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Mapping integration actors for migrant workers in Flanders and Brussels

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MAPPING INTEGRATION ACTORS FOR MIGRANT WORKERS

IN FLANDERS AND BRUSSELS¹

I. Introduction: the PALIM project and research objective

The European Union, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and the Belgian development agency Enabel test an innovative labour migration model linking Morocco's growing ICT sector with Flanders' qualified ICT workers' shortages. This Global Skills Partnership model is based on the assumption that labour mobility can only benefit the parties involved (i.e. the foreign employees, the employers, the country of origin and the country of destination) when potential employees are able to find a qualified job both in their country of origin and in the country of destination.

The 'Pilot Project Addressing Labour Shortages Through Innovative Labour Migration Models' (PALIM) runs from 1 March 2019 to 31 March 2021. It is implemented by the Belgian development agency Enabel, in partnership with the Flemish and Moroccan employment services (VDAB and ANAPEC), Flemish employers federations VOKA and Agoria and their Moroccan counterparts CGEM and APEBI, as well as Fedasil and the Flemish Agency for Integration and Civic Integration.

The research conducted at Ghent University aims at, inter alia, mapping the entities/ actors in Flanders and Brussels who deal with the integration of foreign workers at a professional, social or personal level. These actors are in particular the following: public actors, private actors, associations, organizations of the Moroccan diaspora, actors involved in professional / social mentoring or linked to integration (coaching / training / coaching of mentors in particular).²

This paper starts with a brief introduction on the legal and policy aspects of integration, taking into account the complex structure of the Belgian state (Section II). This introduction aims to identify the main domains in which integration actors are active, in order to further structure our research. We proceed with an overview of the methodology used in this study (Section III). Our main findings, being the mapping of the integration actors in Brussels and Flanders, are presented in the Excel Sheet attached to this paper (Section IV/Annex). We end this paper with our concluding reflections and overall findings (Section V).

¹ This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union and the ICMPD. The content of this document is the sole responsibility of UGent and cannot, in any case, be considered as reflecting the position of the European Union or ICMPD.

² Please note that this mapping does not include any integration initiatives taken by certain private actors such as employers and relocation firms, as these aspects are covered in Geertrui Daem, "Welcome policies of companies and relocation services for migrant workers", Ghent University, 2020.

II. Integration policies in Flanders and Brussels (in a nutshell)³

This research project does not aim to make an analysis of what “integration” is or how an integration policy should look like. However, within the framework of mapping entities that focus on the integration of foreign workers, it is essential to discuss certain legal and policy aspects of the concept, especially given the complex structure of the Belgian state (see Table 1).

Table 1: The division of competences in Belgium

Belgium is a federal state, composed of communities and regions. There are three distinct regions: (1) the Brussels-Capital region (Brussels), (2) the Flemish region (Flanders) and (3) the Walloon region (Wallonia) and three communities: (1) the Dutch-speaking Vlaamse Gemeenschap (“Flemish Community”), (2) the French-speaking Communauté française (“French Community”) and (3) the German-speaking Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft (“German-speaking Community”). Hence competences are in the hands of various partners, who independently exercise their authority within their domains.

Labour immigration

Historically, Belgium’s federal government has been responsible for the development of immigration legislation and policy, including the legislation and policies for admitting third country nationals to the territory. The federal government is also competent for the enforcement of these policies as regards the entry and stay of immigrant workers. The Federal Public Service Interior Affairs, through the Immigration Office, is responsible for issuing visas and residence permits to third-country nationals, including highly skilled workers or workers in bottleneck occupations.

As of 1 July 2014, however, Belgium’s federal government transferred the competence over employment based immigration policy to the regional governments. The three regions are free to develop their own work authorization policies, programs, requirements and exemptions. Hence, each regional government has full decision-making authority over all matters related to the employment of foreign nationals in its region, including the issuance of work authorisations. As mentioned, the issuance of visas and residence permits remains a federal competence.

Integration

All policy aspects related to integration of immigrants (including foreign workers) are a community competence. As such the communities are the main actors involved in the development of a policy regarding the integration of foreign workers. Because of this division of competences, the federal level has little or no input in matters related to integration.

