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Mapping the Asylum Reception System: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Belgian Case (2012-2022)

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Mapping the Asylum Reception System: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Belgian Case (2012-2022)

Natacha Zimmer¹, October 2023

Abstract: This working paper draws a picture of the Belgian reception system for asylum seekers. This complex system has undergone many changes and plays a decisive role in the lives of those seeking international protection in Belgium. This document provides an almost exhaustive inventory of the reception centres between 2012 and 2022, based on official reports from the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil) and its partners. The study also sheds light on how the system works, the different types of dwellings, the organisations involved and the conditions of access to reception and accommodation.

Résumé : Ce document de travail brosse le portrait du système d'accueil belge pour les demandeurs d'asile. Ce système complexe a connu de nombreuses évolutions et joue un rôle déterminant dans la vie des demandeurs d'une protection internationale. Ce document comprend un inventaire des centres d'accueil existants entre 2012 et 2022, créé sur base des rapports officiels de l'Agence fédérale pour l'accueil des demandeurs d'asile (Fedasil) et de ses partenaires. L'étude apporte également un éclairage sur le fonctionnement du système, les différents types de logements, les organisations impliquées dans l'accueil et les conditions d'accès à l'accueil et l'hébergement.

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When facing inflows of asylum seekers, authorities of destination countries adopt various asylum policies to deal with the reception and integration of forced migrants into their society. For example, dispersal policies are commonly used to regulate the settlement of refugees in host countries. These policies aim to equally share the economic and social “burden” of the reception of forced migrants across the territory of a country. For example, in Germany, asylum seekers are allocated accommodation in a reception centre (Kordel & Weidinger, 2019). In Sweden, a dispersal policy was in place in the 1990s, and asylum applicants were also assigned a municipality of residence for the first 18 months after arrival (Vogiazides & Mondani, 2020). A similar regulation has existed in the UK since the early 2000s, and its outcomes have interested several researchers (Kordel & Weidinger, 2019; Stewart & Shaffer, 2015). The initial aim was to spread the reception load across the country and to ensure cultural diversity. However, study results deplore the negative impact of these measures: their motivation stems more from the availability of housing rather than genuine enhancements in integration processes (Stewart, 2009, 2012). The consequences are a (temporary) restriction on freedom of movement (Kordel & Weidinger, 2019) and social exclusion, as migrants, are thus distanced from co-ethnic communities or pre-existing networks (Stewart, 2009, 2012). Even though the aims and consequences of these policies are often similar in each country, the rules and mechanisms behind the policies are diverse and complex.

Indeed, in a comparative analysis of 18 OECD countries, Proietti and Veneri (2019) describe the heterogeneity in the reception strategies. While some countries adopt rigorous dispersal policies (as mentioned above), others do not establish a regulation of the settlement of asylum-seeking migrants. Belgium’s strategy falls in the middle of this spectrum: while there is no stringent dispersal policy, the reception of asylum seekers is regulated by the law, which indirectly leads to the spatial dispersal of asylum applicants upon their arrival (El Moussawi & Schuermans, 2020; Wyckaert et al., 2020). Supporting research on asylum seekers’ settlement, the aim of this working paper is to bring a comprehensive description of the Belgian reception system and its specificities. Using reports made by official institutions and other organisations working in the reception and integration of asylum seekers, we build an inventory of former and existing reception facilities across the country. We propose precisely describing and analysing its mechanisms and evolution over the last decade (2012-2022).

a. Rules and regulations of the reception

Reception for asylum seekers in Belgium is regulated by the 2007 law on the reception of asylum seekers and other categories of aliens². Among other things, this law grants material assistance³ to all applicants for international protection. This assistance covers accommodation but also medical and social support. Upon arrival, asylum seekers may decide whether they want to benefit from this assistance. For those who choose to do so, the Court of Auditors reported that the average length of stay in the reception network was 13.2 months in 2017 (Cour des comptes, 2017). By 2021, this had risen to an average of 14.9 months (AIDA, 2022).

