

# INTRODUCTION

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The welfare state in Europe functions as a dynamic system of complex legal rules and practices, which, despite its high level of formalisation, often leads to unexpected and diverse outcomes for beneficiaries. When it comes to social welfare policies in Europe in particular, their implementation is frequently characterised by wide variations between and within states. One consequence of these variations is that there often exists a difference between ‘rights on paper’ and ‘rights in practices’ for potential beneficiaries.

With regards to immigrants as a specific subset of beneficiaries of welfare policies, the link between the welfare state and the governance of migration has been widely studied in the literature (see, for example, Geddes, 2003; Sainsbury, 2012; Lafleur & Vintila, 2020) and is further discussed in Chapter 1 of this volume. Indeed, when it comes to the provision of social assistance to immigrants, the implementation of legal provisions can lead to the seemingly arbitrary inclusion or exclusion of this population. To this end, the concept of discretion as a practice by states and institutions, but also by professionals on the ground is of critical importance for studying immigrants’ access to welfare (van der Leun, 2006).

As shown in the literature on immigrants’ access to welfare, the use of discretion is often based on moral judgements, stereotypes, personal experiences, and contextual social norms (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012; Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2019; Thomann & Rapp, 2018). These elements are used by street-level bureaucrats to assess not only the eligibility of applicants but also their deservingness of social assistance (Belabas & Gerrits, 2017; De Wilde & Marchal, 2019; Chauvin & Garcés-Mascreñas, 2012). For this reason, discretion carries the risk of discrimination and reproduction or reinforcement of social inequalities (Lotta & Pires, 2019), which, in turn, can create a perception of injustice in bureaucratic processes among immigrant beneficiaries (Lafleur & Mescoli 2018). By studying interactions in the application process for social benefits, one can therefore understand not only the differences in treatment and the motivations and rationale behind welfare

decisions, but also the extent to which specific immigrant needs are met by the norms and administrative practices in place (Brussig & Knuth, 2013).

This book presents the results of a research project that carried out an analysis at three levels: the organisational level, the level of social workers implementing the policies, and the beneficiary level. Through this analytical process, we were able to achieve three goals. First, we mapped practices regarding the granting of rights and social activation interventions targeting newly arrived immigrants. Second, we shed light on the factors influencing social workers' choices and decisions regarding social benefits and social activation targeting newcomers. Third, we provided an analysis of the accessibility of social welfare for newcomers and of their experience with a European welfare state administration.

Aiming to contribute to the study of the intersection between the welfare state and migration governance, this book provides a thorough analysis of the specific case of Belgium. More precisely, we rely on original qualitative and quantitative data collected in Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSWs) and with newcomers.<sup>1</sup>

Similar to the case of other EU member states, the issue of access to social assistance is often perceived as being of growing importance in Belgium. Indeed, the number of beneficiaries of one or another form of social assistance granted by the 581 PCSWs in Belgium has risen sharply over the past 10 years. Looking only at one specific scheme – the social integration income – the number of beneficiaries rose from about 80,000 in 2008 to 144,151 in 2019. Of these, 25,502 are allocated to recognised refugees or immigrants benefiting from subsidiary protection. While the issue of immigrants and refugees' access to social assistance is frequently discussed in public debates, it is however important to note that the Ministry of Social Integration communicated in 2019 that recognised refugees represented only 11.2% of the total population of social integration income recipients.

Several scholars have studied the provision of social assistance services by PCSWs in Belgium in the past decade. Among their most important findings, they showed that service provision differed across the 581 PCSWs that deliver social assistance across the country (see, for example, De Wilde & Marchal, 2019; Dumont, 2012; Driessens et al., 2015; Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2013). This body of literature showed that variations in the delivery of services depend both on the autonomy of each PCSW (even though they are bound by a common legal framework), and on the discretionary power of the agents. The factors influencing these variations are diverse and include the socio-economic and political characteristics of the local environment and institutions, the organisational characteristics of PCSWs, and the agents' approach.

Belgian PCSWs play a crucial role in granting access to social benefits to newcomers and, more generally, in their settlement and integration process. For many newly arrived immigrants,<sup>2</sup> contacts with social workers represent one of the first or most important interactions with the local society. In addition, decisions taken by the PCSW regarding the allocation or refusal of social benefits can have a long-term influence on the lives of newcomers. However, little is known about the practices and interventions with newcomers in PCSWs in Belgium, the policies that regulate them, and other factors that may influence them. With this case study, we will therefore not only contribute to document the specific national situation but also contribute to a broader understanding of the dynamics between immigrants, the welfare state, and street-level bureaucracy.

