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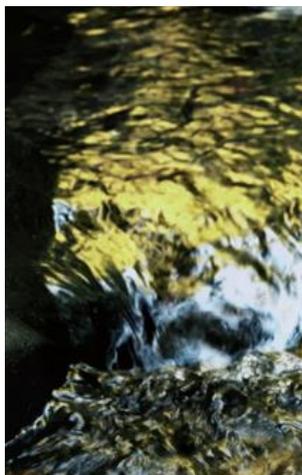
Post-2014 migrants' access to housing,
employment and other crucial resources
in small- and medium-sized towns and rural
areas

in Belgium

Country Reports on integration

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REPORT
<https://whole-comm.eu>





Abstract

This report looks at post-2014 migrants' access to housing, employment, and other relevant resources in different small and medium-sized towns in Belgium. The report is primarily based on interviews conducted in each of the four selected municipalities. It provides an overview of 1) the concrete barriers that post-2014 migrants are facing in relation to housing and employment; 2) the local actors who are involved in, and/or seen as responsible for, facilitating their access to housing and employment; 3) any concrete local measures or practices that help or hinder this access; and 4) the specific target groups of these measures, initiatives, or practices. The report finds that differences in the four localities regarding the access to housing for refugees and other post-2014 migrants largely depend on, firstly, the existing housing stock and the economic situation of the localities, and secondly on the extent to which the local community engages in lifting obstacles, such as discrimination. In Belgium, no level of governance has taken responsibility for refugees' path from reception to durable housing, which means that they have to compete with the local population on the private housing market or for social housing. The extent to which the local community engages in lifting obstacles is not determined by any formal obligation and therefore varies considerably amongst the four localities studied. Concerning employment, we note that limited language capabilities, difficulties in getting one's foreign diploma recognised, and discrimination (by employers and/or fellow employees) are perceived as the main obstacles for (post-2014) migrants in accessing the labour market in all four localities. We find that these obstacles were less prominent in periods in which there is a high demand for labour.



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1. Introduction

Whole-COMM focuses on small and medium-sized municipalities and rural areas (SMsTRA) in eight European and two non-European countries that have experienced and dealt with the increased arrival and settlement of migrants after 2014. More particularly, the research project explores how these communities have responded to the presence of “post-2014 migrants”¹, that is, which policies have been developed and implemented and how these policies shape and enable migrant integration. Taking an innovative Whole-of-Community research approach which conceives of migrant integration as a process of community-making, Whole-COMM pays particular attention to the interactions between multiple actors involved in local integration governance (for example, individuals, public and non-public organizations, institutions and/or corporate entities). Moreover, the project looks at the embeddedness of local actors in multilevel frameworks in which regional, national and EU policies and stakeholders may play a decisive role in shaping local integration policymaking, considering both potential collaborations as well as tensions between actors at different government levels.

Work Package Four (WP4) focuses on local policies, initiatives, and practices addressing post-2014 immigrants’ access to housing, employment and other crucial resources or services.

Following the whole-of-community approach, we assume that the multiple actors involved in integration and community-making processes may have different interests, strategies, resources, and power positions; and that mutual adjustment (between newcomers and long-term residents) and social cohesion do not necessarily represent the only/overall rationale guiding their various efforts; instead, the interplay between different actors (and their various interests and rationales) may also lead to exclusion and inequality. This interplay and the resulting measures can thus be analysed in terms of what Collyer, Hinger and Schweitzer call the ‘politics of’, or ‘negotiation around’, ‘(dis)integration’². As these authors point out, integration/disintegration or cohesion/fragmentation should not be understood as simple binary categorisations but as processes that are intertwined and often coexist within and across policies and everyday practices.

By looking at how a wide range of actors (private actors, civil society actors and street level bureaucrats) foster but sometimes also hinder migrants’ access to adequate housing, work

¹ The group of migrants that arrived in (Western) Europe after 2014 is very heterogeneous, “but mostly comprises migrants that left from areas of political and humanitarian crises” (Working Paper 1 2021, 1-2). The majority of ‘post-2014 migrants’ entered thus as asylum-seekers but may have obtained different legal statuses by now (see for more detail Working Paper 1 for the Whole-COMM project).

² Collyer M., Hinger S., Schweitzer R. (2020) Politics of (Dis)Integration – An Introduction. In: Hinger S., Schweitzer R. (eds) Politics of (Dis)Integration. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25089-8_1.



and other crucial resources or services, we hope to better understand (and be able to compare) these local politics of (dis)integration across different local and national contexts.

The choice of focusing on housing and employment follows two main rationales. First, they are key resources for granting fundamental rights and sustainable integration. Second, they are not exclusively dependent on local administrations but involve a diverse range of actors, thus allowing us to fully apply the whole-of-community approach. Housing is (partly or, in some cases, almost completely) in the hands of private actors, from big owners (including banks and international investment funds) to small ones. Work depends on employers, which again are very diverse ranging from big to small (including family) employers, from private to public employers and across different economic sectors. In both cases, between migrants and these private actors, we find a broad range of intermediaries (trade unions, real estate agencies, civil society organisations, social networks, etc) and a diverse (and sometimes even contradictory) set of policies and programs (at the national, regional, and local levels). Apart from housing and employment, WP4 is also interested in local policies, initiatives or practices that affect post-2014 migrants' access to other relevant resources and services, which might be specific to each national context. In the Belgian context, we have identified the following relevant resources and services: 1) access to psychological help for migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers; 2) access to compulsory education; 3) access to socio-legal services for migrants and refugees.

To assess the role (and understand the interplay) of the different actors in relation to migrants' access to housing, work, and other services and resources, WP4 identifies and analyses:

- major **obstacles/challenges** that are reported to exist in each locality for post-2014 migrants, particularly focusing on those that are perceived as being particular to each locality;
- the **actors** (public, private, and civil society) involved, and their concrete role (e.g. as initiator, promoter, implementer, critic, etc. of a concrete policy, initiative, or practice).
- concrete **local policies, initiatives, and practices** that intend/help to overcome these obstacles. There might also be certain policies, initiatives and practices that have exclusionary effects (whether intended or unintended) and thus aggravate existing obstacles and inequalities in terms of access to adequate housing and employment.
- the **target groups of local policies, initiatives, or practices**: who is entitled to particular services and how is this entitlement justified³. This question will allow us to delve into the main deservingness frames regarding migrants' access to housing, employment and other key resources and services.

³ When explaining who is the target of a specific policy or practice, also those who are excluded (e.g. because they are covered by other policies or because they are simply left out or perceived as less vulnerable) are automatically identified (whether implicit or explicitly).



Methodology

The cases for the research project were selected based on a set of variables, namely:

Population size	Medium town: 100,000 – 250.000 Small town: 50,000 – 100,000 Rural area: 5,000 - 50,000 and low population density
Presence of a reception centre AND/OR Reception facilities	Time period: 2014-2017
Number of currently residing migrants	Time period: arrived after 2014
Share of Foreign Residents	Time period: in 2005 (SF2005)
Variation of Unemployment level	Time period: 2005-2014 (VARUN)
AND/OR Unemployment Levels	Time period: 2005 and 2014
Variation of number of inhabitants	Time period: 2005-2014 (VARNI)
Regional variation	For example: East / West or North / South, choosing localities from different regions
Local politics	Parties in government and local political tradition, choosing localities with different political traditions (conservative / progressive)

The variables 'SF2005', 'VARUN' and 'VARNI' were used to identify **four** types of localities:

Type A	Characterised by a recovering local economy and an improving demographic profile and migrants' settlement before 2014
Type B	Characterised by an improving economic and demographic situation and no remarkable arrivals of migrants before 2014



Type C	Characterised by demographic and economic decline and migrants' settlement before 2014
Type D	Characterised by economic and demographic decline and no remarkable arrivals of migrants before 2014

Methodologically, this report relies on qualitative analysis of data gathered through extensive fieldwork in four Belgian towns, two in the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders and two in the Francophone region of Wallonia. More precisely, 57 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 65 respondents over the four towns selected. We interviewed (local) policy makers, civil society actors, social service providers (in the field of social services, housing, and employment), as well as private actors. About half of the interviews were conducted in person, the other half were conducted online, due to constraints related to the covid-19 pandemic. The transcripts of these interviews (in French and in Dutch), along with participant observation notes and records of 2 focus groups conducted in the two Walloon localities (in the type A and type C localities), which were conducted at the end of May 2022, served as the data upon which the comparative analysis in this report is based. In these focus groups, post-2014 migrants themselves as well as long term residents participated.

The interview transcripts were analysed according to a coding scheme focused on the obstacles that migrants face in accessing the housing and labour market as well as other key resources or services, and the local policies, initiatives and practices put into place to overcome these obstacles. This coding enabled us to compare the data gathered for the four towns on post-2014 migrants' access to housing, employment and other crucial resources or services in a systematic way. Moreover, policy documents and grey literature (including policy reports, annual reports, and legal texts) were analysed to complement the fieldwork observations and arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the qualitative data gathered. During the fieldwork, we have translated the label "post-2014 migrants" as people with different legal statuses, including refugees, family migrants, unaccompanied minors, and rejected asylum seekers, although this last group is only very rarely the subject of local policies, and never the one of regional and national policies.

When exploring the obstacles that post-2014 migrants experience in accessing the housing market and employment, it seems ethically incorrect to have largely excluded the perspectives of migrants and refugees themselves. Whilst some of these perspectives came out during the focus groups already conducted in the Walloon localities, in depth interviews with the "receivers" of migrant integration policies will only be conducted during the next fieldwork phase. These interviews will be included in the country report of WP5 rather than in this report. Considering that migrants' perspective on obstacles to and facilitators of access to the housing market, the labour market, and other social services are not included in this report, there will certainly be aspects that are overlooked. Data regarding these aspects will be collected through the interviews with post-2014 migrants.



2. Context & cases

2.1 General information on the relevant national and regional context/s

In what follows, we will provide general information on the relevant national and regional contexts regarding the housing and labour market in Belgium. We will map out the general characteristics of these housing and labour markets with the intention of understanding the extent to which the overall conditions and policies set in place by the different levels of government (i.e. the federal, Flemish and Walloon) may affect the access to local housing and the labour market, and extent to which the four localities studied have some leeway in further facilitating or obstructing migrants' access.

2.1.1 The Belgian housing market

This report focuses firstly on the access of post-2014 migrants to long-term housing. First and foremost, we should mention that there is a lack of policies and clear responsibilities for long-term accommodation of refugees. In Belgium, there is hardly any relationship between the strictly defined policy domains of asylum and reception, organised at the federal level, and integration and housing, implemented at the regional level (Wychaert, 2017). **As a result, neither the federal government nor the regional governments are responsible for facilitating the transition to long-term housing for recognised refugees.** With the increased arrivals of asylum seekers in 2015/2016 (sometimes labelled the 'asylum' or 'reception crisis'), this has led to a housing crisis for refugees in the following years (Wychaert et al., 2020: 81). Furthermore, important to the Belgian context is that there are **no dispersal mechanisms in place that restrict the movement of people after having received international protection** (refugees or people having received the status of subsidiary protection). Therefore, we should also describe the general housing market in Belgium and the regions, as the **existing housing stock, institutional arrangements, and general housing policies** will have undoubtedly an effect on the extent to which refugees and other post-2014 migrants have access to housing in the localities in which they choose to settle (Deckers et al., 2011).

The **Belgian housing market** is characterised by a large share of private housings and there is a very large share of homeowners in comparison to people renting a premise. Indeed, ever since the origin of the housing policy at the end of the nineteenth century, **homeownership** has been considered one of the cornerstones of the Belgian welfare state, protecting people against high housing costs at old age (De Decker and De Wilde, 2010). The most important measure is the favourable treatment of homeownership in taxation, more precisely the mortgage tax relief (Valenduc, 2008; Van Reybrouck and Valenduc, 2011). Still, the share of homeownership is highly divergent per region. Since the reform of the Belgian federal state in 1980s, the full responsibility for housing policy was attributed to the regions (Winters & Heylen, 2014: 547). In the Flemish and the Walloon regions, the owner-occupied market is very dominant (resp. 77.4 and 72.8 %). In the Brussels-Capital region, by contrast, the private rental market share is equal to the owner-occupied market (Winters & Heylen, 2014: 546).

Research demonstrates that **spatial differences in the Belgian housing stock largely reflect a north-south distinction** (Winters & Van Heylen, 2014: 545). Research on the regional differences between the **quality of the housing stock** (Vanneste et al, 2008 who base their

research on the 2001 Census data) shows that the stock is considerably older in the Walloon region than in the Flemish region and in the Brussels-Capital region. These discrepancies in the housing situation between the three regions is largely related to the economic history of the regions and the situation on the labour market. Whilst in the 1970s, the Walloon economy was hit by the disinvestment in the coal and steel industries, Flanders only knew its first economic development in the 1960s and has since then quickly surpassed the economic development in Wallonia. This economic growth led to a population growth and more residential building activities in Flanders (Winters & Heylen, 2014: 547). The housing stock in Wallonia is in some provinces and localities, such as in the type C locality, still inherited from the period of early industrialisation and the booming of the coal and steel industries. In many cases, the housing patrimony built for industrial workers in Wallonia has not been renovated and is in poor, unsafe and unhygienic conditions.

Furthermore, whereas the Flemish housing market is characterized by higher **building activity** and more prevalent demolition, in Wallonia there is a stronger tendency toward renovation. Yet, the ‘concrete ban’ (*betonstop*), which was announced for the first time in the Flemish policy plan for ‘space’ (*Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen*) in 2012, should halt the building rush in Flanders and ensure that by 2025 only half as much open space disappears and that this stops entirely by 2040. Thereby, half of the remaining 45,000 hectares of residential area would remain unbuilt. With this ‘concrete ban’, the Flemish government aims to stop the ‘building trend’ in Flanders, which has left very little green spaces available in this small region (Vanneste et al., 2008).

The regional discrepancy in the housing market is also distinguishable in the prices for a premise. The **average prices** for houses and apartments generally lie highest in the Brussels-Capital region where houses in closed or semi-open buildings cost an average of €455,000. For open plan houses the average price is €1,150,000. The Walloon region is the cheapest, with an average price of €165,000 for houses in semi-open or closed construction and €273,000 for houses in open construction. The prices in the Flemish region lie between these two extremes: houses in closed or semi-closed buildings cost on average 265,000 euros. The average price for open plan houses is €370,000. The Belgian median price for a house in closed or semi-open development is €235,000. For a house in open construction, one pays on average €337,000⁴. The average prices mentioned here are from 2016 and have been on the rise since then. The average renting prices in these regions reflect the purchase prices. In 2021, the average rent price in Flanders was €797, in Brussels €1.181 and in Wallonia €751⁵.

To understand the housing situation in Belgium, we must moreover look at the **social housing** situation in the country. The share of social housing in relation to the total housing market is **considerably lower in Belgium in comparison to other European countries**. In Flanders, the share of social housing in relation to the total housing market is 5.6 %, in Wallonia 5.3 %, and

⁴ Source: <https://statbel.fgov.be/nl/themas/bouwen-wonen/vastgoedprijzen>, consulted on 6/5/2022.

⁵ Source: <https://www.cib.be/actua/76cfb0f2-24ac-44aa-868e-72a95e14ac2d/huurbarometer-gemiddelde-huurprijs-in-vlaanderen-voor-het-eerst-boven-800>, consulted on 6/7/2022.



in the Brussels-Capital region 7% (figures at the end of 2015; source: Anfrie & Gobert, 2016). This is very low compared to, for instance, the Netherlands where the share of social housing in relation to the total housing market is 34,1%⁶ and to France, where the share of social housing in relation to the total housing market is 18,7 %⁷. At the regional level, the highest share of social housing is found in the Brussels-Capital region and the lowest in the Flemish region (Winters & Heylen, 2014: 546). In Belgium, **social housing companies** are responsible for the development and management of social housing. The social rental agencies rent lodgings on the private rental market to offer them to tenants who are eligible for social renting aid. In **Flanders**, there are three agencies (*maatschappijen*) involved in the granting of social housing: the Flemish Agency for Social Housing (*Vlaamse Maatschappij voor Sociaal Wonen*: VMSW), the Social Housing Agencies (*sociale huisvestingsmaatschappijen*) and the Social Renting Agencies (*sociale verhuurkantoren*)⁸. Furthermore, the Flemish government introduced a rental bonus (*huurpremie*). This is an allowance for households that have been on the waiting list for social housing for more than 5 years. In **Wallonia**, social housing is administered by the Walloon Housing Society (*Société Wallonne du Logement*) and 63 housing companies (*sociétés de logement de service public de Wallonie*). The Walloon housing company (*Société Wallon du logement*) provides supervision, advise, technical, financial, and administrative assistance to public housing companies on behalf of the Walloon government. In addition, since 2016, the Walloon Government has introduced a tax advantage for mortgage loans called the *chèque habitat*. This *chèque habitat* benefits citizens with a very low income, needing help to buy their first home. The amount of the *chèque habitat* rises when one's income is lower and with the number of children that are dependent on one's income⁹.

The access for **migrants and refugees to the housing market is further complicated due to the speed with which they are to move from reception centres to long-term housing**. When

⁶ Figure of 2016, source: http://www.armoedebestrijding.be/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/cijfers_sociale_huisvesting.pdf, consulted on 6/5/2022.

⁷ Figure of 2016. Source: http://www.armoedebestrijding.be/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/cijfers_sociale_huisvesting.pdf, consulted on 6/5/2022.

⁸ On 1 January 2023, the Flemish social housing companies and social rental agencies will merge into a single player in this field: the housing company. The Flemish government agreed in principle to the proposals for the regulatory framework that will serve as a basis for this new body. With the merging planned from 2023 onwards, the housing companies, as the central point of contact for business stakeholders, will also negotiate public contracts for social construction or renovation projects. To finance their activities, they will be able to rely on (project) grants, loans and their own funds. Source: <https://www.agoria.be/en/society/green/climate-neutral-construction/flanders-social-housing-companies-and-social-rental-agencies-to-merge-into-housing-companies-in-2023>, consulted 6/5/2022

⁹ The amount of the Housing Cheque is not applicable when the individual's income is above 81,000€ net taxable income - indexed to 87,043€ in 2021, tax year 2022. Source: http://lampsqw.wallonie.be/dgo4/site_logement/aides/aide?aide=chequehabitat, consulted on 1/6/2022.



asylum seekers arrive to Belgium, they are allocated to reception centres¹⁰. Asylum seekers will then reside in the reception centres until a decision has been taken on their application, which may take from several months to several years. In case the asylum status is granted, the refugee in question is allocated to a local accommodation initiative (LAIs), which are managed by Local Centres for Public Welfare (the *OCMW* in Flanders or the *CPAS* in Wallonia), but entirely financed by the federal government. In these LAIs, refugees most commonly receive a private studio or a family accommodation in case people arrived with children or spouses. However, there is a shortage of places in LAIs, especially for single men, as there are more accommodation opportunities provided for women and families¹¹. People who do not find a space in an LAI often have to find housing on the private housing market in record time after their asylum application has been accepted. There is also a serious lack of space in reception centres, and the reception crisis often dominates the newspapers headlines. The Belgian state and its federal reception service *Fedasil* has recently been convicted in Court for not offering reception¹².

People can then stay in the LAIs for up to 2 months, a period that can be extended twice for one month in the case that one is not able to find housing during this short period. Refugees thus have to search for housing on the private housing market within a period of maximum 4 months after receiving their refugee or subsidiary protection status and leaving the reception centres. In practice, the duration of 2 months (extendable with maximum 2 months) proves to be very little time to find housing on the private housing market. Social housing services usually do not have specific services for migrants or refugees. This means that, after their status has been approved, refugees are very quickly confronted with long waiting lists for social housing. Often, they wait for years until getting access to social housing. In **Flanders**, refugees, like long-term residents, can apply for a rental bonus by the Flemish government or by the municipality in which they reside if their income is insufficient to rent on the private housing market. This does not mean that the housing situation is resolved, as refugees are often confronted with additional obstacles, such as discrimination and language issues, as the following section discusses. In the **Wallonia**, the housing bonus was abolished on January 1st, 2016, and replaced by the *chèque habitat*. Since 2019, the Walloon region has moreover installed the *primes habitation*: financial aid that can be obtained from Wallonia to renovate

¹⁰ There are about 500 asylum centres across Belgium with a reception capacity of 250-800 people per centre. These centres are managed by different organisations, such as *Fedasil*, *Samusocial*, *Caritas*, Red Cross, and private partners, and are entirely funded by the federal government.

¹¹ Asylum seekers accommodated in a LAI have more independence in their daily lives and more autonomy for certain decisions than residents in the collective reception centres. This is reflected, for example, in the fact that they are to shop, cook and wash for themselves. The asylum seekers who stay in an individual house receive material assistance comparable to the assistance provided in the collective reception centres.

¹² See: <https://www.dewereldmorgen.be/artikel/2022/01/21/belgische-overheid-veroordeeld-voor-aanpak-opvangcrisis/>. A more recent newspaper article speaks about 'more than 1000 convictions' of *Fedasil* for not offering reception: *De Standaard* (Avond), 14 June 2022, *Ruim 20.000 mensen wachten op beslissing over asiel aanvraag*.

one's premise, i.e. investments, with the objective of saving energy on renovation, as ranked by a housing auditor who gives guidance on renovation and renovation order¹³.

