

"We reach out but we also expect something in return": Social work engaging with Roma people in temporary container homes at the edge of the city

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Abstract

In this article, we critically explore the research findings of a qualitative study of local social policy and work interventions, called 'the post-mobile project' in Ghent, Belgium. The project provided temporary housing for families in container units, accompanied by mandatory integration assistance, and was implemented as a potential solution for Romanian Roma families after the dismantlement of two informal settlements in 2020. Our qualitative study explores the underlying ontological assumptions of the social work interventions in this project, and aims to gain insights into the role of contemporary social work practice in Belgium and its impact on advancing or hindering the pursuit of social justice within this Roma community. The study is based on an ethnography as a multi-method approach. Participant observations are complemented by document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups to gain an in-depth understanding of the divergent experiences and opinions of different stakeholders involved in the interventions. The findings reveal different ontological frameworks regarding the way the social problem is defined, the project's goals and the principles guiding practice, thus exposing tensions between the local policy-makers and the social justice orientation of social work practitioners.

Keywords

Belgium, Europe, Housing, Migration, Roma, Social Work

Introduction

Romania has experienced a challenging economic trajectory since the fall of the Iron Curtain and its subsequent opening to the global market from the 1990s, which led to high unemployment rates, emigration and a deep economic crisis in 2008 (Sigona & Trehan, 2009). Since 2007, when Romania became a part of the European Union, people have exercised their right to free movement within Europe, primarily seeking employment or study opportunities in more affluent countries in the West (Timmerman et al., 2015). Although people are free to move, entitlement to formal support and benefits depends on their right to reside. However, individuals facing housing exclusion or precarious employment (such as seasonal, interim or informal work) find it challenging, and sometimes impossible, to obtain or maintain residency status, which requires formal employment and an official address as prerequisites. As aptly observed by Mostowska (2014), this makes EU migrants particularly more vulnerable to homelessness. This situation occurs within a context where processes such as gentrification, privatisation, and the reduction of public spending have contributed to a shortage of affordable housing in numerous European cities (Tonkiss, 2013).

Among those who cross borders are also Roma people, the largest minority in Europe. They face many challenges stemming from a historical context of oppression and persecution, leading to complex social needs (Roth & Toma, 2014). Additionally, there is substantial evidence indicating the contemporary prevalence of antigypsyism, a specific form of racism targeting Roma, Sinti and Travellers, across Europe (Okely, 2014; Valero et al., 2021). Pervasive prejudices result in discrimination against Roma individuals, affecting their employment opportunities, access to education, and integration into wider society (Crețan et al., 2022; Sigona & Trehan, 2009). This is also the case for the Romanian Roma families who migrate westward, and in some 'arrival' cities, people have resorted to informal home-making and settlement practices in the margins of cities (Cittadini, 2018). This includes making small houses from recycled materials or sleeping in caravans. These practices often trigger significant public outrage and media attention, and although the absolute number of people involved is often very small, Rosa argues that "the visibility of the poverty they represent makes the Roma a public concern" (2019, p. 192).

The families inhabiting these informal dwellings have become the object of interventionist policies by many local authorities across Europe. Policies include repeated evictions (sometimes with a period of emergency accommodation or deportation) and the provision of temporary

accommodation in transitional housing or authorized 'camps' (for example inclusion villages in France or city camps in Italy) (Rosa, 2019). A substantial body of research indicates that these interventions have resulted in human rights violations and increasing stigmatization (Magazzini et al., 2019; Olivera, 2016; Van Baar et al., 2019).

This evidence underscores the need for the examination of the role of social work in the implementation of these policies. Social work has a complex relationship with Roma, often contributing to mistrust between communities and authorities. Research on social work practices with Roma, Sinti and Travellers in different parts of Europe show remarkable similarities. Despite examples of good practices (see Valero et al., 2021; Vitale & Membretti, 2013), research has revealed amongst others the overrepresentation of children in child protection services (Allen & Hamnet, 2022; Chai, 2005), the shortcomings of professional frameworks of social work (Baciu, 2020; Cemlyn et al., 2008), and the racist attitudes of social workers (Asimopoulos et al., 2019; Cecchi, 2022). Apart from a few studies (Kelleher et al., 2023; Belqasmi, 2015; Olivera, 2016), there is limited knowledge about social workers' perspectives and experiences. Although social work has a public mandate in shaping 'the social' in the relationship between social policy and the life-worlds of Roma people with reference to a social justice orientation (Lorenz, 2016), the social work role risks being characterised as a position of being "betwixt and between" (Kelleher et al., 2023, p.5) due to (local) governments who dismiss social work's professional values and expertise.