The general structure of the book is as follows. A first set of chapters (1, 2, 3) aims at introducing the theoretical framework, the context, and the methodological approach of our study. Then, Part I gathers the chapters (4, 5, 6) dedicated to the analysis of social assistance targeting newcomer beneficiaries from the point of view of PCSW staff members, including a focus on the organisation of service provision – and its challenges and pitfalls – and on labour market activation policies. Part II (Chapters 7, 8) looks in more detail at the decision-making process concerning the granting of social benefits to newcomer beneficiaries, describing its different stages and the role of a range of actors and social factors within it. Part III (9, 10, 11) brings the perspective of the newcomers themselves into the reflection, looking at their access to and experiences with PCSWs and how they cope with the challenges and opportunities they encounter. Finally, the conclusion brings together the main findings from all chapters and levels of analysis, in order to make some final analytical remarks, and in particular to combine and compare insights stemming from different perspectives, namely the point of view of institutions and agents with that of the newcomers.

## DETAILED CONTENT OF THE BOOK

With the general framework presented above in mind, this volume is organised around the following chapters:

### **1. Conceptualising immigrants' access to social assistance and their interaction with street-level bureaucrats**

Chapter 1 presents the theoretical framework of our research, focusing on two main concepts: accessibility and street-level bureaucracy. Accessibility is conceived as a multi-dimensional analytical tool that allows for an account of both the ways in which services are organised and operate and the experience of beneficiaries, thus focusing on the 'degree of fit' between institutions and individuals. With regard to street-level bureaucracy, we first recall the main meaning of this concept as well as its emergence and the theoretical debates it generates. Second, we present a critical review of the literature that mobilises this analytical tool to study the ways in which the practices of street-level bureaucrats influence the access to rights of newcomer beneficiaries. This highlights how the regulation of access to social assistance functions as additional means of migration governance. We then also focus on the notion of (welfare) 'deservingness' as the main key to understanding the functioning of discretionary practices on the ground.

### **2. Social assistance bureaucracies and new migrants: the Belgian context**

Chapter 2 describes the specific context of our research, explaining the functioning of the social welfare system in Belgium and the role of PCSWs as key actors in this system. It also clarifies who is considered as 'newcomer immigrant' both in this study and in PCSWs. In addition, important changes in the approach to the provision of social assistance (in general and to immigrant beneficiaries in particular) are discussed. We highlight, for example, the shift towards reciprocity of rights and duties and the strengthening of the notion of individual responsibility in active welfare states. Attention is also paid to the large diversity in terms of policy orientations, organisational cultures, and policy instruments.

### **3. Applying mixed-method design in the study of immigrant social protection**

Chapter 3 illustrates the methodological approach adopted in our research and in the analysis of the data collected. We highlight, in particular, the relevance of a mixed-method approach. The quantitative and qualitative tools applied are presented in terms of their rationale, their practical implementation, their objectives and results, and the challenges they pose. In addition, we explain the reasoning behind the choice of case studies and the profiles of the research participants involved. Overall, the combination of these methodological tools allowed the collection of a rich variety of data from different research participants.

### **4. Explaining variations in forms of service delivery for newcomers**

Chapter 4 first describes how the provision of social assistance services targeting newcomers is organised in the PCSWs we studied. Two main approaches are examined: the ‘specialised’ approach and the ‘generalist’ approach. Second, the chapter also reveals what types of social assistance is provided to newcomers, and what the conditions of access are. Third, we study the extent to which there are differences in the provision of services to newly arrived immigrants compared to other recipients – with a focus on the ‘tailor-made’ approach. We also present the main forms of collaboration with partner institutions. The objective of this chapter is to better understand why PCSWs make certain choices in terms of service provision to newly arrived immigrants, what the underlying reasons are, and whether or not, and how, PCSWs perceive the (specific) needs of migrant beneficiaries.

### **5. Understanding challenges and pitfalls in the service delivery to newly arrived immigrants**

Based on the study of the organisation of service provision for newcomer beneficiaries presented earlier, Chapter 5 highlights the emerging challenges and pitfalls. In particular, we pay attention to the working conditions and structural constraints that weigh on social workers, as well as on the other difficulties they face in providing adequate social guidance and support to newcomers. We also focus on the ‘understandability’ of the Belgian welfare system for newcomers, highlighting language issues as one of the main factors affecting the accessibility of social services and social assistance rights. Finally, we highlight the existence of implementation gaps and unmet needs – ‘blind spots’ – in the provision of services to newcomers.

