

# Experiences of resettled refugees in Belgium

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# **THE EXPERIENCES OF RESETTLED REFUGEES IN BELGIUM**

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# SUMMARY

## Introduction and aims

Resettlement is one part of an immigration policy, in which resettlement strives to give refugees who live in another country, a country where they first have fled to, the chance to build a new life in another country, and as such also to help reduce the impact on this first country.

Resettlement thus forms *“the selection and migration of refugees from a country where they have sought protection to a third country, that has consented beforehand to give these refugees a definitive residence status. As such, it forms a possible solution for those who cannot return to their country of origin, nor can receive sufficient protection, or who do not have any perspectives on local integration”*.

The Belgian authorities have given many refugees the opportunity to resettle during the twentieth century. Recently, in 2009, 47 refugees originating from Iraq, who had fled to Syria and Jordania, were given the opportunity to resettle in Belgium. These refugees were selected on basis of their need for protection and on the basis of their level of vulnerability. It was mainly single women with medical problems and/or with children. This choice for ‘women at risk’ originated out of the particular needs for protection of these refugees, and also out of the need to support the first countries where these refugees fled to.

In 2011, 25 refugees out of Eritrea and DR Congo resettled in Belgium. They had fled to Libya, but in 2011 fled further to a refugee camp in Tunisia. This resettlement operation to Belgium was an answer to an urgent humanitarian crisis.

Despite these different resettlement processes, few research has been carried out about these processes. Most studies also were limited to the resettlement process itself, and research in which the perspectives and experiences of the resettled refugees were questioned are scarce. Furthermore, there is hardly any research in which the perspectives of the resettled refugees about the support offered to them was investigated. In Belgium, we have some evaluation reports mainly carried out by those key actors involved in the resettlement process. Yet, until now, no systematic research has been carried out to study the lived experiences of the resettled refugees themselves.

This research therefore aims at gaining more insight, from a longitudinal perspective, into the experiences and current living situation of refugees who came to Belgium in the framework of resettlement programmes. We herein specifically question the way the support for these resettled refugees was put into practice and how the refugees evaluate this support.

The following research questions were put forward:

- How did resettled refugees experience the entire process of resettlement?
- What is the current living situation of resettled refugees and how has this evolved over the years? We herein specifically focus on following life domains: housing, labour and income, physical and mental wellbeing social network, and education, and also pay attention to their experiences with immigration policy, in particular family reunification, nationality, and integration processes.
- How have these resettled refugees been supported throughout their trajectory to and in Belgium and how do they evaluate this support?

## Methods

Because the research aims at documenting the living situation of resettled refugees within a longitudinal perspective, so also after some years in Belgium, and their views on the support given throughout this period, we focused on refugees resettled in 2009 en 2011 and followed them for about three years (2013 – 2015).

First, we wanted to gain insight into the process of resettlement itself, both the selection and preparation processes, as the support given to the refugees when living in Belgium. Hereto, we have carried out interviews with key actors: (1) Commissariaat-Generaal voor de Vluchtelingen en de Staatlozen (authority in charge to select the refugees and to grant them residence documents), (2) Fedasil (responsible authority for the cultural orientation of resettled refugees in the countries from where they depart to Belgium and for the first reception of refugees, in large-scale asylum centres, after their arrival in Belgium), (3) Caritas International, SESO, PSC, and Convivial (the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who supported the resettled refugees in 2009 and 2011 from the moment they arrived in Belgium), and (4) Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen (the organisation that was responsible for the coordination of all support by NGOs in 2009).

Second, as the main part of the research, we did several interviews with refugees who were resettled in 2009 (Iraq) and 2011 (Libya) over a period of three years. Yet, we only started with the research in 2013, which means that the refugees' first phase in their resettlement process already had passed.

Via the NGOs involved and further snowball-sample, we tried to reach as many refugees as possible, whereby we mainly aimed at interviewing the heads of family, next to some of their children. Of the 23 resettled refugee families and single persons from Irak (2009 (total number of resettled refugees was 47), we reached 14 families/single persons (with an underrepresentation of the single persons).

