



Service de lutte contre la pauvreté,
la précarité et l'exclusion sociale

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Solidarity and poverty

CONTRIBUTION TO POLITICAL DEBATE AND ACTION

S U M M A R Y

BIENNIAL REPORT 2020-2021

**COMBAT POVERTY, INSECURITY AND
SOCIAL EXCLUSION SERVICE**

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Introduction



Before you is the eleventh biennial Report from the intergovernmental Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service (hereinafter referred to as the Combat Poverty Service). The Report focuses on 'Solidarity and Poverty' as its chosen topic.

In the same way as for the previous biennial Reports, the present Report is the result of a consultation with people who live in poverty, their associations and various other stakeholders. This is one way amongst others in which the Combat Poverty Service – an independent, intergovernmental public institution – fulfils its mandate to assess the effective exercise of human rights in situations of poverty¹.

The subject of solidarity was chosen on the basis of an exchange held in February 2020 within the Support Committee of the Combat Poverty Service. Thus on the eve of a global pandemic that was to have a huge and tragic impact on our society and the world at large, which none of us could have imagined at the time.

Obviously the COVID-19 crisis also had a particularly hard-hitting impact on the preparation of this Report.

First and foremost, solidarity took on a highly relevant meaning during the COVID-19 crisis and the protective measures put in place by the various authorities. In everyday life a wide number of individuals and organisations took it upon themselves to provide maximum support to people in precarious situations. In turn, the various governments put measures into place – in various stages – to support families, employees, self-employed workers and businesses to help them get through the difficult periods of consecutive lockdowns, temporary unemployment, company closures, etc.

In the summer of 2021, we also witnessed solidarity taking a particular form.. The floodings that severely wreaked several Walloon municipalities hit a large number of families particularly hard, including a lot of people who were already living in precarious situations. The conclusion of the previous biennial Report entitled 'Sustainability and poverty' (December 2019) that people living in poverty are hardest-hit by climate change – not just in the South but in our own country too – was yet again tragically verified. However, at the same time, we also saw the emergence of great solidarity with the affected inhabitants, both from those closest to them (neighbours and relatives), and from people living further afield, coming from different parts of the country.

Throughout this Report, reference is frequently made to this solidarity context, in its various forms and in the way it is developing.

The crisis context also had a great impact on the functioning of Combat Poverty Service. From the outset of the COVID-19 crisis, the Service started new activities and demanded attention in different ways for people in situations of poverty and insecurity. Amongst other things by highlighting the potential impact of the sanitary crisis and the protective measures on human rights, by reminding policy-makers and the public opinion of the relevance of the '*leave no one behind*' motto of the UN Agenda 2030 (which is also the key message of the biennial 'Sustainability and poverty' Report) in this crisis, by compiling an overview of COVID-19 measures by the various governments in support of situations of poverty and insecurity, by submitting opinions to the 'Vulnerable Groups' Taskforce at a federal level and to other policy platforms, and by organising stakeholder consultations within the Flemish 'Vulnerable Families' Taskforce².

Needless to say the COVID-19 pandemic also had an impact on the consultation process. As a result of the lockdown measures, no consultation meetings were able to take place as from the spring of 2020. The various associations within which people living in poverty come together, as well as other organisations and services, did everything in their power to adapt their activities to these exceptional circumstances and to continue to deliver support to people in precarious situations. As an alternative for consultation meetings exclusively with the associations within which people living in poverty come together – to explore together the concept of solidarity – the Combat Poverty Service organised a survey among these associations on the topics of solidarity, specific evolutions, the context of COVID-19, etc. Thirteen associations contributed to this survey, providing answers that proved very useful for the preparation and design of the consultation process and for the texts of this Report.

The Service subsequently organised ten consultation meetings from September 2020 to October 2021, nine of which took place by Zoom video conference and the last was held in a hybrid form (a physical gathering in Brussels, combined with video conferencing). We are of course aware that this digital form of consultation stands in contrast to our attention and works on the problem of digital exclusion. Given the COVID-19 circumstances however, we had no other alternatives open to us. At each of these meetings, the Service's staff discussed with the associations concerned, jointly seeking out the most appropriate working methods and making available the technical resources required.

Most of the meetings were attended by 40 to 50 participants, a large number of whom were people living in poverty. The meetings were conducted with the aid of various communication tools (via a computer at the association's premises, by tablet or even by phone, etc.). We would like to take this opportunity to stress the energy and personal investment that the participants brought to the process in attending these meetings and express our warm thanks to each and every one of them for these substantial efforts. In addition, we would also like to underscore the commitment of the associations for the intense preparatory group discussions on the minutes of the gatherings, the discussion points and the draft texts. None of this was easy for the associations, in light of COVID-19 and the various measures in place, which made it difficult for people to get together, with members often required to read the minutes and draft texts on-screen, sometimes on their phones, etc.

In addition, at the invitation of the minister of the German-speaking Community in charge of ?? and his administration, the Combat Poverty Service team was given the opportunity on 8 November 2021 in Eupen to present the elements emerging from the consultation process to the local stakeholders. In turn, these stakeholders brought specific elements from the German Community, which enriched our analysis.

In deciding on the topic of solidarity in February 2020, the Support Committee was aware that this is a particularly wide-ranging topic which would require setting some boundaries. Throughout the consultation process choices were therefore made, based on the survey conducted by the Service among the associations and the first few consultation meetings. In doing so, it was decided to focus on two areas, work and taxation, which had very distinctly emerged from the exchanges as areas where solidarity holds or should hold a key place. Also, at the consultation meetings the demand was expressed to refer to other social domains on a regular basis throughout the Report.

In order to structure the consultation process, the Service's staff used three dimensions of solidarity. Two dimensions are predominant in the existing literature on solidarity: the contribution to and the redistribution of wealth. At the consultation meetings, various stakeholders requested that a third – collective – dimension be added: a dimension that makes the collective aspect explicit, the coming together of people with a view to organising society and fighting inequalities.

The first chapter of this Report puts solidarity and poverty into context, by examining solidarity from the perspective of situations of poverty and by discussing the three dimensions of solidarity perceived during the consultation meetings. In addition, the Report takes a closer look at a number of inequalities and developments in the organisation of solidarity and at the impact of COVID-19 and the floods of the summer of 2021.

The second and third chapter deal with the areas of work and taxation, with particular attention to the dimensions of 'contributing' and the 'redistribution of wealth'.

Building on the first three chapters, the fourth chapter puts forward a number of pathways and recommendations towards greater justice and solidarity. After a first – rather introductory – consideration on the challenges faced, we explore the importance of maintaining a strong social security system, fair taxation as well as quality and accessible public services. As such, this chapter sets out recommendations for the various points, inspired by the analyses in the first three chapters. All the more so as – alongside providing analyses - the Combat Poverty Service's mission is to submit recommendations to the various governments, parliamentary assemblies and advisory bodies.

Quotes in the text without source attribution are comments from participants at the consultation meetings. In addition, the text contains many references - by way of source attributions - to publications and activities of various stakeholders: associations within which people living in poverty come together and their networks, field organisations, institutions, administrations, scientific institutions... and the Combat Poverty Service as such.

The participants of the consultation meetings ask for the analyses and recommendations in the Report to serve as input for political debate and political action, as set out in the Cooperation Agreement on the continuation of the Poverty Reduction Policy³ engaging various authorities. The organisation of an Interministerial conference on the fight against poverty, and of a debate within the various governments, parliamentary assemblies and competent advisory bodies, on the elements of this biennial Report, would be a sign of recognition of the contribution and the commitment of the participants in the consultation efforts within the Service, as well as a concrete contribution towards the fight against poverty for the years to come, in the context of climate and recovery policy.

The team of the Combat Poverty Service, insecurity and social exclusion

* The Combat Poverty Service is duly aware of gender discrimination. However, for legibility purposes we have adopted a non-inclusive writing style to avoid reading difficulties for certain groups of people (people suffering from dyslexia, the visually impaired, etc.).

Chapter I - Solidarity and poverty in perspective



This first chapter puts into perspective the concept of solidarity from the point of view of poverty.

1. Solidarity as viewed by people living in poverty

Under a first point we share a number of ideas about what poverty means for people living in poverty on the basis of a questionnaire completed by the associations in June 2020 and the first consultation meetings. For persons living in poverty, solidarity is about collective values such as helping one another and the cooperation that develops between human beings. It is also about human contact and the bonds formed through dialogue as well as recognising the Other as an equal. Human dignity is essential if solidarity is not to induce a sense of shame and suffering among the persons assisted. The participants in the consultation also stressed the importance of mutual assistance within vulnerable groups, in particular within the family. At the same time, the solidarity that exists among people living in poverty is very often a matter of survival and not necessarily a choice.

Like most of the literature on the subject, participants in the consultation distinguish two types of solidarity: on one hand "warm" or "direct" solidarity that emerges more or less spontaneously between citizens, whether at the individual or group level, and on the other hand "cold" or "indirect" solidarity. The latter is organised by the State and stems from a common social pact in which individuals do not have the direct choice as regards showing solidarity or not. For members of the associations within which people living in poverty come together, there can be no cold solidarity without warm solidarity: current mechanisms of "cold" solidarity, such as social security, were won through the campaigns and struggles of men and women who fought - warmly - together.

2. Three dimensions of solidarity

These discussions on the concept of solidarity made it possible, during the consultation, to identify three dimensions of the concept: contribution, redistribution and the community.

The first dimension of solidarity lies in the fact of contributing to an improvement in society, in creating wealth and happiness, in acting for a fairer and more sustainable society. The contributions to society are many and varied in all sections of the population, including among the poorest. However, certain forms of contribution suffer from a lack of consideration and recognition. For example, people living in poverty tend to invest more in less structured and less recognised forms of voluntary work, such as local groups and informal solidarity networks.

