

Alternative report of children

to the Committee on the Rights of the Child

on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Belgium

2018

“What Do You Think?”

UNICEF Belgium



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Preface

Dear Members of the Committee on the Rights of the Child,

We are delighted to send you the third report of children living in Belgium on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was compiled within the framework of UNICEF Belgium's 'What Do You Think?' project.

In 1999, UNICEF Belgium launched this initiative with the objective of making the voice of the most vulnerable children (migrant and refugee children, children with a disability, sick children, children in psychiatric care, children in conflict with the law, children affected by poverty) heard by the Committee on the Rights of the Child and decision-makers.

This report meets the required format of 20 000 words. It deliberately underlines the main challenges children in situation of vulnerability are faced with, i.e. migrant and refugee children as well as those affected by poverty. This report also highlights the fact that Belgium must do more to reverse trends in terms of inequality at school, and ensure that a child's social status doesn't determine its academic success.

There are too few opportunities to listen to what these children have to say. But when given the opportunity, it is clear that they are driven by a deep desire to share their life experiences and their stories. They want to talk and hope that we, as adults, are listening to them. Children want to participate. They want to explain their joys and their difficulties so that we can better understand them.

Children would like this participation to be meaningful; that it should lead to something and influence the decisions directly concerning them, if only a little; decisions relating to the rights of the child. This because children are best placed to describe their difficulties and find solutions to their problems. The Convention on the Rights of the Child gives them the right to participate in decisions affecting them.

This alternative report offers the opportunity to read some stories of children living in situation of vulnerability; it is a summary of stories that were collected over an eight-year period. In this report, you can read their opinions, experiences, joys, sadness and recommendations. This is what makes it an exceptional text.

As the children who have come from other countries remind us, Belgium is a good place to live, as long as our country makes the effort and provides the means to offer a caring environment to as many children as possible. And yet, despite all, Belgium has only partly succeeded in fulfilling the rights of the most vulnerable children. Furthermore, schools no longer manage to play their role of social lever.

We would like to thank all the children and young people who participated in UNICEF Belgium's 'What Do You Think?' project. This report would never have been published without them. We would also like to thank the educators, teachers, social workers and guardians who work alongside them every day and, without whom, this project would

not have been possible. Through this report, we want to make the voices of children in situation of vulnerability living in Belgium heard.

There is a lot we can learn from their stories.

These stories are sometimes harsh and appalling. Sometimes, they are beyond comprehension for a rich country like Belgium. But as difficult as these stories may be, they are those of children and young people who were happy to talk in the hope that they will be heard by the Committee on the Rights of the Child and political decisionmakers.

In the name of all these children, we would like to ask the Committee on the Rights of the Child to take their recommendations into account and to guide Belgium along the path to equity and to effectively implement the rights of all children.

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Warnings

The participatory methods used by UNICEF Belgium are based on a series of principles aimed at an ethical, respectful and sustainable participation of the children. These requirements are developed in detail in the different 'What Do You Think?' reports (See Annex 1).

Based on the number of children who participated in the project, we can't say that this study is representative of all the migrant and refugee children and all the children affected by poverty in Belgium. This wasn't the objective of the 'What Do You Think?' project, which favoured a qualitative approach, rooted in the long term, rather than a quantitative approach.

The accounts of children on poverty and equal opportunities at school were conducted in complete anonymity. In the accounts of migrant and refugee children, only gender (girl/boy), age and country of origin are mentioned. Given that only 15 isolated teenage mothers took part, we removed the age of the babies and the country of origin from their accounts.

Summary of the recommendations

1. Migrant and refugee children

1.1 Family

Separated or unaccompanied children want to be reunited with their family. They would like to have the chance to be in contact with their parents. They also ask to be better supported by people of trust and would like more 'family' type reception services.

- Favour family reunification upon arrival without asking us for documents that are impossible to obtain.
- Have the chance to remain in contact with our family (access to Wi-Fi and a computer in all the reception centres, greater means to buy a telephone card).
- Have people of trust around you. Reinforce good practices, such as family reception services, buddy service and mentoring, whereby migrant and refugee children are supported and their needs are met.
- The possibility of living with a host family outside the centre for unaccompanied children.

1.2 Procedure

Migrant and refugee children recommend a procedure limited in time that takes into account their life story. Unaccompanied children would like better support from the guardian and the lawyer. They would like better information upon arrival on the types of procedures and decisions taken that concern them.

- Have a procedure limited in time.
- If the procedure is longer, explain the reasons.
- A child who arrived here very young and has spent more time in Belgium than in his or her country of origin, should not be sent back to their country.
- Be better supported by the guardian, especially in preparation for the interview at the CGRS. Be accompanied by the guardian when they have to go somewhere in connection with the procedure. Be regularly informed by their guardian and see him/her more often. Have the chance to change guardian if the latter has no contact with the young person.
- Always be accompanied by the lawyer during the interview. Be informed of changes and reasons for changing lawyer.
- Receive more information upon arrival on the different types of procedure and be regularly informed about the decisions taken.
- Benefit from the help of a qualified social interpreter, during interviews and at the lawyer's.

- Put an end to age tests.
- Provide better support for young people who are about to turn 18, because they often find themselves without a lawyer, a guardian or any protection from one day to the next.

1.3 Reception centre

The big reception centres aren't adapted to migrant and refugee children. The children need a calm and safe environment and rest, and support workers who listen. Children who have arrived alone would like more small structures or host families. Children accompanied by their family would like more privacy and alternatives to the big reception centres.

- The referral centre is a good thing for children who arrive alone.
- Even after the age of 14 years, avoid repeatedly changing centres, which is detrimental to the integration and wellbeing of the children. A child who speaks French should not be sent to a centre in Flanders.
- When they arrive in a reception centre, the children should be supported so that they feel comfortable and safe. Inform the children, upon their arrival, how life in the centre is organised, meal times, waking up, going to bed, people they can contact if they have questions or a problem. Inform them of the possibilities concerning education and training. Ask them if they have specific needs (catching up with school work, plans, individual help, etc.).
- A sufficient number of qualified support workers (educators, social workers, psychologists) who are available to listen, and who respect and support the children upon arrival and throughout their stay at the centre.
- Ensure that the children are received in a calm, clean and protective environment which allows them to feel safe, to rest and to study. Do not put four children who do not speak the same language in the same room. Make sure that there is a quiet room for studying and that it is quiet during the night, so that they can rest.
- Ensure that the children are protected against violence from adults living in the centres and that they know where to find help if they need it. Ensure that the children don't argue among themselves and that they learn to get to know each other better, regardless of their mother tongue or country of origin.
- Favour small structures or host families for unaccompanied children. Favour alternatives outside the reception centres with support (in a house, flat) for children who have already spent several years in a centre with their family.
- Provide better support for young people who are about to turn 18, so that they can find accommodation when they leave the reception centre.
- Give children the means to buy clothes, a bit of food, public transport tickets or do some sport. Allow them to have activities outside the centre or during the holidays with 'Belgian' children. Allow youngsters to get a student job.

- Allow children to prepare a meal from their country of origin. Allow families to have the chance to eat together and cook.

1.4 School and leisure activities

Migrant and refugee children who have dropped out of school and those who arrive at the end of the school year, would like to have more support to learn the language and catch up. All the children would like to practice a sport or an activity outside school or the centre, in order to make Belgian friends and integrate.

- Allow all the children to go to school upon arrival and throughout their stay.
- Children who arrive at the end of the school year should benefit from remedial classes, so that they don't spend three months doing nothing
- DASPA/OKAN classes are a good thing for migrant and refugee children. However, more contact with children from other classes should be encouraged.
- Adapt teaching methods and specific support: a 14-year-old child who has never been to school and who does not speak the language, does not have the same needs as a 14-year-old child who just has to learn the language.
- Encourage learning the language outside class as well (through sport or other activities outside school or the centre).
- Limit the number of children per class.
- Provide help for homework and a quiet place to study.
- Give remedial and/or language learning classes after school and during the holidays.
- Provide guidance regarding academic orientation.
- Help children to implement their projects.
- Enable access to leisure activities outside the reception centres or school.
- Encourage activities with other 'Belgian' children.
- Authorise the children to attend football training and play matches.
- Give the children greater means to do sport and activities outside the centres; and pay for public transport (bus, metro, train tickets).
- Give the children more information on the possibilities of doing activities in the municipality (scouts, activities organised by the commune, etc.).
- Have the chance to take part in courses during the holidays.
- Be able to take part in school trips.

1.5 Isolated teenage mothers

These young girls are particularly vulnerable because they are mothers, teenagers, alone, with no family and in exile. They would like tailor-made support in an adapted, calm and protective environment. Educational support, a focus on the mother's and the child's health, food adapted to their babies' needs.

- Favour alternative reception structures outside the large centres (in small adapted structures, with a host family, in a flat).
- Ensure that the young mothers are received in a calm and protective environment both day and night, allowing them to feel safe, rest, build up their confidence and study while looking after their baby.
- Inform the mothers upon arrival about how life inside and outside the centre is organised (at school, in the commune) and inform them about the people they can contact if they have questions or a problem. Inform them of the possibilities concerning education and training.
- As well as visits to the Office of Birth and Childhood (ONE), ensure regular support for the mothers during pregnancy, birth and after the birth, including information on care for the mother and child after the birth, how to dress the child in winter, taking care of small ailments, washing and feeding the child, as well as information on sleep and development in young children.
- Ensure that the mothers have sufficient privacy and can have a key to the toilets and bathrooms, so that they have access day and night. Allow the mothers to call a doctor in case of a problem during the night.
- Ensure that the mothers receive support which is adapted to their academic level (remedial support, help with homework in the evening, during the holidays). Provide advice and support regarding study programmes. See that the nursery closes at 6.00 p.m. so that the mothers have time to comfortably fetch their child after school.
- Provide young mothers with greater means, so that they can buy clothing or food for the baby and water for the bottle.
- Provide milk adapted to the babies (a baby who drinks normal milk shouldn't be given hypoallergenic milk).
- Allow young mothers to prepare their babies' food with adapted products and materials.

2. Children affected by poverty

2.1 Family

Children affected by poverty who were placed in an institution, don't want to be separated from their brothers and sisters. Those who want to live with their family, want to be protected and treated with respect. They also revealed that they were very worried about their parents' job insecurity and debts, reductions in social assistance mechanisms, discrimination when going for a job and the extreme difficulty of getting out of poverty.

