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9. CONCLUSIONS

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To conclude this important research on energy poverty, we first turn back to and answer the four initial research questions that were presented in Chapter 2. By their transversal character, they provide a good way for summarising our findings across the chapters. We then conclude with a call for policies dedicated to fight energy poverty in Belgium and its Regions.

1. MAIN FINDINGS ANSWERING THE FOUR RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As expressed in Chapter 2, the research questions are the following:

1. Who are the households living in energy poverty in Belgium and what are the generation and gender aspects of this phenomenon?
2. Do persons living in energy poverty experience other fragilities, especially regarding relationships, mobility, and self-reported health?
3. What are the daily practices of persons living in energy poverty, especially those related to energy consumption, and what meanings do they give thereto?
4. How can we translate the voice of people living in energy poverty and experiencing other fragilities into policy recommendations?

1.1 Who are the households living in energy poverty in Belgium and what are the generation and gender aspects of this phenomenon?

The answer to this group of research questions first requires defining who is in energy poverty in Belgium. There is no official definition of energy poverty in Belgium, as opposed to France for example. In this situation, and as underlined in Chapter 4, the prevalence of energy poverty in Belgium varies considerably according to the criteria used to define which household, or what person, is in energy poverty. Therefore, the proportion of households in Belgium that are in energy poverty ranged in 2012 from 0.2% (households disconnected for electricity “the figure is the same for those disconnected for gas) to 14.0% in measured

energy poverty” (targeting households dedicating too high a proportion of their budget to energy costs) as well as 4.6% in “hidden energy poverty” (targeting households dedicating too low a proportion of their budget to energy costs), as calculated by Delbeke and Meyer (2015). These authors explain in this publication why and how they define “too high a proportion of the household’s budget” and “too low a proportion” (see also Meyer et al., 2018). A further criterion reviewed in Chapter 4 is being granted a social tariff: for their electricity consumption, 8.2% of households had such a benefit in 2012, and 8.5% for gas. Thus, the proportion of people / households living in energy poverty depends on the point of view taken: it is either based on a policy approach – the so-called “beneficiaries” or “users” (see also Chapter 7) of a given policy instrument – or on a normative point of view, for example on a correct way to spend the household income.

In Chapter 5, still another approach is put forward: a relational one, following Fitzpatrick (2014). This relational approach is expressed in two ways: 1- our typology of all households in Belgium is based on the perception of the household income adequacy and on affordability problems in keeping the house adequately warm, or on the experience of having arrears in paying energy bills, as defined by the persons themselves; and 2- our comparison between energy-poor households and other less-poor social groups.

On these grounds, and using the data collected in the Belgian survey of Generation and Gender Programme, energy-poor households represent 10.3% of the households in 2009. Unfortunately, this figure cannot be updated because no similar survey as the one realised under the Generation and Gender Programme has been undertaken in Belgium since then. Following our definition, we classify the respondents to this survey as energy poor if they report that for their household, it is either very difficult, or difficult, or rather difficult to make ends meet AND that they find themselves in one of the three following situations: they have affordability problems to keep the house adequately warm, or they have had arrears in paying their utility bills in the last 12 months, or they have both problems.

Who are the households living in energy poverty in Belgium according to the above definition based on the Generation and Gender 2009 survey? Their mean income is rather low (1164 € per month, in 2009) but their socio-economic characteristics described in Chapter 5 are varied and heterogeneous, so the answer to the above question must be nuanced. Indeed, in Belgium, and contrary to some stereotypes, more than two households in energy poverty out of five in that situation own their dwelling and the same proportion live in semi-urban areas or in rural ones. Furthermore, half of the respondents of these energy-poor households have at least 12 years of education with the corresponding diplomas.

Regarding the gender and age of the surveyed person of households living in energy poverty, there are proportionally much more women (60.3%) than men (39.7%), and the mean age of these respondents is younger (46.1 years) than in the other categories of our typology on affordable warmth, developed in Chapter 5. But as both characteristics (gender and age) are those of the respondent to the survey, it is more interesting to turn to the household as a whole and study the living arrangements.