When submitting their application for international protection at the Aliens Office, a reception request is also submitted to the dispatching of Fedasil, the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers. Fedasil manages the reception system and ensures the coordination of the partners owning reception accommodations across the country (see Annex I). The Agency will assign a compulsory place of registration (the “207-code”), which indicates the place of reception for the asylum seeker. In the meantime, the applicant is housed for a very short time in the “Petit Château” arrival centre in Brussels (Fedasil, 2022a).

There are two types of accommodations: collective and individual structures. Being housed in a large-scale structure is the standard practice, while individual accommodations are meant for vulnerable persons or recognised refugees. The theoretical pathway is as follows (Figure 1): migrants are first accommodated in a collective reception structure. When they receive a positive result on their application for protection or when their situation ensures a high probability of obtaining a positive result⁴, Fedasil’s dispatching proceeds with a change of the “207-code”. Individuals then enter a second reception phase in an individual accommodation, a transitional phase towards leaving the reception system (Fedasil, 2022a). After that, those granted international protection must leave the reception network within two months as the material assistance ends. They now have access to social assistance and can choose their place of residence in Belgium, as there is no dispersal policy for recognised refugees (El Moussawi & Schuermans 2020). However, for applicants who do not obtain a protection status and who receive an injunction to leave Belgium, the right to material assistance expires within 30 days.

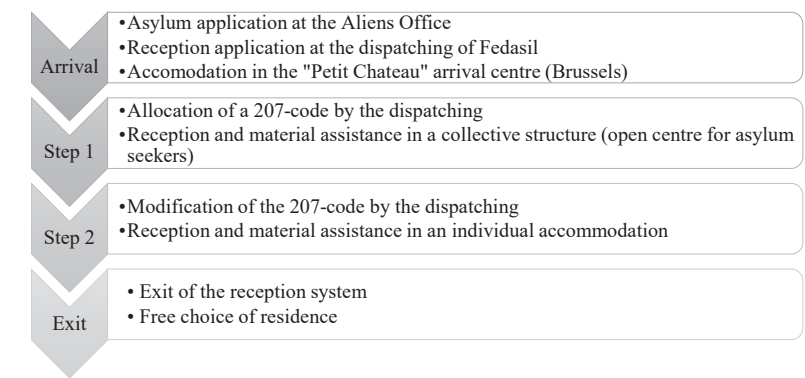
² Law of January 12, 2007 on the reception of asylum seekers and other categories of aliens, M.B. May 7, 2007.

³ Law of January 12, 2007, Art. 2, 6°: “material assistance: assistance provided by the Agency [Fedasil] or its partner, within a reception structure, including accommodation, meals, clothing, medical, social and psychological support and a daily allowance. It also includes access to legal assistance, access to services such as interpretation and training, and access to a voluntary return programme” (translation by the author).

⁴ Also called « people with high protection rates ».

In the meantime, Fedasil rehouses them in a “return place” where migrants are accompanied through the process of returning to their country of origin (ADDE, 2017).

Figure 1 - Classic reception process of asylum seekers in Belgium



Note: this figure represents the classic and theoretical process for a migrant whose asylum procedure results in a protection status in Belgium.
Source: made by the author

The reception process of unaccompanied foreign minors follows a slightly different trajectory. Before being placed in a collective centre (“step 1”), they are accommodated in a centre dedicated to the “observation and orientation” of the child. The stay in this facility varies between 2 to 4 weeks. During this period, Fedasil assesses the minors’ profile and evaluates their needs and vulnerabilities. This preliminary phase aims to identify the most appropriate reception place for the young migrant through the next steps of the reception journey (Fedasil, 2023).

b. The compulsory place of registration: the “207-code”

To benefit from material assistance, asylum seekers are assigned to a compulsory place of registration (the “207-code”) by the dispatching of Fedasil. This code designates the reception structure responsible for granting the assistance. The “207-code” is recorded in the Belgian National Register under the Information Type (IT) 207, "compulsory place of registration". The Aliens Office records it, and either indicates a reception facility or an INS code of a municipality.

