

Isabelle Lacourt

“What are your plans?” The socio-occupational integration of Brussels’ welfare offices’ clients

Translated from French by Gabrielle Leyden

Abstract

Isabelle Lacourt describes and analyses close up the socio-occupational integration (SOI) work done in several welfare offices (CPAS-OCMWs) in the Brussels-Capital Region. In so doing, she pays particular attention to the schemes that have been set up and the tools and methods that are specific to these offices. She starts by reviewing the history of these welfare offices within local administrations and points out the linkage with the “active welfare state” benchmark. She then shows the concrete impacts that the rising importance of these SOI duties has had on the welfare offices’ internal organisation, to wit, the creation of SOI departments, their connections with basic social services, the ways they function, the specific difficulties inherent in SOI, the need to draw up a plan with each client, and the long-term relationships to which this leads.

Isabelle Lacourt is a researcher working with Université libre de Bruxelles’ Research Group on Public Action (GRAP). Her PhD thesis – Normes et Catégories de l’action sociale. Une approche ethnographique de l’attribution de droits sociaux au sein de CPAS bruxellois (Social action standards and categories: An ethnographic approach to the granting of social benefits within some Brussels welfare offices) – is in its final stages.
* www.ulb.ac.be/soco/grap/

Introduction

The role and missions of Belgium’s “Public Social Action Centres” (CPAS-OCMW) or welfare offices in the area of socio-occupational integration (SOI) have grown steadily over the past ten years. The CPAS-OCMWs, which were set up to guarantee human dignity on the local level, must now develop true job placement expertise. This trend stems from the inclusion of social policies under the banner of the *active welfare state*, a well-known notion today, that assumes that the welfare system’s role is no longer limited to guaranteeing benefits, but has expanded to stimulate proactive behaviour on the part of its “users” or “clients”, especially when it comes to looking for work. At the same time, the economic and social context has made these job placement tasks increasingly difficult. The welfare offices are thus caught between their integration roles and the real possibilities that are open to their clients on the job market.

This tension is definitely even more palpable in the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR) than in the rest of the country. A whole series of characteristics effective creates a special working environment for Brussels’ welfare offices. First, the BCR currently suffers from one of the key problems of large urban centres, namely, a high concentration of poor and excluded people. As Vandermotten *et al.* (2006, p. 8) observe, “...the new forms of immigration of poor populations in the larger cities in which they are concentrated are looking for the solidarity that ethnic niches can provide. Cities are often places of refuge for those who are excluded from a much more flexible contemporary economy”. Next, another feature of Brussels that is specific to cities is the high proportion of one-person households and young people. We must also bear in mind some problems that are more specific to Brussels, namely, the capital’s increasing impoverishment as affluent families move out to the suburbs and peripheral areas (Vandermotten *et al.*, 2006); the high percentage of Brussels residents of foreign descent; the high cost of housing; and the specific requirements of the job market (bilingualism first and foremost). So, to give a striking figure, 55% of the jobs offered in Brussels are filled by non-Brussels residents. This is explained

Contact:

Isabelle Lacourt:
+32 (0)2/650 49 78 & +32 (0)475/79 55 36
ilacourt@ulb.ac.be
Michel Hubert (ed. in chief):
+32 (0)2/211 78 53 & +32 (0)485/416764
hubert@fusl.ac.be

by the low levels of qualifications in Brussels or, at least, by the gap between the levels that employers demand and the levels provided by the workers' training (Health and Social Affairs Observatory, 2006). The unemployment rate in the BCR is slightly above 20%, which places the region above the national average. Finally, there is one other important feature: a high concentration of illegal aliens in the BCR.

The study described in this article revolves around five Brussels welfare offices, those of Anderlecht, the City of Brussels, Ixelles/Elsene, Molenbeek-Saint-Jean/Sint Jan-Molenbeek, and Saint-Gilles. Besides the fact that they are located in the BCR, all of them, except for Ixelles, must meet the requests of clients who live in what is known as Brussels' "poor crescent". This "poor crescent" is characterised by a very young population, a high concentration of first- and second-generation Moroccan and Turkish immigrants, a high unemployment rate, and a low-skilled population (40% of the population has no school-leaver's certificate). What is more, the health and social atlas (Health and Social Affairs Observatory, 2006) shows that residents in this crescent suffer more from hiring discrimination, for at equal skills levels, the unemployment rate in the "poor crescent" is systematically higher (Health and Social Affairs Observatory, 2006, p.101).