The second dimension of solidarity relates to the various forms of support which people receive, whether structurally through institutional solidarity or on a more ad hoc basis, through families, person to person, etc. A number of mechanisms seek to ensure a redistribution of wealth, such as the social security or certain fiscal instruments, but also healthcare, education and the public services. Benefitting from solidarity can generate a great deal of suffering: participants in the consultation spoke of *"the bad reputation of people living in poverty"* and the stigmatising of people seen as "profiting" from solidarity.

In addition to these two dimensions, the consultation participants evoked a third dimension, the community dimension and that of the common project. This dimension of solidarity transcends the first two: it raises the question of the values that frame life in society and that underpin the mechanisms of direct and indirect solidarity. However, the gap can be big between these values and the organisation of institutional solidarity. This is why members of the associations that bring together people living in poverty placed great emphasis on the importance of and need for collective struggles. They made the point that the various systems of indirect solidarity, such as social security, the unions or mutual societies, exist as a result of the combats of previous generations to bring about changes in the law and rights. Of course, the realisation in practice of this collective and institutional solidarity is often difficult if not illusory at certain levels. It depends in particular on major developments in society and the crises society faces, whether climatic, migratory, economic, health or social, etc.

3. Inequalities and developments in the organization of solidarity

Under this third point we look at the various inequalities and developments in the organisation of solidarity that impact on situations of poverty and that were the subject of numerous accounts and analyses during the consultation. It is not always easy for people living in poverty to participate as they would wish in the various forms of solidarity. Numerous inequalities and barriers prevent certain types of solidarity. During the consultation, participants drew attention to a no doubt incomplete series of developments that flagrantly increase inequalities in the field of solidarity.

Firstly, the ineffectiveness of rights - such as the right to education, to decent housing or healthcare - for people living in poverty is a major obstacle to participating in society. Human rights are an essential foundation for access to the freedom to make choices, assume responsibilities and therefore contribute fully to society. At the redistributive level, people living in poverty experience many inequalities in terms of access to certain basic rights, goods and services as they often benefit less from measures adopted by virtue of the redistributive effect of taxes.

At the consultation meetings many participants also deplored the various legal obstacles to solidarity, such as the pressure placed on our social security system which hits vulnerable groups particularly hard. They also stressed the effects of certain measures, such as introducing the status of cohabitant, which, from the point of view of indirect solidarity, abandons people living in poverty while at the same time punishing their direct solidarity.

Also, as already highlighted in the biennial report "Citizenship and Poverty", the general tendency to limit aid to certain categories of people and to attach conditions to rights, which has been perceptible over the last decade or so⁴, tends to reduce institutional solidarity. This conditionality increases the risk of non-access to rights or can even result in being excluded from rights altogether.

Finally, a certain shifting of responsibility from indirect solidarity to direct solidarity was observed by the consultation participants: each individual is increasingly expected to fend for himself and to have recourse to personal solidarity networks, such as the family, close friends, the associative sector and the private sector. A particular consequence of this development is the way solidarity actions fluctuate widely depending on current events and the media coverage of these events or of certain persons. However, although indirect solidarity and direct solidarity cohabit and are complementary, indirect solidarity, which is institutional - organised by the State - is a vector for equality between citizens and must therefore continue to fulfil its missions independently of the direct solidarity that may or may not coexist alongside it.

4. The impact of COVID-19 and the July 2021 floods

Two major events served to focus attention on solidarity and its importance: the COVID-19 pandemic and the floods of July 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic made it possible, to a certain extent, to highlight the importance of solidarity in our society as people became acutely aware of how vulnerable we all are in the face of illness and, to a degree, restrictions on freedom. The crisis also showed the importance of a strong healthcare system and social security, two systems of indirect solidarity. In reality, questions of solidarity and of society's choices in relation to solidarity lie at the heart of most of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for social or economic relaunch. As to the July 2021 floods, these also brought people together in a way rarely seen before and revealed the level of direct solidarity that people are capable of, despite any divisions in society.

That said, the COVID-19 pandemic had and is continuing to have a very major impact on people living in poverty. It has highlighted and sharply increased the many inequalities present in all areas of life, whether the right to live in a healthy environment, access to healthcare, access to green areas or the right to decent housing, etc. The slowdown and contraction of the economic system brought a quite urgent need to create mechanisms of indirect solidarity, notably the putting into place of a whole series of measures taken by the respective governments at different levels of power to absorb and lessen the negative impact of the crisis caused by the pandemic.

Finally, the health measures dictated by the COVID-19 crisis brought an increase in the digitisation of society - and of the digital divide that results. During lockdown, people without Internet access at home were denied certain forms of contact and solidarity. They were also hit harder by the interruption of certain public services during the pandemic, such as being able to obtain an identity card at the local town hall. The health crisis also saw the closure of spaces providing Internet access, such as cultural centres or Internet cafés. The accelerated and increased digitisation in various areas of life such as access to information, services, education, work etc. had a major impact on people living in poverty. The COVID-19 crisis triggered a change that is set to continue in regard to the degree to which the digital is present in the different areas of people's lives. Hence the need to step up the fight against the digital divide that creates inequalities in terms of access to rights and public services; inequalities that affect above all people living in poverty. When guaranteeing services for all citizens, attention must not focus solely on digital access and the development and strengthening of digital skills, but on a

combination of channels that guarantee services accessible through a digital channel but also by telephone and physical counters.⁵

Chapter II – Solidarity and work



People living in poverty are actors in solidarity in various areas of life. One of these is work, in the widest sense of the term. People living in poverty undertake considerable work by helping one another in all kinds of ways. They also carry out care tasks – for their children, their parents, their friends and their companion in misfortune – and commit to voluntary work, whether or not it is recognised as such. In addition, many people living in poverty are active to varying degrees on the labour market. Paid employment is the most recognised and socially valued way of contributing to society. Ideally, it also allows people to earn their living and to invest in their own future. In addition, it is thanks to paid work and social contributions paid on these earnings that social security is constructed as a system of indirect insurance based on the solidarity that protects individuals, groups and society against risks.

Many solidarity contributions paid by people living in poverty remain invisible, however, and are sometimes discredited or even punished. As a result these individuals no longer appear as actors in solidarity. Many people living in poverty are also unable to find a quality job that also provides financial security. Precarious jobs rarely provide a lasting route out of poverty and push people to the limits of the solidarity system.

1. People living in poverty as actors in solidarity through work

Through work, people contribute to the functioning of society through the tasks they carry out in their job. Also, thanks to social contributions, a job makes it possible to cofinance institutional solidarity. During the consultation, many questions were raised about the organisation of these social contributions. First of all, many people living in poverty – in a context of a structural shortage of quality jobs for certain groups – are unable to find a job. Or they are obliged to accept precarious jobs that often lie outside the contribution system. The result is that people are not only unable to contribute but are also unable to acquire social rights.

Participants then went on to ask whether those who pay and must pay social security contributions do so in a way that is fair and inclusive. Attention focused on the calculation of contributions for employees (fixed percentage of gross salary) and for the self-employed (degressive and limited percentage per higher income bracket), but also on the contributions paid by employees and employers. The contributions by these two parties are essential for social consultation and the democratic management of social security. However, the discussions also showed that social security contributions are regarded more as a charge than as a "solidarity wage" and are therefore avoided as much as possible. Many employees (generally not the unskilled or vulnerable groups) benefit from fringe benefits and the government is taking measures to reduce employers' contributions with a view to creating more jobs. As a result, the social security system is losing revenue and being compromised.

Finally, the consultation participants believe that the financing of social security is over-dependent on work-based contributions and that more account should be taken of other sources of financing (such as contributions on income generated by assets) as a means of strengthening solidarity within the system.

The consultation participants also stressed that there are other ways of showing solidarity apart from through employment. It is legitimate to ask to what extent society recognizes work that is not in the form of paid employment but which in its own way contributes to building a fairer society. As regards voluntary work, people living in poverty encounter many obstacles. They complain that people receiving social benefits are discouraged from, or even penalised for, undertaking voluntary work on the grounds that it reduces their chances of finding paid employment. This when at the same time they are sometimes forced to carry out voluntary activities in the framework of activation measures. They want the voluntary and altruistic nature of voluntary work to be maintained and for its value in terms of social integration, also on the labour market, to be recognised.

Mutual assistance and family solidarity are very present among people living in poverty and are often a vital necessity. Yet in this case too there are fears of being checked on and losing social rights as a result. In the case of cohabitant status, this fear is justified. Any penalizing of relationships of solidarity must be avoided. Finally, the consultation participants turned their attention to a specific form of direct solidarity: the role of the informal carer, for example, who provides care for a neighbour with limited autonomy. Although many people living in poverty see themselves as carers, it is not certain that recognition of such a status is either easy or even necessarily to their benefit. Also, they often have little choice when adopting this role. In addition, they almost never have paid employment that enables them to benefit from measures designed to support them in their role as carer. On the contrary, by taking care of others their own situation is in danger of worsening and they can find themselves in a situation of poverty precisely because they are unable to receive any form of (financial) recognition for their "work".

2. People living in poverty on the limits of the solidarity system

People living in poverty and other vulnerable groups suffer the consequences of a poor distribution of jobs. Firstly, the growth in employment has failed to reduce sufficiently the number of unemployed households. On the contrary, a growing concentration of unemployment is evident in certain households. In 2020, 11.9% of the population were living in households with low work intensity. These households are at greater risk of poverty. The risk of poverty for a household with very low work intensity (without dependent children) is 50.7%, compared to 4% for a household with average work intensity. The consultation participants were also concerned by the growing trend for the mechanisation and robotization of tasks in certain sectors that could impact on jobs which are potentially accessible to these vulnerable people. There is a need to create sustainable and quality jobs, especially for those facing difficulties on the labour market, as a structural and lasting way out of poverty. During the consultation, the participants discussed the possibilities that exist within the social economy, the "Territoires Zéro Chômeur de Longue Durée" (TZCLD) / Gebieden Zonder Langdurige Werkloosheid (GZLW) [zero long-term unemployment areas] as well as proximity services. These initiatives are based on anticipating local needs, personalised support and a participative approach.