Since 2016, the process of allocation to reception centres and LAIs has been changed for asylum seekers from countries that have high acceptance rates (generally above 80%¹⁴). People coming from countries that have high asylum acceptance rates are immediately allocated to the LAIs after their application for asylum. A federal official noted that the intention of this fast-track procedure was to promote integration from an early stage of arrival, as the chances are high that their asylum application will be accepted in any case. The LAIs managed by the local public centres for social welfare (the local *OCMWs* and *CPASs*) provide accommodations that help in the first steps of integration of asylum seekers. To do so, these initiatives provide guidance during the stay of recently arrived asylum seekers, particularly regarding the follow-up of the asylum procedure, medical and psychosocial assistance, preparation for integration or return, referral to education and training for adults, and the search for housing. Yet, in practice, the search for housing is so urgent that it is the only issue that social workers can help with during the few months in which refugees reside in the LAIs¹⁵. Indeed, an interviewee working for *Fedasil* noted that the issue of finding housing in the record time of two months is often commented upon by social workers in the LAIs as extremely frustrating¹⁶. Yet, none of the four localities studied in the Whole-COMM project have, for now, taken the initiative to open a LAI. LAIs are only opened at the initiative of the municipality and with the support of the local government. When asked about the decision not to open a LAI, local officials in the two Flemish towns studied noted that there is already enough voluntary influx of refugees. Respondents from the type B locality explained that the local government also takes a strong stance against the federal government and the ways in which it manages the reception of migrants. The local government of the type B locality rejected the request of the federal government to open a LAI. A respondent of the diversity department of the type B locality evokes the need for enhanced vertical and horizontal cooperation to make the 'integration story' work:

“Mahdi [i.e. the federal secretary of state for asylum between October 1st 2021 and June 28th 2022] invests in the brick story. You're already with cabinet Somers [i.e. the Flemish minister for integration] when it comes to the integration story. But in fact, you can't separate these two stories. We can say that we will open a Local Accommodation

¹³ Source: http://lamspw.wallonie.be/dgo4/site_logement//aides/aide?aide=primeshabitation, consulted on 11/6/2022.

¹⁴ The Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (Commissariat Generaal voor de Vluchtelingen en de Staatlozen/*Commissariat Général aux Réfugiés et aux Apatrides*) is responsible for determining the acceptance rate that will be applied. The exact percentage and the nationalities that are eligible for the high acceptance rate fluctuate. Since 2016, Syria, Libya and Burundi have been on the list of countries eligible for a “fast track” towards the local accommodation initiatives.

¹⁵ Interview B-F-1

¹⁶ Interview B-F-1

Initiative in this town for fifty, one hundred, two hundred asylum seekers, then what? Then that reception story stops, and we come back to the integration story. Housing and all those other issues that go with it. And that's where I think you are (...) in a staggered position that we are looking at substantive, emancipatory guidance for newcomers. We invest a lot in migrant integration in this town, but we are struggling very hard with the housing problem, while perhaps in the neighbouring local governments there are more housing possibilities. But in terms of manpower and financial capacity, they don't have enough people or resources to devote to substantive guidance of these people. So that's why I also think that it will have to be done in conjunction, which is something that cabinets do not pay enough attention to. The whole approach is very fragmented, everyone stays in their own little corner, when in fact we should look at the complete story¹⁷".

The alderman for integration in the type D locality, on the other hand, mentions that they are planning on opening a LAI soon and criticised the previous local government for not having taken the initiative to open a LAI in the city. However, no clear timeframe for the opening of a new centre was given by the alderman in question. Both Walloon localities are home to large reception centres. The members of local government did not see it as their responsibility to "on top of that" also open one or multiple LAIs in their cities¹⁸.

In the Belgian context, there are thus **no clear rules or systems in place regarding migrants' and refugees' access to longer-term accommodation/housing beyond reception** (reception centre or LAI). After the first stages of reception, refugees can seek assistance with social housing services and have access to bonus systems in the same way as long-term residents. Consequently, refugees and newly arrived migrants often enter into competition with long-term residents in search for accommodation. This leads to friction, as we have learned from respondents working in the social rental agencies in the type B locality and from focus group conversations with long-term residents and post-2014 migrants in the two Walloon localities. With the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, however, a more systematic housing response has been initiated at the local level. Indeed, more than 10,000 housing spaces have been made available to Ukrainian refugees in Belgium following the request from the State Secretary for Migration and Asylum, Sammy Mahdi, for residents and municipalities to offer temporary shelter. Flanders has built 15 emergency villages for Ukrainian refugees¹⁹ and financially supports municipalities that host Ukrainian refugees²⁰. It is not yet clear

¹⁷ Quote from interview B-B-4

¹⁸ Information retrieved from interviews B-A-4&5 and B-C-8&9

¹⁹ Source: <https://www.tijd.be/dossiers/oorlog-in-oekraïne/vlaanderen-bouwt-15-minidorpen-voor-oekraïense-vluchtelingen/10372792.html>, consulted on 3/6/2022.

²⁰ Flanders has already decided to give 1,000 euros to local authorities per place that they make available for at least three months. The intention is that Flanders will now also give 500 euros per place - not directly, but via the municipalities - for the reception of children in private homes. Source: <https://www.tijd.be/dossiers/oorlog-in->



whether more longer-term housing measures will be taken in case some Ukrainians will stay. Several civil society organisations complain that the demands for better housing possibilities for refugees are now being met for Ukrainians but not for others.

Whilst there are **no particular social housing systems in place for refugees** in Belgium, an important aspect is that there are certain **conditions put in place in Flanders** to which migrants must comply to get access to social housing. More specifically, before 2017, complying to civic integration requirements, and ‘language readiness’, which entailed migrants demonstrating a willingness to learn the Dutch language, applied as conditions for being registered and admitted as a social tenant, and as a permanent tenant obligation (the latter continues to apply for persons with a social tenancy contract from before November 1, 2017). Both complying to the civic integration requirements and showing an eagerness to learn the Dutch language were obligations to ‘make an effort’, not to achieve results. Since 2017, a new tenancy obligation has been introduced, which entails that new social tenants must prove linguistic knowledge of Dutch at level A1 of the European Framework of Reference for Languages (ERK). This has thus been transformed into a language proficiency requirement: the social tenant must demonstrate that they have attained language level A1 of the ERK for Dutch within one year of the start of the tenancy agreement. Social housing agents are responsible for taking these language tests. The Dutch language requirements for accessing social housing have thus become stricter for migrants. At the same time, since 2017, the access to social housing has become decoupled from demonstrating civic integration requirements. Following the idea that integration belongs to the policy field of (civic) integration and introducing a renewed effort to monitor and possibly even sanction the attainment of civic integration requirements from within that domain, it was decided that it is no longer necessary to also link the social lease to an integration condition.

At the same time, the Flemish government also imposes several obligations on social tenants. So are they now required to register with the VDAB (the Flemish service for labour market mediation²¹) as a job-seeker in order to be able to get access to social housing. The access to social housing has also become stricter on other fronts. From January 2023 onwards, the Flemish government envisages to merge Flemish social housing companies and social rental offices into one Flemish housing company, which will imply that there will be an adjustment in the allocation criteria for social housing. Now social housing companies (which build and renovate social housing and manage that patrimony themselves) allocate houses and apartments chronologically, whilst social rental agencies (which rent housing on the private market and re-let it), allocate according to people’s housing need, which is organised by a point system. People who have the highest housing need, or have most chance of becoming homeless, they will move up on the waiting list and get faster access to social rental housing. Having children is also seen as a criterion that increases one’s chance to receive housing from the social rental agencies. With the planned fusion of the two agencies, however, the points

oekraïne/vlaanderen-bouwt-15-minidorpen-voor-oekraïense-vluchtelingen/10372792.html, consulted on 4/6/2022.

²¹ VDAB: *Vlaamse dienst voor Beroepsbemiddeling*



system according to the highest housing need will be abolished. Instead, the Flemish government intends to apply the priority criterion 'local link'. Applicants for social housing will from 2023 onwards need to be able to demonstrate to have an unbroken link with the municipality of 5 years in the previous 10-year period in which they apply for social housing²². Only in a very limited number of cases this condition will be overlooked. The local connection requirement will thus most likely cause increasing difficulties for newcomers to obtain social housing in Flanders, as well as for other tenants in a precarious situation. Today newcomers can often turn to social rental agencies, which work with the allocation according to housing need, even though there is a relative scarcity of supply. The local link requirement will allow municipalities and cities to refuse the access of newcomers to social housing who, by definition, have no link with the municipality. Moreover, civil rights organisations claim that the social rental agency's mechanism was an important buffer against homelessness²³. It has been shown by research group of the civil society actor *HUURpunt*²⁴ that of those who find housing through social rental agencies, 87 % have incomes below or equal to the living wage. 77 % of that group have experiences homelessness or at risk of homelessness before their allocation by a rental agency. This includes families staying in emergency shelters²⁵. Therefore, the head of *HUURpunt* claims that "you can safely consider social rental offices as the emergency service for the most urgent situations."²⁶

Lastly, in order to get access to social housing in Flanders one must income below a certain parameter (which is defined at the local level) and one should not possess properties in or outside of Belgium. the Flemish government is engaged in investigating the social properties outside of Belgium. Since 2021, on the initiative of Flemish Minister Matthias Diependaele (the Flemish Minister for Housing of the party *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*, N-VA), social housing companies can now hire private investigation firms to check whether a tenant has properties abroad²⁷. The Flemish government has allocated €5 million for this kind of investigations. In Wallonia, contrary to Flanders, the requirements for access to social housing are simply not

²² Source: <https://sociaal.net/achtergrond/hervorming-sociale-huur-duwt-mensen-in-handen-van-huisjesmelkers/>, consulted on September 19th 2022.

²³ Source: <https://sociaal.net/achtergrond/hervorming-sociale-huur-duwt-mensen-in-handen-van-huisjesmelkers/>, consulted on September 19th 2022.

²⁴ <https://www.huurpunt.be/Paginas/home.aspx>

²⁵ This is according to data from HUURpunt vzw, the federation of Flemish social rental offices Information retrieved from the online articles <https://sociaal.net/achtergrond/hervorming-sociale-huur-duwt-mensen-in-handen-van-huisjesmelkers/>, consulted on September 19th 2022.

²⁶ Quote from article in Knack: https://moneytalk.knack.be/geld-en-beurs/wonen/de-vlaaconsulted_mse-regering-werkt-de-dakloosheid-van-morgen-in-de-hand/article-opinion-1565073.html, consulted on September 19th, 2022.



to exceed an income ceiling and not to own a property (in or outside of Belgium), and thus do not have specific access requirement for newcomers²⁸.

Moreover, there are other obstacles that migrants face on the housing market. **Discrimination** proves to be a pertinent issue in the housing market in the whole of Belgium. An innovative practice that has been initiated several years ago to combat discrimination are the 'correspondence tests'. These have been applied since the 1960s to test discrimination in different fields, such as labour and housing markets. It is a field experimental technique in which pairs of candidates apply by mail or e-mail for a house or a job, or any other service that is being examined. The candidates are similar on all relevant characteristics, such as income, age, or family status. The only difference is the discrimination ground under scrutiny. In correspondence tests, "one candidate originates from the test group (e.g. ethnic minorities, women, or older people), the other from the control group (e.g. ethnic majority, men, or younger people)" (Verhaeghe, 2022: 2). After obtaining the results, researchers will examine whether both candidates were treated equally or not. According to Verhaeghe (2022: 2), "unequal treatment is assumed to be due to discrimination based on the discrimination ground". Several Belgian cities have recently adopted correspondence tests to measure different types of discrimination on the housing market. Of the four towns selected for the Whole-COMM project, only locality B has performed these tests. Another town was engaged in distributing flyers on discrimination to real estate markets to raise awareness on the issue. We will discuss this in more detail in the following section.

Moving from the housing market to the **labour market**, we will discuss the general labour market situation in Belgium and the changes occurring in it between 2014 and today. Firstly, to understand the situation on the Belgian labour market, we should note that the country is known for its extensive social welfare system, which is largely financed by the contribution of employers and employees. The system covers social risks based on illness, invalidity, unemployment, and old age (Winters & Heylen, 2014: 545). These social benefits decrease the risk of poverty from 27% to 15% (*FOD Sociale Zekerheid* 2012). Other than more liberal economies, Belgium is characterised by a neo-corporatist system (Deschouwer, 2012: 205). Within neo-corporatist systems, social and economic policies are mostly based on agreements reached through negotiations between employers' organisations and labour unions, with little intervention from the state. These negotiations are oriented towards the avoidance of social conflict and maintenance of social peace (Korpi, 2006; Siaroff, 1999). Several authors have argued that due to the resilience of its neo-corporatist system, Belgium has been marked by incremental rather than fundamental reforms of its welfare policies (Kuipers, 2006; Hupe and van Dooren, 2010; van Hooren, Kaasch and Starke, 2014). Social security is organized at the federal level, so it is implemented in similar ways across the regions. Still, the regional and local authorities have competencies that are closely involved, such as policies regarding well-being, employment, migrant integration (which has been mostly devolved to the regions), and social inclusion (which has a strong local component). This can also affect the welfare situation at the regional and local level. The budgets for social security at the federal level remain by

²⁸ Source: <https://www.swl.be/index.php/accueil-particulier/louer>, consulted on July 15th, 2022.

far the highest ones in comparison to the regional and local budgets (Winters & Heylen, 2014: 546).

We see that the **impact of the COVID-2019 pandemic on the employment rate** remains limited in Belgium. The number of employed persons decreased by 29,000 between 2019 and 2020 (-0.6%). The employment rate of 15- to 64-year-olds decreases from 65.3% in 2019 to 64.7% in 2020. In addition, the number of unemployed persons increased by 8,800 persons (+3.2%). The unemployment rate of 15- to 64-year-olds rises slightly, from 5.4% in 2019 to 5.6% in 2020²⁹. However, the Belgian labour market is currently grappling with a **steep labour shortage, in almost all industries and fields of employment**. Indeed, according to the newspaper *De Tijd*, the tightness of the Flemish labour market has mounted to historical proportions. In 2022, for every open vacancy, there are less than two job seekers without work. For high educated profile, this number is even higher. The aging baby-boomer population that is leaving the labour market has mainly caused this phenomenon. In fact, the labour shortage threatens to become a structural and long-lasting issue³⁰.

In Belgium, powers relating to employment are shared between the federal government on the one hand, and the regions and the German-speaking Community on the other. The most recent (sixth) state reform of Belgium in 2011 (and completed in 2014), changed the competency division for employment policy. Before the sixth state reform, the federal government was responsible for social security (including unemployment benefits), labour law, income policy and the deliberation between employers' and employees' organisations (that together form the 'social partners') about collective bargaining agreements. The regions, on the other hand, were responsible for guiding employed and unemployed people to employment. In addition, the competency for vocational training also lied with the regions (Adam and van Dijk, 2015: 28-29). After the sixth state reform, **competencies in employment policy were further regionalised**. The executive competence for the control on the availability of the unemployed as well as the legislative and executive competence for 'target group policy' (*doelgroepenbeleid; politique des groupes cibles*) was transferred to the regions. The 'target group policy' is a policy that subsidises labour market integration and allows a reduction of employers' social security contributions for specific groups that are considered to have difficulty in accessing the labour market, namely youngsters, elderly people, and people with a handicap. Migrants, refugees, and ethnic minorities are not included as a target group of this policy, even though their lower-than-average labour market participation has clearly been demonstrated in studies (see below). It seems politically sensitive to subsidise priority access to the labour market for these groups.

Furthermore, the sixth state reform made the regions (in practice, the three different public employment offices in Belgium: VDAB in Flanders, Actiris in Brussels, and FOREM in Wallonia)

²⁹ Source: <https://statbel.fgov.be/nl/nieuws/gevolgen-van-de-covid-19-crisis-voor-de-belgische-arbeidsmarkt-2020-blijven-globaal-genomen>, consulted on 1/6/2022.

³⁰ Source: <https://www.tijd.be/politiek-economie/belgie/economie/we-zoeken-al-lang-niet-meer-naar-de-witte-raven-op-de-arbeidsmarkt/10390108.html>, consulted on 3/6/2022.

responsible for labour market (re)integration programmes for the unemployed. Moreover, with the completion of the sixth state reform, the system of service vouchers (*dienstencheques; titres-services*) – through which the government subsidises domestic work in private households – also came into the hands of the regional governments. Mainly female migrants or ethnic minority women are employed through this system of service vouchers. Finally, the sixth state reform shifted the competency for the system of local employment agencies (*PWA-stelsel; système des ALE*) – aimed at providing the long-term unemployed with the opportunity to gain socially relevant work experience and earn an extra allowance on top of the unemployment benefit – from the federal government to the regions (see: Adam and van Dijk, 2015: 29-30).

Even though the target group policy mentioned above is not directed at migrants, there are some **targeted policies for migrants' and refugees' labour market integration** developed by **both the Flemish and the Walloon government** in the aftermath of increasing arrivals after 2015. For example, the VDAB (*Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding*) and the FOREM (*Office wallon de la formation professionnelle et de l'emploi*) equally have set up programmes specifically for newcomers. VDAB initiated a service for non-Dutch speakers (*anderstaligen*)³¹. In addition, the VDAB is responsible for the guidance to employment or training of newcomers as part of the compulsory Flemish civic integration policy. FOREM, for its part, has since 2015 implemented the *Cellule Primo Arrivants*³² ('cell for newcomers') through which newcomers (defined as a foreigner who has been legally residing in Belgium for less than three years and has a residence permit of more than three months) receive customised accompaniment in their search for a job. This is linked to the Walloon integration trajectory, which also includes a 4-hour socio-professional guidance course offered by the regional integration centres in Wallonia, that has been obligatory since 2018. In chapter 4 of this report, we will further discuss these and other measures to promote migrants' integration into the labour market.

Furthermore, asylum seekers are allowed to work in Belgium 4 months after they have submitted their application. This right to work remains valid until the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons has taken a decision on the request. If one appeals against the decision of the Office, the right to work is valid until the Office takes a decision in the appeal case. In principle, an asylum seeker can execute any type of job in Belgium. Adult asylum seekers who have access to the labour market can register as

³¹ In 2016, VDAB starts to pay a lot of attention to non-Dutch speakers, newcomers, and refugees. VDAB is setting up an action plan to guide refugees to work. Together with Fedasil, VDAB is focusing on 'integration through work'. The @level2work project is also a collaboration between many partners: VDAB, ACTIRIS, VBO, Department of Education, Civic Integration and Integration agencies with the support of the Flemish Government and the European Fund for Asylum, Migration and Integration. The aim is to better guide highly educated non-native speakers to the labour market. Source: <https://www.vdab.be/vdab/geschiedenis>, consulted on 3/6/2022.

³² Source: <https://www.leforem.be/particuliers/accompagnement-ressortissants-etrangers.html>, consulted on 22/02/2022.



jobseekers at the regional employment agencies and are then entitled to a free assistance programme and vocational training. In practice, however, access to the labour market during the asylum procedure often proves difficult because of the provisional and precarious residence status, limited knowledge of the national languages, the lack of a homologized diploma, and labour market discrimination. Yet, due to the current labour shortage in many sectors in Belgium asylum seekers often manage to find jobs in industries and retail services, amongst other sectors.

Several studies have demonstrated the **prevalence of an ‘ethnic gap’ on the Belgian labour market**. These studies have repeatedly identified a gap in employment rates between the foreign and native-born. For example, the OECD calculates that, in 2017, the gap in employment rate between people who were born in Belgium and those who were born outside of Belgium was 10,2%, which is considerably higher than the EU average of 3,6%. However, between 2006/2007 and 2017, the employment rate of the foreign-born in Belgium has increased more steadily (with 3,2%) than that of the native-born (with 0,8%) (OECD, 2018b: 73). In addition, in 2017, the unemployment rate of the foreign-born (16,4%) was much higher than that of the native-born (6,5%) in Belgium (OECD, 2018b: 77). Moreover, the OECD points to a gap of 8,3% between the native and foreign-born inhabitants of Belgium in the long-term unemployment rates (OECD, 2018b: 79).

The differences in employment rates between people with and without a migration background are present across the different Belgian regions. While in Flanders the employment rate is higher for both people with and without a migration background compared to Wallonia, similarly high gaps exist between the employment rates of people with and without a migration background in Flanders and Wallonia (FOD WASO and UNIA, 2019: 50-51). Furthermore, studies point to differences in the width of the employment gap between people with and without a migration background in Belgium according to factors such as educational level, gender, and age (see: FOD WASO and UNIA, 2019: 49, 53, 81-82; OECD, 2018b: 75).