The aim of this text is to provide a microsociological approach to the inclusion work that these welfare offices do. More specifically, the focus is on the schemes, tools, and working methods that were developed in the course of these social and occupational integration activities. The idea was not to draw up an exhaustive description of SOI in Brussels' welfare offices, but rather to understand what their integration work consists of. What exactly does it cover? How exactly does it fit in to the welfare offices' *day to day* work?

The following is based on research that I have been conducting under the *Prospective research for Brussels* programme since 2004¹. The general aim of this research is to understand how the welfare offices take in social assistance policies and how the social workers actually make use of them in dealing with the offices' clients. The focus of our study is rooted in several ethnographic studies² that analysed administrations on the basis of dealings between administrative personnel and clients. This research angle banks on the fact that taking a "detour" through "*in situ* work" enables one to grasp the more general transformations of public policies. From this standpoint, the method that we used consisted of direct observation of client-staff encounters within three departments of the welfare offices, namely, the general social services, SOI, and debt mediation departments. Prior to this observation phase we conducted semi-directed interviews of the departments' key personnel. We also set up group analysis sessions³ with the department heads and social workers from

¹ The title of this research is "L'aide sociale en région de Bruxelles-Capitale : étude comparative au niveau de sa mise en application dans les CPAS" (Social assistance in the Brussels-Capital Region : A comparative study of its implementation in welfare offices.)

² The two volumes most representative of this sociological research current in the French-speaking world are definitely those of Vincent Dubois (1999) and Jean-Marc Weller (1999).

³ These sessions were inspired by the method developed and disseminated by Luc Van Campenhoudt: (Van Campenhoudt *et al.*, 2005).

two of the welfare offices under study. These sessions took place in June and September 2006.

The article consists of two parts. The first part presents the various elements that make it possible to situate SOI in the welfare offices' history and the links that can be made between these tasks and the active welfare state "benchmark". I shall also describe the specific organisation of SOI work in the welfare offices that were studied. The second part takes a closer look at the particularities of integration work in these welfare offices and, more specifically, the time frames of this integration work and the importance of the notion of a *plan*. Finally, the quotations that are not followed by a specific reference are excerpts from interviews or direct observations made between June 2004 and September 2006 inclusive.

1. SOI within Brussels' welfare offices: contextual elements and organisational aspects

While CPAS-OCMW is a household word in Belgium, the history of the welfare offices, diversity of tasks placed upon them, diversity of services that they offer, and their inner workings are relatively unknown to the majority of the population⁴.

1.1. SOI: its history and ties to the active welfare state.

The CPAS-OCMWs are public administrations responsible for dispensing minimum income payments and social assistance in the broad sense. Their "clients" are a weakened segment of the population who are temporarily ineligible for social security. These administrations were instituted in 1976. At the time, they were called "Public Social Assistance Centres" (see below as well). In creating these administrations, Belgium's lawmakers wanted to finalise the break with public assistance that had begun in 1974 with the creation of a right to a minimum income. The CPAS-OCMWs thus took over from the Public Assistance Commissions (Commissions d'assistance publique-Commissies voor Openbare Onderstand) or "CAPs-COOs" that had existed since 1925. As P. Georis writes, with the CPAS-OCMWs "...we shall leave the 'let's help the poor to get out of their sorry lot on a case by case basis' way of thinking, based on standards that are not truly uniform from one municipality to the next, to embrace the logic of entitlements to be granted in the same way for all the country's citizens, regardless of where they live" (Georis, 1994, p. 65). As a result, granting assistance to the people became an objective process through the creation of categories setting strict entitlement criteria, but also through the expertise of social workers with specific skills and methods who were tasked with appraising the applicants' needs, especially through the use of social investigations⁵.

The notion of integration through employment already existed when the centres were created in 1976. Indeed, the organic law on welfare offices included the pos-

⁴ Moreover, the welfare offices recently held some "open house days" to present the diverse range of services that they offer to the public.

