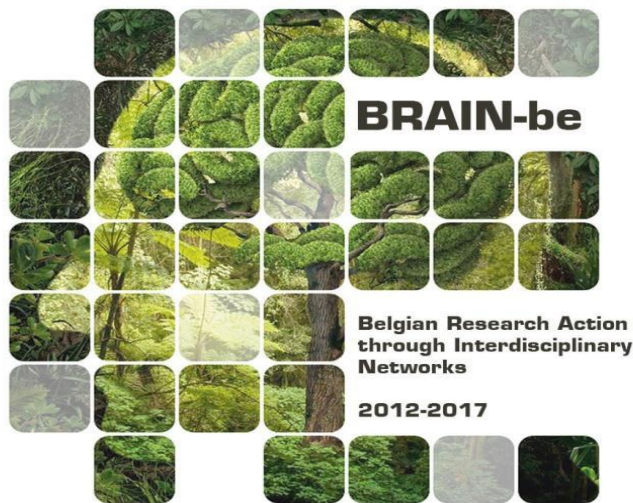




Axis 5: Major societal challenges
Contract: BR/121/A5/2GENDERS
NETWORK PROJECT

Generation and Gender ENergy DEprivation: Realities and Social policies (2GENDERS)

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8. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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This chapter gives nine recommendations that can contribute to diminishing the prevalence of energy poverty. Other policy measures or actions could be useful as well, but a selection was made on two grounds. First, what are the most recurrent and urgent demands observed in the field? Second, with our respondents in mind, what would contribute to alleviate their harsh situations? The nine recommendations can be related to one of the following domains: energy policy (federal and regional competences), housing policy (mainly regional) or social integration (federal and municipal competences via Public Centres for Social Welfare/Action).²³

1. METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

The initial idea was to follow the “group analysis methodology” (Van Campenhout et al., 2005) to discuss and improve our recommendations. Due to the difficulty of gathering all members of the users’ committee even for only one day, we decided to ease the original methodology and choose a “small groups” configuration to exchange on the recommendations proposed by the three research teams. Each team had written three propositions and three groups were formed in order to have at each table: one researcher, male and female discussants, Flemish and French speakers, and the largest variety of sectors represented, with enough knowledge on public policies for each Region. Each group discussed the recommendations of the same research team, so the researcher at the origin of the propositions was at the table during the whole debate to answer any questions.

First, the nine recommendations had been sent to all committee members a few days in advance. On October 16th, 2017, the meeting started with presentation of the synthesis of results from the qualitative research that led to the recommendations. Then, each research team introduced its recommendations and the composition of the groups was announced. There were three to four committee members at each table. The idea was to let each person speak as freely as possible, having the occasion to exchange ideas, information and thoughts about the three recommendations with other stakeholders, and to do this in three groups simultaneously to save time and keep everyone’s attention until the end of the meeting. In each group, a rapporteur was designated to write a synthesis of all comments made about the recommendations and more specifically their relevance, feasibility, limits and possibly corrections or ideas for implementation. Discussions lasted about forty minutes, and then each rapporteur presented the results of the debates for his or her group to the whole audience. Twenty more minutes were devoted for the reactions of the whole audience, with any committee member free to comment on any of the nine recommendations. All discussions were recorded. The remarks were taken into account when reviewing the recommendations. Most of these corrections were realised until the end of the research project in early 2018.

2. ENERGY POLICY

2.1 Access to energy

As some interviewees have no access to energy at certain moments or periods because of a lack of financial resources, we recommend that a system of minimal gas delivery is set up or that the existing system is improved. However, this recommendation will not affect people heating with coal, firewood, wood pellets, or propane as these heating sources have much less social policy attention than gas, electricity, and heating oil. One reason for this is that it

²³ Centre Public d’Action Sociale (CPAS)/ Openbaar Centrum voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn (OCMW) in Belgium.

is easier to identify users of gas and electricity (and heating oil to a certain extent) than users of the more uncommon sources mentioned. In fact, this is a plea to set up a system for minimal energy supply regardless the heating system, but an improved minimal gas supply could be a useful first step. It should take into account income, heating system and household size.

2.1.1. Recommendation 1 on a minimal gas supply for everyone during the winter

1. To set up or improve a system of minimal gas supply

The system of minimal gas supply provides financial support during winter months to a target group of natural gas prepayment meter users. Currently, Public Centres for Social Welfare are not obliged to apply this mechanism. We recommend making this system mandatory throughout the country and broadening the types of people entitled to financial support.

Justification

In the Flemish and Walloon Regions, some minimal gas supply policies exist to provide financial support for partly covering the costs of natural gas during winter months. The term “minimal gas supply” is misleading as there is no guaranteed permanent gas supply.