Research shows that recently created jobs are on average of a lower quality than existing jobs. These lower quality jobs are increasing with the growth of new economic activities (platform and sharing economy, delivery companies, etc.). Many people living in poverty and vulnerable circumstances are forced to accept precarious jobs in order to have an often minimal income. However, these jobs do not make it possible to anticipate the risks that life brings (need to move home, need for medical care, etc.) or to plan for the future (find decent and affordable housing, have children and meet their needs, etc.). At present there is not only a poor distribution of jobs as such but also of the characteristics that contribute to job quality. Both pay and the quality of the job -

type of contract, material conditions (safety, arduousness, working hours, etc.) and social recognition - could be redistributed more fairly.

In terms of income, some jobs do not make it possible to live with dignity and the wages do not even cover basic needs. Although the number of "poor workers" in Belgium is relatively low and stable (5% in 2017), they are very exposed to the risk of poverty. Furthermore, there are major income differences between different professional categories and statuses. The consultation participants believe that a job must provide long-term security so as to provide a lasting escape from poverty.

The consultation participants condemned the day contracts of temporary agency work as well as the unclear employment statuses and under-protection that prevail in platform work and delivery companies. Not only do these jobs offer no contractual security but they also demand a high degree of flexibility on the part of vulnerable groups while failing to offer the associated support. For highly educated employees, flexibility consists mainly of reconciling work and family life as increasingly promoted by provisions such as flexible working hours and homeworking, etc. However, many low skilled workers often have to manage part-time jobs or jobs with a temporary employment contract for which the working conditions and regulations are often different. This means they have to permanently adapt, making any reconciliation of work and family life impossible. How, for example, to organise childcare when you are doing temporary agency work and do not know when you will be working in the coming days and weeks

It was subsequently stressed that most of the jobs filled by persons with low skills are less valued socially (such as cleaning, waste collection and disposal, goods transport, logistics). In the field of parenting and care, much of the "work" is invisible and under-valued, this at the same time having a considerable influence on the risk of poverty among certain population groups. Finally, mention was made of how the unequal social value attached to certain jobs is further strengthened by gender inequality.

As a solidarity-based insurance system, social security is an excellent guarantee of redistribution. But this protection is also under pressure. The consultation focused principally on the growing logic of conditionality that is increasingly limiting access to the redistributive effects of social security for certain population groups. Some people risk being excluded from the system and losing their right to protection. Access to unemployment benefit is thereby reduced and many young people who lose their entitlement to integration allowances have to turn to the CPAS [social assistance centres]. The consultation participants also condemned on several occasions the insufficiency of the various replacement allocations. Most of the minimum benefits are below the risk-of-poverty threshold and therefore insufficient for a life of dignity. It was also noted how social security is increasingly covering special risks that are unequally distributed within the population (such as care for children and families in relation to unemployment and disability).

The consultation participants believe it is important to recognize and value work that remains invisible and under-valued, to again move towards an unconditional social security and to guarantee a decent wage for all. A universal basic income, combined with certain conditions, was raised as a possible avenue to be explored.

Chapter III – Solidarity and fiscality



Fiscality – the collection and spending of taxes – was chosen, together with work, as a field for exploring the subject of solidarity in the framework of this biennial report. The way in which taxation is organised is a very important element in government policy and serves a number of purposes. Tax revenue finances infrastructure and public services, enabling the authorities to finance their (social) policy and permitting major projects that are not possible alone and that therefore exceed what is contributed and received individually. Fiscality also enables people to contribute to society and serves to achieve one of the important aspects of solidarity, namely the redistribution of wealth at national level. As noted on several occasions during the consultation meetings, the issue is not just the choices made when collecting tax but also the choices made on how to use the resources received. A representative from one association that brings together people living in poverty stressed that: *"It is not because you collect more tax revenue from the wealthiest that this money will be used well and help reduce poverty"*. Finally, in certain cases taxes serve to influence means of consumption or to orient behaviour.

Fiscality plays a major role in the functioning of the welfare state and in organising structural solidarity. The idea whereby "the strongest shoulders must bear the heaviest load" is widely accepted. However, this principle of solvency has tended to disappear in the course of successive tax reforms. The consultation discussed the subject of fiscality by looking at the collection of tax and the spending of the resources thereby collected. The three dimensions of solidarity – contribution, redistribution and community – were discussed. Avenues for raising and spending public funds fairly and the associated recommendations can be found in Chapter IV.

1. The collection of taxes

1.1 Effects of the form of tax (progressive, flat and lump-sum taxes)

The country's authorities (federal, regional, community, local) use different types of taxes to exercise their competences and finance their functioning. Some tax regimes are organised on a progressive basis, meaning that revenue that falls within the lower tax brackets are taxed at a lower rate or not at all, whereas revenue in the higher tax brackets is taxed at a higher rate. Such a system is designed to reduce social inequalities and therefore has a beneficial effect on the fight against poverty. The most important example of this is income tax on natural persons. Due to certain developments since the 1980s, this progressive system has become less redistributive.

In contrast to the above, there are also forms of taxation that are not progressive and that have a relatively greater financial impact on people living in poverty, meaning that they tend to increase inequalities. One form of tax often used is the flat tax in which tax is levied at a fixed rate. VAT and customs duties are two examples. As this is a tax that often applies to consumer goods and these goods represent a proportionally greater proportion of the household budget of people on low incomes, these taxes are generally supposed to have a greater impact on people on low incomes. Customs duty is levied on specific products the consumption of which

is discouraged. The carbon tax that is likely to be levied in Belgium in the not too distant future will probably be in the form of a flat tax. With lump-sum taxes every person or business pays exactly the same amount irrespective of income. This approach is often based on the principle of "polluter/user pays". Past or present examples include municipal taxes, vehicle registration tax, audiovisual tax, the Flemish tax on use of the energy network, the "coût-vérité" (cost-truth) tax on household waste in the Walloon Region, etc. The problem of the proliferation of lump-sum taxes is due in part to the very large measure of fiscal autonomy enjoyed at each level of power. Towns and municipalities are in fact free to levy all kinds of taxes and this can result in major differences from one municipality to another.

1.2 Tax base

The decisions made by legislators on what is taxed – and in what way – indicate to what degree solidarity is valued by society. Professional income and replacement income are taxed progressively. Income from assets, on the other hand, benefits from exceptional systems such as "discharging" withholding tax and cadastral income that make the tax rate lower than if this income were subject to progressive tax. In addition to these low taxes on income from assets, the legislator has chosen to levy very little tax on wealth as such. As a result, wealth continues to grow and it is difficult to claim that the Belgian tax system is sufficiently redistributive. Inheritance tax is levied on the assets of private individuals at the time of their death, but it can be (partially) avoided by means of tax saving schemes, especially when larger sums are involved. We also note a development whereby taxes are used increasingly to discourage behaviour that is regarded as negative or to encourage positive behaviour. This has long been the case for the consumption of goods and services, but we are now seeing an increase in taxes on sugar as a means of combatting obesity, and "carbon" taxes to combat climate change. A word of warning should be sounded against the growing use of tax as an instrument for regulating behaviour as it further compromises the principle of solvency.

1.3 (In)equality in regard to extreme wealth and fortune

The consultation viewed extreme wealth as an extreme consequence of wealth inequalities. The huge inequalities between the rich and poor were considered to be particularly problematic by the consultation participants. At the consultation meetings to discuss the "Sustainability and Poverty" biennial report a number of participants had already advocated introducing an 18th Sustainable Development Goal that would help put an end to extreme wealth. Despite economic growth and the accumulation of wealth in the world, poverty is growing rather than decreasing.

The existence of extreme wealth raises a number of questions and social problems. Firstly, extreme wealth threatens democracy. A second problem is linked to the consumer practices of the very rich that have a very negative impact on the environment and that are incompatible with a sustainability goal. Thirdly, the existence of extreme wealth also highlights the fact that wealth is distributed too unequally. Fourthly, the extreme accumulation of speculative financial capital has disastrous consequences on property prices and thus on the right to housing.

1.4 Collecting tax in practice

People living in poverty often face difficulties relating to the way taxes are collected in practice. People on low incomes often don't have access to tax deductions and tax reductions that not even people with a sufficient tax base are easily able to benefit from. The complex nature of taxes can result in the non-take-up of possible tax benefits. The participants asked whether the present tax system could not be replaced by a simpler one. The instrument of the refundable tax credit, which exists in the framework of service vouchers, enables people on low incomes to benefit from a tax reduction. Increased use could be made of such a device.

The present tax system also enables some people to reduce their contribution to institutional solidarity by having recourse to a number of – legal – practices for tax optimisation or even tax evasion. It is important for measures to be taken at national and international level to combat such practices that undermine solidarity and that are regarded as particularly unfair by people living in poverty. This is all the more true as they are subject to tax collection practices by the authorities that are not always optimal.

2. The spending of public funds

Taxes are necessary to finance the policies implemented, maintain infrastructures and finance public services. However, the policies implemented do not all benefit in the same way and the infrastructures or public services provided by public funds are not used in the same way. One tax expert who attended the consultation stressed that collecting tax is just one element in the redistribution chain: *"If we had a system that levied tax on a massive scale on those with the highest income, thus a very social system, but then used this money to benefit those who paid, that is the wealthiest or upper middle classes, then the system would not be redistributive. So one must also look at the redistributive aspect in regard to the use of the money collected"*.

2.1 The Matthieu effect in the use of subsidies and support measures

In the "Sustainability and Poverty" biennial report, the consultation participants stressed the importance of avoiding what is known as the Matthieu effect. This is the principle whereby certain policy measures are systematically used more by the wealthiest sections of the population while people living in poverty have much less access to these measures. Public funds are not paid out in equal proportions to the various sections of the population. A double injustice results: on one hand, people living in poverty cannot allow themselves to opt for sustainable solutions and they do not benefit from the (financial) support the government makes available to them for these purposes. On the other hand, they help finance these measures through various mechanisms.

