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# IS SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND RECREATIONAL PARTICIPATION A LUXURY FOR PEOPLE LIVING IN POVERTY? AN ANALYSIS OF POLICY INTENTIONS AND MEASURES

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## ABSTRACT

**Is social, cultural and recreational participation a luxury for people living in poverty? An analysis of policy intentions and measures**

This article examines the importance of participating in social, cultural and recreational activities for people living in poverty. It draws on some theoretical perspectives on this type

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of participation and examines how stimulating participation is being integrated and how ways of thinking and talking about socio-cultural participation have evolved in the social policies in Europe. Using the case of Belgium, we trace how policymakers can encourage participation among poorer people by means of structural, effective and comprehensive policy measures. Based on in-depth interviews and a quantitative evaluation of two Belgian policy measures, we conclude that promoting socio-cultural participation as a vehicle with which to build a more inclusive society can be intended in different manners. There are two dominant theoretical perspectives: (1) participation as a right free of engagement and (2) participation as an instrument or contributory agent for change and improving the quality of life of a person and his/her community.

### **Keywords**

Social participation, cultural participation, poverty, exclusion, social policy

## **SAMENVATTING**

**Is sociale, culturele en sportieve participatie (g)een overbodige luxe voor mensen in armoede?**

**Een analyse van beleidsintenties en beleidsmaatregelen**

Dit artikel analyseert de beleidsaandacht die gaat naar de sociale, culturele en sportieve participatie van mensen in armoede. Het verkent eerst vanuit de onderzoeksliteratuur het belang van participatie voor mensen in armoede en gaat daarna na hoe het stimuleren van participatie aan bod komt in Europese beleidsteksten en welke visie daaruit spreekt. We stellen ook vast hoe die visie de voorbije decennia veranderde. Specifiek voor België gaan we na hoe beleidsmakers vandaag participatiebevorderende maatregelen nemen. Op basis van interviews en kwantitatieve onderzoekstechnieken evalueren we twee federale maatregelen ter bevordering van de deelname van OCMW-cliënten. We stellen vast dat de promotie van sociaal-culturele participatie verschillende visies kan reflecteren. Deze zien we ook in de theorie hierover: (1) participatie kan als een recht worden aangeboden en is dan gebaseerd op een vrijwillig engagement van het individu, maar net zozeer (2) kan het gezien worden als een compenserende interventie of een duw in de rug richting sociale activering.

### **Trefwoorden**

Social participation, cultural participation, poverty, exclusion, social policy

## **INTRODUCTION: THE CAUSES OF UNEQUAL PARTICIPATION AND MOTIVES FOR PROMOTING MORE (EQUAL) PARTICIPATION**

Nowadays, being able to participate in social, cultural and sporting activities (further abbreviated as: socio-cultural participation) is considered a basic human right. Yet many people are excluded from or marginalized in participating in those activities. Research shows that income level and educational attainment have a strong influence on participation in associations, sporting activities and culture (cf. e.g. Di Maggio & Useem, 1980; Kamphuis *et al.*, 2008; Walker, Scott-Melnyk & Sherwood, 2002). In other words, socio-economic differences relate to differences in social and cultural capital.

Even though there is only very limited specific data when it comes to the access of poorer people to social, cultural, sports and other recreational activities, the EU-SILC<sup>1</sup> survey clearly shows that a significant number of people in the EU live in households that cannot afford a regular leisure activity (Frazer & Marlier, 2007). Not only among adults but also among children, the participation rate of underprivileged groups is below average. Of all children in the EU, 12.5% live in households that cannot afford leisure activities such as swimming, playing a musical instrument or participating in a youth organization (European Commission, 2011). Not surprisingly, over the last few years this aspect of the fight against childhood poverty has received increasing attention in the social policies of the EU and many of its member states (De Boyser, 2012). Because of this growing attention, it is interesting to canvass current discourses on this issues and how they evolved.

