

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Un/Deserving Child: A Qualitative Study of the Discursive Welfare Rationales of a Philanthropic Foundation for Children Living in Extreme Poverty Situations

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Received: 26 February 2024 | **Revised:** 4 November 2024 | **Accepted:** 12 December 2024

Funding: We received funding for the research project of the Foundation itself, which we combined with our own research capacity in the respective Universities.

Keywords: child poverty | neo-philanthropy | social work | welfare rationale

ABSTRACT

Child poverty remains a complex social problem in Western societies. In the context of the complex historical transformation of the institutional welfare state framework in Belgium, we discuss a qualitative study on the welfare rationales of a philanthropic foundation for children in extreme poverty situations. Our exploration of the perspectives of the foundation's social partners and administrators shows how a discursive distinction between un/deserving children can be at stake in anti-poverty strategies. Based on our findings, we tease out whether the foundation might metaphorically function as grit in the machine of public actors in the welfare state system.

1 | Setting the Scene

An extensive body of international social policy and social work research shows that child poverty remains a stubborn and complex problem for social policy makers in most Western societies (Platt 2005; Schiettecat, Roets, and Vandenbroeck 2015). We employ a definition of (child) poverty that includes different dimensions of the social problem, with reference to the combination of a lack of material and financial resources (such as family income, housing, mobility, ...) and a lack of social resources (such as (mental) health care, proper education, proper employment of parents and other public services), resulting in cumulative, multidimensional processes of marginalisation and social inequality and a structural powerlessness and disadvantage of both children

and parents in poverty situations (see Roets, Roose, and Bouverne-De Bie 2013; Lister 2004, 2006). Worldwide more than one billion children live in such situations of poverty, having no adequate access to education, health, housing, nutrition, sanitation or water. Recently, Kimera et al. (2021) address that 22% of children in Europe are at risk of poverty. Compared with working-age adults (aged 18–64 years; 21.5%) and older people (aged 65 years and over; 18.6%), children have the highest risk of living in poverty. In Belgium more specifically, 22.2% of children live in poverty today, a number that has not decreased significantly over the last decades while it became, over the same period, a high priority in Western welfare states (Van Lancker and Van Herreweghe 2023; Main and Bradshaw 2015). As Roets et al., (2023, 3425) address, Western welfare states have recently developed child poverty reduction

strategies that position ‘the child as the central object of intervention’, which is often reflected in national social inclusion policies.

Throughout history, Western welfare states have accordingly considered the provision of resources and support to children in poverty situations, implying a priority given to private and public actors to intervene in these situations (Parton 2011; Schiettecat, Roets, and Vandenbroeck 2015). The concept of (child) poverty, however, is not a neutral yet rather a normative and ideological construct, differing according to the ways in which it is defined and constructed by diverse actors in different societies (Lister 2004, 2006). In the slipstream of shifting historical constructions of child poverty, resulting in the recognition of childhood as a specific domain of social intervention, also contemporary anti-poverty strategies often entail different, ambiguous and often contradictory and contested meanings, perspectives and strategies, especially in the case of child poverty (Platt 2005; Couture 2007).

In this article, we accordingly discuss the key findings of a qualitative study which investigates the discursive welfare rationales of a philanthropic foundation in Belgium, which selectively yet unconditionally wants to provide financial support to children in extreme poverty situations (see Jacquet et al. 2022). The foundation has been constituted by private actors as an autonomous organisation, informed by its directors’ philanthropic philosophy of life and their extensive experience in fundraising of private charitable donations as well as in corporate fundraising. The foundation deliberately does not want to rely on public government support. The foundation develops collaborations with local ‘social partners’, such as professionals or volunteers having direct contact with the parents and the children, who identify and select children as potential beneficiaries, and submit an application for the provision of financial resources to the foundation’s administrators that is being dealt with by its social commission.

Our study is based on qualitative interviews with a diversity of social partners, directors and administrators of the foundation to investigate their discursive welfare rationales and justifications for the provision of financial resources (see Jacquet et al. 2022). The research objectives were focused on teasing out whether the foundation reaches its own goals in unconditionally providing financial support to children in extreme poverty situations, and whether the foundation might function as grit in the machine of public actors in the welfare system.

In what follows, we first explore how a construction of the un/deserving child might be produced by contemporary welfare rationalities, discourses and imaginaries, and explain our conceptual frame of reference.