In addition to the gaps in (un)employment rates between people with and without a migration background, studies demonstrate that there is a clear ethnostratification of the Belgian labour market. Studies show that people with a migration background are overrepresented in the least-valued sectors of employment and are working under the least favourable conditions (Pina et al., 2015: 8). For example, people with a migration background are more likely to have temporary contracts and to work part-time than Belgians without a migration background (OECD, 2018b: 80-81; FOD WASO and UNIA, 2019: 64-65). Moreover, they are generally overrepresented in under-valued employment sectors, such as the food industry, the retail trade, and the cleaning industry, and underrepresented in the public and educational sectors (FOD WASO and UNIA, 2019: 67). Furthermore, people with a migration background are more frequently employed as manual workers and are much less likely to be employed under the statute of public servant than Belgians without a migration background (FOD WASO and UNIA, 2019: 73-74). Additionally, the population with a migration background works more often via a temp agency compared to the population without a migration background (FOD WASO and UNIA, 2019: 71). In conclusion, apart from people of North



American origin and from the EU-14 countries, there is a large wage gap between people with and without a migration background in Belgium (FOD WASO and UNIA, 2019: 58).



2.2 Locality 1 (Wallonia, type A, small town)

The type A locality located in Wallonia, the Francophone region of Belgium, is a town with under 50,000 inhabitants. This small town resides in one of the most rural provinces of Belgium, which has the lowest population density of the country. The town is also far less densely inhabited than most Belgian cities or towns, with a population density of 253.26 inhabitants/km² for an area of 118.64 km². Due to the low population density, the Walloon government has not invested greatly in the local public transport network. Thus, the city is poorly connected to larger Belgium cities. The province was, at the first half of the twentieth century, mainly characterised by a traditional agricultural labour market, although there were also certain sites of steel industry. With the decline of the coal and steel industries in Wallonia, the province has tried to improve the general economic situation by attracting large industries since the 1960s. Still, in this province there are fewer industrial activities than in other Walloon provinces. Between 2014 and 2018, furthermore, there was an increase in economic activities in the province, in the commerce, transport, and hospitality services³³.

The political orientation of the town is a rather centre-right. The town is governed by the Christian Democrats, (*Centre Démocrate Humaniste*: CDH) and the Liberal Party³⁴ (*Mouvement Réformateur*: MR) in government. This city has an unemployment rate around the Belgian national average, but below the Walloon average. In 2005, this locality had a share of foreign residents of 8,3%, which lays well above the national average. This high percentage is attributed to the presence of a large number of EU residents residing in this small city, most of whom work across the border.

The housing market of the type A locality is characterised by high rent prices. These are considerably higher than the rent prices in the surrounding towns because of the high percentage of foreign workers and the nearness to a larger foreign city. The wages of the nearby foreign city are far higher than the ones in Belgium, which has been mentioned as the reason for the staggering rent prices. The difficulty in accessing housing is an issue that both long-term residents and migrants face in this locality. Nevertheless, migrants face additional obstacles to access housing. We will explain this further in chapter 3.

³³ Source: [https://www.idelux.be/servlet/Repository/Le Tableau de bord socio économique de la province de Luxembourg Edition 2021?ID=81797](https://www.idelux.be/servlet/Repository/Le_Tableau_de_bord_socio_économique_de_la_province_de_Luxembourg_Edition_2021?ID=81797), consulted on 18/05/2022.

³⁴ In Belgium the MR, the francophone liberal party is liberal on economic themes, and center-right on ethical issues.

Locality 2 (Flanders, type B, medium-sized town)

The type B locality is a mid-sized town. There are also tens of thousands of students residing in the city, which are not registered there. The city is characterised by a very small surface, a very high population density (1 790 hab./km² for an area of 57 km²), and a fast-growing population. Since 2000, the population has increased by 1% on a yearly basis. The average income per habitant is 16,345 eur/hab. (figure of 2011), and the unemployment rate is below the national average. Furthermore, the fact that the city is home to a university that attracts large numbers of international students has rendered it particularly diverse and created job opportunities. In 2005, however, the share of foreigners in this locality was with 4,7% far lower than the national average. This seems odd given the diverse history and appearance of the town but might be explained by the fact that most foreigners in the town arrived in the early 2000s and those that arrived before were students or other temporary residents who often did not register in the locality and were thus left out of the statistics. Yet, since 2015, this locality has become one with the highest number of migrants per capita in Flanders and Belgium (Noppe et al., 2018: 46). This number has been in a further upward trend since 2017, mainly as the result of the increased arrival of people under international protection and despite the lack of a reception centre in or near to the locality between 2015 and 2017. In 2017, 30,4% of the population was of foreign origin. The influx of refugees (recognised refugees and people under subsidiary protection) is high in the type B locality. In relative figures - refugees per 1,000 inhabitants - this figure is 13.5. This number is the second highest in Flanders. Only the type D locality scores, with 14.5 refugees per inhabitant, higher than the type B locality.

The political orientation of the town is mainly leftist. It is governed by a coalition of the social-democrat party *Vooruit* (which translates as 'forward'), the Christian Democrats (*CD&V*) and the green party *Groen* (which translates as 'Green'). The social democrats have been in power in this town for a long time. The type B locality is also known to be an expensive city to live in. The price of a house is considerably higher than in other central cities in Flanders and Belgium. This can partly be explained by the impact of students living in student rooms or in co-housing, which adds to the housing scarcity in the town. Particular to the housing in the type B locality is the very high number of single-person households, a number that with 47.7% comprises about half of the households (data of 2020). Furthermore, there are significant waiting lists for social housing, which continue to grow³⁵, and a quarter of the people of the type B locality spend a large part (more than 30%) of their income on housing.

Concerning the labour market in the type B locality, we note that there is a large presence of inhabitants with tertiary education. Only few inhabitants work in the primary (agriculture, forestry, and fishing), secondary (industrial activities), and quarterly sectors (non-commercial service provision). The amount of people working in the tertiary sector (commercial service provision) is close to the Belgian average. In 2018, 74.4% of the inhabitants also worked in

³⁵ In 2021, around 12.000 people were on a waiting list of a social housing service in the type B locality.

high-technological sectors³⁶. Nowhere else in the region is this percentage this high. Wage earners of non-Belgian origin are, however, mostly represented in the tertiary sector, and less in the quaternary sector. The economy of this medium-sized town has grown strongly in recent years. Between 2009 and 2015, gross value rose from 56,201 to 68,154 euros per inhabitant. This represents an annual growth of 3.28%. To compare, in the whole of Flanders the annual growth rate was 2.39%.

2.3 Locality 3 (Wallonia, type C, medium-sized town)

The type C locality is a medium-sized urban area located in the Walloon region of Belgium accommodating between 100,000 and 250,000 inhabitants. The city is quite densely populated, with 1 964,7 hab./km² for an area of 102,9 km². The annual average revenue is 13,444 €/hab. (figure of 2011), and the unemployment rate is at 23.6% (figure of 2013), which is one of the highest rates in Belgium. This city has seen an exodus for the past 20 years, as its demography has declined considerably. This has also had an important effect on the housing situation, which is characterised by a high percentage of empty dwellings. In 2013, 2.6% of the rental properties in the city were vacant. A census of 2016 of a social housing service counted 1,358 unoccupied dwellings, of which 597 were undergoing major renovation works, 109 were for sale, and 194 others were being reallocated. The local government of the type C locality has tried to tax the owners of unoccupied buildings as a strategy to combat vacancy on the housing market, but this proposal has been declared illegal by the court, a decision which was appealed by the city. In this city, the waiting list for social housing is extreme, even with the percentage of social housing being 10% higher than the national and regional average.

Concerning the political orientation, the city is governed by a coalition of left-wing parties. The main socialist party of Wallonia, the *Parti Socialiste* (PS), has the majority of seats³⁷ and governs together with what has been called the 'extreme leftist party', the PTB (*Parti du Travailleurs de Belgique: Workers party of Belgium*), and the centre liberal Party MR (*Mouvement Réformateur*). The city has a long history of immigration since the 19th century, when immigrants settled in the locality to carry out heavy work in the coal and steel industries (Manço et al. 2021: 4). When these heavy industries gradually closed in the 1970s and '80s, the city, as well as other parts of the Walloon region, was left impoverished. This economic stagnation is still very much reflected in the poverty and unemployment rates in the city. In recent years, several renovation projects have been initiated in and around the city and several old industrial zones have been restored. Furthermore, with the aim of reviving the local economy, this locality has started to specialise in the fields of craftsmanship of aerospace, biotechnologies, and the technology industry in the past 10 years. Around the city centre, four sectors of economic activity have emerged over the last 10 years, creating over 10,000 jobs in the life sciences industries, health centres and hospitals. The advanced manufacturing industry, represented by large international companies with expertise in

³⁶ This includes pharmaceuticals, transportation equipment manufacturing, utilities, waste management, and business and audio-visual services.

³⁷ In many Walloon cities, and particularly the old industrial cities, the Socialist Party PS has had an absolute majority of seats for a long time.



aeronautics, aerospace, transport, or glass, also constitutes a large part of the employment in the city. Lastly, the type C locality offers services linked to crafts, tourism, and leisure, which are concentrated in the rural areas around the city.

2.4 Locality 4 (Flanders, type D, small town)

Locality D is a small city located in Flanders and consists of 50,000 to 100,000 inhabitants. The city is densely populated with 1752.16 inh./km², this for a surface of 40.95 km². The annual average income is 18,877 euro/inh. and the unemployment rate is high compared to other Flemish cities. The large number of elderly people residing in this coastal city, as well as the large percentage of people with lower educational attainment compared to other urban centres in the region, are explanations for this³⁸. The largest sectors of employment are the tourist sector and 'blue' economic activity in relation to the sea and the coast.

The current political coalition governing the city is more right-wing. It consists of the Liberal party *Open VLD (Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten: Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats)*, the right-wing Flemish nationalist party *N-VA (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie: New-Flemish Alliance)* and *Groen (the greens)*. Nevertheless, this city has not traditionally voted right-wing. The social democratic party (*SpA, now called Vooruit*) had been in power for several terms of office preceding the elections of 2019. Between 2011 and 2021, this locality became increasingly diverse, with a high number of non-EU migrants arriving. In 2011, 15.3% of the inhabitants were of non-Belgian origin, with 10.6% non-EU inhabitants and 4.7% EU-residents. In 2021, the number of non-Belgian inhabitants rose to 25.2%, with 18.9% non-EU residents and 6.3% EU-residents. From 2015 onwards, the city hosts many refugees. Family reunification has subsequently added to already high levels of diversity. Indeed, this locality has one of the highest relative number of refugees per 1000 inhabitants in Flanders.

Concerning the housing market, we note that renting and buying houses in the type D locality is relatively cheap in comparison to other Flemish cities. This is also the reason why many refugees and migrants chose to settle in the type D locality since 2014. A survey that the city held shows that half of the newcomers chose to settle in the type D locality because of the low housing prices. The housing market is, however, in quite bad conditions, with dilapidation and vacancy. The new local government (elected in 2019) has set up programmes to combat this and has started investing massively in new construction projects.

³⁸ We should note that the Flemish and the Walloon unemployment rates considerably differ, with Wallonia (and Brussels) having a far higher unemployment rate than Flanders. The national unemployment rate is raised by the Walloon and Brussels one. The unemployment rate is very high for Flanders, whilst it is still under the national unemployment rate, which is around 12%.

3. Access to housing

3.1 Main challenges/obstacles

In what follows, we will lay out the overall characteristics of the housing situation of (post-2014) migrants in the selected Belgian municipalities. We discuss which issues, problems, and difficulties were mentioned as particularly affecting (post-2014) migrants and refugees and discuss to what extent these issues are different depending on gender, age, ethnicity, or race. Lastly, we also discuss how these obstacles have changed over the last five years. It is important to note that the analysis is mostly based on interviews with policy makers, civil society actors, social service providers and other stakeholders, but hardly includes the perspective of migrants themselves. Some testimonials of migrants regarding the access to services were already gathered during two focus groups in the type A and type C localities and were therefore included. Most interviews with migrants will be collected in the following months. The perspectives of migrants will then be included in the WP5 report.

3.1.1 Locality 1 (Wallonia, type A, small town)

The housing situation of post-2014 migrants in the type A locality is characterised by **high rental prices**. In fact, several interlocutors noted that the rent prices were similar to ones in big cities in Belgium, which is strange considering the smallness of the town and its location in a rural area. The nearness of a foreign city, where wages are considerably higher, has pushed up the prices for housing. This especially because the great majority of European nationals living in the type A locality work across the border. The restricted mobility of non-EU migrants compared to EU migrants creates a clear segregation between EU and non-EU citizens. Newly arrived migrants or refugees do not have the right to free movement and are not allowed to work beyond the border within the first 5 years of their stay. Their legal status is thus an important issue for post-2014 migrants when looking for work and housing in the type A locality. Yet, also long-term residents of the town are affected by these high rental prices. One respondent mentions that it is even very hard for couples who both have full time jobs to pay for the rent in the town³⁹. The income gap between EU citizens who work across the border and migrants and other long-term residents who cannot/do not work across the border is vast and has an immense impact on the access to housing on the private market.

Furthermore, the **unwillingness of local real estate agents to rent out houses to people without a job, or who receive welfare or unemployment benefits**, was mentioned as the main obstacle for (new) migrants and long-term residents alike to get access to housing. Two interviewees in the type A locality who took part in the focus group discussion noted that they could even pay 6 months of rent in advance for a flat but were still not given a house by real estate agencies because they receive social welfare benefits. Interlocutors noted that there is no aid from the government in this process, or to combat this discrimination. In general, the respondents of the focus group conducted in the type A locality shared the feeling that the

³⁹ Interview B-A-10

treatment they received on the housing market was unjust, and that refugees and even Belgians were discriminated based on the amount and the nature of their income. The perception that EU mobile workers earning more would always receive a priority treatment by real estate agents was widely spread. Beyond this differential treatment based on income, it is widely documented that **also ethnicity or race play an important role in housing discrimination** (Verhaeghe et al., 2022).

One of the respondents of the focus group noted that he was in fact only able to find housing and sign a lease thanks to the willingness of long-term residents to assist him and his family to sign as a guarantor. Another respondent noted that some refugees were able to rent apartments thanks to the help of a civilian in the type A locality who decided to rent out her properties only to refugees out of social engagement. Thus, whilst the solidarity of residents in this small town is worth noticing, the lack of the local government to take any action in facilitating their access to the housing market remains very pertinent and problematic. There are some civil society actors that help in the process of finding housing, but there is little that they can do to facilitate this access. One respondent highlighted that the practice of renting through real estate agents increases the competition between possible tenants. The owners receive a list with several possible candidates to rent the dwelling, and then choose the one they prefer. Concerning the social housing in the type A locality, one respondent mentioned that, whilst there are social housing services financed by the local social cohesion plan, the social houses offered are not located within the town itself, but rather in the surrounding, smaller municipalities⁴⁰. Moreover, the waiting list for social housing is very long. In fact, none of the respondents of the focus group or people in their surroundings had benefited from social housing in the type A locality⁴¹.

3.1.2 Locality 2 (Flanders, type B, medium-sized town)

Access to housing in the type B locality forms the biggest difficulty for newcomers and people with a low income. Interlocutors noted that the **local housing market is totally saturated** and that in recent years it has become almost impossible for people with a lower income to get access to housing. Moreover, the type B locality is one of the most expensive towns in Flanders for buying a house. The saturated housing market thus seriously affects refugees as well as economically disadvantaged people. Moreover, **waiting lists for social housing are very long**. Respondents noted that people with a lower income are in fact very often forced to leave the city and look for housing in neighbouring municipalities. This is especially the case for refugees and migrants⁴².

In recent years, a wave of renovations took place in the type B locality. With the increasing saturation of the housing market in the past 10 years, local officials have also noted an

⁴⁰ Interview B-A-1

⁴¹ Interview B-A-7

⁴² Interviews B-B-1, B-B-2 & B-B-4

increase in abuses on the housing market. The higher influx of refugees to the city since 2014 was largely the result of the large supply of relatively cheap housing, due to the big amount of student studios on the market. In many cases, refugees arriving to the type B locality would get access to the student studios that did not pass the quality standards of the university and had been declared obsolete. In fact, the head of the housing service (*Dienst Wonen*) in the type B locality stated that there was a circuit of landlords who were breaching the rules. There were many cases in which **landlords would rent out houses in very poor and unhygienic conditions for too high prices to young refugees** and other groups of people with a low income, who had no other options⁴³.

In fact, in 2017, the extended abuses of a family owning over 1000 student rooms, renting these out overpriced and in very bad conditions, was brought to light. This case and others have led to an increasing engagement of the local government into the quality of housing. It also motivated the city to invest more in renovations and quality control of the housing market. One way the local authorities dealt with this situation is to incite entrepreneurs and landlords to renovate⁴⁴. In recent years, a lot of houses in bad conditions have been declared uninhabitable by the city. In most cases, these houses are then bought up by project developers, renovated and then put back on the market for much higher prices. This led to the **gentrification** of certain areas in the city⁴⁵. This development has further increased the housing prices and has made it even more difficult for migrants, refugees, and long-term residents with a low income to live in the type B locality.

Concerning the obstacles on the housing market for newcomers, various respondents (city employees, social service providers, and civil society actors) in the type B locality noted that **limited language capabilities, prejudices, economic insecurity, and large families represent the main obstacles in the access to housing**. The coordinator of a public housing service in this city talks about the language issues with which they are faced:

“We now get more candidates who do not speak Dutch, English or French, which makes it very difficult for rent councillors to explain the lease, how we live here, the habits, rubbish recycling rules and energy and electricity contracts, for example⁴⁶”.

Furthermore, this respondent explains that the housing market in the type B locality, as is the case in other Belgian cities, is in fact not foreseen for large families. The respondent working in the local social rent service explains:

⁴³ Interview B-B-2

⁴⁴ Interview B-B-2

⁴⁵ Interview B-B-2

⁴⁶ Quote from interview B-B-6



“We get families with 5-6 kids asking for our help, but we don't have many houses in this city that can carry that capacity, as most houses have been built for families with 2 children⁴⁷”.

The respondent explains that large families are not allowed to occupy small houses, even if they would want to, because of occupancy, hygiene, fire safety, and the rules on maximum surface area per person set by the Flemish government and implemented by the city. Furthermore, the respondent explains that property owners are equally not very keen on having their houses inhabited by large families with many children⁴⁸.

Nevertheless, the respondent explains that because social rental agencies work according to point system which allocates social housing according to the highest housing needs, people who earn the least and have the highest chance of ending up homeless first. Having children is another factor that increases chances on obtaining housing through a social rental agency⁴⁹. This whilst social housing agencies allocate housing according to chronological order. This means, the respondent claims, that through in social rental agencies, refugees often times will receive housing before long-term residents:

“In social rental agencies, a refugee family with children living in a studio will be placed higher on the waiting list than a single Belgian lady who receives a living wage and is living in an apartment that is way too expensive for her, and who has been waiting much longer for social housing. So, in many cases a refugee family that just arrived to [name of locality] will get priority over the Belgian lady⁵⁰”.

The respondent explains that this way of working often creates clashes and frustration amongst the long-term residents, and that in some cases long-term residents have come to the office complaining about the fact that “people of colour receive a preferential treatment.”⁵¹

3.1.3 Locality 3 (Wallonia, type C, medium-sized town)

The housing patrimony in the type C locality is largely characterised by vacancy, as well as unhygienic and unsafe conditions. This is very much visible in the streets in the city centre and certain neighbourhoods near the centre. Regarding the obstacles on the housing market for newcomers, various respondents in the type C locality noted that **limited language capabilities, prejudices, economic insecurity, and large families represent the main**

⁴⁷ Quote from interview B-B-6

⁴⁸ Interview B-B-6

⁴⁹ Quote from interview B-B-6

⁵⁰ Quote from interview B-B-6

⁵¹ Interview B-B-6



obstacles in the access to housing. Economic insecurity and the type of income were the sources mentioned most during interviews in the type C locality. A street-level bureaucrat in the city explains: “so, maybe it is a bit of a cliché, a landlord will prefer an African person who earns 2000 euros to a Belgian who is on benefits from the CPAS [the Public Centre for Social Welfare] for example⁵²”. Out of this interview it seems that ethnic discrimination seems to be less of an issue than discrimination based on income. Yet, research shows that ethnicity can form an additional ground of discrimination on the housing market. Another obstacle to get access to the housing market, according to a social worker, is language: “in many cases, newcomers do not understand everything and at times landlords make abuse of these linguistic difficulties and of the misery of people to make them sign a lease with conditions that are not to the advantage of the tenant⁵³”.

Specific to the type C locality is that **there are many vacant houses in the city**. This means that finding housing is not as problematic here. Indeed, the demographic decline in this city has led to low housing prices in comparison to other Belgian and Walloon localities. Yet, in the type C locality, it is rather the **quality of the housing that poses the biggest obstacle** to newcomers and long-term residents with low incomes.

