of concern to the group) and 7. Undertake action/outcome using one or combination of approaches.

2.2 The making of a group of participants

The people with a history of migration in our case study are all newcomers. The ‘oldest’ have lived here for 10 years. Their stories are about their struggle to integrate and to survive during their integration period. All of them are vulnerable.

From September 2015 till mid-February 2016 we organised 10 group sessions. These were complemented with individual sessions. All sessions were initiated and supported by the two ‘Beweging vzw’ researchers responsible for the RE-InVEST project. A social worker from the involved NGO involved attended the first 2 group sessions as well as the presentation of the first draft results to the participants.

The total number of participants being involved was 15. 11 out of 15 participants were present during all sessions. Two male participants stopped participating after 2 group sessions without offering any reason. Women are clearly overrepresented in the group: 9 out of 15. The core group of 11 people only counts 1 male. There was also a quite diverse nationality range within the focus group: Cameroon, Iraq, Afghanistan, Albania, Armenia, Morocco, Russia,

The main common characteristic was that all participants were involved in volunteering work. That resulted in a quite resilient and emancipated focus group.

2.3 The process: the people with a history of migration valued as contributor in the project

Participants spontaneously started talking about their previous experiences with research projects and questionnaires. They stressed that they wanted more than just telling their story again. They wanted a their situation to change. For this reason, we decided to involve them strongly in the process of policy making. We asked them to develop, by constructed reasoning, policy recommendations. Finally, we submitted our draft report to them for feedback and amendments.

Within the scope of the project, participants chose the subjects and themes they wanted to discuss. Important themes that were selected by the participants were ‘their rights’, ‘work’, ‘education’ and ‘social services’. We decided to maximise the emancipatory and critical aspect of the ‘Participatory Action Human Rights and Capability Approach’ (PAHRCA) and not just discussing these themes, but emphasizing on their way of dealing within these scopes. Key concepts we used to develop this method were ‘trust’, ‘well-being’, ‘future plans’, ‘the role of their children’.

At the end of the project, the participants will be invited to the final conference where their voice will also be heard.

2.4 The hypotheses

This qualitative research focuses on the lived experience of vulnerable people, the impact of the crisis (and crisis-related policy reform) on vulnerable groups as well as the impact of growing inequality and social vulnerability on distrust. The main lesson we draw from the discussions with the NGOs is that for newcomers ‘the crisis’ means something else than the crisis of 2008. *“They live permanently in crisis”* said their representatives.

The consequence is that we need to look what ‘crisis’ means for the focus group. They already experienced a feeling of ‘crisis’ in their home country. Because of this traumatic experience they fled to Belgium. This traumatic experience colours their emotions and their evaluation of their daily life in Belgium.

Next there is the definition of crisis as a daily experience. The answers produce a picture of how a society deals with newcomers and of what changed in time. The hypotheses on disinvestment can find here some answers.

Newcomers have initially hopes for themselves and in the end mainly for their children. Actually, this is a matter of resilience. Is their resilience affected by the crisis? Resilience is linked with trust. Trust is necessary to rebound. The discussion about trust and resilience is connected with the first questions. Trust, resilience, investment, support, all these concepts are intertwined.

The biographies and the group discussions gave a new insight into the lives of newcomers.

3. “Our life is not normal”

3.1 Anna’s story

Anna arrived in Belgium in 2010 with the help of an Italian acquaintance. She is originally from Morocco. She has two small children, born in Belgium. She started taking Dutch courses and was granted allowances? for 1 year allowances by the OCMW. Afterwards she benefited during 2 years from a VDAB (Flemish employment office) support. As her basis knowledge of the Dutch language was insufficient, the VDAB did not offer her a training. *“Suddenly, in 2013, our papers have been stopped, we were not notified”*. She doesn’t know or isn’t informed of the reason why her own and her husband’s papers have been stopped. Also her child benefits were stopped. *“All support measures stopped, there was nothing left”*. She finds it so very difficult to understand that, first you are entitled to certain things, and then, suddenly, it all stops, without any transition period or any alert mechanism. All of this provoked great stress and anger in the family. Last month, they followed the same procedure as in 2013 and were granted again legal papers.

Anna’s social worker encourages her to find a job. It is not easy to find a job without a diploma. Sometimes she finds a job for a week, two weeks, but never a long term commitment. Currently, her husband has an interim job as a seasonal worker and as a ‘paperboy’. He is 47 years old and finds it hard to find a full-time contract. The CAW (private social service) helped her with her administration for the child benefits. She was also helped by “De Huizen van het Kind”.

Anna takes Dutch language courses and she also took internet courses. Having to take care of two small children, she doesn’t find the time to do anything more for the time being. All the trainings are beyond her present level. In Morocco, she worked for 14 years in a textile factory, in the marketing sector and the food inspection sector. Here, she hopes to find a half time job in 6 months’ time, when the youngest child will go to the day care centre. But she is afraid that she will not find a job at all, because there is not much demand, not even in the cleaning sector. At VDAB, she insisted to have a counsellor. In the meanwhile, she tries to improve her Dutch. She speaks fluently Greek, Turkish, Arabic and French. But she finds the Dutch grammar particularly difficult.

