

Workshop 18: **Proactive social action: a strategy to empower people and build community: brief report**

Inclusion and participation in society have become fundamental tools to enable progress in the fight against poverty. Social workers have to engage by moving into the field and they have to become part of the community. This is very important, as not all the needy find their way to social services. This phenomenon is known as social under-protection¹.

One of the best answers to social under-protection is pro-active action: the service provider undertakes the necessary steps to ensure that everyone entitled also receives the benefits.

We have highlighted 4 examples of this method in Antwerp, Mechelen, Bruges/Ostend and Ghent, with an overview of ideas to take into account, including critical success factors.

Overview:

1. Antwerp (510.000 inh.): Active detection of child poverty through unpaid school bills

Faced with an outstanding balance of > 1 million of unpaid school bills, the schools of Antwerp entered into partnership with the social services. The school lists the families, which are then visited by the social workers of the social services. Based on the findings, appropriate support, referral or a personal assistance programme is offered. In addition, the social worker can organize follow-up through the school's social service team. The project team also formulates policy advice with respect to invoicing strategies, social rates and general social support services for the entire educational network of the city of Antwerp.

2. Bruges (117.000 inh.)/Ostend (70.300): Creating a network around elderly people

People who get older, often lose contact with friends and family. Building networks and a proactive approach in the community can get elderly people out of their isolation. Community centres play an important role in this approach: people can go there for a meal, a talk or help. In addition social workers, volunteers, key persons, ... share experiences, and plan actions to find lonely people who need help and long for social contacts.

One of the projects is to teach elderly people to work with a tablet. After modification this tablet can easily be used to search for relevant information, to apply for services, to get in contact with social workers and with friends

¹ In the literature and debate in Belgium three different perspectives on social under-protection can be distinguished Steenssens, K., 2014a, Lokaal proactief handelen in de strijd tegen onderbescherming. Presentatie op de studiedag 'Iedereen beschermd' van Samenlevingsopbouw Vlaanderen, Ghent, 28 november 2014

and family (skype). Unemployed people help the elderly people to use this tablet, and are also a confidential adviser, a bridge to social services and other inhabitants of the community. These unemployed people attend an employment program and get support, so they can develop their skills and get a regular job.

3. Gent (251.000 inh.): 'Social guides'

A lot of people living in poverty are not able to overcome practical obstacles in accessing and taking up their social rights (eg certain premiums or benefits). The social services in Ghent recruit and train known clients so they can help and support other, less self-reliant clients, for example in helping them in taking up their social rights. To become 'social guides' the candidate clients receive an intense training trajectory to enable them to give active and practical support to those clients who need a helping hand and listening ear on their journey.

4. Mechelen (83.000 inhabitants): GO-project

In Mechelen hundred families live in inhumane conditions with serious problems in terms of hygiene, health and safety. These families are generally known by several aid organizations and the police, however nobody can get a hand on the situation. Mechelen has established a new team in 2014 of three social workers and each of them guide 4 to 5 families intensively. They help these families with the different aspects of daily life. This is done in close cooperation with the police. This approach is very labor intensive and tough, but delivers results where previously non were possible.

Each of the 4 examples of local proactive social action made a small evaluation of individual project.

In the conclusions of the workshop we made an overall evaluation of proactive action.

Questions and remarks raised by the participants:

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- It would be better if rights and benefits were given automatically. Everybody could agree, but taking into account that the Belgian governmental system is very complex, these projects remain necessary. The local authorities have to be creative in the way they deal with problems.
 - Participants admired the integral approach of the projects and the fact they got financial and political space to experiment.
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- A big need to exchange good practices between countries, within one country, between regions, within a region
- A big need for financial means in order to get structural changes
- A participant raised a question about the need for a more universal service delivery model.