3.1.4 Locality 4 (Flanders, type D, small town)

The problematic issue with the housing market in the type D locality is also **bad housing quality**. A large part of the patrimony is in unhygienic and unsafe conditions. Moreover, **discrimination** on the housing market was perceived as an important issue by civil society actors in this locality, but less so by members of the local government⁵⁴. Bad housing quality is perceived as a major issue by all actors interviewed in the type D locality. In a report of the city, it is stated that 99% of the housing does not conform to fire safety rules and that 90% of the housing does not comply to the Flemish housing code. The report does not give more info on what the requirements were to comply to safety rules. The housing market is largely made up of older houses and apartments that used to function as single-family dwellings, but which in recent years have been divided into smaller studios or rooms. Members of the local government noted in interviews that these subdivisions are often done without a planning permission of the city, which often leads to unsafe conditions⁵⁵. As a result, one respondent notes that “the city has no overview of the number of housing units per property and we also do not know whether minimum quality requirements and safety standards are being respected⁵⁶”. According to the local government, these subdivisions of larger into smaller

⁵² Quote from interview B-C-7

⁵³ Quote from interview B-C-6

⁵⁴ Interviews B-D-8, B-D-12, B-D-13 & B-D-16

⁵⁵ Interview B-D-7

⁵⁶ Interview B-D-7



apartments led to increased pressure on houses and on neighbourhoods, sometimes resulting in cohabitation problems in certain neighbourhoods, especially between refugee or migrant families and long-term residents. According to the mayor of the type D locality, these problems occur in all neighbourhoods with an older patrimony⁵⁷.

Another factor is that the **type D locality is a tourist city**. This means that small apartments and small studios are in very high demand by two specific groups, firstly by people in poverty, ex-homeless people, newcomers, and people who just arrived in the country, and secondly, by tourists and people who want to acquire a vacation home. This leads to a very strong imbalance on the housing market and pushes the prices of small studios and apartments up considerably. The affordable share of the housing market that then remains in the type D locality, which is often inhabited by migrants, is often in unhygienic and unsafe conditions⁵⁸. Furthermore, the head of a civil society organisation working in the city notes that there is a lot of discrimination in the city:

“A lot of people that come here tell us about their experiences when they are looking to rent a house. In many cases, real estate agencies tell them that the premise that they are interested in is already rented out, this whilst this is not the case, as the house keeps on being advertised afterwards. There is racism by real estate agencies based on the name which sounds like this concerns a person with a migrant background. The multicultural advisory board of this city has insisted with both the previous local government and the current one to install correspondence tests on the housing market to measure and tackle discrimination, but this request was not supported by the local government. Their response to this request was: ‘there is no discrimination on the housing market’”⁵⁹.

The local government in the type D locality thus resists to tackle ethnic discrimination on the housing market, notwithstanding the demands of the multicultural advisory board, whilst other Belgian cities have engaged in this via correspondence tests.

3.2 Actors involved (who)

In the following section we will discuss which actors are, or are seen as, responsible for housing in the four Belgian municipalities studied. In particular, we discuss who is (seen as) responsible for dealing with housing issues or solving housing problems that refugees or migrants may face. Furthermore, we also map how actors collaborate, and with whom, and whether there are disagreements between the actors involved, in case this has come up in interviews.

⁵⁷ Interview B-D-16

⁵⁸ Interview B-D-12

⁵⁹ Quote from interview B-D-13

3.2.1 Locality 1 (Wallonia, type A, small town)

The local actors identified as responsible for housing in the type A locality are threefold. The first local actor responsible for housing is **the municipality**. The municipality ensures the quality of housing by being responsible for the health policy, by fighting against vacancy and by issuing rental permits. The municipality set up a housing service to inform citizens about housing subsidies and their rights, and keeps an inventory of vacant dwellings, building lots and emergency rehousing possibilities. In addition to these missions imposed by the Walloon Code of Sustainable Housing, the municipality has a great deal of latitude to conduct its housing policy. It can thus act to renovate and conserve the existing buildings, build new housing, acquire, and rent out housing, grant subsidies to individuals, etc. Finally, it can act through related structures, such as land registries or non-profit associations.

The second actor involved is the **public housing organisation** (*la société de logement de service public*). Further actors involved in housing policy are: the public centre for social action (*le centre public d'action sociale*), the social real estate agency (*l'agence immobilière sociale*), the housing promotion association (*l'association de promotion du logement*) and the neighbourhood coordinator (*la régie des quartiers*). In the housing statement of the locality, we also read that the plan is to create synergies between local housing operators and the public centre for social welfare (CPAS) of the municipality, with the support of the Walloon Social Cohesion Plan subsidies (*Plan de Cohésion Sociale*⁶⁰). The locality also set up a service for urgent housing for people in need. From our interviews, we did not gather any information on civil society actors or private actors which structurally engage in aiding (post-2014) migrants to find housing. Some post-2014 migrants did mention to have received help from civilians.

3.2.2 Locality 2 (Flanders, type B, medium-sized town)

The local actors identified as responsible for housing in the municipality concern, in the first place, the municipality itself, which has set up the 'housing service' (*Dienst Wonen*). In the type B locality, the housing service acts as a central agent in the area of housing. The bulk of what the housing service does has to do with housing quality inspections and procedures related to certificates of conformity or declarations of inadequacy/unfitness, as well as the fight against dilapidation and housing vacancy. This service collaborates with a lot of partners on this matter, such as police bodies from the federal judicial police, the local police, the public prosecutor's office, and the housing inspection. Secondly, the Centre for Common Welfare (*Centrum voor Algemeen Welzijn: CAW*; first line social services accessible for all⁶¹), the tenants' association, and the housing banker's office, which provides support for vulnerable

⁶⁰ Source: <http://cohesionsociale.wallonie.be/actions/PCS>, consulted on 25/7/2022.

⁶¹ The CAW's are non-for profit first line generic social services that exist all over Flanders. They are publicly subsidized. They provide first line social assistance, psychological and legal advice in all types of situations. They must be distinguished from the OCMW's (public centres for social welfare), which provide welfare benefits to people without means of subsistence.



tenants, are important actors involved in the field of housing. The CAW also works in close collaboration with the local public centre for social welfare (OCMW), which in this locality has a team that is dedicated to housing. Lastly, there are several social housing services and social rental services active in the locality. Furthermore, in locality B a civil society organisation operates on assisting migrants in their search for housing. This civil society is made up of volunteers who newcomers during house visits, for example⁶². Moreover, ethnic associations also at times assist newcomers in their search for housing. Lastly, locality B social housing organisations and the semi-NGO (CAW *Centrum General Wellbeing*) are in demand to start Housing First project in this city, as we will explain further in the next section. The local government of locality B has taken first steps to start with this project.

3.2.3 Locality 3 (Wallonia, type C, medium-sized town)

The local actors responsible for housing in this municipality are quite similar to the ones in the type A locality, as they have been appointed by the *Code Wallon pour le Logement*. The first local actor responsible for housing is the **municipality** itself. The municipality ensures the quality of housing by being responsible for the health policy, by fighting against vacancy, dilapidation and by being in charge of issuing rental permits. The municipality also sets up a housing service to inform citizens about housing subsidies and their housing rights, and keeps an inventory of vacant dwellings, building lots and emergency rehousing possibilities. In addition to these missions imposed by the Walloon Code of Sustainable Housing, the municipality has a great deal of latitude to conduct its housing policy. It can act to renovate and conserve the existing buildings, build new housing, acquire, and rent out housing, grant subsidies to individuals, etc. Finally, it can act through related structures, such as land registries or non-profit associations. The second type of actor involved in the type C locality are the **public housing organisations** (*la société de logement de service public*), of which there are three in the type C locality. Further actors involved in housing policies are the public centre for social action (*le centre public d'action sociale*), the social real estate agency (*l'agence immobilière sociale*), the housing promotion association (*l'association de promotion du logement*), and the neighbourhood coordinator (*la régie des quartiers*). Furthermore, **in this locality there are civil society organisations** (*associations sans but lucrative*) involved in setting up projects to combat homelessness, as is the case to different extents in the other Belgian localities. The locality is home to a Housing First project that aims to combat homelessness in the city, as we will explain in the next section. Lastly, in locality D there are equally **civil society organisations** involved in assisting (post-2014) migrants in finding housing. In the aftermath of increasing arrivals of refugees after 2015, the local branch of Caritas international has, for example, launched an appeal to homeowners in solidarity asking them to rent out their houses or flats to help cope with the shortage of reception places due to the growing number of asylum applications.

⁶² Information retrieved from interview B-V-2.

3.2.4 Locality 4 (Flanders, type D, small town)

The local actors responsible for housing in this municipality are similar to the ones in the Flemish type B locality. They are, firstly, the **municipality**, which has set up a 'housing service' (*Dienst Wonen*) within the 'service environment' (*Dienst Omgeving*). This service is involved in ensuring the quality of rental accommodation in the city but does not have specific services for migrants of newcomers. Secondly, the **Centre for Common Wellbeing** (*Centrum voor Algemeen Welzijn: CAW*) works to accompany people in their search for housing and provides other forms of housing assistance, such as help to avoid eviction and training and guidance of people to become sufficiently skilled to live independently. Additionally, the CAW also works to prevent homelessness by providing temporary accommodation and invests in prevention of eviction. The CAW therefore collaborates with the local government and the public centre for social welfare (*OCMW*). To facilitate its working, the CAW engaged an intercultural assistant in the aftermath of increasing arrivals of migrants and refugees to locality D in 2016. This actor is deployed internally at the local CAW to facilitate communication with migrants. This assistant at times mediates cultural differences within a reception centre or translates (mostly to and from Arabic) within a counselling context, amongst other tasks. Moreover, several **social housing companies and social rental companies** operate in the city. Lastly, also the civil society is involved in providing in assisting migrants to get access to housing in locality D. The local branch of Caritas international has launched an appeal to homeowners in solidarity asking them to rent out their houses or flats to help cope with the shortage of reception places due to the growing number of asylum applications. None of the post-2014 migrants interviewed in locality D mentioned to have been helped by Caritas during their search for housing, so it is not clear to what extent this organisation (which was particularly active around 2015) is still active.

3.3 Policies, initiatives, and practices that foster/hinder access (what)

In this section, we will discuss what has been done or is being done more generally in the area of housing at the local level, and what has been done to address any issues or problems affecting post-2014 migrants in obtaining access to housing. We also discuss whether there are any regular fora or meetings established to discuss the housing issue in relation to migration.

Discrimination proves to be a pertinent issue on the housing market in Belgium, and it has been present in media debates in the last years. Innovative practices that have been initiated several years ago to combat discrimination in the housing market are correspondence tests, diversity trainings, hotlines against discrimination, and quotas on the housing market. Correspondence tests show that ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities and single parents are significantly less invited by brokers and landlords to visit a house⁶³. Of the four localities studied in Belgium, **the type B locality is one of the cities that has participated in**

⁶³ Source: <https://pieterpaulver.wordpress.com/2021/09/19/groot-draagvlak-in-vlaanderen-voor-antidiscriminatiebeleid-op-de-woningmarkt/>, consulted on 1/6/2022.

correspondence tests. The main grounds of discrimination on the housing market that were mentioned in the interviews are: dependence on social benefits, the lack of a permanent residence permit, racism and prejudices, and income. The extent to which discrimination impacts the access to housing in the four localities studied partly depends on the general housing markets conditions per locality, and the initiatives taken by the regions and municipalities to ensure access to the housing market, as we will explain below for each locality.

3.3.1 Locality 1 (Wallonia, type A, small town)

The local government of the type A locality is involved in “implementing the right to decent housing as a place to live (...)” as declared in article 2 of the Walloon Code on Sustainable Housing (*le Code wallon de l'habitation durable*). This is also the case for the other Walloon city studied: the type C locality. In 2019, the Municipal Council of the type A locality approved the municipal policy statement that presents the new strategic axes of the municipal policy regarding housing. The statement declares that the municipality: (1) will promote the accessibility of quality rental housing, both private and public; (2) will increase the number of social and other housing units, by creating new social housing (construction, renovation, reallocation of buildings) or by encouraging the occupation of empty housing; (3) will hunt down slum landlords and substandard housing; (4) will fight against the vacancy of dwellings through dynamic taxation and through collaboration with the local real estate agencies and (5) will promote intergenerational housing to break the solitude of the elderly and facilitate access to housing for students.

From this list, it becomes clear that **no specific initiatives have been taken to accommodate new migrants in the type A locality**, even if just outside of this small city there is a large refugee centre. This fits with the ‘colour-blind’ (Westerveen and Adam, 2019) Walloon integration policy and the **hands-off attitude in the locality** (see Country Report Belgium WP3). The general conception that “migrants will leave anyway⁶⁴”, which was mentioned by all policymakers interviewed, appears to be an indirect reason for why the locality does not seem to feel responsible to act on the integration of migrants, or in facilitating their access to the local housing market. The local government also does not tackle discrimination on the housing market.

3.3.2 Locality 2 (Flanders, type B, medium-sized town)

The local government of the type B locality has, over the last years, installed several measures to assist people for whom the private housing market in the type B locality is not affordable. The measures taken are a response to the staggering waiting lists for social housing. A first initiative to counter this waiting list is the local government's “**housing bonus**” for people who are not able to pay for their rent. Since 2017, families or single people residing in the type B locality are entitled to a rental premium from the second year they are on a waiting list for

⁶⁴ Interviews B-A-4 & B-A-5

social housing. It is, more specifically, the local Public Centre for Social Welfare (*OCMW*) that supports families with a limited income on the private rental market. As of March 2022, the local *OCMW* has made the conditions for obtaining this rental bonus less stringent. From then on, also people living alone and without children are eligible for the premium. It is important to note, however, that only those people who are not entitled to the Flemish housing subsidy or Flemish rent allowance are eligible for the rent bonus of the type B locality. The Flemish rental premium is only available from the fourth year that one is on the waiting list. The municipality thus complements the Flemish policy by already providing a rental subsidy from the second year that people are on the waiting list for social housing. Over the next few years, the *OCMW* of the type B locality will make €579,000 available per year to provide for the local rental premium. Yet, an interlocutor working in a social rental service notes that the problems with housing in the type B locality are very complex. She states that “the rental subsidy is a drop in the ocean”⁶⁵. The respondent notes that there are several issues with the rental bonus. Most prominently, one can only get access to this bonus on the private rental market if the house you want to rent conforms to the rules. From the moment the house does not have a certificate of conformity, you will not get access to the bonus. There are many houses that do not comply to the conformity rules, and our respondent says: “it is very hard to get access to ‘proper’ housing that complies to all the standards of the city”⁶⁶.

A second local housing policy developed in the past five year is the setting up of **a specific service to help socially vulnerable people who need extra support in their search for rental accommodation**: homeless people, refugees, people with poor housing conditions. This is a collaborative initiative of the Public Centre for Social welfare (*OCMW*) and the Service for common Wellbeing (*CAW*). It aids in the search process for housing by consulting various real estate sites, by contacting owners of suitable rental properties, for example. Whenever possible, a collaborator of this service will go and visit the property with the client. If there are problems with the owner, then this service can help candidate renters to solve these problems. For similar kind of problems, candidate renters can also search assistance with tenants' associations. Furthermore, this service also checks if a person who is asking for help has exhausted all their rights. They check whether the person is entitled to receive a rental bonus and whether this person is eligible for social housing. The service also offers housing coaching to tenants who need extra guidance. This housing coaching entails that social service providers educate people in how to take care of a rental premise, for example. In many cases, **newcomers are upon their arrival assigned a mediator or a ‘housing buddy’ of this service**, who will assist them in the process of finding a house or apartment, who helps them in arranging the administration of the house, and who explores the neighbourhood with them. This housing coaching service is a short-term support of maximum three months and does not guarantee the final search but generally succeeds in helping all persons assisted to find housing or improve the chances to find housing.

⁶⁵ Interview B-B-6

⁶⁶ Interview B-B-6



Thirdly, locality B a civil society organisation operates on assisting migrants in their search for housing. This civil society is made up of volunteers who newcomers during house visits, for example⁶⁷. In a report of the organisation, it is stated that in 2021 this civil society helped about 15 families to find housing and the organisation limits its waiting list to 70 people because there is too little man-capacity to receive more newcomers⁶⁸. Civil society agents see their work as “bittersweet”, as the awareness remains that volunteers or volunteering organisation cannot replace the essential role of a government in the rental market⁶⁹. Moreover, ethnic associations also at times assist newcomers in their search for housing. In many instances, they then find housing with a house owner of the community in question⁷⁰. Lastly, locality B social housing organisations and the semi-NGO (CAW *Centrum General Wellbeing*) demanded the local government of locality B to start Housing First project in this city, which it did in 2021 in cooperation with civil society agents. Housing First offers housing and long-term counselling to people who have been homeless for a long time and are struggling with addiction or other mental health problems.

Concerning **anti-discrimination measures on the housing market**, we note that the type B locality is taking a very proactive role in tackling this. Correspondence tests to map out and subsequently tackle discrimination on the rental market have been applied in the type B locality on the initiative of the local government. Correspondence tests are fictitious registrations of a prospective tenant with landlords, both estate agents and private landlords. The researchers measured the unequal and unfavourable treatment by estate agents and private landlords of prospective tenants based on ethnic origin or physical handicap. The results show structural discrimination against ethnic minorities, wheelchair users and blind people with assistance dogs. The city is now working on an action plan to tackle discrimination in the rental market. Correspondence tests are currently the most important local anti-discrimination policy instrument⁷¹. The first baseline measurement in the type B locality shows that in terms of ethnic discrimination, men with a non-Belgian name have less chance of being allowed to view a rental property than men with a Belgian name. In 35% of the cases, a man with a Maghreb-sounding name did not receive an invitation for a visit, while a similar man with a Belgian-sounding name did. Men with Nepalese, Sub-Saharan African and mixed names are also invited less. In 24%, 19% and 15% of the cases respectively, they were not invited, while a similar man with a Belgian name was⁷². To combat these discriminations on the housing market, the city focuses on spreading information and raising awareness, and also offers **training courses to landlords**. In addition, the city has launched a **contact point for**

⁶⁷ Information retrieved from interview B-V-2.

⁶⁸ Information retrieved from local media.

⁶⁹ Information retrieved from interview B-V-2

⁷⁰ Information retrieved from interview B-B-1

⁷¹ Source: <https://www.praktijktestennu.be>, consulted on 9/6/2022.

⁷² Information retrieved from the official website of the city.

discrimination on the rental market. Candidate tenants who are victims of discrimination can report this there. The report is then passed on to *Unia*, the Belgian equality body. If these measures fail, then the city will move to enforcement. The member of local government responsible for diversity explains:

“We [the local government of the type B locality] have chosen to put all our efforts into training and awareness-raising in the coming period and count on the commitment of the landlords. However, if that does not prove sufficient, we will consider 'legal practical situation tests'. With these tests, evidence against discriminating landlords will be collected and can then be used to start a disciplinary procedure at the Professional Institute of Real Estate Agents (Beroepsinstituut van Vastgoedmakelaars. BIV). Unia can then initiate legal proceedings”⁷³.

Furthermore, like in the type C locality, the type B locality intends to start a **Housing First project** to fight homelessness and work on the social reintegration of this group. Housing first policies aim to facilitate the housing homeless people by providing housing without requirements for people who have been long-term homeless, starting from the idea that a house forms the basis upon which people can construct their lives. In locality B, the local government cooperates with a civil society actor to work out this project. Housing is followed by tailored counselling. A recognised social enterprise in the city will build at least ten high-quality small Housing First homes between 2021 and 2031⁷⁴.

3.3.3 Locality 3 (Wallonia, type C, medium-sized town)

In the type C locality, the two main priorities regarding housing have been defined as follows. Firstly, the municipality wants to continue the **renovations of the old housing patrimony**, this with particular attention paid to the well-being of the tenants. Secondly, the city aims to continue the **fight against vacancy**. The municipality is also involved in the hunt for dilapidation and abuses by landlords. Whilst the city had mainly focused on renovating the city centre, it now also extends actions beyond the intra-ring, with a reinforcement of the means of the control unit. The use of the indicative rent scale will be strengthened, by lobbying with the Walloon Region to make this scale application binding. Finally, the city intends to adopt a municipal urban planning guide and to centralise information and services working on housing. This will make it easier for citizens to navigate between different actors. With the help of the Local Urban Development Agency (ADLU), the city also plans to renovate neighbourhoods through the acquisition and renovation of substandard housing. As for private housing, the city's objective is to create 400 units per year, by supporting eco-district projects, promoting the creation of new passive housing, and renovating existing properties. Furthermore, in the housing policy statement of the city, we read that it intends to improve the capacity of the Social Real Estate Agency (*Agence immobilière sociale*, AIS), this by improving this agency's access to an inventory of unoccupied housing.

⁷³ Quote from interview B-B-10

⁷⁴ Information retrieved from website of locality B.



Secondly, at the start of 2022, this medium-sized city submitted a proposal to the call of a working group of the Belgian equality body *Unia* that **fights against discrimination** in access to housing by raising awareness and by assisting real estate agencies to prevent and fight discrimination on the housing market. The city also joined the Union of Cities and Communes of Wallonia (*Union des Villes et Communes de Wallonie, UVCW*), which exchange good practices in the fight against discrimination in the housing sector. Concretely, the city handed out an **explanatory brochure to real estate agencies within the locality to educate this sector about the extent to which they can intervene when they perceive cases of discrimination** on the housing market. Moreover, following *Unia's* call, an investigation has been launched by the Aldermen of Housing and Equal Opportunities of the city in collaboration with a research institute on discrimination on the housing market. A first report of this research will be presented to the real estate sector during the year 2022.