When allocating a reception place, the Federal Agency declares on its website that it “tries to take into account as much as possible the particular situation of applicants (family with children, person in a wheelchair, isolated minor, etc.). Some reception structures are, in fact,

better suited than others to the needs of certain applicants” (Fedasil, n.d.). The European Migration Network reports the following criteria used in Belgium to assign the migrant to a reception facility: vulnerability, specific medical or psychological needs, age, gender, family situation, and language skills⁵ (EMN, 2014). The Asylum Information Database states there is no control over whether the criteria are respected: “albeit legally binding, these do not seem always to be taken into consideration” (AIDA, 2022, p. 114). Furthermore, the allocation of a place of registration also relies on the current capacity of the reception network⁶. Another report from the Asylum Information Database in 2016 mentions that “accommodation shortages have meant places are assigned based on availability and no longer on the specific needs of the person” (AIDA, 2016, p. 35), especially following the reception crisis of 2015.

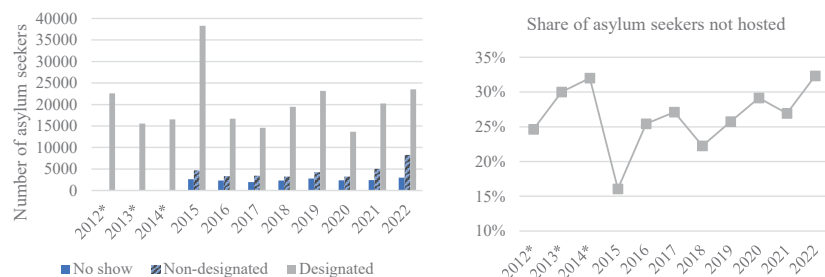
In some cases, asylum seekers do not enter the reception network. There are two possible reasons. The first is that the migrant voluntarily chooses not to benefit from the material assistance (code “no show”) and is not hosted in the reception system. This occurs, for example, when acquaintances can provide accommodation in Belgium. In this case, they cannot claim financial assistance from the Belgian social welfare until their application for protection has been approved (in the meantime, they are still entitled to urgent medical assistance). The share of individuals who decide not to benefit from the material assistance is usually small. Between 2012 and 2022, it peaked in 2020 with 12% of all asylum seekers (Figure 2).

The second reason for not entering the reception network is that the migrant is “non-designated”, meaning that Fedasil’s dispatching does not assign a 207 code. There is no designation of a 207-code for EU nationals or people who have introduced a second asylum application (formerly known as a “multiple application”). This also occurs when the reception system is saturated, and it is not possible to assign a reception place. Asylum seekers are nevertheless covered by the 2007 law and the right to material assistance. They can not receive this assistance in a reception facility but, in this case, they may alternatively obtain social assistance from a Public Social Welfare Centre (PSWC). For example, in 2022, about 5,500 asylum seekers were not hosted because the network was saturated. They were placed on a waiting list to be hosted later (Fedasil, 2023). By contrast, in 2015 and 2016, the reception network adapted faster to accommodate all applicants by rapidly creating new places (Cour des

⁵Each country organising the reception of asylum seekers chooses various criteria. For example, the EMN reports that Belgium does not consider the ethnicity/nationality, neither the family ties while other countries consider them (Austria, Spain, Luxemburg etc.) (EMN, 2014).
⁶This element is similar to the German system, as explained by Proietti and Veneri (2019, p. 4): “Allocation to a specific reception facility is decided according to the current capacities.”

Comptes, 2017) (see also below). Over the past decade, 26.4% of asylum seekers were not accommodated annually within the reception system (Figure 2).

Figure 2 - Annual numbers of asylum seekers by type of 207-code given by Fedasil



Note: Annual numbers among asylum seekers who introduced a request for the reception to the dispatching of Fedasil. No show = asylum applicants who do not want to benefit from material assistance. Non-designated = applicants who did not receive a 207 code because of the limited capacity of the reception network, because they have introduced a subsequent application because they are EU citizens. Designated = applicants who received a 207 code and were hosted in a reception place.

*In 2012, 2013 and 2014, the reports of Fedasil do not mention the precise numbers of no-shows and non-designations. Respectively, 24%, 30% and 32% of asylum seekers were not hosted during these three years.