⁵ Unlike the CAPs, the CPAS-OCMWs are each required to hire at least one social worker.

sibility for the CPAS-OCMWs to find jobs for their clients and even to become their employers for the time it would take for the beneficiaries to benefit from social security coverage once again and thus exit the social assistance circuit. This was the famous “Article 60” measure. However, while this employment strand was already present when the CPAS-OCMWs were instituted⁶, it was not the offices’ main priority and was not intended to dynamise beneficiaries as strongly as it is today. At the time, and for financial reasons, few welfare offices actually used this measure (Rucquoi, 2002). Consequently, the State focused on developing employment incentives as a way to activate public assistance (Rucquoi, 2002). The first major boost to develop SOI work was given in 1991 by the Brussels-Capital Region, which urged the welfare offices to establish partnerships with the Brussels Regional Employment Office (ORBEM-BGDA) in order to increase social assistance beneficiaries’ chances of becoming gainfully employed once again. New means were given to the welfare offices under these partnerships, especially in terms of staffing. Other programmes and measures would follow to bolster the means at the welfare offices’ disposal to conduct SOI work. These included the “spring programme” of 2000 and the law on the right to social integration that was adopted in 2002 (see below). These means thus helped SOI work to grow and spread within the welfare offices.

New ties were thus created between the Brussels Regional Employment Office and welfare offices, thereby attesting to the importance given to the beneficiaries’ socio-occupational integration. A good example of these partnerships and their reinforcement can be found in a federal measure taken in 2004, whereby the welfare offices received a subsidy to set up individualised support plans for clients who looked for work. This decree states that these plans are part of a “bridging partnership” involving the CPAS-OCMW and the ORBEM-BGDA and/or the latter’s accredited partners⁷. We should remember that these employment office-welfare office partnerships and the growing importance of the offices’ socio-occupational integration tasks belong to the active welfare state benchmark. This concept refers to an “enterprising’ State that aims for a society of gainfully employed individuals without giving up the Welfare State’s ambition [...]. It is no longer a matter solely of guaranteeing income, but also one of increasing the possibilities of social shareholding”. (Speech by Federal Minister for Social Affairs and Pensions Frank Vandebroucke, 1999)

This activation of social assistance extends to the entire set of government policies and schemes, “which enable, encourage, even force people to be active” (Flinker, 2003, p.243). Activation is subtended by the idea that “levelling inequalities in society is no longer a matter of repairing, indemnifying, or granting social benefits passively, but of banking on the chances of access by generating involvement through the duty to participate” (Vrancken, 2002, p.51). The concept of activation is inseparable from a certain “rational compensation”, that is, the individual who shows her/himself to be active by searching for a job, taking a training course, resuming her/his studies, solving her/his drinking problems, etc., in a word, who tries to make a go of it, does something *in exchange* for the assistance that s/he receives.

⁶ Even before then, since the 1925 law setting up the Public Assistance Commissions provided for assistance to be granted in the form of a wage (Libert, 2006).

⁷ Royal Decree of 23 September 2004.

When it comes to the CPAS-OCMWs, this activation logic effectively materialised in 1993 with the implementation of the “emergency programme for a society of greater solidarity”⁸. Henceforward, the CPAS-OCMWs had to draw up integration pacts with all beneficiaries under 25 years of age. These “contracts” had to be signed within three months of receiving the minimum income and had to include an individualised plan. This plan had to include “a commitment on the part of the young person who manifests her/his will to ‘take charge of her/himself’ and to make progress compared with the current situation” (Georis, 1994, p. 74). This assistance activation and contractualisation trend was reinforced and confirmed by the law of 26 May 2002 instituting a right to social integration. With this law, the very name of the assistance being granted changed, as the right to a minimum income was replaced by a right to social integration. The law stipulates that the CPAS-OCMW has three major instruments to guarantee this right to social integration, namely, employment, an integration income, and an individualised social integration plan or ISIP. These three tools may be combined and must be used in a personalised way. As in the 1993 solidarity law, the ISIP targets young people between the ages of 18 and 25 in particular. A subjective right to employment is even foreseen for this target group. This law also gives new meaning to the notion of “willingness to work”, which is “no longer based on the evidence, but on an active attitude on the part of the applicant and CPAS-OCMW when it comes to employment. The attitudes of CPAS-OCMWs that content themselves with demanding affidavits from employers no longer meet the new law’s objectives. The CPAS-OCMW must also help the claimant to find a job. [...] Henceforward, the burden of proof of the willingness to work is no longer borne by the claimant alone...” (Law of 26 May 2002 concerning the right to social integration and Royal Decree of 11 July 2002 instituting a general regulation on the right to social integration). This idea of client activation was further expressed very concretely in the new name given to the CPAS-OCMWs in February 2004, which became Public Social Action (instead of Assistance) Centres.

