



What do National Organisations Have to Say About the Cost of Living Crisis?

# AN APPROACH TO TACKLING ENERGY AND WATER POVERTY: SUPPORTING SOCIAL WORKERS IN THE BRUSSELS-CAPITAL REGION

With more than one in four people in the Brussels-Capital Region living in energy poverty, the SocialEnergie Support Centre, a State-funded service, provides support in the form of information, guidance, and training to social workers of the region in the area of energy and water poverty. In this article, SocialEnergie explains in detail what are the different resources and support they provide to social workers and why it is of paramount importance in the current energy crisis.

The SocialEnergie Support Centre (*Centre d'Appui SocialEnergie*) is a regional support service for frontline workers in the Brussels-Capital Region. This project is implemented by the Federation of Social Services (*Fédération des services sociaux*) and funded by the regional environmental administration (*Bruxelles Environnement*). It was launched in 2011 with the aim to counsel, guide and train social workers in the region regarding energy poverty and water poverty.

Energy and water poverty are widespread phenomena all across Europe and they are also pervasive in the Brussels-Capital Region: based on 2020 data, it is estimated that more than one in four people (26,5%) live in energy poverty and that more than one in five people (21%) are concerned by water poverty at the regional level.<sup>1</sup>

These estimations do not yet take into account the impact of the energy price crisis that households have been suffering since the second half of 2021 and that is still painfully present at the time of writing, coupled with a double-digit inflation (12.27% in October 2022 for Belgium) driving sharp rises in other essential household expenses such as rent, food, transport, etc.

Frontline social workers are often confronted with complex social, legal, and technical challenges for which they need expert counselling and support, given the intricacies of liberalised energy markets and increasing water distribution costs due to the need for an infrastructure renewal.

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1 *Baromètres de la précarité énergétique et hydrique. Analyse et interprétation des résultats 2020*, Plateforme de lutte contre la précarité énergétique et hydrique, Fondation Roi Baudouin, 8th edition (2022).

The SocialEnergie Support Centre was therefore created to play a decisive role in the regional energy and water social ecosystems by providing a series of services targeted at social workers (and, indirectly, at individuals living in the region):

- A comprehensive website ([www.socialenergie.be](http://www.socialenergie.be)) containing detailed explanations of various concepts and procedures (energy and water bills, legal procedures for energy disconnections, consumer rights regarding energy contracts, social measures, tenant-landlord relationships, how to lodge appeals or complaints, etc.). This website seeks to proactively answer social workers' questions and enable their work, serving at the same time as a regional knowledge repository with regard to energy and water.
- The development of various tools and publications aimed at improving the knowledge and the ability of social workers to directly take action in energy and water-related matters: factsheets, annotated energy and water bills, practical guides on how to claim and verify the application of existing social measures, average consumption calculators taking into account household composition, a board game to explain the role of different actors in the energy sector in an easy-to-understand manner, etc.
- A telephone hotline open to social workers during working hours, Monday through Friday. Our team of Energy Support Workers with a social work, legal or technical background are available daily to answer social workers' questions. We provide answers to general queries concerning the functioning of the energy market and the water distribution system, as well as more specific and detailed responses considering the particulars of a given case or situation.



# “Energy and water become vectors of disadvantage whenever this right is not fully secured, directly threatening human dignity.”

- Personalised support. If a particular situation demands further reflection or action, our team will guide social workers over time, providing feedback and helping them to deliver holistic and well-balanced solutions in complex cases. This may happen in a number of ways: through continuous counselling and guidance, bespoke training sessions, or in-place visits, accompanying the social worker to the household's home to address with them any outstanding technical or administrative issues.
- Training. We offer a large number of general and specific training and organisation modules about energy and water, ranging from a basic skills training cycle containing legal, administrative, social and technical modules to in-depth training on the functioning of energy markets, the distribution of competences among decision-making levels, or recent legal developments, for instance.
- Administrative support for a regional best practices network. We coordinate a monthly gathering of social workers in the region, along with members of the administration, regulators, and government, around energy and water-related matters. The aim of this network is to exchange approaches and practices and to build connections between different stakeholders in the public sector and in civil society.
- Evidenced-based policy and advocacy work. Our tight-knit connection with frontline workers in this domain enables us to carry out evidence-based policy and advocacy work that takes the realities of the ground as a starting point and addresses them through a robust, contextual-based analysis. This work is reflected in our participation in various advisory and advocacy groups at the regional and federal level, as well as in the publication of analyses, policy notes and concrete recommendations targeted at parliaments, governments, regulators, administrations and other stakeholders.

## COMBATTING HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness is an alarming phenomenon in the Brussels-Capital Region. According to the most recent data of the biennial count conducted by the regional service Bruss'help, which incorporates the ETHOS typology developed by FEANTSA, more than 5,300 persons in the region were homeless in 2020. This includes people living in emergency shelters, public spaces, squats, transitory housing, hospitals, etc. Although the figures for 2022 are not yet published, it is expected that the number of persons living in squats will almost double. These 2022 figures will also include people who are temporarily hosted by family or friends, which were not included in previous data.

Combating homelessness is a transversal priority of the SocialEnergie Support Centre. We are part of the Brussels Rally for the Right to Housing (*Rassemblement Bruxellois pour le Droit à l'Habitat*), which works closely on homelessness-related issues. We have recently contributed to a study seeking to evaluate the cost of homelessness and of housing homeless persons in the Brussels-Capital Region, along with the *Université Libre de Bruxelles*.<sup>2</sup> We also receive a growing

number of demands from NGOs and CSOs working in this field to help them in light of overwhelming energy bills threatening their crucial work.

This transversal priority is also reflected in our policy and advocacy operations: along with various partners, we have advocated for the extension of energy social tariffs to recognise structures hosting or housing homeless persons, as well as squats benefiting from a precarious occupation agreement in order to ensure their ability to continue operating and to provide a crucial respite to those who need it the most.

To carry out our work, we build upon the overarching vision that the access to energy and water is an essential need and a fundamental right that must be secured for everyone. Energy and water become vectors of disadvantage whenever this right is not fully secured, directly threatening human dignity. Our work is thus underpinned by the fight against social disadvantage and inequality, a strong human rights-based approach and social work principles and ethics.

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<sup>2</sup> Benoît Bayenet, Justine Carlier, Ilan Tojerow, and Magali Verdonck, *Le sans-chez-soirisme : suite ou fin ?* ULB (DULBEA), 2022. An executive summary (in French) is available [here](#).