In this contribution, we critically explore the research findings of a qualitative study of local social policy and social work interventions in what is called 'the post-mobile project' in Ghent, Belgium, which was implemented for Romanian Roma families after the dismantlement of two informal settlements in 2020. The initiative provided temporary housing for families in container units, accompanied by mandatory integration assistance. We critically investigate the ontological framework of social work to assess and understand the meaning of these social work interventions, and of the tensions which arise during their implementation. Ontology deals with questions about the essence and nature of being, shedding light on assumptions related to the origins of social problems, strategies for achieving social justice, and the nature and role of the social work profession in contemporary societies (Ornellas et al., 2018). In response to global challenges and evolving historical, socio-political, cultural, and economic circumstances (Lorenz, 2016; Williams, 2016), there is a growing need for a philosophical and

ontological foundation of social work (Noble & Henrickson, 2014). If social work is serious about striving for social justice, human rights and social change, ongoing scrutiny of the ontological foundations inherent in social work interventions is crucial (Ornellas et al., 2018).

In high-income Western European countries, social work has undergone some worrisome shifts influenced by neoliberal capitalism since the late 1970s (Ferguson, 2007; Webb & Gray, 2013). These changes prioritize individual responsibility, increasing welfare conditionality tied to employment, and emphasize economic rationalization (with a focus on efficiency and managerialism). Additionally, the field of social work faces challenges from globalization and increasing ethno-cultural diversity since the 1990s, resulting in inequalities due to varying migration statuses and structural discrimination based on individuals' ethnic and cultural background (Williams, 2016). In this context, Bell (2018) warns, neglecting foundational ontological theory risks reliance on outdated Eurocentric, conventional and modernist perspectives.

In light of this, this study can provide insights into the role of contemporary social work practice in Belgium and its impact on advancing or hindering the pursuit of social justice within the Roma community across Europe. The study consequently tries to formulate an answer to the following research questions: How does Ghent deal with homeless Romanian Roma migrants? What are the underlying ontological assumptions of social work practice in the post-mobile project? What does this mean for social justice, and for the Roma families who are the subjects of these practices?

In the next sections, we first situate the social work interventions and their context, followed by an explanation of the research methodology and a detailed presentation of the findings. Finally, the discussion leads to the formulation of some broader implications.

Research context

In 2009, a group of about forty Romanian Roma was 'discovered' by social work services, living in a small, informal settlement in the north of Ghent. These families have roots in the Caraș-Severin region in the South-west of Romania, a region described to be impoverished, with an ageing population, high rates of emigration and very few employment opportunities (Cingolani, 2016). Following the eviction of the settlement, for the subsequent ten years,

individuals intermittently moved from one vacant space to another, engaged in squatting, or returned to Romania or another country. There continue to exist strong links with (extended) family members in Italy and France, which provide flexible mobility opportunities (Touquet & Wets, 2013).

In 2012, within the framework of the first national strategy for Roma inclusion in Belgium, outreach social workers were employed by the government (so-called 'community stewards'), who carefully started to establish contact with the Romanian families. Concurrently, concerns about attracting additional impoverished intra-European migrants grew, driven by prevailing stereotypes about Roma people who were portrayed as a threat to 'our way of life' (Touquet & Wets, 2013).

After stricter federal squatting laws were enacted in 2017, two larger settlements developed in the northern part of the city (See Figures 1 and 2), prompting the 'post-mobile policy', which promised to eradicate informal settlements across Ghent. Those affected by this policy had two choices: join a temporary housing program with mandatory integration (the 'post-mobile project') or receive a travel ticket for voluntary return to their home country. In November 2020 approximately one hundred people, of which the large majority were Romanian Roma families, chose to participate in the project, leading to the dismantling of all existing caravans and self-made houses.