1.1 | New Charity Economy, Neo-Philanthropy and Child Poverty Reduction Strategies

While children have been the object of social policy and legislation since the 19th century in the context of modernisation and industrialisation, the definition of childhood poverty and how it has been problematised over time has been subject to profound

changes in the relationship between citizens, the state, civil society and the market (Dean 2015; Lorenz 2016). In the context of this relationship, it has been argued that an overall, complex historical transformation of the institutional framework of the welfare state is taking place (Villadsen 2007; Lorenz 2016). Although historical developments are nonlinear and should not be seen as a ‘continuity without breaks and contradictions’ (Lorenz 2007, 599), Roets, Kessl, and Lorenz (2024) observe that a shift from philanthropic to rights-oriented welfare rationales was noticeable while European nation states evolved from prewelfare into active welfare states. Since the mid-90s and early 2000s, however, a discursive shift back to philanthropic welfare rationales can be observed, resulting in a recently newly emerging ‘charity economy’ (Kessl, Lorenz, and Schoneville 2020).

This complex historical reconfiguration of welfare rationales can also be observed in (child) poverty reduction strategies (Roets, Kessl, and Lorenz 2024). From a rights orientation, public responsibility is taken by governments for (child) poverty reduction strategies that aim at the redistribution of material and social resources and power for both children and their parents, and at reducing social inequalities in our societies (Ridge and Wright 2008). With regard to the newly emerging shift back to a philanthropic orientation, key elements of continuity and discontinuity emerge in (child) poverty reduction strategies (Jacquet et al. 2020).

In terms of continuity, critical scholars have argued that our societies have made a distinction between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor at the end of the 19th century, and currently echo this 19th century binary and prewelfare state distinction between deserving and undeserving citizens (Krumer-Nevo 2016). This welfare rationale situated the cause of poverty as an individual rather than a social problem and as a sign of a deficient moral attitude of the poor (Roets, Kessl, and Lorenz 2024). People in poverty were categorised as a so-called dangerous class in society that requires moral civilisation strategies. The system operated a fundamental distinction between the un/deserving poor, between those who conditionally deserve resources and support since they show good moral standards and behave productively—and those who do not (Villadsen 2007; Ridge and Wright 2008).

In terms of discontinuity, scholars have however referred to a *newly* emerging discursive distinction between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor, which manifests itself during the last decades (see Villadsen 2007; Maesele 2012; Krumer-Nevo 2016; Kessl, Oechler, and Schroeder 2019, 365). Terms are used such as ‘neo-philanthropy’ (see Villadsen 2007), ‘new philanthropy’ (see Morvaridi 2016) and ‘new charity economy’ (Kessl, Oechler, and Schroeder 2019). With reference to the recent intensification of class relations and the growth of inequality, Kessl, Oechler, and Schroeder (2019) introduce the term *new charity economy* and argue that ‘this term can be categorised as being “new” because [it] results from and expresses the transformation of the welfare state’. New forms of philanthropy and charity—such as food distribution, the donation of charity clothes and furniture that can be recycled—have emerged on the back of the erosion of social protection and social security principles which were key pillars of the constitution of the welfare state across

Europe, a neoliberal market economy and increasing social inequalities (Dean 2015; Morvaridi 2016; Kessl, Oechler, and Schroeder 2019). In their recent work, Kessl, Oechler, and Schroeder (2019) stress that this transformation of the welfare state also entails a striking and changing orientation of actors being involved in antipoverty strategies.

In that vein, we see a recently emerging and alarming critique on both public as well as private actors being involved in the production of new charity economies in the shadow of the welfare state (Kessl, Oechler, and Schroeder 2019). A recent example concerns an actual social policy strategy that has been developed to combat child poverty in Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium). In the policy period of 2015–2019, the Flemish Minister of Poverty Affairs launched an antipoverty strategy with the aim to provide €1 meals for children in poverty (see Flemish Anti-Poverty Action Plan 2015a, 2015b). Our research on these initiatives showed that a diversity of public actors has been strongly involved with, and entangled in, the development and implementation of these initiatives, in which healthy and affordable meals were provided to children and families in poverty situations on the condition that they accepted family support (see Flemish Anti-Poverty Action Plan 2015a, 2015b; Children's Rights Commissioners Office 2015). In that vein, to tackle food insecurity was considered a relevant child poverty reduction, which dismisses the redistribution of material resources, such as family income and child benefits, according to social protection principles (Lister 2004, 2006).