Lastly, the type C locality has set in place several services to tackle homelessness, among others with the **'Housing First' project**. The project was developed eight years ago and has also been implemented in other Belgian cities. This project aims to lead homeless people back into housing, with the support of a multidisciplinary team made up of nurses, psychologists, social workers, and educators. It is thereby able to tackle homelessness from a multidisciplinary perspective, and with the help of a wide range of institutions. The 'Housing First' project in Belgium was initially an experiment that was implemented in various cities in Flanders, Wallonia, and in Brussels. The experiment, funded by the federal government, ended in 2016 with an international conference. Furthermore, at the federal level, a support service was set up: 'the Housing First LAB'. The Housing First LAB is a structure that aims to support and inspire the development of current and future practices of Housing First in Belgium. The Housing First practices proved to be very efficient, and since then, most of the cities that were involved in the first stage have continued to apply this through local funding⁷⁵. Initiatives to combat homelessness are also present in the three other localities studied for the Whole-COMM project. Yet, as homelessness is a more pertinent problem in the type C locality than in the other three localities, there have been extra projects set in place to combat this.

3.3.4 Locality 4 (Flanders, type D, small town)

In the type D locality, there are **several services involved in the combatting of bad housing quality and abuses on the housing market**. These are seen as the municipality's priority regarding housing. In 2015, the city started with a project that tackles dilapidation and vacancy. More precisely, with this project, the local government systematically subjects properties of which it is suspected that subdivision has occurred to a full investigation in terms of housing quality, fire safety and spatial planning. Practically, this project entails that a group of government employees visits each neighbourhood of the town, street by street, and rings bells of houses, especially those that have multiple bells, to check if the property is subdivided in several units. If they are, then the team will check if the amount of people living in the

⁷⁵ Since June 2016, the regions are responsible for housing and welfare support.

premise is legal, and whether the living conditions are healthy and safe. This project is, according to the mayor of the type D locality “specifically installed to protect the citizen and of course also to support the landlord in terms of correct renting, in terms of legislation”⁷⁶. The mayor notes that the contracts of the people working on this project were renewed after the Flemish subsidies for the project stopped. The project thus started thanks to Flemish subsidies but now continues with local funds⁷⁷. The findings of these home visits are then passed on to the competent services for further action. After the assessment, the occupant and the owner of the rental accommodation will receive a letter stating the results of the assessment, after which they can submit their comments. Finally, the mayor decides on whether the property is declared unfit and/or uninhabitable. If the number of housing units determined does not correspond to the licensed situation, necessary measures will be taken. Residents of houses that are declared uninhabitable by the major can temporarily move into a transit house. Yet, a civil society actor noted that these transit houses are always full, which means that many people are left without accommodation after their house has been declared uninhabitable⁷⁸.

The mayor of the type D locality explains that this **project is focused on fighting exploitation on the housing market** (called *huisjesmelkerij* in Dutch, which translates to 'slumlording'):

“With this project, owners of houses in bad conditions are either forced to adapt the dwellings, so they conform to the housing code, or to sell them. If they are sold, the then these houses will mostly be demolished and new, comfortable buildings will be built instead that guarantee the quality of living.”⁷⁹

The mayor further explains the importance of these policies stating that “if you can't guarantee housing quality, then you're going to have big problems in your society”⁸⁰. The mayor underlines that “In certain neighbourhoods we are already seeing second generation renewals of bad quality housing, such as the ones in which second generation Afghan communities live in housing that is not safe or healthy”⁸¹. The mayor linked the importance of this project also to the influx of migrant communities in the city⁸². Providing better housing quality in the city then was perceived by civil society actors be as a means, be it indirectly, to

⁷⁶ Quote from interview B-D-16

⁷⁷ Interview B-D-16

⁷⁸ Interview B-D-14

⁷⁹ Interview B-D-16

⁸⁰ Quote from interview B-D-16

⁸¹ Quote from interview B-D-16

⁸² Interview B-D-16

reduce migrant arrivals⁸³. Additional to the team checking housing quality, the city also employs a housing supervisor, who is responsible for teaching about the required conditions to ensure healthy housing. Several respondents note that this project was a response to the numerous abuses on the housing market, for example with houses being rented out in bad hygienic conditions at €700 per month. In many cases, people would pay this amount because they have no other choice.

The local Service for Common Welfare (CAW) did, however, criticize this project. The welfare organisation argues that all houses with multiple residential entities will be put under heavy pressure by this action. However, the CAW argues that cohousing is often a valid housing format for people with a low income and that in many cases this way of living prevents vulnerable people from becoming homeless. They argue that cohousing should, therefore, have a place in the urban housing supply. The CAW does agree, however, with the fact that abuses on the housing market must be tackled, and that housing must comply with fire safety and hygienic standards. At the same time, they argue that the one should not exclude the other. The CAW thus pledges for the city to stop this project, and to focus on inspection regarding fire safety, homelessness, and vacancy. Co-housing should thus, according to this actor, be approached as a valuable form of residence that should be structurally supported, as it is one that can respond to the great housing shortages that the region is facing.

The city also has a **housing counselling service**. Housing councillors offer support with all kinds of questions and problems related to one's housing situation. They provide information and advice about the rental subsidy and the installation subsidy of the Flemish region, and if necessary, they will help candidates to fill in the application. To qualify for this assistance, one must have his/her official address in the type D locality. There are, furthermore, three social housing services in the city. There are certain requirements to be able to receive social housing. As a single person the cadastral taxable income could not be higher than €25.850 per year. This amount can go up with €2.167 per year per person dependent on one's income, such as children or somebody with a disability.

3.4 Specific target groups (for whom)

In the following section, we discuss for whom housing policies have been conceived. We discuss whether post-2014 migrants are (perceived/described) as being included in general housing policies and the provision of related services and resources. Furthermore, we discuss what the concrete requirements are for accessing social housing or housing support (like subsidised rent). Furthermore, we discuss whether there have been any policies designed specifically for (post-2014) migrants, for non-citizens more generally, or for other relevant groups like asylum seekers. If this is not the case, then we will discuss how this is being justified considering the existing challenges that were described above.

⁸³ Information retrieved from interview B-D-13.

3.4.1 Locality 1 (Wallonia, type A, small town)

In the 2019 housing statement of the type A locality, elderly people and people with reduced mobility and students are mentioned as the only specific target groups for which housing policies are elaborated. Indeed, the statement of housing of this small town states that one of the priorities of the local government in terms of housing is to offer adapted or adaptable housing for people with reduced mobility. Furthermore, the municipality aims to encourage springboard housing to hearten young people to settle in the municipality and have access to housing. We note that **no specific mention is made to post-2014 migrants in the housing policy** documents of the type A locality. They are not included as a specific target group within the local housing policies. The housing policy of the type A locality can thus be considered colour-blind (Westerveen and Adam, 2019).

3.4.2 Locality 2 (Flanders, type B, medium-sized town)

One of the targeted housing policies developed in the type B locality is its correspondence tests aiming at detecting discrimination on the housing market. Furthermore, there are civil society organisations and initiatives that focus specifically on housing assistance for newcomers. The organisation ‘Neighbours Without Borders’, which is mainly run by volunteers, works in various Flemish cities to help to remove legal and practical obstacles for migrants in the access to housing. In locality B there the civil society organisation focuses mainly on young refugees, often arriving without family members. More specifically, this civil society organisation assists newcomers during visits to premises when they are looking to rent, assist in explaining the contract, and if necessary, also sign the lease as a guarantor so that migrants can rent. Furthermore, social housing in the city does not take a target-group measures for migrants or refugees, as is the case in the other 3 Belgian localities studied. On the contrary, there are specific requirements set in place that restrict the access to social housing for migrants, such as language requirements, as was explained in detail in section 2.1.1. A social housing agent interviewed in the type B locality explains the way in which social service providers of a social rental agency in locality B deal with these additional requirements for migrants for access to social rental houses:

“Social service providers can follow a training course in which they are thought what is expected from migrants, what the basic Dutch level that is required is. It actually means that people must be able to have a simple conversation. People can also submit their certificate of the training course they have taken; this will also count as a proof of language competency. We also mention that at the start of the lease for social housing, ‘these are your obligations’, but are we going to actively check that after a year? No, we don't, even if we are required to do so. We did get a check on that last year from Flemish supervision. Recently the Flemish government is more involved in checking whether recipients of social housing assistance have foreign properties and on checking language requirements. This suddenly became very topical. After that visit we contacted several people renting through the social rental agency saying, look, you're not really complying to the conditions for getting access to social housing, you don't speak Dutch yet, you must give us a certificate

that you're going to Dutch lessons, and if we don't get that, we have to report it to the supervisor, who may also send some letters and impose a fine.”⁸⁴

The social service provider at the social rental agency with whom we spoke noted that she did not take on this responsibility as the workload was already way too high. The respondent states: “we as workers of the social rental agency are not so happy about the fact that we are assigned more and more little tasks like these⁸⁵”. We note thus, that in the Flemish localities, the migrants and newcomers are targeted when it comes to social housing, but this by extra requirements and screenings that can possibly exclude them from social housing, rather than by extra assistance to possibly ease the access to social housing. These extra obligations are imposed by the Flemish government and thus apply to all Flemish municipalities. Yet, out of the account of the social housing agent we learn that social service providers social housing agents have a leeway in the extent to which they control these additional requirements imposed by the Flemish governments. The social housing agents in locality B notably being quite reluctant to check these additional requirements for migrants.

3.4.3 Locality 3 (Wallonia, type C, medium-sized town)

Particular to locality C is that undocumented migrants as well as homeless people were mentioned regularly during interviews conducted. Until recently, there were three reception centres in the surroundings of the type C locality. According to one of the respondents, this has affected the available accommodation for migrants in the locality:

“This city is an urban centre that also attracts applicants who arrive because there are more facilities here to receive people who have an irregular status than in other cities. In terms of accommodation, there are night shelters, for example, which are not found in all the surrounding municipalities, and which eventually attract undocumented migrants and other foreigners who have no resources”⁸⁶.

Notable is that respondents from locality C speak of undocumented migrants as a group that makes use of public resources and for which public resources are lenient. In the two Flemish localities undocumented migrants were never mentioned by service providers or civil society agents. In locality A undocumented migrants were equally rarely mentioned by actors. The only exception is that reception homes were opened for transmigrants who would pass by the nearby highway aiming to reach Northern France and later Great Britain⁸⁷.

⁸⁴ Quote from interview B-2-6

⁸⁵ Quote from interview B-2-6

⁸⁶ Quote from interview B-C-6

⁸⁷ Interview B-A-1

3.4.4 Locality 4 (Flanders, type D, small town)

In the type D locality, the current government is interested in investing in homeless people and refugees. A member of the local government noted in the interview that the city wishes to engage in the set-up of a local accommodation initiative (LAI) to host refugees in the city, although there are no fixed plans yet. Concerning homeless people, the local government has opened **transition houses, which accommodate people living on the street** or which can provide a temporary housing for people whose house has been declared uninhabitable by the mayor of the city. Indeed, this has become more common since the city has started a project to fight dilapidation and abuses on the housing market in the locality. Furthermore, the city also invests in housing services for elderly in the city, which is not surprising considering that this locality is home to a very high number of retired people.

Nobody from the social rental companies in the type D locality responded to the invitation to be interviewed, but also here migrants are targeted by Flemish policies that impose extra checks on migrants. As mentioned above, the new Flemish policy stipulated that migrant have to pass language tests to have access to social housing and can be screened to check whether they have properties outside of Belgium. In the type B locality, we noted a certain resistance to these checks by street-level bureaucrats. In the type D locality, however, these measures are described on the website of the social rental agency. Even though an interview would have been more fruitful, judging from the online communication of some of the social rental service and social housing services in the type D locality. Noting that the requirements for Dutch language requirements are communicated on the first page of the social rental page points to the fact that there is less resistance by this social housing agency to the Flemish policy that adds additional barriers and scrutiny for migrants, than in locality B. The popularity of the extreme right parties NV-A and *Vlaams Belang* Party politics in locality D and the party congruence between the Flemish government, which imposes these restrictions, and the local government, might explain this apparent difference between the approaches of social rental agencies in the two Flemish towns.



CASE	WholeCOMM typology	Major obstacle(s)	Actor(s) involved	Measure(s)	Target group(s)
Locality 1	Type A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High rent prices - Lack of social housing and long waiting lists - Lack of housing for large families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The municipality - The social real estate agency of the province (<i>l'agence immobilière sociale</i>) - The Walloon government through the Plan de Cohésion Sociale (Social Cohesion Plan) - The local Public Centre for Social Welfare (<i>CPAS</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fighting housing vacancy & bad/unhealthy housing conditions (<i>la lutte contre l'insalubrité</i>) - Increasing the amount of social housing in the town 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Elderly people with reduced mobility - Students & young people
Locality 2	Type B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Housing scarcity - High prices - Lack of social housing and long waiting lists - Lack of housing for large families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regional government - Local government - The local housing services - <i>Woonpunt</i> - The Spatial Policy Department of the local government - The Housing Team of the local public centre for social welfare (OCMW) - The Centre for General Welfare (CAW) - Social Housing Agencies (entirely subsidised by the local government) - Tenants' association - The local police - Unia: the Belgian equality body 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rent subsidy - Rental assistance - Prevention of housing vacancy and dilapidation - Anti-discrimination policy via situation testing and warnings - Extra terms and conditions for migrants to get access to social housing, instigated by the Flemish government (more specifically: Dutch language requirements & extra control on properties abroad) - Rental assistance - Anti-racism policies for the housing market 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Single people/people living on their own - Foreign language speakers - Refugees - Homeless people - Ethno-racial minorities



				- Projects to tackle homelessness	
Locality 3	Type C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Housing vacancy, dilapidation and abuses on the housing market - Bad housing quality - Lack of social housing and transit housing, staggering waiting lists for social housing - Lack of housing for large families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The municipality - Public housing organisations - The local housing services - Public housing corporations - The local public centre for social welfare (le CPAS) - The Associations for the Promotion of Housing (APL) - Housing Fund for Large Families of Wallonia - Unia: the Belgian equality body 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rental assistance - Anti-racism policies for the housing market - Projects to tackle homelessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Large families - Homeless people - Irregular migrants/sans-papiers
Locality 4	Type D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bad housing quality, vacancy, and dilapidation - Lack of social housing & staggering waiting lists - Lack of housing for large families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The municipality: Service Living (<i>Dienst Wonen</i>) within the service environment (<i>Dienst Omgeving</i>) of the local government - CAW (<i>Centrum voor Algemeen Welzijn</i>: Centre for Common wellbeing) - Social housing services. - OCMW (local public centre for social welfare) - Local police 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Combatting bad housing quality - Transition housing - Extra terms and conditions for migrants to get access to social housing, instigated by the Flemish government (more specifically: Dutch language requirements & extra control on properties abroad) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Refugees & migrant communities - Elderly people - Homeless people

Table 1: Case-by-case summary of results/findings regarding the area of housing

4. Access to employment

4.1 Main challenges/obstacles

In this section, we will discuss the overall characteristics of the labour market and employment situation of post-2014 migrants in the four selected municipalities. We will discuss characteristics such as the level of unemployment, occupation segregation and wage levels. Moreover, we discuss which issues, problems or difficulties are mentioned as particularly affecting (post-2014) migrants/refugees/foreigners. Furthermore, we will discuss to what extent these issues, problems and difficulties are perceived to be different depending on gender, age, ethnicity, and race. Lastly, we discuss how these obstacles have changed over the past 5 years.

In general terms, we note that the inequalities that (post-2014) migrants face on the Belgian labour market are particularly large in relation to other European countries. This is according to studies that calculate the 'ethnic gap' in labour market participation for all EU/OECD countries⁸⁸ (Westerveen and Thys, 2016: 272). This "ethnic gap" is especially reflected in **high unemployment rate of non-EU migrants**. Studies have provided different possible explanations for ethno-racial inequalities on the Belgian labour market (for an overview, see: Westerveen and Thys, 2016). A first type of explanation that is often mentioned focuses on **individual migrant-specific factors** such as language competencies, educational level, and social network. However, such individual factors can never fully explain the disadvantages that people with a migration background experience on the Belgian labour market, particularly not for those who grew up and went to school in Belgium (OECD, 2018b: 203, 205). Therefore, studies have also relied on more **structural factors** to explain ethno-racial inequalities in employment. Structural explanations that have been brought forward focus on the segmented nature of the Belgian labour market and its low demand for low-skilled workers, the difficult recognition of foreign qualifications as well as discrimination of people with a migration background (see, for example: Colruy et al., 2015; Huddleston et al., 2015).

In all four localities, language barriers, discrimination, and the difficulty of getting one's foreign diploma recognised are mentioned as the most important obstacles for (post-2014) migrants in getting access to the labour market. Both in the Flemish and the Walloon localities (in particular in the latter), the very **high language demands** to be hired, even in manual work, such as cleaning and industry was posed as a main issue that migrants are confronted with. Several post-2014 migrants commented on the fact that they were stuck in a vicious cycle of not being able to work because they did not have a sufficient command of the regional language, and then not being able to practice the language because they were unable to work, which was perceived by several interviewees to push them into social isolation. The **difficulty of getting foreign diploma's recognised** was equally evoked in all four localities studied as a

⁸⁸ The studies to which we refer: studies from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (OECD, 2008; 2012; 2005) the Federal Public Service Employment, Labour, and Social Dialogue (FPS WASO) and the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism (CGKR (2013)). (See Westerveen and Thys, 2016)

major obstacle for refugees and post-2014 migrants to integrate in the Belgian labour market and to find work that fits with their previous experiences and potentials. In Flanders, it is NARIC-Vlaanderen⁸⁹ that is responsible for the equivalence of non-Belgian diplomas. In Wallonia, it is the service *Equivalences* of the Walloon-Brussels federation⁹⁰ that is responsible for the official recognition of foreign diplomas.

4.1.1 Locality 1 (Wallonia, type A, small town)

The main issues and problems discussed in the type A locality regarding access to employment for migrants are their **legal status, language gap, discrimination, and the bad public transport network** in the city. Regarding the legal status, the director of the regional integration centre notes that whilst this used to pose a very big hindrance for employers, who would say ‘I would employ asylum seekers but if they lose their stay in 6 months - I would be annoyed to have invested time in training without having the guarantee that they would stay’, in the last years, this has become much less of an issue as employers are desperate for employees⁹¹. Regarding discrimination, this actor notes that:

“I have already seen people who were extremely competent, who have a place in the company – who could even have progressed quickly – and who in the end quit their job because of the racism in the team in which they were in, and even if it was perhaps unconscious on the part of their colleagues, it destroys the person, and, in the end, they no longer wanted to work in the sector, whereas they could very well have blossomed there if they had been well received”⁹².

The actor seemed quite hopeful that the changing economic situation, with a labour shortage could have positive effects on the access of migrants to the labour market, and that this could then also lead to a mentality shift by employers, who will hopefully become more open to work with migrants after having had first experiences working with this group of people⁹³. The director of the CRI also comments on **language difficulties**:

“There are plenty of jobs for which in theory you can put the person straight into work, even if the language knowledge is limited. In manual industries, some basic language, and codes, and then to be able to understand the basic instructions, such as safety instructions and from there, it can go fast. Yet, in most cases, a very high level of French is required for any type of job”⁹⁴.

⁸⁹ See: <https://nadicvlaanderen.be>.

⁹⁰ See: <http://www.equivalences.cfwb.be/index.php?id=1042>.

⁹¹ Quote from interview B-A-1

⁹² Quote from interview B-A-1

⁹³ Interview B-A-1

⁹⁴ Quote from interview B-A-1



Indeed, a quite high command of language is required by many employers. The reasons given is that safety instructions and other work instructions would otherwise not be understood. These high language standards pose an enormous difficulty for migrants, who have commented on the fact that they enter in a vicious cycle: not being able to practice the language because they cannot get a job and not being able to get a job because they do not have the opportunity to practice the language⁹⁵.

4.1.2 Locality 2 (Flanders, type B, medium-sized town)

The overall outlook of the labour market is quite positive in the type B locality. The unemployment rates are low and there are **many work opportunities in the city**. At first sight, finding employment would thus pose much less of a problem for migrants than getting access to housing, as we explained in the previous section. Nevertheless, there are several obstacles that were commented upon by local government actors and civil society actors regarding migrants' access to the labour market. Issues such as language barriers, discrimination, the difficult and time-consuming process of getting diploma's recognised, the lack of a social network, and the bureaucracy involved with finding employment were commented upon by civil society actors and street-level bureaucrats interviewed in this medium-sized city. Concerning **language difficulties and discrimination** of migrants on the labour market, a civil society actor who works as a job coach in the type B locality notes that:

*“Here language is so important for employers. You would think that for a person who wants to work as a cleaner, speaking French and English would be sufficient, and that Dutch can come later, but no! In many cases, this is not enough for cleaning in public places, at people's homes this is often different. But I think that this is also sometimes a consequence of the negative images in the media about migrants, the prejudices that exist”.*⁹⁶

The actor explains that in some cases it seems that language difficulties are mentioned as a reason for not hiring a person when really it is rather discrimination or prejudices that are behind that decision.

Regarding the **difficulty of getting one's diploma recognised** this civil society actor notes that, most importantly, this process takes a very long time. The interviewee comments on the fact that getting a diploma recognised is often a very time-consuming process, during which people often stay at home and at times lose their skills and get into a spiral of isolation. She suggests that “actually, every city should have a few people working on the validation of diploma's, in that way we would prevent a lot of talent from being lost”⁹⁷.

