

Facilitating Social Participation

Understanding Accessibility Barriers for Newcomers in the Flemish
Ardennes

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Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	3
2. CONTEXT	5
2.1. CIVIC INTEGRATION IN FLANDERS	5
2.2. FLEMISH ARDENNES: WIJ DOEN MEE	6
3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK	7
3.1. INTEGRATION	7
3.2. SOCIAL CAPITAL	9
3.3. ACCESSIBILITY	11
4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LEISURE CONSTRAINT THEORY	13
4.1. INTRAPERSONAL CONSTRAINTS	14
4.2. INTERPERSONAL CONSTRAINTS	14
4.3. STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS	15
5. EMPIRICAL STUDIES ON LEISURE AND INTEGRATION	16
6. METHOD	20
6.1. DATA COLLECTION	20
6.1.1. Method & Justification	20
6.1.2. Activity Design	20
6.1.3. Structure of Focus Group Activity	21
6.1.4. Participant Profile	22
6.1.5. Limitations	23
6.2. DATA ANALYSIS	24
6.2.1. Method & Justification	24
7. DISCUSSION	25
7.1. ACCESSIBILITY	26
7.1.1. Information Scarcity	26
7.1.2. Scheduling	27
7.2. SOCIAL CAPITAL	28
7.2.1. Bonding Capital	28
7.2.2. Bridging Capital	29
7.2.3. Linking Capital	30
7.3. INTEGRATION	32
7.3.1. Language as central driver and barrier	32
7.3.2. Cultural Exchange	32
7.3.3. Misunderstanding of PP	33
8. RECOMMENDATIONS/GUIDELINES	35
8.1. INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION	35
8.2. SCHEDULING AND CHILDCARE	37
8.3. BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL AND EQUAL EXCHANGE	37
8.4. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS	38
8.5. ADVOCACY POINTS FOR FLEMISH INTEGRATION POLICY	39
9. CONCLUSION	41
REFERENCES	43
ANNEXES	49

1. Introduction

Since January 2023, the Flemish government has introduced a fourth pillar to the civic integration trajectory (*inburgeringstraject*): the Participation Programme (*participatietraject*). This pillar requires newcomers to engage for a minimum of 40 hours in activities that involve interaction with the local community in a Dutch-speaking context. The Participation Programme (PP) is intended to strengthen social participation, facilitate encounters with the host society, and support the development of local social networks (Flemish Agency for Integration and Civic Integration, n.d.). Despite these objectives, emerging research indicates that newcomers often encounter significant barriers in accessing and engaging meaningfully in Participation Programme activities. In particular, a lack of clear, accessible and tailored information has been identified as a significant obstacle, limiting both participation rates and the quality of social interactions (Plaete et al., 2025). These findings show that the accessibility and its operationalisation within the Participation Programme do not align with the lived experiences and needs of newcomers.

In collaboration with the organisational network *Wij Doen Mee - Vlaamse Ardennen* from the Flemish Ardennes in Belgium, this research aims to uncover the barriers experienced by newcomers in terms of the accessibility of the services and activities of the Participation Programme, to determine what may be hindering the development of their social capital and sense of civic integration. Based on these experiences, this project intends to come up with practical guidelines for the improvement of newcomers' accessibility to activities within the Participation Programme, in a way that fulfills the participants' needs and facilitates their building of social capital. The guiding research question is therefore: *“What barriers shape newcomers' accessibility to activities within the Participation Programme in the Flemish Ardennes, and how can these activities be made more accessible to support social participation?”* Based on findings drawn from semi-structured focus group interviews with newcomers, the project aims to develop concrete guidelines to facilitate access to activities in ways that better reflect participants' needs, capacities and everyday realities. By emphasising bottom-up service shaping and co-creation, this study seeks to contribute to more inclusive and horizontal forms of integration governance. It aims to move away from top-down policy-oriented research approaches by grounding recommendations in the lived experiences of those navigating the civic integration trajectory. In doing so, the paper situates leisure activities as key sites for social interaction, network-building and the development of bridging social capital.

The research paper begins with an overview of civic integration policies in Belgium and their local implementation in the Flemish Ardennes. It then critically engages with academic literature on integration, social capital and accessibility, to set out the conceptual framework. Then follows the theoretical framework, which regards constraints to leisure activities. The research approach has been informed by both frameworks. Based on the above, an overview of comparable empirical studies is provided, to ground the study in a broader academic setting. Consequently, the methodological approach is expanded upon: the data collection and data analysis methods are explained and justified, as well as their limitations. Then, the study provides a detailed analysis of the findings, structured according to the conceptual framework. This section sets out how the concepts of accessibility, social capital and integration were present in the findings, in order to answer the research question. Finally, the research paper proposes several recommendations to the partner organisation –and the Flemish government more generally– based on the findings. Additionally, a flyer was designed based on the findings and recommendations, to provide the partner organisation with a more concrete and tangible contribution.

2. Context

2.1. Civic Integration in Flanders

Newcomers who move to Flanders or Brussels can, and some must, follow a ‘civic integration trajectory’. This consists of a range of services and programmes provided by the Flemish authorities, more specifically the Flemish Agency for Integration and Civic Integration (*Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering*, AgII). The completion of this trajectory is ensured through a ‘civic integration contract’, which newcomers are demanded to sign. This contract includes the courses and programmes the newcomer shall follow, as well as possible exemptions to this commitment (AgII, n.d.(a)).

The civic integration trajectory consists of four pillars (AgII, n.d.(c)). The first one being ‘societal orientation’, in which the participants are informed on ‘life in Belgium’. Secondly, they follow Dutch courses, specifically levels A1 and A2. These first two pillars are completed through courses and consequent assessments in the form of tests. The third pillar focuses on employment, informing and aiding newcomers in their search for a job. They are required to register with the VDAB or Actiris (employment agencies in Flanders and Brussels respectively) within two months after signing their civic integration contract. Lastly, the fourth pillar consists of the Participation Programme. It is this pillar, specifically its implementation in the Flemish Ardennes, which will be the focus of this research project.

Throughout their civic integration trajectory, newcomers are accompanied by a trajectory coach (*trajectbegeleider*). This coach is described by AgII (n.d.(c)) as the ‘ideal copilot’, as their role consists of following up on the newcomer’s progress throughout the trajectory and providing information and help with regards to administrative tasks. Moreover, the trajectory coaches play a bridging role if additional support is needed, for example legal or psychological aid.

The Participation Programme has been part of the Flemish integration trajectory since 1 January 2023, in accordance with the Decree of June 7 2013 (AgII, n.d.(b)). It is meant to help build and strengthen the social networks of newcomers who are integrating in Flanders. Through for example buddyprojects, internships or volunteering, newcomers are expected to become active participants in Flemish society. They are required to complete at least 40 hours of these activities, which must, moreover, take place within a Dutch-speaking context. The Programme is mandatory for newcomers coming from outside of the EU who do not (yet) study or work, and is optional for EU newcomers integrating in Flanders. It is furthermore required of the newcomers to have a proof of participation signed every time they attend an activity

from the Programme. The participants are expected to independently find and engage in activities. They can, during this process, be supported by their trajectory coach, who can provide them with more information on the Participation Programme, aid them in finding activities which fulfil the criteria of the Flemish authorities, keep track of their evolution throughout the Programme, and call in additional help if needed (AgII, n.d.(b)).

2.2. Flemish Ardennes: Wij Doen Mee

Wij Doen Mee – Vlaamse Ardennen (n.d.) is a regional organisational network in the Flemish Ardennes which was initiated with the aim of supporting newcomers throughout their completion of the fourth pillar. By facilitating cooperation and coordination between local governments, organisations and citizens, *Wij Doen Mee* aims to enable meaningful societal participation for newcomers in the Flemish Ardennes. As they state in their mission, they aim to connect newcomers with locals, in order to ‘bridge differences and strengthen the social fabric’ and to ‘give newcomers a chance to build their social capital’. It thus aligns with the objective of the fourth pillar of the civic integration trajectory as established by the Flemish Authorities.

They emphasise the importance of mutual enrichment, between newcomers and the Flemish host society, through the provision of services which focus on leisure and community. By eliminating barriers to and creating and offering various chances at societal participation, they claim to try and build an inclusive network. As such, *Wij Doen Mee* aims to improve the **accessibility** and inclusivity of the services and activities.

Wij Doen Mee is a ‘dynamic network’ connecting the local governments of Brakel, Herzele, Kluisbergen, Kruisem, Lierde, Maarkedal, Oosterzele, Oudenaarde, Ronse, Sint-Lievens-Houtem, Wortegem-Petegem, Zottegem and Zwalm, as well as AgII, which acts as a structural partner in the network. The network is ‘dynamic’ as it continuously aims to engage a wide range of actors and to mobilise society in the process of newcomers’ integration and thus does not consist of a fixed range of organisations or actors.

3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this research is aimed at providing a strong analytical lens through which newcomers' accessibility to activities in the Flemish Ardennes will be interpreted. In this section, the concepts of integration, social capital and accessibility are explored. As concepts mentioned in the Participation Programme, the following paragraphs establish linkages between them and examine empirical literature to understand the structural barriers created, and how those realities are reflected for newcomers in the Flemish Ardennes. The following section synthesises existing research and literature on these concepts and draws connections to the context of the Flemish Ardennes and the Participation Programme.

3.1. Integration

In Belgium, the Participation Programme is aimed at facilitating newcomers' integration in the region they reside in (AgII, n.d.(c)). While 'integration' is a commonly used word in migration-related discourse, engagement with empirical studies reveals more complex implications for newcomers. This section critically reviews literature on the multifaceted phenomenon of integration for migrants.

Ager & Strang (2008) put forward four central elements to the concept of integration. Firstly, they distinguish the fields of employment, housing, education and health as being vital to newcomers' integration processes. Secondly, the concept of citizenship and the rights that accompany societal membership, thirdly, the authors emphasise the importance of social connection within the community into which one integrates. Lastly, structures –and consequent structural barriers– are central in order to adequately understand and analyse integration practices and processes.

As this research project regards in the first place the social capital of newcomers in the Flemish Ardennes, the study will delve deeper into the third element presented by Ager & Strang (2008): social connection. The authors emphasise the importance of social integration on the local level, which forms the 'connective tissue' of a community. They define it as a "process of mutual accommodation" (p. 177), which allows newcomers to cultivate a sense of belonging within the host community, by establishing trust and thus building social capital.

More specifically, Ager & Strang (2008) distinguish between three forms of social connection. First, there are 'social bonds': links with family and similar groups in terms of for example ethnicity or religion. Secondly, there are 'social bridges': the connections one forms with other communities. The authors speak of 'bridging capital', and the importance of this component of social capital for other dimensions of integration such as employment. Lastly,

there are ‘social links’. These refer to state structures and government services, and how accessible these are to newcomers. The authors emphasise the structural barriers they may face regarding that accessibility, and the importance of identifying and tackling those obstacles.

The Flemish government defines integration as a “dynamic and interactive process in which individuals, groups, communities and facilities can each, from a context of enforceability of rights and duties inherent to our democratic rule-of-law, constructively enter into relations with each other and deal with migration and its consequences in society” (Vlaamse Overheid, 2013, p. 3; own translation). Integration policy is understood as dealing with “situations and dynamics connected to the consequences of migration, with as objective independent and equal participation, accessibility to all facilities, active and shared citizenship of everyone and the establishment of social cohesion” (Vlaamse Overheid, 2013, p. 3; own translation).

Civic integration is conceptualised as an “accompanied path to integration, where the government provides to newcomers a specific and tailored programme which strengthens their self-reliance with the purpose of participation on professional, educational and social level” (Vlaamse Overheid, 2013, p. 2; own translation). Here, too, it is defined in terms of mutuality and two-directional interaction between the newcomers and the host society, allowing newcomers to integrate and participate in Flemish society, and for Flemish society to recognise newcomers as ‘full citizens’ (AgII, n.d.).