Source: Fedasil, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020a, 2021, 2022b, 2023

The dispatching service is also responsible for deleting or changing the 207 code. Deletion means the migrant has lost their right to material assistance and must leave the reception network. Fedasil modifies the code when a migrant is transferred from one reception structure to another (Fedasil, 2010). This change has several reasons, either at the migrant's or the reception structure's request. The 2007 law provides that asylum seekers may request to be transferred from a collective to an individual dwelling after four months⁷ of living in an open centre (ADDE, 2017). However, this practice is difficult to implement because of the lack of places space in individual structures (AIDA, 2022; CIRÉ, 2023).

c. Collective structures: open centres for asylum seekers

Collective reception structures, used in the first phase of reception, are referred to as “open centres”, as asylum seekers are “free to come and go”. In these centres, migrants “receive accommodation and meals, clothing and social, medical and psychological support, a daily allowance, as well as access to legal assistance and services such as interpreting and training” (Fedasil, 2022a). They are often established in buildings that are no longer used for their primary purpose: former hotels (Machelen), military barracks (Bovigny, Kappelen or

⁷ From July 2016, this period is extended to 6 months.

Jodoigne), rest homes (Molenbeek or Auderghem) or holiday centres (Lommel or Senonchamps). The capacity of the centres differs greatly depending on the buildings and the functions assigned to the centre: from about 20 places to almost 900 for the “Petit Château” arrival centre in Brussels. Some are specialised in the reception of categories of asylum seekers. In Auderghem or Neder-Over-Hembeek, unaccompanied foreign minors are accommodated in small structures (less than 100 places), allowing the observation and orientation of minors towards the most appropriate reception places. Other centres are not specialised but still have places available for unaccompanied minors. This is the case, for example, at Sainte-Ode, which has around 420 places but hosted around 30 of these minors in 2022. The centre of Rixensart has a specific section with 30 places for underage mothers and pregnant minors (AIDA, 2022). They can benefit from appropriate support, as well as a day-care service. At the CARDA centre in Bierset (managed by the Red Cross), 40 places are available for asylum seekers with mental illness. The “Pierre Bleue” centre in Yvoir is primarily for women victims of gender-based violence, with or without children.

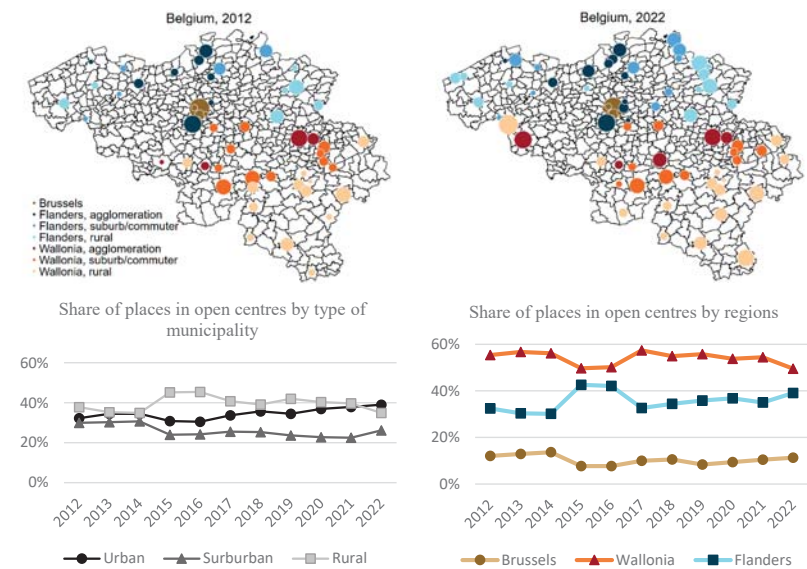
The number of centres fluctuates regularly, depending on government decisions regarding the country's capacity. The reception structure must constantly “adapt its activities to the pace of migratory flows” (Fedasil, 2018, p. 5). In 2015, when asylum seekers from Syria and other Middle Eastern countries increased rapidly, many centres had to open in an emergency. Fedasil reports that Belgium had almost doubled the number of centres, from 48 in July to 90 in December 2015 (Fedasil, 2016). In the years that followed this reception crisis, the trend was reversed with the closure of multiple structures that had been opened temporarily. For instance, Coxyde's Centre, located in West Flanders, opened its doors for just a few months between October 2015 and November 2016, then reopened between February and July 2020. In September 2021, this centre opened again to answer the need for “buffer” places.