⁹⁵ Information from the focus group conducted in the type A locality.

⁹⁶ Quote from interview B-B-7

⁹⁷ Interview B-B-7



Concerning the difficulties of finding employment, a civil society actor leading the one-stop shop in the city explains:

“Many migrants struggle with the IT part of finding a job, and with the dense administration. It is hard to get that explained, because for many people that has never been important. If they were looking for a job in their country, it was via-via, just knock on someone’s door and there you go, you can start. We try to explain to people that there are a lot of advantages to working in a regulated country. There is less corruption, there is less nepotism, but for them it is really a completely opposite system from the one that many people knew before. And it’s that process that you go through in two or three years of ‘OK, is that how you understand it?’ And then you just have to show them where those opportunities lie and then they take them. Because I can’t do that for them, they have to do that themselves. But sometimes the problem is that people don’t know where to start and how to proceed”⁹⁸.

In the one-stop shop that the civil society actor leads, there are support mechanisms for migrants that help them in the process of finding a job and in getting through administrative difficulties.

4.1.3 Locality 3 (Wallonia, type C, medium-sized town)

Language barriers, discrimination, and the difficulty of getting one’s foreign diploma recognised are mentioned as the most important obstacles for (post-2014) migrants in getting access to the labour market in the type C locality. Concerning **the language barrier**, the director of a civil society organisation working on ‘employability’ of people (a similar actor as the one in the type A locality) notes that language is often seen as an obstacle for employers to engage somebody who is still in the process of learning French:

*“Take the industrial sector for example, where there are important safety instructions in place for employees. That means that not all companies are willing to accept someone who barely speaks French or who barely understands the instructions, even if the desire and motivation to work is very present with somebody, this also applies to logistic sectors and factories as well. (...) whilst discrimination is not something that I encounter on a daily basis in working with organisations and companies, there are still companies which are not open to welcoming people of foreign origin, who have prejudices. These negative perceptions and prejudices may hamper the process of finding a job”.*⁹⁹

Furthermore, a social worker at the cell for migrants at *FOREM* notes that the **equivalence of**

⁹⁸ Quote from interview B-B-11

⁹⁹ Quote from interview B-C-2

diplomas is an extremely complicated process in the type C locality and in the whole of Wallonia. He explains: “to give you an idea, a medical doctor who has graduated from an African university, here he will have the equivalent of the Certificate of Higher Secondary Education, so the certificate of higher secondary education!”¹⁰⁰ The actor, moreover, states that “this is a big difference from Flanders”¹⁰¹, which, according to him, is much more flexible in the equivalence of diplomas. This, perception, however, does not correspond to the perception of Flemish actors in the type B and D localities, who equally noted the extremely long and complicated process of diploma recognition. The concrete difference regarding the homologation of foreign diploma’s in Flanders and Wallonia is that they are facilitated by two different agencies: the service *Equivalences* in Wallonia and *NARIC* in Flanders, which have the same competencies. There are no concrete differences that would explain a difference in processing time.

4.1.4 Locality 4 (Flanders, type D, small town)

In the type D locality, **language difficulties, discrimination, and the lack of a social network are argued to be the most prominent obstacles** for migrants in getting access to the labour market by local members of government, social service providers, and civil society actors. The head of a civil society organisation in the type D locality, which has been active in the field since the 1980s, comments on the current labour shortage, and the effect this has on employers’ mentality towards migrants. The actor explains that a few years ago finding employment was a much larger issue for migrants and other people excluded from the labour market than it is now. The actor explains:

“I have the feeling that our people find it much easier to find a job when the need is high. At this point, their Dutch doesn't have to be perfect if they can get around in another language, English for example. But when the economy stagnates, perfect Dutch becomes a prerequisite for finding a job again. I have noticed this throughout my career: when there is a need for hands, the requirements are low, and when there is less employment, then your Dutch needs to be perfect again. I see that many people are finding a job now, often through temporary contracts. So let's be realistic about that, these incomes are very low, often it's just above the poverty line, and that in turn makes it very difficult to find housing”¹⁰².

Furthermore, the interviewee notes that employers can play a very important role in removing or installing obstacles for migrants, and in the integration of migrants. This not only by choosing to employ them or not, but also through the working culture. The interviewee notes:

“We constantly have to keep an eye out on what happens on the work floor. We hear

¹⁰⁰ Quote from interview B-B-10

¹⁰¹ Quote from interview B-B-10

¹⁰² Quote from interview B-D-13

*about certain workplaces in this city in which Flemish employees make a lot of racist remarks when working with people with a migration background. That makes the collaboration very difficult. When this occurs, we always motivate people to report racism through the hotline, but in many cases these complaints are not followed up and are left without repercussions”.*¹⁰³

4.2 Actors involved (who)

4.2.1 Locality 1 (Wallonia, type A, small town)

The main actors responsible for employment in the type A locality are **FOREM**, and its specific service for migrants. Furthermore, the **civil society actors** in the city have installed concrete measures to assist people excluded from the labour market. In many cases, migrants appeal to these services, but they are not, nor is any other group, singled out or specifically targeted by the civil society services, as they believe this would cause even more discrimination on the labour market¹⁰⁴. Furthermore, the Belgian socialist **trade union** (FGTB) is also involved in offering a professional training track combined with a French literacy training, in which a lot of migrants participate.

4.2.2 Locality 2 (Flanders, type B, medium-sized town)

In the type B locality, there are various actors responsible for employment. The **local government**, the **VDAB** (and specifically its service for non-Dutch speakers: *dienst anderstaligen*) the local **OCMW**, and a **civil society organisation** working on labour market integration for migrants, are the most important actors. The local **OCMW** has taken concrete measures to deal with the obstacles in access to employment for young migrants, as we have explained in the previous section on the main challenges and obstacles that migrants face in the type B locality. Moreover, the collaboration and synergy between these three actors, together with the agency for integration (*Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering*) on the topic of labour market integration is quite remarkable in this medium-sized city. Indeed, these services gather once a week in the local one-stop shop to provide customised assistance to migrants, and to map out the best trajectory for them. This can include professional training or direct insertion in the labour market.

4.2.3 Locality 3 (Wallonia, type C, medium-sized town)

The actors responsible for employment in the type C locality are **FOREM**, and its specific service for migrants. Moreover, the civil society actors in the city have installed concrete measures to assist people excluded from the labour market and, in many cases, migrants. Furthermore, there are several civil society actors working on labour market integration. One

¹⁰³ Quote from interview B-D-13

¹⁰⁴ Interview B-A-3



of them is the regional integration centre, which has a specific service for socio-professional insertion.

4.2.4 Locality 4 (Flanders, type D, small town)

In the type B locality, there are various actors responsible for employment. The **VDAB**, the local **OCMW**, and the **local government** are the most important actors. One **civil society actor**, the Economic House, is almost entirely funded by the local government and at times applies to the Economic Social Fund of the European Union to set up programmes with migrants. This actor plays a very important role in setting up initiatives, such as courses and trainings to improve migrants' access to the labour market. The collaboration between the civil society actors and the local **VDAB** has been described as less easy-going by members of the local government and civil society actors.

4.3 Policies, initiatives, and practices that foster/hinder access (what)

In all four localities, the **Article 60 measure** was mentioned as important in the road to employment for migrants. Article 60 and Article 61 are a form of social assistance that allows the public centres for social welfare to offer work to someone who has never been active in the labour market or who has been inactive for a longer period. The public centres for social welfare conclude a contract with an organisation¹⁰⁵, to hire long-term unemployed people for a fixed period of time. To be able to conclude a contract within the framework of Article 60, the employee must simultaneously fulfil the following conditions: 1) receive an integration income or equivalent financial social support; 2) be registered in the population register or the register of foreigners; 3) not be entitled to full unemployment benefits. The employee then receives an employment contract with the CPAS or OCMW, which puts him/her at the disposal of the external employer. This form of social employment offers the opportunity to gain professional experience, but also to open or reopen the employee's entitlement to unemployment benefits at the end of the contract and to be (re)integrated at the professional level. The employment contract is for a fixed term (minimum 1 year and maximum 2 years) and as a rule for 30 hours a week.¹⁰⁶ The article 60 and 61 measures are not set in motion with an eye on aiding refugees and migrants to integrate in the labour market. However, in practice, **a lot of refugees and migrants do resort to this measure to get a foot into the Belgian labour market**, whilst being able to receive social benefits from the public centre for social welfare.

¹⁰⁵ Organisations that qualify to employ a person through an article 60 contract are 1) A private commercial partner who has concluded an agreement with a Public Centre for Social Welfare; 2) A company with a social purpose; 3) A municipality where the Public Centre for Social Welfare is established; 4) A Public Centre for Social Welfare; 4) An inter-communal association with social, cultural, or environmental objectives; 5) An association, 6; A public hospital. See source with more detailed requirements: <https://1819.brussels/nl/subsidies/sociale-tewerkstelling-van-een-werknemer-artikel-60-61>, consulted on 7/6/2022.

¹⁰⁶ Source: <https://1819.brussels/nl/subsidies/sociale-tewerkstelling-van-een-werknemer-artikel-60-61>, consulted on 7/6/2022.

4.3.1 Locality 1 (Wallonia, type A, small town)

In the type A locality, there are various civil society actors involved in leading people to work and mitigating the obstacles that migrants might be experiencing in their access to employment. Firstly, the regional integration centre is responsible for providing 4 hours of socio-professional assistance training, which is part of the obligatory Walloon integration trajectory. Furthermore, there are various civil society actors which provide complementary services. Firstly, there is the MIRE (*Les Missions Régionales pour l'Emploi*: The regional missions for employment), which are located in every Walloon province and funded by the Walloon government. Whilst this civil society actor does not work solely with migrant populations, migrants do represent an important part of the population they support in their search for employment. The director of MIRE in the type A locality explains why they chose not to set up targeted approaches:

“Discrimination comes in different forms. There is discrimination towards foreigners, but there is also discrimination for people who have no diploma, for people who depend on social benefits, people who are unemployed, or people with physical or mental difficulties. All of these are forms of discrimination that prevent our public from integrating into the labour market. For us, discrimination of newcomers or discrimination of a young person with few qualifications remains the same. So we believe that if we were to be setting up specific projects for target groups, that we would then be feeding discrimination. That is why we have chosen not to do so. If people who we assist are motivated to go to work and are available, then it's up to us to find them a company for them to be employed at. We thus look for companies who are ready to work in a different way, to practise a recruitment which is no longer competitive, but a way of recruiting that is less discriminating, one that allows for the labour market integration of these groups of people”¹⁰⁷.

Furthermore, the regional integration centre is also involved in aiding migrants to overcome certain obstacles in their access to employment, but also works “on the other side of the spectrum”, that is, on the side of the employers through **diversity trainings**. The director explains:

“We must think about how to create bridges between foreign people who have skills and the needs of companies. At the same time, we also want to work with the team on diversity issues. We work both aspects at the same time, that is how we position ourselves. We think about how to create a bridge between newcomers who have the skills and the needs of the employers. I believe that we need to keep on investing even more in concurrent learning. We help migrants also, after they have gotten a job, at the production line, for example. We continue to help them to master the basic vocabulary, the safety instructions, teach them to remain attentive to the working conditions, assist them so they know what their labour rights are, to ensure they

¹⁰⁷ Quote from interview B-A-3



understand the cultural codes. This also during the period in which they are already working”¹⁰⁸.

The regional integration centre in the type A locality has also positioned itself as an important actor involved in the **mediation of issues related to discrimination and diversity** on the work floor in the town and in other towns in the region. The director of the regional integration centre speaks of instances in which employers themselves reach out to the CRI when they notice discrimination within their company:

“Temporary employment agencies that have approached us on various occasions, asking if we could help them to create modules to help people before we place them in companies. These are occasions that create opportunities across the economic sectors with the accompaniment (...) - on the language, on the cultural codes, on the critical spirit and the independence of the people, to help them to understand which game they play. These are perspectives that are being sketched out - more easily today than yesterday - but we are right in the middle of it now, and it is a process. I think that this will bring about improvements”¹⁰⁹.

Another civil society organisation, linked to the socialist trade Union FGTB¹¹⁰ (*The Belgian General Federation of Labour*), also organises **trainings with an eye on improving French literacy**. The director of this civil society organisation explains that, in the last five years, this organisation has developed a training project, which combine French language, literacy and learning a trade. The director explains that this project is aimed at people who have **difficulties** with French “whether it's literacy or whether it's because French is not their native language”¹¹¹. The director states that for this project they have positively collaborated with associations all over the province, and that it is a project that attracts a lot of people from a foreign origin. The director gives examples of several **sector-specific projects** that have been set up: “one in collaboration with bricklayers, one to learn the trade of social housekeeper, and this year we are starting a new project with the meat industry”¹¹².

¹⁰⁸ Interview B-A-3

¹⁰⁹ Interview B-A-1

¹¹⁰ This is the second largest trade union federation in Belgium in terms of membership.

¹¹¹ Quote from interview B-A-10

¹¹² Quote from interview B-A-10

4.3.2 Locality 2 (Flanders, type B, medium-sized town)

There are various practices and policies implemented by the local government and civil society actors in the type B locality to facilitate the access to employment for refugees. One of them is the specific **professional buddy project, which is organised by civil society actors and funded by the local government.**

“Suppose you are a highly educated dentist from Palestine, and you come here. Your diploma is not quite up to scratch (according to the Belgian requirement), but you want to work as a dentist later on. Then people here [civil society actors] look for a dentist from here to pair them up as a buddy, who will then function as a mentor, with real people from the work field. They look for people in the field who are willing to commit themselves to explaining the field in Belgium¹¹³”.

This approach of matching a migrant with a ‘buddy’ conceived in the type B locality has recently also been adopted by other cities, especially in Flanders. In fact, the new Flemish integration decree of 2022 has rendered a buddy trajectory (as well as voluntary work) obligatory. This ‘participation trajectory’, also called the ‘fourth pillar’ of the Flemish integration decree, takes at least 40 Hours. The obligatory character of the fourth pillar has been heavily criticised by certain civil society actor, who argue that making voluntary work obligatory and obliging interactions between long-term residents and newcomers is highly contradictory¹¹⁴. Moreover, the fourth pillar has also been criticised because more responsibilities are placed on local governments and civil society actors without more funding being attributed to them.

Moreover, the one-stop shop operating in the type B locality is very much engaged in **bringing together different agencies working on employment** as to ensure that the best solutions towards employment are found. The coordinator of the **one-stop shop** in the type B locality explains that:

“The four main agencies working on employment [the VDAB, the Agency for Integration, the public centre for social welfare, and a civil society actor working on migrant’s access to employment] come and sit here in this [name of one-stop-shop] together every Tuesday. If somebody has a question related to legal procedures, or others, then the Agency for Integration can comment on these. When young people come with complicated questions regarding employment or vocational trainings, or other study opportunities, for example, then the different actors can reply quickly and more accurately. As they are all gathered together, they can then quickly decide, is this a question for the VDAB, or is this for the civil society project, or for the OCMW? It really facilitates communication, these instances are much better coordinated, and people are helped much better because their trajectory are followed up in a much more

¹¹³ Interview B-B-13

¹¹⁴ Interview B-B-1

*detailed way*¹¹⁵.

In addition, this civil society organisation also employs **job hunters**, who more actively engage in finding employment for job searchers.

Since 2017 there is also a civil society actor operating in the type B locality that has created **job coaches**, who are involved in providing personal guidance for migrants and refugees to get access to the labour market. The job coach interviewed notes that these new positions were created because the civil society actors realised that there was a need to guide migrants to work, or to internships, or to go to training in a more tailored way. Moreover, this civil society actor previously worked more on a sociocultural project, so had a lot of contacts with migrant associations¹¹⁶. The job coach works as a mediator between the candidate for a job and the employer, attends job interviews, helps with the writing of a CV, and to work out a career programme according to the wishes of the person.

Furthermore, the **local VDAB and the local OCMW have also set up additional services and projects to aid migrants and refugees in their access to the labour market**. Firstly, the *VDAB* has a specific service to help employers in the process of engaging newcomers who are in the process of learning Dutch. In case an employer is about to employ a newcomer but is hesitant about their language capacities, then the *VDAB* can offer a scheme through which the person can do an internship for 6 months. In this way, the employer is given 6 months to see whether this collaboration is possible, and whether the language proficiency is sufficient for the work required. Furthermore, migrants can receive **language support** on the work floor by *VDAB*, which is completely free for companies and employers. The mediator of the *VDAB* supports the employer when they engage a non-Dutch speaking employee, or somebody in the process of learning the language. Lastly, also the local *OCMW* has set up a **project to lead young and unaccompanied migrants to the labour market**. This activation trajectory entails a very intensive school year to acquire basic knowledge in mathematics, Dutch, and IT, and which also includes professional orientation sessions, during which they visit different professional environments. During the intensive training year, there is also the possibility of acquiring technical and practical skills. The point of this year, as the team director of the activation trajectory explained, is to make sure that students have a feasible job prospect at the end of the year. This means in many cases that young newcomers start a professional training¹¹⁷.

4.3.3 Locality 3 (Wallonia, type C, medium-sized town)

In the type C locality, there are also several initiatives to get people to work and to remove obstacles for migrants in their access to the labour market, this often in relation to the bottleneck professions. FEBI (*Fonds de formation et Fonds Maribel fédéraux et bruxellois*) is a

¹¹⁵ Quote from interview B-B-11

¹¹⁶ Interview B-B-7

¹¹⁷ Interview B-B-5

notable civil society actor, which has offices over the whole of Wallonia and that clusters several federal and Brussel-based training funds, as well as Maribel funds¹¹⁸ active in the non-profit sector. The aim of this organisation is to offer **training in the care sector** (hospitals, rest and care homes, day care centres, assisted living facilities, home nursing, rehabilitation centres, medical homes, sheltering houses, Red Cross blood services, and other open health care services), as well as the socio-cultural sector. These trainings are offered to people in a precarious position on the labour market, such as migrants. The migrant advisor of the FOREM (*conseiller migrant*) working in the type C locality, noted that this FEBI has helped many of their clients in getting a training that leads to a job in the care sector.

Another civil society actor in the type C locality (and the wider province) is engaged in **combatting exclusion from employment**, focusing mainly on people far from employment, namely disabled people, social assistance beneficiaries, young people without qualifications, newcomers, etc. The services offered by this civil society actor, such as one-to-one accompaniment in developing a career plan, are, however, not specifically designed to help migrants or newcomers, even if the director states that this is a very large part of the group that the service assists. The director of the civil society organisation notes that to help newcomers, as well as other beneficiaries, they work in close collaboration with an open university, operating in the city since 2017. This university is involved in offering (vocational) training to young people and adults with few qualifications or little schooling in the city and its surroundings. A large share of their training offer concerns **French language assistance** that non-Francophone migrants can attend. Through funding of the Ministry of Employment and Vocational training of the Walloon government and the European social fund, as well as FOREM, the university supports over one thousand people.

Noteworthy is, moreover, that the socio-professional assistance service of the regional integration centre participates in **validation of skills projects**. The locality participates in a large series of these projects in cooperation with different municipalities in- and outside of Belgium. The validation of skills projects is not a requirement for the integration trajectory of the Walloon government but have rather been implemented in the type C locality on the initiatives of civil society actors, with an eye on responding to the social needs that they observe. The validation of skills projects aims at valuing and recognising the skills of volunteers, with the idea that volunteering gives people the opportunity to acquire new skills, to meet people and develop. The intention of this project is also to make volunteering experiences count on migrants' CVs, and thus work as a steppingstone towards employment. In addition, a civil society actor in the type C locality has successfully lobbied to make the projects available to undocumented migrants, who are now admitted to the validation of skills programme¹¹⁹.

According to the civil society actor working at the regional integration centre responsible for

¹¹⁸ The Maribel Social Funds aim to create additional jobs, and improve the quality of services and employment conditions, see: <https://www.apefasbl.org/les-fonds-maribel-emploi>.

¹¹⁹ Quote from interview B-C-3



this project, the validation of skills projects can give an answer to the long and bureaucratic process of getting diploma's recognised:

"I believe that there is a will of Europe to move ahead as quickly as possible on the subject of labour market integration and mobilisation of the migrant public, but in French-speaking Belgium, we are not very reactive on the equivalence of diplomas. Unfortunately, it is still a paying system, and it is very bureaucratic. In Flanders, they are much more efficient than us on this point. But I think that the validation of skills as a project is something that can help us move out of this stagnation, it is a very useful toolbox"¹²⁰.

Yet, a street-level bureaucrat and migrants in the city often still complain about the inability to get their diploma or experiences recognised. During the focus group, it became clear that information about the validation of skills projects was not widely spread, or still had to reach this audience at least. A street-level bureaucrat noted during our interview that it is very important for the city to put in place mechanisms that get people to work and learn the language in the meantime¹²¹.