## **6. Labour market activation and newly arrived immigrants**

Chapter 6 focuses on labour market activation policies and practices targeting newcomers receiving social assistance in Belgium. Based on the assumption that social welfare institutions invest in citizens and promote social integration, especially through employment, we first investigate what is meant by ‘socio-professional integration’ in our case studies and what goals are set for (newcomer) social welfare beneficiaries. Second, we discuss the role of the PCSW and its social workers, as well as other relevant institutions, in terms of guidance towards socio-professional integration. Third, we analyse in detail how the assessment of the employability (disposition/readiness to work) of newcomers by PCSW social workers is conducted.

## **7. The allocation of social assistance as a hierarchised decision-making process**

This chapter follows a general introduction to Part II of this volume, which recalls the law and policy framework that establishes the functioning of PCSW in Belgium and constitutes the main context of the decision-making process. Such an introduction also highlights the possible room for manoeuvre and interpretation that institutions have (that is, the differences in the overall approach towards the demands of beneficiaries, migrants, and others). After this, Chapter 7 analyses the different steps of the decision-making process (described as a highly hierarchised process) concerning the allocation of social assistance to newcomer beneficiaries and the role of each social actor involved (staff members of PCSWs, including presidents, managers, committee members, and social workers) within it.

## **8. The discretion of social workers towards newly arrived migrants**

Drawing on the literature presented above and additional texts, Chapter 8 examines how discretion operates in the field, particularly through the practices of social workers. Discretion emerges in a discursive context where the law governing social assistance is described as highly restrictive. Therefore, discretionary power functions as a set of often non-explicit micro-practices that take various forms. In this chapter, we also explore the factors that influence choices and decisions on entitlement – including ‘cultural’ skills and stereotypes – with a particular focus on the relationship between welfare workers and recipients and the process of assessing the deservingness of recipients. Finally, we analyse the extent and objectives of the sanctioning of newcomer beneficiaries.

**9. Pathways of access: analysing newly arrived immigrants' access to welfare services**

Chapter 9 examines the accessibility of PCSWs from the perspective of newcomers. It first looks at the emergence of the need for support, highlighting when this need arises, and which forms it takes in the case of newly arrived immigrant beneficiaries. Second, it examines the access to PCSWs and the use of the services themselves. Doing so, it highlights the factors that play a role in this respect – such as the language skills, knowledge, and social capital of newcomers. It also reveals the contextual elements and organisational characteristics of the institution, and the types of support experienced. Information provision, communication, and understandability issues are the central themes of this chapter.

**10. The newcomers' perception of social assistance provision and its organisation**

Following on from the previous chapter, Chapter 10 examines newcomers' perceptions of welfare provision and its organisation. The focus is on the system itself, but also, and in more detail, on the policy implementation practices operating on the ground (including controls, sanctions, and the discretionary power of social workers). This chapter highlights newcomers' self-perceptions as welfare recipients, and their views on the changes in their social status that this may entail. In addition, we analyse the notion of deservingness from the perspective of the beneficiaries' experience by highlighting the negotiations undertaken by them and accounting for the diverse aspirations and expectations of the social actors involved.

**11. Developing forms of agency: how do newcomers deal with difficulties in accessing PCSW services**

In the asymmetrical relationship between social workers and welfare recipients, the latter are not simply passive actors. Indeed, Chapter 11 explores how potential beneficiaries of social assistance cope with the difficulties they encounter when trying to access their welfare entitlements, as well as the strategies they may develop to 'navigate' the Belgian welfare system. These strategies are diverse, ranging from compliance and collaboration to assertiveness. Strategies also include different forms of non-take-up of welfare entitlements. In this last chapter, a particular attention is paid to the ways in which recipients cope with street-level bureaucracy, highlighting a typology of possible responses.

## 12. Conclusion

In a last concluding chapter, we come back to our research aims and shortly recapitulate the main conclusions with regard to each of them, bringing the perspectives of managers and staff as well as newcomer beneficiaries together. In addition, other main findings related to key themes that emerged from our study are also discussed, more particularly the question of equity and the high price of support.

## NOTES

1. This data has been gathered within the framework of the project 'BBOX: OCMW/CPAS & new migrants/refugees: opening the black box of policy in practice', funded by BELSPO – Belgian Science Policy Office, coordinated by the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (HIVA – Research Institute for Work and Society) in partnership with the University of Liège (CEDEM – Centre for ethnic and migration studies, Faculty of Social Sciences) and the University Saint-Louis Brussels (CESIR – Centre for Sociological Research and Intervention).
2. In Chapter 2, we provide a thorough discussion of the meaning of 'newcomers' in the framework of this research.

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