Figure 1: photo of a settlement of caravans and self-made houses in Ghent, 2019



Figure 2: photo of a house made out of recycled materials in Ghent, 2019

The post-mobile project was installed on the Lübecksite, within an industrial zone in the North of the city, shielded from public view. Forty-five containers serve various purposes such as living spaces, bathrooms, kitchens, and offices (See Figures 3 and 4). Within the project, various social work actors are employed. It's worth noting that social work in Belgium isn't a registered profession, making the definition of the professional mandate of social workers less clear compared to contexts like the UK. Among the involved actors are social workers with a direct mandate from the (local) government, such as the community stewards, school mediators, and Jobteam employment officers, all tasked with guiding families in their integration journey. Caritas Vlaanderen, a Christian-inspired civil society organisation that is funded by the government, is responsible for the management of everyday life on the site, also in relationship to its surroundings. Throughout this article, we will refer to them collectively as social workers or practitioners.



Figure 3: photo of containers used as personal living spaces in the post-mobile project in Ghent, 2021



Figure 4: photo of containers used as personal living spaces and a kitchen in the post-mobile project in Ghent, 2021

Research methodology

This study is based on ethnography as a multi-method approach (Roller & Lavakras, 2015). Ethnography's *in-situ* practice enabled us to gain a nuanced comprehension of the evolving dynamics and interactions between social workers and Roma families, inspired by the key challenge "to uncover hidden social worlds and to show the rich patterns of (...) meaning-making that take place within them" (Ocejo, 2019, p.63). As Ferguson (2016) argues, this makes ethnography especially well-suited for examining social work practice. Participant observations were the starting point in the field from which certain issues arose, which called for a deeper investigation through document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups (Roller & Lavakras, 2015). This process allowed for an in-depth understanding of the complex meanings and divergent experiences and opinions of different stakeholders involved in the post-mobile project.

Data collection

The ethical and methodological aspects of the study acquired ethical approval of the Institutional Ethical Commission of Ghent University. Ethical reflection however was an ongoing part of the study, especially regarding the positionality of the primary researcher in the field and the avoidance of enforcing existing stereotypes through the research. As for confidentiality issues, any information shared by social workers about residents was consistently kept anonymous or shared in the residents' presence, with their prior consent.

After obtaining informed consent from the residents and social workers, the primary researcher walked alongside practitioners, conversed with them and observed how they interacted with residents. This was done either on the site of the project or at another location in the city, in the context of a counselling service (for example a doctor's visit). The observations and conversations were systematically recorded in handwritten and typed field notes. These included not only detailed descriptions of what was observed, but also literal quotes from the conversations that took place between those involved. After six months of intensive fieldwork, a longer period of less intensive data collection took place.

To explore the perspective of the policy-makers, relevant policy documents and public communications were gathered. In the semi-structured interviews, predetermined questions regarding the motivations and ontological assumptions underlying the interventions guided the interviews, yet left flexibility to explore the conversation based on the respondent's answers. Lastly, two focus group discussions with practitioners and policy-makers took place in October 2022, following an initial feedback of results. These discussions served to critically assess the preliminary findings and explore divergent opinions between individuals. The table below (Table 1), shows a representation of the data collection process, details about the type of data used and sampling.

Participatory observations	January 2021 – July 2021	Interactions involving 15 social work practitioners (7 community stewards, 6 Caritas practitioners, 1 employment officer and 1 school mediator)
	August 2021 – December 2022	Interactions involving 8 social work practitioners (1 community steward, 5 Caritas practitioners, 1 school mediator and 1 language teacher)
Documents analysis	The user agreement, the counselling concept, website of Caritas, website of the city of Ghent, annual reports of the Outreach Work Service, Municipal council hearings and press articles.	
Semi-structured interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2 (local) policy-makers - 2 service coordinators - 3 practitioners (1 community stewards, 1 school mediator and 1 employment officer) 	
Focus groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 policy-maker, 1 coordinator and 4 practitioners of Caritas - 1 local policy-maker, 2 coordinators and 5 practitioners of the community stewards 	

Table 1. Description of the data collection process

Data analysis

After defining the theoretical framework with reference to the underlying ontological assumptions of social work interventions, we used thematic analysis to systematically generate, analyse, and interpret relevant patterns, themes, and insights across diverse datasets. Following Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step approach, we familiarized ourselves with the data through reading and re-reading field notes, transcriptions, and documents (step 1). We generated initial codes by systematically marking data segments, creating a mind map for broader themes (step 2 and 3). Rather than looking for facts, our focus was on exploring the social construction of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In step 4, we reviewed and refined themes in relation to coded elements and the dataset. Themes were merged or split as needed. Finally, we defined the themes (step 5) and selected convincing examples from the data that related to our research questions (step 6). Quotes were translated into English while preserving the original meaning as closely as possible.