Is the lack of financial means to engage in social, cultural or recreational life the only reason why the participation rate of underprivileged people (children and adults) is low? Empirical studies show that various barriers play a role and illustrate how living in poverty can close off opportunities to participate in different ways (Wood & Smith, 2004). Direct costs, such as the price of a ticket, and indirect costs, such as renting or buying a music instrument or buying sports clothing, can inhibit participation. Other discouraging factors are a lack of transport and the lack of opportunities for (flexible and cheap) childcare. In addition to those *situational barriers*, there are also some *informational barriers*. People at risk of poverty often do not even explore the existing range of leisure activities (Bouverne-De Bie, Claeys, De Cock & Vanhee, 2003; Wyckmans & Dierckx, 2009). *Dispositional and psychological factors* also play a role. For instance elements associated with status embarrassment, such as not knowing how to behave and the fear of violating unwritten codes. Last but not least there are some *institutional factors* that may hinder participation. These factors relate to the social, cultural or recreational services and not to the participant. For instance many social or

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cultural services may be located in an unfamiliar part of town, or the exterior of the building might not be very welcoming for people in poverty (Haesendonckx, 2001; Wyckmans & Dierckx, 2009). Joining the existing membership of a cultural organization may also involve peer pressure and social expectations, which may be beneficial for non-participants but which may also be hard to live up to.

Still, people living in a vulnerable financial situation can, like other people, benefit from this type of participation. Benefits are both individual and social in nature. Socio-cultural participation helps to relieve stress temporarily and allows people to build in a mental and physical "time out" (Hyypä, Mäki, Impivaara & Aromaa, 2005). Cultural participation can encourage self-expression, enhance self-esteem and identity (Grossi, Sacco, Blessi & Cerutti, 2011; Wood & Smith, 2004). With regard to the participation of poor children in particular, participation not only helps to counteract social isolation, it can also engender a sense of belonging, because it allows these children to mix with children from other backgrounds and contribute to social innovation (Daly, 2012b).

Volunteer work in for example a social or youth organization can offer the possibility of individual development but can at the same time have a socially integrating effect by pulling people and families out of their isolation and contributing to the formation of a social network (Thys, De Raedemaeker & Vranken, 2004).

## **POLICIES ON SOCIO-CULTURAL PARTICIPATION PUT TO THE TEST: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS**

In this paper we will analyse EU and Belgian policies on socio-cultural participation among poorer people, adults as well as children. The article consists of three interconnected sections.

First we will take a closer look at how socio-cultural participation has evolved in international and EU policies. The main research question then is whether or not socio-cultural participation is an emerging concept in European social policy. We will use the method of discourse analysis to analyse how ways of thinking and talking about socio-cultural participation have evolved both in a rhetorical and normative way (Gee, 2004). This analysis will look at what is in the policy documents themselves (the exact words, phrases and register) as well as at the situated meaning of the content (by taking the author, time, relation to other policy documents into account).

Secondly, we will focus on measures taken by the federal government of Belgium to promote the socio-cultural participation of people in or at risk of poverty. We will concentrate on two specific

measures. This section is conceived as a case study. The main research question for this section is how these two measures are being implemented in practice at the level of national policy and in the local Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSWs) by the social workers. So, while the first section provides an analysis of policy documents and discourses at the international and EU level, this second section is devoted to exploring how such lines of discourse are being implemented by an EU member state in terms of concrete policy measures.

Our evaluation uses qualitative and quantitative research techniques. A total of 31 interviews were conducted with employees working at a PCSW. When choosing these interviewees, we aimed for a variety of PCSW centres, differing with respect to location, size and familiarity with the measure. A quantitative analysis (using IBM SPSS Statistics) of a government database was done. This database included information on how the PCSWs used the two streams of funding. All data collection and analysis was done in the period September–December 2011.

In the final section of this paper we will analyse the theoretical views that emerge from policies on socio-cultural participation of people in or at risk of poverty. The concluding section will bring together the empirical data (section 1 and 2) with the theoretical views (introduction and section 3).

## **INTERNATIONAL, EUROPEAN AND BELGIAN POLICIES ON THE SOCIO-CULTURAL PARTICIPATION AMONG FINANCIALLY DISADVANTAGED PEOPLE**

Social and cultural development is not a new policy concern. Over sixty years ago, the right “freely to participate in the cultural life of the community and to enjoy the arts” was included in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948, Article 27). Ever since, that right has been regarded as a fundamental human right for every person and community, including those living in poverty. Since the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, a number of international institutions and policymakers have on several occasions endorsed the participation of people who are poor or are living in situations of social exclusion (Daly, 2012a).