- Get children in care to participate in the decisions that concern them. Some children want to go home. Others absolutely not.
- Don't separate siblings. All brothers and sisters want to stay together.
- Stop placing children in long-term care and repeatedly changing institutions, which is detrimental to the integration and well-being of the children.
- Improve children's participation in families. Every child must be treated with respect and feel safe at home.
- A child who has problems must be heard and know where to find help. Parents who encounter difficulties must be better supported and informed.
- Support and accompany teenagers whose parents are of foreign origin to help alleviate their feeling of constantly living between two worlds.
- Encourage mixing and combat self-withdrawal, including arranged or forced marriage.
- Every child has the right to a sufficient standard of living. The most vulnerable families must be supported, reinforce and increase job opportunities, allow all children to receive care when they are ill, and offer affordable and decent accommodation to everyone.
- Help prevent families getting into debt. Children condemn the fact that when you live in a poor neighbourhood, you are often offered the possibility of buying on credit.
- Maintain the social assistance mechanisms aimed at the poorest families. Children are worried about reductions in welfare from the social assistance centre (CPAS) and the disappearance of foodbanks.
- Do everything possible to help children escape poverty. Because, for children, precarity can lead to extreme situations: "When you have no work, no money, no income, no help, it becomes normal to take risks to get out of that situation".

2.2 Leisure activities and free time

Children affected by poverty would like to be able to play in parks and on football pitches and basketball courts that are in good condition. Many would

like to practice a mixed activity or a sport that they don't usually do. Some young people would like to have a student job during the holidays.

- Organise good football pitches and basketball courts in parks. Put up swings and organise play areas for the youngest children, benches for the parents and shelters in parks so that teenagers can get together and chat.
- Give children greater means to practice a sport they wouldn't usually do, such as going swimming, playing tennis, table tennis, going bowling. Give them more information about the possibilities of doing activities in the local area (scouts, activities organised locally, etc.).
- Give boys and girls the opportunity to share activities and experiences. Given them more information about sex and relationships.
- Increase community centres, which are safe havens where children can play, meet and speak freely.
- Support and inform teenagers so that they can get a student job during the holidays.

2.3 Neighbourhoods

Neighbourhood violence weighs heavily on children affected by poverty. They want to live in a healthy, safe and protective environment, where there are no drugs, prostitution, alcohol, gangs, hold-ups, attacks or rubbish.

- Make neighbourhoods safe. Put an end to intolerable situations, such as drug trafficking, drug addiction, alcohol, smuggled goods, gangs, prostitution, violence, hold-ups, thefts, attacks, and rubbish lying around, in the street and around play areas.
- Protect children from the violence of the adults around them. Children must know where to find help if they need it and be listened to if they ask for help.
- Support young people so that they can resist the negative temptations of the neighbourhood. Support and protect them, not just control them.
- Create or renovate play areas for young children, benches, football pitches and basketball courts. Improve the infrastructure, encourage green spaces, install bins.
- Make road safety a priority. Penalise drivers who drive too fast in streets and in areas close to where children play. Put up more traffic lights, speed bumps, cycle paths and improve access to public transport.
- Get children to participate in neighbourhood life and create meeting places or special days for residents in the neighbourhood to get together, so they can get to know each other.

2.4 School

Children affected by poverty consider that equal opportunities don't exist at school. They would like all schools to give every child the same opportunities and for teachers to be motivated, listen and help them succeed. Children want the bullying and the stress to stop, and for measures to be taken against relegation and dropping out of school.

- Equal opportunities at school must be a priority. Schools in poor neighbourhoods must offer the same opportunities as schools in wealthy neighbourhoods. 'Dustbin' schools should be closed.
- Give every child a free, quality education, with motivated yet strict teachers. Ensure that schools are open to everyone, stop ethnic, social and gender stereotyping.
- Involve children in the choice of studies. Children condemn the fact that relegation to specialised streams are rarely a choice. Children are forced into it by their parents or upon the advice of the teachers. They recommend waiting until the age of 16 in order to be able to make this choice.
- Help prevent children dropping out of school. Pay particular attention to children with financial problems or family problems, which mean they can't go to school anymore. An increasing number of children have to help at home or go to work.
- Combat stress and bullying at school. Enable children to talk about it to their teachers and their parents and, above all, take positive measures to stop bullying.
- Reinforce the teacher's role and combat the high level of absenteeism among teachers. Children condemn the fact that teachers who sometimes don't have any experience are sent to disadvantaged neighbourhoods and aren't always aware of their reality. They want motivated, strict teachers who listen, and who help them to acquire skills to succeed and face life's problems.

3. Equity at school

3.1 Teachers

All the children would like to have teachers who are well trained, experienced, devoted and who listen. They would like the teaching profession to be better recognised and better paid. Among the children's concerns are the shortage and absenteeism of teachers, demotivation among some teachers and the stereotypes attached to them as well as their feeling of being treated unfairly.

- Every child has the right to have teachers who are well trained, experienced, devoted and who listen. The children would like more time to talk to their teachers and to have lessons better adapted to each person's abilities and interests.

- Recognise that the teaching profession is a difficult one. The children would like teachers to be better paid, trained, assessed and supported. Some also recommend reducing class size.
- Combating the shortage of teachers and long periods when some teachers are absent. Children can't go for such a long time without a teacher or a replacement.
- Every child has the right to be treated fairly. Some children tell of the humiliations they have experienced. Others talk about teachers who have lost all their motivation and their patience. They want an end to inequality and injustice!
- Combat the prejudices of some teachers regarding 'foreign children'. This attitude helps reinforce inequalities in school results. These stereotypes also affect self-esteem and learning.
- Move beyond the traditional school curriculum and make the lessons more appealing. The children recommend greater creativity in class and remedial classes at school.
- Have more experienced teachers and not ones who wait until they have reached the classroom to find out whether or not they like teaching and working with children.
- Provide help with homework and remedial classes at school for children who are not lucky enough to have parents who can help them at home.
- Better trained and more competent supervisors and educators.
- A psychological medical and social centre (PMS) closer to young people that truly meets their needs and problems.

3.2 Children's well-being

The children think that a safe atmosphere in class could alleviate the feeling of stress at school. They say they feel under pressure because of school, homework, tests and exams. The children want the bullying to stop and real solutions to be found. Many of the children would like to take part in the decision-making processes in their school. Others think that the classes should be taught in a more participatory manner.

- More time to learn and play.
- Put an end to the points system.
- Acknowledge, stop and punish bullying.
- A bullied child shouldn't be afraid to speak to their teachers about it or fear being punished for having spoken to the PMS about it. Putting bullied children in special education is not a solution!

- The children would like schools to organise activities to learn how to deal with bullying in a preventive manner.
- A child who bullies other children must also be helped.
- More participation in class by the children and in school can improve the atmosphere, motivation and the children's behaviour at school.
- Teachers shouldn't get annoyed; instead, they should ensure they stimulate curiosity and enthusiasm. The children recommend more time with their teachers and lessons based on each person's abilities and interests.

The children want the infrastructure of the school buildings to be improved. According to the accounts that were gathered, some schools in urban areas don't really seem to meet safety standards anymore. The children also recommend cleaner classrooms and toilets, more greenery, more spacious classrooms and playgrounds, more colours and more games.

- Schools that offer sufficient space and safety: get rid of schools where children are scared the ceiling might fall on their heads!
- Clean toilets, with soap and toilet paper.
- More space, greenery and games at schools.

3.3 Unequal opportunities

Children in situation of vulnerability recommend real equal opportunities at school. Being reoriented from the general curriculum to technical, vocational studies or special education, repeating the year, the wrong choice of studies, demotivation, or continued failure should not be the norm. They recommend better support right from the start of their education (in nursery school) and better information.

- Reverse the trends in terms of educational inequalities. Belgium must become a champion in terms of educational equity. Schools must assume the role of lever once again!
- Stop the negative division of education into three pillars - general, technical and vocational - and give all children the same opportunities.
- Advise children according to their areas of interest or their qualities, and not according to their social environment or country of origin.
- Better inform parents who are too ready to accept bad advice because they aren't sufficiently familiar with the school system or the language, or because they think that the teachers are always right.
- Involve children in the choice of their curriculum and school.
- Social origin should never determine the relegation of child to special education!
- Special education must genuinely meet the needs of the children concerned.

- Children and their families must be properly informed of the choice of education and its consequences.
- The child must be involved in their choice of studies at school.

Children in situation of vulnerability no longer want to fall behind in class. The children are divided in their opinions regarding repeating the year. However, all the children recommend being more involved in the decision-making process and in finding alternative solutions, such as remedial classes at school during the summer and during the year.

- Children must be correctly informed and involved in the decision to repeat the year.
- Repeating the year should be the last resort. Alternative solutions must be sought, such as remedial classes at school during the holidays or during the school year.

Children in situation of vulnerability don't want to end up being disillusioned with school. They recommend actions in different areas: housing support, combating neighbourhood violence, support for families and real free education.

- Measures to prevent children dropping out of school and extra help for socially vulnerable children who risk dropping out of school.
- Every child has the right to live in decent, calm housing, with sufficient space and privacy, where people are not living on top of each other. The stress and financial difficulties at home prevent them from concentrating at school and even sometimes from sleeping.
- Make neighbourhoods safe. The stress and violence of neighbourhoods prevent children from concentrating at school and they are sometimes exposed to experiences that ruin their lives.
- Support parents with financial problems. The children recommend that after-school care, the swimming pool, some school meals and remedial classes should be free, and that all children should have the chance to go on excursions or school trips.

1. Migrant and refugee children

1.1 Family

a. Challenges for unaccompanied children

Children who have come alone think a lot about their family. They miss their mum and dad. They would like to have someone who supports them, who listens to them, who takes care of them every day. Children who live independently particularly suffer from this situation. What they miss is a dad or a mum who is waiting for them at home when they come back from school, who asks them how their day was, who makes a nice meal for them. A parent who reassures them when they are down, who enables them not to be frightened the next day and helps to set limits and rules. They often feel alone and isolated, overcome by everyday tasks.

The most difficult thing is being alone. When you've finished school, work, an activity, a trip, you hope that someone is waiting for you at home, you want to be able to tell someone about your day. But you have to keep everything in your head, the good and the bad things. Everything will explode one day. I miss my mother especially. Before, my mother was there when I came home. Sometimes here, I think 'Oh, my mother will be there', but no, no noise, nothing. She isn't there. I stay all alone. You can't do anything without your family. (18 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

With mum and dad, you don't have to think about anything, but when you don't have a family, you have to think about a lot of things. You're all alone, you go home, you're all alone and you don't know what's happening to your brother and your family. You don't feel good, you're worried. (16 years old, boy, Somalia)

b. Difficulties of reunification

Children who have arrived alone want to be reunited with their family. But the family reunification procedure is an administrative maze in which they get lost. According to the children, the documents they are asked for are impossible to find.