Out of the group of 25 resettled refugees from Libya (2011) (Eritrean and Congolese nationality), 13 families/single persons were interviewed.

The participating refugees have been interviewed two to three times, over a period of three years, if necessary with an interpretator and on a location of their choice. In these interviews, we mainly focused on their lived experiences during the entire resettlement process and their current living situation and position in Belgium. We hereby explicitly not only focused on their economic position in society, but on different life domains, such as their housing situation, the process of language acquisition, their educational situation, their labour situation, other aspects of participation (volunteering work, leisure time,...), physical and mental health, social networks in and outside Belgium, and their expectations for the future. We herein also examined which mechanisms had had a positive or a negative impact on their process of resettlement and their life in Belgium. We also explicitly questioned what kind of support they had received and how they evaluated this support. Through using a longitudinal approach, with several consecutive interviews over a longer period of time, we could document changes in people's life situations, in their expectations, and in their support and need for support.

In total, we carried out 29 interviews with resettled refugees from 2009 (23 heads of family, 6 children) and 13 refugees from 2011 (all of them heads of family).

All interviews have been transcribed literally and have been analysed systematically via thematic analysis.

The entire research has been followed up by a guidance committee with representatives of the interviewed key actors (state authorities and NGOs) and those who funded the study.

The data out of the interviews has been complemented with a review of relevant policy documents, and information out of the stakeholdersmeetings on resettlement in Belgium.

## **Main results**

This research on the resettlement of two groups of refugees to Belgium, 47 from Iraq in 2009 and 25 from Libya in 2011 has produced a long-term picture – six years for those from Iraq and four years from those from Libya – on how resettled refugees experience this process of resettlement and the support they receive. We were not able to trace back and interview all of the resettled refugees, yet the 42 interviews give a quite clear picture of their experiences

Both groups of refugees can be clearly distinguished: The refugees out of Iraq are mainly ‘women at risk’, while those from Libya are mainly young men and couples whose precarious living situations necessitated a new refuge. The vulnerability of the refugees from Iraq needs to be considered when looking at our results. Yet, those refugees from Iraq were also mainly people who originated from relatively high socio-economic classes in their country of origin, characterized by a strong cultural and economic capital, while the refugees from Libya often already left their home country at a very young age, so they had had little abilities to build up an economic and cultural capital.

### ***Grateful for the granted protection***

All interviewed refugees are very grateful to Belgium for the protection they were granted and the (extra) support while resettling in Belgium, and they felt also welcome in Belgium, since Belgium selected them to come to their country.

While the refugees from Libya did not have any contact with Belgian representatives before they came to Belgium, the refugees from Iraq had been selected by a Belgian mission in the country where they lived and they also received a first cultural orientation there. This meeting with Belgian representatives provided an opportunity of personal contact with the country to which they would be resettled, and they mainly kept the message that they were very much welcome in Belgium. The cultural orientation session, as a moment of information giving, added to the refugees’ idea that they had chosen Belgium on a positive basis. It sometimes even gave them the possibility to rephrase their resettlement as a well-thought individual decision. The warm welcome for the refugees from Iraq at the airport in Belgium by some members of the selection mission was also much appreciated. This presence of ‘known’ people made this transition process smaller.

In contrast, the refugees from Eritrea and DR Congo (2011) had been selected on basis of their file and so did not share this experience. They came to Belgium mainly unprepared and without any contact with Belgian representatives.

### ***Expectations for a new future***

The resettled refugees had high expectations for their future when arriving in Belgium. All hoped that they could move as soon as possible into their own house, after which they and their children could focus on education to prepare themselves for a successful integration into Belgian society.

