A qualitative and responsive analysis of the post-mobile living project in Ghent

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This analysis is based on the knowledge of policy makers, social work practitioners and residents of the post-mobile living project, who took the time to participate in this study. It is part of the TRAHOME research project on the trajectories of (hidden) homelessness in Belgium (led by Prof. Martin Wagener, Prof. Griet Roets and Prof. Koen Hermans), funded by the BRAIN-be 2.0 research program of BELSPO.

To gain an in-depth and reliable understanding, readers should consider the broader context and interrelationship between different parts of the report. Selectively quoting individual sentences from the report can lead to a distorted understanding of the information presented.

English translation of 'Een kwalitatieve en responsieve analyse van het Postmobiel wonen-project in Gent.'

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Cu necazuri si bucurii
Am sa merg inainte orice ar fi
Atunci cand cad stiu sa ma ridic de jos
Ca sunt un om ambitios
Doar inima e averea mea
Numai ea stie durerea mea
Si bunul Dumnezeu ma iubeste mereu
E langa mine la bine si rau
Cat de frumoasa e sau urata ii viata mea
Buna sau rea eu tot vreau sa las ceva in urma mea
Ca viata mea e si buna si rea
Ca stiu sa ma bucur de ea
Dar si ziele mele cat or mai fi ele
Sa le traiesc cu placer

Florin Salam (Viata mea e si buna si rea)

With worries and joys
I will keep going no matter what
If I fall I know how to get up again
Because I am an ambitious man
Only my heart is my wealth
Only it knows my pain
And God always loves me
He is with me through thick and thin
How beautiful or ugly my life is
Good or bad I want to leave something behind
That my life is both good and bad
That I enjoy it
Because my days are as long as they last
To live them with pleasure

Florin Salam (*My life is both good and bad*)

Content

Part 1: General introduction

1. Introduction

This report offers a qualitative and responsive analysis of the post-mobile living project on the Lübeck site in Ghent (2020-2023). The project provided temporary accommodation in container units for Intra-European migrants who previously lived in informal 'encampments' consisting of self-made houses and/or caravans. The accommodation was accompanied by a compulsory integration trajectory and marked the end of a decade-long policy of tolerance towards these dwellings in the city. The dominant assessment for policy makers revolved around the measurable interpretation of the various so-called 'integration domains' of the project. These are figures related to the children's school attendance, the participation in Dutch and social orientation classes, the degree of employment and the transition to the regular rental market. With this report, we aim to provide an alternative narrative. Our analysis does not focus on the quantitative 'outcomes' of the project, but rather aims to examine what the meaning of the project was for the diversity of actors involved. Moreover, the finality of the study is future-oriented in the sense that it does not evaluate the success or failure of the post-mobile living project. Instead, we want to provide learning opportunities for designing future policies for this heterogeneous population within the diversity of vulnerable citizens in relation to a failed housing policy in Ghent and similar interventions elsewhere in Belgium.

The report is based on, and inspired by, the responsive evaluation framework (Abma, 2006; 2014) and the CAIMeR theory (Blom & Morén, 2009). Both are forms of realistic evaluation approaches that can tell us something about how an intervention works, for whom and why, and in what context (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). The findings are formulated from a social work approach in research, policy, and practice development (Hermans & Roets, 2020), in which social work is inherently related (both as an implementer, but also as a thorn in the flesh) to local social policy, based on (human) rights and social justice as its orientation and frame of reference.

Firstly, responsive evaluation starts from the idea of plurality. Policy and social interventions have diverse, sometimes conflicting values and meanings for different stakeholders, and by including multiple perspectives and different forms of knowledge (experiential, practitioner, and scientific knowledge) in the evaluation, a richer picture of the policy reality emerges (Abma, 2014). The analysis thus seeks to connect the perspectives of local policymakers, practitioners, and residents of the project. In this way, we aim to create an opportunity for dialogue between different stakeholders, and potentially expand the support base for transformative change. It gives all actors a voice and puts the focus on the intervention as a dynamic process with the aim of striving for a learning-oriented evaluation (Abma, 2014).

In the spirit of responsive evaluation, CAIMeR theory is used as a structure for analysis. Blom and Morén's (2009) framework emerges from critical realism that pays particular attention to the role of the context and the interaction between the context and the (underlying) mechanisms. Blom and Morén therefor oppose the more common evaluation approach to social work interventions, based on a narrow interpretation of evidence-based practice. A narrow evidence-based approach grounds itself on what is empirically observable (translated as measurable 'outcomes') and takes little account of the often very specific contextual factors that influence the

outcomes of an intervention (Hermans, 2005). Using CAIMeR, on the other hand, we look at the process of meaning-making that takes place between the interventions and the outcomes.

2. The post-mobile living project and its objectives

The 'post-mobile living' project started in 2020. 95 homeless people, mainly Romanian Roma families, as well as a few individuals from other Eastern European countries, and one Belgian entered the project on the Lübeck site, an open terrain in the north of the city. 44 containers were installed, serving as rooms, bathrooms, kitchens and offices. Besides the project leader, several social work actors and partners were involved. They were given different mandates within the project, in a complex constellation of practitioners.




The aim of the project was formulated by the mayor and the relevant aldermen in 2019 as follows:

> "As soon as possible the Ghent city council wants to set up (...) a centralised shelter with compulsory assistance for people living (clandestinely) in mobile caravans or barracks. (...) The project involves clearing the various places where mobile clandestine living is currently taking place in public spaces. (...) Those who now live in mobile caravans or barracks, and are known at the start of the project, can thus be intensively supported towards a stable living situation in terms of housing, education, work and social integration." (City of Ghent, July 19, 2019) [own translation]

Those who did not sign up could receive financial support for a 'return trip' to their country of origin, under the voluntary return programme, in cooperation with Fedasil (The Federal Agency for the reception of asylum seekers). In this way, the post-mobile living project was presented

as a so-called “one-off total solution” (City of Ghent, July 19, 2019) [own translation] for a fixed group of people, with two possible outcomes: return or integration.

Achieving a stable living situation was also stated as an objective in the ‘assistance framework’. This text was drafted by the Welfare and Equal Opportunities Department in June 2020. The text further stated that for this purpose, the social assistance would focus on "working towards a realistic future perspective”, through "tailor-made trajectories", given the diversity within the group (Buyst, 2020) [own translation]. The objectives here are less concrete, leaving room for a subjective interpretation of what constitutes a realistic future perspective and what is considered a successful trajectory. However, the policy document did mention some examples of possible orientations, namely earning a sustainable income, renting on the private housing market, accelerated allocation of social housing and voluntary return (Buyst, 2020). What these examples share with the previously formulated objectives of the mayor and the college of aldermen is the pursuit of permanent and legal residence in Ghent or permanent return.

Throughout the duration of the project, significant emphasis was placed at the policy level on measurable results associated with the four integration domains: housing, education, employment, and the attendance of social integration classes. In the first years, the focus was put on the children's school attendance, the degree of employment and the participation in Dutch and social orientation classes. This was done by developing a points system, three-monthly evaluation interviews and quarterly feedback of the figures to the political steering committee. As the project progressed, the focus was put on the children's school attendance, the degree of employment and the access to and acquisition of housing.

The different social work actors and practitioners involved developed their own objectives based on their mandate within the project, which were sometimes consistent and sometimes in contrast with the idea of measurable outcomes. They indicated that they could not formulate straightforward objectives for the residents' unpredictable and heterogeneous trajectories and cohabitation processes. How they did this is elaborated further in the text.

The residents were not involved in setting the objectives. We could only ask how they had understood the objectives in the beginning:

- "We had to leave, they said we were no longer allowed to live in caravans and so on. And they had something else for us." (field notes interview, June 26, 2023)
- "We went to live somewhere where conditions were better, where there were going to be utilities, electricity and water, and where we had to pay very little." (field notes interview, July 12, 2023)
- "I don't know why, only God knows why, they said it was no longer allowed [in the barracks]. Then they said we could stay for 3 years (...) Not everyone was allowed to participate. Only those whose names were written down." (field notes interview, April 20, 2023)
- "I knew that we would have assistants here and that there would be a close relationship with them and that I would also find work (...) I knew that my life would get better if I got into the project. (...) They said that there were a lot of rats and that there was a lot of dirt [where we lived] and that was not allowed anymore." (field notes interview, April 20, 2023)

The residents faced the decision to enter the project or to go back to their homeland. Those who decided to sign up shared a common desire to stay in Belgium, as they had no other

housing options (and related education and employment opportunities) after the forced eviction of the barracks and caravans. In addition, they developed their personal goals as the project progressed, and defined for themselves what they wanted to achieve from it. This is reflected in how they gave meaning to the interventions, how they resisted certain conditions and whether they made the choice to stay or leave.

3. Research methods

3.1 DATA COLLECTION

This report is based on the experiences and opinions of the diversity of actors involved in the post-mobile living project. These data were collected by the primary researcher Sophie Samyn through ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and group discussions, which took place in the period from January 2021 to July 2023. Data collection was thus completed during the final phase of the project. These primary data were supplemented by a limited document analysis of policy documents, municipal reports and press articles linked to the post-mobile living project, in the period from 2018 to July 2023. Finally, a limited literature review was conducted on the societal context in which the project took place and other social work interventions with Roma.

Ethnographic data

The primary data consists, on the one hand, of field notes based on more than 225 hours of (participatory) observations, on 127 different days, between December 2020 and July 2023. About 70 of these hours are mainly based on the perspective of practitioners, in particular social workers, administrators, animators, and teachers. The researcher walked alongside them, conversed with them, and observed how they interacted with residents. This took place either at the project site - during the day and in the evening (always during visiting hours), or at another location in the city, in the context of an assisted appointment (e.g. a doctor's consultation, a visit to the city hall ...). The remaining data are based on the researcher's interactions with the residents (155 hours), to also capture their experiences. This involved a combination of (participatory) observations and informal conversations with residents, and sometimes also with their relatives. The researcher visited residents and former residents, sometimes drinking, eating, and celebrating with them, while talking to them, mostly in French or Italian. This took place on the site of the post-mobile living project, at several other places in the city where people went to live or work when they left the project, as well as in a village where many residents come in Romania.

The observations and conversations were systematically recorded in handwritten and typed field notes (referred to as 'field notes' in the text). These include not only detailed descriptions of what was observed, but also literal quotes of the conversations that took place between those involved.

Semi-structured interviews and group discussions

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between January 2021 and May 2023 with different actors (see Table 1 below). In contrast to the informal conversations during the observations, predetermined questions and topics were used to gain deeper insights into the meaning-making processes of the diversity of actors. Nevertheless, there was flexibility to explore the conversation based on the respondent's answers. Two group interviews with practitioners took place in October 2022 after initial feedback of the results (see Table 1 below).

These interviews served to receive feedback on the preliminary findings and explore divergent opinions within teams. Finally, the final months of the project, from April to July 2023, involved working with a (Romanian) interpreter to conduct more focused interviews with residents.

All interviews and group discussions were recorded and transcribed (referred to as 'transcript interview' in the text) or typed out as part of the field notes (referred to as 'field notes interview' in the text).

Semi-structured interviews	Political steering committee	Policy maker
	Administration	Policy maker + coordinator
	Community stewards	3 social workers + coordinator
	InGent/Amal vzw	2 social orientation teachers
	Job team	2 social workers + coordinator
	Ghent Education Centre	2 social workers + coordinator
Semi-structured interviews with Romanian interpreter	Residents	9 residents and 3 former residents
Group discussions	Caritas Vlaanderen	Policy maker, coordinator + 4 social workers
	Community stewards + policy maker city of Ghent	Policy maker, 2 coordinators and 5 social workers

Table 1: Overview of interviews and group discussions

Documents

The main documents consulted were:

- The project's user agreement
- The assistance framework
- Internal evaluations of different actors
- Information on the Caritas Vlaanderen website
- Information on the website of the City of Ghent
- Information on the Ligo website
- Annual reports of the Outreach Service
- City Council reports and recordings
- Press articles

Positionality

The primary researcher took extensive time to build a trusting relationship with the residents. Knowledge of French and Italian provided opportunities to engage with them, and in a final phase, also interviews took place, with a Romanian interpreter the residents knew and trusted. Nevertheless, she remained an outsider (= *gadji* or non-Roma) and conversations were often, by average standards of Western research, 'fragmentary' and 'volatile' (Bucerius, 2013). On top of this, the moment when a conversation took place strongly influenced responses, through, for example, the stress of an upcoming eviction, the news of a sick relative or the excitement of preparations for a celebration. As a result, this text does not intend to represent the comprehensive perspective of the residents. Instead, it constitutes an attempt to also capture some of their (heterogenous) experiences.

3.2 DATA ANALYSIS

The CAIMeR theory was used to analyse the data. The collected material was thematically coded and ordered according to the building blocks of the theory (Blom & Morén, 2009):

- Context: the contextual factors that influence interventions
- Actors: the different actors involved in the project and their perspectives
- Interventions: the concrete actions taken within the project
- Mechanisms: the underlying logics, methodologies and approaches
- Results: the results of the project

In describing these components, we highlight the views of different actors (responsive evaluation). We then relate different elements, leading to the formulation of viable principles and obstacles. We do this from a perspective of social work in research, policy making and practice development, as described by Hermans and Roets (2020). This perspective is based on the framework of (human) rights and social justice, as its orientation and frame of reference.

For the sake of readability and intelligibility, all quotes have been translated (from Dutch, French, Italian and Romanian) in English, making every effort to remain as faithful as possible to the original meaning of what was said.

Part 2: Findings according to the CAIMeR theory

1. Contexts

In this section, we situate the social problem in its (supra-local) context. We look for relevant contextual factors that were conducive or impeding to the implementation of the interventions and the objectives of the project (Boost et al., 2017). These findings come from our own literature review, as well as from the data collected, based on the perspectives of the actors involved. The table provides an overview of the main dynamics, which are then separately discussed.

Macro: societal context	supra-local	- Economic inequality in the EU - Access to employment-based social rights - Stigmatisation of Intra-European (Roma) migrants and international recognition of Roma as a minority group
	local	- Legal mandate regarding people without legal residence for local authorities - Limited options on the Ghent housing market
Meso: Intervention context	- Explicit focus on the intersection of Intra-European migration and poverty in local policy - Origins and background of the project - Exaggerated attention - COVID-19 pandemic	
Micro: Lifeworld residents	- Survival mode - Language skills, language barriers and illiteracy - Irregular school career children - Limited access to the formal labour market - Extensive informal network - (Informal) skills - Mobility	

1.1 MACRO CONTEXT

This section discusses the (supra-)local societal context in which the project is located.

Economic inequality in the EU

High levels of inequality within the European Union inevitably result in migration patterns. Romania has known a particularly difficult economic trajectory, following the fall of the wall and opening to the global market from the 1990s (leading to high unemployment) and the 2008 economic crisis that hit Romania hard (Sigona & Trehan, 2009). Since the accession of EU-13 countries (among which Romania and Bulgaria), people from these countries can also use the right of free movement within Europe to migrate. In this way, a response is provided to labour shortages in high income countries in Western Europe.

These migration trajectories vary between circular and permanent/sedentary migration. Circular migration is a cyclical pattern in which migrating individuals or families regularly travel back and forth between their country of origin and the host country where they temporarily stay to work. Despite its many benefits (both for the individuals involved and the host country), there are also associated challenges. Migrants may face job and residence insecurity, and

sometimes have limited access to social services in the host country. Some 'labour migrants' who had originally come for temporary work may decide to stay permanently because of improved opportunities, living conditions, family situations, etc. This was also the case for some of the residents of the post-mobile living project, as this Romanian woman described:

> "I know the city very well. In the beginning, it was difficult. We had ended up here by chance, we woke up here and we stayed here. Meanwhile, we have been here for a long time and we feel good here." (field notes interview, April 29, 2023)

Another man explained why it was specifically in Ghent where he wanted to settle:

> "It's beautiful here, and *civilisé,* not like Brussels. There are a lot of people there, a lot of misery, not here, it's a beautiful city..." (field notes, March 19, 2023)

While many residents spent certain periods (with relatives) in their home country, this was not the case for everyone, as this woman recounted:

> "I no longer have a house in Romania. Because very honestly, you know, if I had a house, I would go back. Have a few chickens, 2 pigs and grow my vegetables." (field notes interview, May 18, 2023)

Most of the project's residents are originally from the Caraș-Severin region around the towns/villages of Oravița/Răcășdia in south-western Romania. The region is described as impoverished with an ageing population, high emigration and very low employment (Cingolani, 2016). A resident remarked:

> "We came to Ghent because we could not earn our living at home, in our home country. Our children are old. They have their own families. If I don't earn my own bread then yes, how can we survive?" (field notes interview, April 20, 2023)

The region is largely agricultural and most industrial activity, including uranium mining, declined dramatically after the fall of communism (Cingolani, 2012). A resident recounted what it was like for him:

> "[Under] Ceauşescu, we all had jobs. I worked in agriculture. And we had money and a house. It was good. We were all together (...) But now it's very difficult. We are everywhere. In Germany, in Spain, in Italy, in France, in Belgium... we don't know the children anymore, we don't see the children growing up. It's sad (...) my brother, he's been in France for 30 years. We don't see each other. When we call each other, we cry, both of us." (field notes, March 31, 2023)

Also from our own observations in Răcășdia in Romania, we noticed, through interactions with locals, that both Roma and non-Roma inhabitants had links to other European countries, mainly Italy, Germany, France, Belgium and Switzerland. In this way, the inhabitants lived largely on remittances from relatives or their own circular migration trajectory. A resident tearfully recounted her own migration trajectory:

> "I did it all for them [=the children]. I left, so I didn't see them grow up for a bit, my mother did. And that's very hard for me as a mother. It hurts not to be there, at the first words, or the first steps." (field notes, August 3, 2021)

Some of the other residents in the project were from equally 'poorer' countries like Bulgaria, Poland and Slovakia.