Anna is overwhelmed by stress and finds it hard to rest because of the tense situation at home. A lot of arguing is going on there and there is too much stress caused by work and money related problems. The cost of living (rent, gas/electricity and a car) is as high as 1200 EUR/month. There is only 200 EUR left for food, clothes, the children, for 4 persons. For food, Anna goes to the Social Grocery. Often she does not get sufficient healthy food. They have to pay a 800 EUR rent for an apartment in an old house, which is in a very bad state. There are severe humidity problems and both mother and the children show allergic reactions. Nothing in the house is finished. The walls haven’t been painted, there’s no wallpaper, there are no skirting boards in the house. The youngest child is beginning to crawl and likes to put his hands against the wall. Each time his hands come back full of chalk and he has to be stopped putting his hands into his mouth. They are on the waiting list for a social house, but they were informed they would have to wait 5 to 6 years to obtain one. She asked for a rental allowance, but she received until now only a letter with the waiting lists.

The first apartment they lived in, suffered from the same problems as the present one: a high rent and a bad state. In the first apartment, they asked help from the ‘Huurdersbond’ to carry out some inspections. The result was that she had to sleep in a separate place from her husband and that afterwards they had to leave the house. Anna does not want to contact the ‘Huurdersbond’ regarding her present apartment: they are too afraid to be expelled from the apartment and to become homeless. She even knows a woman in her

neighbourhood who has been homeless for 2 months now. She very much afraid to end up in the same situation. They are looking for another apartment, but they are hard to find.

Finding a day care centre and a school for the children did not present any major difficulties. She registered in the crèche while she was pregnant and following an integration trajectory. She was helped in a proper way by the social workers of the Integration Centre, where she took Dutch courses and reached level 2.1. Afterwards she continued her Dutch courses at VDAB.

Anna doesn't feel discriminated. *"I follow my own path, I do what I have to do. I encounter friendly and unfriendly people. But that's the same in my own country"*.

What has changed during the last years in Belgium?

Life becomes harder: a lot of people are seeking a job and a good home and there aren't enough jobs and good houses available. She also points at the rising number of homeless people. Anna also mentions the rise of the gas and electricity cost. *"Life became so expensive that it is really hard to survive with only one family member having a job. Both parents need to go to work to survive now."* She also fears the consequences for society after the Paris attacks. *"People who do not believe in a democratic world, bode ill for all of us. This is for nobody a good and healthy situation"*.

3.2 Souma's story

Souma starts her biographical interview by pointing out that, at home, she had reflected a lot on what she would tell today. Eventually she decided not to tell her whole life story, because it would make her too depressed. It would remind her of the bad choices she made in her life and their consequences.

She's originally from Morocco and arrived here in 2009. She came to Europe for economic reasons. Her two sisters were already in Europe (one in the Netherlands and one in France) when she arrived. They are happily married and have all the necessary legal papers. She could only visit her sister in France once, but sometimes her sister comes over to visit her in Belgium. Souma is only visiting her sister in the Netherlands from time to time. She takes the bus, because travelling by train, involves a higher risk for identity controls and she does not have legal papers. *"I thought it would be easier to build a life in Europe; if I had known beforehand what I would have to endure, I would not have come to Europe. But now, with all the time and efforts I have put into this life, impossible to give up, especially because of my son."*

In her first year in Europe, she stayed in the Netherlands with a Belgian visa for one year. Souma puts a lot of effort in her study of the Dutch language. With temporary papers, she lived together with a man for one year. The relationship didn't work out well: the man did not see the need for her to develop herself. He did not offer Souma any time to discover her new world. The relationship collapsed.

Souma appealed for regularisation, but received a negative answer because she was not long enough in Belgium. In Belgium, she started a relationship with a man going through a regularisation procedure. But when his labour contract expired and also due to an administrative mistake, the procedure was interrupted. At that moment, her visa was expired as well.

Souma got pregnant and now has a son of 5 years. She is living separated from the father of her son. The man married another woman and is now living in the same neighbourhood she and their son are living. He is a good father to the child. Souma and the father have a good contact for raising the child. *"I did not choose the right moment, the right place, the right persons. I have to pay now for my bad choices."* She blames herself for that.

Souma decided not to delve too deep in her past and starts talking about her observations and feelings. *"I feel good because I became independent, only thanks to my own efforts and strengths. I survived thanks to the search for rights I undertook myself. By oral communication I have searched for information to see what rights or benefits I could claim. Services never provided me any help. Their overall reaction was very unfriendly because of the language barrier or because of ID-questions."* *"They just tell you that you don't have any rights. You have to search yourself for possibilities until you find useful information"*.