The "Sustainability and Poverty" biennial report mentions an observable Matthieu effect in the tax benefits and subsidies granted by the State to encourage sustainable behaviour. Given the investments required, people living in poverty miss out on these benefits that go primarily to people with the means to provide money up front. This is because a lot of subsidies require personal prefinancing and that is not within everybody's reach. Also, certain grants are only available to home owners whereas people on low incomes are often confined to the rental market. Environment-friendly options are also often more expensive, with the result that they are not accessible to everybody.

Another example is that of company cars that offer significant tax benefits. Yet only a minority of employees have a company car that they can also use for private trips. A final example of the Matthieu effect is found in the field of family policy in connection with aid and assistance measures. Expenditure on paid parental leave has increased sharply, due to a social policy that is focused more on possibilities for combining paid work and child care. Yet not everyone has recourse to such assistance measures that permit paid parental leave.

2.2 Differences in the use of public services

The Matthieu effect raises a number of questions: How are public funds invested, and is it true to speak of fair redistribution? Do we actually redistribute to those who most need it? Those with sufficiently large personal assets can provide, through their own means, access to all kinds of services and also guarantee this access to succeeding generations, given that to a large extent wealth can be inherited. Those who possess nothing, on the other hand, are dependent on what is publicly available while the poor they may not even have access to this. In areas where the Matthieu effect is felt they rarely if ever have access.

The issue of public services was raised in 2014-2015 during the consultation within the Combat Poverty Service. A lot of attention was paid to guaranteeing the effectiveness of rights – an essential mission of public services – by defining public services both as public missions and as the actors that must provide them. In the use of public services – financed with public funds – the Matthieu effect is also apparent, affecting the effectiveness of rights. *"When she looks at the local paper, she sees a lot of things listed that she doesn't use, in terms of infrastructures, in terms of services. She asks the following question: what percentage of the different public services is used by people living in poverty?"* reported one participant from an association that brings together people living in poverty.

Chapter IV – Ways to solidarity and justice



In the previous two chapters, we have looked at solidarity in two areas where it is particularly relevant and present, and which are essential in the fight against poverty: work and taxation.

This fourth chapter proposes a number of avenues and recommendations for greater justice and solidarity. After a first point on the challenges of solidarity, we will look in more detail at the importance of accessible and quality jobs and strong social security (point 4.2.), a fair tax system (point 4.3.), and quality and accessible public services (point 4.4.).

This chapter contains recommendations for the different points, inspired by the analyses developed in the other three chapters. In addition to producing analyses, the Poverty Reduction Unit also has the task of formulating recommendations to governments, parliaments and advisory bodies.

1. Solidarity and the fight and poverty. What are the issues?

Organising solidarity is a major issue for society as a whole and in particular in regard to the fight against poverty. This first point on the issues raised by solidarity describes the challenges to be faced through solidarity.

1.1 Meeting individual and collective challenges

Solidarity makes it possible to cope with the ups and downs of life, whether experienced at the individual or collective level. For an individual it is a question of confronting the difficulties that life may bring, such as illness, disability or losing your job, as well as the "challenges" posed by life in general, such as personal development, training, finding and keeping a quality job, meeting your own and your children's needs, living with dignity until the time of death, etc. For people living in poverty, direct solidarity is often a question of survival to meet basic needs. Needs that for many are not fully guaranteed by social protection and other forms of indirect solidarity. At the collective level, solidarity must make it possible as a group to confront the shocks experienced by society, whether present or future.

Direct solidarity operates within all categories of the population and for the most part spontaneously. Essential, it nevertheless has its shortcomings, such as the difficulty sometimes experienced in reaching the most vulnerable people or assistance that is sometimes ill suited to real needs. There are also many obstacles to direct solidarity that people living in poverty come up against in particular (cohabitant status, fear of being accused of undeclared work, etc.). This direct solidarity also needs to be accompanied by indirect solidarity so as to provide structural solutions. For example, the quality of housing and the right to education are two major levers that make it possible to combat poverty. Direct solidarity (by donating materials to children, for example) is beneficial but insufficient.

1.2 Creating a society

Solidarity makes it possible to create a society by connecting people both structurally and lastingly: it is at the heart of the construction of the collective project for society, for present and future generations. It is both an expression of and a condition for social cohesion.

One of the major issues for solidarity at the collective level is the way it is developed: the organisation of solidarity must be the subject of collective reflection and choices guaranteed by a democratic process. The participation of all, including people living in poverty and their associations, is essential in building a solidarity society. While the consultation participants note a clear increase in associations seeking to participate in all kinds of initiatives, there remain very real obstacles to participation for people living in poverty: the difficulty of establishing contact with vulnerable persons, travel costs, lack of self-confidence, etc. To correct this situation and render participation effective, the so-called "continuous education" associations and associations within which people living in poverty come together have a primordial role. Hence the need to sufficiently fund and support them. In addition to the direct participation of civil society in the decision-making process, participants in the consultation stressed the importance of other measures of democratic control, such as a poverty impact test and the democratic control of the contributive and redistributive aspects of State budgets.

Another issue when considering the organisation of solidarity is that it must be in the context of realising human rights and human dignity. Some forms of solidarity are more conducive than others to the realisation of human rights, such as the development of accessible public services that are funded by the community or social security. Yet these mechanisms do not always make it possible to ensure sufficient social protection for everyone, as became evident during the consultation.

Finally, a third issue when organising solidarity relates to its development over time and the different political regimes. The organisation of solidarity is in effect the fruit of opposing struggles and interests, social movements, power struggles and values that the community may purvey. In Belgium, solidarity is closely connected to human rights, democracy and the European project. Yet society is also evolving towards values that attach greater importance to autonomy, privatisation and increased transfer of responsibilities to the individual. In addition, technological, demographical, environmental and social developments, such as the emergence of social networks, globalisation or the climate crisis, are also bringing changes and calling into question the organisation of solidarity.

The Combat Poverty Service formulates the following recommendations:

- Use human rights as the basis for policies and thereby respect the Belgian Constitution and international commitments.
- Pursue a policy aimed at rendering effective the exercise of rights and evaluate and reform legislation accordingly.
- Bring greater flexibility to the regulations governing voluntary work for benefit recipients.
 - Modify article 13 of the act of 3 July 2005 on the rights of voluntary workers as well as article 6 §5 of the Royal Decree of 11 July 2002 on social integration so as to remove the obligation to declare any voluntary work to the payment organisation.
 - Provide all the actors (associations, mutual insurance companies, CPAS [Social Assistance Centre], benefit recipients, etc.) with clear and comprehensive information on the rights and obligations of people on benefits who want to undertake voluntary work.

- Identify and communicate in a transparent manner the criteria used by the ONEM [National Employment Office] and payment bodies when refusing a voluntary activity.
- Stimulate initiatives for democratic participation and in so doing award particular attention to making them accessible to people living in poverty.
- Award greater recognition to the work of people living in poverty (surviving day to day, mutual assistance, coming together within associations, their struggles, etc.; all activities that demand time and energy). This while most certainly not penalising relations of "warm" solidarity between persons who receive certain social benefits and thereby better protect their right to a family life.
- Recognise the added value of civil society associations and organisations that bring together several groups of citizens, including people living in poverty, and support them.
- When drawing up and implementing poverty, provide for an *ex ante* and *ex post* analysis of the effects on individuals and households living in poverty.

2. Strengthening social security for a fairer and more inclusive society

People living in poverty participate actively in solidarity. One of the ways they do this is through taking up paid employment. This means they contribute to the social security system. At the same time, many vulnerable groups face exclusion mechanisms on the labour market and inequalities in the (re)distribution of jobs that block their access to social security. Yet it is precisely this system that is supposed to provide protection against social risks, despite its shortcomings. Under this point we argue for a strengthening of social security so that it can continue to provide an appropriate response to the challenges we face as individuals, as a society and as a democracy.

2.1. Social security as a response to society's challenges

Our social security system has existed for more than 75 years and for many of us it is so naturally a part of our lives that we scarcely stop to think about it. Yet social security did not happen by itself. The system as we know it today resulted from solidarity among working people and their common struggle, as well as consultation between workers' and employers' organisations. The consultation participants see it as a form of indirect or "cold" solidarity born of direct or "warm" solidarity.

Social security is an insurance system based on solidarity with two basic goals: to guarantee a minimum income and to strive for the maintenance of living standards. The two principles – insurance and solidarity – are complementary and closely linked.

2.2. Protection against poverty

Social security plays an important role in combating poverty, in particular through the benefits paid to people who lose their income from paid employment. In 2020, 14.1% of the Belgian population belonged to a group presenting a risk of monetary poverty. Without social transfers such as pensions and sickness, disability and unemployment benefit, this percentage climbs to 42.3%. But today the social security system is less effective in protecting against poverty than in the past. This is due in particular to the growing divide between working and non-working families, the increased conditionality in certain branches, minimum benefits that are below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold and support for reconciling work and family life that is not accessible to all.

2.3. Protection against economic, social and environmental disruptions

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social security, an institutionalised system of indirect solidarity, played a vital role in combating the health crisis. The system adapted quickly so that people were able to retain (in part) their income (from paid employment). At the same time, the health crisis highlighted weaknesses in the system. It has become increasingly clear who has no access to social security or insufficient access to benefit from its protection, such as vulnerable groups on the labour market and people in precarious jobs, homeless people and people without a residence permit. For people with a legal right to social security access can still sometimes be difficult.

2.4. Towards a strong social security

The right to social security features in several international treaties concerning human rights ratified by Belgium and as laid down in article 23 of the Belgian Constitution. Social protection is therefore a fundamental right subject to the standstill principle. The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Follow the recommendations of international human rights organisations that control respect for international treaties on human rights, and thereby continue to guarantee the protective nature of social security. For example, the UN Committee for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recommends – in its closing observations on the fifth periodic report of Belgium – an increase in the statutory minimum benefits to above the at-risk-of-poverty threshold.
- Always take into account the standstill principle as foreseen by the Constitution. This concerns the prohibiting of any substantial reduction in the level of social security protection.