Kostakopoulou (2010) critically dissects the current policy trends in EU Member States regarding civic integration, and strongly scrutinises the claim to ‘two-directional interaction’. The author argues that, whereas integration is usually framed as a contractual two-way process, it in reality constitutes a form of one-way state control, where newcomers are made to conform to society on the government’s terms, not their own. Kostakopoulou (2010) posits this within a broader context of nationalist and identity politics, as well as security politics. In light of the ‘civic integration contract’, and more specifically its fourth pillar, being mandatory for many newcomers, one can question to what extent one can truly speak of a contractual agreement between two equal partners. Instead, it can be argued that the Flemish governmental authorities impose certain understandings of integration, society and citizenship –and consequent requirements established in the ‘contract’– upon newcomers.

Moreover, through this approach, the responsibility for integration is strongly attributed to the individual, demanding newcomers to ensure they become full and ‘worthy’ members of society. Indeed, as Ager & Strang (2008) explain with regards to the second domain of integration ‘citizenship and rights’, newcomers are expected to adapt to the host society, by becoming familiar with the values, norms and lifestyle of the host community. There has in the

EU been an increase in such contractual forms of integration, where newcomers are made to fulfil certain ‘integration requirements’ (Kostakopoulou, 2010). Within this framework, and along with those requirements, comes a top-down definition of what a ‘good citizen’ constitutes. Concepts such as societal participation, social networks, leisure and more, are culturally defined and cannot be objectively conceptualised. As highlighted by Kostakopoulou (2010), it is of importance to acknowledge that integration programmes are state-led and constructed in terms established by political elites. Indeed, as Kostakopoulou (2010) asserts, there reigns amongst the EU Member States a “preference for a top-down, control-based and sanctions-oriented approach to integration matters” (p. 940). Within the research project, the aim is to move beyond this technocratic approach and instead put forward a more inclusive bottom-up method, centring the experiences of the participants. Therefore, the study adopts a critical approach to the understanding of ‘integration’ in the Flemish context throughout this project and tries to remain aware of the broader governmental setting in which the services and activities under the fourth pillar take place.

3.2. Social Capital

Within the integration programme of the AgII (n.d.(c)), the Participation Programme is aimed at facilitating social relations between the newcomers and the Flemish residents. In effect, the fourth pillar is mainly intended to enable newcomers to build social capital in the regions within which they reside. This part reviews two schools of thought on the meaning of social capital and the socio-structural implications thereof. There exist two main conceptualisations of social capital: one advanced by American political scientist Robert D. Putnam, and the other by French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu.

Putnam (1993) operates in a rather classic framework of Western political science, defining social capital in terms of social networks, norms and trust. Citizenship is understood as a form of societal participation based on pluralism, generalised trust and norms of reciprocity, which are meant to instil a sense of shared belonging in people, so as to ensure efficient social cooperation. Putnam thus understands social capital as a public resource, which serves to the advantage of society as a whole. Moreover, he has contributed to the field of integration studies with his concept of ‘bridging capital’, a concept already mentioned in the previous subsection (Ager & Strang, 2008). Putnam put forward this concept in his most famous work, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). This subform of social capital refers to an individual’s social connections with other groups and communities, and is set apart from ‘bonding capital’, which refers to ties between

homogeneous groups. Thus, bridging capital is meant to span across divides which exist between groups and individuals in society, such as those caused by class, religion, gender or ethnicity. Such bridging, Putnam (2000) claims, is to occur through education, employment, and most importantly leisure, through voluntary associations. He argues that establishing such connections, and ensuring their continuity in the long term, is vital to democracy.

The Flemish authorities' understanding of newcomers' social integration can be interpreted as being primarily established and perceived in Putnamian terms. The aim of the Participation Programme is for these individuals to build their social capital, through the provided services. Via activities like talking groups, volunteering or sports (AgII, n.d.(e)), participants become acquainted with the social norms, values and obligations which are dominant in Flemish society. Throughout these processes, they are expected to build social networks within their local community, thus strengthening their 'bridging capital'. Consequently, the aim is that they acquire a sense of 'generalised trust' in the functioning of society, on a more local and micro-level, but also on macro-level, referring to the institutions and authority of the Flemish/Belgian government. In other words, they become socialised into Flemish society.

Such construction of social capital does not occur in a neutral setting, however. Indeed, Putnam has been criticised for his 'pacific functionalism' (Siisiainen, 2000). Within his theory of social capital, he overlooks the influence of power relations, defined by for example class, gender or race, and how these affect one's access to social resources. Therefore, this framework expands on Putnam's conceptual frame of social capital by incorporating Bourdieu's theorisations.

Bourdieu (1986) takes a more critical approach to social capital, highlighting structural barriers and power imbalances. He primarily conceives of social capital as the *resources* connected to one's social networks and relationships. These resources, he emphasises, are strongly determined by one's class. Thus, Bourdieu centres the role of structures, power dynamics and consequent inequalities regarding citizens' accessibility to social capital. Based on one's societal positionality, one will have more or less access to certain resources, such as education, employment or leisure. The Participation Programme attempts to bridge these gaps and reduce such imbalances, by offering opportunities for newcomers to develop and expand their social capital. *Wij Doen Mee* plays a significant role in the practical implementation and smooth functioning of the Programme in the Flemish Ardennes. Whilst the research acknowledges the organisations' stakeholders' efforts at overcoming possible barriers and gaps, a Bourdieusian lens is adopted so as to remain critical of implicit power imbalances and

structures, and how these may be reproduced, in the framework of the Participation Programme.

In analysing the participants' construction of social capital, the research combines the Putnamian and Bourdieusian perspectives so as to provide a nuanced and deeper understanding of the newcomers' social integration processes, and the barriers they experience to those processes. More precisely, it examines which barriers and challenges the participants face regarding the accessibility of the services and activities provided within the scope of the Participation Programme. Aside from assessing the participants' possibilities to build trust, to interact with the social norms and values, and to build social networks (Putnam's frame), the research aims to highlight to what extent these possibilities and barriers are structural and ensue from power dynamics and inequalities (Bourdieuian lens).

3.3. Accessibility

Accessibility is a key condition shaping one's opportunities to build social capital and participate in leisure activities. The literature suggests that the *accessibility* of these activities is not a neutral condition, but a socially and institutionally mediated factor that may hinder newcomers' opportunities for meaningful participation. The method of the "9 B's of accessibility" [own translation] has been used to assess the accessibility of services and organisations. The Flemish Agency for Civic Integration (n.d.) has adopted this list of factors, identifying potential barriers including physical access, affordability, availability, usefulness, comprehensibility and familiarity. This approach assumes that reducing practical and informational barriers can increase participation and, by extension, access to social networks. Critical scholarship, on the other hand, pays attention to the social relations and power dynamics through which access is negotiated.

Kangas-Müller et al. (2023) demonstrate how inclusion practices often produce paradoxical outcomes. Their study shows that inclusion efforts often construct migrants and refugees as vulnerable and dependent subjects requiring assistance. Such framing may limit the types of social capital newcomers can develop, privileging unequal – or vertical – ties to institutions, who are presented as charitable, over horizontal and reciprocal relationships within the community. In this sense, accessibility to activities becomes conditional upon the person's conformity to norms of the 'migrant' and their integration. These practices may enable access to certain services while continuing to limit newcomers' agency in shaping them. This dynamic is particularly relevant for inclusion initiatives, which risk reproducing hierarchical power relations if participation is tightly scripted or institutionally controlled.

This plays into Burns' (2008) structural discrimination, which seeks to explain the prejudices entrenched in a society that can inadvertently impact the treatment of a certain group. It refers to the way in which "institutions construct and maintain categorisation systems, cultural stereotypes and attitudes that frame discriminatory ways irrespective of the intentions" (Burns, 2008, p. 152). In the Flemish Ardennes, this approach allows for a better understanding of potential challenges newcomers may encounter across local services and institutions, as well as the structural and symbolic barriers that shape their 'integration' trajectories. Maintaining this lens helps situate individual experiences within the broader social and institutional landscape that shapes opportunities for belonging and participation.

Bourdieu's (2011) conceptualisation of social capital clarifies how accessibility operates relationally rather than solely materially. Access to certain social spaces and opportunities depends on accumulated networks and long-term social recognition. According to him, the accessibility to certain activities is divided along class lines. In the case of newcomers in the Flemish Ardennes, this could create a structural barrier: even when activities are formally accessible, the development of bridging social capital may remain out of reach without pre-existing networks or familiarity with local social codes.

López-Frias & Dattilo (2021) refer to Bourdieu's analysis of taste and distinction to further explain how class-based power structures shape access to activities. Certain leisure practices require substantial economic, cultural and social capital, effectively excluding those without long-term access to these resources. Power thus emerges as a central analytical category in López-Frias and Dattilo's (2021) work on accessible and inclusive leisure. They argue that leisure is consistently shaped by unequal power relations, with dominant groups controlling access, norms and meanings. According to their analysis, many inclusion initiatives fail because they overlook power as the core issue. Their threefold framework positions inclusive leisure as a social justice practice: first, it addresses oppression and marginalisation; second, it makes accommodations for individual needs; and lastly, it fosters counter-narratives and aims to unite people around a common narrative. Within this framework, improved accessibility could function as a mechanism through which newcomers collectively challenge dominant power structures and leisure discourses, thereby transforming leisure spaces into sites of shared power and social capital production.

4. Theoretical Framework: Leisure Constraint Theory

The Leisure Constraint Theory is a fundamental framework that examines the factors that limit the formation of individuals' leisure preferences or hinder their participation in and enjoyment of leisure activities (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). Developed by Crawford and Godbey (1987), this theory classifies constraints in three main dimensions. The first dimension regards *intrapersonal constraints*, such as the individual's psychological state, attitudes, self-perception, and subjective evaluations of the appropriateness of an activity. The second dimension is *interpersonal constraints*, which stem from factors that are defined as barriers arising from an individual's interactions with their social environment that limit participation. The third dimension concerns *structural constraints*, referring to external factors such as time, money, transportation, and climate that may affect an individual's participation (Crawford, Jackson and Godbey, 1991). These constraints follow a hierarchical order: the individual must first overcome internal obstacles, then deal with interpersonal obstacles, and finally overcome structural obstacles to achieve participation (Crawford et al., 1991; Godbey et al., 2010).

The multi-dimensional framework offered by the Leisure Constraint Theory is particularly functional in understanding newcomer integration. The integration process is not limited solely to legal status or economic participation, it is also closely related to an individual's ability to actively participate in social life, build social networks, and obtain a sense of belonging. In this context, intrapersonal constraints make the psychological dimension of integration visible. Interpersonal constraints affect newcomers' capacity to make contact with local communities and generate social capital, while structural constraints determine accessibility dimensions such as transportation, time, access to information, and institutional arrangements.

The main objective of the fourth pillar in Belgium is to encourage the active participation of newcomers in social life. However, participation is not solely dependent on the availability of activities and services promoting such social participation. Intrapersonal constraints, interpersonal constraints, and structural constraints can directly affect this process (Crawford, Jackson & Godbey, 1991). Moreover, Jackson (2005) emphasises that constraints have a dynamic and negotiable structure, stating that individuals can develop strategies to cope with these obstacles. For this reason, the Leisure Constraint Theory shall serve as the analytical framework to assess the accessibility of the Participation Programme.

These three separate types of constraints were developed into an integrated 'Hierarchical Model' by Crawford, Jackson and Godbey (1991). According to this model, participation

describes a process in which an individual confronts constraints in a sequential and gradual manner. The process begins with intrapersonal constraints that affect the individual's psychological motivation; if this stage is overcome, interpersonal constraints involving social interaction are encountered, and if that is also overcome, structural constraints, which are physical or institutional, are encountered.

