



Belgium: "experts by experience" helping to combat social exclusion

Since 2004, Belgium's public service has recruited workers with first-hand knowledge of exclusion and poverty in order to improve the way it assists the destitute. This original initiative is starting to show results, but it also poses a real challenge for HR management in the different government administrations.

Originally there were just a handful, but now there are twenty-seven, working in twenty-two administrations, and the number is set to grow. This audacious initiative was launched in 2004 by the PPS¹ SI (Social Integration, anti-Poverty Policy, Social Economy and Federal Urban Policy) with support from the European Social Fund, involving the recruitment of "experts by experience in poverty and social exclusion", in other words people who themselves have experienced poverty and/or homelessness and who as a result are considered well placed to assist others with similar problems. The original idea came from the Flemish not-for-profit association "De Link", the first aid group to introduce a pilot project involving "field mediators", drawing on dialogue with and participation by people directly affected by poverty.

Implementation tailored according to profile

By recruiting these "experts by experience"², Belgium's public service has taken a major step forward in "locating and accompanying" victims of exclusion, but also in shaking up the way services are operated and changing mentalities. It was not, in fact, an easy operation; the recruitment process had to involve a different format³; the positions and assignments varied considerably; some continued to be managed and paid by the PPS SI while others were seconded; an entire framework and training system (mentors, coordinators, etc.) had to be set up.

Detailed evaluations were conducted regularly and several reports were published. One of these⁴, the result of a vast survey carried out in 2010 as part of European Year for Combating Poverty, presented several accounts by the experts of their experience, giving them, finally, a platform to speak out; also included was an overview of how to implement a theoretical project in practice, highlighting the challenges involved. This provided the experts with an opportunity to talk about their work at the Brussels *maison de justice*⁵ (legal advice centre), at the Ghent general hospital, at Banque Carrefour de la Sécurité Sociale (social security data bank), and at the Termonde state prison.

Results that meet expectations

¹ Public Planning Service. As part of the "Copernic" reform in 2000 ministries were replaced by FPS (Federal Public Services). PPS were created alongside these FPS to deal with ad-hoc matters associated with socially-based issues that require coordination between several FPS.

² <http://www.mi-is.be/sites/default/files/doc/100331%20Expression%20indiv%20et%20coll%20experts%20du%20vecu%20.pdf>

³ The experts by experience were not recruited through the usual public service recruitment channels. A specific process was organised for them based on their specific profiles, and the specific skills and experience they could contribute. Two sets of interviews interspersed with training were established for this purpose, note 2, p. 6 of document.

⁴ Marie-Thérèse Casman, Jan Vranken, Danielle Dierckx, Dimitri Deflandre, Geert Campaert, *Experts du vécu en matière de pauvreté et d'exclusion sociale: acteurs d'innovation au sein des Services publics fédéraux belges* (Experts by experience in poverty and social exclusion: innovators within Belgium's Federal Public Services), ed. Garant, 2010.

⁵ Jocelyne, an expert by experience seconded to the Brussels *Maison de justice*: "... I am finding it much easier to help people than when I worked for a voluntary association. The fact that I am employed by a public service means that doors open and social workers deal more rapidly with the requests I make on behalf of people..." , p. 33 of document.

In 2011, after completion of the pilot phase⁶, three consultants were tasked by Julien Van Geertsom, Chairman of the PPS SI, to carry out an in-depth quantitative and qualitative evaluation⁷ of the mechanism, using meetings and detailed questionnaires to query all players: experts by experience, directors, HR managers, functional managers (responsible for the development and monitoring of the experts' assignments), mentors (providing assistance and support for the experts in terms of their integration into public service structures), and coordinators of the expert network within the PPS SI.

The evaluation looked first at the duties required of the experts:

- help to improve the reception of and provision of information to the public, particularly those impacted by poverty;
- provide assistance to users in carrying out administrative tasks;
- create a list of the needs of those living in poverty through meetings, surveys and contact with social organisations;
- improve the general quality and accessibility of services by making proposals on ways to improve communication, procedures and measures;
- help to set up partnerships between the services to ensure that the experts' experience can also be used outside their department (strengthening the cross-departmental objective to combat poverty);
- point out to the policy makers structural problems, shortcomings in the legislation and undetected and untreated needs of people living in poverty.

The results are indisputable. The administrations and the population as a whole were made aware of poverty and social exclusion issues and the need to act. The experts provided real value in helping to simplify procedures, receive people and perform services. They can be accredited, for example, with the illiteracy recognition training (*Reconnaître l'analphabétisme*) for civil servants and the reintroduction of paper forms to apply for certain services that were only available electronically.

A much-praised operation that is raising interest beyond the border

However, there is still work to do in surmounting reticence among civil servants in certain departments and in fine-tuning the procedures for integrating and training the experts. There had been a difference between the French-speaking and the Dutch-speaking service, but training in these languages is now perfectly parallel. The experts, who generally tend not to have educational qualifications, can now obtain a recognised field administrative assistant certificate ("*certificat d'accompagnateur administratif de proximité*") testifying to their experience and skills, qualifying them to apply for permanent jobs and, where relevant, for advancement within the public service.

During the seventh European quality conference held in Vilnius in October 2013, a European jury of experts selected this project as a good practice in the area promoting open and transparent public services. Julien Van Geertsom, who attended alongside one of the experts who spoke at the event, said: "Our ongoing aim is to ensure that every citizen has access to the basic public services they are entitled to. This is a major challenge because certain groups of the population have easier access to services than others"⁸. The project implemented by the administration seems to have proved its worth. Little by little, similar initiatives are starting to be introduced in other places: in the United States, for example, the US Department of Veterans Affairs recently began to recruit veterans who experienced homelessness to help provide aid to their fellow veterans⁹. The experiment is taking place in Boston for the time being. With some 1.4 million veterans in danger of becoming homeless¹⁰, the department is hoping to emulate it and rapidly increase the number of veteran aid workers.

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⁶ The government now aims to integrate experts by experience within federal public services (government agreement dated December 2011).

⁷ Janette Jongma, Leen Goethals, Denis Halbardier: "*Les pouvoirs publics pour tous, rapport d'évaluation du projet d'experts du vécu dans la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale*" (Public services for all, report of the project involving experts by experience in combating poverty and social exclusion), January 2012, <http://www.mi-is.be/be-fr/doc/politique-de-lutte-contre-la-pauvrete/les-pouvoirs-publics-pour-tous-evaluation-du-projet-d-expe>

⁸ <http://www.presscenter.org/fr/pressrelease/20131118/congres-des-experts-du-vecu-en-matiere-de-pauvrete-et-dexclusion-sociale-du-19>

⁹ http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/in-boston-va-enlists-help-of-former-homeless-veterans-to-help-others-still-struggling/2013/12/24/af47bc14-6c9b-11e3-aecc-85cb037b7236_story.html

¹⁰ Veterans of World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, interventions in Grenada, Panama, Lebanon, the Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq. <https://www.dosomething.org/tipsandtools/background-on-veterans>