Yet, many interviewed key actors indicated that the expectations of the resettled refugees are often much bigger than from refugees who come ‘on their own’ (not in the framework of a resettlement programme) to Belgium. One explanation could be that resettled refugees consider this resettlement as an ‘invitation’ from Belgium, that they ‘have been asked’ to come to live in Belgium. Their expectations therefore would also remain unadjusted when arriving in Belgium, while other non-resettled refugees often already have adapted their expectations more to the concrete reality during the flight and the experiences during this flight. Yet, further research is needed here on the expectation patterns of resettled and other refugees. Ideally, such a study needs to start as early as possible, even before the actual process of resettlement, with a longitudinal follow-up afterwards.

All resettled refugees shared the expectation to start a new life from an own house, from the arrival in Belgium onwards. Yet, the first stay in a large-scale asylum centre after their arrival in Belgium

contrasted with the idea that their life as a refugee now had ended, including the life in refugee reception centres. For many of the resettled refugees, the stay in a large-scale asylum centre took up to two or three months. This expectation to being housed independently, immediately after arrival in the country of resettlement, also coincides with the resettlement practices in other countries with long resettlement traditions (Scandinavia, the US, and the Netherlands). This model, that the resettled refugees knew through the stories of other resettled refugees, is clearly preferred by the interviewed refugees. Trying to really leave their refugee status behind them, they need stable housing, and this lack of independent living immediately after arrival in Belgium is for the interviewed resettled refugees clearly a weak point of the resettlement programme in Belgium. The current changes that have been made already in the Belgium resettlement programme will certainly ameliorate this aspect. In particular, the engagement of certain local authorities to house and support resettled refugees will facilitate the way to independent living for those refugees.

Equally, the refugees' expectations regarding family reunification have not been met entirely. While it was possible to be reunified with one's partner and underage children, this process often took very long and requested a considerable financial input. Furthermore, several family members (e.g., overage children, parents,...) could not join them in Belgium.

For the resettled refugees from Iraq (not for those from Libya), it was important to obtain Belgian nationality as fast as possible, probably also due to the information that was given before coming to Belgium. Obtaining Belgian nationality was considered as a feeling of 'belonging', of feeling at home and being at home in the Belgian society. Yet, changes in the law on obtaining the Belgian nationality have made this process much more difficult than expected.

### ***The reality of resettlement on the longer term***

Participants' expectation that they and their older children would have a relatively easy economic integration encountered many challenges. For of all, they experienced several problems to enter the labour market, which are quite similar to those of other refugees: their long-term precarious housing situation, the difficult process of language acquisition, sometimes also the difficult access to language courses, the lack of information about and the financial problems relating to school participation and other skills training, and the shortage of jobs related to their specific labour profiles. This often put them in a position of long-term financial dependency on social welfare benefits. In particular for the Iraqi adult women, this financial dependency is also related to their medical problems and to the fact that these are mainly single parents. Furthermore, most of the interviewed refugees experienced challenges in gaining insight into the functioning of the Belgian society, which sometimes also induced unrealistic expectations towards their participation to the labour market.

Only a minority of the resettled refugees had a job at the time, mainly in precarious job systems. For some, these temporary systems were a step towards a more fixed job status. This precarious labour situation and the hereto related difficult financial situation (also leading to a precarious housing situation) sharply contrasted with their past living situation in their home country, in particular for the Iraqi interviewees. This might even have contributed to their quite large disappointment with their level of participation to the Belgian situation and their overall financial situation at the time.

These findings on the resettled refugees' economic participation are not that different from many other newcomers, and considering that these resettled refugees are often 'vulnerable' (single parents, older persons, medical and/or mental problems,...), this economic position is not really surprising.

Yet, all resettled refugees show very large efforts to participate in the Belgian society and to realize their future in Belgium. This is shown in the fact that almost all interviewees made efforts to follow language courses for a long period or other skills training courses. Furthermore, most of the children

of the resettled refugees do find their way to professional trainings or high school education, which will help to find their way to the labour market. Resettlement programmes therefore need to be seen within a long-term perspective, often also the perspective of the resettled refugees themselves (after some time): resettlement is often much more the creation and realisation of a 'better' future for their children, much more than for themselves.