However, the complete absence of these constraints is not necessary for participation to occur. Jackson et al. (1993) emphasised that participation is possible not through the absence of constraints, but through the successful 'negotiation' of these obstacles. This perspective argues that the individual is not a passive victim in the face of constraints but rather can overcome these obstacles through strategies such as time management, financial planning, or establishing new social networks (Jackson et al., 1993; Kono & Ito, 2023). This emphasises the importance of newcomers' agency.

4.1. Intrapersonal Constraints

Intrapersonal constraints constitute the most basic and initial stage of the hierarchy. Crawford and Godbey (1987) define these constraints as psychological states and characteristics that influence an individual's preference or interest in an activity. Without overcoming this stage, i.e., without the individual feeling intrinsically motivated to participate in an activity, the other layers of constraints (intrapersonal and structural) become irrelevant (Crawford et al., 1991).

In the context of newcomers, interpersonal constraints are directly related not only to individual preferences but also to the psychological burdens and traumas that may have been brought about by the migration process (Stodolska, 2002). The feeling of alienation and the disruption of social networks experienced by refugees in a new society often lead to a deep sense of isolation, hindering social participation (Morrice, 2007). Individuals feeling 'invisible' in the social sphere and experiencing a lack of belonging elevates the psychological dimension of constraints to a more decisive level than structural barriers (Klaver et al., 2024). Accessibility is not just about physical proximity, but also about the individual feeling socially safe in that space (Stodolska, 2002).

4.2. Interpersonal Constraints

Interpersonal constraints refer to a lack of social interaction that affects an individual's participation in leisure activities. Crawford et al. (1991) state that this stage typically arises when the existing social environment does not encourage participation. In the context of newcomers, it is directly related to weak ties with the host society (bridging social capital) and the resulting structural social isolation (Morrice, 2007). Immigrants isolate themselves from

social environments due to anxiety and feelings of alienation regarding social norms in the new society, which leads to personal constraints transforming into social isolation (Stodolska, 2002; Klaver et al., 2024). Therefore, overcoming this constraint is possible by rebuilding social networks and establishing a sense of belonging (Mortier, 2024). The Participation Programme acts as a ‘social bridge’ at precisely this point. By matching individuals with local clubs or volunteer networks, the program aims to eliminate interpersonal constraints that migrants find difficult to overcome on their own (Crawford et al., 1991) through institutional support (Mortier, 2024).

4.3. Structural Constraints

Structural constraints, the final level of the hierarchy, are external factors that stand in the way of participation, even if the individual has the desire and social environment to participate in an activity (Crawford et al., 1991). These include elements such as time, cost, climate, transportation, and access to information.

For newcomers, structural barriers often have been shown as institutional and logistical challenges. According to the OECD (2023) report, the biggest structural barrier to the participation of immigrants in the workforce and social life in Flanders is logistical and transportation limitations. Moreover, research has shown that in Belgium, immigrant women are unable to participate in programs due to a lack of structural support such as childcare (Klaver et al., 2024).

The Participation Programme implemented in the Flanders region aims to increase the accessibility of migrants to social opportunities by minimising these barriers, particularly through institutional interventions such as transportation support and digital information sharing (OECD, 2023; Ahmad-Yar and Laurensyeva, 2020). Such structural support makes participation possible by strengthening the individual's capacity to negotiate limitations (Jackson et al., 1993).

5. Empirical Studies on Leisure and Integration

This section reviews empirical studies that examine the role of leisure participation in newcomers' integration processes. Building on the concepts of accessibility, integration, and social capital, as well as the leisure constraint theory outlined above, these studies demonstrate how newcomers' leisure experiences are shaped not only by individual circumstances, but also by interpersonal dynamics and broader structural inequalities laying the empirical groundwork for the present research in the Flemish Ardennes.

Leisure activities play a critical role in the integration process of newcomers into the host society, both as a tool for integration and as an indicator of well-being. The literature shows that participation in leisure activities directly increases immigrants' life satisfaction and perception of social inclusion. Koçak and Gürbüz (2024), in their extensive research conducted in five European countries, found that leisure time constraints play a critical moderating role in the relationship between social inclusion and life satisfaction. The authors argue that policymakers should focus primarily on reducing recreational barriers (structural, interpersonal, and internal) to improve quality of life.

Similarly, Berasategi Sancho et al. (2023) demonstrated a strong correlation between immigrants' participation in leisure activities and their life satisfaction and sense of social inclusion using quantitative data. However, the study found that the level of participation of immigrants in these activities is quite low and that their basic psychosocial needs are not adequately met in recreational areas; thus, confirming that low-income level remains the biggest obstacle (structural constraint) to participation.

In their work on inclusive leisure, López-Frias and Dattilo's (2021) draw on Bourdieu's work to centre power as an analytical framework. They argue that leisure is constantly shaped by unequal power relations, with dominant groups controlling access, norms and meanings. As such, many inclusion initiatives fail precisely because they overlook power as the core issue. The framework used by the authors is threefold: addressing oppression, making accommodations, and encouraging counter-narratives, aiming to position inclusive leisure as a social justice practice. In accordance with Bourdieu's conception of social capital, leisure constraints are not accidental but produced through social hierarchies linked to class, race, nationality and other axes of inequality. The authors nonetheless argue that, in making leisure more inclusive, it can become a space within which one can challenge dominant narratives and resist this traditional power. As they note, when admitted into a leisure community, those who

experience marginalisation acquire more space to shape discourse and create a shared and equal space to express themselves (López-Frias & Dattilo, 2021).

Plaete et al. (2025) found that newcomers in the Bruges region encountered significant barriers to integration. While language proficiency seems to be the most pervasive obstacle, logistical and financial constraints played a significant role as well. Indeed, the cost and the lack of transportation posed a significant challenge to newcomers, hindering their ability to access certain activities. Moreover, a lack of childcare or the impossibility to bring children to activities prevented many parents from engaging with local communities. These barriers are compounded by informational gaps, as most participants reported being unaware of the Programme's existence. Qualitative data further suggested that social exclusion can be influenced by skin colours, which acts as a silent obstacle in making connections with the local population (Plaete et al., 2025). These multifaceted accessibility constraints in Bruges reflect the findings provided by the critical scholars of integration: accessibility therefore reflects structural inequalities rather than individual choice or motivation.

The research prioritised a theoretical framework that views integration as a reciprocal, multidimensional process, exploring how mandatory social activities can foster social inclusion and the building of social capital (Plaete et al., 2025). Through a survey targeting non-EU newcomers, the study identified a significant discrepancy between policy intent and the lived reality of participants. Findings revealed a low awareness of the Programme, and a variety of structural barriers (mentioned previously) that hindered participation, despite newcomers' strong motivation to engage with the local community. Plaete et al. (2025) advocate for a more personalised approach to information sharing rather than relying on digital platforms. The researchers ultimately conclude that for the Participation Programme to be fully effective it must transition to a bottom-up, co-creative model that allows for enhanced agency over the Participation Programme. According to the authors, integrating structural feedback mechanisms would allow the trajectory to be continuously adjusted to ensure it provides a meaningful sense of belonging to newcomers, rather than just a bureaucratic checkbox.

Research conducted by Breyne (2024) explores the impact of volunteering on newcomers' integration in Flanders, within the context of the fourth pillar of the Civic Integration Programme. Through interviews, her research reveals the positive impact that volunteering can have on one's integration trajectory. Participants found volunteering facilitated friendship formation and allowed them to better understand Flemish societal practices and culture. In their experience, the fourth pillar allowed for a more practical dimension to what they perceived as a mostly theoretical integration programme. Volunteering

allowed them to practice Dutch, form connections and even find employment. Breyne's (2024) research demonstrates the importance of accessibility to both information and activities for improved integration of newcomers. On the other hand, Breyne notes that volunteer work and social orientation courses instil a sense of independence in refugees, while emphasising that the program's "one-size-fits-all" approach ignores individual complexities. Breyne's most striking finding is that the exclusion of asylum seekers from the mandatory program is the biggest structural barrier, leading them to feel their lives are "frozen"

While migration studies in the social integration literature generally focus on large metropolises, the PISTE project conducted by Schyvens et al. (2023) draws attention to the shift of migration to 'small and medium-sized towns' and the unique integration dynamics in these regions. This study, specifically focusing on the Belgian town of Ninove, examines how local governments assume a 'coordinator' role with limited capacity and the political/social participation of migrants. Based on the concept of 'publicising needs', it also considers newcomers voicing their local problems as a form of participation. In this context, it is emphasised that practices such as contact with 'Toeleiders' (Access Social Workers) and Babbelonië (language cafes) in Ninove build low-threshold bridges that overcome digital barriers and increase social capital.

Kılıç (2023) defines language learning as a 'key' to the social independence of refugees, arguing that the process should not be limited to language classes; informal interaction with the local population is vital in overcoming cultural anxiety. However, the author found that structural constraints such as local dialects, lack of childcare support, and deep discrimination in society continue to pose serious obstacles to full integration, even if the language is learned. In their study on Turkish-speaking migrants in Belgium, Kılıç and Jacquet (2023) stated that integration courses broke down isolation by building "social bridges" and reduced cultural anxiety; however, they revealed that highly educated migrants were dissatisfied with being assigned to jobs below their qualifications. The study also specifically points to the inability of less educated women to attend courses regularly due to a lack of childcare support as the biggest inclusivity problem of the system (Kılıç and Jacquet, 2023).

Mortier (2024) emphasises that "buddy" projects are one of the most effective tools for enabling refugees to establish trust-based relationships with the local population, and that volunteers assume the role of "cultural translators". Mortier also notes that this does not always lead to an expanding social network for newcomers as some volunteers may be hesitant to integrate refugees into their social circles, and that the power imbalance between the buddy and the migrant may leave the refugee in a constant "recipient of aid" position (Mortier, 2024).

Overall, the study finds that these programmes have the potential to increase confidence amongst refugees with agency and social capital, but this potential is not fully utilised due to financial costs, legal status restrictions, and bureaucratic rigidities.

In a 2025 study, Van der Klashorst (2025) demonstrates that improved accessibility is not merely about physical entry into a space, but about the accessibility of agency, decision-making power, and cultural validation for migrant populations. By exploring co-design as a strategy in Melbourne, Australia, the study reveals several ways in which removing traditional barriers to participation is vital for genuine social inclusion. The research illustrates that traditional top-down programmes often fail because they focus on what migrants lack, rather than what they offer. Improved accessibility through co-design allowed participants to engage using their existing strengths. The study concludes that the process of engagement is often more important than the final programme outcome. Access to the developmental phase of a programme allowed participants to gain knowledge about how community systems work and improved their agency in defining their own lifegoals. Most importantly, participants reported a strengthened sense of belonging and the sharing of non-Western cultural values, which helped generate social capital and trust within the group. Adopting a Foucauldian lens, the research highlighted access to co-designing leisure programmes can shift the perception of migrants from passive recipients to active architects of their own experience. Van der Klashorst (2025) concludes that when participants gain influence over decision-making, leisure can become more accessible, enabling newcomers to shape narratives, build horizontal relationships, and generate social capital on their own terms.

These studies point towards a conclusion that meaningful inclusion requires moving beyond top-down programming towards participatory, co-creative approaches that recognise newcomers as active agents rather than passive. The study aims to uncover how these dynamics are reproduced within the Participation Programme in the Flemish Ardennes.

6. Method

6.1. Data Collection

6.1.1. Method & Justification

The research data were collected through semi-structured focus group interviews –which took place in Dutch– in the shape of exercises with questions and prompts. This specific method was chosen so as to fit the broader project of the Participation Programme, turning the interviews into social activities and emphasising interaction in a Dutch-speaking context. Moreover, it helped gain a better understanding of the participants’ individual understanding as well as their shared experiences. The focus group discussions allowed participants to express their individual perspectives and opinions, while also creating an environment in which they could build on each other’s contributions. As the individuals in question are part of a larger group of newcomers in the Flemish Ardennes, this method aimed to uncover recurring themes, thus delineating patterns. Finally, this method was selected so as to align with the research project’s ‘critical approach’ based on Kostakopoulou’s critique (2010). The study strives towards an inclusive bottom-up form of data collection, centring the agency and experiences of the participants.