A. Flanders

The Decree of 7 June 2013 on the Flemish Integration and Civic Integration Policy defines “integration” as “*a dynamic and interactive process, during which individuals, groups, communities and services – each in a context of enforceability of the rights and obligations which are inherent to our democratic constitutional state – relate to each other in a constructive way and deal with migration and its consequences for society*”.⁴

At the (local) government level, Flanders has an autonomous Agency for Integration and Civic Integration (known as *Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering (AgII)*) and two local Agencies for Integration and Civic Integration for the cities of

³ Integration should not be mistaken for “civic integration” which is a guided path to integration in which the government offers a specific tailor-made program to specific foreign nationals, which increases their self-reliance with regard to participation in professional, educational and social fields.

⁴ Article 2, 13° of the Decree of 7 June 2013 on the Flemish Integration and Civic Integration Policy, *Belgian Official Gazette*, 26 July 2013.

Ghent and Antwerp (respectively IN-Gent and Atlas). When it comes to integration, these agencies support local governments, organizations and citizens in their integration work. They make numerical analyses, provide information about language policy, help improve accessibility of integration initiatives to new immigrants, and give suggestions on how to deal with diversity. The agencies do not provide language classes themselves, but they look, together with the newcomer, for the course and school that best suits him/her.

B. Brussels

In Brussels, a distinction has to be made between the authorities competent for integration in Dutch and those competent for integration in French. As such, the Flemish Community and the Flemish Community Commission (VGC) are competent for the integration policy towards Dutch-speaking individuals, while the French Community Commission (COCOF) is responsible for the integration policy towards French-speaking newcomers. The Dutch-speaking community adheres to the same definition of integration as the one used in Flanders. On the French-speaking side, there is no official definition of integration.⁵

Furthermore, there is the Common Community Commission (COCOM) which regulates and manages matters common to the French and Flemish Communities in the Brussels-Capital Region. The COCOM did set out a series of principles on which the integration policy of Brussels is based: *"equality of each individual; respect for the individual character, competences and ambitions of each individual; migration as an opportunity for society; anti-discrimination, fight against racism and sexism and gender mainstreaming; the active civil participation of each individual; the empowerment of particular target groups; the acquisition of knowledge of the French or Dutch language"*⁶.

As mentioned, the Dutch-speaking integration programme falls under the responsibility of the Flemish Community and the Flemish Community Commission (VGC). The agency in charge of (Dutch) integration in Brussels is BON (which has been part of the Agency for Integration and Civic Integration since 1 January 2015).

The French-speaking programme falls under the responsibility of the French Community Commission (COCOF). Foreign nationals looking for assistance in French can contact one of the Reception Offices for Newcomers ("*Bureaux d'accueil pour primo-arrivants*" or "BAPA"): BAPA-BXL and VIA.

C. What do these integration policies have in common?

When reviewing the different integration policies and programmes, the federated entities in Flanders and Brussels seem to focus on the following main domains: knowledge of one of the national languages, civic participation, legal integration, socio-economic integration, and socio-cultural integration.

- **Knowledge of one of the national languages** is an important element of the integration policies in the Flemish and Brussels community. For example, one of the objectives of the Flemish Horizontal Integration Policy Plan 2016-2019 is strengthening the knowledge of the Dutch language, as language skills are perceived as essential for a durable and effective participation in socio-economic life.

⁵ In the study we have mainly focussed on Dutch-language initiatives since the employers that participate in the PALIM Project are located in Flanders.

⁶ Ordinance of 11 May 2017 regarding the integration pathway for newcomers, *Belgian Official Gazette*, 30 May 2017.

- **Civic participation** (e.g. rights, duties, values) encompasses a wide range of formal and informal activities. Examples include voting, volunteering, participating in group activities, and community gardening. Some are individual activities that benefit society (e.g., voting), others are group activities that benefit either the group members (e.g., recreational soccer teams) or society (e.g., volunteer organizations).
- **Legal integration** aims to provide newcomers with:
 - Advice and information regarding international family law and migration laws;
 - Information and referral to the relevant authorities for questions related to anti-discrimination, anti-racism, equal opportunities, prevention of radicalisation, etc.;
 - Knowledge on the local laws and habits.
- **Socio-economic integration** aims to guarantee equal opportunities and access to the labour market, health care, housing and education. Limitations could be addressed by providing advice and guidance related to diversity and by breaking language barriers .
- **Socio-cultural integration** envisages to facilitate participation in leisure time and volunteering.