Social security is often regarded as an economic cost that would not be so high if more people were active (longer) on the labour market. It is also assumed that people would find work more quickly if their benefits were low and there were strict controls on their job search behaviour. But in addition to this, there exists a social investment perspective in the field of social protection according to which replacement income must help individuals and households to invest sufficiently in themselves (also in their employability on the labour market) and in their family (through education, health, well-being, etc.). In addition to accessible public services of sufficient quality (work, education, healthcare, housing, etc.), benefits must be sufficiently high. The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Reduce the pressure on social security by preventing risks – of unemployment for example – through the creation of a sufficient number of quality jobs, especially for those with a low level of education.
- Control the application of regulations on temporary work through agencies and limit the use of day contracts as laid down in the federal government agreement of 2020.
- Systematically develop a stronger and more sustainable social economy as a sector in itself. Apply the social clauses in public works contracts so as to reserve a part of the work for the social economy.

- Study the transposition of the Territoires Zéro Chômeurs de Longue Durée (TZCLD)/Zones Zonder Langdurige Werkloosheid (ZZLW) [Zero Long-Term Unemployment Zones] in Belgium, while maintaining the project's initial philosophy and voluntary nature. Study the benefits to society and to the persons concerned. The Service also refers in this respect to the following suggestions proposed by ATD Fourth World:
 - Foresee financial support from the Federal State to ensure the development of TZCLD/ZZLW in the three Regions.
 - Reflect on the amount of the salary proposed in the framework of the TZCLD/ZZLW – taking into account the possible loss of certain assistance when commencing employment and the costs of child care – and envisage an increase in the minimum wage to guarantee decent working conditions for all.
- Further increase the amount of replacement income (unemployment benefit, disability benefit, etc.) so that it at least reaches the risk-of-poverty threshold and thereby enables the beneficiaries to live with dignity and confront the rising cost of living
- Increase the minimum wage and ensure that it evolves in line with the rising cost of living and provides a decent income.

It is essential to again recognize and strengthen the collective value of social security in ensuring an inclusive society of solidarity. The COVID-19 crisis that the social security is helping us to confront can be an ideal moment for this. The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Ensure that people are more aware of and better informed about the individual and collective importance social security.
- Speak about social contributions – or solidarity contributions – and avoid terms such as costs or charges.

Many social security rights are becoming increasingly conditional and selective. This has many disadvantages, such as higher administrative costs, the stigmatising of beneficiaries, greater insecurity for recipients and an increased risk of non-take-up of rights. What we need is a policy that is as universal as possible and that leaves nobody by the wayside. The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Simplify the social security regulations as much as possible as part of the drive to combat the non-take-up of rights.
- Avoid as much as possible people being excluded from social security and consequently having to fall back on social assistance that brings a loss of rights.
- Reduce the activation logic on the labour market and reconnect with the guarantee of a sufficient minimum income, access to quality services and support in finding quality employment.
- Review the increasingly degressive nature of unemployment benefit so as to offer greater financial security to job-seekers, including in their search for employment.
- Combat the under-protection of workers in the "new" jobs of the platform and delivery economy by guaranteeing quality jobs that make it possible to acquire decent social security rights, as foreseen in the 2020 government agreement.
- Study the possibility of improving the financial situation and social integration of benefit recipients.

- Permit a combination of income from paid employment and benefits, especially during the transition from inactivity to (part-time) employment.
 - Allow unemployed persons who find a job to continue to enjoy for a limited period certain benefits of their unemployed status.
 - Make it possible to combine unemployment and voluntary work, as was permitted during the COVID-19 period.
- Review the complex regulations governing the status of cohabitant so as to remove the impact of this status on various areas of life and to ensure that cohabiting and mutual solidarity both within families and between citizens and home sharers is supported, as the Combat Poverty Service recommends in its memorandum "Reconnaitre, soutenir et encourager la cohabitation" [Recognising, supporting and encouraging cohabitation] for the 2019 federal and regional elections.

If social security is to develop in a perspective of social investment then there must be investment in social security itself. Existing financing needs to be improved through correct and fair social contributions by employers, employees and the self-employed. The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Ensure that fringe benefits (such as company cars, luncheon vouchers, etc.) do not undermine social security or create inequalities between workers.
- Give more guarantees so that reductions in employers' social contributions designed to create and stimulate employment actually result in the creation of quality jobs for vulnerable groups. At present, the return on the investment in the form of job creation is not always evident.
- Look again at the social contributions of self-employed workers in the light of the financing of their increasing social protection, the mutual solidarity within the system for self-employed workers and the solidarity between regimes (employees, self-employed and civil servants). Take these elements into account when improving the social status of self-employed workers as foreseen by the federal government agreement.

It could also be useful to diversify the sources of income of social security. The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Review and possibly increase financing through taxation. At present taxation contributes by way of alternative financing and the "equilibrium endowment", in addition to the usual public allocation, but only to a limited extent, through VAT for example. This means that it is not always the broadest shoulders that bear the heaviest burden. Some branches of social security, such as health insurance and family benefit, are not limited to people who pay social contributions out of their salary but are universal and thus accessible to all.
- Introduce a generalised social contribution that is levied through taxation on all potential income – including income from property – to reduce the burden on earned income. These extra funds should be used exclusively to finance social security.
- Take into account phenomena such as robotization and digitisation – which result in the loss of paid jobs and thus of revenue for social security, while expenses linked to unemployment benefit are increasing – and provide a contribution to social security that is based on the value added created by machines and digitisation.

3. Towards a fair taxation

The consultation showed that people living in poverty also want to contribute to (institutional) solidarity through taxation, as they in fact already do more than they may realise, through indirect taxation for example. At the same time, Chapter III evokes the many inequalities in the way in which taxation is organised and applied in Belgium. There is a demand for a fairer system of taxation based on the principle of contributive capacity, with the broadest shoulders (multinationals, major companies, wealthiest citizens) bearing the heaviest load. This chapter explores the various options for a fairer taxation. It looks at the collection of taxes and the way these resources are spent, two cornerstones of a fair and redistributive tax system.

3.1. Choosing tax measures and forms that permit fair contributions.

The form of tax – flat rate, progressive or lump sum – has a major impact on the way in which the efforts and contributions of every citizen and company are shared. Progressive taxes allow everybody to contribute according to their income and are therefore regarded as the form of tax that is closest to the principle of contributive capacity. The consultation participants therefore suggest that priority should be given to a progressive form when levying new taxes and that the existing tax system should be rendered more progressive, following decades during which the trend has been in the opposite direction.

With flat-rate and lump-sum taxes, people on low incomes contribute proportionally more as the goods and services in question weigh more heavily on their budget. Social corrections, which ideally should also be automatic whenever possible, can offset this negative effect. In the case of taxes designed to influence behaviour, such as a possible carbon tax, the revenue thus received can also be used to support vulnerable groups.

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Introduce greater progressivity to the tax system, for example by introducing higher tax rates for natural persons in the highest personal income tax brackets, but also by applying the highest exemptions or the lowest rates to those on low incomes.
- When introducing new taxes, as well as when reforming existing taxes, give priority to progressive rather than flat-rate or lump-sum taxes.
- Abolish tax deductions for the acquisition of a second or third home.
- Evaluate and debate certain VAT rates for essential goods and services, taking into particular account the fact that VAT levies have a greater impact on low income households.
- Foresee social corrections (tax reduction or exemption) to compensate for the greater impact of a lump-sum tax on low income families, with automatic application as much as possible.
- Make an *ex ante* evaluation (poverty impact test) of new taxes and reforms and involve people living in poverty and other actors in the process. Systematically include an *ex post* evaluation in the legislation, following an introductory period.
- When introducing carbon pricing also consider the impact on vulnerable people and those living in poverty and:
 - examine whether the desired effects can also be obtained through a regulatory approach (such as stricter environmental legislation) rather than having recourse to the instrument of taxation;

- Conduct an *ex ante* evaluation, with the groups in question, of the potential impact of a carbon pricing system in situations of poverty and vulnerability;
- Use the revenue generated to support vulnerable groups;
- Adopt measures that provide additional support for vulnerable groups and people living in poverty in accessing sustainable goods and services;
- Ensure a systematic follow-up of the (non-)take-up of these measures.

3.2. Taxing different sources of income proportionally

Not all sources of income are taxed in the same way, and the fact that capital income is generally taxed less than earned income or social security benefits is seen as a major injustice by the consultation participants. The option of a globalisation of income was suggested as a means for a fairer taxation of capital income. This globalised income could then be taxed progressively.

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Introduce income globalisation (wages, benefits, income from capital or property) when taxing natural persons.
- Make a globalised tax on natural persons more progressive.

3.3. Developing a wealth tax

A wealth tax is the most evident solution for an assets-based contribution. This could be a one-off measure, in response to a crisis, or it could be levied annually/structurally. Opponents highlight the risk of this causing the flight of capital or practical objections such as the absence of a wealth register. This risk is seen as relative by wealth tax advocates, however, and studies have identified different ways to combat certain practices. The fact that some countries already have a wealth tax shows that it can be workable in practice.

In relation to a wealth tax, it is appropriate to mention inheritances as a factor in accumulating wealth. It is estimated that 75% of wealth is inherited, this creating very unequal situations at the outset. At the same time, a number of major inequalities are inherent in inheritance tax. For people on low incomes, it can often be a source of problems and anxiety, while substantial assets can often easily avoid inheritance tax through tax advice. Hence the urgent need for a reform of inheritance tax.

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Introduce a form of a progressive tax on wealth.
- Reform inheritance tax, with a higher tax exempt amount and higher tax rates for large inheritances.
- Abolish tax deductions on acquiring a second or third home.