Western welfare states have however recently developed a renewed priority for intervention in supposedly alarming situations, such as children living in poverty (Parton 2011; Roets, Roose, and Bouverne-De Bie 2013). In policy discourses and practices, it is argued that poverty prevents children and youth from acquiring the necessary social and cultural capital to integrate socially (Goldson and Muncie 2006) and of becoming responsible 'citizen-workers of the future' (Lister 2003). Public preoccupations have gradually coincided with a social investment logic, and more attention has been paid to young children in their early childhood between 0 and 3 years old (Schiettecat, Roets, and Vandenbroeck 2015; Lyndon 2019).

Although we perceive addressing child poverty as intrinsically legitimate, the structural conditions in which children live—expressions of poverty and inequality that are also experienced by parents—are all too easily substituted with a conceptual emphasis on the individual responsibility for the parents (Couture 2007; Goldson 2002). As Goldson (2002) argues, a well-established conceptual schism has been resurrected in the form of the 'deserving' troubled child and the 'undeserving' troublesome, so-called incapable parents, who do not behave according to the norm of 'responsible' parenting. Also, Lyndon (2019, 603) recently articulates a similar critique, suggesting that a discourse of the 'undeserving' and 'deserving' poor has pervaded government policy, 'reproducing a moral distinction between "honest hard-working families" and a "parasitical, pathological underclass"'. As our own research on the provision of €1 meals for children in poverty with the Children's Rights Commissioners Office (2015)

shows, the distinctions might even be increasingly drawn between socially constructed stages of childhood, with children in early childhood (0- to 3-year old) being cast as 'extremely deserving' due to developmental potential (see also Schiettecat, Roets, and Vandenbroeck 2015), and a cut-off age between 'deserving' school age children and 'perhaps undeserving' and possibly 'dangerous' youth. In the case of the €1 meals, 14-year-olds were indeed no longer considered as eligible for the meals. Also, Goldson and Muncie (2006, 92) raise a similar critique on system configurations in which 'youth' is the subject of a rhetoric of criminalisation, and 'an increasing tendency to responsibilize children, their families and communities, and a reliance on an expanding control apparatus to "manage" poverty, structural disadvantage and systemic inequality'.

It should however be argued that the child, in its own rights, is therefore constructed intrinsically as the un/deserving child since children are always (economically) dependent on the parents or adults in the household in which they live (Lister 2006; Lyndon 2019). In that sense, antipoverty strategies might be paradoxical in the long run. If parents are being judged and possibly sanctioned as undeserving charity cases, there are intrinsically implications for all the children in these families as well.

2 | Research Methodology

We adopted a qualitative, interpretative research approach (Bogdan and Biklen 2007). Contextual empirical data were collected to gain an in-depth understanding of the discursive welfare rationales of the Belgian Foundation's directors, administrators and their social partners.

2.1 | Research Context

In its approach to child poverty reduction strategies, the philanthropic Foundation targets a specific group of the general population, in this case, children living in extreme poverty conditions; and provides them an annual allowance up to €1200. Whether children and their families receive this budget is dependent on the social partner who has to develop an application, but is also responsible for direct contact with the families and a subjective assessment to ensure that they actually can make use of the budget. The negotiation with the child(ren) and families thus takes place in different ways, dependent on the attitude of the social partner. The annual allowance is often added to the family income yet requires evidence of costs being made, which is not the case in the implementation of, for example, the public child benefit system.

Its strategies are based on a drastic selection, according to preexisting criteria, that determine which children can be supported and which children are not 'deserving' to receive financial support in terms of criteria of 'extreme poverty'. As such, the Foundation works in a residual way and intervenes only in situations of 'extreme' poverty when other potential resources of financial support are supposed to be inadequate.

In addition to these criteria to select a child for financial support, the Foundation develops a collaboration with a local 'social partner' to ensure the follow-up of the file and management of the allocated budgets. The various social partners are professionals or volunteers, mostly in preschool or primary education, pedagogical centres or public centres for social welfare, and have direct contact with the child and the parents. Children are therefore often selected before the age of 12, yet the Foundation grants them the budgets until their educational pathway is formally finished.

Consequently, a child who meets these admission conditions can potentially benefit from the Foundation's support. The selection of children is elaborated in two stages, the first stage or the first filter is the social partner who submits the application. The second stage is seen as the responsibility of the foundation's social commission, consisting of the analysis of the case and the arguments being made by social partners, and the selection of beneficiaries. The social commission of the Foundation meets once a month or more if the situation requires it. It should be noted that the Foundation has two social commissions, one for the French-speaking part and one for the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium.