Research findings

In the quest to explore the ontological assumptions of the post-mobile project, the findings are divided into three parts: the definition of the social problem, the project's objectives, and the five principles that guide social work practice.

Definition of the social problem

The premise of the post-mobile policy is an eviction policy. The political decision-makers want to remove the informal housing of the group of Roma people in their city. Visible poverty and informality do not correspond with the affluent city Ghent wants to be. This is also justified by a discourse on 'inhumane camps', with a focus on hygiene and safety. As pointed out by the mayor:

For several years now, the city of Ghent has been confronted with a group of people living in hidden places, on public property, in tents, caravans, and barracks. Very often this happens in very deplorable situations. This is demeaning, this is unworthy of Ghent. (Caritas, n.d.-a)

Social workers on the other hand express their ambiguous attitude towards the way the residents used to live. This practitioner expresses:

Ok, it's not attractive and it's not good for tourists. A camp, bordering your city, a slum in your city... But what was so wrong with that? (personal communication, April 29, 2021)

Another social worker stresses that the living conditions in the informal settlement weren't always deplorable:

Before when you came to [name of a settlement], I remember, my first introduction (...) There was a big vegetable garden, it was bliss. (...) (personal communication, May 26, 2021)

However, she continues, external circumstances like the criminalisation of squatting in 2017 had an impact:

There were people who came from the squats, and those who came back to Belgium after travelling back and forth, and suddenly they couldn't squat [in houses] anymore. So the place started to boom and then a lot of nuisance reports started coming in. Then we really saw it change, in terms of filth, yes, too many people in too small an area. (personal communication, May 26, 2021)

In general, this practitioner found some of the living circumstances unacceptable from a humanitarian point of view and lamented the precarity that these temporary dwellings offered. However, she also recognized the processes of solidarity and creativity which took place and made it people's homes. This resonates with the accounts of other social workers.

Secondly, in the design of the interventions, the problem is largely individualised. The project's counselling concept describes the group in terms of 'an absence of a long-term vision' and 'living outside of society' (Buyst, 2019). Practitioners can relate to this and concur that the people inhabiting these settlements find themselves in a kind of survival mode, which they further describe as a vicious circle of illegal residence, which results in them living from day to day (Dienst Outreachend Werken, 2020).

In this rationale, no reference is made to the structural factors which may cause these circumstances. However, although absent in policy documents and public communication about the project, the social work actors are confronted with the stigma that Intra-European

(Roma) families face in Ghent as an important threshold for integration, as expressed by this service coordinator:

The group has an image problem, a lot worse than refugees. From an employer's point of view, we notice an attitude of 'oh yes, a well-motivated refugee,' but 'oh dear, not an Eastern European.' (personal communication, June 17, 2021)

Another social worker expresses her pessimism about the outcomes regarding the objective to find housing solutions for the residents:

Housing in Ghent, yes, we have to be realistic about that. [For a] working Ghent resident who has a decent job, [it] is already super difficult.(...) Then there is the stigmatisation of the group: Who wants to give them a house? (...) and also the part of travelling, going back and forth to Romania (...) not everyone finds that appealing. (personal communication, May 26, 2021)

Thirdly, people who do not enter the project or are not successful in the integration trajectories are expected to go back to Romania. Even though some people have been living in the city for more than 10 years, they are thus not considered part of society. One policy maker explains:

In my view, for this project, if someone has no prospects in Belgium, and they do have prospects of continuing to migrate or return, but they don't want to talk about [this option], then the project stops there for me. (personal communication, December 21, 2022)

The social workers hold ambiguous attitudes towards return policies. They acknowledge the deep-rooted connections some people have built with the city. However, due to the limited opportunities available in Ghent for some individuals, social workers question whether 'they might not be better off at home.' Nonetheless, they note that discussing this topic with residents can be complicated, and they often prefer to avoid the subject. In addition, they witness the agency of those not included in the project or those who returned, who continue to travel to Belgium and survive in the margins in Ghent.

The project's goals

The post-mobile project is presented as a so-called 'one-time total solution' for those living informally with two possible outcomes: permanent and legal residence in Ghent or return if this does not work out. The residents were not involved in any way in determining the objectives. The integration project focuses on employment, language acquisition, civic integration classes, and children's school attendance. These priorities are determined by the government and have a one-sided and rather coercive interpretation.