Access to employment-based social rights

Article 45 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU establishes the free movement of workers within the EU as a fundamental right, aligning with the free movement of goods, capital, and services in the European single market[1]. This provision aims to counteract nationality-based discrimination in employment, remuneration, and working conditions. According to Timmerman et al. (2015), EU workers have the right to accept a job offer, move freely within the country, and reside for employment purposes - and beyond, provided certain conditions are met. For those who arrive in Belgium are allowed to stay (for more than three months) because of their status as EU citizens as long as they are not a burden on the state - policy texts hence use the term "economically active union citizen". These migrants have access to formal social rights and welfare services (such as benefits, employment assistance/subsidised training and social housing) if they have long-term residence status, and an official address. We can situate this within the territorial logic of welfare states, where redistribution is directed towards residents who are politically and formally recognised as citizens in a defined national, geographical space (Dewanckel et al., 2022).

The emphasis on formal employment makes it particularly difficult for a number of migrants who face multiple challenges such as illiteracy, intellectual disabilities, impairments, addiction, and more, especially in the context of chronic poverty and discrimination. They find it much more difficult or impossible to access the labour market. This means that if their work is precarious, i.e. seasonal, temporary or informal, it is difficult or even impossible to maintain or obtain a residence status. This also applies to people who are sick or elderly, and who have little access to social rights if they have not accumulated them through employment.

Stigmatisation of Intra-European (Roma) migrants and international recognition of Roma as a minority group

Most residents explicitly identified themselves as Roma and speak Romanès. In conversations, residents sometimes referred to themselves as *gitanes*, *zingari*, *rom* or *roma*, but most often it was the designation of the *gadjo* or non-Roma that revealed their own identity to an outsider. "Romanès is our language, but we also speak gadjitanès," said one man (field notes, June 22, 2022). By *gadjitanès*, he meant the language of the non-Roma, in this case the Romanian language. Roma is an umbrella term for migrant groups from Eastern Europe who have North Indian ancestry and a nomadic past. Contrary to popular belief, they no longer move around, but live in houses and flats (Wauter et al., 2012).

Roma in Romania (and Bulgaria) have a history of persecution and oppression which has created a difficult relationship with the state or system, i.e. police, institutions and the school system. Access to education in these countries is hampered for Roma at various socio-economic levels, resulting in many short-lived school careers. Persistent stigma and violence moreover continue to lead to high levels of mistrust and an 'outsider position' for many (Creţan & Powell, 2018). In addition, Roma were generally negatively affected by the transition from socialism to the free market (Sigona & Trehan, 2009). While they experienced a degree of equality during communism, many found it difficult to access wage labour in post-socialist states.

As in their countries of origin, Roma people also experience discrimination and stigmatisation in Belgium, in the labour market, at school and in wider society. According to a recent European

[1] Article 3(2) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU); Article 4(2)(a) and Articles 20, 26 and 45-48 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

study, about one-fifth of Belgians indicated they would not feel comfortable with a Roma as a colleague, and about two in five said they would not want a Roma as a son-in-law or daughter-in-law (UNIA, 2020). The existing prejudices are deeply rooted and date back to the 15e century when caravan dwellers/travellers first arrived in Belgium. However, the Roma in Ghent today mainly arrived in the 1990s (after the fall of the Soviet Union), and the largest number only since 2009, after the opening of the labour market to the new EU member states. As in other European cities, the presence of poor Roma migrants causes particular public outrage and media attention in Ghent in particular and in Belgium in general. Referred to in France as *la question rom,* in Italy as *il problema nomadi*, in Dutch as *het Roma probleem*. The numbers are often small but it is the visibility of poverty they embody that makes Roma a public problem (Rosa, 2019). As in other countries, Roma culture and customs are presented as a threat to non-Roma. Creţan & Powell (2018) highlight that this perspective lacks historical context and tends to mask racism against Roma. For example, ignoring crucial historical events such as the 500 years of slavery in Romania (13e - 19e century) and the Romani holocaust during WWII hinders a deeper understanding of the Roma's position (for more info see Achim, 2002 and Kelso, 1999).

This is also the case in Ghent where already in 2010, there was talk of a so-called 'influx' of Roma that had to be kept under control (Wauters et al., 2012). The group of Roma in Ghent is very heterogeneous (with the largest numbers of Slovak and Bulgarian origin). Yet they are often considered as one ‘group’ by for example, the press, which has participated from the start in a one-sided and often negative coverage of this population. A coordinator explained:

> "There exists a societal focus [on Eastern-Europeans] of 'they’re all Roma'. The group has an image problem compared to refugees. They generally have a good image. Not with everyone, but, for example from an employer's point of view, it’s 'oh yes, a well-motivated refugee,' but 'oh, not an Eastern European.'" (transcript interview, June 16, 2021)

Moreover, this has led to violent incidents, as was the case in 2017 when armed football supporters entered a squat in Ghent where (Romanian) Roma were staying.

At the same time, international recognition of Roma as a minority group has emerged in recent decades and there is EU legislation requiring member states to work towards Roma inclusion. Moreover, there are European policy reports on interventions with Roma and Travellers that have developed ‘good practices’, from the evaluation of interventions across Europe. This happens within the EU Strategic Framework for Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation. This European framework offers opportunities for the development of target group-specific assistance in the member states. Within this framework, Flanders developed a Flemish Action Plan MOE(ROMA)-Migrants in 2012, which led to the funding of community stewards (see below) who act as mediators between the city and Roma families in neighbourhoods experiencing significant social tensions in Ghent, Sint-Niklaas, Antwerp and Brussels (see Lamaire et al., 2016).

Legal mandate regarding people without legal residence for local authorities

Local governments have a number of legal obligations towards people without legal residence, including providing education for minors (regardless of their or their parents' residence status) and medical assistance. This also applies to Intra-European citizens without valid residence status.

Belgium has a system of urgent medical assistance (UMA) for people without legal residence. This covers both preventive and curative medical care and the medical expenses are covered if the person in question has no income. A doctor's consultation, medication, hospitalisation, home nursing, lab tests, physiotherapy, dental care,... potentially all qualify. A person can obtain a so-called 'medical card' through a reception office of the Public Centre of Social Welfare (PCSW). In Ghent, this is a fairly low-threshold procedure, provided there is evidence of a local connection. This implies that a person must be able to prove that he/she has been in Ghent for 3 months, through, for example, a statement from an outreach (social) worker. The medical card system (of UMA) is not flawless, as indicated in the last two 'policy signal reports' of the Ghent Primary Care Zone (2021 and 2023). First, it does not cover everything, such as home (health) care equipment, mental health care and palliative care. Secondly, the administrative procedure is sometimes too complex for healthcare providers. As a result, they make mistakes to the detriment of the patient (Signalenbundel ELZ Gent).

Limited options on the Ghent housing market

Flanders has a shortage of social housing (See historically long waiting lists) and there is a structural 'crisis' on the private rental market, more precisely a shortage of cheap rental housing and discrimination linked to poverty and migration background, especially noticeable in the larger cities (see De Decker, 2019). Recent research shows that, despite the efforts made by the city, ethnic minorities are structurally discriminated against in the Ghent rental housing market (Verhaeghe et al. 2023). While most EU migrants manage to find housing in Ghent, a minority find themselves on the margins of the city due to various aspirations and challenges related to circular migration, temporary or informal employment or poverty. Given the very limited supply of flexible and temporary housing options, this can lead to (hidden) forms of homelessness and informal housing practices (Hermans et al., 2020). People squat empty houses or flats, make so-called barracks out of recycled building materials or sleep in caravans and cars. Despite the tightening of the squatting law in 2017, squatting still takes place in the many empty flats and houses in Ghent (including many empty social houses).

Moreover, the structural housing shortage for the lowest incomes adds sensitivity to target group-specific projects, especially when it comes to so-called 'newcomers' or migrants such as the post-mobile living project. A policy maker also pointed to the context of the current economic crisis and the compelling cutbacks which Ghent faced since 2022:

> "They're going to emphasise how much [the project] cost per head, ...while an ordinary person is struggling to pay their bills, the taxes going up, the swimming pool fee going up, ...it's going to be a difficult one. It's going to be very difficult to justify." (transcript of interview, December 21, 2022)

The residents of the post-mobile living project found themselves at the intersection of several structural challenges, which are not unique to Roma. Nevertheless, these challenges are often unjustly targeted and categorised as unique Roma problems, partly due to the symbolic significance of the project and disproportionate media coverage (see below).


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1.2 MESO CONTEXT

The meso context or intervention context consists of the various factors that influenced how social workers carried out their interventions. These factors are both direct (related to the organisation itself) and indirect (related to broader political and policy contexts). The study highlights that besides the immediate work environment, broader political and policy decisions also influenced how social workers pursued and achieved their goals (Boost et al., 2017).

Explicit focus on the intersection of Intra-European migration and poverty in local policy

Since 2010, the city developed its own IEM (Intra-European Migration) policy through the so-called *Permanent Overleg Comité* (Lamaire et al., 2016) which, over the years, translated more concretely into the start-up and expansion of the team of community stewards, the school mediators, the project *Instapwonen* and the *A-TIEM* (het Arbeids Team Intra-Europese Migratie, which was later incorporated into the Job team). A policy maker explained:

> "In Ghent, a vision statement was drafted in which a two-track policy was outlined. One, let's keep supporting those who want support, and two, let's tackle forms of crime and exploitation, because that exists too." (field notes interview, September 10, 2021)

This policy was drawn up by the former Integration Department. In this way, expertise and practical experience was developed in the city:

- Ghent's community stewards have been working in an outreaching way with the city's most vulnerable Intra-European migrants, including Roma families, since 2011.
- The School Mediation Intra-European Migration project, through which four additional school mediators were recruited to reach out to the most vulnerable Intra-European families and achieve better cooperation between schools, families and neighbourhoods. The project was funded with funds from the Bernard Van Leer Foundation from school year 2012-13 to school year 2014-15, after which the four social workers were incorporated into the regular team of school mediators.
- The 'Link to Work- Roma mediators' projects (2014-2015) and the A-TIEM (*het Arbeids Team Intra-Europese Migratie*, 2015-2019) continue in the current Jobteam, dedicated to the support of vulnerable citizens in their search for regular work in an accessible and slow-paced manner.
- Since 2012 the project *Instapwonen* provides temporary accommodation in three houses for vulnerable Intra-European families with or without legal residence.
- The preliminary phase of the post-mobile living project: At the end of 2018, 56 caravan dwellers were officially allowed to remain on a terrain in the *Hurstweg/Buitensingel*, on the condition that they accepted assistance. When they were evicted after more than a year, they were given a pitch on the city's Travellers' site (= *Doortrekkersterrein*) before entering the post-mobile living project (see below).

Origins and background of the project

The post-mobile living project was preceded by a genesis that had an impact on the actual interventions. The first so-called 'encampment', or collection of informal/self-made houses (often called 'barracks') of a group of mainly Romanian Roma was discovered in 2009 in the Rabot neighbourhood in Ghent. Eviction was followed by a period where people alternately squatted houses or occupied other land (with barracks or caravans). After the tightening of the

squatting law in 2017, the presence of self-made houses and caravans grew because it had become more difficult to occupy vacant houses. These forms of precarious housing on the outskirts of the city bothered the city authorities because it created nuisance due to the visible poverty (as mentioned above) and also, from a more humanitarian concern, because of the sometimes deplorable conditions in which people lived. Residents' experiences and perspectives on their 'homeless' situation before the interventions varied. Living in self-made houses or caravans on vacant sites and squatting were experienced differently by different people at different times. Residents indicated that it was cheap and it gave flexibility to travel back and forth to their home country. Moreover, at times it was quite comfortable provided they could stand or stay in one place for a relatively long period of time. Some residents reminisced about these times nostalgically, like this man who missed his caravan:

> "We had to destroy it, but I couldn't. I explained this [to the social workers]: this is my *mandruta* [= pride in Romanian], this is my home, (*holding his hand on his heart*) That's impossible. We were able to give it to family. At least in this way it would become someone else's home, instead of being destroyed." (field notes, March 31, 2023)

Another resident missed her barrack. It had been very spacious with several rooms and a front garden with flowers. She was especially proud of the vegetable garden she had created, with a make-shift greenhouse filled with neat rows of cucumber, lettuce and parsley (field notes, July 6, 2021). On the other hand, most of the residents indicated that it was also difficult. It was sometimes very precarious, interspersed with periods when they were truly homeless and sometimes conditions were less than ideal. A man who stayed in a barrack on the *Aziëstraat* for a long time said that life was not easy then. He fetched water in large water bottles and washed himself with a small bucket. Gradually more and more people joined the terrain which made (living together) difficult (field notes, February 25, 2021 and April 20, 2023). Social workers also noticed this, like this practitioner recounted:

> "Before, when you came to the *Aziëstraat* (...) there was a whole vegetable garden, it was a bliss. Very occasionally a rat might walk around, but it was actually pretty ok. But it boomed with that anti-squatting law. You had a lot of people who came from those squats, or who came back to Belgium, from travelling back and forth, and suddenly they couldn't squat anymore. So it started to boom and then a lot of nuisance reports started coming in. Then we really saw it change, in terms of filth, yes just really, too many people in too small an area." (transcript interview, May 26, 2021)

Some individuals and political parties in the city exerted front- and behind-the-scenes pressure to end the illegal occupations (Coordinator, field notes, February 7, 2023). At the same time, Ghent's civil society pleaded for a more humane solution for these people. In the context of the Housing Task Force, established in 2017, the Mobile Living Working Group argued for regulations and minimum facilities in places where people had settled in order to have time to work on structural solutions (Mobiel Wonen, derde open vergadering, June 11, 2018).

This led to a so-called pilot project in August 2018. For those who had recently settled on the *Hurstweg/Buitensingel*, an agreement was made between the city and the Flemish public transport company 'De Lijn', the owner of the land, and regulations were drawn up for the residents. It involved a series of conditions such as paying 100 euros for water and electricity, renting portable toilets and keeping the site clean. The (socialist) mayor stated the following at the city council on September 24, 2018:

> "The demand for a controlled and manageable response to the unauthorised caravan occupancy, stems from a realism and sense of responsibility, which we as the city

> government have always demonstrated and are also urged to do by an assertive and humanitarian-based civil society." [own translation]

The (right-wing) opposition reacted vehemently, making reference to a (for them) similar agreement, made in 2013-2014 for a group of Slovak families, who were squatting in a monastery. A much-discussed project they felt had failed (for a nuanced analysis, see Debruyne, 2022).

The *Hurstweg/Buitensingel* 'experiment' would last one year so the next step would no longer be for this mayor (he was no longer running for re-election) but for the next administration, ultimately led by a liberal mayor. In July 2019, the outlines of the post-mobile living project were drawn by the new mayor's office and six aldermen (for more on this see p.30). In order to justify the substantial funding allocated to the project, policymakers made decisive choices that could be explained convincingly to both their constituents and the opposing parties (interview policymaker, December 21, 2022). These decisions aimed to address existing concerns surrounding the establishment of a reception project for (Roma) migrants amid a structural housing shortage, as well as the existing xenophobic fear of potentially encouraging more migration. Several interpellations by the opposition in the run-up to the start of the project bore witness to these concerns. Moreover, this coordinator explained, "there were also raised eyebrows on the side of the administration. Why is a priority policy being developed for a very specific small group?" (field notes, February 7, 2023). Consequently, the project was presented as a one-time "total solution" for a problem the city was dealing with: this 'group' of people who were living "clandestinely mobile" in the city (City of Ghent, 2019).

A project leader was appointed and 138 'homeless' people were registered in September 2019 as part of the so-called 'baseline measurement'. These were mostly Intra-European migrants, but also some Belgians. They lived in various places in the city but the majority had settled in the *Hurstweg/Buitensingel* and in the *Aziëstraat*, on a terrain of SoGent (= the city's urban development company), where the presence of barracks had long been tolerated. Of those 138, 108 signed up for the project.

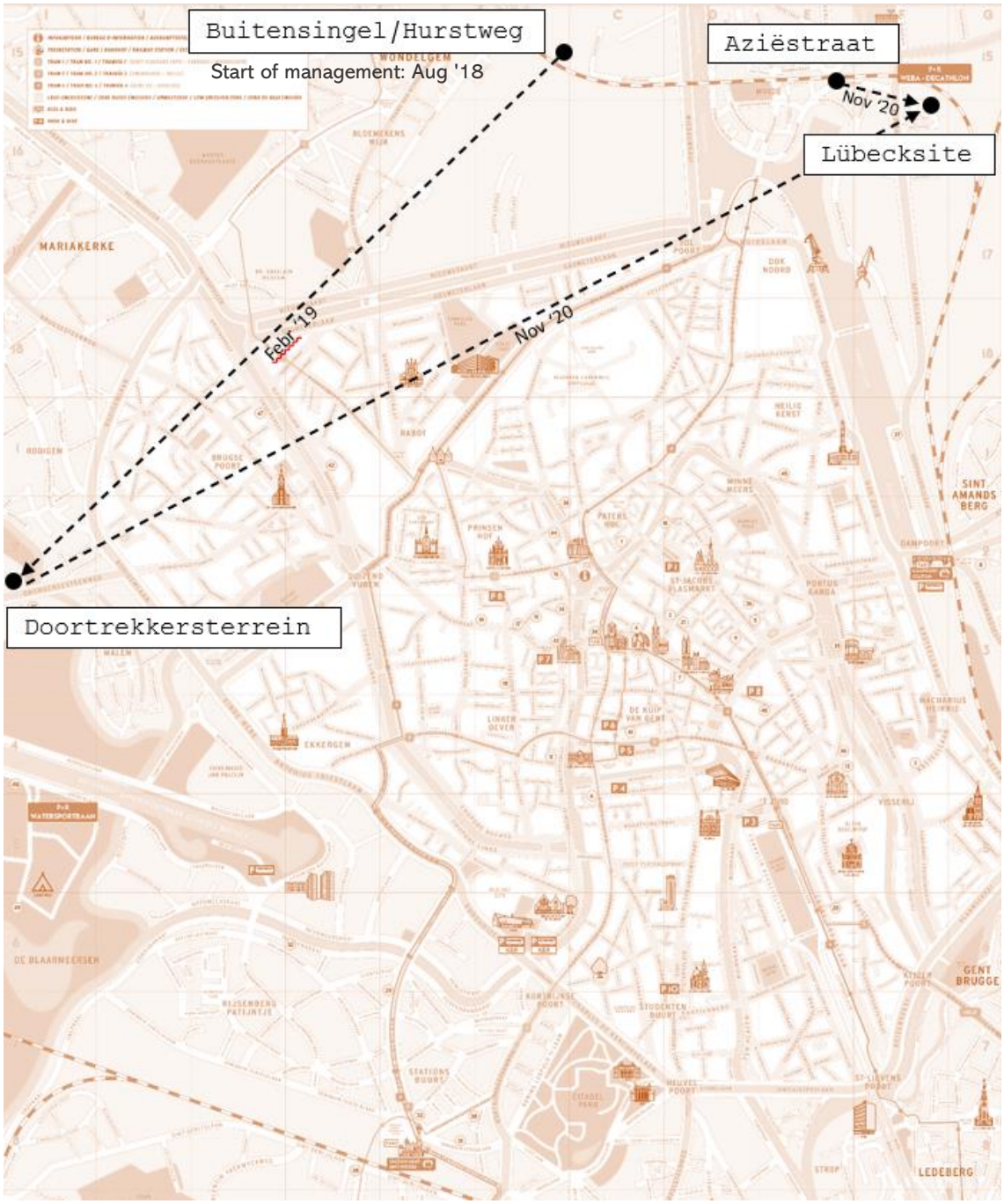
This was followed by logistical and organisational challenges. "The site was selected fairly quickly, but then containers had to be installed and a manager appointed," said a coordinator (field notes interview, February 7, 2023). From the start, it had been decided to separate the social assistance (to be carried out by existing city services) from the operational tasks. "It was very difficult to find an operational partner," remarked a policymaker, "and because of this, the project was much delayed" (field notes interview, September 10, 2021). The idea of a single centralised location, put forward by the city council, was non-negotiable, leading to the withdrawal of collaboration from the Ghent civil society. "They instead wanted to accommodate people in various locations in the city. But that was not an option," the policy maker added (field notes, September 10, 2021). Moreover, it was difficult to find a supplier for the housing containers that met the safety requirements set by the city.