When we want our family to join us, we're asked for documents that are impossible to find. I won't be able to invite my family over here, because it's impossible to get the requested documents. As for the documents, just think about it. If you flee your country, how are you supposed to have documents from your town's police station? With the war, it's impossible to get these documents. They asked me for my parents' marriage certificate. (17 years old, boy, Syria)

My grandmother took care of me throughout my whole life. Today, she's in Turkey. I had to leave her behind because she was too sick and too elderly to continue the journey. I'm trying to bring her over to Belgium, but I can't. I really miss her! (17 years old, girl, Syria)

c. Alternative care

Even if it isn't possible to replace a mum or a dad, many children who have come here alone emphasise the importance of having a mentor family, a mentor father or mentor mother, or an association that protects and supports them like a family. A few of the children talk about the essential role of associations like Mentor-Escale, which allow them to mix with trusted persons.

Having mentor families helps. I have one, and thanks to them, I feel better and more confident. (16 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

Two months ago, they started a 'Buddy' project at the centre. It is a sort of mentoring scheme with people from the commune. A volunteer who lives in the neighbourhood offers to take care of a young person from the centre. My Buddy gave me a lot of information. (15 years old, girl, Angola)

Mentor-Escale is like a family. When I left the reception centre, I didn't know anyone, and they were the ones that helped me. (16 years old, girl, Cameroon)

1.2 The procedure

a. A heavy burden

The uncertainty concerning their stay in Belgium has a considerable effect on the children. They do not know whether they will be authorised to remain here or whether they will have to return to their country of origin. The procedure is a recurring problem among all the children. The wait makes them feel insecure. Many children are subjected to permanent stress associated with waiting for a decision. Some deplore the fact that some children are treated differently. They don't understand why some obtain an answer very quickly, while others have to wait for years.

On the first day, I saw someone who had been here for four years, so I thought that if the same thing happened to me, I wouldn't be able to handle it. Waiting for four years is far too long for me. (15 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

I can't concentrate on my studies; it's such a weight not knowing what will happen to me after the procedure. What will happen to my family? (17 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

For unaccompanied children, waiting for a decision concerning their application for asylum or to stay is an additional burden. Some of these children have spent more time here than in their country of origin. They have been able to learn the language, go to school and integrate, and they are afraid of having to return to a country that they no longer consider theirs.

It's difficult! When you're 18 years old, they tell you you have to leave. You've studied or you're still studying, but you have to leave the centre and maybe return to a country you don't know anymore! It's very difficult. There are children who have spent their life in Belgium from the age of five to 18 and they're told they won't get their papers. We must be given an answer much more quickly, at 14 or 15 years old, so that we can envisage another future or begin another procedure. (17 years old boy, Guinea)

'The procedure is too long'. Many of the children complain about it, because they consider it to take far too long, which prevents them from living fully in the present, focusing on school and feeling confident about the future. The children recommend a procedure limited in time.

The procedure is very difficult for children who are alone here in Belgium. The procedure is far too slow. Some of them wait four, five, six years before getting an answer. In our group, some young people have been here for three years and still haven't got an answer. It's impossible to imagine the future in these conditions. (Group of young people between 8-17 years old, from Afghanistan, Guinea, DRC, Cameroon, Burundi, Morocco, Brazil, Algeria)

The procedure is too long; set the same period for everyone. We're human beings after all, not cows or pigs. We're human beings. The only thing we do here is sleep and eat. (17 years old, boy, Somalia)

The children consulted recommend clear and adapted information as soon as they arrive. Any written documents should be accompanied by oral information.

It's good to receive information in the beginning. We received information in a brochure. But I can't read the brochure and we weren't given any oral information. (18 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

b. Guardians and lawyers

Children who arrive alone in Belgium are allocated a guardian and a lawyer who are supposed to help them out. According to the children who speak in this report, the involvement of these two 'figures' is variable. The children often have the impression of being alone during the various stages of their procedure. It is not very easy to go to the Immigration Office alone, because you do not know the way or the country's language. Several children have even had to walk for a long time to find the Immigration Office or the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons.

It is not easy for them to take trains to go to a city they do not know. Their guardian or lawyer has not always prepared them. The children said that they were missing information on the procedure and that they are not always informed about the decisions taken.

They told me to go there alone. I got confused when I was there, close to the Office. There are a lot of entries, a lot of exits, I didn't know what to do. I walked around with my child all day long. My guardian came to fetch me at the Gare du Nord, then, after the appointment, she left. I didn't even know where to buy the tickets, where the platform was. It went very badly. To find the Gare du Nord, find the right platform, buy my ticket and go back to the centre, it took me more than three hours. (16 years old, mother)

Half of the children seem to have a good relationship with their guardian

My guardian is nice. (8 years old, girl, Guinea)

My guardian came here, took me to the interview and took me back. (17 years old, girl, Guinea)

The other half of the children don't have a good relationship with their guardian. They are disappointed by the lack of trust and the fact that they don't listen. The guardians are seldom there (some children have only seen them once) and they don't inform them of the procedure. Some children would like to change guardian, but they don't know how.

I've changed guardian three times. I don't know who I can trust anymore. (16 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

My guardian never comes to the centre. One day, he was supposed to come, but he never came. He didn't even apologise. (16 years old, girl, Morocco)

c. The interpreter

The handful of children who spoke on this subject consider that the interpreter did not always understand their story or that they did not play their role. Some even find that the interpreter interferes in the procedure.

At the Immigration Office, the interpreter does the commissioner's job, but not his own job as an interpreter. They say to us, "It's not true, you're not 16 or 17 years old. You're 18 years old". By doing that, they're not interpreters anymore. (17 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

d. Age tests

For some of them, this test is not fair and symbolises a sort of mistrust regarding their story. The young people find that this test isn't reliable. It can be upsetting, because it sometimes modifies the perception of their own story and casts a doubt on their word. This test raises many tensions. Some children are therefore given an age that is older or younger than the age they stated upon arrival.

I did the age test when I arrived. I was 16 at the time, I had to do the test. After four months at the centre, I did the test again. Everyone was 19 years old then and one

of the young people who was 20, was estimated as being 16 years old. (19 years old boy, Afghanistan)

1.3 The large reception centres

a. Constant changes

The majority of the children we met had been shunted from one reception centre to another. A young boy explained that he had been in four centres since his arrival in Belgium. This fragmented reception doesn't encourage the children's integration in their local environment. Especially when certain refugee children don't feel sufficiently informed about how the centres work, which complicates their adaptation. Added to all that are the linguistic problems. Some French-speaking children were sent to Flanders, thus increasing their feeling of isolation. Others were moved from a French-speaking centre to a Dutch-speaking one (or vice versa). Each time, they had to relearn the language, find a new school, make new friends, deal with a new social environment and, sometimes, new rules.

The people at my old centre weren't nice to me. The boys were nasty. No one spoke French. They spoke Flemish. I was all alone there, it was difficult. (8 years old, girl, Guinea)

At the beginning, I found it difficult to understand how the centre worked. You come from another centre, you don't know anyone, and no one is there to advise you. In the other place, they rang a bell when it was time to eat. Here, there are set mealtimes. But I didn't know. I missed several meals and I didn't eat for a day. Then I asked people and now I understand better. (16 years old, girl, Guinea)

I've been in the centre for three years and in Belgium for eight years. I've been in four centres, including one in Flanders. I was in a social centre for four years. (12 years old, boy, Guinea)

Some children who arrived alone do nevertheless appreciate going through a referral centre when they arrived in Belgium:

I think it's good to be in a centre in the beginning, and to meet people with experience of living here, to start learning to speak French. If I had lived alone when I arrived, I wouldn't have met anyone. (18 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

b. Pocket money

Pocket money is a source of concern for all teenagers, and all the more so for young exiles who feel isolated and receive no 'extras'. The children speak freely about this subject. They receive 7.40 euros in pocket money a week and consider it to be very little. Some would like to buy food, sweet drinks, clothes, a telephone card, or even a public transport ticket or do sports outside the

centre. But they can't. 7.40 euros does not give them any room for manoeuvre. With such a small amount of money, they consider they can't do anything.

We need a bit of money to phone, for clothes, food. (16 years old, boy, Somalia)

I had no tickets left to go to the gym and I was told to pay, it wasn't possible. (18 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

c. Erratic support

According to the interviews conducted with the children, help given by the educators at the reception centres is very erratic. Some children are very grateful for the support that the staff at the centres give them every day. Others are not quite of the same opinion and complain of a real lack of support. They mention shortcomings in the information given to them. A group of young people emphasise the lack of respect towards them from authoritarian educators. One boy thinks that those who behave badly may get better support. A young girl says that she was completely left to her own devices. All these difficulties are exacerbated when they are experienced by unaccompanied minors.

Lieve at Fedasil is nice. At least she helps me. (15 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

In Belgium, I like my educator! She's the person I like the most in Belgium. (17 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

We would like the educators to stop giving us orders, to be polite, nice, respectful and understanding, that they listen more, that they support the young people with their plans. They should put more trust in the young people. We should be able to get advice when we need it and only when we need it, they should stop giving us orders. The adults should be more respectful to the children. (Group of young people between 8-17 years old, from Afghanistan, Guinea, DRC, Cameroon, Burundi, Morocco, Brazil, Algeria)

In the centre where I was, there weren't enough educators for the unaccompanied foreign minors, I had become completely independent. (15 years old, girl, Burundi)

d. The large centres: living environments and tensions

Refugee and migrant children are highly critical of the large reception centres. Many negative elements were expressed by the children. These large structures aren't adapted to their age. These centres are considered as 'depressing, violent and dirty'. Many children are unhappy about the resulting crowding in the centre, the violence, the fights and the fact that there are several people to a room, mixing with adults, putting up with the noise day and night. The children complain about not being able to sleep and, subsequently, not being able to concentrate at school. Unaccompanied children would like tailor-made support in small structures. As for children

accompanied by their parents, when they have spent many years in a reception centre, they express the simple desire for a 'normal' family life, in a flat or in small reception structures, far from the large centres.

It's an enormous centre here and things aren't as good. For example, the children are a lot more emotional here. Some children suffer emotionally because it's depressing. (15 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

The first year was the most difficult. I slept in a big centre with four people in the same room. (18 years old, boy, Syria)

It's dirty in the centre. There are fights all the time here. The centre is crazy and dirty. Crazy because there are problems sometimes. The problems are the adults. They argue. I'd like to live in a flat. (10 years old, girl, Chechnya)

We need support. We have already experienced a lot of things and it's good to live in a calmer environment where adults help and support us. Even if we don't always like it, we need to be encouraged to go to school, go to bed on time and respect the rules. (15 years old, boy, Syria)

I would like to go to a host family. (15 years old, girl, Guinea)

I live in a centre with my family. I sleep in a room with my mum, my sister and my older brother. It's difficult, because my brother is already older. I don't go out of the room much, because there are so many people in this centre. I would prefer to live in a house. (15 years old, girl, Syria)

1.4 School

The children like school. They all want to learn French or Dutch, and all of them express the desire to start or continue their studies. This is actually what they are doing, because in Belgium, education is a right for all children, regardless of their migratory status. Children who speak one of the national languages and who haven't dropped out of school, can directly attend a normal class. For the others, getting up to speed and learning the language are done in a class for new arrivals (DASPA/OKAN classes).