The Flemish Public Centres for Social Welfare/Action can opt to participate in this policy measure, in which case they can reclaim 70% of the cost of the financial aid from the distribution network operator. The remaining 30% is paid either by the municipality or by the customer. This system is for prepayment meter users only. However, in Flanders, not all Public Centres for Social Welfare/Action take part in this system, as only 230 centres are participating (+/-70% and rising). But some major cities such as Hasselt, Roeselare or Lokeren do not participate.²⁴ Moreover, with only 3 695 beneficiary households, or 13% of all prepayment users, the share of people supported is rather modest.

In Wallonia, the system is for protected customers only. Other conditions are the same as in Flanders: people need to have a prepayment meter, have to be supplied by the distribution network manager and have to apply for the allocation themselves. Then the Local Advice Commission decides whether and how much financial aid a customer can receive. The support can be for a maximum of 70% of the invoice. The Brussels-Capital Region does not apply this system.

Quite a lot of the (Flemish) interviewees with a prepayment meter for gas can get financial support during winter. In most cases, interviewees welcome this support, but claim that it is not sufficient. Some interviewees complain about the fact that they have to repay [a part of] their minimal supply to the Public Centres for Social Welfare/Action. Not all centres reclaim the amount from their clients. In a sense, the repayment of the financial support afterwards is against the philosophy of a prepayment meter. The prepayment meter was introduced in order to avoid debts, but the repayment of the financial aid can again cause debts to occur.

Some people in energy poverty reported a tense relationship with the social worker about gas supply. As an example: X was entitled for a minimal gas supply. The first year she applied for it but did not get it. Her social worker would only provide her with a minimal supply if she went into debt management (it is allowed to impose certain conditions on the minimal supply), which she refused, finding it intrusive. The next year, she never received an invitation letter to apply for the minimal supply although all clients with a prepayment meter for gas should receive one. An automatic allocation of this right would help people who are not aware of these policy measures. It would also avoid discussions during the social inquiry (about letters received) and free up time for social workers.

In the interviews, there were many recommendations related to a minimal gas supply. Most of them dealt with the voluntary character of the measure and the payback system for the 30% financial aid. One idea mentioned in the interviews was “a guaranteed gas supply

²⁴ Own calculations are based on Eandis and Infrax data about minimal supply in winter 2016-2017.

during peak hours”, with peak hours referring to the few hours immediately before and after school when children are present in the dwelling. Although understandable, it is probably not the best way to tackle cold homes. First, it is technically impossible to restrict timing, at least with the currently existing analogue metering systems. In the future, it may be possible with digital and/or smart meters. More importantly, it would not be fair to people who are ‘stuck’ at home during the day due to retirement or illness. Another rather similar suggestion to avoid gas disconnections during winter was an “unlimited emergency credit during cold periods”. The same argument – the entanglement of debts – is true for this suggestion. A third concern expressed during interviews was the fact that currently, all people receive an equal amount of minimal gas supply, which is adapted to the type of dwelling, but not adapted to the energy efficiency of the house. The recommendation is to give a higher supply to people with badly insulated homes.

This recommendation is worth considering. It could be further refined according to, e.g., the composition of the household. This would certainly contribute to the system fairness but would require extra administrative work, and hence raise the question of whether the costs will outweigh the benefits. In Wallonia, these reflexions led to the idea of a “progressive and solidary pricing”, which was adopted by the government in 2014 but abandoned in 2016.

Implementation

We recommend making financial aid for gas supply available in all municipalities. In the Flemish Energy Poverty Programme, it is recognised that “the optional character of the policy measure leads to a situation in which energy users do not have equal rights”. In the ‘action list’ that follows this statement however, there is no action suggested to deal with this shortcoming. The only step undertaken so far is to try to convince the Public Centres for Social Welfare/Action to adopt the system by lowering the administrative burden. We therefore recommend that the system is mandatory in the whole Flanders Region, and that a comparable system is set up in Brussels and Wallonia. Because of the specific context in the former Region, there should be other ways to qualify, rather than just having a prepayment meter. In addition, whereas the period and the amounts are equal all over Flanders, one of the biggest differences between municipalities is whether energy consumers have to repay a part of the financial support or not. We thus further recommend a uniform application of the system of supporting a minimal gas supply in the most favourable way to these vulnerable consumers.

The automatic allocation of financial aid to a certain group (e.g. all prepayment users), the extension to some other groups (e.g. non-prepayment users that meet certain requirements) lead to an extra cost. To manage these, there are two possibilities: 1) to increase the contribution of the distribution network operator and to compensate the cost by charging all other users, or 2) to look for new financial resources. There is a need for a detailed study of the effects on the overall prices for the suggestions made.