Her son was a very active baby. He always wanted to crawl, he didn't sleep well. At that time, Souma didn't have any work at all and suffered from a deep depression. She went to 'Kind and Gezin' and asked for psychological assistance. *"I wanted to search for my strength."* They refused to help her because she does not

have legal papers. A friend suggested she went to a church where they provide food aid packages. The woman who was working in the church called the CAW, because at that time Souma could not pay her rent. The CAW stated that they could not be of any help because she could not claim housing help or call on financial support. Eventually, she was asked to come over for a consultation: they could provide help only for the child, but not for her, because she's not a political refugee. The CAW has called 'Kind and Gezin' asking to arrange a day care centre for the son although he is not registered anywhere. The solution was to bring the son to the day care centre of the OCMW. Bringing her baby to the day care centre was a relief for her because she needed rest. Now, her son is in his first year at the kindergarten. To register your child via the computer at school, you need to fill in a registration number, which he does not have. Souma asked 'Kind and Gezin' what to do. They told her that there were some specific registration moments. Finally she succeeded to enrol her son in a day care centre where he really feels good.

Through 'Kind and Gezin' her son eventually received a 'child code'. This was arranged through the OCMW, but it was a very difficult procedure. She wonders how people manage this when they don't understand the language sufficiently. She could also work with the 'Inloopteam' (initiation team) of 'Kind and Gezin' and that was a positive experience. For Souma it is of a vital importance to learn and improve her Dutch. *"I have to learn Dutch to exist"*. However, due to a 2012 Belgian law, it is forbidden for schools to allow adults without legal papers. Eventually, she found a teacher who teaches Dutch on a voluntary basis and who organises initiation courses for undocumented people. She takes courses twice a week and now speaks fluently Dutch. She tries to correct her language mistakes and to fine-tune her grammar. To her, learning Dutch, is an important way of organizing her time in a positive way. She had to seek profoundly to exercise her language. She also does volunteer work in order to speak the language as often as possible and she follows the news.

Souma has a diploma of accounting. Until now, she has never practiced. *"I am sometimes shocked when someone asks me, 'did you go to school'. It is not because I have to clean over here that I do not have a diploma."* Currently, she does undeclared cleaning work in the week and over the weekend she gives private lessons of Arabic. She earns about 600 EUR per month. Additionally she gets 150 EUR of alimention from the father of her son. Next to that, she receives a monthly 150 EUR from someone for allowing that person to have his domicile registered her place. Per month she pays a rent of 550 EUR and 70 EUR for gas and electricity and other house related costs. That leaves her and her son with about 150 EUR per month to eat, buy clothes, school stuff, toys, etc. She doesn't pay for the internet, and she uses the code of a friend. Souma goes to the social grocery and receives food aid packages. For her, it is very important to have healthy food. Sometimes the food dates have expired and she does not trust that kind of food. She sometimes gets help from her sister.

The state of the apartment is good. The only problem is that the bathroom is in the corridor; her son copes with allergic and asthma problems, and often suffers from colds.

Did life became harder in Belgium?

"If someone would come to North-Africa without any legal documents, he or she would not be able to have access to the benefits I have sought out. I can go to the hospital when I need to. My son can go to school. I can find some undeclared work."
"The search for benefits became increasingly harder. It takes up a lot of energy. Sometimes I have to deal with unfriendly people. People that do not value me and only see me as a cleaning lady. I am not happy with my life. I want to have a decent job and a good life". *"The only solution I see, is that I start living together with a Belgian man or that I get married. I have had 2 failed relationships. I do not make any more efforts for the moment. I do volunteer work and take Dutch courses, but in the meanwhile, I forget myself. I need to reflect on my future, but I fail to do so. I am waiting for a solution, but when and how that will come, I do not know. I have to do my best."* *"It is unfair, society wants me to integrate, which I did, but I do not get a fair chance."*

Souma went to the OCMW because of a debt with the day care centre that she needs to cover. The OCMW told her they could not help because she is not entitled to debt mediation. Some days ago, she received a phone call inviting her to go to a rights centre.

Souma's plans for the future

Souma wants her son to have rights so that he can build a decent life here. For herself, when she's old, she wants to go back to North-Africa. *"I did not achieve my dream. Where do I get my strength? My psychologist gives me strength to move on, as well as my volunteer work. My volunteer work makes me feel for a moment that I am a person worthy of this society"*. She receives also help from her doctor who provides free medication. He was also the one who directed her to a psychologist, whom she pays 15 EUR. She had to stop the consultations because it was too expensive for her. She confirms that she needs psychological assistance to release herself and for advice. *"How can I overcome my depressed feelings? I need to search for my strength and my power. I do not have time for a depression."*

Souma is determined to continue her fight and to take responsibility over her future life. *"I don't expect any financial aid, but I do expect to be given an opportunity to work, so that I am able to go to the hospital whenever I need to go, so that I can take courses. I am a fighter and I am used to struggle for everything, that is the way I was raised."*

Souma is not afraid to be recognised by third people who will be reading this biography: *"I am not a criminal, I have not committed any crime and neither am I doing any harm."*

Reading her biographical story has given her strength: *"I realised that I am indeed making progress and that I can be proud of myself."*

4. Analysis: what newcomers said

What can I do and what will I be? This basic question summarises the capability and human rights approach. In its naivety it opens a whole world of feelings, experiences, wishes and potentialities. It opens a window on how people want to organise their lives, how they can have their voice heard, how they can build their future. At the same time the question emphasises the importance of the societal context. It focusses on the obstacles, the hurdles and the opportunities society creates.