III. Methodology

It is important to note that there is no pre-existing map/platform that gives an overview of all actors active in the field of integration in Flanders and Brussels.

As such, we started from a general Google (internet) search, which would also be the first tool that is used by immigrant workers who arrive in Belgium.⁷ This led to the identification of numerous initiatives and organisations. However, these were often larger (governmental) organisations who had the capacity to develop their own website and to appear in Google-(internet) search results.

To get a more comprehensive understanding of the actors involved, we also contacted several local authorities (mainly municipalities) who have direct contact with immigrant workers upon their arrival in Belgium. Various municipal authorities were informed and able to forward us to a contact person if smaller grassroots initiatives existed or non-profit organizations were active in their territory. However, several local authorities were unable to assist and completely unaware of integration actors within their territory. Such a lack of knowledge was more noticeable with smaller municipalities in areas that tend to have a lower number of immigrants, as opposed to municipalities that surround bigger cities such as Antwerp or Brussels.

We carried out this research for each of the Flemish provinces and the Brussels Capital region. We then listed all the identified initiatives in an Excel-sheet per province and per domain (language skills, orientation upon arrival, leisure time, diaspora organisations), and included contact details for every entity. The Excel-sheet is envisaged to function as a user-friendly tool for the Moroccan workers who arrive in Belgium and look for assistance outside their work environment.

It must be noted that the Excel-sheet does not exhaustively cover all actors that are involved in the integration of foreign workers at a professional, social and personal level in the 319 municipalities of Brussels and Flanders. We have tried to give an overview of actors involved in the different aspects of integration for each province in Flanders and Brussels. As a

⁷ The author thanks Marise Braem, Celien De Wever, Lara Dumortier, Lauria Gatoni, Lotte Moreels and Marie-Emmanuelle Turcq for their research assistance.

newcomer, this list can function as a starting point which will guide you to actors in the field of integration, who will be more than happy to assist you further.

The actors have been divided in four groups, and listed per province. First, we identified organizations which offer Dutch or French language classes to foreign nationals. We focused on those initiatives that specifically target Moroccan nationals and/or skilled workers. Second, we looked for actors that offer assistance with practical aspects that an immigrant worker would face upon arrival in Belgium. Included are organizations who provide advice with regard to registration upon arrival at the town hall, finding housing, opening a bank account, completing the registration for health insurance, etc.. It concerns assistance with the execution of practical matters that have to be dealt with upon arrival in Belgium. Subsequently, we included those organizations who offer leisure time activities, such as buddy programs where individuals are linked to a buddy/mentor, local initiatives which offer a meeting place, etc. Finally, we also listed diaspora organizations for Moroccan immigrants.

For all actors, we have provided a brief description of the services they offer, followed by their target audience, remarks with regard to their accessibility, specific remarks where relevant, and their contact details.

IV. Overview of the integration actors

The overview of integration actors can be consulted in the Excel sheet attached to this paper.

V. Concluding reflections

A. Language courses

Each province has a wide range of organizations offering language (Dutch) courses. It either concerns official language courses, organized by an educational institution recognized by the relevant regional government (e.g., institutions for higher education, institutions for adult education, etc.), or smaller (private) initiatives which offer language training in a more informal way. In this regard, each province has so-called 'conversation tables', which link non-Dutch speakers (new immigrants) with local residents in order to practice Dutch in a social setting while meeting new people.

Courses are generally aimed at non-native Dutch speakers and do not specifically target Moroccan nationals or Arabic speakers.

All these courses are easy to find online, even though the information online is often only available in Dutch. However, it is always possible to contact a local branch of the Agency for Integration and Civic Integration which directs immigrants to the most suited course for them, based on their pre-existing language skills and education level. These local branches offer assistance and information in different languages.

B. Assistance with practical aspects upon arrival and orientation

It was hard to identify organizations focussing on this aspect of integration as there is no structural help/assistance for newcomers when arriving in Belgium. The main reason is that integration and orientation are not state organized. As such, immigrants heavily depend on local initiatives for assistance.

The most accurate information can be found on websites written for so-called 'expats', which give general but helpful information in a very accessible way. However, these websites mostly set out the general Belgian system without going into detail about local specificities.