Meanwhile, the agreement between the City and the Flemish public transport company 'De Lijn' in connection with the *Buitensingel/Hurstweg* expired and, after a one-time extension, De Lijn refused to renew it. In anticipation of the (delayed) start of the post-mobile living project the people who had been staying on the terrain temporarily moved to the Travellers' site on the outskirts of the city (*Doortrekkersterrein)*. A community steward recounted:

> "There you have the origins of the idea of management and assistance. We had an office on the Travellers' site, even though it was only a shack. We were much more

present on the ground. The *Aziëstraat*, [on the other hand], has always been different. Of course, no office, lots of separate houses, barracks, whereas on the Travellers' site everyone had their caravan and when they sat outside, everyone saw each other. And [there were] communal kitchens. So these people already had a very different experience." (transcript interview, May 26, 2021)

As this practitioner pointed out, the above-mentioned context was significant because it reveals that the residents of the post-mobile living project had different preceding experiences of assistance/support, and the idea of 'management' on the site where they live. The map below shows the moves that preceded the project.



Exaggerated attention

From the outset, there was a lot of interest in the project from different angles. This is evident considering the many policy and social work actors involved. This coordinator explained:

> "If you look at the total number of actors taking part, if you also look at the various structures, groups, representations, hierarchies, and then politicians looking down with a magnifying glass... That doesn't always make it [easy]" (transcript interview, January 18, 2023)

Firstly, there was a strong involvement from the local government. The project fell directly under the authority of the mayor and there was a political steering committee that oversaw the project, through, among other things, quarterly meetings where intermediary (measurable) results were discussed. This steering committee consisted of the mayor's cabinet supplemented by three other cabinets with the following mandates:

- Education, family counselling and outreach work
- Civil affairs and protocol
- Equal opportunities, welfare, participation, community work and public green spaces

In this way, all four coalition parties were present. This level of coordination operated separately from the 'project group' where the coordinators of the various participating partners convened.

In addition, the opposition parties on the right, the NVA (*Nieuw Vlaamse Alliantie*) and the VB (*Vlaams Belang*), constantly exerted pressure on the city council, through repeated interpellations and disapproving remarks about the project in the city council. These interventions began long before the start of the project (as mentioned above) and continued during its implementation. The questions they raised reflected a populist dichotomy between 'us' and 'them', underscored by a security-oriented stance on migration. This perspective often hinged on the hypothetical idea of welfare migration (i.e. the belief that increased assistance results in higher migration rates) (for a more nuanced understanding see de Haas, 2010; Lucassen and van Houtum, 2016; Orsini, 2020). The discourse of the local VB party leader in 2018 in response to the temporary management of the *Hurstweg/Buitensingel* went as follows:

> "The problems don't just persist, they get worse. Due to the influx of Roma, the problems escalate (...) When, colleagues, will there be a strong emphasis on a resolute deterrence policy and a clear indication that Roma should not come here?" (City Council, September 25, 2018)

About halfway through the project, the local NVA party leader stated in a popular newspaper:

> "It is terrible to observe that halfway through, many of the participants are still not doing what is expected of them: learning Dutch, learning or practising a job, and sending the children to school. This money could be better spent elsewhere." (Van Damme, 2022)

The left-wing opposition, PVDA (*Partij Van De Arbeid*) also voiced criticism. They advocated for a decentralised project approach and cooperation with Ghent's civil society.

As a result, the project evolved into a symbolic case. Twice during the project intermediary evaluations, centred on measurable outcomes, were disclosed following requests from the opposition. This usually resulted in press coverage, albeit limited.

COVID-19 pandemic

In 2020, the year the project started, the world faced the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This affected the project (especially in its early stages) in several ways, increasing tensions. A policymaker stated:

> "...the fact that a lot of people also experienced the corona crisis, [followed by] the energy crisis, etc. it's struggling to stay afloat (...) We made the decision at the beginning of the legislature, when we were still in a different financial climate. We didn't know that corona was coming, the war [in Ukraine] and so on, but now, for everyone unable to pay their bills, helping people with precarious residence, is very hard to digest." (transcript of interview, December 21, 2022)

The same policymaker highlighted the fact that the pandemic contributed to a lack of favourable collaboration and communication between different levels of government. The lack of informal meetings for example did not benefit relations between the various actors.

Moreover, the organisation of Dutch and social orientation classes on the terrain of the project, as well as the (intended) set up of community and volunteer work, were complicated. The schooling of children also faced additional challenges, related to stigma and distrust. This school mediator explained:

> "Too bad for the project we have to start in the corona year in terms of education. [On the one hand,] there was a lot of stigma towards people, a few times there was this reaction like 'yes, I heard corona broke out on the site.' I wouldn't know where they heard that. So there was that. But also parents [= residents] who were anxious about all kinds of topics concerning infection and vaccinations." (transcript interview, June 16, 2021)

The measures further affected the labour market. It became more difficult to find work in agriculture and horticulture, for example.

> "They [= the residents] are applying for jobs again. It's tough. Because of corona the bar is set much higher, because there are a lot of unemployed people now" (transcript interview practitioner, May 25, 2021)

Residents were hindered in their mobility, with various consequences, as this practitioner related:

> "I have two [= residents] who go away regularly. (...) to get a driving licence in Romania and [to pick up] a child's passport [for example]. The child was born here and never had a Romanian passport, but he has Romanian nationality. So they went but with corona, appointments were postponed all the time, and suddenly the paper with the birth certificate from here in Ghent was no longer valid. They are now stuck in Romania and they have been gone from January." (transcript interview practitioner, May 26, 2021)

Practitioners also became responsible for supervising compliance with the corona measures of the moment, such as wearing masks and quarantine obligations. This sometimes led to strange (power) dynamics between residents and staff. That is because many residents were sceptical about the measures. Bulgaria and Romania had the lowest vaccination rates in the EU. This was mainly due to disinformation campaigns (which also reached residents in Ghent), poor communication from the government and a deep-seated distrust in government agencies (see Henley, 2021).

Finally, residents were confronted with harsh images from their home countries. Romania had the highest death toll in the entire European Union by November 2021. It was a recurring topic in conversations.

> "It is very bad is Romania. Many people die and they just put the bodies in plastic bags." (resident, field notes, January 20, 2021)

1.3 MICROCONTEXT

This section deals with the residents' lifeworlds, living conditions, challenges and available resources. These context factors are closely linked to the macro and meso context we discussed earlier. The residents are a heterogeneous group in terms of family situation, gender, mental and physical health and age (see below), and these variables are meaningful in the sense that they make each pathway unique.

Survival mode

The project's assistance framework described the group in terms of 'the absence of a long-term perspective' (Buyst, 2019). Those with extensive experience working with this population affirmed that they existed within a kind of survival culture, trapped in a vicious circle of illegal residence and, above all, living 'from day to day' (Jaarverslag Buurtstewards, 2019). Van Lancker (2023) situates this state of survival within the framework of the scarcity theory proposed by Mullainathan and Shafir (2014). According to this theory, individuals experiencing (extreme) poverty face a reduction in mental bandwidth, leading to a singular focus on perceived scarcity and a lower IQ. This results in the neglect, underestimation, or repression of other, perhaps more crucial, (long-term) goals and considerations, regardless of the consequences. Consequently, individuals may make choices that are deemed 'bad' by societal actors unfamiliar with the challenges of poverty, while, from the perspective of those individuals, these decisions are highly rational (Melrose & Dean, 2015; Krumer-Nevo, 2020).

While this provides some insight into certain 'issues', it's crucial to approach such an explanatory model with caution, as it potentially differentiates between the behaviours of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' citizens, reflecting a conservative rather than a structural poverty paradigm (Krumer-Nevo, 2020). From the perspective of a structural and poverty-aware poverty paradigm, the emphasis lies in examining the interplay among macro, meso, and micro dimensions, or on how the relationship between lifeworld and system is configured. Through the narratives of residents, we observed unpredictable housing and income trajectories that impacted children's regular attendance at school or the ability to integrate into the formal job market. Residents shared that they often did not know how long they could live somewhere, and whether there was going to be money for food that day which caused considerable concerns in the here-and-now. Despite devising survival strategies, it is noteworthy that individuals simultaneously made deliberate (long-term) choices. For instance, they purposefully engaged in seasonal work as part of circular migration, studied to obtain a driving license, or saved money for significant endeavours such as purchasing a car or renovating the family home in their homeland.

> Six months into the project, a resident excitingly shares that his 19-year-old son obtained his driving licence. "It was very difficult and it cost a lot of money," he says. "I don't have a driving licence myself and I wanted to give this to my son." His pride is palpable. (field notes, April 10, 2021)

We can scrutinise our interpretation of 'long-term', while recognising that it may also sometimes involve nurturing other priorities and aspirations, which are not always in line with

what is conventionally expected. Practitioners acknowledged and struggled with this, as this practitioner put 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." (field notes, July 9, 2021)

A Jobteam employee reflected on her own career as we talked about the issue of 'sustainable choices':

> "Because ultimately I want to find a secure and stable job [for them]. Seasonal work on farms is ok for now, but is this sustainable? I aim for something long-lasting. [Colleagues ask me] what is sustainable? Are *you* going to stay here all your life? Well no, it's only three years and after that I'll see (...) I like to change environments. My CV is very varied." (transcript interview, May 25, 2021)

Language skills, language barriers and illiteracy

Apart from a few individuals speaking Slovakian, Hungarian, Polish and Bulgarian, the majority of residents was trilingual. Firstly, they spoke Romanès, the language spoken by Roma (as mentioned earlier), and Romanian. Additionally, some residents also spoke French and/or Italian due to their time spent in France and/or Italy. These Romance languages share some similarities with Romanian, facilitating its learning process for Romanians. These language skills increased communication opportunities in a diverse city like Ghent, particularly benefiting those who knew French. However, this proficiency in languages clashed with certain social expectations, especially in areas like education and employment where Dutch was expected. Notably, most residents had limited or no proficiency in Dutch, with many finding it a challenging language to learn. This difficulty posed obstacles to accessing support services and institutions, particularly in a city where Dutch is predominant. Some residents, particularly older individuals, had minimal or no formal education (as discussed below), and some were illiterate, further creating social and administrative barriers. In short, there was considerable diversity within the group. Concerning those who were illiterate for example, a language teacher attested:

> "We are already noticing significant variations in proficiency levels. Some people can already read and write a little, others not at all. While some are still practising motor skills by drawing curly lines and straight lines, others write their names without problems." (Caritas, s.d.-a)

Lastly, it's worth mentioning that there was a degree of digital illiteracy among certain individuals, potentially hindering their access to the job market or specific services/opportunities.

Irregular school career children

Many of the children had experienced somewhat irregular school careers before the start of the project. They had sometimes accompanied their migrating parents or remained in their home country, often with grandparents. The mobility and the sometimes precarious situation in which families had found themselves, had resulted in periods when children had not attended school. A teenager recounted:

> "At that time I stayed home [from school] because my father was away for work. So my mum had to do everything by herself, like the shopping and things, and then I stayed with her to help." (field notes, July 3, 2023)

As pointed out by this boy, children were likely to be given responsibilities within the household. In some cases, they were expected to help with cooking, shopping or caring for younger siblings, sometimes hindering their attendance at school. Despite these challenges, all residents considered (formal) education very important for the children. Most (older) children had been to school for several years in Romania or in other European countries including Belgium. Nevertheless, as highlighted by this practitioner, a learning deficit in the educational program easily emerges:

> "The conventional school system typically involves children who follow a classical trajectory from kindergarten onwards, creating a cumulative experience. As early as kindergarten, you learn how to hold a pencil or have a group event or have a relationship with your teacher. And for children who join much later, that's all new. It’s

> often more difficult to adapt to such a system at a later age. Addin to that, the Belgian school system is also very demanding." (interview practitioner, May 26, 2021)

The children did not only face a significant learning gap compared to their peers, but they also grappled with learning Dutch as their third or fourth language. This situation is further complicated by less-than-ideal conditions at home, both logistically and socially, to do their homework or receive extra support. Keeping up with the regular curriculum at times appeared as a daunting task, which negatively affected their academic performance and self-confidence. Research shows that this creates a risk that children may see themselves as less capable and unintentionally distance themselves from educational opportunities (see Agirdag, 2020).

Limited access to the formal labour market

> "When I go to a company, they ask me why I am not retired. There is no work for me here." (resident, field notes, March 19, 2023)

People faced various 'personal' challenges, relating to a limited knowledge of Dutch (as mentioned above), illiteracy, a lack of formal education, illnesses, mental or physical disabilities, addiction or advanced age. As a result, access to the regular and formal labour market was challenging for some. Not everyone who wanted to work could easily find work (in contrast to popular belief). Both Roma and homeless people are also generally more prone to health problems, as they are at risk of being victims of health inequalities (Robinson et al., 2022). In addition, many adult residents' life stories were marked by loss, poverty and (childhood) trauma.

The labour market mainly focuses on young and healthy people. Research shows that low-skilled people, people with a migration background and people with a work-limiting disability, long-term illness or condition have significantly fewer opportunities in the labour market (Lenaerts et al., 2023). Many residents were at some intersection of the above factors. A coordinator explained:

> "There are barriers that make Intra-European migrants akin to generally vulnerable jobseekers: they are low-skilled, face language barriers, the fact that there is a scarcity of jobs opportunities in that segment, contend with intense competition, and also everything concerning digital barriers. In this context, it doesn't matter whether you are an Intra-European migrant or not. These are common challenges. But then Intra-European migrants face specific challenges related to the intricate connection between employment and [rights linked to] residency." (transcript interview, June 17, 2021)

Intra-European migrants are less able to pursue training because of their immediate need for income (as opposed to others who are eligible for welfare benefits). Moreover, they are not entitled to certain social employment projects of the Public Centre of Social Welfare (PCSW), such as working under Article 60 or 61, AMA (work-based activities) or paid volunteer work as a stepping stone to the regular labour market.

Extensive informal network

The Romanian Roma families in the project generally had very extensive (care) networks in the context of (extended) family relationships. Grandparents, for example, often (co-)cared for grandchildren. Almost everyone had strong ties with relatives in their home country, or in other European cities. People who arrived in Ghent more recently had sought out their fellow villagers to help them find a place to live and work.

When one of the residents unexpectedly passed away, a lot of family members visited the terrain of the project. The place was filled with cars. Everyone was upset and there were a lot of emotions. A lot of the relatives who had come actually stayed in Liège, a city in the south of Belgium. The social workers were not aware of the presence of these relatives in Belgium. "Suddenly they were here, out of nowhere, little did we know. They have been discussing since yesterday. Apparently, a lot has to be arranged and planned." (field notes, July 9, 2021)

Also at other times, especially when there were employment opportunities in the context of seasonal work, family members 'visited' the residents on the premises, while often sleeping in cars near the project terrain.

Clearly, these networks were very valuable for the survival and well-being of the families. This was different for the single men in the project. They had a less extensive or more fragile network.

Strong informal social networks also hindered individuals' social mobility, according to some. One coordinator observed that tensions sometimes arose within families when someone 'stepped outside the group':

> "The law of 'the restraining head start' I call it. For example, father and son, son finds a well-paying job, but he encounters his father's resistance, (...) with a reaction the likes of, 'stop trying too hard. [it's not who we are]!'" (field notes interview, February 7, 2023).

(Informal) skills

> "Someone who doesn't speak a word of Dutch, barely any French, but who knows perfectly which tram to take, how and what, she can't name it (...) 'It's not along here, it's along there,' [she tells me]. But I looked it up, I reply. 'No!' Ok, I'll just listen. Unbelievable. People also look around more. See things we don't see. So you can also learn a lot from them, I like that." (practitioner, transcript interview, May 26, 2021)

Residents possessed many (informal) skills through which they generated income. These skills encompassed activities such as the impromptu organisation of hairdressing sessions, collecting, trading (buy-sell) and repairing materials, objects and cars. "The *gadje* [= non-Roma] throw away a lot of really good stuff," stated a resident (field notes, May 26, 2023). He personally collected all kinds of appliances and tools in order to repair (and sell) them. Facebook was an important platform on which objects were traded, as well as through local dealers (mainly in old metals).