To capture these evolutions, we made an inventory of all existing and former open centres between 2012 and 2022, using information mainly from Fedasil's official reports. To complement this data, we also contacted several centres of the Red Cross for which information was lacking in the official reports. We listed the name of the centres, their location, their reception capacity and the periods during which they were in activity. In all the following descriptive analyses, annual data report information about centres that were in activity during at least one month of the year. Despite many variations across the ten years, a general trend is an increase in the reception capacity in open centres: from about 12,600 places across 59 different centres in 2012 to more than 27,700 places across 86 centres in 2022. The lowest

number of reception places in open centres was reached in 2014, with close to 10,300 places (Annex II).

Depending on the demand, the number of centres and their spatial dispersal has varied significantly from year to year. Given that the creation of centres generally responds to emergencies (Wyckaert et al., 2020), their geographical location is not explicitly designed to be the most appropriate for the integration of asylum applicants and is spread across the country. About 40% of the reception centres were located in rural municipalities among those in activity between 2012 and 2022. It represents between 35% and 45% of the available places within open centres (Figure 3, graph). Places in rural municipalities are also more common in Wallonia than in Flanders.

Figure 3 - Location of places in open centres for asylum seekers



Note: The maps represent all the centres that existed in 2012 and 2022, even if they were only open for a few months in that year. There were 59 centres in 2012 and 97 in 2022, respectively.
Source: own inventory based on Fedasil 2013, 2023.

Despite the network's total capacity variations, the share of reception places available in open centres located in Brussels remains relatively stable during 2012-2022. It represents about 10% of the reception capacity of collective centres (including the arrival centre of “Petit

Chateau”). The same goes for Wallonia, which hosted half of all the reception places in collective centres during the decade (see Annex II).

d. Individual structures: Local Reception Initiatives (LRI)

The primary purpose of the individual reception structures, Local Reception Initiatives (LRI), is to help migrants’ transition from collective centres to private dwellings. This type of structure offers material support to the applicants while allowing them greater autonomy. Asylum seekers are housed in furnished accommodations but do not receive the same supervision as collective centres. However, they receive financial allowances to meet their needs for food, clothes, etc. (Boudart et al., 2018). The allocation to an LRI by the dispatching should consider the asylum seekers’ needs. Ideally, the LRI place should also be the closest to the collective centre where the individual was previously hosted. In practice, it is difficult to do as “there is no structural cohesion between collective and individual places” (Boudart et al., 2018, p. 79). In their qualitative study among 144 refugees, conducted between 2017 and 2018, Saeys and colleagues report that the transition through LRI is actually not really effective: 103 refugees in their sample had experience reception in a collective reception centre but only 62 of them were hosted in LRI before entering the housing market (Saeys et al., 2018).

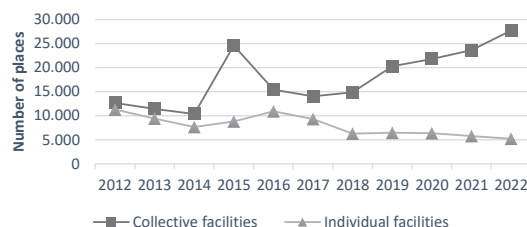
LRI primarily host vulnerable individuals, recognised refugees, or people with high chances of recognition. If an asylum seeker is granted a protection status while he is still accommodated in a collective centre, he will have the choice between moving to an individual reception dwelling for two months or receiving a financial allowance for one month. In the case of the latter, the refugee must leave the open centre within ten open days (AIDA, 2022).

The management of individual facilities is mainly handled by the Public Social Welfare Centres (PSWC) in each of the 581 Belgian municipalities. According to a distribution plan, each municipality has to offer a definite number of LRI places. The criteria for the distribution plan, also defined by the 2007 law, are the population size of the municipality, total income of inhabitants, number of already existing reception structures in the municipality and number of beneficiaries of an integration income. For example, in the municipality of Aalter, ten places are available in LRI, while Dilbeek has 34 places spread in 11 different dwellings. The LRI of Marche-en-Famenne consists of 4 accommodations that may host up to 17 individuals.

As for open centres, the individual structures are spread over the whole territory. Also, the number of individual reception places varies over time. From 2012 to 2022, there was a

notable decline in the proportion of individual reception places, decreasing from 47% to 16% of the total capacity of the reception network (Figure 4).