Let us take a closer look now at some EU policy documents (since 2000) relating to the right to participate in sport, cultural and social life. In the *Resolution of the European Parliament on the importance and dynamics of the theatre and the performing arts in an enlarged Europe* (15 July 2002) the European Parliament calls on member states “to promote theatre and the performing arts as a whole as a means of social inclusion, particularly in disadvantaged spaces and places.”

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(p. 9) In 2007 the European Commission stated something similar in the *Communication on a European agenda for culture in a globalizing world* (10 May 2007): "Cultural activities also help promoting an inclusive society and contribute to preventing and reducing poverty and social exclusion." (p. 3) In both documents, participation is seen as a means rather than an end. In that very same year the European Parliament stressed not only the importance of working on social cohesion through participation but also the role played by public services in this process. The Parliament's *Resolution on social reality stocktaking* (15 November 2007) also stated that the effects of inequality, poverty, social exclusion and lack of opportunity are interlinked, "(...) requiring a coherent strategy at Member State level focusing not only on income and wealth, but also on issues such as access to employment, education, health services, the information society, culture, transport and opportunities of future generations (...)." (p. 5) Further on, the Parliament calls on the Commission and the Member States to "provide adequate resources to facilitate access to lifelong learning programmes as a means of limiting the exclusion of elderly people from, among others, employment and to foster their continuous participation in social, cultural and civic life." (p. 9) Sports or other recreational activities are not mentioned in the resolution.

In the *Recommendation Active Inclusion of People Excluded from the Labour Market* (3 October 2008) the European Commission again urges the EU's member states to put social participation high on their agenda. The reason given for this, however, is rather different than before. More than before, participation is perceived by European policy makers not just as a way to *prevent* things from happening (poverty, social exclusion) but as an instrument for activation and integration: "Active inclusion policies should facilitate the integration into sustainable, quality employment of those who can work and provide resources which are sufficient to live in dignity, together with support for social participation, for those who cannot." (p. 12)

More recently, the Council of the European Union has formulated some specific suggestions on the role of culture in combating poverty and social exclusion. The *Council Conclusions on the role of Culture Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion* (18–19 November 2010) was one of the products of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. The Council Conclusions invite the member states and the European Commission to take a comprehensive, coherent and participative approach in order to promote culture by incorporating the cultural dimension into strategies on combating poverty and social exclusion and promoting social inclusion through cultural policies. This strategy is in keeping with the "Europe 2020" strategy proposed by the European Commission. One of the elements in the "Europe 2020" strategy is to promote social inclusion, in particular by reducing poverty.

Neither the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* nor any of the more recent EU policy documents mentioned above devote much specific attention to the social, cultural and recreational participation of *children*. Does this mean that the socio-cultural participation of children and youngsters is not regarded as an important international policy concern or objective? Not really.

In 1989, more than forty years after the *Universal Declaration of Rights*, the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* emphasized the right of all children to play and participate in leisure, recreational activities, cultural life and arts. This Convention is the first legally binding international instrument that mentions cultural and social rights for children. By mentioning play and recreational activities, this Convention also emphasizes – although not explicitly – the right to sports activities as a fundamental right of children. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* contained no such reference to sports. A recent *General Comment* by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (18 March 2013) provides more detailed information on the concepts used in the *Convention*. For instance: “Recreation is an umbrella term used to describe a very broad range of activities, including, inter alia, participation in music, art, crafts, community engagement, clubs, sports, games, hiking and camping, and the pursuit of hobbies.” (p. 6).

Over the last years, the EU policy has emphasized the importance of the participation of children and youngsters in order to promote their personal development and social cohesion (Belgian Presidency of the EU, 2010; Daly, 2012a). Relevant EU measures in this perspective are for instance the *Youth in Action Programme* (2007–2013) and the 2007 European Commission Communication *Promoting young people's full participation in education, employment and society*. Still, socio-cultural participation as such is not yet included in all strategic documents concerning children and youngsters.

All these policy documents show that increasingly EU policy makers believe in the potential of socio-cultural activities to tackle social exclusion and link this strategy directly to the reduction of poverty among adults and children. But the EU's contribution to the issue of stimulating socio-cultural participation is multifaceted, also linking participation to other issues such as employment and education.