Children who have suffered major trauma, or those who live in a large reception centre, find learning the language and returning to school difficult. The length of the school day, the lack of sleep and the pace of the lessons can cause adaptation problems.

It's difficult to learn a new language. (15 years old, girl, Argentina)

The school day is too long. (16 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

It's chaos at the centre. Many people do what they like and make noise late into the night. It's very difficult, because I have to study and get up to go to school. I fall asleep late and I'm often tired in the morning. (14 years old, boy, Syria)

School is difficult, because I have a lot of problems and I can't get to sleep and it's difficult to go to school. (15 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

a. The children like school

Despite the difficulties, all these children like school and its reassuring environment! School helps them to overcome the traumas they have suffered and provides hope for the future

I get support from the support workers and teachers. They don't hit you when you do something wrong, like in Afghanistan. They're nice. (15 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

I like school, speaking French. (12 years old, boy, DRC)

The children all appreciate the DASPA/ OKAN* classes and willingly learn French or Dutch.

I think it's a good idea to have DASPA classes in Belgium. (15 years old, boy, Brazil)

I learn a lot of things at school, it's really good! I know all the children in the OKAN class but not all the children in the other classes. It's difficult when you leave the OKAN classes. You miss OKAN. They speak quickly in the other classes. (15 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

b. Not easy to make Belgian friends

The children would like more contact with young Belgians of their age. This would help them to learn the language and extend their network. However, the DASPA/OKAN classes mean that they are separated from the other classes. And some migrant or refugee children sometimes encounter hostility, or mistrust, from Belgian pupils.

In the OKAN classes, we're separated from the others. It doesn't really matter. But it upsets my friend. During an OKAN course, another pupil said to her, "You're an OKAN, you're not at home here". Why do we have to be separated in this way? In my school, the 'normal' pupils have a break between 11.15 a.m. and us at 12.45 p.m. I would like to have a break at the same time as them. (15 years old, girl, Angola)

c. What special needs are there

Those children who haven't been to school for many years, or those who arrive at the end of the school year, need more support after school or during the holidays.

School is very difficult for me. I never went to school in my country. I would like someone to help me think about my future so that I can succeed. I would like help with my homework after school. It's very difficult for me to make any plans for the future. I'm scared of not succeeding, of failing at school. (14 years old, girl, Syria)

I'll be going to school. I don't know how it works here. I can't say anything for the moment. When I arrived, I was simply told that I was going to be enrolled for the new school year in September, because it was currently the exam period. I told the volunteer I wanted to continue school, and she offered me maths and French lessons during the month of June. I don't know if all the young people receive this help. Everyone has their own ideas and needs. But it would be good to talk about it to every young person and explain properly how the classes work here. Talk about it upon arrival. (16 years old, girl, Guinea)

1.5 Leisure activities

Just like all children around the world, migrant and refugee children like to play. Playing, doing a leisure activity or sport are marvellous ways for young people to develop. They are real tools to overcome hardships, regain interest in the joys of life and show resilience. It is also through leisure activities and sport that children form links with the country's inhabitants and integrate with its social fabric. A few children have the chance to practice a sport or an activity. Unaccompanied minors particularly appreciate the support provided by associations who offer them activities on Wednesdays or at the weekend. However, the majority of children indicated that they didn't have the opportunity to practice a sport or have fun outside the reception centres or school. Several boys were prevented from playing football in a club and bitterly regretted it.

a. Children like to play

Football clubs, sport, it's important. (18 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

We have activities in the centre. (9 years old, girl, Albania)

These unaccompanied foreign minors who live independently (alone outside the reception centres) appreciate the associations that allow them to do activities on Wednesdays, at the weekend and during the holidays:

Sometimes on Wednesdays, we go and cook at Mentor-Escale and we demonstrate how to prepare Afghan food. Sometimes, we also eat Belgian or African dishes there. There are often activities and celebrations at MentorEscale to which our friends are also invited. (15 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

b. Difficult access to leisure activities

These children also tell us how difficult it is for them to take part in an activity outside school or the centre.

For me, it's also very difficult to have any leisure activities. I'd love to do sport, I'd like to play basketball or volleyball, but I can't for the moment. (13 years old, girl, Romania)

We can't go on school trips because we don't have any papers. (17 years old, boy, Iran)

The majority of boys would like to play football outside the reception centre. They would like to enrol in a club, take part in training and play matches, but they are prevented from doing so because they have no papers.

I can't play my sport. I'd like to play football, matches. Here, children can't do any sport. We can only do sport here, among ourselves. (12 years old, boy, Guinea)

We can go to football training once a week for an hour or two. We would like to go to all the training sessions and matches. (12 years old, boy, Guinea)

c. Social networks, looking for a good connection

The young people are disappointed that the Internet isn't available in all the centres. Connection to the Internet would offer a window to the world, allow them to look for information but, especially, help them to remain in contact with their family.

There was Wi-Fi for minors at the centre. Wi-Fi is good, because it helps you to stay in contact with your family. (18 years old, boy, Afghanistan)

There was no Wi-Fi at my centre. The computer wasn't working. You couldn't speak with your family and your parents, even if you wanted to speak to them. (16 years old, boy, Somalia)

You have access to a computer for half an hour a week in the large centres, but the computer is so slow and freezes so often that it's practically useless. (15 years old, girl, Syria)

1.6 Isolated teenage mothers

a. Mothers, minors, alone, without a family and in exile, all at the same time

They are 16, 17, 18 years old. They come from Syria, Guinea, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan and Cameroon. They are isolated minors and mothers. Some of them left their country with their baby. Others gave birth in a refugee camp in Greece or Belgium. They are all very vulnerable young women, because they have many issues. There is loneliness on top of the trauma of exile, the lack of family support and the difficulty of assuming the role of mother when they are so young themselves. Many of these mothers are angry. They feel dispossessed of their motherhood, their ability to take care of their child. They would like to make choices for their baby. Be able to buy them clothes, prepare the food of their choice for them. But the lack of money and lack of privacy that prevails in the reception centres causes deep anxiety, making them feel as though their every movement is restricted. These

anxieties resurface when their child is sick and they ask for support. Added to this is a deep feeling of insecurity. Going to school under normal circumstances within this context is an impossible task

b. Large reception centres: the loneliness of the mother

The young mothers who live in large reception centres vent their anger. Some of them feel like prisoners, handcuffed. Others feel depressed. Their accounts, tinged with suffering, reveal the difficulty of living in a large reception centre when you are a mother, a minor, alone, without a family and in exile, all at the same time. All of them would like the chance to be more autonomous. They would like to be allowed to be mothers for their children

You'd die if you spent a day here. You can't cook, you can't treat illnesses, you can't look after your baby. I can tell you, but there the difficulties are endless. We don't choose this life. There are lots of people living here, full of viruses and germs for the babies. This worries me, and I can't sleep. So I pray to my God, because I haven't got anyone. The baby cries, for a long time. I've got no help. I've got no money: 7.40 euros per week for me and 3 euros for the baby. What can you do with 7 euros? My baby doesn't want to eat, the food isn't good. I can only breast-feed, but I haven't got enough. I can't give my child just anything. I've got no money for clothes for the baby. I can't buy anything, because I haven't got any money. We're alone, with our babies, no one can help us. We have to do everything with nothing. (17 years old, Mother)

I haven't got any family. I didn't choose this life. I feel like a prisoner, handcuffed. We have to eat at set hours, 6.00 a.m., 12.00 noon, and if you don't eat then, you don't get any food. For instance, if I'm hungry at 9.00 a.m., there's no food. (17 years old, Mother)

c. The food, the milk, the lack of autonomy

For the young mothers who speak in this report, their baby's food is a priority. They speak of the constraints concerning mealtimes (set times), the milk which isn't adapted to their child, the cost of basic necessities such as water or powdered milk, and the difficulty of getting it. All of them dream of being able to cook for their child. All these stories show that these young mothers sometimes sink into despair faced with the powerlessness and lack of autonomy they suffer on a daily basis.

I have dreams, I dream of cooking what I want for me and for my baby, at whatever time I want and not eating what I'm obliged to eat. I hope someone will hear me, listen to me, in Belgium. (17 years old, Mother)

The food isn't good. For the babies, it isn't good. My baby spits out what I give him. Here, we don't have any money to cook. I'd like to have some money and cook for myself. I haven't got enough money to buy food for the baby. We receive 3 euros a

week for the baby and there are also clothes. I give the baby the food from here, but he has diarrhoea. So I don't take what they give us here anymore, and I have to cook for him and prepare his meals. But it's difficult without enough money. (16 years old, Mother)

The main problem is the food. There's already the issue with the baby milk. Then the baby food. If we want jars, we have to buy them. (16 years old, Mother)

These young mothers talk about the milk which isn't suitable and the water they have to buy to prepare their child's bottle

They gave us some milk that was different to the other milk we received. But the babies were used to it, and so they refused the new milk. When we said something, we were told that the doctor said that it was all okay for the babies. But my baby drinks normal milk. Now its milk for allergies. I've tasted it, it's bitter, my baby doesn't want it. (16 years old, Mother)

In my other centre, you received bottles of water. Here, you have to buy the water for your baby or take it from the water fountain. A carton of water costs 6 euros. You get 11 euros with the baby, you buy food for the baby and afterwards, you have nothing left. (16 years old, Mother)

d. Health

If their children fall ill, the young refugee or migrant mothers are all alone. They have to manage everything, with very little help. They say that no one really listens to them, that there is no support, and that they are extremely tired when their sick babies cry during the night. Some of the young girls are saddened by the fact that they are not taken seriously and that they are even suspected of using their child as an excuse to miss school. All these factors cause stress and have a negative impact on the health of these young mothers. Their accounts reflect an alarming lack of support.

I have to do everything. I have to do everything by myself. I take care of everything. If my little girl is sick, I have to stay with her, no one helps me. For instance, she had spots the day before yesterday, like chickenpox. She was crying, all night long, she was crying. I took her to see the doctor, and he said: "It's nothing serious, go back to your room". (18 years old, Mother)

It's difficult being a mother here at the centre. You don't feel good mentally, you're stressed, and therefore, your child doesn't feel good. (18 years old, Mother)

The baby has something, he's got something on his face and the medication isn't doing anything. No one helps me. I get the impression that I'm not being taken seriously. (17 years old, Mother)

The doors are closed at night, so if the baby vomits, you can't go out and wash it. There's no hot water to wash it. You have to do everything by yourself, without water in the room. (18 years old, Mother)

When we go to the doctor's, they say it's because we don't want to go to school. There's no family to help us. (17 years old, Mother)

I had no support when I gave birth. It was a caesarean, it was very difficult. I feel like crying every day. I don't sleep enough. There's no one here to help us, we have no family. (16 years old, Mother)

The lack of hygiene in the toilets and bathrooms is also of concern to the young mothers.