While some residents comply easily with what is expected, social workers encounter resistance from others. As this social worker puts it:

Especially the idea of integration and what that represents. The project says so much about our system and our values, and leaves so little room to be different. (personal communication, July 9, 2021)

Many of the social workers acknowledge that the goals of the interventions do not take into account the heterogeneous situations and aspirations which exist within the group. This team coordinator takes a more open approach:

They have to go their own way. (...) They make choices and maybe they aren't the choices you or I would make. (...) Some [residents] may have reasoned that they will have a stable home for the next three years. That expectation has already been met for them. (...) That view is not consistent with the social and political message that has been conveyed. (Caritas, n.d.-b)

The importance of the (extended) family as a key feature of the Roma tradition (Exteberria, 2002) is a recurrent theme in the interactions social workers have with residents. Care for family, especially children and ill family members, is often prioritised over school and work. This is linked to the mobility habits of this group, who travel to Romania or other countries when family members call upon them. A social worker relates:

For them, family is number one. We are really *homo economicus*, work is number one (...) At the same time, it is how things work here. (personal communication, January 20, 2021)

The end of the quote touches upon a dilemma social workers struggle within the post-mobile project. They are sceptical of the one-way integration model, and in their interactions with

residents, it is very clear that they try to respect the values and choices of the people. At the same time, through contact with services, employers, and schools, they are confronted with the norms of the larger society and the lack of space to think or act differently outside the project. The post-mobile project, at some level, is a mirror of society. As one social worker expressed:

I am hard (...) on the people. I don't want them to think when they come out here after three years that they are going to get a job and a house. They need to know what it will really be like. We don't have to pretend that the world is so much softer; we have to confront people with society. (personal communication, April 28, 2021)

Five underlying principles of practice

Territorial Logic

The project is designed for a specific group of people. The names recorded on a list in 2019 consisted of sons, brothers, daughters, and sisters of individuals in Romania (or France and Italy). By the time the project commenced in 2020, the group of people living in Ghent had changed, while the list remained unaltered. Residents have pleaded for permission to include other family members in the project, but such requests were invariably denied. Additionally, strict visitor rules were enforced, including set visiting hours and a prohibition on overnight stays, even for close family members. This practitioner explains:

Since the beginning, there has been a kind of obsession [of the local government] about the 'visitors,' and this idea that things must not get out of hand here, so that absolutely no exceptions should be made to the list... (personal communication, September, 29, 2021)

Although social workers do not consistently enforce these rules as rigorously as intended, most of them have a basic understanding of the rationale. They aspire to work qualitatively with a fixed number of people, allowing for proper relationship building. Furthermore, they aim to maintain a certain level of control over the site. However, some have raised concerns about the human rights implications of the strict list (resulting for example in the separation of families or keeping new love partners apart). Yet, when addressing these concerns, the local authority's argument is straightforward, as shown in the mayor's quote during his project visit:

No one is compelling you to stay here. If you wish to be with other family members, you are free to leave. (field notes, September 9, 2021)

At the same time, it is expected that lawful residents of the project remain settled. If they wish to leave the city outside of school holidays, they must request special permission from the project coordinator. Social workers grapple with the disconnect between these rules and the lifeworld and habits of the residents.

The Creation of a Limited Home

In the containers, people can register their address and officially live without the uncertainty of evictions. Both policy-makers and social workers argue that this situation will give people mental rest to get out of their survival modus and adopt more long-term aspirations for their lives. In addition, the official address facilitates getting a bank account and employment and, further, opens up the possibility to build up rights by legalising people's residency.

At the same time, and contradictory, it is argued that people should not get too comfortable or they will not make progress. Certain characteristics of the project consequently and deliberately hinder the 'home' feeling of the residents. The project firstly does not offer permanent housing but temporary accommodation (max. 3 years) under strict conditions. Secondly, they are given a small personal space, when compared to similar interventions. All facilities are shared, and the containers are 3x3 m for couples and 3x6 m for families. Thirdly, there is a lack of personalization and control of the space. The container is rented, so no permanent changes are allowed, and all common areas are strictly regulated.

Most residents have a history of moving around – forced and voluntarily – in Ghent or elsewhere, and have divergent experiences of what a home is or can be. In this way, the social workers are confronted with different needs and expectations, especially related to the size of the containers, the (un)willingness to live together, and the issue of privacy/control of the space.