Figure 4 - Number of places in the asylum reception system by type



Source: own calculations based on Fedasil, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020a, 2021, 2022b, 2023

e. Other specific reception places

As observed, the place of residence of asylum seekers depends significantly on the advancement of their asylum procedure. Up to this point, our focus has primarily centred on the reception situation when the procedure follows the most straightforward path and results in granting international protection. In this last section, we describe the reception phases relevant to other stages of the asylum procedure: the voluntary or forced return and the Dublin procedure.

When asylum applicants are not granted protection and receive an injunction to leave Belgium, Fedasil's dispatching allocates a new 207 code corresponding to a return place. These places have existed since 2012 and are only available in a few open centres in which social workers provide them with information and social support to follow the voluntary return programme (Fedasil, 2013). Following the notification of an order to leave the country, the return places are the only ones where the asylum seekers can still benefit from the material assistance. They have the right to stay in these reception centres until their notice to leave the country expires (generally within 30 days). From 2012 to 2022, there were 327 return places in the reception network (between 0.5% and 2.2% of the total capacity). The places are available in the following open centres: Arendonk (since 2012), Jodoigne (since 2012), Peolokappelle (since 2012), Sint-Truiden (since 2012), Charleroi (since 2016), Mouscron (since 2020), Zaventem (between 2016 and 2022).

A comparable arrangement exists in the Dublin procedure. At the start of the asylum procedure, the Dublin procedure determines which EU country is responsible for processing

the application for international protection. If it is established that another state is responsible and agrees to take charge of the applicant, the latter is transferred to a "Dublin" reception place by Fedasil's dispatching. This becomes the sole location where the applicants receive material assistance. They must report there within five working days. Otherwise, they lose their right to material assistance and are given a 207-code "no show" by the dispatching (Fedasil, 2020b). As is the case for the return places, Dublin places are in collective open centres where asylum seekers receive the same material assistance. The only difference is that they receive better support from social workers specialising in voluntary return and Dublin transfer procedures. The open centres where Dublin places are available are the same as the return places. In 2022, Zaventem's centre became entirely dedicated to the reception of asylum seekers waiting for their Dublin transfer (Fedasil, 2023).

In this document, we did not touch on the detention of asylum seekers in closed centres as their purpose differs from that of open reception facilities. The aim is not to organise the reception and prepare the integration while the asylum procedure is ongoing. Asylum seekers may be detained when they receive an injunction to leave Belgium and are not granted a right to stay. Detention occurs when they do not want to return voluntarily to their original country. The Aliens Office thus organises their forced return and detain them in these closed centres. Six of these centres exist in Belgium with a joint capacity of 657 individuals. They are located in Anvers (since 1993), in Steenokkerzeel (since 1994, and a second centre opened in 2012), in Bruges (since 1995), in Vottem (in 1999) and in Holsbeek (since 2019).

Conclusion

This paper offers valuable insights into the complexities and dynamics of the Belgian reception system. Going beyond the scope of annual reports released by Fedasil, this work takes a longitudinal perspective by describing the evolutions over the past decade (2012-2022). It sheds light on key trends, such as the diminishing proportion of individual reception places within the network. The overall capacity presented a substantial rise of 39% in 2022 compared to 2012 due to the opening of numerous open collective centres throughout the territory.

Moreover, this paper also contributes to a better understanding of the spatial dispersal of the reception network in Belgium. The system indirectly leads to the dispersion of asylum seekers across various municipalities throughout their asylum procedures. It is important to note that the inventory presented focuses solely on open collective centres and does not encompass individual reception facilities. Although comprehensive data on LRI remains less accessible, a

thorough inventory of all individual reception venues would complement the insights presented in this study.

Understanding the reception system's functioning is crucial to studying the life course of asylum seekers in Belgium. Many enter this network managed by Fedasil, where they may spend over a year transitioning through different reception facilities. The reception program, organised in several phases, is designed to prepare the integration of asylum seekers into Belgian society while considering various characteristics when assigning a 207 code. However, the reception network periodically encounters challenges arising from capacity shortages. These findings underscore the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the reception system's functioning to support research on any aspect of the life course of asylum seekers in Belgium.