Only a few residents still possessed expertise in the traditional skill or craft of their (grand)parents and ancestors. This was the case, for example, for a resident who worked with copper, as shown in this photo of the copper stills he crafted.

Begging also served as an important source of income for many. In line with recent research in Brussels (Adriaensens & Soare, 2023), these Roma families also generally perceived begging as a regular form of employment (Dean, 1999). When questioned about the ongoing strike by the staff in the supermarket where he begged, one resident replied:

> "I noticed it. One Saturday I was standing there, and the shop didn't open. They explained it to me. It's for the people who work there and they want more money. And I said, 'what about me, I also work here, I also want more money,' and he laughed. (field notes, May 26, 2023).

That said, it's worth noting that some individuals were well aware of the stigma associated with begging and/or even disapproved of it. For instance, one woman revealed that her husband no longer wanted her to beg. She thought of doing it secretly anyway. Another woman said she wanted a better future for her children and this included not wanting her children to (be compelled to) beg.

Begging is generally frowned upon within the prevailing discourse in Belgium. Nevertheless, it is legally permitted, and notably, the European Court of Human Rights has recently acknowledged begging as a human right (Cahier Steunpunt, 2023).

Lastly, residents possessed a variety of caregiving, maintenance and housekeeping skills. This was visible in how they carried out small renovations, cooked, took care of the children, maintained a vegetable garden, organised parties, etc. At the Lübeck site, residents were constantly engaged in activity. These informal skills played a crucial role in maintaining the overall well-being of children and ensuring the smooth operation of households.

Mobility

> "Resident: My sister normally lives in France but she has gone to Romania now.
> Researcher: On holiday?
> Resident: Is it called a holiday if you don't work?"
> (field notes, July 26, 2021)

Through their informal network, most residents had a lot of mobility options. Consequently, they could (by choice or necessity) migrate to other locations to seize specific opportunities or escape challenging circumstances, such as eviction. They also often returned to the home country for administrative or medical reasons, or when something happened in the family, such as a death or an important celebration. In this way, residents sometimes felt at home in several places, for example in Belgium and in Romania.

Cars played a crucial role in this dynamics, as many individuals crossed national borders using their personal vehicles, enabling them to transport a substantial amount of belongings. Those without their own cars often hired a driver to take them, for instance to Romania. However, the travelling expenses made it challenging for everyone to undertake such journeys regularly.

The personal vehicle was also used as a means of transport in the context of (in)formal employment and finally, it also served as a place to sleep when needed.

This mobility can be situated within the context of 'circular migration' described earlier, and was largely ignored by social policy in general and by the project in particular. Within the context of the welfare state, where the aim is to realise rights based on permanent residence, mobility has always been a difficult issue. This is due to the territorial logic of the welfare state (as mentioned above).

Practitioners found it challenging to assist or support people who travel back and forth a lot. This also applied to professionals concerned with education, who clash with the lack of flexibility in schools, exposed by circular migration. Especially in a context where there are barely enough places in schools, the enrolment and de-enrolment of children is a challenging matter. This has

been brought forward in the past within the Local Consultation Platform of Primary Education, in cooperation with Education Centre of Gent and in the framework of a project proposal on the right to education for children on Travellers' sites, but so far without a conclusive answer (coordinator, personal communication, October 23, 2023).

2. Actors and their perspectives

In this part we describe the actors who (un)directly influenced the intervention process. In doing so, we also attempt to integrate their view/perspective on society and the role of social work. We divide the actors into designers, implementers and beneficiaries.

An important observation here is that policy and practice (design and implementation) cannot be completely separated. Practitioners and coordinators of the different services also helped shape policy. Some examples of this:

- The various services (implementers) were given (limited) space within the overall framework to design their own policies. In what way the on-the ground practitioners were involved varies from one service to another.
- A consultative body 'project group' was created consisting of the project leader, the coordinator of the POOW cell (see Tabel below) and the coordinators of the different services.
- Attempts were made to involve practitioners in shaping policy through, for example, the STAM sessions (see below)

No actor or service had prior experience with a project of a similar (large) scale.

Designers	Before start	• Political level: the mayor and the college of aldermen • Administrative level: the city department Society and Welfare, services 'Welfare and equal opportunities' and 'Outreach Work' • Caritas Vlaanderen
	During the project	• Administrative level: the political steering committee consisting of four cabinets with the flowing mandates: Outreach (*Groen*), Equal Opportunities and Welfare (*Vooruit*), Mayor (*VLD*) & Civic Affairs (*CD&V*) • Administrative level: the city department of Society and Welfare, 'Thematic Aid' service, 'POOW' cell (Precarious Stay, Reception and Transition to Housing)
Implementers		Coordinators and practitioners (social workers, staff and teachers) of the following services: • Community Stewards • Job team • School mediation • Caritas Vlaanderen • Ligo (Centre for Basic Education) • IN-Gent/Amal vzw (Ghent Integration and Integration Agency)
Beneficiaries		• Residents • Relatives of residents

2.1 DESIGNERS

As described earlier, the basic principles of the project were laid down on 19 July, 2019 by the mayor and the college of aldermen, in a concise text (on a mere A4 sheet). This included the following:

- The project will be designed for a fixed group of registered people currently living 'clandestinely' in Ghent
- The project will last for maximum 3 years
- The accommodation/shelter takes place in one centralised location (either in a building or in container units)

Within these outlines, the project was further developed by the departments 'Welfare and equal opportunities' and 'Outreach work'. The guidance framework was designed and several city services were involved. Management of the site was outsourced to Caritas Vlaanderen, which developed the operational framework (including the idea of a points system) together with the city's project leader.

Meanwhile the integration of the city of Ghent and the Public Centre of Social Welfare (PCSW) in 2019 led to a number of reforms in organisational structure in local social policy, which had an impact on the management/direction of the post-mobile living project. The project was brought under the POOW (Precarious Stay, Reception and Transition to Living) cell within the Thematic Aid service in 2020.

The defining A4, the governmental reform and some staff changes during the course of the project (at the political and civil service level) make that responsibility at the policy level cannot be unambiguously assigned.

Interviews revealed discrepancies in perspective within and between different levels, political colours and services, but overall we can say that the project was framed within local responsibilities on homelessness, extreme poverty and nuisance. The approach to social work from the policy level emphasised conditionality and intensive assistance, as the people were considered to be significantly removed from meeting the set integration conditions. The aim was to achieve ‘integration’ through stable employment and obtaining legal residence, in line with European legislation and the territorial logic of the welfare state, in order to access social rights. In this way, there was no room for circular migration (at the intersection with chronic poverty). Finally, great emphasis was placed on the importance of children's school attendance.

2.2 IMPLEMENTERS

Within the post-mobile living project, the policies were implemented by several social work services, some of which had already developed a partnership with some of the families (such as the community stewards, the school mediator and the Job team). The actors were given different mandates within the project, according to their expertise, creating a complex constellation of practitioners.

The social workers/practitioners had varying orientations and experiences, influenced not only by the vision of the service they were a part of, but also by their personal orientation and values, identity and life experiences.

On the one hand, there were social workers with a public mandate from the local government, i.e. the community stewards, the school mediator and the Jobteam employees. These services had experience working with this population (= vulnerable Intra-European migrants) and were appointed to provide individual assistance to the families and individuals. Some of the practitioners had years of experience, while others were recruited specifically for this project (and sometimes had no prior working experience).

- Community Stewards operate within the Outreach Service of the city, focussing on providing support to vulnerable individuals with an Intra-European migration background. The 'team Romania' was expanded to take on the individual assistance of families and individuals in the project. Community stewards generally adhere to the philosophy of the 'presence theory', approaching their work from a human rights perspective. They stand alongside the people, engaging with them at their own pace, connecting and confronting them with the broader society.
- School mediators work towards a good partnership between parents, schools and the community. They 'bridge' the gap between parents and schools by improving their relationship and supporting both parties. As a result of the post-mobile living project, a school mediator was linked to a place/project rather than to a school. This practitioner worked towards strengthening the relationship between residents and schools for the school-age children.
- The Jobteam is a mobile employment team operating in Ghent, that supports people in vulnerable positions towards employment. They work in an outreach way and enter into long term trajectories without fixed goals or outcomes, also engaging with employers. The project involves three practitioners overseeing residents' paths to 'activation' (through internships, volunteering and work). Additionally, the Jobteam provides off-site training and language coaching for residents.

On the other hand, the (operational) management and the organisation of the cohabitation on the site was entrusted to an actor from the (supra-local) civil society, namely Caritas Vlaanderen. This Christian-inspired non-profit organisation is committed to issues related to poverty, characterised by an international orientation and acknowledged in Flanders for its work with Travellers. The team employed in the post-mobile living project included one staff member who was of Roma origin. This practitioner spoke Romanès, the mother tongue of most residents.

Caritas' mission was threefold: the operational management of the site, organising the cohabitation, and facilitating the connection with the surrounding neighbourhood. Different practitioners were appointed for this purpose:

1. Administrators: responsible for operational management and integration into the neighbourhood.
2. Animators: organising communal activities with the residents that promote the coexistence of the different sub-groups

The teachers of Dutch (Ligo) and social orientation (IN-Gent/Amal vzw) were actively engaged in the project, as they conducted their teaching sessions directly on the terrain.

Moreover, partnerships were forged with Ghent civil society initiatives such as De Tinten, De Rode Lotus and Sluis-Onze-Thuis for material support (for example the distribution of food and second hand clothes), and close cooperation was developed with the local Community Health Centre.

2.3 THE BENEFICIARIES

The beneficiaries:

- The residents: Romanian Roma families, 1 Bulgarian Roma family and 8 individuals of Belgian, Romanian, Polish, Hungarian, Bulgarian and Slovak nationality.
- Family members of residents ('accidental beneficiaries')

The Romanian families almost all came from the same region, in different towns around Oraviţa in south-western Romania (as mentioned above). Most nuclear families had 2 to 4 children and they were all linked by family ties in one way or another. However, this was not the same group that had been living in the city since 2009. While some had been staying in Ghent for 14 years, others came to Ghent shortly before the start of the project. Many lived alternately in Romania and other European countries in previous years. They knew different migration routes (especially noticeable through the knowledge of French and Italian) and this created big differences in knowledge, skills and trust in official services. Moreover, residents had diverse and various care needs (as mentioned above). A practitioner explained:

> "There are some people here who will always need to be cared for. People who need support for life. And other people are going to want to leave the project [early on], people who don't want to stay because of the rules, and the cohabitation, because of the waste and so on." (field notes, April 28, 2021)

Some family members of residents were (in)directly involved in the interventions. They also had a history of staying in Ghent, but they did not subscribe to the project. This mainly concerned people who had not been in Ghent at the time of the so-called 'baseline measurement' or who were insufficiently known to the city services. Indeed, the Romanians who were registered (almost) all joined. The unregistered family members were often homeless in Ghent (sleeping in the car or squatting) and were registered as ‘visitors’ when they entered the terrain of the project. One resident recounted how she experienced this:

> "Of course it was strange because my children were all here. My sons are here with us. [Name of son] has gone by now but [name of son] is here [standing] next to us, my daughter was also here, my grandchildren, four, five years old. My heart hurt a lot that I

> was allowed to sleep somewhere warm and they slept outside." (field notes interview, April 20, 2023)

One visitor said she had lived in Ghent for eight years but could not participate in the project:

> "At the time when they made 'the list', I was in Romania to give birth to my daughter." (field notes, July 31, 2023)

As mentioned before, they could access the premises during visiting hours. One man, homeless himself, explained it was very pleasant for him to come on some days to eat together with his brothers who participated in the project. However, he was apprehensive about the 'small' scale of the project, which he felt could have easily accommodated more people:

> "I was not allowed into the project, there was no more space [name of project manager] said. And now look, at this terrain (points to the whole terrain of the former Lübeckstraat, of which only a small part is occupied by the project), they only got a small place! Why can't we live here? There is a lot of space, we can pay something for rent." (field notes, March 15, 2023)

Lastly, the single men usually had a long history of homelessness and did not migrate as a family. A practitioner explained that their challenges were very different from those of the families. "We call them the 'street work crowd'," she added (transcript interview, May 26, 2021).

Prejudices towards Roma existed among the residents, with some non-Roma individuals, particularly single men, occasionally expressing racist views about this community. Prejudices also manifested among families, and at times, there was self-stigmatization (Creţan & Powell, 2018). It was not unusual for a resident to assert that 'they were not like the others'. Aware of the stereotypes that existed about Roma, this woman tried to refute the often made generalisations:

> "We are all Roma but we are all different. There are women who wear long flowered skirts, I am not like that. There are women who wear tight black trousers, but I'm not like that either. I don't like to party. Yes, we are all Roma but we are all different." (field notes interview, May 18, 2023)

The residents were categorised into different groups at various points in time. After one year, an assessment was conducted to map the different future perspectives, resulting in three categories: 'permanent residence,' 'return,' and 'onward migration/undecided'. In the last year, as the project was going into its final year, the main distinction was made between 'singles', 'families with children' and 'couples without children', to determine the conditionality attached to the user agreements. Families were also occasionally informally subdivided into *'de Aziëstraat'*, *'het Doortrekkersterrein'* and 'the street work crowd' (as mentioned above). This division partly reflected the residents' whereabouts before the project commenced and it was meaningful because it was linked to the kind of experience they had had with social work services and sometimes the amount of time spent in Ghent. A resident who had adapted well in the project also identified this difference. "You see, [wife's name] and I, we have a lot of experience in Europe. I left 15 years ago. (...) I know it all. (...) There are other families who came directly to Belgium. They don't know. I understand how it works here." (field notes, March 31, 2023) He was familiar with many aspects of the 'system' in Belgium (and other countries) through years of lived experience.

2.4 DIRECTION, COOPERATION AND TRUST

In the design of the project, actors were given clearly defined mandates. In practice, however, this proved more difficult to achieve. For example, the coordinator of Caritas explained:

> "We are much more often on the premises, and we have to be vigilant not to take over a mandate that actually belongs to someone else. The distinction is not always apparent. If I get employment related questions, I have to refer them to other colleagues. The boundary between responsibilities is not so clear. (...)" (Caritas, s.d.-b)

There were also misconceptions and divergent interpretations regarding each other's roles. Notable in the design of the project, is the strict division of controlling and caring tasks for different actors. This sometimes created tensions in practice. Caritas, for instance, was expected by some to take on a more controlling role with regard to the internal regulations. They, on the contrary, aimed to create support for the rules within the group of residents, which they saw as a process 'of trial and error'. The community stewards were also faced with the expectation that they would participate more actively in the conditional framework. However, they chose to remain alongside the residents.

"The interpretation and expectations of the roles remains a quest and causes resentment and frustration," the community stewards concluded after a year in their annual report (Outreach Service Annual Report, 2021) [own translation]. The different expectations testified in part to a lack of knowledge about, and trust in each other's work. For instance, a practitioner of community stewards recounted:

> "There have been a lot of tension at the project site because it was dirty, because the cars entered the terrain, which made us wonder: 'How can this be? What is the management doing if anything?' (...) I only recently started to understand how they work. They work from the vision of seeking support for the rules and tap into people's inner motivation. Otherwise, nothing meaningful is achieved. (...) This is in fact a very human approach and we are much more on the same line than what we initially thought." (field notes, May 20, 2021)

Another predicament arose concerning information sharing, as community stewards were bound by professional secrecy. Not everyone perceived this as relevant or comprehended why certain information couldn't be disclosed. Other professionals, like the school mediators, who are obligated by official rather than professional secrecy, believed that the lack of information sharing—especially in the project's early stages—impeded their work.

Furthermore, the various (integration) domains were tackled concurrently right from the beginning: participation in social orientation and Dutch classes, school attendance for children, and employment assistance. This simultaneity led to frustrations among several actors as it appeared unrealistic. A practitioner articulated her lack of comprehension regarding the expectations formulated in the project's design. "I do have questions about that. Who ever thought that was realistic? Surely the group was known," she stated (field notes, October 14, 2021).

Moreover, there were concerns related to certain fundamental (human) rights within the framework of the project. Disagreements and ambiguities arose regarding the right to privacy (enter without knocking to check compliance to the rules?), the authority of the police on the premises (public or private terrain?), and the right to family life, among other issues. Despite

the emergence of new relationships or the appearance of minor children, there was a strict adherence to the list. Only those who were registered could live on the premises.

Finally, tensions also arose between the conditional logic underpinning the project design and the human rights approach ingrained in the DNA of the various partners involved. Further discussion on this topic is provided later in the text (p.47).

What is evident from all this is that people were not always on the same page. In the third year of the project, all the actors came together in the city museum in Ghent. The aim was to establish a common frame of reference for the crucial 'landing year' of the project. The new project leader, after all, desired a “gallant landing" (field notes, March 16, 2023). The initiative fostered a sense of shared goals and greater harmony among the involved parties. However, simultaneously, some actors perceived this as a constraint on their flexibility, as they were henceforth required to operate within the confines of this enforced shared frame of reference.

It is noteworthy that the beneficiaries or residents were not involved in any capacity in the design or adjustment of the project. They were viewed as 'the object' of the intervention, and minimal dialogue was sought in practice. Efforts were made at one point to establish a residents' council, but it became more of a platform for making one-way announcements from management to the residents. Nevertheless, practitioners did attempt to tailor individual assistance based on the input received from residents.

Residents were not aware of the tensions. They confused different roles and also directed their requests for help to certain practitioners in management with whom they had established a trusting relationship. For them, they were all ‘assistants’.

Because distrust towards social workers and certain institutions was deeply ingrained among many residents, establishing (and maintaining) a relationship of trust with them was crucial. This trust could only develop through a high level of commitment, a non-judgmental attitude, and a respectful approach by social workers (The Roma Support Group, 2016; Lamaire et al., 2016; Foyer, n.d.). Our findings affirm that trust was a prerequisite for being 'admitted’ into people’s lives and obtaining a certain mandate which allowed for a climate of open communication and constructive disagreement.