‘What can I do to do and what will I be’ is a permanent concern for people with a history of migration and especially for the newcomers among them. Having left their country, generally for urgent reasons, they are now confronted with the question how ‘to be’, how to exist in another society, how to integrate the Belgian society, how to live and seek a new future. Their story tells their struggle for integration in a society that itself is struggling with a crisis.

4.1 Crisis as a daily experience

Every day the participants fight for their survival. ‘Crisis’ is an on-going, daily experience. An experience that has become harsher than ever before. Harsher because society seems to be pulling back. And instead of being able to claim rights, one has to fight for rights. This struggle constitutes a major obstacle for a full integration.

4.1.1 Their struggle for wellbeing

Once they reached Belgium, all the participants were very much relieved. Their gratitude towards the Belgium society is immense. And they want to express this gratitude by doing something in return for the society they are living in: ‘*returning the favour*’ is a recurrent theme in their stories.

I come from Asia. The capital was nearly destroyed, I simply had to move out, run away with the children. In the beginning, we tried to find refuge in the country. When that was no longer possible, we came to Belgium. When I arrived in Belgium, I was first put in a refugee centre. I was happy that I did not have to be afraid of bombing and the like. I was just happy to be able to sleep, that my children could play soccer. After a while, I received a positive response to my requests - I could stay here.’

This gratitude is one part of their story. The other part is the struggle for their well-being. There is a permanent feeling of stress: the struggle to survive, to give their children a future, to fight for their rights. And there is this permanent anxiety of not being able to fulfil the demands of social services.

When people do not have an income or do not find work, it puts pressure on them. I sometimes tell my social worker that their severity and strictness push people ending into prostitution or criminality. It became harder the last years to look for benefits. It takes a lot of energy. It’s unfair: society requires us to integrate, which we did, but we are not given a fair chance.’

A majority of the participants are depressed and looking for psychological help. Often they are obliged to stop their treatment for lack of resources.

She stresses that she has reached the limits of what she can take and that she feels her physical and mental health gradually deteriorating. The never-ending fight for survival and the on-going fight for obtaining minimum rights for her son (and herself),

simply takes up all the energy she is left with. She is now on the verge of a break-down. She's absolutely unable to make any progress in life.

She affirms that she needs psychological assistance. 'How can I overcome my feelings of depression? I need to find back my strength and my power. I simply do not have time for a depression.'

When your head is filled with worries about debts and bills, it is very difficult to think about anything else.'

They don't want to use the word 'poverty' to describe their situation. They feel that, should they start using this word, it would only add to their misery. It adds to the precarity of their existence. They are very poor indeed, but refuse to admit it.

'We don't want to use a negative word to describe our situation, and using the word 'poverty' is depressing, it plunges us even deeper into our misery.'

4.1.2 Their struggle for their rights

When discussing their rights, it became obvious how their struggle has become harsher over the last years. The participants were very much aware of the fact that they have a feeble claim to rights, they know that for a fact. They have indicated that their rights are not disclosed in a transparent way. They cannot simply claim their rights, and always do they have to put up a fight.

'I feel good because I became an autonomous person, thanks to my own efforts and strength. I survived because I searched and found my rights. It is by talking to people that I came up with the information that finally put me on the track of the rights or benefits I could claim. Social services never provided me any help. Their overall reaction was very unfriendly, mainly because of the language barrier.'

4.1.2.1 The right to an income

All the participants are living in extreme poverty. They have to make do with a small daily amount of money, and they have to find the strength to cope with their poverty.

'One respondent tells us that at the end of the month, he is left with very little money. He pays 480 EUR/month (without energy and water expenses) for his apartment. He puts aside 25 EUR at the beginning of the month and has to limit his spendings to a maximum of 5 EUR/day for the last week. 5 years ago, he was able to save about 100 EUR a month: he could put his housing allowance aside for unexpected expenses. This is no longer possible.

Asking another respondent how much money is left after having paid the rent and the bills, she says that she used to have 'a piggy bank'. 'But with children growing up, becoming adults, they need more food and more clothes, more than I can afford'. Sometimes family and friends help when I cannot pay the bills, but not always. They don't have much either.'

4.1.2.2 The right to work

Most participants are doing undeclared work. We are generally talking about cleaning work.

'Finding a job, that is my plan. After our last meeting, I worked for 3 weeks. But now I am out of work, my job was a temporary job. There is little work to be found for the moment. In my line of work, the problem is not the language, the language is not important. On the work floor, I don't meet a lot of people speaking Dutch. So that is not the problem, the problem is all about finding work.