Many stories of refugees revealed a quite problematic difference between their great need for a social network, also with Belgian people and the concrete reality of having a very limited social network, with lots of challenges to build contact with people out of the neighbourhood and the broader society. Their entire social life seems to stay oriented to their own family living outside Belgium and with whom they mainly had contact via internet. The recent initiatives to involve volunteers and resettled refugees themselves in the support programmes of these resettled refugees can help to overcome these challenges in their social life. Also, the activities that were organised by the NGOs for the entire group of resettled refugees were much appreciated by the interviewees, although there were some differences here between the two groups of resettled refugees.

Many resettled refugees experienced problems in their psychosocial wellbeing because of a variety of stressors (e.g., precarious housing, limited financial resources, little social network,...), yet also longing for their family members or their (life in the) home country also had an impact here. The medical problems of many resettled refugees were an extra stressor for their emotional wellbeing.

### ***Evaluation of the support***

Both groups had received support on an individual basis throughout the first year after arrival in Belgium, some extra support that was much appreciated by all refugees. After this first year, the resettled refugees received the mainstream support from local social welfare services (OCMWS) in their home town.

All participants indicate that they were very happy about the support they received throughout the entire process, such as the language and integration courses in the asylum reception centre, the intensive support by the NGOs, and the support given by other organisations, such as the OCMW.

The differences in how the NGOs were involved in the support in the first year after arrival shape these supportive initiatives are not clearly reflected in the interviewees' evaluations. Yet, most of the refugees indicated that this support during only one year is too short and that they wished this could have been extended longer.

Their views on the support they received by other organisations differed much more. Some participants were very happy about this support, while other interviewees indicated they received too little support; they experienced large difficulties in having access to certain services or had large communication difficulties with service providers and social workers. In particular the access to mainstream services is certainly something which could be largely improved, not only for resettled refugees, but most likely for all groups of newcomers in Belgium.

### **Recommendations**

Looking at the overall evaluation of the interviewed refugees about their entire migration process and in particular about its last 'phase', the resettlement to Belgium, it is clear that for all resettled refugees, this resettlement phase saved them. 'Life-saving' is used here not particularly in reference to its purely physical meaning, but mainly in the idea that the resettlement has given the opportunity to build a new, human life in another context. The situation in which they lived before their resettlement to Belgium was for many still a situation of still being 'on the move', a 'protracted refugee situation'. The resettlement to Belgium formed the beginning of a new 'settlement' phase that could end the ongoing situation of 'being on the move'. Yet, this does not result in a life in

Belgium without challenges: the resettled refugees do find themselves in many life domains, in particular regarding labour, income and housing and social network, in relatively precarious situations, which indicate clear areas in which the resettlement programme and the overall support for refugees and newcomers can be ameliorated importantly. Yet, we want to stress that resettlement opens opportunities for people to end their long-term 'refugee' status and to build a new, humane future, pointing at the importance of the Belgian resettlement programme and the need to further extend this programme.

The findings of this study cannot be generalized to all resettled refugees, nor to the different resettlement initiatives over the years. We only interviewed resettled refugees out of two resettlement moments, and we noted already considerable differences between both groups. The Belgian resettlement programme also has been changed considerably during the following years, which mean that the refugees we interviewed in this study arrived in Belgium at the moment that the resettlement programme was still young, and many things yet had to be organised. This framework of a certain 'urgency', with many unknown factors in the programme and in the trajectories of the resettled refugees, evoked several problems, reflected in the stories of the interviewed participants. Over the years, the Belgian resettlement programme has gained structure and the kind of support provided also has changed considerably: Local social welfare agencies (OCMWs) are now involved in the programme on a structural basis, improving the (first) housing situation of the resettled refugees, and also the involvement of other refugees and volunteers in the support programmes are important changes. In the next section, we outline some recommendations in order to optimize the Belgian resettlement programme further.

