

ENERGY POVERTY IN BRUSSELS

First results of a qualitative research

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Outline

- 1) Energy poverty in Belgium : a few figures
- 2) The 2GENDERS project
- 3) Field work since March 2014
 - Réseau vigilance/ vigilance network
 - Energy guidance/advisors
 - Preliminary results : information as keyword
- 4) Social recognition, health and social life in relation with energy poverty

1. The Belgian situation (SILK data)

- **6%** of Belgian households have **arrears** on utility bills (16% below the poverty line)
(Grevisse & Brynart, 2013)
- **7%** can't keep their home **adequately warm** (20% below the poverty line)
(Grevisse & Brynart, 2013)
- Household's **expenditure on energy** :
 - **~6%** of income for the median income
 - **15%** for the first income decile
(Huybrechs et al, 2011)

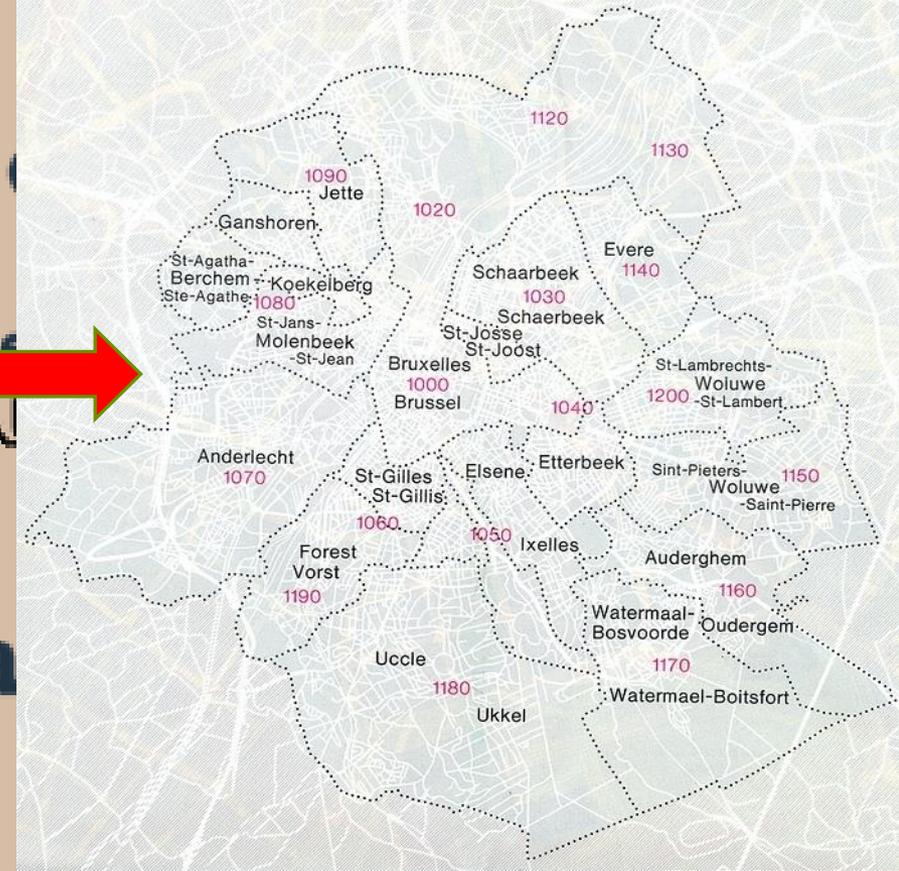
In 2000, it was 5,3% for all the households
(Vanneste et al, 2001)

North Sea

Netherlands

Flandre

Brussels
Capital



France

Wallonia

Luxembourg

- 19 municipalities in Brussels
- A Public Social Action Centre in each one
- Creation of energy units in these centres to help people having difficulties regarding to their energy consumption + general information in “energy houses” (insulation, subsidies...)
- Social tariff
- No prepayment meters in use

2. The 2GENDERS project (Generation and Gender ENergy DEprivation: Realities and Social policies)

- Multidisciplinary project on energy poverty involving the universities of Louvain (BE), Antwerp (BE), Mons (BE) and Birmingham (UK)
- Qualitative and quantitative research
- Founder = BELSPO (Belgian Scientific Policy Office)
- Objectives:
 - describe & quantify energy poverty in Belgium
 - deliberate possible interventions
- Focus on gender and generation aspects
- Associated vulnerabilities (health, mobility, social relations...)