By opting for a semi-structured interview guide, the focus-group discussion could be steered without imposing a rigidity upon the participants and to allow the facilitator to ask follow-up questions or clarifications. Yet, by having a set of fixed questions, the focus-group discussion remained functional for the research purposes.

The focus group interviews served to answer the research question by gaining a better understanding of newcomers’ interpretation of the Participation Programme and their role within it based on their lived experiences. More precisely, through those experiences, the research aims at uncovering newcomers’ understanding of the PP and the barriers they face in accessing activities that meet their needs, wishes and individual circumstances. Thus, the study aims to uncover what barriers the participants face with regards to accessing the activities of the fourth pillar, more precisely what obstacles exist to the development of their (bridging) social capital.

6.1.2. Activity Design

The prompts and questions were derived from the conceptual framework and focused on integration, social capital and accessibility, to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences in regard to these concepts. A preliminary activity design was developed and sent

to the partner organisation *Wij Doen Mee - Vlaamse Ardennen* as well as those responsible for coordinating the activities in Ronse, Oudenaarde and Zottegem (annex 1).

After the first focus-group interview in Ronse, some adaptations were made to the activity design based on feedback received from the partner organisation. As one of them attended this interview, they could see first-hand how the activity design was implemented and how the participants responded to the questions and prompts. They noticed which (follow-up) questions were missing from the framework, specifically in relation to the effectiveness of the Participation Programme's social dimension and its opportunities for social bridging. This was both relevant to the research question and to the partner organisation's interest in this research project, namely the improvement of their services. Thus, they suggested expanding the section on social capital and integration, so as to gain a better understanding of the participants' experience regarding the development of their social network and sense of belonging through the PP activities.

Specifically, alterations were made to sections 3: *Integration & Social Capital*; 4: *Accessibility* and 5: *Possible Improvements*. Some questions were deleted and others rephrased to put more emphasis on the Participation Programme's objective of constructing social networks and bridging capital with Belgian people. This second version can be found in the annex (annex 2). In the two ensuing focus-groups –in Oudenaarde and Zottegem– that final version of the activity design was employed.

6.1.3. Structure of Focus Group Activity

After an initial introduction by the research team, followed by clarifications on the specifics of the focus group interviews, the participants were first asked questions about their personal background (e.g. country of origin, how long they have been in Belgium and when they started the PP; see Table 1). This was followed by icebreaker questions, in order to create a comfortable setting. Then, the activity proceeded based on the main questions and prompts, which were designed following from the conceptual framework, focusing on integration, social capital and accessibility. Whilst some questions required only verbal responses, others could be answered through physical positioning exercises or the use of images (annex 3). As a last exercise, everyone –the research team, to encourage participation– could design their own 'ideal' leisure activity.

Three focus group interviews were conducted in Ronse, Oudenaarde, and Zottegem. In Ronse, three participants took part; in Oudenaarde, four participants participated; and in Zottegem, two participants joined the discussion.

6.1.4. Participant Profile

To recruit participants, the partner organisation *Wij Doen Mee* put the researchers in contact with activity organisers. This enabled participant observations to be conducted at three *praattafels*, namely Bib-Babbels and Taalkaffee in Ronse, Babbelonië in Oudenaarde, and Mama Mundo in Zottegem. Through this active participation, contact was established with potential participants with whom a date for the focus group discussion was agreed upon through WhatsApp communication. Thanks to the support of a representative from Wij Doen Mee, two additional newcomers were recruited for the study. Ongoing coordination with activity organisers further facilitated participant recruitment, with additional newcomers being invited to participate through announcements made to the wider *praattafel* group on the day of the focus group discussions. Newcomers who were recruited attended local *praattafel* initiatives Babbelonië in Oudenaarde, Bib-Babbels and Taalkaffee in Ronse, and Mama Mundo in Zottegem.

The focus groups consisted only of women, who are between 20 and 60 years old. The group is diverse in terms of country of origin, and their native languages are Arabic, Tigrinya, French and/or English. Moreover, whereas some women have only arrived in Belgium a few months ago, several of them have been living in Flanders for multiple years already. They are at different stages of their Participation Programme, with five participants who had (recently) completed it, and four whose trajectories are ongoing. Table 1 provides an anonymised overview of their individual data.

Gender	Country	Age	Length of stay	PP-status	Location
Female	Morocco	24	3 years	Ongoing (March 2026)	Zottegem
Female	Cameroon	38	18 months	Completed	Zottegem
Female	Eritrea	—	~1 year	Completed	Ronse
Female	Syria	—	1,5 years	Completed	Ronse
Female	Morocco	—	~3 month	Ongoing (January 2026)	Ronse
Female	Eritrea	23	3 years	Completed on day	Oudenaarde
Female	Nigeria	28	6 years	Ongoing (October 2025)	Oudenaarde
Female	Eritrea	60	1 year	Completed	Oudenaarde
Female	Eritrea	56	~6 months	Ongoing (November 2024)	Oudenaarde

Table 1: Overview of the participants' profile.

Further, as the participants were all newcomers who were still in the process of learning Dutch, translation was provided when needed. For French and Arabic-speaking participants, oral translation was provided during the interviews. For participants whose native language was foreign to the researchers, other newcomers who had a better knowledge of Dutch or English helped with translations. In some cases, translation platforms such as Google Translate, were used to facilitate communication.

6.1.5. Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into newcomers' experiences within the Participation Programme, several limitations should be acknowledged.

One of the main challenges encountered was the language barrier. As the newcomers are still in the process of learning Dutch, it proved difficult at times to make the questions or prompts clear. Moreover, in the three focus groups, there were significant disparities between the participants' level of Dutch: some were still struggling with basic interactions, whilst others had more advanced levels. This undoubtedly affected the responses and thus results. More generally speaking, whilst there are many advantages to focus-group discussions as a research method, group dynamics might negatively influence the research outcomes. For example, some participants may be more dominant, present or engaged, for instance due to language skills or personality, causing their contributions to outweigh other participants' contributions.

Another important limitation of this study is that all participants were female, many of whom were mothers. As a result, the findings primarily reflect the experiences and needs of female newcomers within the Participation Programme. This means the research cannot account for how male newcomers may experience accessibility or integration differently, nor can it identify potential gender-specific barriers that may emerge.

It is also of importance to highlight the researchers' positionality as (Western) university students. The academic setting from which we depart affects the vocabulary used as well as the behaviour and approach vis à vis the focus-group participants. In addition, how we may have been perceived by the participants could have influenced their responses.

Finally, certain images were selected as means to answer the questions or prompts, which may have influenced responses by association.

6.2. Data Analysis

6.2.1. Method & Justification

The data gathered from the focus group discussions have been examined through a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) guided by the Leisure Constraints Theory (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). This allowed for a categorisation of the data along the three forms of constraints: intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural. The thematic categorisation is analysed through the conceptual framework, focusing on integration, social capital and accessibility. The discussion is structured along these concepts. By combining the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, the study aims to provide an in-depth and comprehensive answer to the research question.

Thematic analysis as developed by Braun & Clarke (2006) was employed to uncover patterns and themes within the qualitative data. As Ahmed et al. (2025) claim, thematic analysis offers “a structured yet flexible framework for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning” [sic] (p. 1).

Braun & Clarke’s (2006) approach consists of six steps (Ahmed et al., 2025; Naeem et al., 2023): familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing potential themes; defining and naming themes; and writing the report. Ahmed et al. (2025) provide a 16-item checklist (p. 5) along with Braun & Clarke’s six steps, to ensure a methodically sound use of this method. This checklist was employed as a guide during the data analysis process.

7. Discussion

This section presents the analysis and findings derived from the three focus group discussions conducted in Ronse, Zottegem and Oudenaarde. The findings are organised thematically, in accordance with the structure of the focus group activities and the Leisure Constraints theory is used to complement the conceptual framework. The first part examines barriers in terms of accessibility, while the second discusses social capital, separated into bonding, bridging and linking capital. The section ends with an overview of the constraints identified in terms of integration.

The analysis draws attention to patterns across experiences in the three locations. The findings are intended not only to answer the guiding research question but also to inform the practical guidelines that will be developed for the partner organisation, *Wij Doen Mee – Vlaamse Ardennen*, and other stakeholders in the region.

Before turning to the analysis and findings, it is important to acknowledge a broader contextual consideration that informs how the data presented in this section should be interpreted. This consideration is in relation to the timing and expectations embedded in the Participation Programme. The programme places a strong emphasis on social participation and the development of bridging social capital. However, for many newcomers, this expectation may come relatively early in their integration trajectory. In reality, newcomers often face a range of more immediate and pressing concerns, such as being separated from family members who are not (yet) in Belgium, learning Dutch, finding employment and securing stable housing. These priorities can significantly shape how they engage with the programme and may limit their capacity to focus on building new social connections at this stage.

While these aspects are beyond the scope of the research and will not be delved into in the following section, it is indispensable to take this broader context into account to better understand newcomers' limited accessibility. This could help to further nuance the analysis, by situating participants' behaviour and choices within the realities of their integration process. It may also provide a useful lens to interpret why certain goals of the programme, such as bridging social capital, are not always realised in practice. Furthermore, it contextualises newcomers' needs for facilitation and guidance, underscoring the important role of *Wij Doen Mee* within this process.

This acknowledgment therefore serves as a guiding preface to the analysis and findings that follow, as the experiences captured in this research are not solely shaped by the programme

itself, but also by wider personal and social circumstances in which newcomers navigate their integration.

7.1. Accessibility

7.1.1. Information Scarcity

The most prominent and consistent finding across all three locations is the information barrier. The term *participatietraject* was unknown to almost all participants, including those who already completed the trajectory. Out of the total of nine research participants, only one person was familiar with the purpose of the Participation Programme. Indeed, while the other participants knew it was an essential part of their integration trajectory, they perceived it as a mere obligation to improve their Dutch and to increase their chances of finding employment.

The one woman who was familiar with the purpose of the Programme had been informed through her integration coach, who clarified the reasoning behind it and explained that any activity that allowed for interaction with Flemish speakers can count towards the completion of the forty hours. On the other hand, all other participants had simply been told about the obligation to complete these hours, with most of them receiving flyers for *praattafels* (talking groups). One younger participant – the only one to have engaged in an activity other than *praattafels* – received more information from her trajectory coach, but only upon specific inquiry:

“I asked her what else I could do to learn more Dutch and she said I could do volunteer work. I didn’t know before that I could do something else.”

This information was thus only received on the newcomer’s own initiative rather than an existing understanding of the Participation Programme.

Furthermore, none of the participants in Ronse or Oudenaarde were familiar with the *ikdoemee.be* website. This resource, compiling many activities in different towns, was known to the two participants in Zottegem. Both had been made aware of this platform through their two-week integration course, but one of them did not know that she could choose activities other than the standard *praattafels*, due to a lack of understanding of the Participation Programme.

This finding has direct implications within the framework of Leisure Constraints Theory. When individuals are unaware of the existence of particular activities or opportunities, their leisure participation becomes structurally constrained before any intrapersonal or interpersonal negotiations can take place (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). The findings suggest

that information regarding the PP, its objectives, and the range of available activities is not always communicated consistently across participants. As a result, newcomers often rely on the information and guidance available through their immediate institutional contacts and the channels most readily accessible to them. Given that the Participation Programme constitutes only one component of a broader integration trajectory, and considering the substantial caseloads often managed by trajectory coaches, the level of guidance devoted specifically to participation opportunities may vary. In practice, this can lead newcomers to engage primarily in low-threshold and easily identifiable activities, such as *praattafels*. While these activities undoubtedly provide value, reliance on a limited set of options may restrict participants' exposure to a broader range of activities that could facilitate stronger forms of social bridging. From an LCT perspective, this demonstrates how structural constraints are not only produced by the absence of opportunities, but also by unequal access to information about those opportunities, thereby shaping the range of leisure choices available to newcomers, creating a closed information ecosystem (Crawford & Godbey, 1987).