Once integration became one of the CPAS-OCMWs’ main tasks, it appeared necessary to concentrate this work in specialised departments. Little by little the CPAS-OCMWs created their own internal SOI departments, which in turn split off from what was then dubbed “general” or “baseline” social services (referred to as BSSs hereinafter)⁹ and employed social workers specialised in SOI or “integration officers”. These people have as a rule the same qualifications as the social workers providing BSSs, that is, social work degrees. However, we find increasingly that these officers are selected on the basis of more selective criteria that are not necessarily used in BSS hiring. So, the SOI department heads often look for university graduates in psychology (especially for plan development – see below) and sociology, and social workers with experience in getting people back into the mainstream and into work. Overall, several SOI departments tend to hire more four-year college graduates rather than junior college graduates and the like. In addition, the Brussels Regional Employment Office (ORBEM-BGDA) offers training courses for integration officers. The rise of specific SOI training courses in short-course establishments of higher

⁸ “*Programme d’urgence pour une société plus solidaire*” - Law of 12 January 1993.

⁹ These findings are based on the field work done in five Brussels CPAS-OCMWs. They cannot be generalised out of hand to all of Brussels’ CPAS-OCMWs. However, various interviews that we conducted and documents in the “gray literature” show that it’s a good bet that this segmentation of labour is to be found in all of the CPAS-OCMWs in Brussels.

education (“junior colleges”) attests to the growing professionalisation of this field of activity.

1.2. Clarifications of some organisational aspects of SOI work in the CPAS-OCMWs studied.

These departments' internal organisation usually corresponds to the ORBEM-BGDA's integration pathway. This pathway is defined as “a planned, structured process comprising regularly assessed steps” (ORBEM, 1999, p.3). The length of the pathway is linked to each client's individualised plan. More specifically, this pathway consists of four phases: ① development of an integration plan, ② pre-training, ③ skills training, and ④ getting into work. The pathway is not necessarily linear, for phases ② and ③ are optional, whereas phases ① and ④ are compulsory. Moreover, returning to an earlier phase is always possible.

The SOI departments' internal organisation can be described schematically as follows: The CPAS-OCMWs in the study generally divided their SOI departments into two major cells, one composed of the integration officers in charge of plan development and the other composed of integration officers in charge of guiding and supporting clients who already have their plans. The first cell is in charge of clients who do not know what they want to do, who hesitate between training and employment, “who are in the drink, in a haze”, in the words of one SOI department head. The clients who know what they want to do, who have developed their “career” plans, are managed by the second cell. The latter manages the search for training institutes, training cost reimbursements, and working under Article 60; helps the clients with their job searches, writing up their résumés, writing letters of application; and so on. The tasks themselves may be redistributed differently, according to the office. Thus, for example, some SOI departments are subdivided into sub-departments, each of which manages a specific phase of the integration pathway.

Moreover, “guidance” or “support” integration officers within these departments look after and support clients who are put to work under “Article 60”. These officers are in charge of managing problems or difficulties that may arise in the workplace as well as the administrative questions surrounding the process of putting these people to work.

Some CPAS-OCMWs even include “youth cells” responsible for overseeing the clients who are under 25 within their SOI departments. This “youth” specialisation stems from the 2002 law on the right to social integration, which stresses the need to follow up young people and makes the signing of an integration pact compulsory for this target group.

1.3. Directing clients to the SOI department.

When a client asks the CPAS-OCMW for help, s/he is first received by the BSS section, which analyses the request, grants financial assistance, and oversees this assistance. All clients are thus seen by the BSS staff, but not all of them are referred on to the SOI department(s). The referral decision is taken by the BSS social workers when they feel that the client is ready to enter an integration process. More

specifically, although there is no formal rule in this regard, the SOI department accepts clients only under certain conditions. The general condition is to have a relatively stable social situation, which excludes housing problems, family problems, child custody problems, chronic health problems, problems of addiction, and so on. In other words, and in the words of one of our interviewees (the head of an SOI department), excluding "...all crisis situations that can cause absenteeism or dropping out". Clients who have such problems are thus urged to deal with them in the BSSs.