The bathroom is very dirty. The toilets too. I told the person who cleans that it isn't clean enough. But nobody checks whether the bathroom and the toilets are properly cleaned and if the work has been well-done. There's still excrement sometimes. (17 years old, Mother)

Many of the young mothers criticise the lack of privacy in the reception centres. Their accounts indicate that these young women are frightened for their safety and that of their babies at night. A feeling that is expressed in their fear of leaving their baby during the night when they go to the toilet.

At night, when the educators go home, I have to take my baby with me. When I need to go to the toilet in the night, I take the baby with me. (17 years old, Mother)

I'm scared to leave the baby alone in my room. He might wake up, be frightened and start crying. When you've got everything in the room, you do what you want. Even if the room is small, you can manage in there instead of going out. (17 years old, Mother)

I'm too scared at night and I don't dare to go out at night to go to the toilet. The toilet is close to the educators' office, not in the corridor. (16 years old, Mother)

The centre isn't adapted to me. For instance, you're in your room, you want to go to the toilet, no one can look after the baby, you've no one by your side. You have to leave your room to go to the toilet. If you have everything in the room, you can at least leave your child in the room. I put my baby on my back to go to the toilet, otherwise the baby cries at night. (17 years old, Mother)

We don't have any privacy here either. If I have to go to the toilet at night, I'm wearing shorts, I have to get dressed again and take my baby with me because I'm frightened of leaving it alone. (17 years old, Mother)

e. School

How can you combine life as a mother and life as a student when you are alone and far away from your country? It's the same question every day for these young girls who tell us how difficult it is to get up, go to classes, study and take care of their baby. Their days are very long and exhausting. It is only when their child sleeps that they finally have a bit of time to work and take

care of themselves. Their accounts reveal their loneliness and the need for help, which they talk about candidly.

I've got problems with school. I have to go, and I have to take my daughter to the nursery. Sometimes, someone helps me to go and fetch her. If I'm late for the nursery, the school refuses to let me leave earlier. I have to get up at 6.00 a.m. to get myself and my child ready. I need help so that I'm not late. (18 years old, Mother)

It takes 10-15 minutes to get to the school, which closes at 4.20 p.m. You have to run back, because the nursery closes at 5.00 p.m. (18 years old, Mother)

The nursery at the centre should close at 6.00 p.m. because we don't have time when it's 5.00 p.m. (16 years old, Mother)

When you get back from school, you have to go and take care of your child straight away, you have to feed it, wash it, and when it's asleep, only then can you take care of yourself, you have homework to do. (16 years old, Mother)

2. Children affected by poverty

2.1 Family

a. Challenges for children in care

Some children affected by poverty are placed in care, outside the family unit. Sometimes, they miss their mum and dad. Others absolutely don't want to go home. They say how difficult it is to often have to change institution. But what hurts them the most is that they are sometimes separated from their brothers and sisters.

I've got three brothers and two sisters. I've got a sister who's at boarding school. My two brothers are at boarding school. My little brother is still at home. Mum asked if I could go to the boarding school with my brothers. I'd like to be with them. (6 years old, boy)

It's hard because I've changed institution seven times. I see my family every now and then. I have a mentor family. If I were a politician, I'd like to stay in the same institution all the time and see my parents every now and then. (10 yearw old, boy)

I don't want to go home. I like the centre. And with my sister too. And my brother too. They went to a different institution but I often see them. (6 years old, girl).

It's difficult being in an institution and not seeing my other brothers and sisters very often. (9 years old, girl)

b. Complexity and tradition in families

The majority of children affected by poverty grow up in a family. However, their family structure is complex, owing to the presence or absence of biological parents, the presence of a step-mother or step-father, brothers or sisters, or sometimes a big age difference between the children. Nevertheless, among the majority of children interviewed, the parents have a relatively traditional role. In general, the mother takes care of the housework and the children's education. Although the father is less present in the young people's accounts, he is nonetheless a figure of authority.

I haven't seen my father for three years.

I've got four brothers and two sisters. No, two brothers and four sisters. I've also got three half-brothers and a half-sister.

I'm glad there's someone who brings us up. She tells us not to do this or that, or not to be led astray. My mother knows what's good for me.

We hardly see him. He works at night, in the restaurant. He sleeps during the day so we don't see him a lot.

c. Respect for and conflict with other generations

The majority of children respect parental authority. In their opinion, parents must encourage them, love them, protect them and set limits for them. Even if the family is important, respect isn't always unconditional. Many teenagers talk about family breakdown and conflicts. They expect their parents to respect and support them.

For me, it's important to feel loved by your parents, who should set limits. They must show that they love their children.

Respect. It's obligatory for us, we're forced to, it must go both ways, parents have all the rights but if they want respect, then they have to give it, we should be respected.

If you're mistreated or exploited at home, if you're aren't well treated and they don't respect you, you shouldn't respect them either.

Teenagers whose parents are of foreign origin talk about other generation conflicts and say that when parents are from another generation and come from somewhere else, it is difficult to talk to them and meet their expectations. They feel like they are living between two worlds.

Culture in the family, respecting your origins, religion, it's difficult (in relation to wearing a veil), your parents are from another generation and come from somewhere else, they have another mentality, taboos, things that are forbidden. It's difficult with friends, to go out or not, to be Belgian but not too Belgian either.

Parents can't force their children to marry, I can't understand people who give in...; I'd run away. It's complicated, you have to try and convince your parents, maybe accept.

d. Insecure income

Although some state that they've never lacked anything, children affected by poverty are aware of their parents' precarious state of employment. For some of them, there is no work-related family income. For others, there is only one income. The majority of children are aware of the need to spend carefully, to set priorities and save on expenses. What is more worrying is that according to some, there are families who go without healthcare because they have no money.

Our parents take care of everything, we eat every day, we have a roof above our heads and clothes. It's just that they're not brand-name clothes.

My mum's at home but she's ill.

My mum is handicapped.

My dad is unemployed.

Everyone has the right to receive healthcare but we can't afford it, you have to pay. There are families who go without healthcare.

e. Debt

The majority of teenagers condemn the fact that the income of the poorest households isn't better protected and that social benefits are constantly being reduced. Some even go so far as to criticise the fact that when you live in a poor neighbourhood, you are often offered the possibility of buying on credit.

Poverty will increase because there are no jobs, unemployment benefit will disappear, maybe we'll be poor. We have to help, support each other, organise demonstrations.

At least they help you at the social assistance centre (CPAS). There aren't any organisations like there used to be. Foodbanks are disappearing again.

If you say you come from a certain neighbourhood, people quickly assume that you're poor and that you don't have the means to pay. Then they offer you the possibility of paying on credit.

f. Overcrowded or squalid housing

The children don't always seem satisfied with the size or sanitary conditions of their housing. It is clearly too small and sometimes, "there's mould on the walls" or "it's raining inside". The children often share their room with their brothers or sisters. And to study, they have to share the kitchen table and the bed.

We only have one desk. It's really annoying at the moment with the exams coming up. We can't both study in the bedroom. One of us goes on the kitchen table, and the other one on the bed.

But we have a really small bedroom and we haven't got a desk at all. We just study inside.

And there's mould on the walls in the bedroom.

It rains inside at our house.

g. Extreme situations

The children and the young people think that disadvantaged people don't always have the chance to change their situation on a financial level. They understand that poverty can lead to extreme situations.

There are more homeless people, and more thefts because these people don't have any other choice.

It's normal, what would you do? No work, no money, no CPAS, no income. What would you do, beg for EUR 2 a day or take more risks to have more money in one go?

2.2 Friends

a. Helping you to laugh and grow up!

For children affected by poverty, friends are the people they would miss the most if they had to leave their neighbourhood. They help them to laugh, grow up and feel good. Friends very often come from the same neighbourhood and social group.

Friends are sometimes more important than family because they are usually people from your own generation, so you share the same stages in life. You evolve together.

I think you feel much, much better when you're with young people who are in the same situation. You have the impression that you can say what you want and be yourself.

b. Boys and girls

Girls and boys have romantic relationships. These relationships are often short-lived and the partners with whom these young people want to have fun, often change. Sexuality is important but young people say they don't have enough information on the subject. At home, it's often taboo.

Sexuality is more important than before but parents talk less about it, we don't talk about it enough. You're informed about it in Dutch-speaking schools, but this isn't the case for the French-speakers, you can't talk about it in school, and it's often taboo at home. We need to talk about it.

With girls, you can more easily talk about it than with boys. You can't say to a boy: look, I've got this or that problem. However, you can tell a girl that kind of thing.

c. Youth clubs

This type of neighbourhood organisation is like a home for the children. They feel welcome here, meet up with their friends and educators who listen. They take part in a variety of activities. These clubs are also a place to escape stress. It is a place where they can have fun and feel free. Finally, it is sometimes the only place outside school that certain girls go to.

It's really cool here. It's a shame that I'm only here every two weeks. Here, you meet friends who support you. All we do is have fun, laugh, and make some noise. The educators here are really nice.

After school, you can get rid of all your stress here.

The educator is also mentioned as an extra reason to come here. They are real people of trust and a reference. Young people don't only talk to them about their problems, but also about their little secrets.

We know the educator who has been here for a long time already.

There's good support here.

2.3 Leisure activities and free time

a. In the neighbourhood

Children affected by poverty spend a lot of time playing with other children in the neighbourhood (playing football in the park, going to the playground or the youth club). They also like playing with brothers and sisters. Some children are members of a sports club or a youth organisation. But there aren't many of them who do that. Others don't do any kind of sport outside school.

I like playing football in the park, I like going on the swing. I like going to school to play with my friends.

I go outside. I play with a ball. I play on the swing. I play on the slide. And that's all.

Once I went to the swimming pool with my mum. I don't do any activities outside school. We went bowling once.

b. At home

The children also spend a lot of time at home alone, at the computer or on the phone, 'remotely' in contact with other people. They especially use social media to maintain their friendships. A friend or two sometimes come round to their house. The girls also mention helping out with the housework.

The ideal amount of leisure time would be four hours a day, to play outside and on the PlayStation.

Mobile phones are better. Everyone plays on their mobile.

I go on the computer a lot. I watch TV first and then I go on the computer for the rest of the evening.

Sometimes I don't want to clean, but I do it all the same because I have to.

c. Student job

A few young people work during their free time to earn money and be independent, others out of respect for their parents and to support them a bit financially. However, it isn't easy to find a job. Not all young people know exactly where or how to look.