2.1.2. Recommendation 2 on the right to energy

2. To recognise the right to energy as a fundamental right

Article 23 of the Belgian Constitution guarantees to all its citizens a set of fundamental economic and social rights to live a life in conformity with human dignity. The right to energy should be considered as one of these fundamental rights and therefore be mentioned in the Constitution. The rights cited include the right to work, the right to social security, the protection of health, a social, medical, and legal assistance, the right to adequate housing, the right to the protection of a healthy environment, the right to cultural and social development, the right to family benefits. Article 24 § 3 also refers to the right to education.

Justification

Access to energy is also a fundamental social right. As our interviews showed, citizens who do not have access to energy cannot live a decent life as guaranteed by the Belgian

Constitution. It is thus necessary to include access to energy in the Constitution, at the same level as other fundamental social rights. This complementary social right would improve legal processes at all institutional levels for creating legal obligations on the different stakeholders of the Belgian energy field, in particular the distribution system operators that would be required to guarantee access to continuous energy, in various ways, to the entire population.

Implementation

The right to energy is a fundamental social right that must be guaranteed by the legislator. It should be added to the list of fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution to enable all citizens to have stable access to energy.

2.2 Prices of energy

On the energy market, customers can choose a supplier and by doing so, they can find the most attractive price. It is however known from official statistics, and confirmed during the interviews, that switching suppliers is not a usual practice for vulnerable consumers. Some respondents do not know that it is allowed or where to start to do so. Not all of these vulnerable consumers know their consumption, let alone that changing suppliers is free of charge. Nor do they necessarily know whether they have a market tariff or the social tariff. For this, it is important for people living in poverty that these rights to the most advantageous tariffs are allocated automatically. The arrangements for enjoying the social tariff are complicated. They are different in the three Regions and we recommend a fine-tuning and harmonisation of the beneficiary groups. An often-heard proposal that goes further than this recommendation is the addition of a new criterion based on income. This could mean that people on low incomes that nowadays do not belong to one of the existing beneficiary groups could benefit from the social tariff. On the other hand, it means that certain persons that are entitled because of a certain social statute would lose the right if their income is above the threshold. A few years ago, the federal ombudsman made a proposition²⁵ just to enlarge the access to the social tariff for people who have a preferential reimbursement for health insurance. One of the criteria to qualify under this statute is being on a low income.

A final remark regarding prices is that the total price is far above the commodity price (i.e. the pure energy price without distribution network costs, taxes, levies and VAT). It would be fair to exclude the costs for public service obligations and costs for a green energy transition from the total price and finance these costs by means of public resources generated from income or corporate taxes. Another suggestion in this respect is similar, but applicable to a smaller group. Poor households would pay the pure energy price and be exempted from taxes and levies. For electricity, this commodity price represents 25% (in Flanders and Wallonia) and 30% (in the Brussels Region) of the price billed to the residential consumer, while for gas, the proportions range from 37% (Wallonia) to 43% (Brussels Region) and 48% (Flanders).²⁶

2.2.1. Recommendation 3 on the social tariff

3. To expand the target group of the social tariff

One of the most important policy measures to relieve energy poverty in Belgium is the so-called social tariff, a beneficial tariff for electricity and natural gas that is granted to certain target groups. These groups differ from one Region to another, and it is not always clear why certain groups are entitled and others are not. We recommend an expansion and a fine-tuning of the target group.

²⁵ https://www.ombudsmanenergie.be/sites/default/files/content/download/files/advies_14007.pdf (in Dutch) or <https://www.mediateurenergie.be/fr/node/597> (in French).

²⁶ <https://www.creg.be/nl/consumenten/prijzen-en-tarieven/hoe-de-energieprijs-opgebouwd> (in Dutch) or <https://www.creg.be/fr/consommateurs/prix-et-tarifs/comment-est-compose-le-prix-de-lenergie> (in French). Last update: October 2019).