In my home country I graduated as a lawyer. But here, my diploma is not recognised. If I wanted to get a lawyer's degree in Belgium, I needed to do another 3 years of law study. However, I couldn't study because I had to take care of my child who was 3 years old at the time. For a child at that age it does not matter whether her mother is a cleaning woman or a lawyer. I arrived in Belgium in 2004. I was lucky because I quickly received the necessary papers. I studied a lot, but it was hard to find a job that fits my profile. In my country, I had a good job: I was a journalist. Upon my arrival in Belgium, I started as a cleaning lady. I like to clean, but not as a job. I was traumatised, was overwhelmed with stress, and was ill a lot of the time.

She stresses that it is impossible for her to find a flexible part time job over here due to language constraints. Employers give priority to higher skilled staff. There are simply not enough job offers on the market.

Sometimes I have to deal with unfriendly people. People that do not value me and only see me as a cleaning lady. I am not satisfied with my life. I want to have a decent job and a good life.'

4.1.2.3 The right to housing

All participants are renting a place to live, two of them are renting a council house. The rent on the private market is very high. Most of their income is spent on paying the rent and public utilities.

My son needs internet and television for school, but with a total income of 800 EUR, there is not enough left for food. Moreover, taxes on electricity have just increased in Belgium because of the taxes, so she has to cough up an additional 150 EUR. As she cannot pay the total amount in one go, she has asked the electricity provider to be allowed to pay in instalments.'

Almost every participant lives in a poorly conditioned house. The pressure on the house market is enormous, and getting stronger by the day. This pressure results into higher rents and in a housing market that is less and less accessible to newcomers and people with a history of migration. Good-quality houses are manifestly not available to them.

'One participant has already moved 4 times since arriving in Belgium. Now, having been on a waiting list for two and a half years, she was allocated a council house that comes with a rent of 300 EUR. 'She was lucky', she confirms. Her first apartment has been declared uninhabitable, the second was too expensive for her. The third one had very poor living conditions: there was a bad smell, humidity problems and insects were crawling on the floor and walls.

They have to pay 800 EUR per month for an apartment in a big old house which is in a very bad state. There are serious humidity problems and both mother and the children have recently been showing allergic reactions. No efforts whatsoever have been put in the house. The walls have not been painted, there is no wallpaper, and there are no plinths. The youngest child is starting to crawl and loves putting his hands against the wall. Each time his hands are full of chalk and he must be kept from putting his hands into his mouth.

She is frightened to be expelled from the apartment and to become homeless. She knows a woman in her neighbourhood who has been homeless for 2 months now. She is so very much afraid of ending up the same way. They are looking for another apartment, but it is hard to find a suitable one.'

4.1.3 A daily struggle to rebound

Each participant has hopes and wishes for themselves and especially for their children. These hopes give them the strength to go on fighting every day. Their daily fight is a matter of falling and getting back up again, going for a rebound that is heavily jeopardised by a society in crisis.

Life becomes harder: a lot of people are seeking for a job and a good home and there aren't enough jobs and good houses available. She emphasises the rising number of homeless people and the rise of the gas and electricity costs. Life became so expensive that it is very hard to survive with only one family member having a job.'

4.1.3.1 Their struggle to integrate

All participants are very grateful to the Belgian society, they want to pay back what they received. Being part of Belgium, that is what they really want.

I trust everyone and everything in this country. I am so very much aware of a huge difference with my own country, where I had no one to trust. I'm very grateful to be here and I thank Belgium for the opportunity I was given.

Having been in Belgium for 8 years, her life has become harder, everything has become more difficult and more expensive. But she feels she understands the Belgian state: their budget decreased as well, she reasons.'

NGOs and other organisations, that is where they feel connected with the Belgian society. There they can build a network. Most participants are doing volunteer work. Volunteer work opens the door to our society.

I do volunteer work to get to know people. I like to learn from people. I like to learn new things in the social restaurant, through social work, volunteer work. I obtain new ideas and reach solutions by getting to know new people.

My volunteer work makes me feel for a moment that I'm a person worthy of this society.'

They know a lot of people, but their relations are mostly superficial ones. Poverty is why.

‘Although she finds it important to go out, she mentions not having any real friends out here in Belgium yet, just some superficial contacts with people while doing their hair.

I have no money to go to the pub and to get to know friends.

I’ve been through so many negative experiences, situations in which people, even so called best friends and organisations, stabbed me in the back. In order to survive, it was necessary for me to build a wall between myself and the others. I’m vigilant all the time. My first reaction towards an organisation or a person will always be one of distrust. Afterwards, little by little, I may start allow my distrust to be replaced by a more open attitude.’

Most participants emphasise the importance of trust and how trust was undermined by the crisis.

‘But there many persons and mechanisms in society (i.e. erroneous publicity) that are misleading. Because of these misleading mechanisms, people start doing the wrong things. This is worsened by the crisis. The crisis created ‘bad’ situations that generated distrust. People lie and mislead to survive.’

More than ever before they are exposed to discrimination. They also admit that discrimination has become more manifest. Discrimination makes it even more difficult to get connected.