In energy poor households, the main living arrangements are the following. More than one fifth of these households are made of one man living alone, and the same proportion of one woman living alone (the latter is likely to be underestimated, see details in Chapter 5); 29% of the energy-poor households include a couple, with or without dependent child(ren); one-parent families represent nearly one household out of seven energy-poor households (14%), the large majority (90%) of these lone-parent families being headed by a mother (note that the dependent person(s) may also be a grand-child, or sibling(s) of the respondent); and finally, another 14% of these energy-poor households are found in the three other types of living arrangements (two adults; other types of households with no dependent person; other types of households with at least one dependent person).

A comparison by gender and age group of the respondent has shown that for the respondents living alone, the likelihood of living in energy poverty is similar for men and

women if their age is less than 60 (16% under 40, 18% between 40 and 59), and is higher for women after this age. For the women in one-parent families, the likelihood of being in energy poverty is highest if they are aged under 40 (35%), and is far from being negligible after that age (21% between 40 and 59 and 14% after 60).

Summarising the generation and gender aspects of living in energy poverty in Belgium also means considering how the equality between women and men that is stipulated in the 2000 Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union is ensured in the areas of energy-efficient housing and energy services. The figures above drawn from Chapter 5 clearly show that equality between men and women in these areas is not achieved in Belgium.

1.2 Do persons living in energy poverty experience other fragilities, especially regarding relationships, mobility, and self-reported health?

In the beginning of the research, we had indeed hypothesised that social isolation, mobility problems as well as health problems including poor well-being were associated with living in energy poverty – associated with, not necessarily caused by energy poverty or a consequence thereof, because our approach is systemic rather than causal. Indeed, these issues were the most commonly expressed during the qualitative interviews as detailed and exemplified in Chapter 6. From a methodological point of view, the question remains whether these issues were most often raised during the interviews because they were prompted by the researchers or because they are very important for the persons interviewed, or maybe for both reasons.

As expressed in Chapters 2 and 6, we first used the term ‘vulnerabilities’ for the difficulties and impairments associated with energy poverty. However, in the more recent and current academic literature on energy poverty, the concept of energy vulnerability is defined in a precise and causal way by Bouzarovski and Petrova (2015: 35) as “the factors that affect the likelihood of becoming poor” and when “combined with the systems of provision approach, energy vulnerability (...) [encompasses] the nature and structure of the home (...)”, and hence to distinguish our concept we moved to using the term ‘fragilities’.

People living in energy poverty are experiencing several other types of fragilities, and these associations between energy poverty and other fragilities seem to operate most often in vicious circles, thus reinforcing each other.

In Chapter 5, these associated fragilities were called “uncapabilities”, following the capability concept developed by Sen and Nussbaum. One important finding of Chapter 5 is that these uncapabilities arise for energy-poor households in more areas than expected, namely for the uncapability related to material property and interestingly enough, for the uncapabilities related to recreational activities (“Play”) and to culture (“Senses, imagination and thought”). Culture indeed enables the development of another social imaginary, in Castoriadis (1987)’s terms that could be more just and less energy demanding, thus more in line with low-carbon energy systems. Households living in energy poverty are also very unequal to the energy- richest households in their capabilities related to emotional management and to health and protein intake.

To reinforce these results, the in-depth interviews with people in energy poverty (analysed in Chapter 6) have indeed exemplified in multiple ways how energy poverty shrinks the physical space, both at home – only one room heated – and outside the home: weak access to private or even public transportation, and furthermore, feelings of shame and of stigmatisation (as also shown in Chapter 7). This “spatial shrink” (following the expression of Liddell and Morris, 2010: 2993) is also a “mental shrink” caused by anxiety and other negative emotions. For example, many interviewees continuously have to count the money left, if any, until the end of the month. This anxiety as well as feelings of emptiness, loneliness, or sadness are reported by a good many among the interviewees in our qualitative survey (Chapter 6) as well as among those surveyed by the Generation and Gender Programme (Chapter 5).