3. Fieldwork

- Started in March 2014
- Participant observation
- Introduced to the “vigilance network”: one meeting every month
- Following energy advisors in their tasks
- Exploratory in-depth interviews in three different municipalities of the Brussels Region

« Vigilance network »

- Created in 1999 by activists of the Christian Labour Movement to help social workers dealing with energy problems
- At least 20% of requests to municipal Public Social Action Centre are about energy bills
- 2 hours meeting per month
- About 40 social workers per meeting
- Interventions of specialists, debates, practices exchange, share of difficulties

Energy guidance

- What kind of problems:
 - unpaid bills
 - problems with energy suppliers
 - difficulty to understand bills
- What kind of service :
 - giving workshops on energy-saving tips
 - interviews with “users”
 - visiting dwellings with energy issues
 - Tips to save water, free refrigerators, switchable multiple socket,...

Preliminary results

- Change of audience : not only social beneficiaries anymore (as energy price increases every year)
- Difficulty to understand bills
- Choosing a supplier
- Knowing one's rights
- Which service to turn to ?
- Frequent problems after a move
- Frauds, misleading advertising, despair
- In need of a political answer! (not only local help)
→ **Information = keyword**

4. Social recognition, health and social life

Recognition

- Feeling understood
- Pride
- Practical solutions VS affects
- Taking the time
- Relationship with the owner

“[This house] is the last thing I have left from my husband [...] so many memories and all the pain to have it! When we bought the house in 1975 I was 23. And every single week-end my husband and I [...] we were working here. At the time we had many friends [...] **there is nobody left**. Just me, my daughter and the kid. [...] **this is what [the social workers] do not understand... this is why I don't want to sell.**”

(Woman, 61, widow, owner of a house, living with her daughter and grand-son, Molenbeek)

- **Logic of social workers VS sentimental choices, history of the users,...**

After a year she heard “your case is too complicated, I will transfer you to another person.” [...] I’m called, I come, and she asks me for all the papers again. I said “but, I gave everything already [to the previous social worker], you're now in charge of my case, didn't she give you the file right?” sounds logical... “No, I have to start all over”. So, I said okay, and again the same documents, the same copies... I made a new file, I came back and she said I will have my medical card [for free health care] in two weeks. [...] I got the card, but for the rest [...] **in two years I only saw her 3 times. 3 meetings of half an hour in 2 years!**”

(Woman, 61, widow, owner of a house, living with her daughter and grand-son, Molenbeek)

➤ **Feeling of not being considered**

“You have to know that with all the thefts, the aggressions, everything that happens here, **insurances don't want to pay for persons living in a social neighbourhood** anymore. So tell me where is the social concern today! [...] There are many problems with the social-services level too. When you bring your documents for example, **they often lose them and they claim it's you**. So, what these documents are: tax assessment, income, family composition and family allowances. The four documents they usually ask from you and... they lose them.”

(Woman, divorced over 50, renter in a social dwelling, Anderlecht)

➤ **Insecurity, feeling of injustice**

- Did you tell [your owner about the windows and the droughts]?
- Not really, because we know very well that **he will never do anything**... it would be useless to say something. [...] for example the intercom is broken so I mentioned it, he did nothing... so I can't imagine telling "your windows do not insulate very well", he won't do anything either!