This information gap further leads to participants stating that the *praattafels* they attended felt more like 'classes' than leisure activities. The lack of information newcomers have therefore leads to a perceived limited range of available activities. This touches upon what Crawford & Godbey (1987) describe as the 'appropriateness' of certain activities: when the available offerings do not align with the cultural expectations, life situation, or interests of the participant, their availability effectively functions as a structural barrier. Moreover, as López-Frias and Dattilo (2021) show, certain cultural and social capital is required to engage in leisure practices. Access to leisure is strongly dependent on understanding its meaning and the norms on which it is based. An information barrier or gap is present, limiting that access. Thus, it requires better institutional mediation through more effective and standardised information provisioning.

This echoes Plaete et al.'s (2025) findings regarding the Bruges region, which posited that limited accessibility reflects structural constraints posed by inequalities rather than individual choice or motivation.

7.1.2. Scheduling

As many of the research participants were women with children, they often expressed the need to plan around their family responsibilities. In Oudenaarde, for example, the activity had a hard stop at 3PM due to most of the participants' children finishing school at that time. Accounting for the children's hobbies and playdates came up as a major barrier, with mothers expressing the need for more child-centred activities.

In another focus group discussion, one mother explained that most activities do not permit children, restricting her to activities in the evening, oftentimes waiting until her partner arrives home first. Similarly, she identified a need for childcare at activities to increase accessibility for primary caregivers.

“Sometimes I can't go to class because I have to wait for my husband to come home from work to look after our daughter.”

Crawford & Godbey (1987) identify ‘scheduling work time’ and ‘family life cycle stage’ as classic structural constraints. Both come together in this data: participants mostly have young children and are often the primary caregivers, making them dependent on their partner to tag team these responsibilities, while activities are often presented at fixed times without considering these family dynamics.

7.2. Social Capital

7.2.1. Bonding Capital

Most participants have close ties within their own language communities or national groups. Participants with a Tigrinya heritage in Oudenaarde, for example, explained they come together as a group to practice their Dutch or go on walks. This closeness was identified as being a source of both their shared heritage, as well as a perceived difficulty in establishing connections with locals. The participants named major differences between their own cultures and Belgium saying:

“In Eritrea one’s neighbour is like one’s family, you share more things with each other [...] in Belgium the culture is much more closed.”

The women explained they enjoyed joining the *praattafels* but felt it did not necessarily help them build connections with Flemish people within or outside the activities. While participants still expressed a willingness to engage with Flemish locals and establish relations with them, they emphasised spending most of their free time amongst members of other national and language communities. Similarly, another participant said she preferred spending most of her free time visiting family in Antwerp. As per Ager and Strang (2008), this illustrates the already established social bonds that strengthen during the ‘integration’ process.

From an LCT perspective (Crawford & Godbey, 1987), this bonding capital can provide psychological security, but it can also function as a negotiation strategy: when building bridging capital becomes too difficult, participants retreat into existing networks.

7.2.2. Bridging Capital

Across all three focus group discussions, participants expressed enthusiasm in relation to the *praattafels*, saying they enjoyed the company of other attendees. However, almost none of the participants had built connections within the activities that extended outside of them.

Two main reasons were identified for this. Firstly, in some cases, participants expressed a disinterest in building relations with people specifically from the activities due to a lack of shared interest, or a very wide age gap. One person explained that most *praattafel* attendees were much older than her and she did not feel the need to meet outside of the activity context due to a difference in interests.

“I don't want to meet new people, people are a bit older, so I don't have to meet them because I have other interests. I'd prefer to meet more people my own age.”

While she has become friends with another attendee in her age range, that person was not Belgian.

“In [Dutch] classes there are more people my age but they are not Belgian.”

Indeed, the second obstacle to bridging social capital is the low number of Flemish participants. At all activities attended by the participants – Bib-Babbels, Taalkaffee, Babelonië and Mama Mundo – few Dutch-speaking volunteers attended, and these were usually the same people. As a result, participants did not see the events as a place where they could forge new intergroup connections or practice speaking with Dutch speakers.

This concern oftentimes reflected the *type* of activity newcomers engage in. Our observations revealed that *praattafels* oftentimes set Belgians up as volunteers, alongside the newcomers who are the main attendees. As most of the interviewed newcomers were unaware of the possibility of attending other activities to complete the Participation Programme, it seemed this barrier was also compounded with the information scarcity newcomers are faced with. As the *praattafels* seem to be the sole activities they are familiar with, they do not join others that are not primarily aimed at newcomers. For the participants, this becomes a structural constraint to the formation of bridging capital, which is vital for social integration and the connections between group boundaries (Ager & Strang, 2008; Crawford & Godbey 1987; Putnam, 2000). This situation constitutes the main limiting factor in the process. The primary aim of the Participation Programme is social integration through participation in leisure

activities, but these activities are primarily designed to connect newcomers with one another. Bridging capital, which is key to deeper integration, is structurally underdeveloped.

Structural constraints appear to be primarily responsible for consequent intra- and interpersonal constraints. As Bourdieu (1986) argues, power dynamics and differences affect one's access to social resources. In the case of the Flemish Ardennes, the dynamics between local Dutch-speaking 'coordinators' or 'volunteers', versus newcomer participants who are demanded to attend 40 hours of PP activities, reproduce and exacerbate unequal power relations, and thus structural constraints. Instead, as López-Frias and Dattilo (2021) assert, true inclusive leisure practices ought to consciously address such inequalities and allow for spaces of 'shared power'. As per Putnam (1993; 2000), effective social cooperation and a shared sense of belonging are dependent on reciprocity. This reciprocity – the mutual effort for integration and building bridging social capital – is lacking, as it mainly takes the shape of interactions and relations between volunteer and beneficiary. Instead, true mutual participation is required on a horizontal level, to ensure the inclusive construction of bridging capital.

One participant described developing a connection with a Belgian woman she met through volunteer work. After asking her trajectory coach for ways to further improve her spoken Dutch, she was encouraged to engage in volunteering. Once provided with clearer and more suitable information, the participant was able to access an activity that better matched her needs and created a favourable environment for building lasting social connections with locals. This case demonstrates the importance of accurate information provision for all newcomers, as it can allow them to engage in activities more suitable to them, with improved conditions to establish enduring relations with Belgians. In Bourdieu's (1986) terms this proactive role could allow trajectory coaches to play a vital role in bridging capital, helping break down certain structural barriers that divide different groups in society.

7.2.3. Linking Capital

This last case further highlights the importance of trajectory coaches as key informants for newcomers. Without the trajectory coach recommending volunteer work, the participant may never have become aware of alternative opportunities beyond the standard *praattafels* initially presented to her. In fact, only one other participant had a clear understanding of what the Participation Programme actually entailed, and she had likewise received this information directly from her trajectory coach. On the other hand, participants who did not receive this personalised guidance often remained unaware of the broader purpose of the PP or of alternative opportunities available to them. The asymmetric information provision became particularly visible during these discussions: while two participants were able to confidently

explain the aims of the Programme, the remaining seven admitted that they did not know why they were participating in it - beyond it being an obligation. This demonstrates the significant control institutional guidance plays in shaping newcomers' understanding of and engagement with the PP.

Similarly, participants identified activity facilitators and organisers as important actors in circulating information and connecting newcomers to new opportunities. Several explained that WhatsApp groups had been created to share information about upcoming events and activities, while also giving newcomers a space to ask questions more informally. Activity organisers also regularly distributed flyers and verbally informed participants about future initiatives. These informal communication channels appeared particularly valuable, as they created more continuous and accessible forms of support outside formal institutional settings.

These findings also suggest that linking capital - particularly the circulation of information and access to opportunities through institutional actors - is currently highly individualised. As a result, newcomers' information was highly contingent on the information provided by their specific coaches and participants who did not receive this personalised guidance often remained unaware of the broader purpose of the PP or of alternative opportunities available to them.

At present, responsibility for providing this information appears to fall largely on trajectory coaches. However, the way their role is currently organised with the AgII, does not always allow sufficient time or provide the necessary tools to consistently ensure comprehensive information-sharing. Given that the Participation Programme constitutes only one component of a broader integration trajectory, trajectory coaches are required to balance a wide range of responsibilities and priorities simultaneously.

This points to the need for a more systematic and standardised information-sharing mechanism within the integration trajectory. While personalised support remains valuable, access to information should not rely predominantly on trajectory coaches who are already tasked with managing a substantial workload. Instead, a burden-sharing approach could be explored, whereby responsibility for informing newcomers about the Participation Programme and available opportunities is distributed across multiple actors within the system. More consistent communication regarding the objectives of the PP and the range of possible activities could help reduce arbitrary accessibility inequalities between newcomers. Participants' reliance on WhatsApp groups and informal exchanges further demonstrates the importance of accessible, continuous and centralised communication channels that newcomers can easily navigate and rely on throughout their participation trajectory (such as ikdoemee.be). Such an

approach would not replace the important role played by trajectory coaches, but rather support them by ensuring that information provision is embedded more structurally, and does not solely rely on this personal guidance

7.3. Integration

7.3.1. Language as central driver and barrier

A striking pattern across all three locations is that various participants explicitly state they do not need or wish for new friendships, mostly indicating that learning Dutch and improving their language skills is the priority. This is a classic example of constraint negotiation (Jackson et al., 1993): when bridging social capital is structurally difficult, participants shift their goals from connecting with Belgians to language acquisition. This is a rational adaptation strategy, but the risk is that the integration potential of the activities remains limited.

At the same time, language anxiety emerged as the most common internal limitation in this study: present in all nine participants in each of the three towns. All participants expressed that the language barrier represented one of the main obstacles for them. Consequently, their willingness to attend these activities was largely driven by the possibility to practice and improve their Dutch. In many cases it was also believed that learning the language was the purpose of the Participation Programme, demonstrating that the information gap forms yet another obstacle for the integration process.

7.3.2. Cultural Exchange

As discussed in the section above on bonding capital, newcomers experience difficulties in understanding Belgian culture and social norms, impeding on their ability to construct lasting social relations. Several participants explained that this lack of familiarity with local customs and everyday social practices often made interactions with Flemish people feel uncertain or intimidating. This demonstrates how limited understanding of the local cultural context can act as a barrier not only to communication, but also to the formation of meaningful and lasting social ties. Naturally, when asked to design their own activity (during the last focus group exercise), research participants voiced interest in local culture and history. Many participants' designs displayed an interest in further understanding the history of the town they are in. One participant suggested visiting local monuments and reading stories in Dutch, to gain a better grasp of Flemish customs. Others similarly expressed curiosity about local traditions, events and the historical background of their city, suggesting that learning about the local environment could help them feel more connected to the community they live in. This revealed an interest in cultural exchange, which emerged as a very common theme among other designs.

On a similar note, cooking together was brought up by four participants. This was specified as a form of mutual cultural exchange, where both newcomers and Flemish community members could introduce each other to their native cuisine. Participants often framed these activities not simply as opportunities to ‘learn about Belgian culture’, but as spaces of reciprocal exchange in which both groups could contribute equally and learn from one another.

“We could cook together to learn about other countries’ gastronomy. Then we can cook together [with our children] and we can learn Dutch.”

Two participants emphasised that this interest also fits their needs as mothers, as cooking represents an activity they engage in with their children, overcoming the structural constraints currently posed by the lack of possibility of children attending alongside their parents.