2.2 | Strategies of Data Collection

We conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews (Bogdan and Biklen 2007) with social partners ($n = 20$: 10 in the French-speaking part and 10 in the Dutch-speaking part, referred to in the analysis as P1–P20) across Belgium and with the Foundation's administrators ($n = 7$: 3 in the French-speaking part and 4 in the Dutch-speaking part, referred to in the analysis as A1–A7).

The constitution of the sample of social partners interviewed in the Dutch-speaking and French-speaking part was underpinned by reasoned choice to include diversity in the sample. The definition of the desired participants in terms of selection and recruitment criteria was based on characteristics according to the types of partners (school, foster care, non-profit organisations, public centres for social welfare (PCSW), etc.), the regional representativity in terms of the provinces in which social partners operate, and the functions and number of years social partners have been active. The selection was elaborated based on a list of social partners offered by the Foundation (Table 1).

In what follows, we provide an overview of the selected social partners.

2.2.1 | Social Partners

- Provinces: Namur ($n = 1$), Liège ($n = 2$), Luxembourg ($n = 2$), Brabant Wallon ($n = 1$), Hainaut ($n = 2$), West-Flanders ($n = 4$), East-Flanders ($n = 2$), Antwerp ($n = 2$) + Brussels ($n = 4$)
- Duration of the interviews: between 1 and 2 h
- The first 10: French-speaking side, the last 10: Dutch-speaking side

TABLE 1 | Social partners (Interview number, respondent code, type of organisation).

1	P1	PCSW	11	P11	School
2	P2	Foster care institution	12	P12	PCSW
3	P3	Youth care	13	P13	PCSW
4	P4	PCSW	14	P14	Special education centre
5	P5	Foodbank	15	P15	Pedagogical institute
6	P6	School	16	P16	Special education centre
7	P7	Foster care institution	17	P17	School
8	P8	PCSW	18	P18	School
9	P9	School	19	P19	School
10	P10	School	20	P20	School

Before the semistructured qualitative interviews were conducted, the research team jointly developed an interview guideline that was informed by our theoretical frame of reference. The guideline was constructed to translate concepts such 'un/deservingness', 'conditionality', 'selectivity', ... into analytical yet still open-minded questions, so that participants could express their welfare orientations and justifications in their own language. The interviews were all audio recorded or videotaped (in case of online interviews due to COVID-19 restrictions) and fully transcribed.

2.3 | Strategies of Data Analysis

The data were analysed by means of a thematic qualitative content analysis, defined as 'any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings' (Patton 2002, 453).

The data were analysed by engaging in a directed approach to content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005), using the existing research insights on child poverty reduction strategies and empirically based 'feedback loops' to enrich the existing body of research. In that vein, we relied on a conceptual frame of reference that has been developed by Jacquet, and identifies three central fields of tension that indicate the features of, and distinction between philanthropic and rights-based orientations that unfold within the context of current welfare arrangements addressing (child) poverty: whereas selectivity, conditionality and instrumental approaches refer to ideas being rooted in charity-oriented welfare discourse and social work practice, universality, unconditionality and lifeworld-oriented approaches refer to rights-oriented value orientations in welfare discourse and anti-poverty strategies. The analytical question driving the data analysis was therefore articulated as follows: does this construction of the un/deserving child manifest itself in practices of the Foundation and its social partners that are to be situated in a complex nexus of

philanthropic and rights-oriented approaches, and if so, how? In that vein, the central findings of our research are structured around three analytical nodes:

- Conditional versus unconditional;
- Instrumental versus life-world oriented;
- Selective versus universal.

The analysis is the result of extensive exchange between all authors. The analytical insights were discussed and further refined in a constant dialogue.

3 | Research Findings: Deserving Versus Undeserving Children?

3.1 | Conditional Versus Unconditional

Judging the willingness to behave according to social norms is rooted in the idea of ‘goodwill’ (Maesele 2012), which refers to the dependence of the poor on those providing help and the goodwill of those providing help to assist those ‘deserving’ it. In social work, welfare conditionality refers to the fact that access to publicly provided welfare benefits and services is dependent on individual citizens first agreeing to meet obligations or patterns of behaviour. People’s access to welfare resources is restricted due to conditions that are implemented to change people’s behaviour. In that sense, the argument goes that people do not have rights without fulfilling their responsibilities. An unconditional approach implies that all citizens have the unconditional right to make use of support that is provided, without conditions or goodwill.