> “It's very simple what I'm about to say, but it's the thing that works – ‘you looked for work for us then, and that time too and that time also, so [now] I trust you [when you say] that it's necessary to follow an internship. That's kind of how it works." (practitioner, interview, January 16, 2023)

This trust had to be cultivated, a practitioner argued:

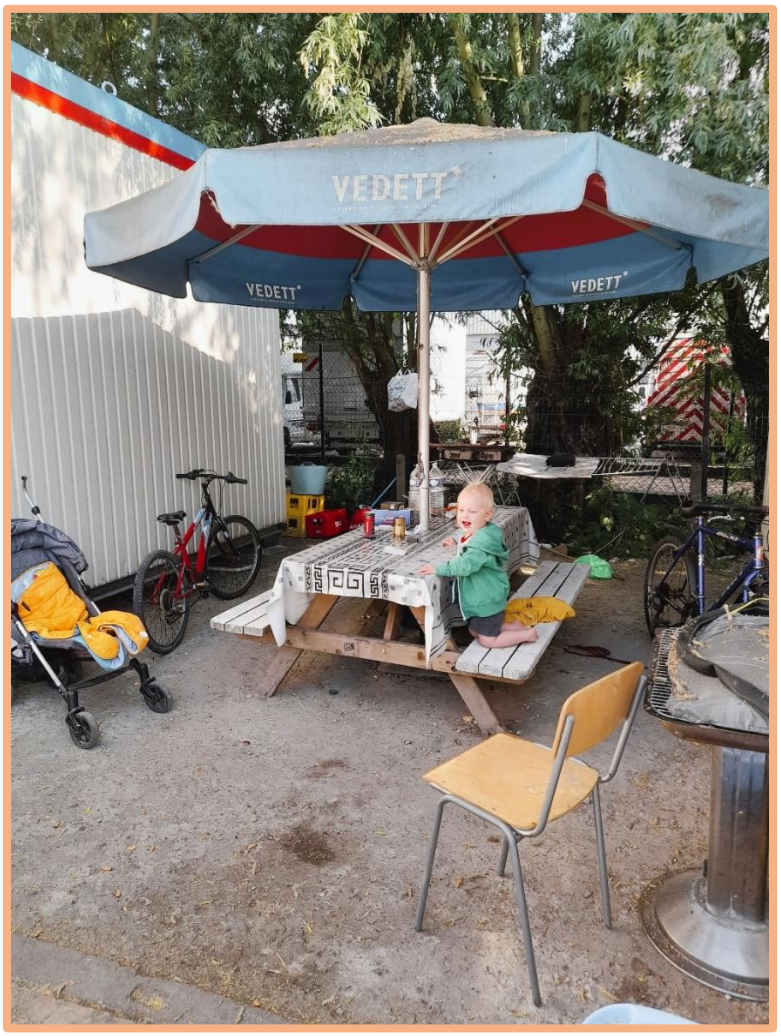
> "If there is no trust, they won't do anything. It is a slow process to build trust, but you can also lose it with them like that. That's because of what they've been through in the past." (field notes, April 6, 2023)

Social workers who were familiar with residents from before the project, participated throughout the entire project, or who spoke the mother tongue of the residents were granted more authority. A practitioner shared het experience working with a colleague proficient in Romanès:

> "I am too lenient. [name of colleague] is strict and can express anger. But he gets respect from the people, they listen to him. [The residents] explicitly confirm this. (...) They always seek him out, even if he is not on duty.” (field notes, August 9, 2022)

Due to frequent staff changes and dropouts among all involved actors, trust often had to be repeatedly rebuilt. Quite a few people resigned because they struggled with the framework of the project and their role in enforcing the regulations. One practitioner expressed her fear that residents would misinterpret her decision:

> "I am going to quit. (...) The residents don't know it yet. I feel bad about it. Another person walking away from them, giving up on them. When [former colleague] left, they came to me, 'you're not leaving are you?' No… but now I am." (field notes, August 9, 2022)



3. Interventions, mechanisms and outcomes

Interventions
- Shelter in containers - On-site assistance - Individual or family assistance - Educational support - Employment assistance - Dutch and social orientation classes
Mechanisms
- Official but temporary place of rest - Conditional logic and control mechanisms versus human rights approach - Mediation - Resistance
Results
- Growing confidence in services and institutions - Labour market access through interim and social employment - Legal residence and accrual of rights - Medical care - Positive effect on children - Transition to other shelter initiatives and the private rental market - Continued homelessness (but not in barracks and caravans) - Circular migration persists - Further stigmatisation

3.1 INTERVENTIONS

In this section, we elaborate on the specific actions undertaken in the post-mobile living project.

> One woman looks back: "How they helped me? They gave me a ticket for a food package once a month, and we had heating, and we were allowed to cook, and if we needed shampoo, we could ask Caritas." (field notes, April 20, 2023)

Shelter in containers

On the terrain of the project, commonly referred to by the residents as *le place*, there were a total of 44 containers. Singles or couples without children were allocated a half container, measuring 3x3m, while families with children received a full container, measuring 3x6m. Each unit was equipped with electricity. Additionally, communal containers were available with facilities such as showers, toilets, and kitchens. Residents had to adhere to specific rules outlined in the user agreement, which included paying a user fee based on their income, ranging from 50 to 450 euros. Outsiders were only permitted during designated visiting hours and were not allowed to stay overnight. The management and communal living on the terrain were overseen by Caritas staff, who also monitored adherence to the established rules.

Most residents said they were very satisfied with the site's infrastructure. They had a roof over their heads, and in addition, the utilities of electricity, gas, and water, in particular,

contributed to their well-being. Most felt that it was a big improvement from the places where they used to live because there, it had become too crowded and dirty. Several residents recounted:

> "Yes, for me, it was actually good compared to living in the barracks. I have everything I need here, and I've tried to make my life a bit better in this place." (field notes, April 20, 2021)

> "It's good here. We pay 50 euros, which isn't much. We have a bed, heating – that's the main thing – and we have a kitchen, toilet... It's good for us here." (field notes, March 19, 2023)

> "We had everything we needed. It was good for us there." (field notes, March 30, 2023)

> "It was good for us. We didn't have to pay much, and I think it was very good for everyone... even for the visitors, it was good. There is a big difference between sleeping in the cold and sleeping in the warmth. That's why I say it was good here." Her mother concurs: "We will miss the place. They treated us well." (field notes interview, April 29, 2023)

During visiting hours, relatives of residents made use of the kitchens and toilets. For example, a man who was engaged in seasonal work, recounted:

> "It is good for us here. I don't sleep here, I sleep in my vehicle. But now I come home from work, I can stay here for a while. I can eat, and then I go back into the car." (field notes, April 20, 2023)

Some residents stressed that it was good to live with other Roma. Research shows that this is a common strategy to avoid discrimination (Creţan et al., 2023). Holidays and birthdays were often celebrated together, and the idea of living somewhere without knowing the neighbours intimidated some people. In the final months of the project, a woman voiced her displeasure at the decreasing number of residents. "I don't like the fact that so many people have left. It used to be better with everyone together." (field notes, March 30, 2023)

Children and adolescents also participated in the activities organised for them. They reported that this helped them to explore the environment outside the project's premises and get to know Ghent a little better (Decaestecker, 2021)

Other residents found it too stressful to live with so many people in close proximity. One resident recounted:

> "There were a lot of celebrations. That's nice, but sometimes too much (...) which wasn't always easy with the children." (field notes, March 17, 2023)

The experience of the material conditions of the accommodation was also dependent on the specific location of the container on the site. While some faced a lot of passers-by, noise and overlook, others managed to create some privacy for their family in a corner of the terrain, like this woman, who recounted:

> "It is ideal to live together with the others, who we can talk to. And at the same time, my family's container is located a bit separately from the rest, because I don't always want to be with the others. (...) The others sometimes don't interest me.' (field notes, August 3, 2021)

In the final months of the project, things were much quieter. This was preferred by some residents and staff.

The containers were rented and no permanent changes were allowed. Decaestecker's research shows that adolescents grappled with the idea of living in a container. It made them feel ‘homeless’. They also found it very different from living in a caravan, which was 'theirs', moveable and could be decorated externally (2021). Despite their young age, the children realised that the container was not owned by the family, and that this undermines their autonomy, Decaestecker concludes (2021).

Within these constraints, much effort was made to create a homely atmosphere, and residents transformed the containers into cosy spaces adorned with shiny sideboards, plastic flowers, and lace tablecloths. Due to the limited space, some parents shared the bed with one of their children, and beds often doubled as a seats or dining tables.

The containers lacked insulation, causing inconveniences especially in summer. Additionally, some residents experienced a lack of privacy within the family, as pointed out by this woman:

> "It was good because there was a roof over our heads, and our children could go to school. But we had to live with 2 older children, no longer small children, and that was difficult. You can't change your clothes, you always have to ask the children to go outside. So in terms of privacy and such, that's not ok at all. As Roma, it's also embarrassing. You can't just walk around while the children are there. It was difficult because they are older. We had 2. There are families here who had to sleep with 4 children together." (field notes, April 29, 2023)

Adolescents also indicated that it was embarrassing for them to live so close together, sometimes leading to conflicts within (nuclear) families. Furthermore, residents had little control the communal spaces. At one point, residents came up with the idea of creating parking boxes at the entrance to the site, to address part of the emerging parking problem. However, their initiative was hampered by the fact that the actors on the ground did not have the mandate to allow for this to take place. Strict rules were in place regarding the infrastructure, which were decided on a higher level. This was also the case for the idea of closing the terrain to car traffic. Instead of penalizing every car with a minus point, some practitioners wanted to instal a physical barrier so that cars could no longer enter. It took more than a year for this to finally happen.

The shared facilities created frustrations for some. Asked if she would miss the project, a woman who had just moved into a rental apartment replied:

> "No way, if you leave things in the kitchen, they get taken, you lose everything... at home, I put a spoon on the table, and it stays there and nobody comes near it." (field notes, July 6, 2021)

Practitioners questioned some of the spatial arrangements.

> "The Housing Code defines how much area is needed for a person to live in dignity. People live much smaller here, also parents living together with teenagers. This causes a lot of problems. The Housing Code is not respected. That's not okay, is it? They could have also provided separate bathrooms. That would have made everything so much easier." (coordinator, field notes, June 15, 2021)

> "They don't have the ideal conditions to study. We want them to learn Dutch, but they are all together with their whole family in a small container. And being all together like that is not a peaceful place to study." (teacher, field notes, February 21, 2023)

On-site assistance

Most of the social work took place on the terrain of the project, where some of the containers served as offices and meeting rooms. The community stewards, school mediator and the Job team employees came on site, rendering assistance was very low-threshold and accessible. The Caritas staff, primarily responsible for managing the site, were present 24/7 (in the end they reduced the hours). Although they did not take on individual assistance, they were always approachable.

At the outset of the project, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, schools tended to communicate solely with the school mediator rather than directly engaging with parents. There was also a tendency to make less referrals to other services, such as the CLB (pupil guidance centre), assuming that issues were being managed by the school mediator, who was employed on-site. Consequently, opportunities to involve parents more actively in the education of their children were missed (personal communication, October 23, 2023).

A practitioner also noted the challenges in their approach concerning the individual assistance:

> "Especially when you don't have actual appointments. You don't want to disturb people all the time. Then sometimes there is little to do and in the meantime we are just sitting in our container." (field notes, January 21, 2021)

In this context, some practitioners expressed concerns about getting too close to people's private lives. A Job Team staff member reasoned:

> "It's also weird, you know, having an employment counsellor so close. Imagine the VDAB [= Regional Employment Office] knocking on your bedroom door, frightening!" (transcript of interview, May 25, 2021)

Decaestecker's (2021) study revealed that adolescents sometimes felt overly monitored because practitioners frequently visited their containers

Towards the end of the project, this changed somewhat and more referrals were made to services in the city. There was a growing realisation among some actors and management that the project had become too self-centred. "Even though this was the strength of the project in the beginning," added a coordinator (field notes interview, February 7, 2023). A practitioner elaborated:

> "We were happy at first. (...) People are easier to find. But so are we. This creates a completely different relationship. People come knocking for the slightest thing. (...) We have made them very dependent on us - something that goes against our vision. Because we work where they live. Whereas the intention is to refer people to existing services." (field notes, October 27, 2022)

Individual or family assistance

As mentioned before, families and individuals received individual supervision from a community steward, often referred to as their 'assistant'. These practitioners served as the main point of contact for residents and upheld professional secrecy, extending to other actors and management. The community stewards offered support to residents in various areas, including administrative and medical aspects. They played a vital role in explaining

'the system', clarifying concepts like the different procedures regarding residence status and health insurance, its importance and the associated costs.

> "We have it all in our heads. If you start [questioning] us, we are like walking libraries." (transcript of interview, May 26, 2021)

They referred residents to other actors in the city or in the project where relevant. Those without a high income were directed to voluntary organisations that provided material emergency assistance, such as clothes and food parcels. Residents talked fondly about their 'assistants':

> "She is like family. We can't read. We need help. She did everything for us. The documents, the house, the work..." (field notes, March 31, 2023)

> "We had a good relationship with her [...] She applied for my (medical) card, she went with me to the doctor, to the hospital, everything I needed she never said 'no' to." (field notes, April 20, 2023)

Community stewards also prepared the residents for the quarterly evolution interviews with the project leader, during which individuals had to discuss the steps they had taken in their integration process. The social workers tried to highlight small achievements, sometimes using pictograms, to make progress visible, and for residents to follow along. A practitioner elaborated:

> "We demonstrated that someone is trying to live healthier, for example, or that someone came to class on time every week...because those are things that matter." (field notes, May 26, 2021).

In doing so, they tried not to judge people's choices, even if they sometimes fell outside expectations:

> "For [name of resident], I can offer and discuss all kinds of things but he doesn't want this. He drives around, collects iron, and then sells it. He thinks this is ok. If he wants to stay out of the system, that's his choice. I am not going to pull him out of that. (...) I schedule appointments, like now, a whole afternoon we are going to interim agencies. I think he goes along for me rather than for himself… Maybe it's something like 'planting a seed'. If he ever wants this, a formal job, he'll know how to do it." (practitioner, field notes, April 29, 2021)

The interactions between community stewards and residents were based on relationships of trust, although the extent to which residents engaged with the social workers varied. It is notable that residents who came from the Travellers' site (*het Doortrekkersterrein)* and had already been already participating in an intervention, as mentioned above, displayed more confidence in the assistance and the outline of the project in general. In each case, however, this confidence was fragile. A practitioner shared an incident where she intervened when police arrived on the terrain, "to calm tempers" (field notes, June 16, 2021). The residents interpreted her action as 'siding with the police' and it took time for her to regain their trust.

Educational support

The school mediator worked on the relationship between residents and schools for school-age children. This involved both the children themselves and the parents/grandparents. One practitioner described her role as follows:

> "Standing alongside them and guiding them. We cannot perform miracles, although I often think people [higher up] sometimes think that now everything is going to improve in one snap. It's not [like that]. So what is it sometimes... listening and accommodating frustrations and showing understanding." (transcript of interview, January 18, 2023)

On Wednesday afternoons, a kind of 'study hall' is also organised in one of the containers.

> "I think [the study hall] not only serves the purpose of supporting the children with homework. This too, of course, but it also contributes to somehow making school visible here on the terrain. Also for the parents." (practitioner, transcript interview, June 16, 2021)"

Moreover, another practitioner emphasized that the organization of the study hall and giving positive feedback to the children contributed significantly to the children's self-confidence. She noted that this made them "more motivated to attend school and feel better there too" (transcript interview, January 18, 2023). As discussed earlier, children often experienced a sense of displacement at school. In fact, Decaestecker's study (2021) revealed that teenagers in the post-mobile living project felt 'different' from their peers at school, struggling to find a sense of belonging in Ghent because they reasoned that, as Roma, they would never really belong. On the project terrain, the study hall container was their favourite place.

As the project progressed, Caritas became involved in addressing these challenges. A staff member explained:

> "You have a framework but you have to navigate between the lines. That's what makes this project what it is. It's difficult for someone outside the project to grasp. (...) It is something that grows, that is not predefined. For example, we [now] collaborate with the school mediator on the [the issue of the] relationship with school. That was not officially our assignment, but that is now an important part of our role." (field notes group discussion, October 27, 2021)

In addition to organising activities for the children, the Caritas animators extended their support to the school mediator in promoting the children's (school-based) skills in order to facilitate what they referred to as 'intergenerational change'.

Employment assistance

Three Jobteam social workers were employed (part-time) to guide individuals into the labour market. They assisted with tasks such as preparing CVs, practicing job interviews, registering residents with the VDAB (= regional employment office), and negotiating with employers. The Jobteam also offered on-the-job training, language lessons, and language coaching. They considered the pursuit of sustainable employment as a gradual learning process, emphasizing the significance of internships and voluntary work as crucial steps. However, this approach did not always align with the expectations of residents, as one practitioner explained:

> "I proposed internships to a lot of people, and employment screenings, and they tell me, 'We just want work' (...) I was also talking to someone just now and they said, 'yes I do want to take Dutch classes if that is convenient with my work.' 'What work? You do not have work [I said] 'Yes but now suppose I have work tomorrow.'" (transcript interview, May 25, 2021)

The need for an immediate income complicated the assistance, as the practitioner further elaborated:

> "People set the bar very high for me. 'We don't want those little steps, we just want work.' (...) The fact is, we have time but they don't. It's continuous 'rapide, rapide, rapide,' quick, quick, work." (transcript interview, May 25, 2021)

In this context, interim and seasonal work were often preferred. A coordinator explained:

> "If you ask me, regarding employment, I think the biggest difficulty is that this is a group that mainly needs an income. Because other avenues aren't possible [like welfare benefits], work becomes the only viable source of income, but sometimes significant efforts are required to get them formal work. But there is no time for that, because they have to feed their children." (transcript interview, June 16, 2021)

She also highlighted that within the Belgian middle class, work is frequently regarded as a crucial aspect of life, interconnected with one's social network and status. Nevertheless, this viewpoint isn't universal, particularly among individuals with lower education. For them, work can be viewed as a means of earning income without necessarily pursuing deeper personal satisfaction. This disparity can pose a challenge in job interviews, where employers often expect applicants to express enthusiasm and passion for the job.