Justification

The social tariff is the lowest tariff available on the market. It is calculated by the Commission Regulating Electricity and Gas (CREG) for the entire country. This policy measure helps people or families to pay their utility bills with favourable tariffs for gas and electricity for specific categories. Energy suppliers are compensated for the lower tariffs by the federal government that finances this operation by taxing all other non-eligible households. The following categories are eligible: 1) those entitled to a specific allowance of the Public Centre for Social Action (e.g. a living allowance), 2) the disabled receiving an allowance, 3) those receiving a specific allowance of the Public Service for Pensions or 4) social tenants in a building with collective heating. Three of the categories of beneficiaries find their origin in other social benefit conditions (1-3) and only one is directly related to a specific energy situation (4). The Brussels and Walloon parliaments have opted to expand this federal definition. On certain conditions – being in debt mediation, or in a collective debt arrangement, or in financial guidance, or receiving an improved reimbursement of the medical insurance (only in Brussels) – these persons can also be provided with the social tariff. In Flanders, this enlargement does not exist and it is not mentioned as an action point in the Energy Poverty Programme.²⁷

About 9% of Belgian households benefit from the social tariff.²⁸ This is far below the share of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion (20.3% in 2017, see Eurostat, 2019) and below the joint estimations of measured (14%) and hidden energy poverty (4%), according to Delbeke et al. (2017).

It was striking to notice that most interviewees are unaware of the existence of this measure. In most cases, as mentioned above, they do not know which tariff they pay.²⁹ This can be partly solved by putting the applied tariff more prominently on the invoice. A better solution is to allocate social rights automatically. Most often, this is the case but as the interviews illustrated, people who do not receive this social aid automatically will probably be unaware of the existence of their right. Only a minority of our respondents were very well informed – they knew that they are not entitled and regret that e.g. an unemployment benefit or a low income does not grant this social right.

Implementation

We recommend enlarging the group of beneficiaries. We advise the government of each Region to expand the right to the social tariff to those: 1) in debt mediation, 2) in collective debt arrangement, 3) receiving an improved reimbursement of the medical insurance (as done in the Brussels Region). An alternative is an adaptation of the definition of a protected customer by the federal government. The definition used by the Social Heating Fund could serve as an example. Since an enlargement of the target groups is financed by all other customers, it is useful to study the effects of certain scenarios on the invoices of others.

2.2.2. Recommendation 4 on the protection of consumers against sales malpractice

4. To prevent abuse when selling energy by door-to-door or phone

More severe sanctions should be set up to target subscription frauds: even if they are reported, there is generally no follow-up) to protect consumers already experiencing financial difficulties.

Justification

Door-to-door, internet and phone solicitations may cause higher energy bills for the most vulnerable groups in the population, as well as for other households. Companies that send

²⁷ In this Programme, there is one suggestion (action 17) concerning the improvement of the social tariff, namely in the case of central heating management.

²⁸ CREG, <http://www.creg.be/sites/default/files/assets/Prices/boordtabel.pdf>, consulted in September 2017.

²⁹ We could not check whether the interviewees were entitled or not. We rely on what people told us.

salespersons are acting with impunity according to our respondents. This opinion was corroborated by several users' committee members.

As an example, the following story was told by an interviewee, whom we call Jasmine. A woman came at her door to make her change her energy subscription but that woman only said that she needed the interviewee's signature to give her access to a lower tariff. It happened just after the birth of Jasmine's baby and she was feeling confused. She asked if she really had to sign, she did not feel like it, but the woman insisted. Then Jasmine realised that her energy invoice was even higher:

"I think many people are being duped, they think it's their consumption, but they are paying managing costs [for something] they did not even asked for!" (Jasmine, Brussels Region).

"I was searching on the internet to compare suppliers, and (...) for supplier [Z], you have to fill in an online form in order to know your monthly rate. Suddenly, I got a bill of 180 € and I didn't understand. (...) They said I had sealed a contract online. I said: "No, I was just looking, I didn't sign anything." (...) They never sent me a contract that I had to return with my signature, so I said I didn't have an agreement with them." (Anna-Maria, Flemish Region).

Implementation

An existing campaign against door-to-door scamming highlights this problem frequently met by people living in energy poverty. This campaign promotes a sticker that one can put on the mailbox to warn the prospectors that they are not welcome. If the door-to-door seller tries his/her luck anyway, it might be considered as aggressive marketing. But a campaign is not enough: companies that are misleading people by phone, internet or through door-to-door solicitation, with an unintended contract to a new energy supplier as a result, should be legally prosecuted and charged with high fine.

Intentionally misleading households should, in our opinion, be punished – for example when a (real or virtual) seller asks someone to sign and/or fill a form "to get more information", or "to prove that the door-to-door seller came by", forms that are not supposed to lead to a contract, when in fact, that is ultimately what happens. Showing false figures or pretending to speak in the name of a certain organisation or supplier when it is not the case are other examples of intentionally misleading. To offer a platform (online or via regular mailing) to collect complains is not enough, especially as companies can argue that it is only a dishonest seller acting without his/her employer's agreement on the marketing method. One way to deal with this is to decide on a certain number of complaints above which it would result into a global complaint (that could be led by a consumer organisation for instance) brought to Court. The possible consequences of that complaint could be considerable costs to pay for damages and/or public accusation of fraud in front of a judge with legal sanction. A label could also be created to bring to the fore companies with honest and reliable practices.