So, "admission" to the SOI departments is governed by specific measures¹⁰. This matter is usually settled during collective information sessions run by one or several integration officers. The purpose of these sessions is to explain the department's aims and how it works to the clients, but they also give the SOI departments a chance to ascertain whether the clients sent to them by BSSs are effectively ready to enter an inclusion process and belong to the department's target population. Such client selection is often the source of disagreements, even disputes, between departments. On the one hand, the integration officers denounce the premature referrals of certain clients to the SOI departments. On the other hand, the BSS staff are not always aware of the particularities of inclusion work and do not always understand why "their clients are rejected" by these departments. Indeed, given that the recent social policies stress the need to get people into work, or at least to reintegrate them into society through employment, the BSS people do not hesitate to send their clients to the SOI departments and, what is more, to make this a condition for extending their assistance. This obviously poses problems as to how voluntary the employment orientation is (see below). Here is what one SOI department head has to say in this regard:

If I look at how the SOI department has changed, it is true that in the beginning people were free to choose to come or not, and then they were forced to come. Now there is this law on availability for work that can be interpreted in a very, very different way, and before that there was also...since I've been with the department throughout...and even a certain time when we were told [by the social assistance adviser], "No, the person doesn't even have the choice to work; he must accept the job", which for me is already...That's a sure-fire recipe for failure. If people must accept any proposition, you are heading for disaster...

2. The particularities of inclusion work

We have seen how the growing importance of the SOI's tasks has given rise to specific arrangements and organisational structures. These changes have influenced the social work that the offices do and fostered the development of new professional practices within the SOI departments.

¹⁰ These referrals are contingent on a process of categorising specific publics that relies on the clients' subjectivity. These categories thus stray somewhat from the "classic" administrative and legal categories of aid beneficiaries. This subject is covered in an article that is slated for publication in 2007, *i.e.*, LACOURT, I. (in press), "Des catégories d'action publique à l'épreuve de la subjectivité", in CANTELLI, F and J-L GENARD (Eds.), *Action publique et subjectivité*, Paris, LGDJ.

2.1. *The integration officers' tasks and tools*

Several documents list the integration officers' tasks and give us some indications of what SOI embraces within the CPAS-OCMWs. For this part of the text I shall use two methodological benchmarks drafted by AVCB (Association of the City and Boroughs of the Brussels-Capital Region)¹¹, another document drafted by this same association¹², and an ORBEM-BGDA document¹³.

All of these documents say that the inclusion programme is aimed at voluntary clients, with priority given to those in the 18-45 year old age group, who have first done some remotivation and remobilisation work. The way the client is received, the creation of a relationship of trust with the client, the identification of her/his expectations, wishes, and possibilities, and getting the client's work and social skills to come to the fore are central to the definition of inclusion work. There are also references to working on self-image and to creating work experience (for example through measures to have people work under fixed-term contracts), which is also a way to test other job orientations. In addition, SOI itself is defined as going hand in hand with restoring the client's autonomy.

The integration officer must do the following:

[...] to achieve through his individual work with the applicants for inclusion: maximum resource mobilisation; appropriate structuring of the steps in terms of both methods and time frame; and assessment of the match between the individual plan and the pathway. Continuous assessment of each individual pathway's implementation,...to make certain to mobilise the right resources both within and outside the CPAS-OCMW to carry out collective or group actions that meet the ascertained needs¹⁴.

It is stated that "...the work done specifically by the integration officer with the applicant is identified by the notion of monitoring". Moreover, the integration officer must "...get the client to invest or re-invest in her/his social integration". The officer intervenes as an adviser "...on different levels: on the methodological, socio-psychological, and logistic levels". Some tools, such as the job table (see below) or certain pre-training courses turn the integration officer into an activity leader. It is also stated that the aims of contractualising certain types of assistance under the inclusion banner are educational and supportive.

In parallel with the development of integration services and the specialisation of certain social workers, a very specific methodology appears to be emerging. The

¹¹ "Référentiel méthodologique: La table emploi en CPAS", 2006, written by V. Libert and E. Michel, and "Référentiel méthodologique: le bilan socio-professionnel en CPAS", 2005, coordinated and written by V. Libert.

¹² "Rapport concernant le volet 'emploi' des CPAS de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale: évolution 2000-2005", 2006, written by V. Libert.

¹³ "Promotion des actions locales d'insertion socioprofessionnelle dans le cadre des conventions de partenariat avec l'ORBEM. Réforme du programme de guidance socio-professionnelle du public bénéficiant du minimex et de l'aide sociale", 1997.