These designs reveal how participants actively seek out activities that combine cultural exchange, language practice and social interaction within environments they perceive as more comfortable and accessible. Rather than expressing a desire for one-sided adaptation to Belgian society, newcomers repeatedly described integration as a mutual process of exchange and participation, reflecting Kostakopoulou’s (2010) critique of integration as a unidirectional process, with the responsibility attributed solely to the newcomer. Moreover, their suggestions and ideas strongly align with López-Frias and Dattilo’s (2021) conceptualisation of inclusive leisure, which enables ‘shared power’ between participants. This highlights the importance of activities in which both newcomers and Flemish residents contribute actively, as such reciprocal settings facilitate stronger social connections and create more inclusive forms of participation (Ager & Strang, 2008; Putnam, 2000).

7.3.3. Misunderstanding of PP

As previously mentioned, a recurring finding throughout the focus group discussions was newcomers’ misunderstanding of the Participation Programme and its broader objectives. Most participants were unable to clearly explain the purpose of the PP beyond it being a mandatory requirement within the civic integration trajectory. Several described the Programme primarily as a mere obligation to complete 40 hours of activities, rather than as an opportunity to build social connections.

From an integration perspective, this limited understanding is significant, as it shapes how newcomers engage with the activities themselves. When participation is seen mainly as an administrative requirement, activities risk being approached in a passive or instrumental

manner, reducing their potential to enable meaningful social interaction and the development of social capital. Participants who lacked information about the objectives of the PP also appeared less aware of the wider range of activities available to them and less able to identify opportunities that aligned with their personal interests or needs.

Once again, this gap demonstrates the importance of clearer and more accessible communication regarding the goals of the PP. A better explanation of the social purpose of the PP could help newcomers choose activities more intentionally, which strengthen their integrative potential. More broadly, the findings suggest that integration cannot rely solely on participation itself but also requires newcomers to understand the purpose and value of that participation within the broader social context.

8. Recommendations/Guidelines

The findings from this study illustrate a coherent picture: newcomers in the Flemish Ardennes are motivated to participate, willing to engage and often actively negotiating the obstacles they encounter. However, they are confronted with a series of structural challenges that limit their access to social participation in the Flemish Ardennes. Chief among these is the pervasive and consistent information gap: in all three focus groups, in all three locations and across most of the participants, it is noticeable that the understanding of the Participation Programme – its purpose, its scope, and the range of activities available to newcomers– was almost entirely absent.

Beyond the information gap, the research identified a set of reinforcing constraints such as scheduling and childcare barriers that structurally exclude mothers with young children. Furthermore, other major barriers to social participation included the formats of activities, which are experienced as obligatory rather than social, and the lack of sustained connections with Flemish residents that integration requires.

The recommendations below are directed at the partner organisation, *Wij Doen Mee – Flemish Ardennes*, in its coordinating role as the regional network organisation. They are intended to build on what the research shows is already working –welcoming atmospheres, modes of information sharing, and the genuine social value participants find in activities– and to address the structural gaps that currently limit newcomers’ social participation and integration.

8.1. Information and Communication

The clearest finding of this study is that the purpose of the Participation Programme is not reaching the people it is designed for. The same institutional system is therefore producing radically different levels of awareness depending on the individual coach, **not on any standardised provision**. This demonstrates a closed information ecosystem: participants learn only about *praattafels*, with no visibility of the broader landscape of options available to them.

On the other hand, the study found that when participants do understand the PP's social rationale, they engage with it very differently, accessing a wider range of activities and building stronger social connections (like volunteering, for example). Taking this as a communication opportunity, the recommendations below aim to make that experience the norm rather than the exception.

(1) Develop and distribute a clear, accessible explanation of what the Participation Programme is and why it exists.

Most participants understood the PP as a mere obligation for integration, typically through *praattafels*, rather than as an open invitation to build a social life in their new community through any activity involving contact with Flemish speakers.

The development and dissemination of a plain-language explanation of the PP's rationale (what it is, why it exists), and how it can be used as a resource for building a social life in the region would give newcomers the understanding they need to make active and meaningful choices about how they participate. A visually engaging flyer or brochure available in multiple languages would provide the required details in a format that is already being used to disseminate information.

(2) Distribute a standardised information package on the PP through activity organisers to reduce reliance on any single channel of information.

Information on the Participation Programme and its objectives currently flows primarily through trajectory coaches —and the quality of that information varies considerably depending on the individual coach. At the same time, AgII's top-down approach limits the possibilities of disseminating ready-made information packages through coaches. A standardised resource that activity organisers can share directly with participants would reduce coach dependency, ensure consistency for newcomers, creating a more consistent baseline of awareness across the region.

Wij Doen Mee, as the coordinating body, could work with activity organisers to ensure it reaches newcomers. Information received during Dutch class, during *praattafels*, WhatsApp groups, venue displays and flyers at activity locations are all channels that participants already trust and use.

(3) Explore opportunities to introduce participants to ikdoemee.be in a supported way, as part of their mandatory integration courses.

The ikdoemee.be platform represents a significant resource that is currently underused: it was known to one participant in Zottegem who had encountered it through their mandatory integration course, but entirely unknown to participants in Ronse and Oudenaarde. *Wij Doen Mee* could coordinate with those responsible for the other pillars of integration in the Flemish Ardennes to introduce a short overview of the platform to the course's programme. A brief and supported introduction to the platform at an early point in the trajectory could help participants navigate it with confidence and find activities that better suit their interests and needs.

8.2. Scheduling and Childcare

Most participants in this study were mothers with young children. For them, accessing activities was not simply obstructed by the information gap, but a real structural barrier to participation identified in all three locations. The only participant who knew what the PP and was familiar with the ikdoemee.be platform said Mama Mundo was the only activity that accommodated for her young child. Despite her motivation for participation, her options were restricted to one single activity. This is a practical and solvable challenge, and one where small adjustments to activities or timetables can meaningfully expand who is able to participate.

(4) Map child-inclusive activities and, where possible, support activity organisers in accommodating children or providing childcare.

The participant who was familiar with [Ikdoemee.be](https://ikdoemee.be) in Zottegem was unable to find activities that provided childcare. Mama Mundo, the only activity that included children, was consistently described in more positive terms than those that do not. Further, it was closer to what participants across all three sites described as their ideal format, as family-oriented programming appeared in many participants' own activity suggestions. *Wij Doen Mee's* mapping and coordination work should prioritise the promotion of child-inclusive activities to facilitate access for newcomers with young children. The regional network could also identify and share examples of what works in this region to support organisers in adapting their formats where feasible.

8.3. Bridging Social Capital and Equal exchange

Participants across all three sites were consistent in what they enjoyed about activities and what they felt was missing. They valued the welcoming atmosphere and the opportunity to practise Dutch. What they found harder to access was genuine connection with Flemish community members, which could extend beyond the activity itself and contribute to real participation and a sense of belonging in the region. A recurring structural reason for this is the composition of activities: the majority of participants are newcomers, with Flemish residents present primarily in the role of volunteers or helpers rather than as co-participants on equal terms. This dynamic limits the type of social capital that can be built: it produces contact without genuine exchange.

(5) Support the promotion of activity formats built around shared interests and mutual exchange.

While the goodwill of volunteers is genuinely valued by newcomers, when Flemish residents participate in activities as helpers or volunteers rather than as fellow participants with their own stake in the activity, the relational dynamic is asymmetric. Newcomers are positioned as

recipients, Flemish people as providers. This framing, however well-intentioned, does not produce the conditions for equal social connection.

The network organisation could encourage and promote already existing activities which are attended by Flemish people. Group cooking, local history walks, music, and sports all generate reciprocal interactions and were mentioned by participants as activities they would genuinely choose to attend. This way, newcomers can be integrated into activities already attended by locals and build social relations around shared interests or contributions from both newcomers and locals. This shift from service delivery to mutual participation is a precondition for the kind of bridging social capital that the *Wij Doen Mee's* mandate seeks to cultivate.

8.4. Summary of Recommendations

1	Develop and distribute a clear, accessible explanation of what the Participation Programme is and why it exists.
2	Distribute a standardised information package on the PP through activity organisers to reduce reliance on any single channel of information.
3	Explore opportunities to introduce participants to ikdoemee.be in a supported way, as part of their mandatory integration courses.
4	Map child-inclusive activities and, where possible, support activity organisers in accommodating children or providing childcare.
5	Support the promotion of activity formats built around shared interests and mutual exchange.

Limited understanding of the Programme's purpose, scope and available opportunities appeared to shape many of the other obstacles identified throughout this research, including difficulties accessing suitable activities, building social connections and engaging meaningfully with the local community. As such, the information gap appears to underpin many of the other accessibility barriers identified throughout this research, including access to activities with childcare and increased participation from locals.

Consequently, the principal recommendation of this study is the implementation of a more systematic and standardised information-sharing mechanism for newcomers participating in the PP. While trajectory coaches currently play an important role in informing participants, the findings suggest that access to information remains highly personalised and inconsistent depending on the level of guidance provided by individual coaches. Due to the highly

bureaucratised nature of the AgII, standardisation through trajectory coaches alone may not be feasible. Therefore, this research recommends strengthening information dissemination through already existing and accessible channels, such as *praattafels*, integration courses, or through the newly created role of regional coordinator.

To support this process, the researchers developed an informative flyer intended specifically for newcomers participating in the PP (annex 5 and 6). The flyer aims to provide clear, accessible and practical information in simple language. It explains what the Participation Programme entails, its broader purpose, and the kinds of activities that can count towards participation hours. In addition, the flyer includes practical guidance on where and how to find activities, including a QR code linking participants to the *ikdoemee.be* platform, where activities can be filtered by location. Finally, a short Frequently Asked Questions section addresses common concerns raised during the focus groups, such as language barriers, childcare possibilities, and uncertainty regarding participation requirements. By centralising and simplifying information, the flyer seeks to support *Wij Doen Mee*'s mandate to facilitate newcomers' access to activities and encourage more meaningful forms of participation within the local community.

8.5. Advocacy Points for Flemish Integration Policy

Based on the obstacles described in the previous sections, the study also presents three advocacy points aimed at the Flemish Government's integration policy. The framework in which the PP activities can be designed and implemented is defined by the AgII, thus there is a need for action and change at the government level.

(1) Greater local autonomy over programme implementation.

The research suggests that there is a need for more autonomy and power at the local level. Whilst AgII might have the official mandate to decide on the structure and purpose of the PP, the practical and day-to-day implementation of the Programme happens at the local level. The organisers, coordinators and volunteers of the activities are in direct contact with the newcomers and experience the effectiveness of those activities first-hand. This proximity gives them a better grasp of what works and what does not, and more local autonomy would allow more flexibility –particularly in regard to information dissemination– to make alterations when and where necessary. Granting local network organisations greater autonomy to adapt how the Programme is communicated and how information is disseminated would allow them to respond to these realities more effectively, without requiring every adjustment to pass through centralised decision-making structures.

This would furthermore counter the strict top-down and control-based tendencies of Flemish civic integration policies and structures, as criticised by Kostakopoulou (2010). Instead, expanding local authority and autonomy would allow for a more inclusive and horizontal environment, where activities can be shaped in a bottom-up manner.

(2) Implement regular Feedback Mechanism from local actors.

In order to ensure more bottom-up inclusion and input, a feedback mechanism should be installed within the Participation Programme. More concretely, newcomers, local volunteers and activity organisers and coordinators could regularly fill in a feedback form. This form could assess the availability of information, and the extent to which this is facilitating the construction of social capital in local, Dutch-speaking contexts.

This mechanism should allow both PP participants and organisers to provide feedback to AgII on a systematic basis. This feedback would further feed into the first advocacy point, representing a step towards increased local autonomy. Consequently, the agency could make more adequate and grounded assessments on the effectiveness of the Programme's implementation, as well as allow for greater flexibility regarding the changes and improvements to be made.

(3) Invest in trajectory coach capacity to reduce information inequality between newcomers.

The research consistently shows that the quality of information a newcomer receives depended almost entirely on their individual coach. This problem did not reflect the coaches' abilities but rather it is a systemic resourcing issue at the level of the civic integration trajectory. This is not a problem local organisation can solve on their own; reducing caseloads and providing coaches with standardised communication protocols would make the local activity ecosystem far more effective without requiring any change to the activities themselves.