Most of the social workers point to the challenging situation of families with teenagers, who share just one small space. In fact, this raises questions about what is considered proper housing, as these circumstances can be interpreted as overcrowding by some standards. In addition, as the following social workers put it, apart from the spatial elements, the conditional framework of the interventions (see *infra*) equally hinders a sense of belonging:

Just imagine doing what you want all your life. And suddenly someone says 'this, that, that,...' So do they have a place to live? Yes A roof over their heads? Yes. But is it their home? No, and it never will be. So the temporariness, I think that's ok for them.

(personal communication, May 26, 2021)

Conditionality and Control

When the mayor visited the site of the project after 10 months, the residents gathered outside, and he addressed them as follows:

This is a three-year project, no longer, and if after three years you want to rent and work here in Ghent, it is up to you to make it happen. Because realise that after those three years, it will be stopped, and if you don't stick to the rules, it can be over before that. It is in your hands now. This project is a favour because we do not have any obligation to help you. (field notes, September 9, 2021)

As mentioned before, the temporary housing is linked to a compulsory integration process, and in addition, there are rules regarding (co)living on the site (see supra). These rules and obligations can be found in the user agreement signed by the residents, as well as by the mayor and the general director of the Public Centre for Social Welfare of the city.

The designers argue that the regulatory framework is operationalized using a point system to allow for a process of trial and error. However, most social workers struggle to hand out the minus or plus points because of its infantilizing effects.

Regarding the COVID-19 measures which were also integrated into the system, this practitioner elaborates:

What is our mandate? (...) We are not the state. If we are consistent with the penalty points when people don't wear mouth masks, the project was already empty. It is a living community. It's their home. (personal communication, April 21, 2021)

In addition, quarterly interviews take place in which residents discuss their progress and future prospects with the project coordinator. In this, no defined targets are set, but full transparency is expected from the residents.

Some practitioners argue that the controlling mechanisms give unnecessary stress to residents, which can be counterproductive, while others feel it can push people to 'make progress'. Everyone agrees that the mandatory civic integration and Dutch classes, full-time school attendance for children, and employment assistance all at once from day one were not realistic. A practitioner explains:

There are too many issues being addressed and it is not clear to us what the priorities are. Now people are often absent from Dutch classes because they are going to apply for jobs or are in training. (...) At the same time, [name employment officer] complains people cannot speak a word of Dutch at the job interview. (personal communication, March 25, 2021)

Finally, social workers grapple with the rigidity or randomness of some of the rules, which they describe as not always being in line with 'their ethical compass'.

Measurability of Integration

The post-mobile project is politically evaluated on a three-monthly basis for its effectiveness by monitoring school attendance (children and Dutch lessons), civic integration and Dutch class attendance and the number of people employed. This put pressure on the practitioners very early on, as this service coordinator testifies:

We feel the pressure. That [the project] has to move forward. And that questions are being asked. What are you actually doing? (personal communication, April 21, 2021)

When asked about the school attendance of the children, this social worker replied:

It is difficult, I think. Yes, I think that's fair to say. It's also very much under political scrutiny (...) and there are very high expectations, or at least a bit of a naive political expectation that 'now there is nothing that can stop them going to school every day'. (personal communication, June 16, 2021)

She continues to explain that a lot of the work goes into creating a positive relationship with the school, including working on the self-esteem of the children and trying to build trust with the parents. This takes time and is not measured for evaluation. In fact, social workers express their doubts about the narrow interpretation of success. They tend to see it differently, and at

a different rhythm, but they do not always have the vocabulary to define it. A coordinator from Jobteam explains their work ethic:

...the route we offer, the end point does not have to be a job. The end point can also be a nice, connecting other route. (...) if you have done an entire trajectory with someone and the end result is that they end up, for example, in psychiatric care. That is also a good result. Because then it is clear that this is what the person needed.

(personal communication, June 17, 2021)

Changing Society

Although the social workers generally focus on the individual circumstances of residents' lives, they carefully look towards society for change. Firstly, they adopt a mediating role between the residents and 'the system' (schools, local administration, job market, etc.) to facilitate mutual understanding. This is mostly related to trust issues and existing prejudices, or simply communication, for example in the relationship with schools, as expressed by this practitioner:

It's an incredible thing to ask the parents, 'Give your children to us, but don't come in, and we don't have a clear way of telling you what we actually do here, because every week we send a long newsletter in Dutch by e-mail. Oh yes, you don't have email.'