These spatial and mental shrinks produce a specific lifeworld (Habermas, 1987) among people living in energy poverty. This lifeworld is closely related to a feeling of powerlessness. In these conditions, people adopt what we called an agentic posture (chapter 6) when facing adversity and when trying to adapt living conditions to external constraints. The lifeworld expressed by energy-poor persons is a restricted environment strongly determined by a lack of energy provision. Most of the time, these persons express the feeling of facing a destiny that they did not choose, as they are also confronted with fraud and dishonest practices. This agentic lifeworld gives the impression of facing an uncontrolled and unjust world, which leads to an increasing feeling of low self-confidence.

To sum up, persons living in energy poverty also experience other fragilities than those initially hypothesized (social isolation, mobility problems, as well as health problems including poor well-being). These other fragilities are related to material property, leisure activities and culture as well as to negative emotions (such as loneliness, sadness, or shame) and to health, including protein intake.

1.3 What are the daily practices of persons living in energy poverty, especially those related to energy consumption, and what meanings do they give thereto?

In the in-depth interviews analysed in this research (Chapter 6), people living in energy poverty report different daily practices. Most of the time these practices refer to strategic competences developed to reduce energy consumption. The principle of these practices is mainly based on self-restriction especially heating curtailment. These restrictive practices are accompanied by adaptive and pragmatic strategies to prevent suffering from a lack of heating (using kerosene lamps, caulking doors and windows, wearing extra clothes, leaving home to go to public centres to get warm).

According to energy-poor households, these self-restrictive behaviours have a great impact on the standards of living and values they want to preserve. Parents feel compelled to reduce the well-being of the whole family by applying severe restrictions related to food, furniture, appliances, and leisure but they are strongly affected when these restrictive practices impact the well-being and daily life of their children. Using adaptive competences, people living in energy poverty try to overcome the problems they are facing. Controlling the energy consumption with self-restrictive and pragmatic practices, they behave like “actors” (Chapter 6) but they have to face a severe shrinkage of their own well-being even though they try to preserve the quality of life of their children. In this context, energy poor households often feel that the future they want to preserve above all (their own children’s well-being) is strongly affected by their living conditions.

The in-depth interviews realised in the qualitative part of the research also show coping strategies developed by people living in energy poverty. These kinds of strategies are alternative to adaptive competences. When they use coping strategies, energy-poor households refer to inventive practices such as involving the help of their entourage, their relatives, and various social public or private institutions for building new solutions. For instance, they get help from energy suppliers in negotiating plans for arrears in energy bills, or they apply new advice for energy savings and teach it to their children for a better implementation of these practices at home. These coping strategies lead to new social relationships when solidarity competences are developed with neighbours. In these circumstances, people give and receive help for better well-being, such as food, clothes, or time for child caring. It can also be collective help for retrofitting the dwelling of a neighbour.

When people are confronted with energy poverty, they mainly act in an ‘agentic’ posture: they hardly have the opportunity to adopt their living conditions to the external constraints. The adaptive practices they apply help them to face these external constraints but have a great impact on their own well-being and even more on the quality of life of their children considered as the main value to be preserved. Finally, even if they are subject to a

deterministic life situation, energy-poor people develop inventive coping strategies based on their family, neighbourhood or institutional support.

1.4 How can we translate the voice of people living in energy poverty and experiencing other fragilities into policy recommendations?

The interviews with people living in energy poverty in Flanders, Wallonia, and the Brussels Region allow us to understand better their daily life experiences, the obstacles and constraints related to energy poverty with which they are confronted and the practices and strategies they engage in to cope with energy poverty. Based on this, we developed a set of recommendations that would make an important difference to the life of people in energy poverty. The recommendations are related to energy policy (federal and regional levels), housing policy (mainly regional level), or social integration (federal and municipal levels).