3. HOUSING POLICY

As to housing policy, a major concern is the private rental market. There is a range of options possible, varying from stimulating premiums for landlords who do a certain effort to retrofit or a more penalizing policy. Or, for instance, there could be an obligatory certificate of conformity re a minimum standard of energy efficiency of the dwelling. Three recommendations for a more efficient housing policy are grouped in this section.

3.1 Rental market

3.1.1. Recommendation 5 on a rental legislation that caps the rents

5. To institute stronger legislation on rents

We strongly recommend determining a cap for rent cost that matches the actual characteristics of the dwelling. Indeed, the absence of rent control is a problem that people in energy poverty mention as one of the main factors explaining or aggravating their energy

poverty situation. It was also pointed at by the social workers met during the field research in the Brussels Region.

Justification

Due to housing scarcity on the market, a dwelling will always be rented, no matter the price. And the rent is the most important expense in the budget of tenants. Therefore, this situation often constrains households to the “choice” of a cheaper rent over an energy efficient dwelling.

Various reasons can prevent someone to get a decent dwelling, even if it is against the law: for the people in the most precarious positions, pressure on the rental market is even more significant, due to discrimination on ethnic basis or on the origin of the income for example; some owners do not hesitate to take advantage of this discrimination, and illegal subleasing makes it difficult to detect and prevent that kind of business. This discrimination phenomenon had also been highlighted in a study conducted in the Brussels Region by researchers from the University of Gent and the Vrije Universiteit Brussels (Verhaeghe et al., 2017): “From the correspondence tests, it appears that there is huge discrimination against rental candidates with a North-African or a Sub-Sahara African name. In 23% of the rental advertisements, male candidates with a North-African name were systematically adversely treated in comparison with male candidates with a French name.” Moreover, according to the same study, real estate agents in Brussels Capital Region discriminate because of the source of income. In one third of the rental advertisements, the rental candidates with unemployment benefits were systematically adversely treated in comparison with rental candidates with a wage, even when the levels of both incomes were similar. Before tackling energy efficiency of a dwelling, one should make sure to secure first the access to a proper dwelling.

Implementation

A path forward proposed by several associations is the “rents guide” that aims to target unfair prices by showing what should be a reasonable rent according to the actual characteristics of the dwellings, including its energy performance certificate (see the indicative grid online for the Brussels Region).³⁰ To address this objective, we suggest that each Region work on a new indicative grid that would help to determine a reasonable price range according to the quality of the dwelling to rent.

An additional or alternative solution could be to initiate a declining rent (to some extent) as time goes on for dwellings with serious and persistent insulation and/or dampness problems and/or a worn-out heating system that are not retrofitted to be in line with standards. The constraint seems to be the only way for some landlords for whom renting is a source of financial revenue, but this revenue should be declining (with a minimum limit to be determined) if no effort is done to ensure the basic thermal comfort of their renters. This implies two more things: control and complaints. First, as a systematic control would be very expensive³¹, we recommend organising random controls to check that minimum standards of comfort are respected, and to publicise this quality control measure a lot (because making laws is not sufficient, since laws are known to be frequently violated). Secondly, the complaint system should be improved so people would not be discouraged by delays and procedures when it comes to claim about healthiness or security of their dwellings. The objective is that renters would no longer be forced to pay excessive prices due to the rental market and lack of regulation on rents, affording them the fundamental right to be housed. It also could prevent forcing people with low budgets to rent far from their job and/or their children’s schools in relegation zones because of inaccessible prices, and allow more people to have higher life comfort. If declining rents were adopted, it might also encourage some owners to improve their real property to the best benefit of all.

³⁰ <http://www.equipespopulaires.be/etude/renegociier-les-loyers-abusifs-decembre-2016/>

³¹ As several users’ committee members have highlighted it.

But there are possible negative effects given the costs associated with this measure. One should be careful with the financial repercussions that this measure could have: a higher rent if the owner has to pay (partly or entirely) renovation expenses; or, if the State is taking over all the extra costs (to hire inspectors etc.), there is a risk that one or several federal budget would be diminished. This is why we advise organising random controls with great media cover in order to optimise their impact.

3.2 Housing quality

3.2.1. Recommendation 6 on standards of insulation in the law on healthy housing

6. To incorporate insulation standards into the existing law on healthy housing

To fight energy poverty at the source, standards on insulation and energy efficiency of the heating system should be incorporated into the existing law on healthy housing.

Justification

Our interviews show that poor insulation in dwellings is a frequent problem encountered by both tenants and owners, in both social and public housing markets.