‘We never get the first opportunity.

I am sometimes shocked when someone ask me ‘did you go to school?’ It is not because I have to clean that I do not hold a degree.

Sometimes I have to deal with unfriendly people. People that do not value me and only see me as a cleaning lady.’

4.1.3.2 A daily struggle for support

All participants have had and still have multiple contacts with social services. Even undocumented migrants have (limited) access to social services.

They all show their gratitude for the help they get, but ... they are quick to add that they have to fight every step of the way. They all complain about the rudeness and the arbitrary and quite inhumane behaviour of social workers. They feel as if they have no rights at all. The help they eventually receive feels more like a kind of personal favour than a true right. They complain about the bureaucratic rules and the lack of transparency of these rules.

‘If I find myself in the situation I have reached now, and if I have achieved the things I have achieved up until now, that is not thanks to the OCMW (public assistance services), but rather thanks to other organisations or informal contacts or thanks to my own efforts.

I often offer translating services to people during their contacts with the OCMW or with their social worker. I have come to see there are major differences between the various cases. Sometimes the social worker dictates the rules. It all seems to depend on the people in front of him.

For the social services, we are merely an administrative number: they do not take into account individual situations.

For me, dealing with the OCMW is always a struggle. I do what I can, I never say ‘no’ to anything. For medical reasons, I can only work part time, and my social worker knows that. But the OCMW refuses to offer part time work. Sometimes the OCMW does not want to pay me, I always have to put up a fight. But they do not tell me why, I do not receive any explanation at all. Last year, I had to stay in the hospital 3 times. I had a notice from my doctor, but my social worker refused to arrange for payment. Always a fight.’

They all mention that this rudeness has become more obvious in recent years. They see it as a result of general budgetary constraints, a result of the crisis: *‘When the government has less money, then everyone has to economise.’*

Especially the undocumented migrants complain about the lack of minimum support.

‘They just tell you that you do not have any rights (says an undocumented migrant. You have to seek out the necessary information yourself.

When problems of physical abuse did occur in the life of mother and child, social services refused to help, because the situation was found to be too complex. It is deemed too difficult to find a way to deal with the stringent bureaucratic rules in a flexible manner within their own services system, and so, in certain cases, all help is refused. In one story of a undocumented migrants we learned how social services time and again refused to lend a helping hand to a mother and son in need.'

They mention also the important work the NGOs are doing: they fill in the gaps that social workers create. Without NGOs, newcomers would be lost. However, they fear that recent policy restrictions will have a negative impact on the potential help offered by the NGOs.

'Again social services declare themselves 'unfit' to help a mother (undocumented migrants) and her son. X, the non-profit organisation where she works as a volunteer, contacted more than 10 shelters. They all refused help. Eventually, the non-profit organisation itself provided an apartment for mother and son. It was vital and urgent for mother and son to be placed in a secure environment.'

4.1.3.3 Their struggle for their children

Children are the reason why they fight. They don't expect anything for themselves, but they expect and hope for a better future for their children.

'The future of my children. A good education, a good diploma and next a good job. That is what is important for me and for my future life. My children need to have a good job, they should not be submitted to discrimination. I want to raise my children as good citizens, so that they can offer a positive contribution to Belgium. That is the way I can show my gratitude towards Belgium.'

A respondent hopes that her daughter succeeds in obtaining a good diploma and a successful job. It is her daughter's dream to buy a house for the holidays in Greece, because she was born there. She wishes to take her daughter to Greece.

They understand that for them it is too late, but not for their children, they hope.'

4.1.3.4 Their struggle to be heard

All participants want to be heard. They highlight the importance of politics. They identify politicians as being responsible for their situation. In their home countries basically all the politicians were corrupt. Here, the situation is different. But since the new government came into power, everything has changed. Their trust in politics depends on their individual situation. Now they don't trust politics anymore. The politicians made it worse for them. The refugee crisis make it altogether worse. They became 'little people'. And nobody listens to little people. But still they believe that change is possible.

'What with the new conservative government, things have changed. For us, strangers, life became harsher, people are becoming more anti-refugee.'

I trust Belgian politicians. In my country everyone looks only after his or her own interest; here they look after the common good.

Another person answers: I don't trust politicians anymore. What do people want: decent food, a decent shelter, decent public transport, ... but it is all changing for the worst. They come and take the money from us, not from the rich citizens. People become poorer all the time.

Now we only have money for buying food. Yesterday we could even save some money, but today that is out of the question. And tomorrow, we won't be able to buy food anymore. And they are to blame.

There used to be trust among people. Nowadays there is less democracy, there is less freedom. We cannot speak freely anymore. Politicians are destroying everything. They transform us into little people, and nobody listens to little people.

We must learn to speak with one voice and vote for the right party. Some parties are still willing to listen to us, and together with them we might still have a go at equal chances, at equal rights. We are doing it for our children.'

5. Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

RE-InVEST wants to emphasise the true experience of vulnerable people, the impact of the crisis (and crisis-related policy reform) on vulnerable groups as well as the impact of growing inequality and social vulnerability on distrust. Our two key hypotheses in this regard are: 1. That growing distrust and indeed resentment among the population may be attributed to (a rejection of) the neoliberal policies employed by national as well as European elites in recent years; 2. That this integrated diagnosis builds on the idea of the erosion of/disinvestment in (individual and collective) capabilities and basic social rights in the EU. This means that experiences of insecurity, poverty and social degradation need to be re-analysed from those perspectives.

In this report we have translated the two hypotheses into the following question: what can the participants do and what can they become? This basic question summarises the capability and human rights approach. At the same time, this basic question gave the participants room (freedom) to explore their story and to find ways to tell said story.

This first part summarises the main findings within the framework of the two key hypotheses.

The second part can be read as a petition. By means of this report, the participants wanted to go beyond a simple description of their life. They want their story to be translated into political demands and into a request for other (social) policies. They want their story to encourage politicians and other stakeholders to acknowledge the existence of vulnerable people and to take account of the social damage of the crisis. Therefore this petition is an integral part of their story.

5.2 Two hypotheses

The first hypothesis was that retrenchment by the state, in conjunction with rising inequality and income insecurity, may very well have undermined trust, especially among the vulnerable people.

Our analysis confirms the hypothesis of a loss of trust among newcomers. Participants experienced this loss of trust on a general level, but also on a personal level. They expressed vividly their distrust or loss of trust in governments and key institutions. There is also a loss of trust in people. The participants live quite isolated and have no friends. They expressed their fear of losing out again, because of the recent refugee crisis. Some participants expressed anti-refugee sentiments.

But at the same time they show a high degree of gratitude towards Belgium and its institutions. They want to 'give back' to our society what they were given themselves. Their gratitude is a positive stepping stone for their integration. Yet, in the long run, the loss of trust undermines this stepping stone.

This high degree of gratitude is also expressed towards NGOs and schools. That is where they find help and support that other parties, such as social institutions, appear unwilling to offer. NGOs and schools strengthen their resilience.

The second hypothesis explores the concept of erosion of (or disinvestment in) social rights and capabilities within the EU and its impact on vulnerability. Our analysis confirms the erosion of social rights. This erosion, partly due to disinvestment, partly due to the neo-liberal ideology, has a tremendous impact on newcomers. Their rights are not granted anymore, they actually have to fight for each individual right. The access to social protection, income security, jobs, decent housing, have all been reduced. The erosion of social rights has an indirect impact on undocumented migrants as well: more than ever they are not welcome.

Social services and NGOs are forbidden to help. As a consequence of the erosion of social rights the collective capability has diminished. Their capacity to support, their capacity to choose, their resources: they have all been truncated.

The erosion of social rights has thus real consequences for people's individual capabilities. The participants are aware that it is too late for them. They can no longer make plans or progress, they are left without choices. The only hope they have left is for their children.

5.3 A petition

One of the requests of the participants was that their life stories would be heard and have a political impact. The participants wanted to speak on behalf of all those who are struggling to survive and fighting for integration. This petition is a plea for them to become true members of our society.

5.3.1 Build on their resilience

Build upon the resilience of the newcomers, do not discourage them. One of the common threads in their stories is the one about resilience, about wishing to become partners of our society, about building a future for their children. Their resilience is still brisk, even if they have to struggle. Their resilience is worthy of a positive welcome.

The newcomers want to become part and parcel of the Belgium society. They are grateful, and they want to offer something in return. They have all taken language courses and are still trying to improve their knowledge of the Dutch language. Integration is seen by them as a normal task for everyone that comes to live here. But at the same time, they are all (more or less) isolated from the Belgium society. Poverty is one reason. Another reason is an unfriendly, un-welcoming society. NGOs and schools are sometimes the only places where they can enter into contact with the Belgian society. Because of their isolation, they do not experience severe discrimination or racism. But they confirm the existence of discrimination and they go on to add that discrimination is becoming more and more obvious.

Inclusion should be more than learning the language and the culture; inclusion requires our society to welcome newcomers and to provide a (decent) place for them. Inclusion is in the first place a challenging task for our society, rather than for newcomers. Our society has to learn to welcome and to integrate them.

A welcoming society is also a society that combats discrimination and racism. The stories in this report highlight the silent forms of discrimination. Silent, because these forms are not immediately attributable. They generally take the form of a bureaucratic refusal for help. A welcoming society has to destroy any silent form of discriminatory behaviour.

NGOs are using different methods for having a stronger voice in the chapter. They support human rights and challenge the governments to implement the Human Rights. A necessary task, because the newcomers do indeed stress the uncertain implementation of their human rights, and the total lack of implementation of rights for undocumented migrants.

NGOs who defend the voice of vulnerable people and try to empower them, find their attempts to be curbed or else they are obliged to refocus their work, not to say to abandon their support. Some NGOs are integrated into agencies and lose their autonomy. The consequence is the loss of the voice of newcomers and undocumented people.