¹⁴ LIBERT, V. and MICHEL, E., Association de la Ville et des communes de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale (AVCB), 2006. "Référentiel méthodologique: La table emploi en CPAS", p. 9. Underlining has been added.

methodological benchmarks that I have used here are a good indicator of this. These methodologies stress the need to identify the client's situation well and the fact that the client is a key player who thus must be truly motivated and determined. These benchmarks provide various tools as well: "information sheets" listing the information that is most useful for inclusion work; "guidance tables" that should make it possible to "single out the positive, usable information" for writing a résumé; a "time line" that is supposed to help the client to redefine her/his past and future pathways; "brainstorming" to "stimulate the outline of a plan based on ideas and dreams of personal and occupational activities"; "I like, I don't like" lists to differentiate between what the client does and does not like to do; the "work experience review", which is a grid with items such as "I have a lot of energy and I like action" to which the client must answer "yes" or "no"; a list of "personality traits"; a "list of expectations"; and so on.

The "job table", for its part, refers to a client group activity. It concerns the many components of searching for work, e.g., the job, the job announcement, the construction of a résumé, the writing of an application letter, etc., and includes various learning exercises to enable the clients to express their perceptions and understanding of what the job hunt entails.

To sum up, we are dealing here with various benchmarks and tools that put the client at the heart of social action and tend to trigger reflexivity and responsibility on the part of the client. In banking on getting people into work through a case management approach that allows for the client's "desires" and "expectations, the tools proposed to the CPAS-OCMWs for SOI work refer back to the philosophy of the active welfare state. Moreover, these tools commit the clients to a true effort of "working on themselves", as Vrancken and Macquet (2006) observe. The phrase "working on one's self-image" is moreover explicitly mobilised in the definition of pre-training activities (Libert, 2006, p. 10). So, the clients' visits to the SOI departments are of course supposed to connect them to the working world, but must also be self-building tests in which the clients work on their own behaviour (Vrancken and Macquet, 2006, p.4). In this context, the social worker is responsible for guiding the work that the people do on themselves.

These reference documents also refer to the voluntary nature of the clients' requests for SOI assistance. As we saw earlier, this aspect is threatened by certain public policies' rationales.

2.2. The time frame of SOI

The above-mentioned benchmarks that have been proposed for use by the CPAS-OCMWs have a special relationship with time, for they refer to a long-term framework. The emphasis that is placed on "monitoring" and "continuous appraisal", the "time line" tool, and the fact that these departments organise their work around the notion of a "plan" attest to this tie with the "long run". This in itself is nothing new, nor is it a very specific distinctive sign in the area of social work. However, compared with what I have ascertained within the general social services sections (BSSs), it is interesting to point out and analyse the SOI departments' ways of managing time.

This time management differs from the approach characterising the BSSs with regard to three things, namely, 1) the time spent on individual interviews, 2) the clients' requests, and 3) what the integration officers expect from the clients. These three dimensions are of course linked and will be separated here only for the purpose of analysis.

① The length of the interview

Both the BSS and SOI staff see their clients in the social workers' offices or "cubicles" that have been specially arranged for meeting with clients. This guarantees confidentiality and lets them have individualised meetings. Each department has its own offices or cubicles.

In the BSS sections, the lengths of the individual meetings vary with the nature of the request but it is not rare for them to be very brief (ten minutes). In welfare offices where appointment management is highly centralised and bureaucratic (that is to say, where the social workers do not manage their diaries themselves but appointments are managed by the administration instead), the meetings do not exceed twenty minutes. In the SOI departments, the meetings are often much longer than in the BSS sections, and it is not rare for them to last an hour.

② The clients' requests

Unlike the SOI departments, which filter admission to their services, all clients who want to request assistance go to the BSSs. What types of request do they make? The overwhelming majority of their requests concern financial matters. So, they include (in no specific order) requests for integration income, equivalent social assistance, medical cards, emergency medical assistance, reimbursement of medical expenses, aid extensions, aid for rental deposits, aid to buy spectacles, advances on alimony, supplemental unemployment allowances, affidavits, information about the aid that they have obtained, etc. The SOI departments, for their part, take in clients who are deemed able to enter an integration process and, as has already been pointed out, are not in emergency situations. This obviously influences the types of request that are expressed in their dealings with the SOI department. Rather than providing urgent assistance that is directly related to a financial or medical matter, the integration officers have to draw up plans with the clients and help their clients to carry these plans out, to identify what the client wants to do: Get training? Look for work? What kind of work? And so on.