(Man, lone-father, 55, renter in a private dwelling, Uccle)

➤ **Feeling of being powerless**

Social support

- Role of relatives in difficult situations
- Dwelling's importance in social life
- Ability to resist/survive/protest in relation to the social support received

"The 20th of the month, even with my daughter's income [...] sometimes from the 12th of the month [...] we have no more food. [...] One day, **my neighbour came , I don't know how**, and said "Madam, do you eat enough every day?" I swear it's true. I said yes but... [...] I started to cry. "Come with me" he said. He insisted and we went to the shop across the corner. He bought frozen fish, meat, potatoes, vegetables, [...] for over 50€. He brought everything in my house and I said "Sir, I cannot afford for this, I'm not able to repay you right now..." "Madam, do not repay, I don't want it!" **Do you imagine? I didn't ask for anything...**"

(Woman, 61, widow, owner of a house, living with her daughter and grand-son, Molenbeek)

- **Feeling thankful in contrast with previous disappointment with social aid and racist statements**

*“You know, when I went bankrupt... when everything’s okay you’ve got lots of friends. **Once it’s turning bad, there is only a few left...** almost zero.”*

(Man, lone-father, 55, renter in a private dwelling, Uccle)

*“**The dwelling, it’s everything:** it’s wellness, safety, rest. It’s the place where there is complicity among the family. And when you don’t have this anymore, **where is your dignity?** We always hear about human dignity... where is ours? We are not respected.”*

(Woman, divorced over 50, renter in a social dwelling, Anderlecht)

Health

- Health care and (energy) poverty
- Mental health (feeling of inferiority, powerless, abandon,...)
- How everything holds together

*“When I lost my job, my family fell apart too. And as a misfortune never comes alone, **I also had cancer at the same time.** And... yeah... it wasn't doing okay. I coughed up [money] and... I cannot be a self-employed worker anymore because once you have debts with banks and the State... you cannot start all over again. **You're in a deadlock.**”*

(Man, lone-father, 55, renter in a private dwelling, Uccle)

➤ **Feeling of despair, loss of control over his life**

“I was raised by my grand-parents. Social help was **taboo**, we couldn't... at the time for us the people asking for social help were hobos and such [...] but one day you have your daughter, a little baby and no more money to buy a bottle of milk, you have to **swallow your pride**... I asked for social help. [...] “I cannot pay my gas and electricity bills, etc.” I said. I showed everything and I said “the worst is **I am no longer able to buy my drugs**” [...] the social worker looked at every proof and said : I cannot do anything for you. **You have a house? Sell it!**”

(Woman, 61, widow, owner of a house, living with her daughter and grand-son, Molenbeek)

- **Symbolic violence, trying to keep one's pride VS facing a very rough answer**

- If we talk about health care, well... **it's a double standards medicine!** As I have experimented it myself...

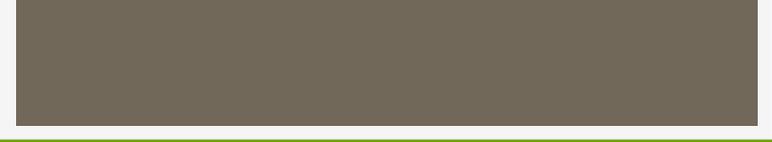
- What do you mean?

- Well, when they know you depend on social help [...] **you are being considered as the dirtiest person**, eh, they give you generics and they don't care that it gives you hallucinations, that it drives you crazy, that it gives you hives, stuff like that. That's it... if you get money from social services, you have to deal with that sort of things [...] now that I have a political mandate and that I am invalid I'm treated like a queen! So when I say there is a two-speed medicine... I know what I'm talking about.

(Woman, divorced over 50, renter in a social dwelling, Anderlecht)

Perspectives

- Education?
- Policy and legal measures sometimes seem too rigid
- Difficulty to deal with a giant web of information
- To be continued...



Thank you very much
for your attention!

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