Implementation

Bonuses already exist to help house renovation and changing heating system for lower budget owners, but few people use them: they are not well known, landlords do not have the tendency to invest in home quality for their tenants, and the procedures tend to be too complicated. However, interviews with landlords show that positive outcomes may happen when owners have good advice and professional help to get a renovation bonus and/or when they can rely on the positive experience of an acquaintance. That is why much more means should be invested on campaigns and on renovation advisers who would help owners with low budgets and/or low interest (because they are not living in the building that should be renovated) to go through all the administrative steps.

If living in retrofitted dwellings, renters would then be able to pay less to warm properly their dwelling, with positive impacts on their consumption and therefore on the environment but also on their bills. Furthermore, healthier dwellings, and thus healthier people, would have positive impacts on the social security system, as demonstrated by the study of Eurofound (2016). But a possible negative effect would be a higher rent charged so the owner would cover his or her renovation costs. This is the reason why this recommendation should come with the support of the State to limit rent inflation (for example with an improved bonus system).

Quite a lot of possibilities exist to promote dwelling renovation, such as tax deductions, energy and renovation grants, green loans, social insulation projects for renters, free energy audits, etc. It would be useful in further research to collect and analyse experiences and examples from social workers who try to help their “users” but clash against the limits of the system. Is it purely a matter of income? A matter of available working time? A matter of convincing landlords? Or not knowing where to refer to for information? Where and why do they find themselves stuck despite the existing policy measures?

3.2.2. Recommendation 7 on unsecure or unhealthy dwellings

7. To shift the risk of a condemnation of a dwelling away from the tenant

Existing policy measures aimed at an improved quality of rental houses are based on the concepts of reward on the one hand (premiums, guidance...) and punishment on the other (the house can be condemned when it is considered no longer safe to live in). However, in this latter case, the tenant does face the highest risk since there is no guarantee that an alternative dwelling is available. We recommend a series of possible interventions to protect tenants who find themselves in this situation.

Justification

As our respondents stated, and as we could notice during our interviews at the home of the interviewees, some dwellings were in a very bad state.

Some deficiencies had to do with energy management and efficiency, others were more related to the general construction. We saw windows with woodworms, windows without glazing, and windows that could not be opened, or closed properly; water taps that were dripping and in one case, even constantly running; filthy and (very) outdated bathrooms; walls, ceilings and corners with mould; houses with no insulation of the walls, floor, and roof; weird electric sockets and even an electrical heater next to a shower. We had testimonies about unstable terraces and front walls, and from a woman who fell with one leg through a wooden floor; about Eternit (a type of fibre cement containing asbestos) panels; about stoves with bad ventilation, and much more. We recorded bad experiences with slumlords in all three Regions and saw a small two-room “apartment” that was let for over 500 € in Antwerp.

So how does it come that these dwellings may still be rented out despite all these imperfections and despite the existence of legislation protecting tenants and legal requirements? A lack of income (e.g. someone in debt mediation) can certainly be a reason why people are unable to move, but it is clearly not the sole cause.

Interviewees knew from the beginning that their dwelling was not energy efficient, but they simply had no other option. Two respondents had been on the street for a few months and they clearly stated: “this never again”. Certainly, families with kids did not want to risk ending up in the streets.

Some people explicitly mentioned the “Catch-22 situation” they were stuck in: to stay in their house is bad, but to leave it may be even worse. They could start a condemnation procedure, but the consequence of a positive decision is uncertain. Emergency social housing is limited in time and the private market is full. The next quote illustrates the fear with which people are struggling, whether or not the figure cited is correct:

“The Public Centre for Social Welfare/Action of [his city] suggested to me, as well as the social housing company, to start a condemnation procedure, in order to get priority for a social housing unit. I was informed on the risk that nine times out of ten, it would not be accepted, and I could become homeless.” (Paul, Flemish Region).

All these findings lead to the conclusion that 1) houses in the lower rental-costs segments are (very) often of (very) poor construction quality and (very) poor energy efficiency, 2) the shortage of dwellings for low-income people makes that even worse as these dwellings of bad quality can easily be rented out. Moreover, these poor-quality dwellings will not improve or “disappear” automatically by some kind of market selection and 3) this shortage places people in a powerless position: the lack of alternatives and the fear of ending up homeless mean that people do not “chose” a home, but have to “accept” whatever they can get.