Given this growing attention, we can argue that socio-cultural participation is in fact an emerging concept in European social policy today. However, despite being mentioned in several international and EU agreements and declarations, the right to social, cultural and recreational participation is

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still one of the less developed rights and national policies relating to this matter often appear weak (Daly, 2012a). Follow-up procedures relating to the international agreements and declarations are not always clear and given the scarcity of public resources, other issues and interventions (e.g. social security, health care, education) often seem more urgent (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012). Furthermore, international and national policy documents cannot prevent fluctuations in public support for measures concerning equal participation. In fact, participation in social, cultural and sporting events is often not afforded to socially vulnerable groups such as the unemployed and living-wage earners. As a consequence of all that, many states do not manage to integrate socio-cultural participation effectively into their social inclusion and anti-poverty agenda.

In accordance with international and EU policies, the Belgian state backs socio-cultural participation as a right for every citizen. In 1994, the right to cultural and social development was written into the *Belgian Constitution*, and as in EU policies, the formulation of this right is related to other issues such as employment and social security.

Recently, as part of the *European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion* (2010), and during the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the autumn of 2010, the policy focus on the participation of vulnerable groups became more pronounced. In that same year, particular attention was also devoted to the participation of disadvantaged children. This initiative was based on the observation that at least one in five children (between 0 and 18 years old – 20.5%) throughout the EU lives in a household with an income below their national at-risk-of-poverty threshold (De Boyser, 2012).

Based on both the *Belgian Constitution* and the Belgian Presidency, the Belgian government took several measures in order to promote socio-cultural participation. In the next section we will analyse two of those measures<sup>2</sup>.

### **FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: PROMOTING THE SOCIO-CULTURAL PARTICIPATION OF THE CLIENTS OF THE PUBLIC CENTRES FOR SOCIAL WELFARE (PCSWs) IN BELGIUM (A CASE STUDY)**

Every municipality or city in Belgium has its own PCSW that people or families with insufficient means or in need of social assistance can turn to (De Boyser, 2012). Because of their mission and wide geographical distribution, it is clear that PCSWs, which often function as the first point



of contact for people living in poverty, can play an important role in promoting participation in cultural, social and recreational activities for underprivileged families. The federal government promotes this role through several policy measures with concomitant sources of funding. In this section we will take a closer look at the principles and implementation of these two policy measures:

**Table 1: Two measures by the Belgian Government to tackle poverty by means of socio-cultural participation.**

<p><b>Measure to promote the social participation and cultural and sporting development of PCSW clients (General SCP measure)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Since / occasion:</i> 2003. Since that year, a Royal Decree (RD) has been (re)approved annually to continue the measure.</li> <li>• <i>Budget:</i> €6,656,000 (year 2011)<sup>3</sup></li> <li>• <i>Objective:</i> to promote social participation and the cultural and physical development of PCSW clients. Means of participation, according to this measure:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o participation in social, cultural or sports events;</li> <li>o participation in social, cultural or sports associations (including membership fees and the materials and equipment required for participation);</li> <li>o participation in initiatives organized by or for the target group with a social, cultural or sports interest;</li> <li>o access to and participation in new information and communication technologies.</li> <li>o The amount of money that clients pay in order to participate is (re)funded by the centre.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Some examples of specifications for PCSW clients:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o A trip to the zoo or to a museum</li> <li>o A free swimming subscription</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>The measure for combating child poverty among the children of PCSW clients</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Since / occasion:</i> 2010. Since that year, a new Royal Decree (RD) has been approved annually to continue this measure. The measure is related to the general SCP measure but is separate since it works with separate directives and budgets.</li> </ul>

(Table 1: Continued)

- *Budget*: €4,199,977 (year 2010). Budget for each PCSW varies between €251 and €233,917 depending primarily on the number of clients at that centre.
- *Objective*: to help prevent poverty being passed down from parent to child (inter-generational transmission) by making use of various means of encouraging participation: social programmes, educational support, psychological and paramedical support; pedagogical materials and games.
- Some examples of specifications for PCSW clients:
  - o Free second-hand bicycles for children who do not have their own bicycle
  - o A toy lending library
  - o A campaign that helps parents judge when they need to go to hospital and when to see their family doctor

### **Principles of action**

Both the general SCP measure and the measure on child poverty are stand-alone measures in the sense that they are not really embedded in a comprehensive and transversal national policy on socio-cultural participation. Until now, both measures have had to be renewed annually, which hinders the effective integration of their principles of action into other policies.