4.3.4 Locality 4 (Flanders, type D, small town)

There are several civil society actors working on employment in the type D locality, and this with a specific focus on migrants. This is not surprising, as the insertion of migrants into the labour market as well as the self-sufficiency of migrants is presented as a priority in the integration plan of the local government. **Improving work-related language skills** is then also a very important aspect of the integration policies of the type D locality. Indeed, the mayor of this medium-sized town notes that the language policy and guidance towards employment policies should be linked: "Language policy is one thing, but also everything that has to do with employment [is important]"¹²². Additionally, (Name of Town)@Work offers all sorts of trainings, which also increases chances of people to find employment. The local government has started to offer **language classes especially focused on work-related language**, to learn job-related vocabulary and specific dialect words used in the sector. The member of the local government responsible for integration states that:

"We [the local government], put extra effort into language lessons specifically for the job they are doing and some dialect or locality specific words that are very relevant to their job. Those are the new initiatives that we have developed over the past two years because we have noticed that what we want is for as many people as possible to feel

¹²⁰ Quote from interview B-C-3

¹²¹ Interview B-C-4

¹²² Quote from interview B-D-16

good in their job. In addition, we also want to develop initiatives to support employers (...) when they hire newcomers”¹²³.

Concerning the **guidance to employment policies** for migrants in the type D locality, the local government works with a civil society actor that is entirely funded and coordinated by the local government. The ‘Economic House’ provides trainings and assists people in finding and preparing for employment. This service functions in parallel to the service of the *VDAB*, the Flemish public employment agency that links jobseekers with employers. Yet, several actors, amongst which the member of the local government responsible for migrant integration, stated that **the *VDAB* service functions particularly inefficient in this locality and that the ‘Economic House’ therefore complements their work.** For programmes that assist newcomers in the formal aspect of job seeking the ‘Economic House’ has received funding from the European Social Fund. This enabled them to install several programmes specifically for migrants and refugees, amongst which a project that teaches them how to fill in forms and how to apply for jobs. **The local government thus created a complementary local service with help of European funds where regional services were not working efficiently.**

The projects initiated by the Economic House are mainly concerned with **improving the ‘employability’ of migrants.** One of these projects set up several years ago invests in helping migrants to get a driving license as, according to the manager of the Economic House, being in the possession of a driving license improves the employability of migrants enormously, considering that many bottleneck professions require one. The director notes that “more than 90% of the people who managed to obtain their driving license are currently employed”¹²⁴. Language is another important working point for this civil society actor: “And I think that’s the key to really helping those people. Because most of them are very motivated to get a job, so that’s an extra help for them”¹²⁵.

Furthermore, the Economic House has set up **initiatives to prepare employers for (ethnic) diversity** in the workplace and has organised events to connect people with a migrant background and employers, playing an intermediary role between them. The project coordinator of the Economic House elaborates on an event that they organise in collaboration with the local government on diversity on the work floor. This event is about diversity in the broad sense but is mostly focused on hiring people with a migrant background. The respondent explains:

“During the event, employees receive guidance on how to deal with diversity in your company: how to employ somebody with a disability, for example, what bonuses and

¹²³ Quote from interview B-D-5

¹²⁴ Quote from interview B-D-3

¹²⁵ Quote from interview B-D-3

*aid systems exist when you hire somebody with a migration background, and how to connect with social economy initiatives of the city*¹²⁶.

There are other civil society actors that work on other domains. One organisation works on organising cultural events and is, since the start of the new local legislature in 2019, more and more involved in providing ‘bridge figures’ between migrant communities and the receiving society. This organisation is also involved in setting up **buddy projects** between migrants and long-term residents in the type D locality. The head of this civil society organisation explains:

*“We are working hard on making sure that migrants have a network around them. We do that by facilitating buddy work and mentoring projects. There are a lot of people that come here and who have been looking for work for a very long time. We match these people with a mentor from the same sector they are looking for work in. For example, we matched an accountant with a lady who was an accountant in her country of origin and through her mentor's network she has now found a job. The network is important, but the biggest obstacles are discrimination and high language requirements”*¹²⁷.

4.4 Specific target groups (for whom)

The concrete requirements for accessing unemployment benefits and job placement programmes are decided at the federal level. The National office for employment (*Rijksdienst voor Arbeidsvoorziening/Office nationale de l'emploi*) provides the unemployment benefits and the specific requirements they determine are not easily circumvented at the local level. Regarding social benefits, however, the public centres for social welfare in the four studied localities have more leeway in organising the conditions of access and to set up additional projects and pathways that allow for access to these benefits, as we will explain below.

The *VDAB* in Flanders and *FOREM* in Wallonia are responsible for providing access to the labour market. Both institutions have specific services for (non-Dutch or non-French speaking) migrants. The *VDAB*, moreover, has specific services for increasing employability in bottleneck professions. It regularly publishes an overview of all jobs for which it is difficult to fill vacancies in Flanders. Each year the list contains several structural bottleneck professions, such as technical professions, nurses, cleaners, and others. Linked to this list are the bottleneck courses. The *VDAB* gives an overview per sector of the trainings you can follow via the *VDAB*. These are trainings recognised by the *VDAB* that lead to a bottleneck profession. A jobseeker who wants to follow an accredited course is entitled to benefits, such as the retention of unemployment benefits or an allowance for courses, mobility, or childcare.

¹²⁶ Interview B-D-3

¹²⁷ Quote from interview B-D-8



4.4.1 Locality 1 (Wallonia, type A, small town)

In the type A locality, (post-2014) **migrants are not explicitly mentioned or included in employment policies** and the provision of related services and resources. The service for newcomers of *FOREM* and the regional integration centre have, however, set in place specific services to aid migrants and refugees in getting access to the labour market. Yet, we should remember that these are regional actors. When we solely look at policies and initiatives installed at the local level, we see that migrants are not targeted by local policies.

4.4.2 Locality 2 (Flanders, type B, medium-sized town)

In the type B locality, there are **several policies that have been designed specifically for post-2014 migrants** and non-Dutch speaking migrants. The activation trajectory of the public centre for social welfare (*OCMW*), which was created in 2017, is an example of this. A lot of young and often **underaged refugees** have been arriving to the city since 2015. The local *OCMW* has set up the activation trajectory in response to this trend. Indeed, certain social service providers noticed that often very young refugees were not finding their way to the labour market or to other forms of training schemes, which led them to knock on the door of the local government to set in place this programme. Furthermore, **non-Dutch speakers are also targeted** by the local employment policies. The language aid of *VDAB* for employed migrants is an example of this. Moreover, the *VDAB* has also installed courses for highly educated migrants. In this programme, migrants learn the Dutch vocabulary they will need to do a job at their level and receive intensive guidance when applying for jobs. For these courses, the *VDAB* collaborates with the Centres for Adult Education (*CVOs*). In some cases, the courses are free, in other cases migrants must pay for these themselves.

4.4.3 Locality 3 (Wallonia, type C, medium-sized town)

In the type C locality, most of the services related to labour market integration which migrants and newcomers use are not designed specifically for this group of people. These services are rather focused on assisting people who have been excluded from the labour market more generally. The **validation of skills projects, coordinated by the regional integration centre, however, do have the specific objective of including migrants**, and particularly undocumented migrants, with the intention to integrate them into the labour market through volunteering work.

4.4.4 Locality 4 (Flanders, type D, small town)

In the type D locality, the **Economic House focuses particularly on migrants** and at times implements projects for sub-groups of migrants. This by applying to AMIF funding, and often in response to local realities. The manager of the Economic House states that in recent years they have set up **projects aimed at migrant women**, as they calculated that the greatest share of inactive people in this small city were migrant women. This actor organised several information days for migrant women to explain more about the labour market in the city, and



to get women with a migration background interested in working¹²⁸.

CASE	WholeCOMM typology	Major obstacle(s)	Actor(s) involved	Measure(s)	Target group(s)
Locality 1	Type A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Language gap - Difficulty in getting foreign diploma's recognised - Discrimination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - FOREM - Civil society actors - Regional integration centre - FGTB trade union (The Belgian General Federation of Labour) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Job coach at FOREM - Assistance in finding a job (help with administration, making a CV, connecting to employers, ...) - Diversity trainings for employers and employees - Trade and literacy projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - People excluded from/ outside of the labour market - Migrants - Employers
Locality 2	Type B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Language gap - Difficulty in getting a foreign diploma recognised - Discrimination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Civil society actors - VDAB - OCMW - Local government - CVO (Centre for Adult Education) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Job coaches & job hunters - Assistance in Dutch language acquisition on the work floor (VDAB) - Language training for highly educated migrants - Intensive activation trajectory for young refugees - Training in bottleneck professions - Professional buddy project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Migrants - Young and unaccompanied refugees - Highly educated migrants
Locality 3	Type C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Language gap - Difficulty of getting one's diploma recognised - Discrimination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Civil society actors - FOREM - Regional integration centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Job coach at FOREM - Assistance in finding a job - Training in bottleneck professions - Validation of skills projects - Language training - Personalised assistance in the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - People excluded from/outside of the labour market - Migrants - Undocumented migrants

¹²⁸ Interview B-D-3



				employment search (help with administration, making a CV, connecting to employers...)	
Locality 4	Type D	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Language gap- Discrimination- Lack of a social network	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Local government- Civil society actors- OCMW- VDAB	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Driving license training and other customised trainings and networking events for migrants- Organisation of employment events- Professional buddy project- Training in bottleneck professions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Migrants (Unemployed) youth- Inactive migrant women- People with disabilities and people having been excluded from the labour market for a longer period of time

Table 2: Case-by-case summary of results/findings regarding the area of employment

5. Access to other resources and services

5.1 Access to psychological assistance for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants

5.1.1 Main challenges/obstacles

The psychological wellbeing of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants was a subject that was mentioned in several interviews in all four localities. Civil society actors in Flemish localities expressed their concern about the Flemish integration decree of 2022 that is expecting more and more from refugees and migrants. With the addition of the fourth pillar to the integration decree, migrants following the integration trajectory will be, from the start of 2023, obliged to do volunteering work¹²⁹. Furthermore, there will be more financial hurdles, as the compulsory integration courses will no longer be free. In addition, the Dutch language requirement will be elevated and tested with a final exam. If people do not pass the courses, then they will have to pay for them once again. **The Flemish government is also putting more and more pressure on refugees to become economically independent** as fast as possible. Several social service providers and civil society actors in both the type B and type D localities noted that all of this puts a lot of pressure on refugees, especially if they are struggling with psychological problems and trauma's, which might hamper their compliance with all these requirements installed by the Flemish government.

5.1.2 Policies, initiatives, and practices that foster/hinder access (what)

To handle the psychological issues that migrants are faced with, the CAW has set up a project, called Mind-Spring: a **psycho-educational programme for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants** with the aim of increasing psychological resilience. The Mind-Spring programme consists of an information session, six two-hour sessions and possibly a follow-up session, given in the group's own language. The series is guided by a trainer and a social worker. Both have followed the Mind-Spring training as trainer or co-counsellor. An interpreter translates between group, trainer, and co-counsellors. This type of assistance is found in both the type A and type D localities.

Furthermore, the **type B locality has put in place additional psychological assistance for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees**. More specifically, a civil society actor, specialised in psychological help, and a research lab of the university are working together with this city to provide tailored psychological help for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. This network organises meetings, tailor-made trainings, supervision, and culturally sensitive care to OCMW clients with a migration history and/or an ethnically diverse background. The university institute also offers trauma care for asylum seekers, refugees, and their families. Moreover, the city has also set up a project that offers psychosocial counselling or assistance for refugee

¹²⁹ Information retrieved from interview:



children in the classroom at schools. This is done together with psychologists, with the Centre for Student Accompaniment (*Centrum voor Leerlingenbegeleiding: CLB*) and with care teachers aiming to create a network around these children and their parents in the classroom. The local member of government explains:

“We have a psychological or mental support that we give to children who are in school with a traumatic past. We have a very integrated elaboration for that together with the university and education network. We are looking for ways to support the families through the children at school, of whom we might perceive that there are certain traumas that come up. Also, complex family situations may arrive within the family. Imagine a child arrives here at the age of three or four and learns the language very quickly and can in that way connect with his classmates at school, which sometimes creates some distance from mum and dad at home who don’t learn the language as easily, who must look for work, who are frustrated by unprocessed trauma. In these types of situations, the bridge figure will work together with the school to provide the right support for this family so they can reach their full potential”¹³⁰.

In the type D locality, on the other hand, we did not identify psychological assistance services working specifically with migrants or refugees. The city does provide psychological assistance according to age group, but no “intercultural” or theme-specific assistance related to one’s refugee status.

In the Walloon localities, there are equally various social services involved in providing psychological support for refugees. **A civil service provider in the type A locality has since 2014 installed a psychological support service.** More precisely, the civil society actor employs three part-time psychologists who work with migrants and refugees in distress because of their exile status and/or because of traumatic experiences they have suffered. Often the clients are referred to this psychological service by other services, such as reception centres in which they reside, but at times they also call for help spontaneously¹³¹. **In the type C locality, there is also a civil service provider funded by the Walloon government** that provides psychological assistance to refugees, having suffered traumatic experiences related to exile or migration experiences.

5.1.3 Specific target groups (for whom)

The specific target group identified by the local government of the type B locality are thus refugees, asylum seekers and migrants with a traumatic past. The local government has invested in the accessibility of their psychological assistance services by reaching people through schools. There are programmes designed for both children with a traumatic past and for their parents. In the type A locality, the target group identified by civil society actors working on psychological assistance for refugees and migrants is people suffering from

¹³⁰ Quote from interview B-B-10

¹³¹ Interview B-A-9

traumas or their current exile status.

5.2 Equal access to compulsory education

5.2.1 Main challenges/obstacles

Next to psychological assistance, **increasing multiculturalism and multilingualism in compulsory education was an issue that was raised in both Flemish localities**. This is especially the case in the type D locality, which has a high percentage of high school dropouts and in which ethnic diversity has steeply risen in the past 10 years. These developments were perceived by various actors to be affecting education in the city. The salience of this topic is not very surprising. Belgium has a disproportionately high number of students that repeat years in secondary education, this whilst society invests about €9,335 per child annually. Still, nearly one young person in ten leaves secondary education without a diploma¹³². In Brussels, for children of non-EU origin living in poverty this number even rises to almost one in two¹³³.

In the type D locality, the **difficulty of involving young migrants and non-accompanied minors in the educational system** was also mentioned by various city workers and civil society actors. The member of local government responsible for integration noted that there was a very diverse public arriving to the city in the aftermath of 2015. In some cases, people would be arriving who had never gone to school, others were, on the contrary, very highly educated¹³⁴. In the type B locality, the member of local government elaborates on the fact that a lot of very young, at times underaged, refugees arrived, who had suffered severe traumas. At times, these people would end up with one leg in petty crime circles, also because they would want to be sending money home as fast as possible. The local government has set up a specific program to accommodate these arrivals and address this issue, as we will discuss here below.

5.2.2 Policies, initiatives, and practices that foster/hinder access (what)

To assist schools in dealing with ethnic and linguistic diversity, the **type D locality** has set up various projects. The **“bridge figure” project**, founded by the local government, is an important example. This figure is a neutral figure, meaning that they are not affiliated with any school in particular, but is rather employed by the local government, who works in primary and or secondary schools in the most vulnerable neighbourhoods in the city, and with the

¹³² Unfortunately, early school leavers often become NEET: young people between 15 and 29 'Not in Education, Employment or Training'. According to some estimates, such NEETs cost society about EUR 1 million per head in a lifetime. Means of preventing school dropouts, repeats and NEETs are scarce. More often, the government prefers visible measures such as counselling, if the damage has already been done.

¹³³ Source: <https://www.tijd.be/opinie/algemeen/we-doen-veel-te-weinig-om-onderwijsongelijkheid-te-voorkomen/10390923.html>, consulted on 3/6/2022.

¹³⁴ Interview B-D-5



most vulnerable families in schools. She/he tries to narrow the gap between parents, schools, and relevant social partners. Bridge figures respond to the daily questions or concerns of families. Helping a parent apply for educational cheques, following up on questions from the care team, making time to listen to parents, organising an information moment, helping to monitor the time spent at school, etc. are just a few examples of what a bridging figure does. A bridge figure in the type D locality explained her tasks in the following way: “We build that bridge with the school, but also with all the services, like homework support services or walk-in teams, the children's houses, and leisure time organisations. With the increasing ethnic and linguistic diversity, new challenges have arisen for both families and schools”¹³⁵. The bridge figure then noted that a lot of what she and her colleagues do on the ground is to prepare schools for multilingualism and multiculturalism. She explains that:

“In many schools, the mentality persists that they are in a middle-class, white public school, but this reality has changed drastically in the past 10 years. This change in the public attending schools requires a drastic mentality change of those schools and school teams. They need a vision of how to deal with these new realities, with diversity within the school. Bridge figures play an important role in conceiving new ways of tackling these realities. As bridge figures we thus often collaborate with school teams in conceiving strategies on how to deal with multilingualism and diversity within the school, in making this diversity a strength of the school”¹³⁶.

In addition, the local government in the **type D locality** is involved in **combatting racism and discrimination and fostering inclusion in schools** (as well as in other domains, such as housing and in the cultural sector). The local government has, in collaboration with civil society actors, set up an education network, made up of various actors involved in education in the city. This network is also involved in mapping the difficulties regarding racism and discrimination in schools, and in finding ways of responding to these in an innovative way. The coordinator of the anti-racism project of the city tells that one thing that this network found was that in the first years,

*“When it came to fighting racism, the focus was always on schools and teachers, and that there was too little focus on students themselves. In response to these results, the city has set up a **project on education ambassadors** (who can be various actors in the educational system), which are given the liberty to propose new initiatives to combat racism and discrimination in school. The city supports them. The idea of providing a wide range of skin colour pencils amongst children in schools was one of these initiatives. We also have study days on various themes such as dealing with racism and with discriminatory statements in the classrooms, for example”¹³⁷.*

¹³⁵ Quote from interview B-D-9

¹³⁶ Quote from interview B-D-9

¹³⁷ Quote from interview B-A-4



Furthermore, as was also mentioned in the previous section on the access to the labour market, to **combat unqualified school dropout of young migrants and unaccompanied minors**, the city has since 2017 set up a one-year long intensive trajectory to accompany young migrants after their arrival to the city. In this school year, young migrants get intensive Dutch classes, mathematics, and IT classes, as well as personalised assistance to determine a professional path ahead. Furthermore, during this intensive year, the participants also receive personalised orientation and are introduced to the various civil society actors in the city, and volunteering organisations.

Furthermore, in the **type B locality**, one civil society actor also works with **educational ambassadors**. These educational ambassadors provide information about the educational system in the city and in the Flemish context for migrant families and children. Mostly they do this in the mother tongue of the people being informed. The information sessions cover the nature of compulsory education and the school structure (the system of nursery, primary, secondary, and higher education). Moreover, the educational ambassadors also inform parents about which services and agencies exist to assist children at school and can provide study or parenting support at home. They respond to the needs of the family and the signals that they pick up from organisations. This educational ambassador service receives funding from the local government¹³⁸.

In the **type C locality**, the Centre for Secular Action (*Le Centre pour Action Laïque*) provides free pedagogical services that assist schools in preparing and implementing projects in schools regarding multiculturalism. This can be a presentation of tools (philosophy for children, edutainment, etc.), an intervention that allows a group to reflect together on a specific theme (racism, violence, citizenship, multiculturalism, etc.), or a meeting or support for the development of a school project (implementation of non-violent communication as a cross-curricular practice in a school, for example).

¹³⁸ Interview B-D-2

5.3 Access to socio-legal information for migrants and refugees

5.3.1 Main challenges/obstacles

One of the issues that we encountered throughout our interviews is the lack of proper access to information about socio-legal services for refugees and migrants. This obstacle was mentioned by migrants during the two focus groups in Wallonia and by social service providers in both Walloon localities. More precisely, **in both the type A and type C localities, migrants communicated that the information provided about the integration trajectory and services, such as language courses, as well as their legal procedure and the expectations from the regional and national government were not very clear.** One man in the focus group in the type A locality noted that he and his family continued to live in this town because he thought that they had to stay close the reception centre to which he and his family had been allocated. During the focus group in the type C locality, the lack of information about services, such as French language classes, and even the obligatory integration trajectory was a very big issue for several respondents. Many migrants mentioned that they did not find the way to different types of courses or services in the city. If they had, it was often considered to be a case of “luck”. In most cases, migrants had found out because of word to mouth information. The lack of available courses was also commented upon by participants in the focus group. Furthermore, in the type A locality, civil society actors noted that there had been several complaints about personnel of the municipality that failed to provide information about the existence and the obligatory character of the integration trajectory.

In the two Flemish localities, the issue of a lack of access to information was mentioned far less by civil service providers and social workers. Yet, we should consider that the perspective of migrants themselves are not yet included in this report, as the interviews and focus groups with migrants have not been conducted yet in the Flemish localities. In the type D locality, there was one employee of the local government who noted that newcomers, and especially people who are isolated, generally have a lot of doubts regarding their rights, duties, and the legislation in Belgium, and particularly in the city¹³⁹.