The waiting rooms are also a good indicator of the departments' relationships with "emergencies". The BSS waiting rooms are usually full and one often encounters "arguments" between their reception staff and clients as to the urgency of the latter's requests. Indeed, the clients often express their requests by referring to their personal situations in the first person singular: "I have to see a social worker because I need an official request for care"; "I need an advance on my financial aid because I had some unexpected expenditures"; etc. The receptionists, in contrast, answer according to general principles: "We cannot let you meet with your social

worker because you have to have an appointment, and your request is not truly urgent"; and so on. The SOI departments' waiting rooms are not as full and the types of controversy mentioned above are almost never seen. "Urgency" has effectively been removed from the SOI departments. This makes it easier for these departments to handle their clients' requests and the pressure that they exert.

③ What is expected of the client

Since only clients who are ready to enter an integration process are referred to the SOI departments, the integration officers' expectations differ from what the BSS social workers expect of their clients. The integration officers expect their clients to look ahead, to go beyond the urgency that characterises fragile situations in order to foresee and set future actions. So, integration officers make certain that their clients project themselves into the future and envision alternatives: "...and if that does not work, what else would you like to do?" They also tend to urge their clients to think about long-term integration. For example, in the case of an "Article 60" work plan, social workers point out that "...the aim is not to collect unemployment benefits". When clients come to the department with their plans, the integration officers assess each plan's content and consistency and test the clients' motivations: "How do you see a counsellor's job?" The verbal exchanges I observed show that the integration officers also try to prepare their clients for future trials. For example,

Yes, but in front of your employer: He has lots of people who want to work, so the employer is going to want to know what motivations you have that will make him hire you rather than someone else.

What makes you want to work as a school cafeteria aide? I'm asking you questions because at your job interviews the employers are also going to ask you questions.

In a nutshell, the staff's expectations as regards reflexivity and planning differ in line with the department. These expectations are more specialised in the SOI departments.

2.3. *The importance of the plan and insecure situations*

As we have seen, the SOI departments' work revolves around the idea of "plans" and involves a special relationship with time. However, this notion also entails another important element, that of the client's participation in drawing up these plans. This participation is not always optimal. Indeed, although the SOI clients are deemed able to enter an integration process, they nevertheless remain vulnerable people in precarious situations who very often have few skills to vaunt on the job market. Moreover, the welfare offices' clients do not always master even one of the two national languages used in the Brussels-Capital Region or even, failing that, English. This largely jeopardises the elaboration of plans, in particular because drawing up these plans is basically contingent on the client's ability to verbalise, to formulate in actual language her or his dreams, what she or he wants to do. So, one integration officer told me that he felt somewhat uneasy about the fact "...that he greatly influenced the development of the people's plans", adding,

I sometimes take the time to try to discover the people's motivations, but when people don't speak French, when they don't get anything, I say, "It's going to be a clean-up job, and that's it".

This officer's uneasiness refers us back to the crucial importance of client participation in drawing up their plans. If this is not done, the aid that is granted is not considered to be relevant.

It happens that some clients are in such uncertain situations that going back to work prevails over everything else, including drawing up a plan. Their priority is to find work quickly, not to ponder what they want to do or to project themselves into the future. The social workers frequently find themselves dealing with requests of the following types: "Please find me some work, I have to work, for my children!" "I don't give a damn; I want to work." The integration officers consider such requests problematic, for a will to look for a job without more or less solid skills and qualifications is not considered a "good plan". Even if clients assert that they want to work, the officers realise that such ambitions are dictated by their insecure situations and are not the result of thinking things through. So, to deal with such requests, the integration officers sometimes use strategies aimed at getting the clients to confront the reality of the world of work and to think about a training course's usefulness. The following excerpt comes from an interview with an SOI department head. It illustrates the strategies that may be deployed and shows moreover that job interviews can become tools to get clients to challenge their situations or their assessments of their situations.

So, our findings are still as follows: 50% of the people who enter the SOI scheme ask to engage in an immediate job hunt whereas they don't even have any training... We start by telling the people, "But you don't have the skills" and then we find ourselves dealing with someone who says, "Yes, but I still don't want any training". So, we were in something of a dead end. The option that was chosen was thus the following one, that is to say, let's listen to that type of request, refer it to the department that is in charge of job placement, and test it through the person's confrontations with employers. Of course, that is not a suicide operation, right? The idea is, the person says, "I want to work as a secretary." We warn the department head, "Here you are, this person does not have the requisite skills; it's important that you bring her back to reality, to tell her what the secretary's job involves, what you have to learn, what you have to do to be eligible for such a position."