Nevertheless, the measures are not ad hoc or isolated. They are linked to one another and interrelated with various other initiatives to promote the participation of vulnerable groups. In general, we see that the various measures at various policy levels reinforce one another. However, this implies strong communication and coordination between the different policy levels in a multilevel policy-frame on participation (De Boyser, 2012). According to the social workers interviewed, many PCSWs work together with other organizations situated at other policy levels. At the same time, there are few formal partnerships concerning this theme even though there are many opportunities for collaboration because both measures, and this is important to note, use a very broad definition of “participation” including, in the case of the measure combating child poverty, educational support and support for buying games and pedagogical materials, psychological and paramedical support, and so on.

Both measures also rely heavily on a holistic approach to the client. This means that the measures compel social workers to address the clients' leisure time, social network, cultural interests, the

participation of their child(ren), paramedical and psycho-social issues and so on, and thus not to limit the contact to typical PCSW issues such as employment, homecare, financial assistance, debts, legal assistance and housing. The measures and the social workers who implement the measures must approach the client as a whole, in all areas of their life, and try to assist and stimulate the client in constructing a dignified existence. This holistic approach to the client is not simple or obvious for all professionals in the centres and it presupposes good communication skills and continual alertness.

### **Implementation of both measures**

Our quantitative analysis shows that the general SCP measure, which has been in force for one decade now, is widely and intensely applied by the centres. While their use of the measure in its first years was rather hesitant, the request level (the amount that PCSWs request from the government in relation to the amount to which they are entitled), since 2007 uptake has been almost complete (99%). This is not the yet case for the (newer) measure on combating child poverty. While all PCSW interviewees value the attention to this theme highly and consider reducing child poverty a core task for their centre, the effective use of the budget in the first year (2010) was low (58% of resources provided). In 2011, the utilization rate was significantly higher (76.3%). In 2011 only 78 of the 589 centres did not use any of the resources. This demonstrates that a measure like this needs time to become enrooted. Only PCSWs with experience of working in child poverty used the resources immediately. The subsidies were used mainly for educational support (mainly contributions to school bills, books, meals, bus passes and school excursions), paramedical support (mainly orthodontics, ophthalmologists and opticians) and recreational and amusement activities for children (e.g. celebrations).

How the centres use the resources that stem from the two measures varies widely and depends on local policy decisions, the local situation, the vision and size of the centre. Not every centre manager attributes the same importance to socio-cultural participation. The local situation and political vision of the PCSW play a major role, also in the way they use the resources. The use of the budget associated with these measures is to a large extent demand-driven (the initiative must come from the potential beneficiary) and is, mainly in the smaller centres, based upon a "first come, first served" principle. This leads to a skimming effect: the best informed, quickest reacting clients have the best chance of benefiting from these resources, while "non take-up" is highest among the poorest and most isolated clients.

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Many PCSWs also point out that more and more clients are getting to know about the general measure. Because the level of the budget is fixed, this puts pressure on the budget. At a number of centres, demand currently exceeds the budget, which forces centres to adjust their allocations to the level of demand (e.g. decreasing the maximum contribution per person). The longer the measure is in force however, the more clients come to rely on the support. They increasingly come to see it as an “acquired right”.

## **SOCIO-CULTURAL PARTICIPATION AMONG PEOPLE LIVING IN POVERTY: A RIGHT OR A MEANS OF SOCIAL ACTIVATION?**

Although participation in social, cultural and recreational life is considered a basic right for every citizen in many international, EU and Belgian policy documents, it is a right that is not equally accessible for all. Because of the barriers (financial and otherwise, as we pointed out in the first section) for some groups, such as PCSW clients, the promise of participation in, for instance, a social movement, cultural institution or sporting club often goes unfulfilled. In other words, they are beneficiaries without having access to the provisions to which they are entitled. Thus, simply declaring that the “right to participation” is a basic right does not mean that this right is realized immediately and across the board. In many cases, a right such as this is a rather passive compensation for exclusion, meaning that it is up to the individual to take the initiative to start participating. However, some groups may simply need a degree of extra support, guidance and supervision by an organization or institution. This can be provided, for instance, through government intervention such as the Belgian measures to promote the socio-cultural participation of PCSW clients.