Enhancing human rights is only possible if vulnerable people can speak up. NGOs are in the frontline to defend this voice. This democratic function must be valued.

Newcomers do have numerous skills. They all speak different languages. But they only have access to low skilled labour (if given an opportunity to work at all). Some are doing undeclared work.

They want to be useful. But the hurdles are high. Social and labour services should consider those skills. This means also that i.e. language conditions must be customised, that foreign study results and degrees must be accepted as acquired competencies.

The children are the reason why the participants continue to fight. The participants are all particularly anxious about the future of their children. People with a history of migration and undocumented migrants are all struggling for a better world for their kin. All their hopes lie with their children. Especially for the children of undocumented migrants this struggle is a tough one: they realise that their children have to pay for their choices. Nevertheless, those very same children are all part of the Belgian society. Their only life is here. Expulsing them would make them stateless. A discussion about the rights of these children is necessary to avoid stateless people.

Regional and federal governments do not sufficiently tend to the needs of newcomers and people with a history of migration. One rarely comes across the words newcomer or people with a history of migration in their policy plans, even in the antipoverty plans. However, all official reports clearly reveal the vulnerability of people with a history of migration and newcomers. This systemic lack of attention is plunging the people with a history of migration into vulnerability and is destroying the fragile resilience of newcomers.

Local, regional and federal governments (and the European Union) must develop a migration policy based on the Human Rights and on a welcoming approach.

5.3.2 Strengthen their resilience, creating a more human society

‘A human being in peril’. This is one of the key sentences of their life stories. They are in danger. As members of a middle class, we have lost touch with the concept of peril. We have forgotten what it means to struggle every day. We must rethink what it means to be in danger, to fight each day for survival. This rethinking is only possible if we learn to listen to those who are actually struggling to survive. Not only should we listen, but we should also establish a true dialogue.

Social services are in the frontline. Social services must support people. They create the conditions for ‘can do and can become’. Newcomers confirm the support and are grateful for all the help they were given. But at the same time they don’t feel supported. They have to fight for help.

Social services have to endorse into their daily practice the right of support for everybody. Some social services have a charter that deals with the means of achieving their goals, a charter where ‘clients’ can consult their rights and entitlements. This charter needs to be introduced in the social service sector as such and has to be based on the notion of ‘a human being in peril’ and on the above mentioned dialogue.

The charter must, consequently, be translated into concrete actions that help people in peril. For example, a medical card for undocumented migrants could prevent long waiting hours and bureaucratic interventions¹⁶.

With a charter, social services will be more autonomous, free from political influences. We observed the change in support and assistance. Support is more restricted, conditional, limited, and in some cases arbitrary. Social services become an instrument for political goals. The consequences are grave. Support workers are more brutal, act in a more bureaucratic way and are, in some cases, simply discriminatory. They are obliged to limit their support or to redirect their support to other groups. They are obliged to refuse support for people in peril. This change has become obvious in the course of years.

A charter is a first step. On top of this, social services need to have the freedom to achieve their social goals.

The struggle for financial support lies at the very heart of many of their stories. The analyses show the arbitrariness of this support.

¹⁶ Different cities in Belgium have a medical card that gives undocumented migrants the possibility to get preventive and curative health care. See f.e. <http://www.ocmwgent.be/Medische-kaart-illegalen.html>. More information on medical support for undocumented migrants: <http://www.medimmigrant.be/uploads/Publicaties/Handleiding/DMH%20voor%20MZWV%20handleiding%20voor%20OCM Wmedewerkers%20en%20zoraverstrekters%20%20basispakket%20NL.pdf>

Financial support in Belgium is limited and stays largely under the poverty threshold (AROP). Financial support must meet the ‘minimum income level’¹⁷, but reality is different.

Financial aid is necessary to live a more ‘normal’ life, to achieve ‘can do and can become’. These extras enable newcomers to rebound. These extras should be seen as an encouraging support and as a veritable right.

Most participants live in poor housing conditions. Tenant ‘rights’ are very limited. The scarcity of (decent and affordable) rental houses is huge, and the rent is high. The absence of a real social or affordable housing policy sustains and provokes the residuary house market.

The story of ‘can do and can become’ starts with a decent home. The lack of a social/affordable housing policy stifles every opportunity to live a normal life.

A lot of social support is provided by the NGOs. There are NGOs that offer support in the field of well-being (like CAW), and others that work with vulnerable people.

The very existence of NGOs working with vulnerable people is a means to meet the challenge of the concept of ‘a human being in peril’. They stand in the frontline. They are sometimes the safety net of the social system, even though that is not their first calling.

Today they are not (always) appreciated for this work. Nowadays they are more and more obliged to redefine their function as a safety net. The consequences of this refocusing are grave: people in peril are left behind.

NGOs working with vulnerable people must be appreciated for their social work, for their role as safety net, for the way they are working with vulnerable people. They need to be re-enforced.

¹⁷ The Belgium government declared that the existing minimum income schemes would be increased to 60% of the median income, and this before the end of their government term.

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