As regards the relationship between social partners and the children they support, apart from the fact that partners have discretionary space and margin in following up cases, they must however respect a few conditions imposed by the Foundation such as delivering an annual report. However, extra rules and conditions are imposed by the social partners themselves, for example, how they define poverty and how they position themselves on the continuum of care and control, which is an inherent part of their double mandate. Some partners add additional admission criteria concerning the merit or motivation of the families they wish to support:

I want families who are invested. And so, it’s essential for me to have that relationship with them. And the children too, because the children they need to know where the money is coming from.

(Interview P9)

Foundation money is never entrusted to the parents. Based on the same logic, the Foundation does not communicate what amount of money they make available to the parents.

So, the Foundation gave me the information not to give the detailed amount. So, I’m vague. But it’s always very tricky.

(Interview P6)

Hence, the social partners receive the funds and are expected to manage it responsibly. In practice this leads to diverse approaches when informing parents about the available budget, reflecting different perspectives on people living in precarious situations, the cause of these situations and how they behave (ir)responsibly in it:

We don’t pass on amounts to the families because we know they are going to abuse it a bit. Misuse it, in the sense of, if they knew, they could call a social partner saying, there is budget left, can I buy that?

(Interview P14)

It should be noted that the liberty and trust granted by the Foundation to its partners also come along with the responsibility of managing the budget allocated to each child. The partners usually do not have a professional mandate to work on such issues. Although they do not have to submit a request for each expected expense for the child, they are required to submit a summary sheet of the expenses every 6 months. These expenses can be legitimised if they fit in one of the five basic needs: (1) a hot meal a day, (2) decent clothes, (3) medical and paramedical care, (4) hygienic care and (5) leisure activities.

This list leaves a lot of space for interpretation and in this vein, difficult decisions on spending resources are outsourced to individual care partners who all have their own normative orientation, resulting in different strategies that affect parents. Although the Foundation’s trust in the social partners is highly valued, the need for more guidance from the Foundation resonates, as the social partner in the following quote seems to feel like a lonely voice: ‘Maybe it might be good for the Foundation to draw the line more clearly. (...) Just kind of that we’re all on the same wavelength because right now it’s basically a little cavalier seul in your actual case, so to speak, of “yes, I think that’s necessary...” It’s wet finger work: What are we going to do? Where is the wind going to go? What are we going to choose?’ (Interview P14).

This lack of precision in the use of the budget by the partner leads to a great disparity between partners, which is explained by each partner’s perception of poverty and the strategies to be put in place to struggle against it. Social partners are very aware that they are expected to meet the children’s needs as if it were their own children on the one hand and to manage the budget in a responsible way on the other hand:

I think that €1200 is doable. That’s not too much and not too little. So, it’s like, OK, you must keep that account like a good housefather. If they get more, I don’t think it would be healthy, because the wastefulness might surface instead of buying two pairs of trousers, we’re going to buy three, and so on.

(Interview P14)

In doing so, a variety of practices emerge, with some partners not willing to make the support provided more conditional, while others adding additional admission criteria:

I had to convince the mother by saying: ‘Well, you see, you still earn as much, and you can buy her birthday presents rather than just a dress and shoes because that will drain the account’. I directed her. We bought her birthday presents, but because we had received the grant but hadn’t spent the money, I choose educational games. It would be nice if she had a blackboard because she’s starting elementary. So, she could write this, that, and other things.

(Interview P6)

The quotes reveal that decisions are motivated in terms of so-called rationality and necessity that are weighed based on the extent to which they contribute to broadening a child’s future opportunities. Moreover, the social partners’ own normative orientation shines through in this decision-making and prioritising process about justifiable costs, referring to their own family situation as a frame of reference:

At the Foundation, the philosophy is: as a care partner you treat the children as you would treat your own child—well of course always a bit of weighing up of, is that really important now—that that’s a different philosophy.

(Interview P12)

Despite the Foundation’s goal to develop unconditional strategies (beside the selection criteria that are imposed on children and especially their parents) to support children living in poverty, interviews with social partners show that in practice they tend to develop strategies with children that are more conditional than what the Foundation expects due to the interventions of social partners in the implementation process.

4 | Instrumental Versus Life World-Oriented Strategies

An instrumental practice means that the aim of what is to be done is defined from an external viewpoint and without considering what is meaningful for welfare recipients (Maesele 2012). This entails that the outcomes of the interventions are defined beforehand by the actors who intervene, without consulting the welfare recipients about their definition of problems and solutions (Roets, Roose, and Bouverne-De Bie 2013). Life-world-oriented practices, on the other hand, consider and embrace the life worlds, and concerns of people in poverty situations. According to a social justice orientation, the interplay between life world and system becomes vital for actors who intervene, as they analyse how the everyday life is contingent on potentially unjust social and systemic forces (Roets, Roose, and Bouverne-De Bie 2013).