I can't find one. They all say "we'll call you", but... (he shrugs their shoulders)

2.4 The neighbourhood

a. Poverty

Children affected by poverty associate the neighbourhood with their family, their friends and their free time. However, they mention many concerns regarding poverty in their neighbourhood; they all talk about the rubbish lying around and the dilapidated state of the buildings.

When you go towards town, you can see nice buildings but here in the neighbourhood, the houses are uglier.

Brasschaat, it's a big difference. But take a walk in Merksem and here, in X street. And don't look at the people but at the houses.

b. Living environment and crime

The children are highly critical of the neighbourhood they live in. Many negative elements were expressed by the children. They say they don't feel safe there. Many children complain of intolerable situations, such as dealers, drug addiction, alcohol and smuggled goods. The children also talk about gangs, prostitution, old men who chat you up in the parks, and disgusting behaviour. But also violence, crime, robberies, thefts and numerous attacks.

You grow up in the neighbourhood, you survive there, you protect yourself the best you can. In the park, we play among the dealers, trafficking, dog mess, gangs. The neighbourhood is also full of robberies, thefts, attacks, hookah pipes, weed, drugs, alcohol, arguments. The shops, corner shops, thefts, snack bars. The neighbourhood is all that but there are also fights, prostitution, homeless people, refugees. Then the young people, myself, the lack of quiet, the filth.

I don't like dealers, the smell of hash, the works, the old men who chat you up. I don't like the smell of the toilets, the alcoholics, the rubbish, the containers, the disgusting behaviour.

c. More safety

The children would like more safety. They express the simple desire to be able to go and play outside like children, to be able to study in a calm environment and sleep at night. They would like more police officers in the neighbourhood and close to the places where children play. However, many of them point out that the presence of the police should be to protect children, not to scare them or carry out checks.

The police don't come to our neighbourhood often enough.

There are a lot of drugs, a lot of drug addicts. We'd like more police officers because now, they don't do anything. I want the police to do more because they hardly ever come. They're afraid to come to our neighbourhood.

I feel uncomfortable walking about without my ID card. I'm afraid the police will stop me and beat me because I haven't got my card. If I were mayor, children wouldn't be obliged to walk around with their ID card.

d. Support to resist

Children affected by poverty require more support to resist the negative temptations of their neighbourhood. Some talk about friends, acquaintances, young people in the neighbourhood who have "turned out badly". They say they need help to resist these influences, "so as not to do anything stupid" and "to be able to say no".

There are some people in my family who have taken the wrong path, you see them everywhere. Maybe 90 % of this neighbourhood is on the wrong path. But nothing is done about it.

Everyone knows it's a bad neighbourhood. Outside, it's a bad street. All that, it's problems when you go out. The people are bad. They look for arguments, they drag you into it. Into a fight, for instance, or into doing something, for instance.

e. More road safety

The children are concerned about the dangerous driving in the neighbourhood. They talk about drivers who drive much too fast in streets where children are crossing, the lack of traffic lights and cycle paths, but also the lack of public transport.

People drive like crazy round here. We need more traffic lights. More buses in the street. Less cars so you can play in the street.

There should be more cycle paths. We haven't got any cycle paths in the neighbourhood.

f. More green spaces and cleanliness

The children would like the infrastructure to be improved in their neighbourhood by providing green spaces and installing bins.

Yes, more green spaces, a better view, more light in the world, more trees because we're nothing without nature. Planting trees because they provide oxygen.

There should be more bins because it's really dirty here. There are hardly any bins.

g. More activities and mobility

The children would also like to have more activities in their neighbourhood. In this case, they mean more playgrounds for the little ones, open parks, small basketball courts and football pitches. As regards activities outside the neighbourhood, the children depend on their parents (who aren't always

available or who don't always have a car) or public transport. They would like public transport to be cheaper for children over the age of 12.

I want more activities for children and more parks. There are parks but no slides, no playgrounds.

I'd like a good football pitch or a place to play football in our neighbourhood. Swings and playgrounds for the children.

I pay in the metro but some people can't pay. I think the metro's too expensive.

h. More participation

The children also want to participate in social life and take part in life in the neighbourhood. They also want more participation. They don't feel involved and they have the feeling they aren't allowed to say anything. The children recommend creating more meeting places for the neighbourhood's inhabitants: a neighbourhood party, an event for people to meet or a day devoted to a visit of the neighbourhood, for instance.

The neighbourhood's inhabitants should learn to get to know each other. When they walk past each other in the street, they could say hello. We thought about a neighbourhood party or an event for people to meet.

i. Leaving the neighbourhood

Many children would like to live abroad. Others would like to live elsewhere in Belgium. Some clearly say that they want to leave their neighbourhood.

If I left here, I definitely wouldn't miss my neighbourhood.

I'd like to study to become an architect or a dentist. I'd like to live in student accommodation with my best friend. I'd also like to live in another country, ideally in London.

I'd also like to study and live in a town like Leuven. Ideally, I'd like to have a good job. I'd like to study and work at the same time.

2.5 School

This point is developed in detail in the chapter devoted to equal opportunities at school.

a. Unequal opportunities

Children affected by poverty are aware of the big difference between school results and the opportunities available to children from a disadvantaged background and those from wealthier ones. Children whose parents are foreign, criticise the ethnic, social and gender stereotypes. All the children condemn the fact that schools located in poor neighbourhoods don't have the

same level of quality as schools located in wealthy neighbourhoods and that some teachers have lower educational expectations of them. This contributes to reinforcing inequalities in school results.

Learning difficulties don't only concern 'Belgians'. In our case, it's called laziness. They have the right to feel ill but we don't.

There are 'dustbin' schools and posh schools. A 'dustbin school' is discriminating because they throw in all those who cause problems in class. More specialised teachers are needed, who are stricter with the children who muck around. In a posh school, the pupils have more rights, they have more outings than us, they're more advanced in subjects, the classes are better, stricter, better organised.

b. Cost of education

School plays a fundamental role in getting children out of poverty. When school is mentioned, children affected by poverty talk indirectly about the cost of education. Children are sometimes prevented from studying certain subjects because of the family's income. The children also explain that the material conditions at home sometimes make it very difficult to study.

If the school asks you for money and your parents don't give it to you, you can't pay.

We have a really small bedroom and we haven't got a desk at all. We just study inside.

c. Academic orientation and relegation

The children interviewed consider that they have very little choice. Very often, it is their parents who decide on their academic and professional options, sometimes according to the teachers' advice. They would like to have more information about this and recommend waiting until the age of 16 to make this choice in a more informed way.

The choice of studies isn't a right. Two-thirds of parents decide instead of the children. If we could choose, we would change. In our group, there are those who are studying care-giving, construction skills, economics and languages. We don't know what to choose when we're in the third year of secondary school. We should choose at the age of 16, it's not fair that you can't change anymore afterwards (between the 5th and the 6th), if you want to take a different option, you're made to fail the year and start again, it's not right, you've lost a year, it's demoralising.

Some young people don't like being relegated to certain subjects and the bad reputation of vocational education. They feel like they are studying inferior subjects.

Yes, but studies are important. Some say that vocational isn't good enough, but I don't care what people say. For me, vocational studies are worthwhile.

d. Repeating the year and dropping out of school

Many children lag a long way behind at school and have to repeat the year. Their opinions are quite varied on this point. Some see it as a necessary evil. Others don't see the point. Several teenagers talk about dropping out of school. Some have dropped out because they encountered too many difficulties at school or they were expelled. Others mention that they dropped out to go and work. It wasn't a choice.

I was expelled from school in the middle of the year. No other school would take me. So I never went back to school.

If you're between 12 and 16 years old, you don't have any money and problems at home, you have to work and stop school.

Last year, my mother was pregnant. That's why my sister often had to stay at home. After being absent four times without a doctor's note, the police came knocking at the door.

e. Stress and bullying

The majority of children affected by poverty say that they find school difficult because of the long hours, and the pressure caused by homework and exams. But many of the children also talk about the bullying they suffer. Even when they dare to talk about it, they have the impression that neither the teachers nor their parents listen to them or take them seriously.

I don't like school because you have to work all the time. I prefer doing practical exercises.

If I tell the teachers that I'm being hit, sometimes they don't do anything.

I can tell my parents anything but they don't understand everything. When I tell my parents that I'm being bullied, my mum says "so what?".

f. Teachers

The children consider teachers to be key players in education and would like them to be dedicated, competent, patient and capable of supporting pupils with special educational needs. The children complain about not having enough teachers and a high level of absenteeism. In some cases, the children feel they aren't "understood, listened to or taken into consideration" by the teachers. They would like to have more teachers who are familiar with and understand their reality, and who give them the confidence and skills to be ambitious, succeed in their studies and face problems.

We don't have the right teachers. They should be trained to work with children. All our teachers come from outside Brussels. They have no knowledge of our reality. They have a different mentality. If they came from the neighbourhood, they would

have more experience with young people. Those who come from the countryside are shocked.

Some of the teachers are discouraging. They regularly tell us that we aren't up to the general curriculum (secondary and higher).

It is necessary to be better trained and better informed. Children should be better informed at home and at school about today's problems, so they can find a good job, be independent, not have any problems finding accommodation, an insufficient salary, living with the fear of falling ill, educating your child. We must be given the skills to manage problems.

3. Equity at school

1.1 Teachers

a. Teachers who make a difference

The children consider teachers to be key players at school and would like them to be dedicated, competent, patient and capable of supporting them. Many children consider that the teachers do quality work. They like to talk about the ones who have helped them, who have listened to them and who have made all the difference in their lives!

I had a construction skills teacher who helped me a lot. I still see them regularly. He gave me a huge amount of support. He listened to me whenever I had a problem. When I had nothing to eat at midday, he would go and get me a sandwich. He would drop me off at home in the evening when I'd been in trouble.

A good teacher is someone you can talk to when you have problems. Someone who sees when you're having difficulty following and makes more of an effort with you. Someone who understands you, who understands your situation at home and really cares about you. Someone who gives you space when you're being difficult.

b. Difficult relations between teachers and children

Even though a lot of children are very grateful to their teachers, many also complain of difficult relations. They feel they aren't "understood, heard or taken into consideration". They believe that some teachers don't always realise the difficulties some children have at home. The majority of children also don't like the fact that schools are so results-oriented. They recommend more time to talk to their teachers and to have lessons better adapted to each person's abilities and interests.

These days, teachers live far too much in their own little world. They don't know how hard life is.

The teachers listen to us but they don't do a lot to help us. They're not familiar with and don't understand our problems or our situation at home. This causes communication problems and therefore a bad atmosphere, which leads to bad results.

Some teachers don't teach well. They test us on things we've never learnt. And the lessons aren't much fun. I mean if they were more lively, then we'd learn much faster. Future primary school teachers should be better trained in their job so that they're nicer to us.

c. A difficult job

The children show understanding and empathy towards teachers and their work conditions. They think that teaching is a difficult job which isn't sufficiently recognised and is badly paid. They also worry about the poor work conditions. Some children recommend that teachers be better paid, trained, assessed and supported. Others recommend reducing the number of pupils per class.