(personal communication, June 16, 2021)

In addition, social workers choose small 'battles' in which they practise their politicising or transformative role and work towards the gradual change of more inclusive services. An example of this is the lobbying work they did with banks in Ghent who refused to open bank accounts for people without a residence permit. According to the EU directive on payment accounts, an EU-citizen is entitled to open a basic payment account in any EU country, even if he/she does not officially reside there. Having a bank account is often a prerequisite for signing a (temporary) job contract, thus playing a major role in hindering/facilitating access to employment.

Concluding reflections

Limitations

The study has several limitations. At the time of writing, the project is ongoing and some changes have been made in its policies which are not incorporated in this study. Continued

research is necessary to examine changes over time, their implications and the complex processes which lead to these changes. Another notable limitation is the single focus of the study on the perspective of social workers. Although the ethnography embraces the perspective of the resident as active agents in the way they make sense of the interventions, we will analyse their firsthand experiences and perceptions 'from within' in future studies to provide a more complex understanding of the ontological frameworks at play.

Discussion

The study of social work exposes tensions between the post-mobile project's design and the social justice orientation of social work practitioners responsible for its implementation, revealing different ontological frameworks at stake.

Notably, the design of the project, as orchestrated by the local government, reflects a neoliberal, managerialist approach intertwined with a very narrow interpretation of integration (Garret, 2019; Ornellas et al., 2018; Williams 2020). Within this approach, the expectation for Roma families is to assimilate into Belgian societal norms, guiding them towards sedentary life and formal employment. The focus on efficiency moreover restricts the discretionary space of social work while "welfare chauvinism" is at stake as a reference point for local politicians (Garrett, 2019, p.196). They draw a strong, discursive distinction between 'us' (the deserving), and 'them' (the undeserving), echoing a 19th century distinction based on judging welfare recipients' merit, that is today also racialized (Garrett, 2019; Kessl, Oechler & Schröder, 2019).

The social workers struggle to work in these circumstances. The conditional framework and economic logics contrast with their human rights approach. Knowing the families closely, they have a much more complex understanding of the challenges experienced by the residents. This echoes the "betwixt and between" position social workers have working with Travellers in Ireland described by Kelleher et al. (2023).

Moreover, our analysis suggests a notable absence of focus on collective responsibilities and systemic solutions that transcend the boundaries of the interventions. Providing temporary shelter in a context of a housing crisis is *a priori* problematic. In this context, social workers can merely function as intermediaries between the families and the project's outlines, and by extension broader society. The analysis lastly reveals a striking absence of anti-oppressive

practices within the program, a failure to involve Roma individuals meaningfully in decision-making processes, and a notable oversight in addressing the pervasive issue of antigypsyism.

Implications

In their urge to formalise all ways of living on their territory, we argue that the local government risks to illegalize the survival strategies of those in the margin, offering little real social change in return. In fact, the temporary project shows an unwillingness of the local government to find sustainable solutions for future (poor) Intra-European families on their territory, fuelled by a fear of attracting more (Roma) migrants to Ghent, openly expressed by politicians, press and even social workers.

Political action and enforceable legislation are needed on a federal or regional level to install principles of solidarity between different localities in Belgium. This will avoid interventions perceived as favours, which enhance unequal power relations instead of reducing them. Such legislation will have to question some of its premises, especially regarding the definition of homelessness, mobility patterns and family constellations. To foster lasting positive changes, it is crucial that future strategies adopt a transformative perspective that actively engages Roma individuals in shaping the interventions, and genuinely challenges the systemic barriers perpetuating their marginalisation.

Although there are specificities to the Belgian or Ghent context, there are lessons to be learned for similar interventions in other welfare states in Europe, where social rights are linked to a form of citizenship in which a state vouches for the welfare of its (sedentary) inhabitants (Dean, 2011; Lorenz, 2016). As such, the welfare state has always had a difficult relationship with migrants on the move. However, the movement of people within the EU, especially to more affluent regions, inevitably includes the movement of more marginalised groups who establish connections and 'homes' away from home. They become part of society and social work has a role to play in supporting these communities, also if they do not permanently settle.

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Figure Legend

Figure 1: photo of a settlement of caravans and self-made houses in Ghent, 2019

Figure 2: photo of a house made out of recycled materials in Ghent, 2019

Figure 3: photo of containers used as personal living spaces in the post-mobile project in Ghent, 2021

Figure 4: photo of containers used as personal living spaces and a kitchen in the post-mobile project in Ghent, 2021