Implementation

We recommend that the regional and federal governments find solutions to shift the risk of a condemnation of a dwelling away from the tenant. There are some possible pathways to achieve this. A bigger housing stock is crucial. Therefore, governments should give absolute priority to large interventions in the private rental market. The financial resources that are now reserved for owners could be reoriented towards tenants. Secondly, governments have an important role to play in the increase of the housing stock, namely the social one. The share of social housing in Belgium is very low compared to neighbouring countries. Both pathways will enlarge the market and provide tenants with more options. Thirdly, the existing mechanisms of condemnation and fines intended to prevent landlords from letting obviously deficient houses are apparently insufficient and should be reconsidered. Finally, improved safety mechanisms for tenants should make it more common for competent authorities to

decide that a certain dwelling is indeed inhabitable. The tenant who takes the risk to start a procedure should not be punished for his or her courage.

4. SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Besides our suggestions to improve regulations or to create new ones, we also have some recommendations aimed at building from the best mechanisms of existing structures and dynamics. Fieldwork and literature showed us that a certain number of initiatives were quite positive and we thought about how to expand them and how to improve local networks and their visibility.

4.1 Synergy among social workers

Social workers often reported to us their aspiration to reach more people with their services, knowing that many potential beneficiaries are not aware of the existence of certain structures.

4.1.1. Recommendation 8a on social-work coordination

8a. To better coordinate Public Centres for Social Welfare/Action and NGOs

The Public Centre for Social Welfare/Action is the institution of reference for fighting against poverty and, consequently, for fighting against energy poverty. However, they are facing an increasing number of households living in a precarious energy situation but with diminishing resources to do so. More funding of social coordination on the local scale between the Public Centre for Social Welfare/Action and all public and private services related to energy poverty by the federal and regional governments is therefore particularly recommended.

Justification

Our interviews show that social assistance is essential for overcoming the numerous adversities engendered by unequal social situations. Invested by the federal and regional authorities in a series of missions, the Public Centre for Social Welfare/Action is and remains the last protection of weakened citizens. As for energy, the missions deal with information on various policy instruments as well as preventive and curative support for households. Social workers and energy tutors offer their services inside the Public Centre for Social Welfare/Action but also at home for persons in need.

However, these Public Centres for Social Welfare/Action are confronted with a double problem that hampers their proper functioning: the increasing number of households living in energy poverty, but without increase in the human resources allocated for social action. This problematic situation has a series of negative impacts both for citizen in social emergency and for the working conditions of a staff increasingly put under pressure.

“In two years, I saw (my social worker) only three times. Only three meetings of half an hour in two years!” (Lucie, Brussels Region).

“The public centre for social action is saturated with requests. From my point of view, my file is urgent but according to their criteria, they have piles of emergencies. Now I am waiting for the answer” (José, Walloon Region).

People in energy poverty are in situations that can worsen quickly. It is therefore necessary to provide them with the most efficient service possible, while relieving the burden on social workers. One of the possible solutions at the local level is the reinforcement/creation of a networked social action between the Public Centre for Social Welfare/Action and the other public services and non-profit organisations active in the field of energy poverty.

Implementation

We recommend that the federal and regional authorities provide better funding to the Public Centres for Social Welfare/Action to enable them to create or strengthen social coordination at a local scale in order to cope with the growing phenomenon of energy poverty.

4.1.2. Recommendation 8b on “Energy Clusters”

8b. To encourage the creation of “Energy Clusters”

For people living in energy poverty, information on energy and housing can be particularly complex to collect. Organizing this into “Energy Clusters”, a grouping of services dedicated to energy and housing, each with its own specificity but collaborating transversally, could reach more the concerned public.

Justification

There are numerous testimonies in our research that show that people have difficulties to know about or to understand social tariffs, invoices, or steps for getting energy premiums.

“The Energy Cell really did what was necessary for me to be able to benefit from an advantageous rate (for gas and electricity) because I am entitled to the reduction for modest incomes. I was not even aware that I could benefit from it” (Martine, Walloon Region).

“You already have to dedicate so much energy to how can we eat as cheap as possible, how can we live as cheap as possible, how we can get energy as cheap as possible... So that often, for those things, you don't have energy left anymore. And I think that's terrible and that you have to ask for everything yourself. (...) they assume that you know everything. And yes, if you don't know it, that's bad luck for you” (Renate, Flemish Region).

“I was really stressed (...) without the “energy desk”, I think, I don't know how people are doing it, it's really difficult [to go through a renovation bonus procedure]” (Rose, Brussels Region).

Struggling for a decent living, searching for information via Internet require energy and competences. Furthermore, public centres for social action/welfare sometimes suffer from a stigmatising image and some people do not ask for help or are ashamed to enter there.

Implementation

Encouraging collaborative work or even a grouping among social services dealing with housing and energy poverty can create a “snowball” effect, that is to say, accelerating and improving significantly the support of persons in energy poverty. Therefore, “Energy Clusters” that bring together specialised services in the various aspects of energy poverty should be further encouraged. These services would have complementary missions and would operate transversally to determine a common path of support and accompaniment of the person in a symbolically more neutral place than the public centres for social action/welfare.