The Foundation wants to ‘break the vicious circle’ of poverty and ‘offer real chances for the future’ to the children it supports. By supporting children financially, they aim to gradually solve child poverty in Belgium. The following quote explains their logic:

Today there are 1,300 Foundation children, the plan is to help 2,000 children by 2024–25. Those 2,000 children don’t stay children, they grow, they become adults, they start families. Now take an average of two children for each, is 4000 people who no longer cost anything to society, but contribute to it themselves. We put that out in a graph, and we come to realise that over a 30-year period, we would take between 75,000 and 100,000 people out of poverty. Then we are probably going to solve a very nice portion of poverty in a sustainable way.

(Interview A4)

The core of the Foundation’s merit however lies in the possibility of offering long-term support. This contrasts with public policies and poverty reduction strategies today. Moreover, the Foundation prolongs this financial support when the youngster starts higher education:

I think that the Foundation is unique. Because it helps children from the moment, they become Foundation children until they reach the age of 18 or longer and continue to study. So, it’s not a one shot, yet a long shot support in the child’s life so that they can have everything that a child in a normal situation has.

(Interview A3)

As such, the Foundation values education as essential for their current as well as future well-being, and sees it as an essential leverage to engage in the struggle against child poverty. The following excerpt illustrates that the Foundation invests in deploying youngster’s talent, while at the same time leaving room for the aspirations of young people:

It’s open to all kinds of degrees. We are never going to impose one type of study. Young people are free to do the studies they prefer, what they want to do. I believe 100% in the free choice of everyone to be able to choose their future and to be able to work towards their goal.

(Interview A3)

Throughout several interviews with the Foundation directors and administrators, success stories are shared, invariably referring to obtaining a degree or job, being aware that a diploma and a job provide the best protection against poverty:

We paid for those studies, and a few months ago I received a very pleasant email. One child followed a communication degree, got her diploma and now is in the labour market. She has broken the cycle of poverty; she no longer costs to our society.

(Interview A7)

However, the above excerpt can be read in instrumental terms of developing human capital, connecting with the historical socio-political goal of labour market qualification. The Foundation’s

aim is to equip people to find and to retain suitable jobs, which has a positive correlation with economic growth, as outlined in the following quote:

We had a study done because we also wanted to know: every euro we invest in a child, what is the return for our society? I was a bit surprised when you see that every euro times five, times nine returns to our society. So, then I think we have a strong story after all.

(Interview A7)

The whole idea of investing in the children with the final goal of active economic participation reflects an instrumental goal. Yet it is noteworthy that the Foundation believes children's aspirations strongly depend on the available resources and material living conditions. Social partners address that the financial support offered by Foundation is much appreciated by partners as it immediately affects the everyday life of families (both children and parents).

Moreover, although the stories that are cited as a success explicitly refer to future degrees and jobs, the guidelines set out by the Foundation concerning meaningful costs are much more focusing on the well-being of the child in the here and now. So, in addition to having an approach based on investing in education, the Foundation intervenes in all areas of life, taking the aspirations of the children who receive support into account.

We don't make judgements about needs and if it is written that there is 120 euros in the budget per month for cigarettes for young people, that is not our problem. And this is the big danger that we must not fall into, and we must be extremely careful. We must not pass on our values and our representations on the way the budget is managed.

(Interview A2)

The broad range of financial interventions are embracing the life worlds of children and youngsters:

Actually, we want to integrate the children more towards society or let them participate. So very often the budget from the Foundation is spent on membership fees for scout, for a sport, for dance, also the uniforms there.

(Interview P15)

Although there is an overarching instrumental goal of contributing to education and future employment, the concrete strategies developed by the Foundation as well as the concrete interpretation of children's needs by social partners reflect a life-world-oriented approach.

This broad life-world-oriented perspective is facilitated through their funding system that works fast without major bureaucratic issues, enabling social partners to intervene based on the needs

captured. Here they differ from the public welfare state apparatus. At the same time, this entails the risk that social partners ask for funding rather than making an appeal to the public welfare state apparatus.

