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# Minimum Income and Social Integration Institutional Arrangements

Comment Paper, FEANTSA



on behalf of



**European Commission**  
**DG Employment, Social Affairs**  
**and Equal Opportunities**





## Introduction

FEANTSA is the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless. The European Commission invited FEANTSA to participate in this peer review to bring the perspective of service providers working with homeless people to this debate on the Social Integration Income in Belgium.

FEANTSA's working group on Employment has been working on the issue of employment for homeless people since 2002. The group meets twice a year; its members have considerable experience in working with social re-integration through employment and meaningful occupation for homeless people, and come from France, Spain, Denmark, Hungary, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom. The group analyses the EU's employment initiatives in terms of re-integration services and training for homeless people. In order to prepare FEANTSA's contribution to this peer review of the Belgian Social Integration Income, the working group used available information to assess the Belgian federal legislation, the programmes and measures, as well as the effects of this law.

This document is complemented by a supporting document that states FEANTSA's general statement on minimum income policies. These two documents comprise FEANTSA's contribution to this Peer Review on the Belgian Social Integration Income.

### I. General observations – a look at the philosophy and the policy

Minimum income policies, as an important aspect of the fight against exclusion, are now reaching their limit: increasing numbers of people claiming benefits, insufficient income or obstacles to social integration, weakness or failing of the 'integration' dimension of employment. The evolution of the *minimex* and the Social Integration Income seem to be following the trend seen in European society.<sup>1</sup>

Though the *minimex* was never an official unconditional right, it did have the advantage of being a right to an essential minimum income that the State had to provide unconditionally to all citizens on its territory.



The Social Integration Income (RIS – *Revenu d'Intégration Sociale*), on the contrary, is based on the concept of a contract, which shares out the responsibility between the State and the individual. This threatens to reinforce the idea that the people living in poverty and those most excluded are to blame for their situation.

The RIS, however, does include a positive element: the right to social integration, implied by occupation or 'activation'. All things considered, this would be a progress, if the essential minimum income (unconditional) and the right to integration were not confused. This should not be in opposition to living decently.

## II. Conditions and possible obstacles

The first condition concerns the income. Article 2 of the Law of 2002 puts forward the 'Social Integration Income' as an alternative to either a job, or an 'individualised social integration project.' Though we consider the possibility of individuals participating to such a project with the aims of employment, both positive and realistic, we disapprove of the opposition set up between employment and minimum income. Evidence drawn from people who are most excluded shows that combining minimum income with employment income should be made possible with both quantitative limits and for a limited period of time. Indeed, questions about the kind of employment arise. The employment is often initially supported employment and part-time employment (20 – 30 hours). Clearly the types of jobs called "Article 60 or Article 61" could become traps and force the 'claimant/recipient' back to square one.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the RIS targeted young people using the 'bureaucratic' pretext that they made up a quarter of the recipients of the *minimex*. However, if the RIS is to become an efficient instrument in fighting exclusion, this discrimination on the basis of age must be removed, especially since 52% of the recipients are students. We feel that the 'poverty' of students is a completely different matter and is not an integral part of the fight against social exclusion. This is not to say however, that the age of recipients should not be taken into account, particularly for people leaving the educational system without qualifications, or those who are close to retirement age.



### III. Proposals

The concept of employment must be better defined. Moreover, during the Belgian Parliamentary debate, the concept of 'suitable employment' was put forward. Our experience indicates that homeless people in particular generally have access to supported employment, accompanied employment and or, adapted employment before some of them move on to the labour market. A social integration process must take into account both the lack of available employment on the labour market and the necessity for people to go through a transition period in supported employment first. However, this is dependent on the existence of a social economy sufficiently adapted and ready to take on this role. The example of internal hiring by the CPAS is not one to be followed! It seems to us that this social integration policy is missing a fundamental element, which is the key to social integration for people who are socially excluded: social support and guidance. This support must be able to adapt throughout the period that a person needs help. Thus, it is useless to set a time limit; it is crucial for the people involved to develop trust with the professionals providing support to make sustainable integration a reality. In our experience, working to help someone integrate lasts at least three years.

A final note: some progress has been made, when comparing the RIS with the minimex, as under this legislation foreigners and Belgian nationals have equal rights.

### IV. Questions raised

- Payments based on contracts by the CPAS raises questions about financing such a measure. A good activation of passive expenditures in the long term, and any other expenditures, will not be capable of resolving the problems around permanent, sustained funding that is adapted to this measure. Clearly there have not been, and will not be sufficient funds directed to the RIS.
- A good law must take into account other policies with the same aim, in this case, social integration. Thus, the question of how the RIS is linked to housing policy and general social policy is raised. Both pilot projects and pieces of legislation must be transversal.



- There are clear regional disparities in Belgium. This would probably also be the case in many other decentralised countries or those in the process of devolution. What means could be used to prevent these disparities, which contradict the general objective of social cohesion?
- Finally, the question of regular evaluation is raised. This measure is not sufficient<sup>3</sup>. What measures should be put in place that would be shared by all actors, including those working in the field (CPAS, social integration enterprises, social workers and people benefiting from the measure), that would also improve the measure without having to wait another 27 years?

## Notes

- 1 Minimex : minimum income set in the Law of 7 August 1974
- 2 Article 60 § 7 and Article 61 of the organic Law of 8 July 1976
- 3 Study of the effects of the implementation of the law on the right to social integration, commissioned by the Federal Ministry for social integration, the fight against poverty and social economy, carried out by Ernst and Young <http://www.mi-is.be>