3.4. Strengthening the combat against tax fraud.

Belgium is often ranked among Europe's six tax havens for large fortunes. The consultation participants are of the opinion that a fair taxation requires the closing of loopholes that make it possible to avoid tax through various kinds of tax arrangements. It is also possible to further step up the fight against tax fraud by granting the tax authorities and courts the means to do so, as well as by acting more on the recommendations of the parliamentary committee of inquiry into major tax fraud cases.

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Continue to implement the recommendations designed to combat tax fraud, as formulated by the parliamentary committee of inquiry into major cases of tax fraud.
- Combat tax fraud by giving the tax authorities and the courts the means to effectively fulfil this mission to the full.

3.5. Combating the Matthieu effect and the non-take-up of rights

To evaluate the fairness of a tax system it is also necessary to look at the way the resources collected through tax are spent. If they are largely returned to those who contribute the most, the redistributive effect is limited. It would be interesting in this respect to take transparent stock of public expenditure and identify those population groups that benefit, and to provide a more systematic analysis of take-up and non-take-up. The consultation participants also consider that the use of tax revenue, which accounts for 97% of State revenue, should be the subject of a collective reflection and that citizens – reflecting the diverse composition of the population – should be involved in the process. However, there are a number of obstacles to greater democratic control of the budget – which is a challenge in itself – when the participation of people living in poverty is at stake.

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Map the Matthieu effect at the federal, regional, community and local level, with a systematic gathering of quantitative information on the take-up and non-take-up of advantages and public services.
- Make more use of tax credits that can be distributed in case of tax exemptions and deductions so that people on low incomes can also benefit from tax reductions.
- Make tax advice accessible to people living in poverty so that they can exercise their right to certain benefits.
- Carry out poverty impact tests for the new tax measures.
- Look at the possibility of access to grants and other advantages being granted by a universal or selective measure and how the principles of proportional universalism can be applied.

4. Equitable use of public funds: accessible public services of guaranteed quality

People living in a situation of vulnerability benefit much less from the fruits of investment in public services as they have much less recourse to them. Under this point a number of general issues are raised that threaten access to public services for people living in poverty and recommendations made on how to improve both access to and the quality of public services.

4.1. The role of public services in the realisation of rights

The consultation participants confirm that the mission of public services should be the effectiveness of rights, while also highlighting certain trends that complicate this mission. The first of these lies in the transfer of many tasks and responsibilities to a more local political level. This results in local differences and thereby legal uncertainty and unequal access to rights. Secondly, responsibility is being placed increasingly with the individual, as reflected in the application of an activation logic in support in finding employment. Finally, the transfer of responsibility for providing public services from the public to the private sector also brings dangers for the quality of public services through the greater emphasis on setting costs.

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Confirm the realisation of rights as the core mission of public services.
- Strengthen the financing of public services so they can fulfil their missions in the realisation of rights.
- Strengthen the legal nature of services such as access to water, energy and the Internet by extending Article 23 of the Constitution to include these rights.

4.2. Improved access to public services

The Matthieu effect in the use of public services as described in chapter III shows how various factors can create obstacles when accessing services. Problems such as the pertinence of the supply, cost, information, mobility, reception and appeal procedures all impact negatively on access to public services. During the consultation the emphasis was placed on the conditions attached to rights, often linked to strict income limits. The use of more progressive income limits makes it possible to offer assistance adapted to different groups. The consultation participants request that such an approach - known as "proportional universalism" and in which universal measures are supplemented by specific actions for certain groups - should be applied more often.

Digitisation is an important factor for the accessibility of public services and an issue frequently mentioned during the consultations, in particular in relation to the impact of the accelerated digitalisation triggered by the COVID-19 crisis. This not only requires access to hardware, software and the Internet plus ICT skills but also means less physical contact with the providers of public services, a contact that is very important for people in vulnerable circumstances. Digitisation has its benefits but the participants believe that alternatives must always be available by maintaining counter staff and sufficient support.

One important avenue to be explored in seeking to make public services more accessible is to render rights automatic. Four possible levels can be identified in this respect: automatic granting of rights, identification of possible beneficiaries, automatic updating, and simplification of the regulations. The consultation participants stress that the automatic identification of rights also has its risks, such as the risk of violating private life and the fact that the automatic application of rights also implies an automatic cancellation of these rights:

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations.

- Map public spending and identify which population groups use it. Provide a more systematic follow-up and analysis of the take-up and non-take-up of rights and services.
- Develop a digitisation and digital divide policy and foresee measures for access to software, hardware, the Internet and ICT skills. Provide alternatives to digital access to public services by maintaining a sufficient number of physical counters and support measures.

- Make young people and adults more aware of the importance of digital literacy and the new technologies, in particular by guaranteeing access to affordable hardware and software.
- Stimulate and assist organisations and institutions in evaluating their supply, in terms of accessibility and (non-)take-up of their services.
- Provide assistance adapted to the various groups by using progressive income limits.
- Apply the principle of proportional universalism as much as possible and in this way provide tailor-made support to citizens in different situations.
- Further develop automatic rights, at their four possible levels (automatic granting of rights, identification of potential beneficiaries, automatic updating, simplification of regulations) while respecting private life and ensuring good communication with the individuals in question regarding their case and situation.

4.3. Guaranteed quality of public services

The unequal use of public services is also influenced by the quality of the service. A tendency of concern to the consultation participants is the confusion of roles, public services being entrusted with more authority to check rights, a development that places pressure on the necessary relationship of trust between the care provider and beneficiary. During the discussions, people living in poverty spoke, for example, of their sense of helplessness when confronted with the demands of social workers when submitting an "individualised project for social integration" (PIIS/GPMI).

The Charte de l'assuré social/Handvest van de social verzekerde [Insured Person's Charter] is one example of an instrument that can help guarantee the quality of public services. The Charter enshrines in law a number of principles concerning the rights and obligations of the insured person, on one hand, and an obligation to provide proactive information on the other. The introduction of this Charter has strengthened the position of insured persons and ensured that more attention is paid to the effectiveness of social rights within social security institutions, even if there remains scope to further increase awareness and provide more services automatically rather than on request.

The experience of the Agora group, in which people living in extreme poverty engage in dialogue with professionals from the youth assistance services and administration, shows that a fruitful and lasting dialogue is effectively possible and has a positive impact on the quality of services. For the dialogue to be successful, it is essential for the participants to believe that discussions between professionals and stakeholders is necessary, that there is a commitment between partners with different points of view, that there are common references on which this commitment can be founded, and that the dialogue has legitimacy in the eyes of all a sector's professionals.

The Combat Poverty Service makes the following recommendations:

- Strengthen the relationship of trust between the social workers and the persons involved and make this a central point of departure within the public services.
- Continue to implement the provisions of the Insured Person's Charter.
- Stimulate and support the process of participation and dialogue within the public services.

Conclusion



When, in February 2020, the Support Committee of the Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service chose solidarity as the topic for this biennial Report, we could not have imagined the kind of problems the population of this country and around the entire globe would end up facing in 2022, let alone the particular importance the notion of solidarity would take. From spring 2020, the coronavirus was to cast a dark shadow over our society, with an enormous impact on public health, the economy and society. The climate crisis has also had concrete effects in our own country, with last summer's floods.

These floods dramatically illustrated that existing inequalities are exacerbated by climate changes, as we already stated in our previous biennial 'Sustainability and poverty' Report: the places worst affected, located along the river banks, are the rather more deprived neighbourhoods and camping sites that are occupied year-round. The people that end up living in these camping sites are people searching for an affordable place to live in the first place. In the aftermath of the floods many of them found themselves once again faced with the huge shortage of affordable quality homes.

The COVID-19 crisis has also made inequalities in our society more visible. In a string of publications and comments, the Combat Poverty Service has drawn attention to the way in which these inequalities – by analogy with the climate crisis – were reinforced and aggravated by the pandemic, and in some cases by the protective and support measures put in place by the authorities.

Over the first few months of the pandemic, the Service put significant effort into delivering opinions and press releases, organising stakeholder consultations and preparing the inter-federal overview of measures in order to raise awareness on those living in precarious situations in the way the crisis is being tackled. Plus, as it was impossible to meet face to face, the team started the consultation on the topic of solidarity at the beginning of July with a survey for the associations within which people living in poverty come together. This was followed by ten digital meetings as from September 2020 and a face-to-face meeting with the German-speaking stakeholders in November 2021. We would like to take this opportunity to thank the various participants, and especially those from the associations within which people living in poverty come together, for their effort and commitment in taking part in these consultations, often in difficult circumstances, each using the resources available to them, with the support of their association.

The topic of solidarity was discussed with these participants - from associations, as well as from a number of other stakeholders -, with focusing on two areas where solidarity is particularly relevant and essential in the fight against poverty: work and taxation. This Report deals with these two areas in separate chapters, although the two obviously share common ground. The recommendations are set out in the concluding chapter, detailing pathways towards greater solidarity and justice. We specifically address the importance of a sufficient number of accessible and quality jobs, a strong social security system, fair taxation as well as quality and accessible public services.

Based on the consultations and exchanges conducted over the past eighteen months, the first chapter explores the concept of solidarity and a number of evolutions. As explained, over the past two years, solidarity took on a very concrete form in the multiple aid and support initiatives for those who were struggling. Citizens and

Conclusion

organisations rolled out various actions, something which we referred to as direct or 'warm' solidarity at the consultation meetings. But it was our social protection – a system of indirect or 'cold' solidarity – that played an extremely important role as a shock absorber throughout the crisis. The different authorities put in place a wide number of measures in different areas, as listed by the Service in its inter-federal overview. The importance of a strong institutional solidarity system was repeatedly underscored during the consultations within the Service.