9. Conclusion

The report uncovered various barriers that newcomers face within the fourth pillar of Flanders' civic integration trajectory. Introduced in January 2023, the Participation Programme is designed to strengthen social participation and support the development of local social networks through engagement in 40 hours of activities in a Dutch-speaking context. In collaboration with *Wij Doen Mee – Vlaamse Ardennen*, this study investigated the gap between the policy intent and the lived experiences of the newcomers in the Flemish Ardennes.

Through semi-structured focus group interviews, the study found that the barriers shaping participants' access to the Participation Programme are overwhelmingly structural and have a great impact on the development of social capital. Using the Leisure Constraints Theory by Crawford & Godbey (1987), and the concepts of social capital, accessibility and integration, the analysis reveals that those structural constraints heavily affected newcomers' participation on the inter- and intrapersonal level. The most notable finding is the significant lack of information regarding the Programme's purpose and content. Almost none of the nine participants were familiar with the term *participatietraject*, and only one fully understood its social rationale. This resulted in participants viewing the program not as an opportunity to build social networks, but rather as a mere bureaucratic requirement or a tool for language learning. This points to a clear need for a standardised, multilingual explanation of the PP's purpose to be made available to all newcomers from the point of enrolment, communicated through multiple channels rather than left to coach discretion alone.

The study further shows that this information gap is not incidental but systemic. Overreliance on a single –already overburdened– actor, the trajectory coach, resulted in asymmetric information provision that bled onto other constraints. Where coaches proactively explained the PP's rationale, participants engaged more broadly and were able to build stronger social connections. Where they did not, participants remained confined to the narrow set of *praattaafel* activities they had been pointed toward at the outset. The research also found that structural barriers, particularly faced by mothers –such as the absence of childcare and inconvenient activity schedules– could transform participation from an opportunity to build social connections into a logistical challenge that must be overcome.

On the level of social capital, the findings are consistent across all three sites. Participants maintain strong bonding ties within their own linguistic and national communities. This bonding capital provides psychological security but also functions as a negotiation strategy when bridging proves structurally out of reach (Jackson et al., 1993). More critically,

the formation of bridging capital remained difficult across all sites: a misunderstanding of the PP reduced the social and integrative potential of the Programme, leading newcomers to engage primarily in low-threshold activities such as *praattafels*, organised around a hierarchy of local volunteers, and newcomers as beneficiaries. The research shows this dynamic reproduces the asymmetric power relations that Bourdieu (1986) identifies as central to social capital formation, undermining his emphasis on horizontality as the foundation of genuine bridging capital. Indeed, this activity format did not reflect participants' needs, who required more mutual engagement and exchange. The study therefore recommends that *Wij Doen Mee* facilitate newcomers' access to existing activities that specifically foster mutual exchange, in which both newcomers and Flemish residents contribute as co-participants, as this would further support the development of the genuine bridging connections that the Programme is designed to foster. As López-Frias and Dattilo (2021) argue, true inclusive leisure must consciously dismantle such hierarchies to produce spaces of shared power rather than structured inequality.

Importantly, the research also demonstrates that participants are not simply passive in the face of these constraints, but already actively negotiate the barriers they face. Where clearer information was provided, as in the case of one participant directed toward volunteering by her coach, stronger and more sustained connections with Flemish residents followed. This finding shows that the motivation to participate is present, and that structural adjustments are what determine whether that motivation translates into meaningful participation. At the policy level, this points to the need for greater local autonomy within the Programme, so that organisations like *Wij Doen Mee* are empowered to adapt communication and respond to local realities without requiring every adjustment to pass through centralised structures.

In conclusion, for the Participation Programme to achieve its true purpose, it is necessary to address the barriers that make up newcomers' realities. Closing the information gap, accommodating family responsibilities, promoting activities designed around mutual exchange, and granting local organisations the autonomy and resources to act on what they observe would represent a meaningful and achievable step toward the Participation Programme genuinely fulfilling its intended integrative potential for newcomers

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ANNEXES

ANNEX TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page 50: ANNEX 1: ACTIVITY DESIGN - VERSION 1

Page 55: ANNEX 2: ACTIVITY DESIGN - VERSION 2

Page 60: ANNEX 3: ACTIVITY PICTURES

**Page 63: ANNEX 4: INFORMATION ON RESEARCH AND INFORMED CONSENT
FORMS**

Page 66: ANNEX 5: INFORMATIVE FLYER IN ENGLISH

Page 67: ANNEX 6: INFORMATIVE FLYER IN DUTCH

ANNEX 1: ACTIVITY DESIGN - VERSION 1

(1) Introduction

About us

- Who we are
- Why we are here
- What the purpose of our research is

Clarifications

- Consent
 - Ask all participants to sign the ‘information & consent’ form
 - Recording of activity
- Confidentiality
- No need to answer question(s) if they do not want to
- No right or wrong answers
- Explain how the activities will proceed
 - Language of the interview (Dutch + translations if necessary)
 - Through visual means (pictures) and physical position exercises
- They can always interrupt us and ask if anything is unclear, confusing, ...

Individual questions

- What is your name?
- What is your age?
- What is your gender?
- What is your current place of residence?
- What country are you originally from?
 - When did you move to Belgium/Flanders?
- What is your mother tongue?
- When did you start learning Dutch?
- When did you start the Participation Programme (40 hours)?*
- How many hours have you completed?
- What PP activities have you participated in?*

*These questions will only be relevant for the participants who are following/have followed the PP.

(2) Icebreakers

Activity 1

Participants choose a picture representing their favourite leisure activity: sports, time with family/friends, nature walk, music, cooking, art, language class ...

Activity 2

Participants indicate how they feel about joining the leisure activities, through a physical positioning exercise:

“Do you enjoy coming to ... [activity in question, e.g. Taalkaffee, Babbelonie, Mama Mundo] in Zottegem/Ronse/Oudenaarde?”

→ Participants stand in areas labeled:

😊 Yes

😐 Neutral

😞 No

+ *“Why do you feel this way?”*

Activity 3*

“Do you know what the Participation Programme is?”

“If yes, which of these images makes you think of the Participation Programme/40 hours?”

→ Participants choose from the same range of pictures as Activity 1.

**These questions will only be relevant for the participants who are following/have followed the PP.*

Purpose

- Create a comfortable setting, make participants feel at ease.
- Explore and understand participants' perception of leisure & PP activities.
- Initial exploration of what may stimulate or hinder their participation in the activities
 - Emotion mapping.

(3) Integration & Social Capital

Activity 1

“Do you feel at home in Ronse/Oudenaarde/Zottegem?”

- Participants stand in areas labeled Yes / No
- + “*Why do you feel this way?*”

Activity 2

“*Does participating in ... [activity in question, e.g. Taalkaffee, Babbelonie, Mama Mundo] make you feel more part of/included/at home in the town?*”

- Participants stand in areas labeled Yes / No

Activity 3

“*Have you met new people during ... [activity in question, e.g. Taalkaffee, Babbelonie, Mama Mundo]?*”

- Participants stand in areas labeled Yes / No

+ Follow-up questions:

- “*Have you seen these people again outside of the activity?*”
- “*Would you like to see these people again outside of the activity?*”
- ...

Purpose

- Explore the participants’ understanding of (social) integration.
- Explore the feelings they associate with the activities.
 - Specifically their ‘sense of belonging’ in Flanders.
 - Emotion mapping.

(4) Accessibility

Activity

Physical positioning exercise:

“*For you, participating in the ... [activity in question, e.g. Taalkaffee, Babbelonie, Mama Mundo] is...*”

- Participants stand in areas labeled:

- Easy
- Somewhat difficult
- Very difficult

“*What makes it easy/difficult/...?*”

→ Participants can choose from a range of images representing:

- Information
- Language
- Transport
- Finances
- Time and schedule
- Family responsibilities (child care, chores, cleaning, cooking ...)
- ...

+ “Are there other things which make it easy/difficult/...?”

Purpose

- Identify which obstacles they encounter in accessing the activities, more specifically extrinsic and structural factors.
-

(5) Possible Improvements

Activity

Participants design their ideal newcomer activity (individually or in pairs).

- Where would it take place?
- What type of leisure activity?
 - → Participants choose from a range of pictures (music, cooking, sports, nature walk, ...)
- How many people participate?
- What kind of people participate?
- Free or low cost?
- With childcare?
- ...

→ Participants can describe this ideal activity with the aid of pictures which we will provide.

→ Then discuss it with us and the other participants, if they feel comfortable doing so.

Purpose

- Generate participant-driven solutions
 - Get a better understanding of what they may need, what they feel is currently lacking, ...
- Collect policy recommendations

ANNEX 2: ACTIVITY DESIGN - VERSION 2

(1) Introduction

About us

- Who we are
- Why we are here
- What the purpose of our research is

Clarifications

- Consent
 - Ask all participants to sign the ‘information & consent’ form
 - Recording of activity
- Confidentiality
- No need to answer question(s) if they do not want to
- No right or wrong answers
- Explain how the activities will proceed
 - Language of the interview (Dutch + translations if necessary)
 - Through visual means (pictures) and physical position exercises
- They can always interrupt us and ask if anything is unclear, confusing, ...

Individual questions

- What is your name?
- What is your age?
- What is your gender?
- What is your current place of residence?
- What country are you originally from?
 - When did you move to Belgium/Flanders?
- What is your mother tongue?
- When did you start learning Dutch?
- When did you start the Participation Programme (40 hours)?*
- How many hours have you completed?
- What PP activities have you participated in?*

*These questions will only be relevant for the participants who are following/have followed the PP.

(2) Icebreakers

Activity 1

Participants choose a picture representing their favourite leisure activity: sports, time with family/friends, nature walk, music, cooking, art, language class ...

Activity 2

Participants indicate how they feel about joining the leisure activities, through a physical positioning exercise:

“Do you enjoy coming to ... [activity in question, e.g. Taalkaffee, Babbelonie, Mama Mundo] in Zottegem/Ronse/Oudenaarde?”

→ Participants stand in areas labeled:

😊 Yes

😐 Neutral

😞 No

+ *“Why do you feel this way?”*

Activity 3*

“Do you know what the Participation Programme is?”

“If yes, which of these images represents the Participation Programme/40 hours?”

→ Participants choose from the same range of pictures as Activity 1.

Explain what the PP is with an emphasis on the building of social relations with Belgians.

Explain the different activities

*These questions will only be relevant for the participants who are following/have followed the PP.

Purpose

- Create a comfortable setting, make participants feel at ease.
- Explore and understand participants' perception of leisure & PP activities.
- Initial exploration of what may stimulate or hinder their participation in the activities
 - Emotion mapping.

(3) Integration & Social Capital

Activity 1

“Have you met new people during ... [activity in question, e.g. Taalkaffee, Babbelonie, Mama Mundo]?”

→ Participants stand in areas labeled Yes / No

+ Follow-up questions:

- *“Have you seen these people again outside of the activity?”*
- *“Would you like to see these people again outside of the activity?”*
- ...

Activity 2:

Do you feel like the activities you are joining now are helpful for you to build these relations with Belgians?

Participants stand in zones labeled Yes/No

+ Follow-up question:

- How so?

Purpose

- Explore the participants’ understanding of (social) integration.
- Explore the feelings they associate with the activities.
 - Specifically their ‘sense of belonging’ in Flanders.
 - Emotion mapping.

(4) Accessibility

Activity 1

Do you feel like you are well informed on the possible activities to join to meet people from your town?

+ Follow-up questions:

- Why/Why not?

Activity 2

Physical positioning exercise:

“For you, participating in other activities with Belgians would be ...”

→ Participants stand in areas labelled:

- Easy

- Somewhat difficult
- Very difficult

“What would make it easy/difficult/...?”