> "That's quite unfortunate that an employer expects you to declare, 'cleaning toilets is my dream job'. No, that is nobody's dream job. Yet, you are poorly evaluated if you honestly admit, 'I just need money'." (coordinator, transcript interview, June 16, 2021)

A practitioner emphasised that it is also about differing expectations:

> "I think many residents are disappointed in the project because we cannot provide them with jobs. (...) I think people had different expectations from the project. The pursuit of employment was a condition that made people think they were going to be given employment." (transcript interview, May 25, 2021)

This ties back to certain historical experiences:

> "During communism, for instance, there was the notion that the government should provide employment. It's strange, but for some individuals, those expectations persist." (coordinator, transcript interview, June 17, 2021).

Upon securing employment, new challenges emerged. A community steward explained that a resident she assisted had failed to show up for work on the first day. A colleague from the Jobteam and herself decided to accompany him on the trajectory for a few days:

> "But now he is doing it alone. Now there are people he recognises, who are there with him on the train from Ghent. That helps." (field notes, March 4, 2021)

Another resident similarly faced a 'mobility problem', during an internship in a neighbourhood she was not familiar with:

> "When she did her internship at [company name], [colleague] and I tied pink ribbons everywhere to help her find the way. And this worked. Because I didn't know how else to do it. And then after a while, she didn't need the ribbons anymore." (practitioner, transcript interview, May 25, 2021)

Pathways towards the social economy were (successfully) explored (see below).

Dutch and social orientation classes

Two language tutors from LIGO (Centre for Basic Education) were tasked with teaching Dutch to the adult residents in a container on the terrain of the project. They divided the residents into groups and organised classes once a week. Numerous challenges hampered (regular) attendance:

> "Some don't have the energy because they are working and taking care of the children, some are not motivated because they have no intention of staying here and still others are struggling with some disability or school disadvantage as a result of which they are just not ready for this." (teacher, field notes, October 14, 2021)

To address these challenges, language coaches from the Jobteam were involved, particularly for individuals facing difficulties in joining a group within the project. A language coach explained:

> "These are people who are often labelled 'unteachable'. [According to the system] illiterate [newcomers] are expected to learn to write in six months! That is absurd. We go to school for years and sometimes still write very shakily after years of practice. For them, this is also going to take 10 years, or 15. I work with that mindset. Very slowly." (field notes, April 22, 2021)

A social orientation teacher from IN-Ghent (now AMAL vzw) was appointed to provide weekly lessons to adults about life in Belgium. "There is no curriculum," explained the teacher. "I get *carte blanche*, provided the lessons are based on the themes of social orientation laid out by the Integration Agency" (field notes interview, February 18, 2021). These are: Belgium, mobility, public services, education, family, health, housing, work, leisure, residence and consumption.

The vague assignment did not prove easy and after the first year, two new teachers took over, focusing on more hands-on activities. They organized trips to organizations, city visits, sports events, and a neighbourhood party. Motivating residents to participate, however, remained difficult.

3.3 MECHANISMS

In this section, we identify the key mechanisms of the interventions. This extends beyond describing actions to unveil the underlying logics, methodologies, and approaches that contributed to the functionality of interventions (Boost et al., 2017). We seek not only to understand what works but also 'what makes it work' (Blom & Morén, 2010).

Official but temporary place of rest

In the containers, individuals were provided with official shelter, allowing them to register their address as domicile or residence. This not only facilitated the process of finding employment or opening a bank account but also provided the opportunity to legalize their residence. The municipality could now issue an 'Annex 19' (pending application for registration certificate) by enlisting someone on the waiting register for EU citizens. However, only if they had proof of (potential) employment after three months, they could obtain an EU card (= proof of registration for Union citizens staying more than three months) to which social rights are attached (as mentioned above). Especially following periods of seasonal work, many began the process towards legal residence (for the first time).

The official registration of residence also brought unwanted consequences. Some people feared the possible legal consequences and thought the formalities would be too overwhelming. One family was suddenly faced with an overdue energy bill. This bill had been waiting for them for five years, accumulating a high penalty that made the amount increase fivefold

In addition, the post-mobile living project was a place where residents were allowed to be without the risk of being evicted, under reasonably good conditions. It was in this context that practitioners wanted to create a safe 'home' where people could find some peace to get out of their 'survival mode'. According to the scarcity theory, people need help to expand their mental bandwidth (to allow for more long term strategies) by reducing the sense of scarcity (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2014).

At the same time, there were counteracting mechanisms that undermined the intended 'sense of home'. First, there was the temporariness of the project. The project lasted a maximum of 3 years. Moreover, there was confusion about the duration of the 'contracts' (= user agreements) among residents and practitioners. Residents stressed that they had been initially told they could live in the project for three years, but this did not turn out to be the case. They were in fact given one-year contracts and, at the beginning of the second year, some were provided with three-month contracts, subject to conditions for potential extension. At the beginning of the third year, everyone transitioned to three-month contracts, and the pressure was put on residents to leave (see below).

> "[The project manager] puts too much pressure. He just wants us gone. We have a lot of stress. Kids to school, [searching for a] house, work ta ta … Really, he doesn't know us. I know they don't mean bad but still... it's not easy to find a house." (field notes, April 6, 2023)

A coordinator tried to explain the reason behind these shifts in the last year:

> "This is not *Housing First.* It that case you give housing that can be permanent. This is not it. It is fundamentally different. Here, it is fundamentally temporary. Nobody can stay." (field notes, February 23, 2023)

In the end, the project was concluded prematurely after two years and eight months. A coordinator acknowledged that this timeframe proved insufficient for certain residents:

> "It was an attempt to break that circle of poverty that has existed for generations or at least give an impetus.... You don't have to be a genius to know that this doesn't succeed in 3 years. [It takes] at least a generation. At least." (field notes interview, February 7, 2023)

Finally, as we discussed earlier, important spatial elements contributed to the temporary nature of the project. Beyond this, the conditional framework of the accommodation, coupled with the internal regulations and their enforcement (see below) also influenced the establishment or hindrance of the intended sense of home needed for residents to de-stress. A practitioner recounted:

> "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." (transcript interview, May 26, 2023)

Conditional logic and control mechanisms versus human rights approach

The accommodation was conditional. Compulsory assistance, weekly Dutch and social orientation classes, children's school attendance, paying the user fee and respecting the internal regulations were requirements to enter and stay in the project. The reasonableness of these conditions was a point of contention, sparking disagreement among both residents and practitioners.

To ensure compliance with these conditions, a points system was established, "so that there is some leeway," explained a policy maker (field notes group discussion, October 27, 2022). Residents received minus and plus points based on rule violations or the assumption of additional responsibilities on the premises. Accumulating too many minus points could lead to exclusion from the project.

> "A differentiated points system is used whereby sanctioning is applied in proportion to the severity and repetition of the offence. In addition, accumulated penalty points can be reduced if persistent positive behaviour is exhibited. Those who make extra efforts for the project can also be rewarded for this." (User Agreement, s.d., p.7) [own translation]

A social orientation teacher described how he communicated attendance and absences, stating: "In Excel there is a monthly schedule of all the activities, noting the person responsible and their respective timing. (...) So that is how it is registered" (transcript interview, February 21, 2023). For the children's school attendance, the figures were obtained directly from the schools.

> "People signed an authorisation sheet at the start. The permission to [name of project leader] to request the attendance rates from the school on a monthly basis. So that happens. And [name of project leader] makes an assessment based on that information: is there progress? Then they can get a positive point (...) But if we see that it is deteriorating, then they receive a minus point. If it stays the same, then sometimes there are no points assigned." (practitioner, transcript interview, June 16, 2021)

Every quarter, residents had to meet with the project manager to discuss their trajectory, as previously mentioned. These sessions, known as 'evolution interviews', inadvertently

generated some pressure and stress, despite the well-meaning intentions, as explained by a practitioner:

> "[Project leader name] always says, 'I don't put pressure, I don't put pressure', but every time it is time for evolution interviews, people are very nervous. It's the same every three months. Then it starts, and you feel the pressure. They then come to me, 'I have to go to [project leader name]. What should I say? Because I still don't have a job'." (transcript interview, May 25, 2021)

"Every time it was the same," stated a resident, "How do you like it here? Watch out, because the project is not going to last, and you cannot stay here. That's what they always said" (field notes interview, April 20, 2023). Another resident felt threatened by the expected transparency:

> "They ask all kinds of things. About what we do to find work, why [name of son] doesn't always go to school... and [name of project leader] writes everything down. They also ask difficult questions, about what we think, what we want, where we want to live, about what we want in the future. My husband says, 'that's very personal, isn't it?' [Name of project leader] writes everything down, I don't know why and for whom. And we don't know what will happen in the future now do we? So how can we tell him?" (field notes, August 15, 2021)

The measurable results regarding the children's school attendance, participation in Dutch and social orientation classes, employment (who is working?) and housing solutions were reported quarterly to the political steering committee. This put pressure on the practitioners very early on in the project, as this social worker expressed:

> "It's difficult I think. Yes, I think that can be said. It's also hugely scrutinised by politicians around the project. There are very high expectations or perhaps, a somewhat naïve expectation from the government, especially concerning the children, that 'now there is nothing that can hinder their daily attendance at school'." (transcript interview, June 16, 2021)

Residents reported that sometimes they could not keep up with what was expected and therefore felt that there was no real understanding of their situation. A young mother recounted:

> "In the interviews, [name of project leader] asks why [name of son] is not going to school. But he doesn't understand that sometimes, we don't have food. And he likes going to school and often goes to school but indeed not every day. Sometimes we have other things on our minds. We try to take care of them as best we can so they can go to school." (field notes, August 3, 2021)

In the project's final year, the diminishing number of residents experienced a departure from certain regulatory requirements. This shift aimed to tailor support more closely to the unique priorities of each family or individual, with an emphasis on access to employment, housing and children's school attendance. Shorter user agreements were now implemented, lasting only three months (as mentioned above). During the evolution interviews, the decision to renew this agreement was contingent on residents' compliance with the rules and their proactive steps towards a 'sustainable future perspective'. A social worker explained:

> "Now we are working with quarterly contracts that contain certain conditions on what they have to achieve to be able to renew it (...) For a long time they have been in a system of here and now: 'Within a year, oh that means we still have lots of time'. It's only now that the urgency emerges, because it's a lot more conditional. Yes, that really makes a difference. And actually, a bit in our favour, because they are taking more action." (transcript interview, January 16, 2023)

Some residents 'take action' while others leave the project early without a housing solution:

> "It is intense, a lot is expected. But well yes, that also has to do with the fact that you don't want everyone to be out on the street in November (...) Those people who have left recently (...) they cannot be assisted, not in the short term anyway." (practitioner, transcript interview, January 16, 2023)

At all levels, various perspectives regarding this conditional framework existed, reflecting distinct views on the general role and functioning of social work. The conditional logic of the (active) welfare state, which also determines local social policy in Ghent, implies that specific conditions must be met in order to obtain certain forms of support or assistance (see Dwyer, 2004; Fletcher & Flint, 2018). On the other hand, a human rights perspective on social work places much more emphasis on respecting and guaranteeing the fundamental rights of individuals, regardless of their situation or behaviour. In practice, a balance is often sought between the demands of the welfare state and respect for human rights.

One policymaker elucidated her perspective on the project's conditional framework, stating: "It is also about ensuring safety for everyone and the principle that rights always come with responsibilities" (personal communication, September 29, 2023). However, for many practitioners in the project, the balance was lost. Drawing on their experiences working with families in chronic poverty, they emphasised tailoring the pace to the needs of individuals in a way that matched their lifestyles. In doing so, they aimed to assume a mediating role between the residents and 'the system' by confronting individuals with broader legislative frameworks, highlighting the associated rights and obligations. The social work professionals strongly believed in the transformative potential of legal residence for securing social rights. However, they argued, this could not be imposed.

Looking back on the initial year of the project, the community stewards invoked the wisdom of an African proverb: "Grass does not grow faster if you pull it", appending, "especially when the grass is still fragile" (Outreach Service Annual Report, 2021, p. 28) [own translation]. This underscored their commitment continue to stand alongside residents while taking small but realistic steps.

Building on the metaphor of 'the glass half full,' the educational guidance prioritized positively acknowledging children for their school attendance, even if occasional tardiness or more frequent absences occurred. A coordinator underscored the importance of consistently considering the broader context and individual experiences of residents in this matter (personal communication, October 23, 2023). A practitioner added:

> "In any case, I think... school attendance should not be one of the criteria. (...) Besides the emotional aspect. If you approach it rationally, beyond this project, no one is going to be thrown out of their house if their children miss school. I mean, there are other

> systems in place for that. On this point, I think it is actually incredibly harsh - scaling families that are already weak (...) I don't think it's an added value to link [school attendance] as a conditional factor to housing. I advocate for providing additional support and assisting them on their journey, but not under the condition of 'if your children don't sufficiently attend school, you're no longer welcome here. No." (transcript of interview, January 18, 2023)

In the user agreement, rules were also included pertaining to life on the terrain. Residents indicated that they thought it was normal and necessary to have certain rules on the site. One resident recounted:

> "Those rules were not difficult for us, to respect or accept. (...) it's their job [= of practitioners]. Also for parties. We had to ask permission. Today we are celebrating [daughter's name]'s birthday. We will do that somewhere else." (field notes interview, April 29, 2023)

However, not all these prescriptions were perceived as reasonable at every moment. One woman found it very difficult that you had to pay more when you worked. Her son and her husband had worked a few days in agriculture, through an interim agency. They had earned 200 euros each, only to see their user fee raised to 150 euros for both of them for that month. In general, she struggled with the concept of having to pay a user fee:

> "It can go up to a maximum of 450 [euros] if you have a full-time contract. But this is not our home here, is it? At 10 pm they come and tell us to be quiet, and the way they address us here, like police, (...) and no visitors are allowed to stay overnight and so on." (field notes, August 3, 2021)

Similar frustrations applied to certain rules regarding the use of common areas, including issues like parking for cars, the placement of furniture and carpets in outdoor areas, and regulations concerning pets. However, it was predominantly the rules concerning visitors that residents highlighted during interviews. One woman shared her experience:

> "In general, it was good here. There were also things that were less good. The point system, yes, if your guest overstays ten minutes, you immediately get a minus point. And yes, the rules about the visitors. No one was allowed to visit [= stay overnight]. That was not really ok. The so called visitors' right, from 5 to 9 pm. That's like a consultation hour from 12 to 1 or something like that. It’s ridiculous." (field notes interview, May 16, 2023)

According to these rules, outsiders - including close relatives and (new) romantic partners - were restricted to specific hours on the premises, initially from 10 am to 9 pm, and overnight stays were not allowed under any circumstances. A woman recounted:

> "That was difficult for me. My children could not stay here. That is very difficult. My children sleep in cars. But it was like that and I adapted." (field notes, April 27, 2023)

This stringent policy originated from the administration’s concern that the project had the potential to get out of hand. At one point, visiting hours were further reduced to 5 pm – 9 pm. A coordinator explained that this happened in response to the increased presence of visitors in the preceding weeks:

> "It is typical for this group, this period, September. After summer. There are a lot of seasonal workers then, in transit. They sleep in cars. They are friends and relatives of the residents." (field notes, September 29, 2021)

While residents generally understood the intended purpose of the regulations, many had issues with the way they were enforced. The point system had an infantilising effect for many. These are the words of a young man, addressing the mayor when he visited the site:

> "We understand that there have to be rules, we are not stupid; Yes there have to be [rules], but sometimes it's like a kindergarten class here. Everything is with points, penalty points, reward points... that's too much! We understand that there are certain rules, but not for everything." (field notes, September 9, 2021)

The designated practitioners also found it difficult to sanction and reprimand the residents. Their understanding of communal living was more nuanced, surpassing the simplicity of the prescribed policies. In practice, they exercised a degree of discretion in implementing the point system, grappling with questions about the limits of their legal authority:

> "What is our mandate? Also in terms of corona measures... We are not the state. If we are consistent with the penalty points when people don't wear mouth mask, the project site would already be empty. It is a living community here. It is people's home." (coordinator, field notes, April 21, 2021)

> "At 9.15 pm, we tell guests to leave. Then sometimes someone disappears without having left the terrain. It will remain a cat-and-mouse game but there is no other way to do it. We don't believe in allowing everything because that can get out of hand but we also have to respect people's privacy. We are not the police." (Practitioner, field notes, July 29, 2021)

It was a constant effort to ensure compliance with the regulations, also for example when it came to keeping the site clean and sorting waste. This coordinator summarised her vision as follows:

> "Create a place that is calm and safe, an environment from which people can transition into society, but at the same time, create growth opportunities to develop skills and to experience what integration is going to entail, also towards the future. Living, renting, respecting the environment, recycling, ..." (field notes group discussion, October 27, 2022)

Nonetheless, the controlling aspects of some functions led to a significant number of dropouts, resulting in frequent staff shortages. Sanctioning and reprimanding adults created uncomfortable power dynamics between residents and staff. In addition, the collective setting also presented challenges, as highlighted by this practitioner:

> "The rules seem arbitrary at times. There are exceptions for some residents, but not for others. Sometimes I get it, sometimes I don't, because they [the coordinators] make decisions on an individual basis, but not consistently. And that's tricky, because then residents come to us: 'Why them and not me?' or vice versa." (field notes, August 9, 2022)

While the sanctioning system was implemented rather flexibly in the early years, certain rules were applied more rigorously in the project's concluding year. This practitioner explained:

> "Maybe we protected them too much in the beginning, but that was also because we had that one group, that single [fixed] group, with all those staff and resources (...) However, we do have to confront people with how it works outside. What else are we doing?" (field notes, February 23, 2023)

Mediation

A significant aspect of the various practitioners' roles involved mediation. Language barriers, with some residents not proficient in Dutch or French and others struggling with illiteracy, created obstacles in their interactions with services, employers, and schools. Social workers played a crucial role in bridging these gaps.