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Annex I: Organisations involved in the reception of asylum seekers

1. Fedasil, the federal agency for the reception of asylum seekers

The Agency has existed since 2002, and its role is described in the 2007 law on the reception of asylum seekers. The Agency organises the reception of asylum seekers and controls the quality of the material assistance provided. It is responsible for dispatching the reception beneficiaries and coordinates the partners involved in this task. Fedasil also owns many open reception centres across Belgium (Figure 5).

2. Red Cross (Croix Rouge/Rode Kruis)

The Red Cross is one of the leading partners of Fedasil and has managed many collective reception centres across both regions of Belgium since 1989 (Rode Kruis for Flanders and Croix Rouge for Wallonia). Over the past decade, the Red Cross had more reception places in the French-speaking part of Belgium than in Flanders.

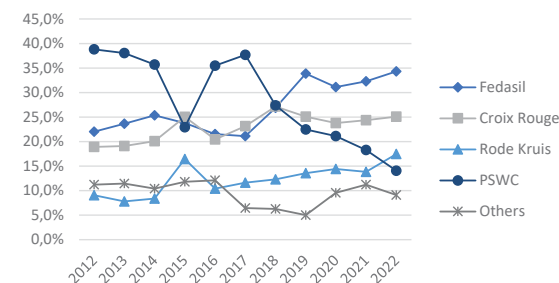
3. Public Social Welfare Centres (PSWC)

There are 581 Public Social Welfare Centres in Belgium, one per municipality. These centres oversee the Local Reception Initiatives. A lead organisation coordinates the centres for each region: the “Association of the City and the Municipalities of the Brussels-Capital Region” (Brulocalis), the “Union des Villes et des Communes de Wallonie” (UVCW) and the “Vlaamse Vereniging van Steden en Gemeenten” (VVSG).

4. Other partners

About 9.5% of the reception places are managed by other partners such as Samusocial, Caritas International, Ciré, “Vlaamse Gemeenschap”, “Communauté française” and several private partners. They manage collective centres as well as individual reception accommodations.

Figure 5 - Contribution of each partner (% of reception places managed at the end of the year)



Source: Fedasil, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020a, 2021, 2022b, 2023

Annex II: Spatial dispersal of reception places in open centres from 2012 to 2020

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Places in open centres	12,679	11,446	10,367	24,613	22,503	14,025	14,883	20,276	21,791	23,654	27,719
Dispersal per region (% of reception places)											
Brussels	12.1	12.9	13.7	7.7	7.7	10.0	10.6	8.4	9.4	10.5	11.3
Flanders	32.5	30.4	30.1	42.6	42.1	32.6	34.5	35.8	36.8	35.0	39.1
Wallonia	55.4	56.7	56.2	49.7	50.1	57.4	55.0	55.7	53.8	54.5	49.6
Dispersal per municipality type (% of reception places)											
Total Rural	37.8	35.3	34.9	45.2	45.4	40.8	39.1	41.9	40.4	39.7	34.9
Rural Flanders	13.1	9.7	10.3	18.3	17.9	13.7	16.2	16.1	15.4	15.6	13.8
Rural Wallonia	24.7	25.6	24.6	26.9	27.4	27.1	22.9	25.8	24.9	24.0	21.1
Total Suburbs	29.9	30.3	30.7	24.0	24.1	25.5	25.3	23.6	22.8	22.5	26.1
Suburbs Flanders	7.6	8.1	8.6	10.9	10.9	8.8	7.6	6.7	8.1	8.0	11.9
Suburbs Wallonia	22.3	22.2	22.0	13.2	13.2	16.7	17.7	16.9	14.6	14.5	14.3
Total Urban (without Brussels)	20.2	21.5	20.8	23.1	22.7	23.7	25.1	26.0	27.5	27.4	27.7
Urban Flanders	11.7	12.5	11.2	13.4	13.3	10.1	10.7	13.0	13.3	11.4	13.4
Urban Wallonia	8.4	9.0	9.5	9.7	9.5	13.6	14.4	13.1	14.2	15.9	14.2

Source: own calculations using Fedasil, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020a, 2021, 2022b, 2023

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