5.3.2 Policies, initiatives, and practices that foster/hinder access (what)

In both the type A and type C localities, actors have set up services to provide legal aid and administrative assistance to migrants and refugees. This in response to the administrative difficulties that migrants often face. In the type C locality, the local centre for social welfare (CPAS) has set up a service working on the reception of migrants. This service has about 20 assistants and provides legal information to irregular migrants and assists them during their asylum application process, amongst other administrative procedures. In the type A locality,

¹³⁹ Interview B-D-6



there is a civil society service that works particularly on providing socio-legal aid to migrants. The director of this civil society service explains that migrants approach the service with different types of requests, be it legal aid for family reunification, for international protection, or with questions regarding obtaining nationality. The service also receives a lot of queries from undocumented migrants, and the civil society organisation assists them to find possible ways for regularisation. It also provides information about the services that they can appeal to, such as urgent medical aid. Furthermore, the service helps asylum seekers to prepare for their interview with the General Commissariat for Refugees and Stateless Persons. The director explains that the civil society service travels to reception centres and local integration initiatives present in the region to get into contact with potential beneficiaries¹⁴⁰.

In the two Flemish localities, there are also services that are involved in providing socio-legal information and support. In the type B locality, the opening of the one-stop-shop was a response to the difficulty that migrants face regarding their administrative procedures and the multitude of services they have to visit. In the one-stop-shop all services that work on migrant integration also assist migrants in legal aid and can respond to all types of questions in a coordinated way. In addition, the Centres for Common Welbeing (*Centrum voor Algemeen Welzijn: CAW*) has various social assistants working on providing legal assistance to migrants and refugees on family reunification procedures. Furthermore, the CAWs also provide information about possibilities on voluntary return to one's country of origin. The director of the CAW in the type D locality explains in what situations migrants seek help from their services:

“With the start of the Afghan crisis of mid-August 2021, for example, we were overwhelmed by all kinds of requests for help. Especially Afghans who were already living here in [name of the city] but then became very concerned about their families and were crying out for help to bring them here. There were a lot of requests for help with family reunification at that moment. It was really all hands-on deck at this point in time. And in many cases, it was very frustrating for social assistance providers because family reunification is a very complex procedure within which they are often powerless. In some situations, it is very hard or even impossible to attain”¹⁴¹.

The director explains that the care takers working on legal aid at the CAW need to be very well informed about the legislation around nationality, migration, and family reunification, as the advice given can severely impact the legal procedure. They also need to stay up to date because it is constantly changing. The director mentions that two years ago they recruited a social worker to make connections with the target group. This social worker is somebody who can speak Arabic and perfect Dutch. They can then form a bridge between the target group and social workers. This person can interpret and translate the requests for legal help and

¹⁴⁰ Interview B-D-10

¹⁴¹ Quote from interview B-D-10

other requests or questions¹⁴².

The director of the CAW mentions that their services and social service providers are involved in checking the best possible solutions for their clients. The actor mentions that recently also a new dimension has been added to their work with the insistence on the voluntary return option by the government. The possibility of (re)opening a return office at the local level is being discussed. The director mentions that the social workers at the CAW will look at the whole pallet of possibilities for people, by taking into account the needs of the clients and their own point of view. He mentions that the CAW will thus only focus on the possibility of a voluntary return if that is what the client desires. The director does mention that in some cases a voluntary return is possible, and even the best solution if people cannot get papers and have been in misery for years. In some cases, voluntary return will thus also be presented as a possibility to clients, but this, the director mentions, only if the country of origin is relatively safe¹⁴³.

Furthermore, the **type D locality has appointed a city employee who can provide information sessions in Arabic** or in “slow Dutch” to newcomers¹⁴⁴. This actor explains that these information sessions are about migrants’ rights and obligations in Belgian society. The information sessions will, for example, inform migrants about which conditions must be met in order to receive a living wage of the public centre for social welfare (*OCMW*). Furthermore, during these information sessions, this city employee provides information about the rights and duties of migrants and the integration trajectory. The actor explains that a large part of the information sessions tackles practical questions: which energy suppliers are available, how to save energy, what to look out for when looking for a house on the rental market, which supermarket is the cheapest one, and how do you do online payments and sort bills. In fact, the actor notes that these information sessions can be about anything that the participants wish to know more about¹⁴⁵.

5.3.3 Actors involved (who)

The actors involved in providing information to migrants in Wallonia are mostly civil society actors. Especially in the type A locality, civil society actors respond to the lack of involvement of the local government in providing (adequate) information about the services and initiatives that are present in the town to accommodate newcomers. In the Flemish localities, it is also mostly civil society actors who are involved in providing a response to questions that migrants may have. In the type D locality, the local government is involved in setting up information

¹⁴² Interview B-D-10

¹⁴³ Interview B-D-10

¹⁴⁴ Interview B-D-6

¹⁴⁵ Interview B-D-6

sessions for newcomers, which are specifically focused on providing information about the rights and duties of newcomers in the city.

5.3.4 Specific target groups (for whom)

The specific target groups for the socio-legal information services provided are migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who have questions regarding nationality, family reunification, regularisation, and other topics. Some services, like the information sessions of the public service for social welfare in the type C locality, are also targeted at irregular migrants. This extensive engagement with irregular migrants has not been observed in the three other localities studied.

Tables 3-X: Case-by-case summaries of results/findings regarding other resources and services (one for each selected topic)

CASE	WholeCOMM typology	Major obstacle(s)	Actor(s) involved	Measure(s)	Target group(s)
Locality 1	Type A	- Trauma's & psychological suffering amongst refugees	- Civil society actors	- Psychological assistance (three part-time psychologists working to assist migrants and refugees)	- Refugees - Migrants
Locality 2	Type B	- Trauma's & psychological suffering amongst refugees	- The local government - The university & the educational network - CVO (Centre for adult education: <i>Centrum voor volwassenenonderwijs</i>) - OCMW	- Psychological support for children in schools - Bridge figure, providing extra (extra-curricular) assistance and guidance for children	- Refugees, asylum seekers and migrants - Migrant children and their parents - Migrants having suffered traumas
Locality 3	Type C	- Trauma's & psychological suffering amongst refugees	- Civil society actors	- Psychological assistance to refugees	- Refugees
Locality 4	Type D	- More general psychological issues, not the ones related to exile experiences	- The local government	- Psychological assistance according to age group	- Young people - Elderly people

Topic 1: Access to psychological assistance for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants



CASE	WholeCOMM typology	Major obstacle(s)	Actor(s) involved	Measure(s)	Target group(s)
Locality 1		- None identified by the actors interviewed. This does not mean that they are not present.			
Locality 2		- School dropout of young migrants, refugees and unaccompanied minors - Discrimination in schools	- Local government - Civil society actors - The Public Centre for Social Welfare (OCMW)	- Anti-discrimination and anti-racism initiatives in schools - Activation trajectory	- Young migrants & refugees - Unaccompanied migrants
Locality 3	Type C	- None identified by the actors interviewed. This does not mean that they are not present.	- Centre for secular action (<i>Le Centre pour Action Laïque</i>)	- Sessions to discuss issues such as racism, citizenship, multiculturalism in schools	- Children from different backgrounds
Locality 4	Type D	- Increasing multiculturalism and multilingualism in schools - High school dropout in high schools	- The local government - Civil society actors	- "Bridge figures" - Educational ambassadors	- Vulnerable children

Topic 2: Access to compulsory education

CASE	WholeCOMM typology	Major obstacle(s)	Actor(s) involved	Measure(s)	Target group(s)
Locality 1	Type A	- Lack of information regarding the integration trajectory	- Civil society actors	- Providing legal information and paths possible to obtain citizenship	- Migrants - Refugees



		provided by the municipality			
Locality 2	Type B	- None identified by the actors interviewed. This does not mean that they are not present	- CAW (Centre for Common Welbeing: Centrum voor Algemeen Welzijn) - The local government - Civil society actors - The one-stop shop	- Providing legal information on family reunification - Providing information on migrant's rights and obligations - Bringing together all services in one place as to facilitate the access to information	- Young migrants & refugees - Unaccompanied migrants
Locality 3	Type C	- Lack of information regarding services and courses for migrants and refugees	- Centre for secular action (<i>Le Centre pour Action Laïque</i>)	- Sessions to discuss issues as racism, citizenship, multiculturalism in schools	- Children from different backgrounds
Locality 4	Type D		- CAW (Centre for Common Welbeing: Centrum voor Algemeen Welzijn)	- Providing legal information on family reunification - Translator of help requests	- Migrants - Refugees

Topic 3: Access to socio-legal services for migrants and refugees



6. Conclusion

In this report, we have discussed the extent to which local communities have implemented policies to address obstacles that migrants might face in acquiring access to housing, employment and other resources and services, namely 1) psychological assistance, 2) compulsory education, and 3) socio-legal information. Overall, we find that the extent to which the federal and regional governments have taken on responsibilities or have left gaps for local communities to fill in, impacts the involvement of local governments in these matters.

Regarding the access of post-2014 migrants to housing, we have discussed the lack of policies and clear responsibilities for long-term accommodation for refugees. In Belgium, there is hardly any relationship between the strictly defined policy domains of asylum and reception, organised at the federal level, and integration and housing, implemented at the regional level (Wychaert, 2017). As a result, neither the federal government nor the regional governments are responsible for facilitating the transition to long-term housing for recognised refugees (Wychaert et al. 2020: 81). Together with a lack of social housing in Belgium, this means that in practice the local level is responsible for access to long-term housing of refugees, without local governments being properly funded for taking up this role. We find that both local governments as well as informal players such as civil society organisations at times develop actions at the local level to make up for the lack of policy and funding regarding long-term housing for refugees (Mayblin and Poppy, 2019; Schrooten et al., 2019).

The housing crisis for refugees as well as other types of post-2014 migrants is clearly discernible at the local level in the four towns studied. Yet, the extent to which obstacles in finding housing have been “softened” by the local community depends on various factors. The access to the housing market is firstly determined by general conditions, such as **the housing stock, the neighbourhood composition, institutional arrangements, and policies implemented at the local level** (Deckers et al, 2011), as well as **influenced by the overall economic situation of the town** in question. Secondly, the extent to which the local level (the local government, civil society actors and volunteer organisations) chooses to engage in countering additional obstacles for post-2014 migrants in gaining access to housing, such as discrimination and the lack of social networks, proves to be of importance. Indeed, we note that these factors have led to **strong differences regarding the access to housing in the four localities**.

In the type A and the type B localities, which have low unemployment rates and a good economy, the very high housing prices were mentioned as the main obstacle that migrants and refugees, as well as long-term residents in a precarious position, were confronted with. In the type C and D localities, with high unemployment rates, a **shrinking economy**, and an old housing stock related to industrialisation, the bad and unhygienic conditions of the housing patrimony formed the major obstacle for migrants to find adequate housing. Furthermore, in all four localities, the issue of abuses on the housing market of migrants and refugees, who are often in a precarious position, was mentioned as an obstacle. Lastly, the **lack of social housing and staggering waiting lists for social housing, as well as the lack of adequate housing for larger families were mentioned in all four localities** as recurrent



difficulties that migrant families and newcomers are confronted with.

In the type B, C, and D localities, the local governments have, to different extents, engaged in tackling abuses on the housing market and are investing in renovating the older segment of their housing patrimony. In the type B locality, the local government has since 2015 invested in the renovation of the patrimony, which has led to very rapidly increasing housing prices. Yet, this city has also engaged in setting up additional housing subsidies, in response to the staggering waiting list for social housing. Whilst one can ask for the Flemish housing subsidy from the fourth year on the waiting list for social housing, one can receive a similar housing subsidy from the local government in the type B locality from the second year on the waiting list for social housing. It is however not possible to receive both housing subsidies at once. In the type C and D localities, the local governments also engage in the renovation and renewal of its housing patrimony. These renovation and renewal processes are not yet affecting the housing prices in the same way as it does in the type B locality but are equally on the rise. In the type D locality, the local government has invested largely in checks for overpopulation, the illegal repartitioning of homes, and dilapidation. According to the mayor, these checks have the objective to tackle unsafe and unhygienic housing conditions in the city. Whilst the local government of the type D locality has set up transition houses for people that are evicted from their houses after they have been declared uninhabitable, some civil society actors noted that in fact these transition houses are nearly always full, which means that in many cases people are left without help and are at times forced to leave the city¹⁴⁶.

The intense renovation and renewal projects set up by the local government of the type B locality since 2015 were, according to the head of the housing department of the city (*Dienst Wonen*), mainly intended to tackle abuses of landlords and unsafe living conditions of which migrants, refugees and long-term residents with a low income were often victim. Yet, many actors noted that these renovation projects have driven housing prices up and have gentrified several neighbourhoods of the city. People with a low income have, consequently, been forced to leave the city and move to surrounding towns. In the type B locality, the fight against dilapidation and abuses on the housing market has thus had the undesirable effect of pushing people with low incomes, often migrants and refugees, out of the city. A similar development might now be taking place in the type D locality, although the housing prices are for the moment not as high as in the type B locality and gentrification seems to be less of a problem in the city. Yet, since 2019, the new government in the type D locality has invested in new housing projects, and the patrimony prices are rising in the city. In both the type B and D localities, many actors told us that by tackling these issues, people with low incomes were in fact pushed out of the city. Civil society actors then noted that even though pushing migrants and people with low incomes out of the city (centre) may not be an intended consequence of the renovation projects, it was also not a development that they tried to prevent from happening¹⁴⁷.

¹⁴⁶ Interview B-D-10

¹⁴⁷ Interview B-4-13

Concerning the **obstacles in the access to the labour market** for (post-2014) migrants, we see that there are **even more similarities between the four localities**. Language gaps, difficulties in getting one's foreign diploma recognised and discrimination (by employers and/or fellow employees) were mentioned in all four localities as the main obstacles hampering (post-2014) migrant's access and long-term integration into the labour market. Moreover, **the actors involved** in tackling these obstacles **are also very similar in both Walloon towns and in both Flemish towns**, with some important differences in the programmes installed.

In the Walloon localities, migrants can resort to civil society actors working on the (re)insertion of people excluded from the labour market more generally. Moreover, some civil society actors working on labour market integration argued it to be important for them not to set up separate services for newcomers, as they believed that this would reinforce discrimination practices on the labour market¹⁴⁸. The 4-hour socio-professional integration track¹⁴⁹, provided by the regional integration centres as part of the Walloon integration trajectory, and the *migrant cell*, part of the *FOREM*, do provide customised assistance for migrants to integrate into the labour market. The **regional integration centres in the type A and type C localities did also set up services to assist employers in creating inclusive work environments by tackling discrimination and racism on the work floor**. Whereas the Walloon government has set up specific services for migrants since 2016, such as the 4-hour ISP track as part of the integration trajectory, this assistance was considered **insufficient** by civil society actors and social service providers¹⁵⁰ as well as by the migrants that participated in the focus groups in the type A and type C localities.

In the Flemish localities, the local governments and civil society organisations do provide customised support for refugees and migrants to overcome obstacles to employment. In the type B locality, for example, the public service for social welfare set up an integrated trajectory, which is a one-year intensive course for young migrants to acquire the first tools to choose a path towards the labour market. In the type D locality, the Economic House works in collaboration with the local government to provide courses and assistance to migrants oriented towards labour market integration. The local government of the type D locality and civil society actors also organise events on diversity on the work floor for employers and candidate employees alike. When analysing the approach of local governments and local civil society service providers to facilitate the access to the labour market for migrants across the

¹⁴⁸ Interviews B-A-3 & B-C-2

¹⁴⁹ This module should enable the beneficiary to better identify his or her skills and needs, to be informed about his or her rights and duties as a Belgian resident, and to be informed about the public and private services to which he or she is entitled, depending on his or her needs. The CRI then directs newcomers to the citizenship module and, depending on the social assessment that has been drawn up, to the French language and socio-professional orientation modules (Gossiaux et al. 2019: 38).

¹⁵⁰ Interview B-C-1 & B-C-4

localities, we note that **the colour-blind versus colour-conscious dichotomy between Wallonia and Flanders remains largely confirmed** (Westerveen & Adam, 2019).

Furthermore, we have identified several additional measures, resources, and services beyond the fields of housing and employment that came out as relevant in the interview material. Psychological assistance, educational assistance in response to increasing multiculturalism and multilingualism in schools as well as a high percentage of high school dropouts in secondary education amongst migrant and refugee children, and socio-legal information programmes, were the most prevalent additional services that came up in interviews in all or some of the four localities.

Factors such as political colour, size, structural socioeconomic factors, and previous experience with diversity experience play a role in the different ways in which the four localities have responded to obstacles that migrants face in obtaining access to housing, the labour market, and other services. In the type B locality, the combination between a leftist local government and the affluent socioeconomic conditions, as well as the diversity experience (albeit it temporary through the presence of a university that attracts foreign students) explains the welcoming character of the locality. Indeed, the city has taken a plethora of initiatives and installed projects to aid migrants in overcoming obstacles in the access to work and housing, many of them as a response to the increased arrivals of refugees after 2015. Intensive trainings to lead (young) migrants to the labour market, and anti-discrimination measures on the housing market are a few examples of these wide-ranging policies that the local government adopted. In the type D locality, the more right-wing coalition (composed of the liberal party Open VLD, the N-VA, and the greens) in government since 2019, poor socio-economic conditions, and little experience with diversity can in part explain the policies adopted (or the lack thereof) regarding migrants' access to housing and the labour market. This locality has been marked by a steep arrival of refugees and other migrants in the last 10 years, which has led to rising polarisation in the town, and might explain the somewhat hesitant approach of the local government to take structural measures promoting migrants' access to the housing market. The local government has not responded to the appeal of civil society actors to respond to discrimination that migrants are facing in their encounters with real estate agents and private landlords. Due to the high unemployment rate, and the high number of vacancies after the COVID crisis, however, the city has set in place numerous initiatives to facilitate migrants' access to the labour market, this often in cooperation with civil society actors. There is, moreover, a large insistence on the self-sufficiency of migrants in the type D locality, which moreover explains their focus on labour market integration.

For the Walloon type A locality, we note that the size of the town plays an important role in the policy development regarding migrant access to employment and housing. Considering that there are no structural conditions set in place to restrict refugees' movement after they have received a status in Belgium, people often choose to move to larger cities, often in Flanders, because there are more employment opportunities. The fact that little refugees continue to live in the city means that the local government has not set up specific policies to respond to the obstacles that migrants may face in their access to the housing and labour markets. Finally, in the type C locality, the mixture of the political colour, the socioeconomic



conditions and the history of diversity partly explain the way in which the local government has engaged in implementing projects for migrants. This post-industrial city has been governed by a leftist government for decades and is, due to the settlements of migrants in the locality to carry out heavy work in the coal and metal industries, very accustomed to diversity. Furthermore, this city is characterized by a very high unemployment rate in the Belgian context and is socioeconomically disadvantaged. The mixture of these variables partly explains the largely *laissez-faire* approach towards migrant integration by the local government of the type C locality, which focuses mainly on the provision of equal opportunities and equal access to services by all inhabitants of the city. The local government does not wish to install projects for labour market integration or housing that focus specifically on migrants, as they do not want a differentiated approach for different groups in society. Instead, all inhabitants should have equal access to social services such as the public centre for social welfare (the CPAS). Differentiated programmes would according to members of the local government install and reinforce differences between people in society¹⁵¹.

Still, the most important factor to understand the differences and commonalities between the approaches of the four Belgian localities studied is the **regional context and the availability of funding for local governments**. Both these factors play an important role in the extent to which local governments have engaged in setting up local integration initiatives. As we have explained in detail in the Work Package 3 report, the competency for migrant integration has been regionalized in Belgium. Since the 1980s, distinct approaches to migrant integration governance can therefore be found at the regional level. Especially the diverging role that the regional governments have granted to the local governments is important in understanding the current differences in approaches to migrant integration between the studied localities. Whilst in Flanders, local governments have been given the “coordination role” on migrant integration, which was in 2016¹⁵² accompanied by integration subsidies, in Wallonia local governments have nearly no responsibilities in migrant integration, and do not receive funding from the regional government. Municipalities are only expected to give information regarding the integration trajectory offered by the regional integration centres, funded by the Walloon government. Rather than the local governments, the regional integration centres, funded by the Walloon government, and civil society actors may apply for regional funding to set in place local migrant integration initiatives. The funding that municipalities do receive from the Walloon government, such as the funding of the *Plan de Cohésion Sociale*, focuses on societal integration, which once more explains the fact that Walloon localities have set up little services specifically targeted at migrants. Because of this lack of responsibilities of the local governments regarding migrant integration in Wallonia, local governments have remained largely uninvolved in immigrant integration. By contrast, in Flanders, local governments have

¹⁵¹ Interviews B-C-8 & B-C-9

¹⁵² In the aftermath of 2015, with the increased arrival of refugees and migrants to mid-sized and smaller municipalities, the Flemish government allocated funds to municipalities and cities accommodating more than 1000 refugees to set up migrant integration initiatives. These subsidies have been faded out, but local governments of the type B and type D localities have in most cases continued the projects that were initiated with this funding.



been incentivised in several ways to take on responsibilities regarding migrant integration. They receive both project funding and thematic funding to set up initiatives related to migrant integration and have been granted the coordination role on migrant integration in 2012. We can therefore conclude that the main difference regarding policies is related to the regional context. Furthermore, the political orientation of local governments in power seems to be of prime importance in explaining diverging approaches towards migrant integration in the localities.

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