4.2 Proactive approaches and mutual help

4.2.1. Recommendation 9 on developing the capacity of action of the energy poor

9. To develop the capacity for action of people living in energy poverty

The feeling of powerlessness is present among people living in energy poverty. It hampers their coping, including (but not only) their search for information. On the other side, social workers have the expertise to improve the daily life of people living in energy poverty. Policies should encourage new methods of social support aiming at restoring the capacity for action of people living in energy poverty.

Justification

As shown by our interviews (see Chapter 6, section 5.2.4) and by our quantitative analysis (see Chapter 5, section 2.4), a number of people living in energy poverty feel powerless. Moreover, society asks them to be autonomous but does not often give them the possibility of being truly autonomous. Indeed, they depend on their energy provider or on their owner who impose rules or their own views on things.

Many of our interviewees acknowledge the significant help provided by social workers. However, others have had a bad experience where they felt negatively judged, and above all, ashamed and deprived of their own capacity of action.

"I went to see the social worker (of a Public centre for social action) ... sometimes, I need a helping hand. "Oh, you exaggerate, you already came six months ago". It's not like if I go there every week either, I do not ask for charity (...). That's why I do not want to see her anymore, even though I know that I have rights. She said: "You just have to resell your car". First, my car is 16 years old, I do not see how much I would have. "It is to save insurance and tax circulation" (...) I answered "I still prefer to be homeless and live in my car than to find myself stuck [home], because without a car, how would I find a job?" (Anna, Walloon Region).

Julie qualified her home as a "dump", and do not feel understood by her social worker as she usually only says her: "you can condemn [your housing company], but if you don't have another house within six months, you'll end up on the street" (Julie, Flemish Region).

We have noticed that information, good practices, and knowledge are easily exchanged in an equal-to-equal relationship in which everyone keeps control of his/her life.

"That's what I was saying to my neighbour: "Listen, you too, you've to go for it, go on because we'll never have this chance again [to benefit from] a "neighbourhood contract" (...) now I know how to do it (...) so we took the lead with my neighbour" (Nadia, Brussels Region).

We also recommend an accompaniment by social workers who would consider people in energy poverty as full partners with the expertise to act on their life. Two illustrative methods follow. First, the Networks of Reciprocal Exchanges of Knowledge, co-founded by Claire Héber-Suffrin (2011), are primarily based on the positive reciprocity of knowledge and learning in a collective framework. Second, the Federation of the Walloon Public Centres for Social Welfare/Action has developed an action research project in 2009 focused on "developing the agency for people and communities", in partnership with the University Laval in Quebec. Yann le Bossé (2012) defines this process as follows: "a process whereby people access together or separately a greater opportunity to act on what is important to themselves, their loved ones or the group to which they identify" (Le Bossé, 2012).

Implementation

These new methods of individual and collective social support could be set up by any Public Centre for Social Welfare/Action or a non-profit organisation working in the field of energy. A dedicated budget allowed by the federal and regional authorities for these specific innovative projects would also help to set them up and to reach a better-targeted population.

The methodological aspects of this kind of social support project are of great importance. It is necessary to ensure that the collective animation and/or the individual accompaniment do not deviate towards a disguised social control where a teacher-student relationship or dominant-dominated relationship is established. It is therefore essential to respect the basic rules governing the functioning of such a methodology, such as a reciprocally respectful relationship, and to ensure that these activities are carried out by duly trained persons.

5. SUMMARY

As a concluding reminder, our nine recommendations justified above are thus as follows.

1. To set up or improve a system of minimal gas supply in every Belgian municipality during the winter months;
2. To recognise the right to energy as a fundamental right and to add it in Article 23 of the Belgian Constitution;
3. To provide more support and information to people in energy poverty to choose the most advantageous energy supply contract and tariff, to expand the groups benefiting from a social tariff (e.g. by adding an income criterion) and to automatically allocate the social tariff to those who have a right to it;
4. To prevent abuse by those selling energy door-to-door or by phone;
5. To establish a mechanism for controlling rents, such as a stronger legislation or a rents guide showing what is a 'reasonable' rent according to the actual characteristics of dwellings, notably including its energy performance;
6. To include minimum standards of insulation and of energy efficiency in the law on housing healthiness;
7. To shift the risk of a condemnation of a dwelling away from the tenant;
8. To develop and financially encourage synergy among social workers;
9. To adopt new practices of social support aimed at restoring the capacity for action of people living in energy poverty.

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