There are no good or bad pupils. There are only good or bad teachers. Unfortunately, it's a job that has been undervalued and undermined owing to pay conditions, work conditions, the constant workload, etc. If something were to be changed, it should be the teachers work conditions above all.

Teachers should be paid properly. Make this job attractive. It's normal that no-one wants to work in schools that are falling apart. That they all prefer to give private lessons and earn a lot of money.

Teachers should be better paid. But they should receive more assessments.

The classes are too big: therefore, the teachers have less time to offer support adapted to children who have personal problems. It's a serious problem and it's not taken into consideration.

d. Shortage of teachers and absenteeism

The shortage of teachers or long periods of absence are detrimental to the children's learning processes. It is particularly trying for children whose teacher is absent for many months without being replaced.

Our teacher was absent for four or five months. Then a supply teacher came. We worked on what we knew according to the files that were left; what we didn't know, we didn't do. I think all that has to stop: if the teacher isn't there or takes time off, they have to inform the school. They have to inform the school so that the headmistress can do something. Maybe get another teacher or do something, find a solution.

e. Feeling of inequality and unfairness

Inequality and the feeling of unfairness. Nearly all the children consulted mention it. In their opinion, it is incorrect to think that all children are equal at school. Some children talk about the humiliations they have experienced. Others speak of teachers who have lost all their motivation and their patience. One child said they felt they had been completely abandoned.

Children must be treated fairly and equally.

Some teachers aren't respectful towards us and make fun of us in front of the others.

How do you recognise a bad teacher? When you don't understand something and you say to them "I don't understand the exercise". And they reply "It doesn't matter. Forget about it".

f. Stereotypes according to origin

Several children talked about ethnic stereotypes. They said that some teachers tend to be prejudiced against "foreign children" and expect less of them. According to them, this attitude helps reinforce inequalities in school results. Many children condemn the fact that these stereotypes affect their self-esteem and their ability to learn.

There are two children: a Flemish one and a foreign one. If the Flemish one has six fails, they're told "Ok, we'll help you and support you and you'll pass the year". And they're allowed to pass the year. If that's a foreign child, they're simply told "No, that won't work. Go to technical".

Marie and Abdel both have 4 out of 10. The teacher says to Marie "You can do it, you can do it, you can do it. Don't worry, it will be better next time. You're capable of it". And to Abdel "Yes, Abdel... things aren't looking very good for you".

I get the impression that they look at where I come from and not who I am.

g. The perfect teacher

The children interviewed want teachers who listen, are respectful and who are interested in each child's individual situation. They want to be "better educated and informed". They would like teachers to think outside the traditional programmes and make the lessons more interesting. They recommend remedial classes taught by the teachers and the chance for children to participate more in school.

Someone you can talk to, who gives you a bit more attention when necessary, and with whom you can perhaps take remedial classes.

Someone who makes the lesson fun, who doesn't always teach the same subject. Someone calm, who doesn't treat us like toddlers.

A teacher who gets us to participate when a decision has to be made.

During a debate, a group of young people made a list for the ideal teacher. This teacher is also an open person who has experience and who hasn't waited until they were in the classroom to find out whether they like working with children or not.

Make sure you acquire experience of contact with young people before you find yourself in front of a class. This will allow you to find out if teaching and contact with young people is really your cup of tea. As a teacher, also be open to meeting people.

h. Unequal help outside school

Several children mentioned that help with homework is also a source of inequality: some children have parents who help them while others have to manage by themselves.

Children with two working parents get everything they want. If these children have problems at school, their parents pay for private lessons. As for us, when we have problems at school, we have to manage by ourselves.

The children and young people who aren't lucky enough to have parents to help them recommend individual help with homework or remedial classes at school. Some would also like to be able to talk to their teachers directly when they don't understand the contents of the lessons.

At school, I like the fact that there's a lady who looks after us and goes over the subjects again that we haven't understood properly.

I'd just like the teachers to give us remedial classes at school.

i. Support staff and the PMS centre

The relationship with support staff is also a determining factor as regards atmosphere and the children's well-being at school. Many children complain about the unqualified staff who supervise after-school care or mealtimes. A lot of children consider that the majority of these people don't have the skills to work with children. Some children also complain about the lack of support staff.

I don't like one of the caretakers, one day she insulted me.

I don't like the supervisors. Sometimes I don't feel well when I'm told off.

I don't like it when we're punished and we're told to stand against the wall during playtime because I think everyone has the right to relax and have fun outside the classroom.

We need more supervisors. We'd like more supervision at lunchtime and at 16:00.

Some young people think that the psychological medical and social centre (PMS) doesn't provide enough of the right kind of support. They have the feeling that they are asked too many questions about their family circumstances and that the advice given doesn't always correspond to the problems they encounter at school.

I don't trust the PMS. For me, it's just an extension of the teachers.

1.2 Children's well-being

a. Time to learn and to play

School causes quite a lot of stress in many children and teenagers. They say they feel under pressure, and even stressed, because of homework, tests and exams. Some think that a more 'reassuring' atmosphere in class could alleviate this feeling: they recommend more time to learn and play. Several children also recommend putting an end to the points system.

I'd really like to have a bit more time for the exams and tests. We don't have enough time to answer, so sometimes we forget some things.

I feel really stressed, the children don't have enough playtime.

I think the points system is a problem. When children don't do well, their parents often try to console them by saying that the points don't matter. But the problem is, the points do matter. If you don't get good marks at school, they think you're lazy, rebellious or stupid.

b. Too much bullying

The majority of children we met talked about bullying. One young girl told us that she dropped out of school because she was sick of being bullied. A boy said that he was bullied so much that he couldn't concentrate anymore. Several children condemn the fact that the only solution they were offered was to go into special education. Such answers do nothing to encourage self-confidence in children and certainly don't solve the problem. Teachers and schools should be strict in this respect, because children suffer a lot. This is all the more difficult for the most vulnerable children who don't feel supported either at school or at home.

My headmaster didn't do anything about the bullying. One day, I was in the third or fourth year of secondary school and I thought that the headmaster had come to the classroom to intervene. But instead, he said in front of the whole class "Wouldn't it be better if you went into special education?". Several pupils started to laugh. The teacher didn't say anything because the headmaster was there. So you lose all your self-confidence. A year and a half later, I dropped out of school. I was sick of being bullied.

I was often bullied at playtime, it was just before the maths or the reading comprehension lesson. I was already having difficulties with these subjects and the bullying at playtime was affecting my concentration. Therefore, this prevented me from doing my best in class, because all I could do was think about this problem. When I told my teacher, she replied "Your problems have got nothing to do with that, you don't understand anything about the subject. We're going to put you in special education, and there you'll learn it".

There was a lot of bullying at school and that made me aggressive. The PMS centre wanted to help and I had to go and talk to them. But afterwards, the bullies thought I was a 'grass' and it became even worse.

The children think a lot about bullying and see many solutions to this problem. They would like to be able to speak to their teacher or organise activities to learn how to deal with bullying in a preventive manner. Others recommend more supervisors. Finally, a child who pesters other children explains how sad he is to see them cry. He would also like help to change his behaviour.

Children who have a problem or are the victims of bullying must be able to go to the teacher to speak about it and try to find a solution.

Organise more activities to make pupils understand that no-one is better than anyone else.

More supervision is required during playtime, against bullies.

When I pester someone, I sometimes feel sad afterwards because the boy or girl I'm annoying starts to cry. Then I stop doing it.

c. Not enough participation

The children are aware of their role in the learning process and understand that they share the 'responsibility' with the teachers to create a positive learning environment. Many children would like to participate more in the decision-making processes in their school. Others think that the classes should be taught in a more participatory way. Some teenagers following vocational studies think it is a shame that some young people only can only express themselves in a negative way. They talk about pupils who mess around, shout and walk up and down between the seats, throw dangerous objects in the middle of the lesson, which means the lesson can't continue and it is impossible to create a positive participatory environment.

I want to be able to say more, because the teachers boss us around too much.

The teachers shouldn't allow themselves to get cross, they should make the pupils interested in the subject, arouse their enthusiasm.

Teachers should be able to arrange time for their pupils. At my school, they had a lot of trouble keeping control of the class. The pupils were absolute pigs, they messed around, shouted, walked up and down between the seats, chatted with each other, wrote on the walls, threw dowels and screws.

d. Infrastructure and hygiene

The way the school is organised and its overall appearance has an impact on the children's well-being. Many children who go to school in an urban environment have their lessons in old buildings, with not enough room in

class or in the playground. The children recommend cleaner classrooms, more greenery, more spacious classrooms and playgrounds, more colours and more games.

The classrooms need to be cleaner.

We'd like more space in the classroom and more colours in the school.

We'd like more games.

I'd like to have more greenery.

According to the children's accounts, some schools also don't seem to meet the most basic safety standards anymore. This little girl talks about her classroom, mentioning walls covered in damp, broken windows in winter and her fear that the ceiling will collapse on her.

In the 4th year, there was a lot of damp in the walls and ceilings. In winter, the windows were broken. We had to keep our coats on in class. We received a container halfway through the year. It's my brother who organised it and we finished the year in there.

It's truly impossible. My sister was scared to go to school because she thought the roof would fall on her. And she wasn't the only one to be afraid, the teacher was afraid too. I went to see the headmistress. She told me "Our school is listed as an urgent case but... it isn't top of the list". I said "Really, there's worse than this?!"

The hygiene and cleanliness of the toilets are also important points in the children's opinion. In many schools, the toilets are dirty and there is no paper, soap or towels. Some children prefer to wait all day because the toilets are so dirty.

I hardly ever go to the toilet at school because it's too dirty.

I prefer having stomach ache from morning to evening the whole year round rather than having to go to the toilet at school.

All these negative factors are an extra scratch on top of the already wounded personality of socially vulnerable children, which have significant consequences on their well-being and health.

I don't deserve to go to a school like that.

1.3 Unequal opportunities

a. A waste of talent

Changing school, being moved from the general curriculum to the technical, vocational or specialised one, repeating the year, the wrong choice of studies, a lack of information, demotivation, and repeated failures are part of many

socially vulnerable children's daily lives. Far from trivial, these situations have a lasting impact on the children's ability to learn and their self-esteem, and on society as a whole.

Poor children should have the same opportunities to succeed at school!

b. Orientation and relegation

An above average number of children from socially vulnerable groups are more frequently put in special education, vocational or part-time studies, or apprenticeships that don't really correspond to their level. They condemn the fact that they are relegated to certain types of studies that offer very few opportunities.