This shows that a *rights discourse* is not the only possible approach to the issue at stake; one can also approach the matter from the perspective of *social activation*. The Belgian measures fit well into the current debate on social activation because their purpose is not only to assert a right but also to activate people to exercise that right. Using a broad-brush definition, activation means re-involving or more closely involving disadvantaged people, such as the less well-educated, the long-term unemployed or people living in or at risk of poverty. In other words, the activation discourse aims at the speedy reintegration into society of those who are excluded (Geldof, 1999).

It is also important to understand that the notion of “activation” is dated and linked to various policy discourses (Van der Laan, 2000). Promoting the socio-cultural participation of vulnerable groups is in keeping with a specific type of activation discourse: activation in terms of realizing

basic social rights (Tuteleers, 2007), which in fact means that it corresponds closely with a rights discourse. An activation discourse, however, starts with the top-down granting of rights by the state and the active prompting of individuals to realize those rights. A pure rights discourse on the other hand aims for a bottom-up realization of rights by the beneficiaries themselves, at their own initiative. In doing so, the rights discourse has clear emancipatory roots and purposes.

The interviews we conducted with policy makers and social workers at the PCSWs showed that it was that particular emancipatory and empowering thought that led to the conception of the Belgian measures. Both types of actors assume that PCSW clients can have a certain need (latent or explicit) for participation, but they often do not participate due to a number of barriers, leaving the client excluded or disadvantaged in a specific societal domain. Through the measures, the client himself can take steps towards participation.

At the same time, both Belgian measures presume that an explicit route towards social integration should be foreseen for excluded or disadvantaged individuals (Hermans, Van Hamme & Lammertyn, 1999). That is where the PCSWs come in. The basic idea behind the measures is therefore *more* than simply to provide financial benefits as financial compensation for social exclusion (Geldof, 1999). They also form an occasion to address people, to encourage them and to set out a route to social integration with them. In other words, social activation can imply that a government entuses people to participate by reducing financial barriers, presenting them with opportunities for participation, and so on. This is done with a view to the (more) sustainable mobilization of people in society, and with a more inclusive society as the ultimate goal. This reasoning demonstrates that the activation discourse implies an instrumental approach rather than a rights approach.

At the same time we can conclude that social inclusion via socio-cultural participation does not necessarily represent a narrow or purely instrumental perspective on participation. The Belgian measures, for instance, are linked to an activating labour market policy, but even more to an activating welfare policy which focuses on the welfare and well-being of the individual as a whole.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

In this article we have dealt with three different questions. In this final section, we will summarize our conclusions concerning those three issues.

### **Is socio-cultural participation an emergent concept in European social policy?**

Our analysis shows that the issue of participation in social, cultural and recreational activities has become an important theme in international and EU policies. Many international and EU policy documents frame this theme as a basic right, alongside (or as a part of) other basic social rights such as education and healthcare. Looking at the EU policies of the past five years, the issue of participation has become more associated with the prevention and reduction of poverty.

Participation is clearly not only considered an issue for adults. The socio-cultural and recreational participation of children and young people has also become an important international policy concern, although this is a more recent development and concerns about children's participation have not yet been raised in all strategic EU documents and policies.

Notwithstanding the growing prominence of this topic, we agree with Daly (2012a) that socio-cultural participation is still one of the less-developed rights at international level and national policies related to this matter often appear weak. Possible explanations for this include the sometimes weak monitoring of how international agreements, policy documents and regulations are implemented at state level and the fact that, in times of economic crisis, national policy makers may experience little social acceptance or public support for promoting this type of participation.

### **How are the Belgian measures concerning socio-cultural participation implemented in practice, at the level of national policy makers and in the public centres?**

The way in which the Belgian government encourages the socio-cultural participation of underprivileged adults and children is an example of how the promotion of participation as a basic right can be put into practice. It is also an illustration of how a policy on enhancing social, cultural or recreational participation can be integrated effectively into an anti-poverty agenda.