→ Participants can choose from a range of images representing:

- Information
- Language
- Transport
- Finances
- Time and schedule
- Family responsibilities (childcare, chores, cleaning, cooking ...)
- ...

+ *“Are there other things which make it easy/difficult/...?”*

Purpose

- Identify which obstacles they encounter in accessing the activities, more specifically extrinsic and structural factors.

(5) Possible Improvements

Activity 1

Participants design their ideal activity where they can build relations with Belgians (individually or in pairs).

- Where would it take place?
- What type of leisure activity?
 - → Participants choose from a range of pictures (music, cooking, sports, nature walk, ...)
- How many people participate?
- What kind of people participate?
- Free or low cost?
- With childcare?
- ...

→ Participants can describe this ideal activity with the aid of pictures which we will provide.

→ Then discuss it with us and the other participants, if they feel comfortable doing so.

Activity 2

Participants explain how the information on this activity should be spread:

- Through their schools?
- Through their trajectory coach?
- Through a group chat?
- ...

Purpose

- Generate participant-driven solutions
 - Get a better understanding of what they may need, what they feel is currently lacking, ...
- Collect policy recommendations

ANNEX 3 - IMAGES PROVIDED DURING FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

THEATER



TAALESSEN



DANSEN



MUZIEK MAKEN / NAAR MUZIEK

LUISTEREN



WANDELING IN DE NATUUR



KUNST MAKEN



KOKEN



TIJD DOORBRENGEN MET VRIENDEN



TIJD DOORBRENGEN MET FAMILIE



ALLEEN SPORTEN



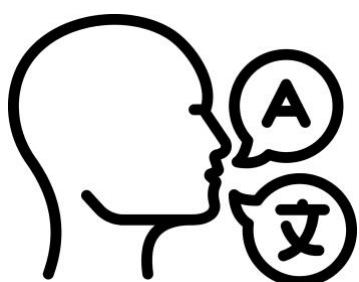
SPORTEN IN GROEP



TAAL

FINANCIËN

AGENDA, PLANNING, TIJD



INFORMATIE



HUISHOUDEN



FAMILIE & KINDEREN



TRANSPORT



PARTICIPATIETRAJECT

40 UREN

AGENTSCHAP
INTEGRATIE &
INBURGERING

ANNEX 4: INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS + INFORMED CONSENT FORM

INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS IN THE RESEARCH

This project looks at how newcomers in Flanders can more easily take part in activities in their local community by answering the guiding question: *“How can newcomers’ experiences in the Flemish Ardennes contribute to improving the accessibility of activities within the Participation Programme?”*.

Since 2023, newcomers are required to follow a participation programme, where they must join activities for 40 hours and interact with others in Dutch. The stated goal of this is to help them meet people and feel part of society. However, many newcomers find it difficult to access these activities due to a lack of clear information, language barriers, or practical obstacles.

In collaboration with the organisational network *Wij Doen Mee – Vlaamse Ardennen*, this research explores how these activities can be made more accessible. The project focuses on the experiences of newcomers and involves them in shaping better solutions. Based on findings drawn from semi-structured focus-group discussions with newcomers, the project aims to develop guidelines for organisations and regional networks to facilitate access to activities in ways that are more meaningful for newcomers and better reflects participants’ needs and capacities so they can build social connections and feel more included.

Practical Information

What personal data are collected?

The following personal data will be processed:

- Surname and first name, age, gender, place of residence, country of origin, language
- Feelings and experiences with regard to the activities attended in the Flemish Ardennes.
- Feelings and experiences with regard to integration and civic integration programs and services in the Flemish Ardennes.

Personal data will be collected using audio recordings of focus groups and note-taking.

Why are these personal data collected?

These personal data will be collected to acquire an understanding of who participates in these activities in the Flemish Ardennes and how the participants in question experience those activities, in order to analyse and potentially improve the accessibility of the activities.

What is the legal ground for processing personal data in this study?

For the processing of your personal data, your explicit permission will be asked. This is done by signing a 'consent form'. This consent can be withdrawn at any time by notifying the principal investigator.

Who has access to my (personal) data?

The personal data collected will be fully anonymised. Only processed data on participants' experience will be used in the research, while personally identifying details will be excluded. The researchers (Mai Fitiane, Beyza Duyar and Isaura Susanna Beyer) and research promotor and assistant (Prof. Tony Valcke and Dr. Gaelle Le Pavic), as well as the employees of the organisational network *Wij Doen Mee – Vlaamse Ardennen* (external collaborators) will have access to the anonymised research data.

The data shall merely serve to complete the research objective, namely investigating the accessibility of newcomer activities in the Flemish Ardennes. **The data will not be used for any other purposes.**

Reuse of data

The research data collected in this study will not be reused for other research. They shall pertain only to this study.

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Accessibility of newcomer activities in the Flemish Ardennes.

I, the undersigned, hereby confirm that I

1.	have read and understood the information about the research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and my participation and to ask questions which have been answered to my satisfaction.
2.	understand that my participation in this research is entirely voluntary and that I may discontinue my participation at any time during the interview without having to provide a reason for doing so.
3.	understand that if I discontinue my participation in this study, I can withdraw my already collected data until 15 May 2026. A simple e-mail or phone call to the researcher will suffice. I do not need to give a reason for the withdrawal of my data.
4.	understand that discontinuing my participation will not affect my participation in the activities or my civic integration trajectory.
5.	understand that I will receive no financial compensation for my participation in this study
6.	give permission for the researchers to record the interview (audio recording).
7.	understand that the data collected during this research will be processed in accordance with the legal provisions and the information provided to me.
8.	agree to participate in the research.

The participant:

Name:

Date:

Signature:

The person requesting the consent:

Name:

Date:

Signature:

Name and contact details of the researchers:

Mai Fitiane, mai.fitiane@ugent.be
Isaura Beyer, isaura.beyer@ugent.be
Beyza Duyar, beyza.duyar@ugent.be

Name and contact of the Data Protection Officer of Ghent University:

Hanne Elsen
+32 9 264 95 17
privacy@ugent.be
Universiteitsdiensten - Bestuur, Juridische zaken en
Compliance, Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 25, 9000 Gent

ANNEX 5: INFORMATIVE FLYER IN ENGLISH

PARTICIPATION PROGRAMME

PRACTICE DUTCH. MEET PEOPLE. DISCOVER YOUR CITY

As part of your integration trajectory, you need to do **40 hours** of activities with other people in a Dutch speaking environment.

A great chance to feel at home in Flanders!

WHAT KIND OF ACTIVITIES CAN I DO?

You can join any activity you would like, as long as it allows you to interact with others in a Dutch speaking environment.

This can include:



Sports



Volunteering



Cooking together



Walking groups



Internships



Community activities



DON'T WORRY ABOUT YOUR DUTCH

You do not need to speak perfect Dutch. Joining these activities is a great way to practice and improve your language skills!



REMEMBER TO TRACK YOUR HOURS

Ask the organiser or companion to sign your attendance sheet each time, to keep track and prove your participation!

THE PARTICIPATION PROGRAMME TO BE COMPLETED

Your **40 hours** have to be completed:

- In a Dutch-speaking environment with local(s)
- In an activity of your choice
- While remembering to prove your hours using the tracking sheet

1



Join an activity

Choose an activity you enjoy in a Dutch speaking environment

2



Participate in Dutch

Interact with others and practice your Dutch.

3



Collect signatures

Have the organiser sign your attendance after each activity.

4



Finish your 40 hours

Submit your completed tracking sheet as proof of participation.

WHERE CAN I FIND ACTIVITIES?



1. ASK YOUR MUNICIPALITY

Your local administration can inform you about activities.



2. LOOK THROUGH ACTIVITY BOARDS AND POSTERS

Check community boards, school, libraries, and more.



3. VISIT IKDOEMEE.BE

Explore hundreds of activities online in your area!



SCAN AND SEE
ACTIVITIES NEAR YOU

ikdoemee.be

Available in 6 languages

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

I have a child; can I bring them to these activities?

Depending on the activity. Some activities are specifically designed for parents with children. You can reach out to the organisers of the activity of your choice for more information.

Does an internship count towards my 40 hours?

Yes, internships and volunteering can be a great way to complete your 40 hours while building skills for employment.

Can I go alone?

Yes, you can always come alone. This is a great way to meet new people!

Do I need to pay for these activities?

This depends on the activity. You can reach out to the organisers of the activity of your choice for more information.

ANNEX 6: INFORMATIVE FLYER IN DUTCH

VIERDE PIJLER VAN HET INBURGERINGSTRAJECT

WAT IS DE VIERDE PIJLER?

De vierde pijler van het inburgeringstraject heet **sociale participatie**. Dat betekent: **meedoen aan de samenleving in Vlaanderen**. Je moet 40 uur deelnemen aan **activiteiten** waarbij je in **contact komt met anderen**, **Nederlands oefent** en de **samenleving beter leert kennen**.

WAAROM IS DIT BELANGRIJK?

- Je **leert mensen kennen**.
- Je **ontdekt hoe het leven in Vlaanderen werkt**.
- Je voelt je sneller **thuis en verbonden** met je buurt.
- Je **oefent Nederlands in echte situaties**.



WELKE ACTIVITEITEN TELLEN MEE?

Alles wat contact met anderen en oefenkansen Nederlands mogelijk maakt. Bijvoorbeeld: sportclub of hobbygroep, vrijwilligerswerk, workshop of cursus, speelpleinwerking (als ouder of begeleider), buurtactiviteit, samenkomen met een buddy of buur, kennismakingsstage in een organisatie, activiteit in een bibliotheek of cultuur centrum.

Kies iets dat bij jouw interesses en talenten past.
Dan is de kans groter dat je blijvend contact maakt.

WAT WORDT VAN JOU VERWACHT?

- Je **kies zelf** de activiteiten die bij jou passen.
- Je zoekt mee naar mogelijkheden om deel te nemen.
- Je laat bij elke activiteit een **aanwezigheidsattest ondertekenen**.

WAAR VIND JE ACTIVITEITEN?

INSERT
QR CODE

- **Ikdoemee.be** is een **meertalige website** met activiteiten.
 - In de Vlaamse Ardennen is het aanbod op ikdoemee.be nog beperkt, maar we werken eraan om dit uit te breiden.
- Vraag hulp aan jouw **trajectbegeleider**.
- Een **contactpersoon van het lokaal bestuur**.
- **Samen met je burens** kan je een wandeling maken, een praatje in het Nederlands of je wegwijzen maken in de buurt.

Kreeg je een kaartje om aan je burens, de organisator van een activiteit, of een andere deelnemer af te geven? Gebruik het gerust! Het helpt om de eerste stap te zetten om contacten te leggen.

VEELGESTELDE VRAGEN

Ik heb een kind; mag ik hem of haar meenemen naar activiteiten?

Dat hangt af van de activiteit. Sommige activiteiten zijn speciaal ontworpen voor ouders met kinderen. Je kunt contact opnemen met de organisatoren van een activiteit naar keuze voor meer informatie.

Wat is een kennismakingsstage?

Sommige organisaties laten nieuwkomers even meedraaien in hun werking, om kennis te maken. Dat heet een kennismakingsstage. Je helpt mee, leert bij en ontdekt of het iets voor jou is. Dit telt ook mee voor je participatietraject.

Wat is vrijwilligerswerk?

Vrijwilligerswerk betekent onbetaald helpen bij een organisatie of vereniging. Bijvoorbeeld in een sportclub, een school of een woonzorgcentrum. Je doet ervaring op, leert nieuwe mensen kennen en oefent Nederlands. Dit telt ook mee voor je 40 uur participatie.

NOG VRAGEN?

Bespreek alles gerust met je **trajectbegeleider**.

Zij of hij helpt je zoeken naar activiteiten die bij jou passen.

We weten dat dit spannend kan zijn. Je hoeft het niet alleen te doen, er is ondersteuning.

Samen bouwen aan jouw toekomst in Vlaanderen!