Organizations, both publicly or privately established, that do exist often target all new residents in a specific municipality without a focus on persons with an immigration background. This entails that information is often not available in English and aimed at Belgian nationals, which decreases the accessibility for newly arrived immigrant workers. When this focus does exist, the initiatives mostly target refugees arriving in their new hometown or lower educated workers.

The best way to orient oneself is probably by entering a community centre (*gemeenschapscentrum*) in one's local neighbourhood, as they are most suited to answer pressing, but informal questions and are usually accustomed to working in an international environment. The contact details of these centres can usually be found through the website of the municipality or by asking a civil servant at the local town hall. In addition, local initiatives organized by the municipalities are worthwhile exploring or asking for upon registration. Some town halls offer guidance by organizing information meetings, guided tours, information booklets, etc. This information is often the best in quality.

C. Leisure time

In general, higher educated foreign workers are not a target audience for the non-profit organizations or grassroots initiatives that offer leisure time activities. When residing in bigger cities like Brussels, Ghent or Antwerp, it is easier to find organizations with an international composition.

Again we would advise foreign workers to inquire about the possibilities at their local municipality upon registration. Alternatively, a Facebook search or tips from colleagues might be helpful in identifying suitable leisure activities.

D. Diaspora organizations for Moroccan immigrants

There are several Moroccan associations in Belgium which offer all kinds of activities related to any of the foregoing categories. However, these diaspora organizations are quite hard to find, since they are usually not present online and often closed towards non-members. The website of the Federation for socio-cultural organizations of individuals with a migration background (*Federatie voor sociaal-culturele verenigingen van mensen met een migratieachtergrond* - FMDO) gives an overview of all member organizations with a short explanation on what they do. This is very useful, but contacting the actual organizations turns out to be very hard as contact details are not publicly available or people do not respond. As the organizations are closed, it is advisable to contact these organisations through their Facebook-pages or via the phone, or to visit them at their physical address. Most of the time, communication is in Arabic.

E. Overall findings

It is noticeable that most initiatives aimed at the integration of foreign nationals are not centralized and depend heavily on initiatives from private actors, such as non-profit organizations, volunteers or individual projects organized at the level of the municipality. Very often, social welfare institutions also have integration projects or social workers who guide their clients through their new environment upon arrival. However, these avenues are not open to immigrant workers who have a regular income.

In addition, integration initiatives are not specifically aimed at highly-qualified workers. This specific group of immigrants has to resort to the general initiatives that are available to all newcomers. This is not ideal, since highly-qualified workers may be looking for another type or level of assistance.

Moreover, there is no central database or website available which lists all integration actors in Flanders and Brussels. The individual immigrant has to embark on his/her own investigation. This is often difficult as a lot of information is either only available in Dutch or can only be obtained by an in person inquiry. This may scare newcomers, who are already

insecure in their new surroundings. As general advice, we would recommend new arrivals to inquire about integration initiatives at the local level upon registration at their municipality. Usually the civil servants at the town hall are more than willing to direct them to an organization who can further assist.

In the Excel-sheets we have tried to give an impression of the integration initiatives available in the different provinces of Flanders and in Brussels. Based on this exercise, it seems that offer and demand are linked to each other, which is not surprising: those provinces and cities with a higher concentration of immigrants in general tend to offer a greater diversity of integration initiatives. However, as there is no official or comprehensive list of all initiatives, we have to be cautious when drawing conclusions.

If we were to make two general recommendations, they would be the following:

- Set-up an online platform which is open to all integration actors to register themselves. In this way, immigrants who arrive in Belgium could easily identify organisations in their area that can assist with their integration-related-queries. This platform could, for instance, be coordinated by the Agency for Integration and Civic Integration as Flanders is concerned⁸. The present mapping exercise already provides a good starting point for the development of such a platform.
- Develop orientation guidance for new arrivals, organised at the level of the municipality or the province, open to new residents with an immigration background. This guidance could take the form of an information evening, a guided tour through the commune, information booklets available in several languages, etc. Participation in such activities should be voluntary. We would propose to develop instruments specifically aimed at the needs of immigrant workers as well.

⁸ In Brussels, the counterparts of the Agency for Integration and Civic Integration could participate in the mapping, being VIA, BAPA or BON.