The two measures we analysed are not ad hoc measures. At different policy levels and in different policy fields in Belgium, programmes have been initiated to encourage people in or at risk of poverty to participate in social movements or local youth movements, cultural services such as museums or art academies, sports associations (e.g. local football clubs) and so on. This shows, as De Boyser (2012) states, that Belgian policy makers at different levels and in different fields

are becoming ever more convinced that stimulating socio-cultural participation is a valuable way of tackling poverty and that, as a means of promoting social inclusion, it needs to be addressed through a multidimensional and multilevel policy-frame. The integration of the agenda on socio-cultural participation in different policy fields is, however, not yet complete since neither of the measures is really embedded in a comprehensive and transversal national policy on social, cultural and sporting participation. In order to enable the PCSWs to develop a policy on participation, it is recommended that the resources associated with the measures are made structural, which will allow the centres to develop a long-term local policy in this regard (written regulations, a network of partners, communication strategy, etc.).

Of course, no single measure to enhance participation for people in or at risk of poverty is a cure-all solution. Working via the PCSWs seems to be a good strategy for reaching adults and children living in underprivileged conditions. The centres are locally based and are certainly able to tap into a wide network of families and services. These are, according to Frazer & Marlier (2012), important prerequisites to ensure access. But still, PCSWs cannot reach all those at risk of poverty. There are certainly people who live in poverty but are not PCSW clients. Moreover, since some PCSWs, mainly smaller ones, reward participation on a first-come first-served basis, a 'skimming effect' may emerge: the best-informed, quickest reacting clients have the best chance of fully using the resources available, while "non take-up" is highest among the poorest and most isolated clients. It is precisely among this latter group that the measure could have the greatest impact, however. The PCSW social workers play a key role in this. They should recommend participation opportunities to all of their clients in a positive, non-imperative way. Based on our interviews, we note that some social workers experience difficulty with this and tend to see the financial incentive for participation as a "conditional gift", something that clients only deserve if they meet the strict conduct regulations of the centre.

### **What theoretical perspectives on participation are present in policies on socio-cultural participation among people in or at risk of poverty?**

The fact that some PCSW social workers use the incentives for participation as a "conditional gift" illustrates how a measure that was conceived to enforce "a right" can also be used as an instrument to activate people in an evidently top-down way. This shows how measures to promote socio-cultural participation as a vehicle for building a more inclusive society can be used in various ways simultaneously. It can be used to offer help in tackling barriers (e.g. financial barriers,

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informational barriers) free of engagement, it can introduce opportunities for participation and encourage people to engage, but it can also be a means to enforce an element of discipline (e.g. "they should get organized first"). Depending on the point of view of the PCSW and the social worker, the measures encouraging socio-cultural participation can be more "compensatory" or "more activating", but as the Belgian case makes clear, this is not an 'either-or' scenario.

Another aspect of the theoretical perspectives on socio-cultural participation is the definition of "participation" itself. The EU applies a broad understanding of participation, including various aspects such as art and culture, civic and social life, recreation and sports. Policy makers rarely go into detail about what participation really means, what type of engagement or involvement it requires. In both Belgian measures, socio-cultural participation is defined as a very broad set of practices (even including the obtaining of educational materials or paramedical support), strongly orienting participation towards prevention. Further debate and research is necessary to flesh out the concept of participation (different interpretations, different objectives, etc.) and to ascertain which types of participation a person in or at risk of poverty *and* an inclusive society needs the most. Examining the concept of participation further could also shed new light on the low level of participation among people in poverty. This could raise questions like: do poorer people perhaps have their own culture, their own model of commitment? And are their cultural preferences and social networks a reason for or an effect of their limited participation in mainstream social and cultural facilities?

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## NOTES

- 1 European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions.
- 2 The analysis focuses on the evaluation of the basic principles and implementing the measures. We do not have the data to examine whether or not the measures lead to different levels of participation or change the lives of people in poverty in some way.



- 3 The distribution of grants among the PCSWs occurs annually on the basis of two parameters:  
 (1) 50% is based on the number of people with a right to social integration (so-called RSIs) from the month of January the previous year; and (2) 50% is based on the number of people with a right to an increased financial aid from the health insurance fund.

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