The first recommendation is concerned with access to energy, specifically gas. We recommend rolling out a system of minimal gas supply in every Belgian municipality during the winter months. Currently, public centres for social welfare are not obliged to organise minimal gas supply. Because public welfare centres organise minimal gas supply in some municipalities but not in others, (vulnerable) energy users currently do not have equal rights.

A second recommendation, which relates to the previous one, aims to include the right to energy in Article 23 of the Belgian Constitution, which guarantees all Belgian citizens a set of fundamental economic and social rights. The right to energy is currently not included among these fundamental rights and while inclusion would not lead to a direct and immediate change in the life of people living in energy poverty, it would reflect the acknowledgment of a collective responsibility to guarantee every citizen access to energy.

The third recommendation is related to the price of energy. It emerges from our interviews (but also from official statistics on consumer switching suppliers) that many people living in energy poverty have a poor understanding of how the energy market works, what they are paying for which service and what their rights are. This results in a situation in which many vulnerable energy consumers are not having the most advantageous energy contract (and hence do not benefit from the opportunities offered by the liberalised energy market). We suggest to provide more support and information to people in energy poverty to choose the most advantageous energy supply contract and tariff, an expansion of the groups benefiting from a social tariff (e.g. by adding an income criterion) and the automatic allocation of a social tariff to those who have a right to it. Also, we think it would be fair to exclude the costs for public service obligations and the green energy transition from the total price and finance these costs out of the general government budget.

Fourthly, door-to-door, internet and phone sales of energy contracts often result in higher energy bills for the most vulnerable groups. We recommend the government to closely monitor these sales practices and intervene forcefully in case of abuse.

The next three recommendations are concerned with housing policy. Our interviews clearly show how energy poverty is strongly related to poor quality housing. Given how many people living in energy poverty mention high rent prices as one of the main factors causing or aggravating energy poverty situation, the fifth recommendation is the establishment of a rent control mechanism. The scarcity of (decent) housing on the rental market puts low-income groups in a vulnerable position, often leading them to 'choose' cheaper rent over energy efficient dwellings. Another, maybe intermediate measure, is a 'rents guide' that aims to target unfair prices by showing what is a 'reasonable' rent according to the actual characteristics of the dwellings, notably including its energy performance. As a sixth recommendation, we suggest to include minimum standards of insulation and energy efficiency in the law on housing healthiness. In any case, and this is our seventh recommendation, tenants need to be better protected if they complain about the bad quality of the housing, so that they do not lose access to housing when their building is officially labelled uninhabitable. The structural solution to all these problems is however to create

a bigger housing stock to provide more choice for low-income families and push bad quality housing out of the market.

Our eighth recommendation relates to social support and integration policies. Given its central role in addressing energy poverty, more funding and capacity for social coordination should be provided to local public welfare/action centres. In addition to that, a strong collaboration between services dedicated to energy and housing (whilst retaining their own specificity) would be very helpful to reach out and support the energy poor.

Finally, a ninth recommendation addresses the strong feelings of powerlessness that were reported during our interviews. Social workers have an important role to play here. They need to be given sufficient time and resources to develop new methods of social support aimed at restoring the capacity for action of people living in energy poverty.

2. A CALL FOR STRONG POLICIES TO FIGHT ENERGY POVERTY

In ending, we return to the concept of capabilities and emphasise the integral importance of energy and energy services in supporting a range of capabilities for individuals and households that are core to their wellbeing and ability to flourish. A household in energy poverty, however creatively they find means of coping and eking out their resources, has a high likelihood of experiencing damage to their relationships, physical and mental health, family life, cultural participation, social respect, recreation, self-development and self-worth.

Energy poverty thus has far-reaching effects, with long-term implications. There are strong indications that the burden is greater for women, especially younger single mothers, and older women compared to older men. As a country concerned with the life chances of its citizens and also with gender equality, it is imperative for Belgium and its Regions to take action on energy poverty.

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