This Report examines solidarity in its various dimensions from a poverty angle. First and foremost there is the dimension of contribution. To the participants who live in poverty themselves, things are clear: they are keen to express their solidarity and contribute to society. And they effectively do so: they help one another, take people in, work as volunteers (recognised or otherwise), work in essential jobs albeit often with precarious employment conditions, they pay VAT on goods and services, etc. Only, this is barely noticed by society, with people often thinking 'let's give them something to occupy them and pay them a few crumbs', 'they made their bed, they should lie in it', 'benefit scroungers', etc. Society even sees fit to penalise the poor in their endeavours to help one another in some cases (see the status of cohabitants). This Report presents people living in poverty as actors of solidarity.

Through their paid work and the social contributions deducted from it, workers contribute to the social security system, which offers protection when people cease to receive income from work. Many people living in poverty either don't have a job or are in a precarious job which does not allow them to contribute to this indirect solidarity system and therefore does not give them sufficient social security rights. Others perform tasks that are essential to society, but that are often invisible and unpaid, such as volunteers, home carers, those who provide informal assistance, etc. However, work can help people to get out of poverty in the long term if it is a quality job in terms of financial reward, contractual terms, working conditions and social value. It is therefore up to the authorities and the social partners to provide these kinds of jobs for those who have difficulties in accessing the labour market. The Report lists a number of suggestions based on local needs, tailor-made work and a participatory approach. The recovery plans need to pay more attention to these elements. In addition, it is important that everybody is guaranteed a decent income so that they can build their lives and face the future with financial security.

The second dimension of solidarity revolves around redistribution. At the consultation meetings, the participants underlined numerous inequalities in redistribution mechanisms and between the groups that benefit from them. For one thing, we explore the various Matthew effects that exist in our society in greater depth: people living in poverty use public services to a much lesser extent. At one of the consultation meetings, one participant spoke about how she often sees her local city magazine promote offers which she never uses. In discussing the area of taxation, the importance of the expenditure of public resources collected became clear, and how this expenditure, too, must be assessed in terms of equity. In addition, there is the issue of the non-take-up of rights, a subject on which the Combat Poverty Service has worked a lot in recent years: people who live in poverty often do not use the rights available to them because they simply do not have the information, because they are afraid of being stigmatised or scared of perverse effects when they do request help, because they lose their way in the maze of procedures and complicated regulations, etc.

The participants who were involved in the consultation also put forward a third dimension of solidarity: the collective dimension. The collective struggle of people experiencing poverty, together with their associations and networks - and other social actors - gives shape to a particular and concrete solidarity in everyday life.

The COVID-19 crisis has left its mark on the budget. After the economic crisis of 2008, governments focused mainly on cutting public spending, especially under European pressure. This Report expressly calls not for making cuts, but for investment in and strengthening of social protection, also by seeking new sources of funding, in the

interests of solidarity and equity. At the consultation meetings, as well as throughout society as a whole, there is the belief that the strongest shoulders can and should carry the heaviest burden. This idea can be realised, among other things, by reinforcing the principle of tax progressiveness, by taking into account in a much more balanced way, from a fiscal point of view, the different incomes, but also the heritage, and by tackling extreme wealth.

In discussing the draft texts, the Support Committee of the Combat Poverty Service pointed out that the Report possibly addresses more the fight against wealth than the fight against poverty. In this respect, we also refer readers to the previous biennial Report on sustainability which put forward the proposal to include an 18th SDG (*Sustainable Development Goal*) on the fight against wealth. After all, extreme wealth is a form of extreme inequality that does not contribute to a fair and supportive society that stands shoulder to shoulder with its less fortunate members. For this reason, we put forward a number of recommendations on ways for the authorities to have wealthy citizens and multinationals contribute more.

Finally, this Report gives even more resonance to the *leave no one behind* slogan, the motto behind the 17 SDGs of the UN Agenda 2030, as well as the concluding message of the previous biennial Report. We reiterated this call on repeated occasions during the COVID-19 crisis. During the consultation process leading to the Report, people living in poverty took part in the debate on solidarity, work, social security and taxation.

Involving people who live in poverty and insecurity – in dialogue with the other stakeholders in the fight against poverty – remains an important task for the country's governments, in order to effectively combat poverty and realise the rights of all.. This Report delivers input and recommendations for political debate and political action, with the aim of providing a sufficient number of accessible and quality jobs, reinforcing the social security system, and moving towards fair taxation as well as quality and accessible public services. The organisation of an Interministerial conference on the fight against poverty, as set out in the Cooperation Agreement on the continuation of the Poverty Reduction Policy, would be a strong signal that the various authorities are prepared to include this Report and its recommendations in their policies, in the context of the recovery plans and the fight against poverty.

Enclosure



1. Cooperation Agreement between the Federal State, the Communities, and the Regions concerning the continuation of the Poverty Reduction Policy

The Cooperation Agreement between the Federal State, the Communities, and the Regions concerning the continuation of the Poverty Reduction Policy was signed in Brussels on 5 May 1998 and approved by:

- The Flemish Community, Act of 17 November 1998, Belgian Official Journal of 16 December 1998
- The Federal State, Law of 27 January 1999, Belgian Official Journal of 10 July 1999
- The French Community, Act of 30 November 1998, Belgian Official Journal of 10 July 1999
- The German-speaking Community, Act of 30 November 1998, Belgian Official Journal of 10 July 1999
- The Walloon Region, Act of 1 April 1999, Belgian Official Journal of 10 July 1999
- The Brussels Capital Region, ordinance of 20 May 1999, Belgian Official Journal of 10 July 1999

TEXT OF THE AGREEMENT

Taking into account art. 77 of the Constitution;

Taking into account the special law of 8 August 1980 on institutional reform, with particular emphasis on article 92bis, § 1, appended to the special law of 8 August 1988 and amended by the law of 16 July 1993;

Taking into account the special law of 12 January 1989 concerning the Brussels Institutions, with particular emphasis on articles 42 and 63;

Taking into account the law of 31 December 1983 on institutional reform for the German-speaking Community, with particular emphasis on article 55bis, appended to the law of 18 July 1990 and amended by the law of 5 May 1993;

Taking into account the decision of the Advisory Committee of the Federal Government and the Community and Regional Governments of 3 December 1997;

Considering that insecurity, poverty and social, economic, and cultural exclusion, even in the case of just one single individual, seriously and adversely affect the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all human beings;

Considering the restoration of the conditions of human dignity and the exercise of human rights, as established in and by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10 December 1948 and in the two International Covenants on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and on Civil and Political Rights dated 19 December 1966, constitutes a common goal for each and every public authority in the country;

Considering that the above is achieved, in particular, through constant endeavour by each public authority separately and together, to outline, implement, and evaluate policies aimed at the prevention of insecurity, the fight against poverty, and the integration of individuals into society;

Considering that social security is a priority to maintain social cohesion among citizens and for the prevention of insecurity, poverty, and social inequality, and for human emancipation;

Considering that it is important to guarantee the continuation of this integration policy, in particular by the adaptation and the development of public services;

Considering that the involvement of all individuals affected by this integration policy, from the time of its development, must be guaranteed by the public authorities;

- The Federal State, represented by the Prime Minister, the Minister of Social Affairs, the Minister of Employment and Labour, responsible for the policy of Equal Opportunities for Men and Women, the Minister of Public Health and Pensions, and the Secretary of State for Social Integration;
- The Flemish Community and the Flemish Region, represented by its Government through the Minister-President and the Ministers responsible for the coordination of the Policy for Poverty Reduction and for Assistance to Individuals;
- The French Community, represented by its Government through the Minister-President; the German-speaking Community, represented by its Government through the Minister-President and the Minister for Youth, Education, Media and Social Affairs;
- The Walloon Region, represented by the Minister-President and the Minister for Social Action;
- The Brussels Capital Region, represented by the Minister-President;
- The Common Community Commission, represented by the members of the United College competent for matters concerning Assistance to Individuals;

Have agreed as follows:

ART. 1

Without prejudice to their own individual competences, the signatories undertake to continue and coordinate their policies for the prevention of insecurity, the fight against poverty, and the integration of individuals into society, based on the following principles:

- The realisation of social rights as established in article 23 of the Constitution;
- Equal access to all of such rights for every individual, which may also include measures for positive action;
- The introduction and reinforcement of modes of participation of all public administrations and individuals concerned, in particular those living in poverty, and the development, implementation and evaluation of these policies;
- A policy of social integration is an inclusive, global, and coordinated policy, meaning it must be implemented throughout all of the areas of competence and requires an ongoing evaluation of all of the initiatives and actions undertaken and contemplated.

ART. 2

In this way, the signatories undertake to contribute, each within its own competence, to a "Report on Insecurity, Poverty, Social Exclusion, and Unequal Access to Rights", hereinafter referred to as "the Report". The Report shall be drawn up every two years no later than November by "Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion

Service", as provided for in article 5 of this Agreement, based on the contributions by the parties. The Report shall be drawn up in the country's three national languages.

The Report shall contain at least:

- An evaluation of the evolution of the insecurity of personal living conditions, of poverty, and of social exclusion based on indicators defined at article 3;
- An evaluation of the effective exercise of social, economic, cultural, political, and civil rights, as well as of the inequalities that persist in relation to individuals' access to rights;
- An inventory and an evaluation of the policy and of the actions taken since the previous Report;
- Concrete recommendations and proposals to improve the situation of the affected individuals within all of the areas considered in this article, both for the long and the short term.

ART. 3

Following consultation with the scientific community, the competent administrations and institutions, the social partners, and the organisations where people living in poverty have a voice, the signatories shall investigate what quantitative and qualitative indicators and tools can be employed and/or developed to analyse the evolution in all areas as considered in article 2, in order to enable the competent authorities to intervene in the most appropriate manner. A first set of indicators will be defined prior to 15 November 1998.

Without prejudice to the laws and regulations concerning the protection of the individual's privacy, the signatories undertake to make available to the "Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service", without charge, all data about which prior agreement has been reached, or to facilitate access to this data should they belong to external services. The signatories will also have access to this data.