5 | Selectivity Versus Universality

Selectivity refers to the creation of criteria that determine whether welfare recipients have the right to a certain welfare state intervention and entails a categorisation between those who deserve this and those who do not meet specific conditions as undeserving citizens (Villadsen 2007; Maesele 2012). A universal approach implies that all citizens have the right to make use of support that is provided, whereas selectivity refers to the construction of target groups, and aims to direct public resources towards the most disadvantaged to maximise equality on the condition that they are willing to accept the social norm (Martin 2010). However, in the implementation of these policy rationales, selective approaches often have stigmatising and unexpected effects (Maesele 2012).

The partial outsourcing of children's selection is a key aspect of the Foundation strategy. The outsourcing allows the Foundation to identify children who could benefit from its support. The trust granted by the Foundation to its social partners is well appreciated as a recognition of their expertise, regardless of the type of partner the Foundation collaborates with non-profit organisations, public centres for social welfare, schools, etc. However, the strategy of trusting social partners is concomitant with the responsibility they bear while selecting children and applying for intervention. Although the Foundation is growing and supporting more children each year—with reference to the number of 1252 children in 2020—it is financially and organisationally not feasible to support all children experiencing poverty in Belgium, which leads to more stringent selection criteria. The selection process leads to identifying children who 'deserve' and those who 'do not deserve' to receive support. This means that social partners must sort out the eligible children:

We're not going to be able to submit applications for all our beneficiaries'...No, we're really trying, now, to... It's always the problem of sorting out poverty between those who are less poor and those who are poorer, and still being able to make a sort of classification of needs.

(Interview P4)

Evaluating the growing number of applications, the social commission relies on the criterion of extreme poverty in the decision-making process. Although this is 'not an exact science' (Interview A4), it is argued that extreme poverty speaks for itself.

Social partners are aware that the extremity of the poverty situation is decisive for obtaining social commission's approval. As such, the interviews with the social partners were peppered with urgent situations in which they asked the Foundation to intervene. However, this dynamic that consists of establishing

who deserves and who does not deserve the Foundation support might generate a competition between children, putting social partners in a difficult position to decide which children experience the most distressing situation. This might also entail the risk that depending on the school or the foster care population, the probability for a child to be supported by the Foundation may increase or decrease:

We thought about other young people, in particular a young person we have just received who is in a similarly precarious situation and for whom we could also introduce a grant. But the message I received was: "obviously, you can't introduce a grant for all the young people you have"...Because we cannot take in 17. So, you must weigh up, you must think a little bit. You must be reasonable'.

(Interview P2)

Some social partners expressed their discontent about the expectation to portray the poverty situation in terms of harshness. Although they understand the social commission's need for detailed and descriptive input to evaluate the situation, they raise the concern that it might undermine the last bit of parents' pride.

Moreover, the Foundation's social partners are very different organisations in terms of mission, professionalisation status, target audience (children for schools, parents for the public centres for social welfare, etc.), but also in the ability to assess children's poverty situation (e.g., some social partners have more information on the socio-economic situation of families), etc. This diversity of profiles is not reflected in the type of collaboration the Foundation develops with its social partners. The Foundation specifies that partners are intermediary between the eligible family and the Foundation. It is the partner who helps the family to assess the child's needs, analyses the situation and determines the relevant elements to be shared with the Foundation.

Both the French and Dutch versions of the application document that must be completed do not specify the elements that have to be considered or rejected to carry out the 'poverty diagnoses'. Therefore, social partners develop different strategies that have consequences for children's eligibility. Depending on the social partner involved, details are communicated to the Foundation. Some partners working for a public institution, which disposes an in-depth insight of families' finances, are reluctant to share too much information. In the same vein, ethical questions are raised concerning the fact that the far-reaching social research is put in the basket of the social partner. Some of them dig deep into the (financial) privacy of families to ensure that abuse is avoided and to guarantee that all the other financial resources are exhausted, while others do not. The following quote shows that, informed by a certain mistrust, some social partners insist on a home visit, enabling them to accurately assess the situation:

A home visit is very interesting; I usually do that too along the applications. I once had people refuse to let

me visit because they had a big dog, and I would say I also have a dog at home, I'm not afraid of dogs. So, it's really like that sometimes... Afterwards I heard from the teacher, there's a Jacuzzi at home, there's a big flat screen at home. So, I ask myself do they really need that help?

(Interview P14)

On the one hand, this intrusive strategy may prevent abuse, but on the other hand, it assumes that parents are not transparent and must dismiss their pride. As such, this might unintentionally lead to a selection by which some vulnerable children are not eligible:

Those are actually the most difficult conversations. From the moment they get the Foundation's support, it's not too bad, but as a school it's very difficult to discuss financial issue with the families. We see that it doesn't work out. And we especially also notice that a lot of families, especially one target group, our blacks, if I must put it that way, don't accept that. But that's really a pride issue'.