Services. Social workers not only guided residents to mainstream assistance and services, they also served as translators, repeatedly 'explaining the system' to them (as mentioned above), "but it is also more than that," explained a practitioner:

> "A lot of people are getting regular support now. That was possible because they had an address in the project. And also because we join them [to the service centre]. I think that makes a huge difference. People used to be kind of waved away [there], but now we explain everything and their situation is genuinely considered and listened to." (field notes, May 15, 2023)

Mediation also extended to healthcare. Some residents were distrustful of hospitals and doctors: Are we being treated the same way as others? Have doctors taken all possible steps? Do they take my complaints seriously? These were concerns prevalent among residents. Practitioners often accompanied them to medical consultations, serving as intermediaries between doctors and residents. In this way, they guarded over equal treatment and helped prevent misunderstandings.

Employers. Practitioners mediated to break down prejudices among employers and make residents aware of employers' expectations (as mentioned above). A practitioner articulated the challenges, particularly for Romanians, stating:

> "It's not so easy for Romanians because... you know, they're often stereotyped, and however you spin it, there are still people, also from outside the project, who work a few days, they then quit for a reason that the employer didn't understand and... (...) so it's not like 'Yay, Romanians are coming to work', no, not at all. [We can then play a role here] and that has been successful a couple of times, that I contact an employer and suggest, 'Can I drop by? I can help you establish a better contact with the workers.'" (transcript interview, January 16, 2023)

Furthermore, practitioners facilitated negotiations on wages or reimbursements of transport expenses. Sometimes the support involved more trivial matters, such as clarifying to employers that people might not have a [Belgian] identity card but are authorised to work as union citizens. Similarly, practitioners explained to residents the necessity of having a bank account, as employers generally did not pay in cash.

Practitioners reported that employers' expectations were sometimes difficult to match with residents' lifestyles. For example, residents sometimes forgot to give notice when they were ill or they could not keep up with the expected pace of work. Opinions among practitioners varied; some believed residents should adapt more, while others felt that the labour market placed excessive demands on individuals.

At times, conflicts arose at workplaces, and then it was important for the social workers to be vigilant for potential instances of exploitation. A practitioner shed light on this dynamic:

> "Not all employers are alike. There have been instances where even we found ourselves questioning... What is happening here? Is this situation fair? (...) the more I know, the

better that I can engage with them to see: who is in the wrong and how can we correct it? How can we improve communication? How can we solve conflicts?" (transcript of interview, January 16, 2023)

Finally, close partnerships were established with certain companies and employers, offering several residents job and internship opportunities. These good relationships were maintained by company visits and on-the-job language coaching by the social workers.

Schools. Practitioners developed a trusting rapport with the children in the project, serving as a supporting link with the schools during challenging moments. A practitioner explained:

> "We had a few children here who went to school for the first time, and they were scared. It reached a point where we accompanied them inside, (...) to sit in the classroom for a while and having us there did make a difference." (transcript of interview, January 18, 2023)

Many parents themselves had attended school only to a limited extent in the past, and sometimes their trust was fragile (as mentioned above). When one of the teenagers got involved in an argument with other pupils at school, his mother kept him home for three weeks. A practitioner explained:

> "Especially in a secondary school (...) conflicts among students are quite normal. But here it was really understood as, 'he is being bullied there and it's not safe for him to go back to school'." (transcript interview, June 16, 2021)

The practitioner elaborated that five (mediation) talks took place at the school with the parents. These were necessary to rebuild trust and demonstrate that the school was a safe environment.

In addition, schools were generally inaccessible for non-native speakers as communication with parents primarily took place in Dutch.

> "I think at the school level we often witness the depth of the gap, recognizing how long they've been living somewhat detached from society. Because at the end of the day, the school asks them their child for a full day and, especially with corona, those parents have never been inside that school before (...) It is something incredible to ask of parents, 'give them to us, and you are not allowed inside, and we also don't have a clear way to tell you what we are actually doing here. Because yes, we do send weekly long newsletters by e-mail, but that is in Dutch." (transcript of interview, June 16, 2021)

Moreover, digital barriers contributed to misunderstandings, as explained by this practitioner:

> "A lot of schools use a digital platform, also to communicate with parents, and you have to log in to an app and (...) schools don't understand that this doesn't work, that parents are not constantly reading it, that they don't always understand the system, that they don't always have internet." (transcript interview, June 16, 2021)

Interpreters were regularly made use of by social workers in interactions with residents. Besides translating, they also pointed out specific cultural contexts.

The importance of interpretation in the mother language was evident in the roles of two practitioners fluent in Romanian and Romanès respectively. Beyond the tasks they were assigned in the project, they assumed an additional mediating role, so to speak, namely between the residents and the other practitioners, which facilitated mutual understanding.

Although opinions on this differed among practitioners, one of the social orientation teachers emphasized that language posed a significant barrier to carrying out his own task:

> "The mother tongue, that changes everything. They should have looked for people who can speak to them in the mother tongue. You could see it, if [practitioner name] or [practitioner name] said: 'you have to be here at 9 am tomorrow', they were there. Personally, I built a very different connection with someone who spoke my language. Because we could talk. He told me all kinds of things about his life." (field notes interview, February 21, 2023)

Resistance

Some residents resisted certain rules, attempting negotiations, or adopting a creative approach within the established framework. Instances included people not paying their user fee, extended stays in Romania, unauthorized visitors staying over, and driving cars on to the terrain. Some residents resisted the expected transparency by not revealing everything about their everyday lives or future plans. Others refused to go along with the 'slow' job search, like the younger generation who preferred seasonal work over unpaid internships.

A practitioner recounted how a woman kept her children home from school to strengthen her bargaining position:

> "The mum was very well aware that education was an important pillar of the project, and in the many negotiations with [name of project leader], this was sometimes used as *leverage*. (...) The project is starting to become a world of its own. They are almost hacking the system. 'You want us to go to school, but we actually want an extra container, because we are a family of six and this is too small.'" (transcript of interview, June 16, 2021)

When a family had to leave the project in the initial year, it had a big impact on the others. The family's departure, enforced with a prominent police presence, left a big impression on the residents. "It was as if they were trying to make a point, to show who is in charge. As an example for the others. People really got scared," said a staff member (field notes, June 15, 2021). Several months later, a form of collective protest emerged. Cars were driven onto the property, and all the men gathered in front of the administrator's office. A practitioner recounted:

> "They wanted parking space. To me, that meant they were no longer afraid [of being thrown out of the project]. It was powerful because they stood up for themselves. And they obtained it [= parking]. They swept the whole terrain clean after that." (field notes group discussion, October 27, 2022)

However, these instances of constructive agency were not recognized or positively evaluated within the context of the project's objectives.

Anger, protests, and stubborn residents created a challenging work environment, and practitioners reported that residents did not always make things easy for them, as this social worker pointed out:

> "They are intense people: learning to deal with their mindset and way of life, not taking them seriously when they shout. You have to learn to put things into perspective, because otherwise it becomes a stressful environment." (field notes group discussion, October 27, 2022)

Residents were aware of this:

> "For the people who worked here, it wasn't an easy job either, mind you. They had to make sure certain rules were respected, but not everyone is very good at respecting rules. I noticed it myself, when you tell people, 'Only throw plastic in here, and glass here', there are always people who don't do it. It is difficult with everyone together... there were so many of us here." (field notes, May 16, 2023)

3.3 RESULTS

In this section, we examine the positive, negative - intended and unintended - changes that were brought about by the implemented interventions. It is important to consider the timing of this paper, that, after an extensive period of research, was completed during the project's final year. A retrospective analysis several years after the conclusion of the project could offer deeper insights into the meaning of the project in the work and lives of those involved. It is also too early to know the long-term results. However, we can begin to highlight the effects and experiences of the various interventions thus far, which are directly or indirectly connected to the formulated objectives.

Growing confidence in services and institutions

> "I would like to thank them, just this, thank them for those three years we got." (field notes interview, July 12, 2023)

This was a resident's response when we inquired if she wished to share anything additional at the conclusion of the interview. Despite leaving the project without a housing solution, she now felt confident that there were people who wanted to help, people who were 'on her side'. It took time for her to allow this realization. Besides the objective of securing permanent residence, over the course of the project, residents developed trust in various institutions, support services, and schools. People got acquainted (sometimes for the first time) with the employment office (VDAB), interim offices, community health centres, etc. There were residents who were appointed a social worker at the PCSW (Public Centre for Social Welfare) for the first time, whom they now regularly met by appointment. As one practitioner elucidated:

> "They trust and believe other services, also outside of the project. Now they go see a doctor here, whereas before some used to travel to Romania if they were sick." (field notes group discussion, October 27, 2021)

Practitioners also noted that residents had significantly improved in keeping appointments and were now also more inclined to notify an employer about a problem, something that had posed significant challenges in the past (field notes, January 16, 2023).

Residents further indicated that they were satisfied with the schools their children attended and that they wanted their children to go regularly. One woman proudly recounted:

> "It is a very good school, [son's name] can read and write well. There was parent-teacher conference and they told us that for maths, for mathematics, he is the best in the class. In the beginning it was difficult because he didn't speak the language and he didn't know the [other] kids. But now he is used to it there." (field notes interview, April 29, 2023)

We can therefore assert that the so-called "gap with the rest of society", as referred to in the guidance framework, has been reduced (Buyst, 2020).

However, the built-up trust is always fragile. Different residents with similar trajectories sometimes achieved different things. This led to frustrations and mistrust. Practitioners indicated that this was partly because (assistance) resources were scarce and certain regulations left room for interpretation, but this was not always easy to convey to people.

Two women separately recounted that they felt disadvantaged after some residents secured a spot in 'Project Leegstand', a housing initiative in vacant social housing (see below), while they did not:

> "They should help us with a house. They haven't done anything to help us. (...) To others they have given a house, to [resident name], to [resident name], to ... why not us?" (field notes interview, July 12, 2023)

> "But I do wonder why they give some people a room or house, like [name of resident], maybe because he is working now? But if they do that for some people, is it not possible that they help us too?" (field notes, April 20, 2023)

Certain residents felt deceived as they were initially promised a three-year stay in the project (as mentioned earlier), only to find out that their three-months contract was not renewed in the final year:

> "They lied. They said it was for three years, and now suddenly we have to leave earlier. Give us some more time. It's not easy to find a house. Why is it suddenly no longer for three years?" (field notes, April 29, 2023)

Even the visitors were aware of this situation, citing the exact date. "You know, normally it is until 9 November, but they want to finish it earlier," a regular visitor remarked (field notes, April 6, 2023).

Access to the labour market through interim work and social employment

People experienced improved access to the labour market through the assistance and mediation of the Jobteam and community stewards. Seasonal work retained its significance as a prevalent form of employment. Residents frequently engaged in diverse sectors, particularly in agriculture, horticulture and food production, either through interim agencies or direct interactions with employers. Some individuals worked 'officially' for the first time.

> "They registered me with the VDAB [= employment office], they made a CV for me... (...) I wouldn't have been able to do that on my own. They helped me with everything. Before the project, I was working in the black. Never with a contract or anything. Working in the black was the only way to help my children in Romania. (...) Before I had no papers. No domicile, nothing. They helped me a lot here you know." (resident,field notes interview, April 20, 2023)

Similar experiences were echoed by this woman, who took on interim work during the project while her husband looked after the children:

> "I did everything that was asked. I worked with carrots, flowers, pâté—wherever they needed people, I went to work." (Interview, April 29, 2023)

The work was often physically demanding, making it challenging, especially for people struggling with health issues. This was also the case with cleaning work. One woman shared that after more than a year of cleaning in a school, she was not invited back after the summer. The physical demands proved too strenuous for her, leading to frequent absences:

> "At home, I can do something and then sit down to rest. If I bend my back, it works, I have no pain. But at work, I can't do that. There is no time for that." (field notes, February 4, 2023)

Mobility also remained a challenge. Some who were lucky to find something close by could go by bike. Others often depended on friends or relatives for transport:

> "Sharing rides in a car is still common, it has been from the beginning. Then [the problem is] if the driver is sick or the car breaks down, they all can't go to work. And then they lose their jobs." (Practitioner, transcript interview, January 16, 2023)

In this context, the same practitioner did notice what she called a 'growing capacity for reflection'. She explained:

> "Some now say 'I had a good job, I've lost it because I can't get there. I'm totally dependent, I have to find a job where I can go by train or bus.' They say it, but they also know now that this is not so simple. (...) Sometimes they reflect on things that went wrong months ago, like 'oh dear, we didn't do it right, we could have done it differently'. Yes. There is a growing capacity for reflection. Not that it (...) is completely solved, but reflecting on past actions, thinking a bit about the future…it's new..." (transcript interview, January 16, 2023)

In this context, the aspiration for stable employment also evolved for some people:

> "I believe the mindset may also have shifted. Moving away from 'okay, we want work and immediate income'. Seasonal work addresses that need, but in the meantime they have also experienced that these are not the best-paid jobs, that these are quite labour-intensive jobs, that they are not always easily accessible by public transport... That [this type of work] also poses some challenges. The shift towards wanting a permanent contract - regardless of [the fact] whether we succeed or not - is there. Also because they realise that they need it to be able to rent a house. (...) but that's just my interpretation." (transcript of interview, January 16, 2023)

As this practitioner pointed out, residents indicated that seasonal work complicated renting a flat or house, given the lack of consistency in both work and income.

Additionally, access to the social economy was noteworthy. Several residents secured permanent contracts in sheltered workshops, thanks to the employment office (VDAB) identifying employment related disabilities.

> "This has turned out to be a success, (...) in the beginning there were lengthy procedures, but it has become a lot easier now because we have a much better... yes, a good contact with the employer in the meantime. [We provide] job and language coaching [within the company], so there is mutual relief, and... yes, we have been managing this quite well." (Practitioner, transcript interview, January 16, 2023)

One of the residents who had begged for an income in the last fifteen years, got employed in such a workshop. He proudly talked about his new job, while demonstrating how certain pieces of chocolate had to be in the right place on the belt, "otherwise the system blocks. Some don't pay attention, but I watch carefully. The boss is very satisfied with my work (smiles)" (field notes, July 19, 2021). His dedication was evident as he ensured punctuality, leaving before 6 am each morning, even if this meant waiting for his train at the station for over half an hour. Later, also his wife secured a position in the same company, which suited them perfectly. They now worked full-time and made plans to travel to Spain, Italy and Romania to visit family when they were able to get leave, or when the company closed for its annual shut-down.

Legal residence and accrual of rights

> "Researcher: How was it for you, at *le place*?
> Ex-resident: It was good there. It ensured we got papers, that's what it was for."
> (field notes, March 17, 2023)

Many residents acquired a legal residence status during the project. This was also the case for this nuclear family of whom both adults found long term formal employment. A few days before moving into a rental house, the woman proudly recounted:

> "We are like the Belgians now. At the beginning of the project, they [the assistants] had asked us what we wanted, and we had said, 'like the Belgians', and by this we meant a house, a job, everything." (field notes interview, April 29, 2023)

This meant that they now acquired social rights and, if necessary, could access social resources, assistance, and services. They could now register on the waiting list for social housing, access certain shelter projects, call on the services of the PCSW (Public Centre for Social Welfare), etc.

For many, however, their residence status was attributed to periods of temporary employment. Within the legal framework, this carries a certain degree of uncertainty for the future, considering residence rights are linked to employment for EU-citizens in the first five years. In addition, maintaining this legal position requires having an official address.

> "I could lose my rights when the terrain here, when the project is done, and I don't manage to find housing. Then I will no longer have an address and I will lose everything." (resident, field notes interview, April 20, 2023)

For some, a reference address with the PCSW offered a solution, albeit limited in time.

Residents generally recognised the importance of a permanent address but were less aware of the importance of employment to maintain their residence status.

Some residents expressed disappointment or frustration as they were unable to meet the employment requirements necessary for obtaining a residence status in the first place. This challenge was exacerbated by the complexity of migration law, whereby the rules pertaining to residence are subject to varying interpretations by different agencies, including the local municipality. This sometimes created absurd situations where different family members within a nuclear family had different legal statuses.

Medical care

A significant part of the social assistance was allocated to medical care, with a considerable number of individuals grappling with health issues, a common occurrence among vulnerable groups like the homeless or Roma (as previously mentioned). These individuals enrolled in a community health centre, were accompanied to doctor's appointments, and received appropriate care, either within the system of urgent medical aid (UMA) or through health insurance if a formal income was obtained.

Positive effect on children

The various actors pointed to an important effect the project had on the children and adolescents. The presence of social assistants, animators and volunteers helped them learn new skills and build confidence for a life in Ghent.

Many children now spoke good Dutch. Their parents were often amazed. One mother recounted:

> "My son speaks Dutch very well and he also reads in Dutch. He goes to school regularly because yes, otherwise, what should he do, a whole day at home? From me, he has to go to school." (interview field notes, April 29, 2023)

In this way (through on-site assistance and promoting school attendance), the social workers endeavoured to bring about what they referred to as 'intergenerational change'. Practitioners acknowledged the challenges in this process, citing tensions arising from diverse pedagogical viewpoints. Emphasizing the importance of involving parents, they noted that while "many steps have been taken, project is too short." (personal communication, October 23, 2023).

Transition to other shelter initiatives and the private rental market

Notably, a single family became homeowner, in a small row house, in another smaller city. In addition, one family and one individual found placing in social housing, offering them an affordable and long-term housing solution. Apart from these instances, the outcomes in terms of housing show a varied picture of transitioning to shelter initiatives and the rental market.

A number of residents secured housing on the private rental market, which often involved diligently saving to cover the required rent deposit. One man recounted:

> "I will always be honest. I don't send as much money to the children as I used to because now I have to save every cent for my deposit. I don't know the exact amount I'll need, so I set aside small amounts, and sometimes, [I send money to them] every two months—like 100 euros, 50 euros, but not like before." (field notes interview, April 20, 2023)

Finally, several families transitioned to 'Project Leegstand', a shelter initiative that allows the temporary occupation of vacant social housing for a maximum duration of one year. A practitioner expressed her optimism:

> "I do believe it can be a good intermediate step. Away from the community, and [not yet] as expensive as the regular market" (field notes interview, May 15, 2023)

However, others were less convinced this was the right avenue, also considering they cut the project's long waiting list of candidates. "From shelter to shelter. This cannot be the intention," argued one of the policy makers (field notes, June 7, 2023).