Denis Castra (2003) has looked at the current exploitation of the "plan discourse" and its importance in the socio-occupational integration of people in insecure situations. Castra, like other authors whom he quotes, stresses the fact that the people who are the most subject to this requirement to have and follow a plan are the very people who do not have the best conditions to look ahead to the future (Castra, 2003, p. 86). Yet project-based learning is used with such target groups with ever growing importance, as the rise of certain public policies (such as the law of 26 May 2002 – see above) attests. He has also found, after reviewing the outcomes of several investigations, that getting the subjects into work depends less on their plans than on their actual behaviours, which are or are not triggered, facilitated, or stimulated by the inclusion schemes in which they participate (Castra, 2003, p. 93). In short, in the wake of Castra's findings, we see that the integration schemes that have been set up in Brussels' welfare offices revolve primarily around the individual client and little around the economic context. However, it is vital that this context

(which is rather unfavourable, as was pointed out in the introduction) should be taken into account in inclusion work. It explains for example some of the inclusion failures that the social workers mentioned during the group analysis sessions¹⁵. Although injunctions to draw up formal plans provide opportunities to set landmarks and give the clients resources to achieve their integration, meeting such demands is difficult in the case of clients living under precarious conditions in an unfavourable economic context.

In conclusion

A new form of expertise in socio-occupational inclusion is being deployed in Brussels' welfare offices (CPAS-OCMWs). This expertise has a tense relationship with the weakened profiles of the clients for whom the inclusion schemes are designed. As these schemes revolve around the idea of a plan and entail stepping away from the current moment, they clash head-on with the situations of insecurity that are the welfare offices' clients' lot. In other words, the situations in which these clients find themselves do not always let them engage in the "self-analysis and improvement" work that new social policies such as the Belgian law on the right to social inclusion require.

In Brussels, these tensions are definitely felt more acutely. Indeed, given the specific characteristics of the Brussels-Capital Region that were mentioned in the introduction, the Brussels welfare offices that I am studying and the Region's entire network of offices must work with specific segments of the population and in a specific context. So, although a systematic, objective link cannot be established, one can assume that Brussels' welfare offices are organisationally more complex than those of the rest of the country and help a more diverse range of people who are exposed more to the risks of stigmatisation and face much higher requirements from employers (bilingualism, gap between requisite and actual skills and qualifications, etc.). I must stress, of course, that the other welfare offices in the country must deal with these problems, too, but they are definitely more salient and frequent in Brussels.

Through this description of the socio-occupational integration departments that I studied, we can see that conferring the right to social benefits is henceforward contingent on following a pathway through the welfare office and "self-analysis". So, asking for social assistance and getting such assistance are not subject simply to showing that the characteristics of one's individual situation fit specific legal and administrative categories (age, income, place of residence, etc.). They also entail visiting a socio-occupational integration or "youth" department, trying to draw up a plan, attending French or Dutch classes, enrolling in a training scheme, showing that one is looking for work, justifying why one is not looking for work, etc. If we stand on the social worker's side of the fence, guaranteeing this right does not mean simply requesting administrative information. It means appraising the client's situation

¹⁵ Two group analysis sessions were held to examine the problem of clients who are difficult to get (back) into work and society. During these two sessions the integration officers tackled the issue of their lack of control over the job market and the limits of the measures at their disposal. Here the "Article 60" measure, which allows fixed-term employment only, comes to mind.

to see if s/he may be referred to the SOI department, appraising the content and consistency of plans and projects, looking for training schools, helping the client to draft letters of application, and so on.

To wrap up, let us come back to this article's subtitle, "What are your plans?" Here I can draw a parallel with Isabelle Astier's (1997) findings. According to Astier, individuals are henceforward required to "swap" their biographies for social benefits. Social entitlements are effectively becoming more and more individualised and dependent on the clients' moral qualities. It is therefore vital to know what these clients' lives comprise. I have made a similar finding in this research, where the relevant public policies are now paying increasing attention to the work that the individuals do on their own situations. "Give me your plan and I'll give you a benefit" is the message, inspired by Astier's findings, that this text was intended to illustrate.

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RIB - Réseau Interdisciplinaire de recherches sur Bruxelles
 Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis
 Bd du Jardin Botanique, 43
 B-1000 Brussels (Belgium)