(Interview P18)

Nevertheless, during one of the interviews with the social partners, a practitioner revealed that her experience with the Foundation's flexibility to meet children's needs ignites the debate internally about the limits of the public welfare state apparatus that is supposed to work in universal ways, as social partners are often aiming to stretch the range of interventions:

I think this cooperation does show that the public center for social welfare (PCSW) cannot always provide an answer to everything either. As a social worker in a PCSW you know that you can't solve everything. As much as you'd like to, you can't ask support for the same family every month, it's not possible. I also see the difference with families who get the Foundation support. I put that in the social report to approach the committee members saying: "Look how valuable that would be." And maybe next time, the PCSW can have the philosophy of: "We are going to take charge of that".

(Interview P11)

In another interview, a social partner working in the PCSW also raised the question of the financial limits of the public apparatus linked to the action developed by the Foundation:

I find them really useful at the moment because, unfortunately, maybe that's the problem that we don't have enough resources. Maybe the Foundation should not exist. Maybe we should have more resources so that private people don't have to help families. But that's the way it is. The means of public services are not enough.

(Interview P1)

These critiques may raise the need to think about more effective universal and redistributive antipoverty strategies, which might potentially affect and benefit a broader range of children in poverty.

6 | Concluding Reflections

Our qualitative research study investigated the perspectives of the Foundation's directors, administrators and social partners to figure out whether the foundation reaches its own goals in unconditionally providing financial support to children in extreme poverty situations, and whether the foundation might function as grit in the machine of public actors in the welfare system. We return briefly to the three analytical dimensions that we mobilised to analyse the data, which enabled us to explore whether the construction of the un/deserving child is at play in their discursive welfare rationales.

The analysis shows that the support offered by the Foundation to a child is meant to be almost unconditional and life world-oriented. This strategy of the Foundation's directors and administrators differs in remarkable ways from the strategies developed by other private and even public actors in the field of poverty reduction strategies, who often offer short-term or limited resources. The Foundation is radically pulling the card of long-term financial support, acknowledging that poverty is both a lack of material and immaterial resources. Moreover, the flexibility of the allocated budget and the lack of bureaucracy allow for greater coverage of the uncertainties that arise in a child's life. A key danger emerging in the implementation process, however, is the finding that the Foundation leaves the negotiations and direct contact with the families in the hands of social partners, who might have a lack of proper professional knowledge in how to deal with complicated judgments towards parents (Krumer-Nevo 2016; Jacquet et al. 2022). In that sense, what is meant to be unconditional and life-world oriented, might turn into judgemental and moralising attitudes towards the families. On the one hand, the social partners benefit from the necessary autonomy for the follow-up of the children. On the other hand, this autonomy has the effect of legitimising their strategies rather unreflexive ways, which appears problematic when social partners' practices are more conditional and instrumental than the Foundation's expects.

The Foundation nonetheless also works in extremely selective ways and only includes children living in extreme poverty, which shows a blindness for how social inequalities are (re-)produced and interfere in the lives of other children who need support (Ridge and Wright 2008). In times where a public and universal welfare state redistribution of resources is under pressure due to the changing relationship between citizens, governments, civil society and the market and more recent policy developments no longer address poverty as a complex social problem that requires both a structural redistribution of material as well as immaterial resources and of power (Dean 2015), the Foundation's deliberate lack of relationship with the public welfare state system is a critical deficiency. Critical scholars have indeed scrutinised the recently increasing emphasis on moralised conditions and merit, which tends to replace the public commitment to secure citizenship and rights, and results in blaming the irresponsible

behaviour and so-called incompetence and 'undeservingness' of families in poverty situations (Garrett 2018; Lyndon 2019; Jacquet et al. 2022). As Lyndon (2019, 606) asserts, 'if the fortunes of children and families on low incomes are to change, the government needs to recognise that poverty is a structural and economic issue which urgently needs addressing'. Whereas the Foundation now often claims that it is the victim of its own success as they struggle with providing resources to all children in extreme poverty, they could tackle the failure of the welfare state. The Foundation and all its social partners might equally well throw grit in the machine of public actors of the welfare state and take a political stance towards these developments, with reference to the question how a social justice orientation can be re-incorporated in the public agenda in our societies (Lorenz 2016).

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings will be not available in [repository name] at [DOI/URL] following (1) an embargo from the funders (2) an embargo from people we interviewed. They have not allow us to disclose raw material from interviews.

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