For individuals who had experienced prolonged periods of homelessness, having their own place was a significant achievement. They invested time and effort in decorating, acquiring second-hand furniture, placing plants, and adding personal touches like posters and

colourful curtains to create a sense of home. A resident shared her relief, saying, "Okay, I pay 700 euros a month, but I don't have to worry that the police will be here. I am at ease" (Field notes, May 18, 2023).

However, these new living arrangements came with fresh challenges. A woman who left the project early to move into a rental flat testified to the financial strain and stress she now faced every month to make ends meet. Another man, who relocated to a rental flat with his wife, echoed a similar experience:

> "It is very expensive. The total amount, rent, electricity, internet and everything, almost 1,400 euros. But that's normal. It's like that for everyone. For [social worker name] too, for you too." (field notes, March 30, 2023)

One resident shared the harrowing story of physical violence he endured within the confines of his social housing. In another instance, a family encountered abusive rental practices that abruptly rendered them homeless. These incidents show that there are not only financial barriers, but also safety concerns and instances of abuse in the pursuit of secure and sustainable housing.

Continued homelessness (but not in barracks and caravans)

Some residents had to leave the project early because they did not comply with the terms of the project, or they got an end date in the project's final year without having found a housing solution. A practitioner explained how she interpreted the behaviour of some of these residents:

> "They are very much focused on the present. It's still very difficult to talk about the future, to engage in a trajectory, to do an internship, or to make efforts that don't generate immediate financial returns." (transcript interview, January 16, 2023)

A resident shared his perspective on those returning to homelessness, stating:

> "We actively looked for work and a house. Some people don't understand this, that [the project] is temporary and they should look for a house, and not wait until they are on the street." (field notes, March 17, 2023)

As a consequence of the adverse impacts of conditionality, individuals found themselves returning to homelessness, often resorting to living in cars or squatting (in the context of the city's structural vacancy problem). A practitioner grappled with the limited alternatives available, expressing a desire for more comprehensive options:

> "I would like to provide them with more. Perhaps we should have had additional alternatives, like 'if it doesn't work out here, you can go there, and if it doesn't work out there, then another option.' Unfortunately, there was only one option available here" (field notes, interview January 16, 2022)

The uncertainty and stress caused by (the threat of) homelessness weighed on families and brought them back in 'survival mode', effecting amongst other things the children's schooling. A family that left the project within the first year initially returned to Romania with their four children. A few months later they returned to Ghent for seasonal employment, while sleeping in their car. When they were able to live a little more comfortably in a squat, the children also returned to live with them. While they enrolled the

children in a nearby school, the mother expressed reservations about their future stability, not knowing how long they would be able to stay in the house before the eviction notice.

Another woman, compelled to leave the project without a housing solution, recounted the project management's suggestion to return to Romania:

> "They [= project management] said, 'if you don't like it, then you should return to Romania.' But yes, what should I do in Romania? I have no money, I have nothing, what should I do there?" (field notes, April 27, 2023)

Similarly, a stressed teenager, facing homelessness, voiced a desire to remain in the project for the sake of continuing his education in hairdressing. However, the uncertainty led him to discontinue attending school, stating:

> "What's the point? We won't stay here anyway. We have to leave, and then I won't be able to go to school." (field notes, April 6, 2023)

On the other hand, we also noticed a form of agency amongst those unable to transition to 'Project Leegstand' or social housing. Squatting for them became a strategic choice for affordable housing, particularly given the exorbitant rents in the private market in Ghent. A woman stated:

> "We have to be honest; we cannot rent a house. It's too expensive, we don't have jobs. We want social housing [= Project Leegstand] like the others. Or we squat." (Field notes, July 12, 2023).

Circular migration persists

Even as the majority of families established more permanent roots in Ghent, others continued to navigate back-and-forth travel, posing a challenge for practitioners attempting to provide support in this dynamic context. A practitioner acknowledged the complexity of the situation, stating:

> "We are exploring the procedure for social employment for more individuals, in collaboration with the Jobteam, to establish a more structured approach, but this is challenging for those going back-and-forth. It's a long process." (Field notes, May 30, 2023).

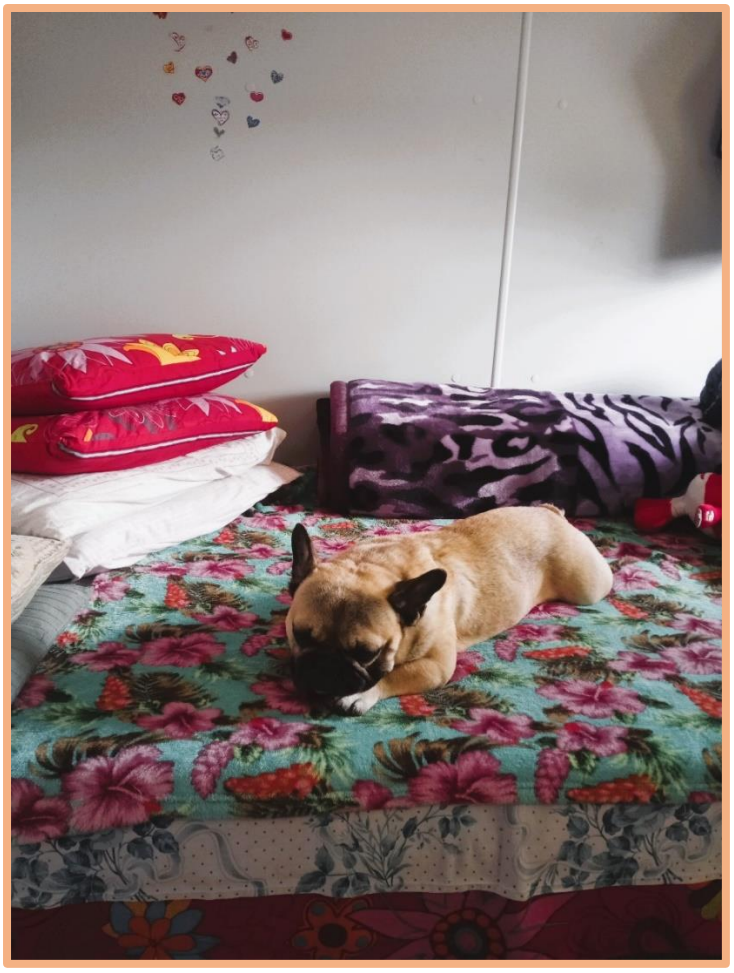
Interestingly, some individuals now viewed their home country through the lens of annual leave periods at work. But this didn't apply to everyone. When asked about regular returns to Romania, one woman described het own situation:

> "For us, that is not the case. I have been to Romania twice in five years. I have no family there anymore. My parents died, the rest of the family is gone. If we find a house, our intention is to stay here in Ghent. My family is here, my husband and my children." (field notes interview, April 29, 2023)

Further stigmatisation

The reluctance to embrace societal change in addressing the plight of Intra-European (Roma) residents within the city has perpetuated their continued stigmatization. Additionally, the promise of a 'one-off total solution' remained unrealized, resulting in the

continued visibility of homeless migrants in the city. This carries the potential danger of reinforcing negative stereotypes and prejudices about this community, a concern already exemplified by the biased and unfavourable coverage of families squatting in vacant social housing in Ghent today.



Part 3: Conclusions

> "Researcher: What would you do if you were the mayor, would you have handled certain things differently?
> Resident: I would not let people sleep on the streets. It doesn't matter what nationality they are. The people who want to work for a better future should be helped."
> (interview field notes, April 29, 2023)

In this third and concluding part, we will establish links between the project's mechanisms, contexts, and outcomes. This allows us to identify explanations that shed light on why different mechanisms and dynamics of the project become meaningful. Drawing from different insights, including both stakeholders' viewpoints and our own perspective based on social work in research, policy development and practice (as described by Hermans and Roets, 2020), our aim is to uncover useful and meaningful principles, while acknowledging and recognising obstacles. The quantifiable results presented before the City Council on September 18, we argue, fall short of capturing the nuanced and meaningful aspects inherent in the social work that took place. With this approach, we hope to encourage future dialogue among the involved actors.

One of the fundamental principles that emerged from our evaluation is the importance of consistently operating from a stance of respect and dignity in all interactions. While this may appear self-evident, its implementation demanded substantial energy, empathy, and time, particularly considering the sometimes challenging relationships individuals had historically formed with institutions and services. Residents contended with difficult circumstances and societal stigmas that impacted their self-esteem, and they were acutely aware of how they were approached. The establishment of a respectful relationship played an important role in cultivating trust between practitioners and residents, facilitating meaningful collaborations, and ultimately achieving tangible 'results'.

This required experienced social work actors who were given the necessary discretionary space to apply their professional judgment. Dealing with erratic, unpredictable and unique life trajectories, while living in a collective setting, required constant deliberation, adjustments and personalisation – as an integral part of the social assistance. While none of the actors had experience with a project of such magnitude, they brought in their expertise in terms of the targeted population and the associated issues, affording them a nuanced understanding of dynamics like migration and chronic poverty. Nevertheless, the regulatory framework they had to navigate, prioritising measurable results, exerted pressure on their discretionary space (cf. Devlieghere & Roose, 2017). The political involvement and the (intermediary) public evaluations that took place are unprecedented, when juxtaposed with similar social work interventions implemented for other target groups.

Furthermore, establishing a safe place to live with basic amenities not only addressed immediate housing needs, but also provided individuals with a basis from which they could focus on other aspects of their lives. Nevertheless, this approach was partly compromised, because of the conditional framework of the project (to which not all residents could conform), the temporal nature of the support, and the minimal spatial comfort. Furthermore, our analysis also showed that having an official address facilitated access to services and rights. Provided other conditions related to employment were met, an address could act as a gateway to essential resources and opportunities.

Intensive guidance/assistance further emerged as a key principle to overcome administrative obstacles and access services. Navigating bureaucratic processes was overwhelming for many on top of the language barriers that existed. Therefore, personal assistance was indispensable to ensure that individuals fully accessed available support systems or participation opportunities. This also relates to the many challenges people faced, such as illness, addiction or disability. Recognising people's diverse needs and tailoring interventions accordingly were crucial to achieving holistic improvements in their well-being.

Finally, the social economy deserves special attention as a valuable option for those who faced multiple challenges (language, illiteracy, physical disability, etc.). Providing opportunities within sheltered workshops enabled individuals to do meaningful work in a more protected environment in the face of obstacles that hindered their participation in the mainstream labour market.

While the aforementioned principles provide insight into the factors that contributed to meaningful outcomes, a series of challenges must also be recognised. The project took place at the intersection of several structural factors that transcend the local level. The lack of employment opportunities in poorer EU countries, the stigmatisation of Roma across Europe and European and federal migration laws that only provide social rights for 'sedentary and economically active Union citizens' complicated any intervention at the local level for Intra-European migrants dealing with (chronic) poverty. However, alongside these broader challenges, several local dynamics also impeded the project's ability to create meaning.

First, the idea of one-sided integration is outdated. Certain Western (neoliberal) norms were presented as the only option, while existing skills and potentials of residents who did not fit into that framework were overlooked. In addition, emphasising individual responsibility as the core of the integration approach has the disadvantage that it does not adequately address underlying structural problems. Moreover, it is not consistent with Ghent's equal opportunities and integration policy:

> "We strive for a city of solidarity with equal opportunities for every person and group, a city where everyone feels included. A city where every individual can be himself or herself without worries and can develop to their full potential. Therefore, we pursue policies that empower people on the one hand and address the existing inequalities that our structures and services create on the other." [own translation]

For instance, the project design lacked any ambition to address the discrimination and stigmatisation faced by Roma migrants and homeless people within the broader society. This oversight also extends more generally to the issue of homelessness. While efforts were made to 'prepare' people and detect care needs, the housing market did not structurally change.

Setting unrealistic expectations not only put undue pressure on both residents and practitioners, it also resulted in a lack of success in the public evaluation. Overlooking certain contextual factors (e.g. circular migration, family dynamics, etc.) when defining the problems and goals of the project led to ongoing challenges such as persistent homelessness. A lot was expected of a group of people who had lived in very precarious conditions for a long time. Additionally, some residents struggled with additional challenges insufficiently considered in the framework, such as old age or health problems. These issues emphasise the need for a more long-term engagement rather than the illusion of a 'one-off total solution', also considering the nature of migration and the societal stigmatisation faced by residents. Some policy actors were aware that the proposed expectations were unrealistic given the context of chronic poverty (survival mode) and the lack of a basic income. At the public evaluation before the city council, one of the municipal councillors concluded: "At least we tried". However, this rationale is highly

problematic particularly considering the highly stigmatized nature of groups such as homeless people and Roma. It risks being (mis)interpreted as suggesting that opportunities were provided but not seized by (choice) of the individuals involved.

The majority of resources and attention in the interventions were directed towards assisting adults, regulating the needs of children, as it were, to a secondary position. In addition, despite the strong emphasis on school attendance while in the project, minimal consideration was given to the implications for the children, their experiences, and the potential impact on their education when a user agreement was terminated, and a family was compelled to leave the project. Certain actors argued that a project could do more to emphasise the importance and meaningfulness of engaging with children and adolescents, starting from each child's right to self-development. Furthermore, it is well-known that children of 'newcomers' often acquire language skills more quickly, assuming a crucial but challenging mediating role between their families and the broader society. It is important that these children receive adequate support in fulfilling this role.

Due to a lack of an in and outflow policy, fewer people were helped. The project was designed for a group of homeless residents whose names were recorded on a list in 2019, without considering family ties or migration dynamics. Consequently, individuals who were not in Ghent during the registration period were denied entry. Furthermore, residents exhibited diverse needs, preferences, and paces. While some residents left voluntarily after finding a housing solution outside of the project, others resisted certain regulations, leading to their expulsion from the project. Providing only one option deprived individuals of choice, leading to the dropout of many from the project, perpetuating the cycle of homelessness. The resident group gradually diminished as other homeless people, including family members who had been residing in Ghent for years, were not permitted to take their place.

The implementation of an excessive conditional logic yielded certain counterproductive effects, inadvertently excluding individuals who struggled to comply with the established rules. Research indicates that imposing stringent conditions in exchange for support adversely affects the most vulnerable homeless populations in their pathway to housing. People grappling with complex challenges often find it difficult to comply with these conditions, preventing them from making 'progress' (Busch-Geertsema & Sahlin, 2007; Maeseele et al., 2013). This research underpins the Housing First approach, that prioritizes the provision of stable housing as a foundational step out of homelessness (Atherton & Nicholls, 2008; Bush-Geertsema, 2013).

In the absence of a legal framework, some perceived the project as a favour for which people should be grateful. Such conditional and paternalistic logics risk reinforcing existing power dynamics, relegating residents to mere subjects of decisions made by authorities and social workers. Notably, residents had no involvement in shaping the project's objectives or outlines, which can also be considered problematic for historically marginalised groups like long-term homeless individuals and the Roma community. In the absence of formal social rights, interventions should, at all times:

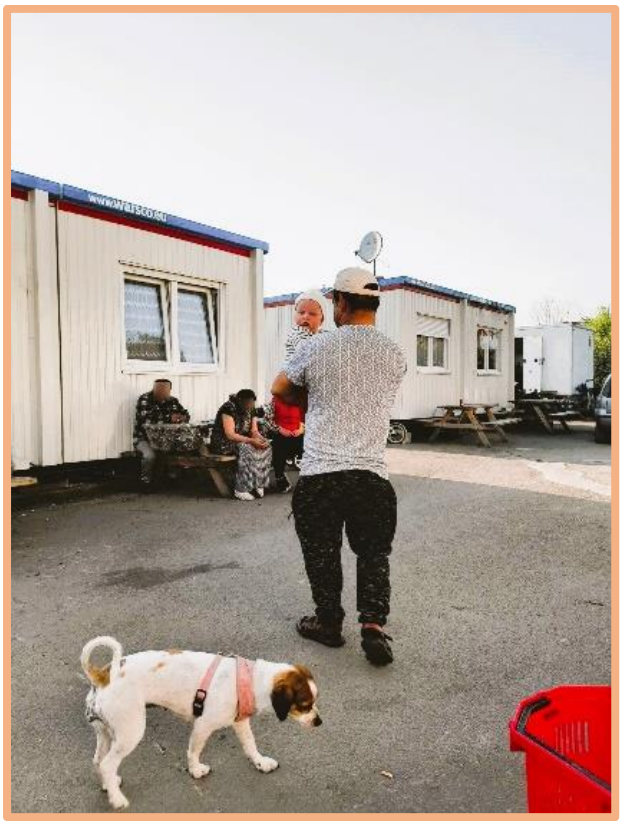
- avoid infantilising sanctioning mechanisms
- respect human rights, including the right to privacy, right to family life, right to freedom of movement
- do not set the schooling of children as a condition for housing

Residents had valuable insights and experiences and by involving them in decision-making processes, the interventions could have been better tailored to their needs and challenges. This would have allowed individuals to play a (more) active role in improving their own situation,

potentially increasing their motivation to engage in meaningful change. Recent studies and EU recommendations for interventions targeting the Roma community underscore the significance of such engagement as a determinant of intervention success or failure (Fresno et al., 2019).

We noticed that there were different perspectives on the social problem and the role of social work among the involved actors. This absence of a shared frame of reference sometimes hindered good cooperation among various levels and partners. The question arises: Is it possible or desirable to establish a shared framework at the outset of such interventions, given the absence of a legal framework and the current societal climate surrounding migration and the Roma community. In any case, it is imperative that actors can use their expertise without losing their distinctiveness, and good direction is crucial in this regard (Boost et al., 2017).

With the project now concluded, we hope that both policy makers and the diverse array of involved actors can derive valuable insights from this analysis. These insights can inform their own evaluations and contribute to the formulation of future policies for this diverse and heterogeneous resident group. The mobility of people within the European Union inevitably includes the movement of more marginalised groups, who create connections and a sense of 'home' away from their original home. These groups are part of society, and it is crucial that society continues to play an active role in supporting these communities, even when they do not settle permanently. These families will not 'disappear,' and the ongoing efforts by the city of Ghent and all involved actors underscore the necessity to think ahead about future scenarios.



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