ART. 4

§ 1. The Report shall be presented via the Interministerial Conference on Social Integration, as mentioned in article 9, to the Federal Government and to the respective Governments of the Communities and the Regions, which in turn undertake to forward it on to their Councils, Parliaments, or Assemblies.

§ 2. Within one month of receipt, the Federal Government shall forward the Report to the National Labour Council and the Central Economic Council which, in turn, shall within one month issue an advisory opinion, particularly in relation to the areas that are part of their mandate. Following the same procedure, the Communities and the Regions shall likewise request the advice of their advisory bodies that are competent in this area.

§ 3. All of the signatories undertake to hold a debate about the content of the Report and of the advisory opinions, particularly in relation to the recommendations and proposals set out in the Report.

ART. 5

§ 1. In order to be able to realize the above objectives, a "Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service" shall be formed, to be charged with the following responsibilities:

- To index, systematize, and analyze information concerning insecurity, poverty, social exclusion, and access to rights on the basis of the indicators defined in article 3;
- To make concrete recommendations and proposals to improve the policies and the initiatives towards the prevention of insecurity, the fight against poverty, and the integration of individuals in society;

- To draw up a Report at least once every two years as stated in article 2;
- Following a request from one of the signatories, of the Interministerial Conference on Social Integration, or on its own initiative, to issue advisory opinions or draw up interim reports concerning any question that pertains to an area that falls within its mandate;
- To organize structural consultation with the most disadvantaged.

§ 2. In order to realize the objectives in § 1, the Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service shall, in a structured and ongoing manner, involve in its activities the organisations where the poor can voice their opinions, using the dialogue method as developed during the composition of the "General Poverty Report".

The Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service may likewise call upon assistance from any person or public or private organisations that have expertise in the areas in question.

ART. 6

§ 1. The "Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service" shall be formed as a tri-lingual institution at the federal level, at the "Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism". It shall be subsidized by all of the parties. For 1998, a budget of BEF 20 million is being earmarked:

- BEF 15,000,000 by the Federal State;
- BEF 2,800,000 by the Flemish Community and the Flemish Region;
- BEF 1,700,000 by the Walloon Region (in consultation with the French and German-speaking Communities);
- BEF 500,000 by the Brussels Capital Region (in consultation with the Common Community Commission).

These amounts shall be subject to annual indexation. With agreement from all of the involved parties, the budget may be adjusted to need by means of an addendum to the present Cooperation Agreement.

The amounts shall be paid by the month of March of the year in which they are applicable.

§ 2. A permanent and structural cooperation shall be established between the "Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service" and the competent administrations of the Communities and Regions. To that end, scientific collaborators shall, in one form or another, be put at the disposal of the "Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service" by the three Regions, namely 1.5 full-time equivalents by the Flemish Region, 1 full-time equivalent by the Walloon Region, and a 1/2 full-time equivalent by the Brussels Capital Region. In the event this involves the participation of civil servants, these shall remain attached to the personnel complement of the Region in casu.

§ 3. The Communities and the Regions shall, with all due respect for each other's mutual competences and budgets, strive for the recognition and encouragement of organisations where the poor can voice their opinions.

ART. 7

§ 1. A Board of Administrators shall be formed within the "Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service" and assigned the following tasks:

- Ensuring the correct implementation of the present Cooperation Agreement;
- Calling upon the services, at the proposal of the Advisory Board as provided for in article 8, of scientific institutions or specialized study bureaus that, given their experience and the material resources at their

disposal, will be in a position to assist the "Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service" in the execution of its tasks. In this case, an agreement must be concluded with the "Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism";

- Drawing up for the benefit of the "Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service" a draft budget, the management of which shall remain strictly separate from the organic endowment for the "Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism";
- Determining the personnel requirement plan and, in particular, the coordinator's job profile.

§ 2. The Chairman and the Vice-Chairman of the Board of Administrators and the Coordinator of the "Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service" shall attend the meetings of the Board of Directors of the "Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism" with an advisory voice when points concerning the "Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service" are placed on the agenda.

§ 3. Aside from the representative of the Prime Minister who chairs the Board of Administrators, this committee counts 12 members, including:

- 4 members proposed by the Federal State;
- 3 members proposed by the Flemish Community and the Flemish Region;
- 2 members proposed by the Walloon Region in consultation with the French Community; 2 members proposed by the Brussels Capital Region in consultation with the Common Community Commission, amongst whom one Dutch and one French-language speaker;
- 1 member proposed by the German-speaking Community.

These members shall be appointed on the basis of their expertise and experience in the areas that are identified in the present Cooperation Agreement. They shall be assigned their mandates by the respective Governments and appointed for a renewable 6-year office term by a Royal Decree submitted to and discussed in a Council of Ministers.

§ 4. In addition, the Director and Assistant Director of the "Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism", and likewise the coordinator of the "Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service", shall be members of the Board of Administrators with an advisory voice.

ART. 8

An Advisory Board shall be formed under the chairmanship of the Minister or the State Secretary with the competence for Social Integration, to guide and assist the activities of the "Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service". The Advisory Board shall also monitor the methodology and the criteria as established in article 3, as well as the progress made with the Report. The Advisory Board is to be composed of members of the Board of Administrators, as provided for in article 7, to be complemented by at least:

- 4 representatives of the social partners, proposed by the National Labour Council;
- 2 representatives of the health insurance institutions, proposed by the National Belgian Intermutualist College;
- 5 representatives proposed by the organisations where the poor can voice their opinions, amongst whom a representative of the homeless;

- 3 representatives proposed by the Department of Social Welfare from the Association of Belgian Cities and Municipalities.

These representatives are proposed on the basis of their expertise and experience in the areas identified in the present Cooperation Agreement. They are given a 6-year mandate by the Board of Administrators.

ART. 9

In order to guarantee consultation among the various Governments, the Interministerial Conference on Social Integration shall meet at least twice a year.

Without prejudice to the competences held by the administrations that make up its composition, the Conference is mandated to ensure a global, integrated, and coordinated approach to the policy for the prevention of insecurity, towards the fight against poverty, and for integration of all members of society.

The conference shall be chaired by the Prime Minister and prepared in collaboration with the Minister or State Secretary responsible for Social Integration. They likewise shall be responsible for its follow-up. To that end, they shall call upon expertise assistance from the Poverty Cell within the Directorate of Social Integration and from the "Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service".

ART. 10

Within the context of the Interministerial Conference on Social Integration, the signatories shall on an annual basis evaluate the activities and procedures of the "Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service" and of this Cooperation Agreement.

ART. 11

The present Cooperation Agreement intends to confirm the mandate of the "Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism" as described in article 2 of the law of 15 February 1993 with respect to the formation of a "Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism", in particular with regard to the competence for the fight against any and all forms of exclusion. That is therefore also the reason why, at the time of re-electing the Centre's Board of Directors, the Federal Government will invite Parliament to take this confirmation into due account based on the evaluation as provided for in article 10.

Executed in Brussels, on 5 May 1998, in 7 copies (originals).

- On behalf of the Federal State: J.-L. DEHAENE, Prime Minister; M. COLLA, Minister of Public Health; M. DE GALAN, Minister of Social Affairs; M. SMET, Minister of Employment and Labour, J. PEETERS, Secretary of State for Social Integration;
- On behalf of the Flemish Region and the Flemish Community: L. VAN DEN BRANDE, Minister-President; L. PEETERS, Minister of Internal Affairs, Urban Policy and Housing; L. MARTENS, Minister of Culture, Family and Well-being;
- On behalf of the French Community: L. ONKELINX, Minister-President;
- On behalf of the German-speaking Community: J. MARAITE, Minister-President; K.-H. LAMBERTZ, Minister for Youth, Education, Media and Social Affairs;
- On behalf of the Walloon Region: R. COLLIGNON, Minister-President; W. TAMINIAUX, Minister of Social Action;
- On behalf of the Brussels Capital Region: CH. PICQUE, Minister-President;

Enclosure and endnotes

- On behalf of the Common Community Commission: R. GRIJP, D. GOSUIN, Members of the Associated College responsible for Social Assistance to Individuals.n.

Endnotes



¹ The assessment mission of the Combat Poverty Service also included activities such as collecting information, supporting and stimulating research, the publication of court decisions of interest from a poverty perspective, the follow-up of international human rights treaties (in association with other human rights institutions), the ex ante assessment of regulations and their impact on poverty, and works on topics such as the non-take-up of rights. For further details on these various activities, please visit the website of the Service:

www.combatpoverty.be.

² See the Combat Poverty Service's theme page: <https://www.armoedebestrijding.be/themas/covid-19/>.

³ [Cooperation Agreement between the Federal State, the Communities and the Regions on the continuation of the Poverty Reduction Policy, published in the Belgian Law Gazette of 16 December 1998 and, as amended, on 10 July 1999](#)

⁴ Combat poverty, insecurity and social exclusion Service (2017). [Citizenship and poverty. Contribution to political debate and action. Biennial report 2016-2017](#), Brussels, Combat poverty, insecurity and social exclusion Service, p. 7 to 10.

⁵ Combat poverty, insecurity and social exclusion Service (2020). [Input van het stakeholdersoverleg i.f.v. de Vlaamse Taskforce Kwetsbare gezinnen, op vraag van de Vlaams minister van Welzijn, Volksgezondheid, Gezin en Armoedebestrijding \[Input of the stakeholders consultation in the framework of the Flemish Taskforce Vulnerable Families, at the request of the Flemish Minister of Welfare, Public Health, Family and Poverty Reduction\]](#), dd. 6 July 2020, Brussels, Combat poverty, insecurity and social exclusion Service, p. 13 to 22.

Biennial report 2020-2021


Solidarity and poverty

Contribution to political debate and action

Summary

Brussels, May 2022



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An electronic version of this summary is available on the Service's website at:
<https://www.combatpoverty.be/>.

This summary of this Biennial report is also available in French, Dutch and German.

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la précarité et l'exclusion sociale

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bestaansonzekerheid en sociale uitsluiting

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Lebensumständen und sozialer Ausgrenzung

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