Personally, I don't like this classification between general, technical and vocational in secondary education. It isn't a nice feeling when we're forced to choose one of these options.

Vocational studies don't offer a lot of opportunities, and special education even less.

The majority of children would have liked to have received better information. They condemn the fact that their teachers didn't advise them according to their centres of interest or qualities, rather than their social environment. Young people of foreign origin condemn the fact that the guidance they receive rarely corresponds to their abilities or their desires. They recommend being involved in the elaboration of their academic orientation and choice of school. Finally, some children condemn the fact that even with a diploma, they are still disadvantaged on the labour market.

Instead of supporting children by suggesting they take remedial classes, the teachers choose the easy option by telling them to take a vocational or technical option. By doing this, they destroy and waste children's futures.

Young people of foreign origin are undervalued at school.

Even if young people of foreign origin manage to obtain their high school diploma, they're always disadvantaged, also on the labour market.

Good information is essential in order to make a positive choice. Often, the children and their parents don't really know the school system very well or they receive insufficient, inaccurate or incomplete information. Some children also say that many parents are too ready to accept bad advice concerning options, because they are not sufficiently familiar with the school system or the language, or they think that the teachers are always right.

I'd never repeated the year before. But in the fifth year, they told me that I should change option and that I couldn't go into the sixth year because the sixth was too difficult for me. My mother didn't really know what to say. They told her I had to go into 1B, and she listened to them. If they say the same thing for my brothers or sister,

I won't let them do it.

c. Special education

Overrepresentation of socially vulnerable children in special education is both significant and worrying. One child said that he had always been in this type of education and that neither he nor his parents realised. The majority of children believe that it wasn't a choice. For many, it was yet another change of option and an outcome that didn't correspond in any way to their personal ambitions. One young girl even had the impression that her life had fallen apart since she had been put into special education.

I've always been in special education. With my parents, we didn't even know that I was in a special education school.

When I see them holding their A2 diploma, I feel sick. All I have is a stupid certificate. They had no time for me. It was go on, get out, go to special education. But there's no diploma there.

My life has fallen apart since I was put in special education.

I've learnt very little in special education. The only place I can work in today is a sheltered workshop.

d. Repeating the year

Many children lag a long way behind in class and have to repeat the year. The children are quite divided in their opinions about this. Some see it as a necessary evil inherent to our system:

For some children, repeating the year is a good thing. It allows them to catch up and understand all the subjects they need to.

Repeating the year isn't much fun but it allows you to learn whatever you haven't understood properly.

Other children especially remember the hurtful, demotivating and ineffective aspect of this practice. They recommend being more involved in the decision-making process and in finding alternative solutions, such as remedial classes at school during the summer and during the year.

My sister failed. She feels vulnerable, she doesn't believe in her potential anymore. It's very serious at her age if she doesn't believe in herself anymore.

There are too many children who aren't nice to me. They make fun of me and tell me that I'm weak. They make fun of me because I had to repeat the year and, what's more, it's the ones who are top of the class who say that all the time.

You should be able to take remedial classes during the summer so as not to repeat the year.

I don't want to repeat the year. I want the teacher to give me more work until I can follow with the rest of the class again.

e. Disillusionment, absenteeism and dropping out of school

Changing school repeatedly, repeating the year, the wrong choices, successive failures, lack of future prospects, and bullying all lead many children to be disillusioned with school. In addition to these difficulties, there are other vulnerabilities: loneliness, sometimes the absence of parents or the difficulty of assuming the role of mother and student. One young person said he couldn't go to school anymore because of the bullying and because he lived alone. Some teenage mothers said they could no longer combine their family life with going to school. These young girls think that they have no choice but to leave school.

At the time, I still wanted my diploma, but I couldn't manage anymore full time. It was due to a combination of bullying at school and the fact of living alone.

I'm not saying that I'm still going to study for another four years to have a diploma because I would risk losing custody of my child because I wouldn't be able to look after it.

I stopped my studies in the fifth year of secondary school. I first went into part-time education then I stopped everything because I moved in with someone.

f. Decent living conditions

Even though socially vulnerable children don't say much about it, the lack of money has consequences on their school life. They condemn the fact that schools don't give more help to children who have less money. The children wish that all children could go to the nature classes. Others wish that schools would provide school supplies. One boy suggests that lunch on Friday should be free for children who don't have the money. And others feel that they should be able to study and have extra lessons for free at school.

The school doesn't help with money. There's a boy who can never go on any of the bike rides because he hasn't got enough money.

Lunch on Friday should be free for children who don't have the means, and there should be extra lessons for children who need them.

I think that the school should pay for the swimming pool, school trips, the canteen and outings for children who don't have the means. Or allow children who have no room to study at home to learn their lessons at school, three times a week for an hour and a half, and the teacher who supervises the study period will be paid more for doing it.

When financial problems are combined with difficult family circumstances, this weighs heavily on the children's well-being and their ability to learn. Some can't even concentrate anymore at school.

There's a bad atmosphere at home because there's too much stress. There are too many of us in a small space, and we're tripping over each other. There's no privacy, you can never be alone, and everyone ends up getting annoyed. There are a lot of people with problems in my neighbourhood, and they too have difficulties at the end of the month. All this stress at home is tiring and I find it difficult to get up in the morning. So I arrive late at school.

If I hadn't had the life I had outside school, I could have continued, I would have had the energy. Far too many things happened to me in my personal life. In a situation like that, you can make all the effort you like, it will never work.

Some pupils only have to concentrate on school whereas others have to concentrate on school and find a job to help at home.

Annex 1. One report: three participatory processes

In this document, the children's accounts are divided into three main categories. Those concerning migrant and refugee children.

Those concerning children affected by poverty.

And finally, in the last part, children who describe what they think about equal opportunities at school in Belgium.

2. Migrant and refugee children

This chapter is based on ['The voice of migrant and refugee children living in Belgium'](#) report. Published in January 2018, this report is the result of a participatory process conducted in 2016 and 2017 with migrant and refugee children and young people in Belgium. These children talk about their experiences in their country of origin, their new environment, what prompted them to leave their country, their ordeals along the way, their joys and their sorrows in Belgium. The 'What Do You Think?' process provided 170 children between eight and 18 years old, from 36 countries including Afghanistan, Syria, Guinea, DRC and Eritrea, with the opportunity to talk. There were 57 children accompanied by their family and 98 unaccompanied children. Fifteen isolated teenage mothers also took part in the project.

3. Children affected by poverty

This chapter is based on the ["This is what we think. Young people experiencing poverty talk about their lives"](#) report. Published in 2010, this report is the result of a participatory process conducted in 2009 and 2010 with children affected by poverty in Belgium. It examines the experiences of children affected by poverty and reveals some of the effects of poverty and social exclusion from a child's point of view. In this process, 'What Do You Think?', in collaboration with 'Kind en Samenleving', gave 110 young people aged between 11 and 18, 67 of whom were between 11 and 14, the opportunity to voice their opinions. This chapter is also based on four debates organised in August 2017 by 'What Do You Think?', in collaboration with 'Uit De Marge', with 43 children affected by poverty. The latter were between six and 18 years old.

4. Equal opportunities at school

This chapter is based on the ['Egalité des chances à l'école ? Voilà ce qu'ils en pensent. Le point de vue d'enfants et de jeunes vulnérables dans le débat sur l'enseignement'](#). Published in 2013, this report is the result of a participatory process conducted in 2011 and 2012. It contains a compilation of various stories, conferences, illustrations, postcards, and messages expressed by children during debates and conferences. Thanks to a multitude of schools and partners, almost 1 000 children and young people were able to speak and give their perception of equal opportunities at school.

Annex 2. List of partners

A Place To Live

Ambrassade

AtMOsphères AMO

CEMO asbl/ Classe Daspa de l'Institut Filles De Marie à St Gilles

Centre El Paso de Gembloux

Centre FEDASIL de Bevingen

Centre FEDASIL Lubeek

Centre FEDASIL de Poelkappellen

Centre FEDASIL de Pondrôme

Centre FEDASIL de Rixensart

Centre FEDASIL Kapellen

Centre Liégeois d'Aide aux jeunes

Centrum Kauwenberg

Centrum Wes

Commission Nationale aux Droits de l'Enfant

Coordination des ONG pour les droits de l'enfant

D'Broej, Brussel

De Buiteling

De Puzzel

De Verliefde Wolk

Défense des Enfants International- Belgique

Délégué général aux Droits de l'Enfant

Dynamo asbl

Ecole primaire De Bron, Saint-Gilles

Ecole primaire De Kleurdoos, Bruxelles

Ecole primaire De Klimpaal, Molenbeek-Saint-Jean

Ecole primaire De Toverfluit, Molenbeek-Saint-Jean

Ecole primaire Het Plantzoentje, Laeken

Ecole primaire Nos Enfants, Forest

Ecole primaire Sacré-Coeur, Nivelles

ECPAT Belgique

Exil asbl

Fondation Roi Baudouin

Foyer, Brussel

Infor Jeunes Laeken

Institut du Sacré-Coeur, Nivelles
Jesuit Refugee Service
KHL Louvain
Kids Noord vzw
Kind and Samenleving
Kinderrechtencoalitie Vlaanderen
Kinderrechtencommissariaat
KIYO
Kras, Antwerpen
Latitude TAM, Tournai
Latitude Junior asbl
Latitudes J, Mariembourg, Olloy, Philippeville
L'école pour tous
Ligue des droits de l'enfant
Maison de jeunes Chambéry
Maison de jeunes Chicago, Bruxelles
Mentor-Escale asbl
Minor NDako
Observatoire de l'Enfance, de la jeunesse et de l'Aide à la Jeunesse
OKAN klas, Diest
Plate-Forme Mineurs en Exil
Point Jaune, Charleroi
Recht-Op
Réseau Wallon et belge de lutte contre la pauvreté
Rode Kruis Vlaanderen
Samarcande
Samenlevingsopbouw Vlaanderen
Service d'Action Sociale AMO, Liège
Service Droits des Jeunes, Bruxelles
Uit De Marge
Universiteit Gent
Vlaams Netwerk van verenigingen waar armen het woord nemen
Vlaamse Scholierenkoepel
Vluchtenlingen Werk Vlaanderen
Vrij Universiteit Brussel
Wijkcentrum De Kring, Eeklo

The report 'The voice of migrant and refugee children living in Belgium' received the support of the Directorate-General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (DGD).

The report "This is what we think. Young people experiencing poverty talk about their lives" received the support of the federal Public Planning Service (PPS) Social Integration and the Wallonia-Brussels Federation.

The report 'Egalité des chances à l'école ? Voilà ce qu'ils en pensent. Le point de vue d'enfants et de jeunes vulnérables dans le débat sur l'enseignement' received the support of the federal Public Planning Service (PPS) Social Integration, the Wallonia-Brussels Federation and the Government of Flanders.

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