### ***Preparatory trajectory***

The preparation of refugees who will be resettled to Belgium is an important phase in the total process of resettlement. The information and 'cultural orientation' provided to selected refugees was experienced as very valuable. Yet, this cultural orientation should be mainly a 'dialogue', not a 'monologue' from the country of resettlement, since both parties can largely benefit from a real moment of meeting before the resettlement actually happens. For the country of resettlement, this moment of meeting the refugees provides the opportunity to say 'welcome' to the refugees, and to question the refugee about their reasons to come to Belgium, as a way to see whether their expectations are not too high and, if needed, to try to adjust these expectations. In particular, attention can be given to refugees' expectations related to living standards, housing, educational and job opportunities.

The interviewed refugees explicitly indicate that giving (and repeating) correct information may prevent as much as possible that (too) unrealistic expectations grow (e.g., regarding the acquisition of Belgian nationality, participation to the labour market or family reunification). This meeting also gives the resettled refugee the possibility to obtain personalised information about resettlement in Belgium and as such to translate the resettlement in Belgium as a positive choice for him/herself. As such, an important dimension of 'agency' can be brought into the resettlement processes, making it possible to feel more involved in the whole process.

Finally, refugees indicated that it is important to feel a certain continuity throughout the whole process: the presence of some people involved in the cultural orientation and / or selection mission at the airport when arriving in Belgium was felt as important and as a reassuring moment.

### ***Housing situation***

Both groups of interviewed refugees judged the immediate housing in a separate, own house as one of the pivotal elements of the resettlement trajectory. The stay in the large-scale refugee reception centre therefore needs to be as short as possible, because this type of housing largely contrasts with the idea of resettlement as conceptualised by the refugees themselves. If it is not possible, due to

particular circumstances, to house resettled refugees immediately after arrival in private housing, it is important to clarify these reasons to the resettled refugee as also to inform them about the duration of their stay in the asylum centre.

The often long-lasting unfamiliarity with the Belgian society, combined with the experiences of limited access to the private housing market and their precarious financial situation necessitate a – sometimes intensive – long-term support for these refugees, in particular regarding their access to qualitative housing. Since the Belgian government has opted to select vulnerable groups with high protection needs for the resettlement program, it is important to consider also this vulnerability in the housing of these resettled refugees. This involves that the housing location needs to take account of these specific needs, for example through the availability and accessibility of certain medical services and other basic services (e.g. language courses, social welfare services, integration courses,...) in the near neighbourhood.

### **The need for differentiated support**

The support provided to resettled refugees is considered as being very important in the course of their trajectory. The way the support in the first phase is given, in particular the support by the involved NGOs, is well-valued, which means that this type of support should be continued in future. Yet, some of the refugees, in particular because of the governmental choice for ‘vulnerable’ refugees in the resettlement programme, expressed the need for support during a longer period of time. . This requires to differentiate the support more, adapting it to the specific and individual needs of each refugee, including herein the possibility to also differentiate the support over time, given that one’s needs may change over time, including an increase in the need for support after being some time in Belgium.

The research also showed that the accessibility of mainstream services and the support provided by these services is highly variable. A resettlement policy focusing on vulnerable profiles of resettled refugees requires that these refugees during their entire resettlement process receive support on an individual basis, adapted to each refugee’s needs. The cooperation between Fedasil, involved NGOs, and the local welfare services (OCMWs) may open up these possibilities for a more tailored support. This tailored support can increase refugees’ possibilities to participate in society in different domains (labour, education, language, social network, housing, religion,...), and as such ameliorate both the interaction with society and the refugee’s individual wellbeing. More attention is in particular needed for refugees’ housing situation, given that they consider this a crucial aspect of their resettlement process, and the still precarious housing situation of many of the interviewed refugees. Besides, attention needs to be given to the acquisition of Belgian citizenship, which may increase their feelings of belonging to Belgian society.

These recommendations, based on the lived experiences and views of resettled refugees, indicate the importance of a continued involvement of the resettled refugees to detect their particular needs. Listening to their voice may therefore give particular information that other actors cannot provide. We therefore highly recommend to monitor the resettlement of refugees to Belgium via mixed-methods (quantitative and qualitative methods), longitudinal follow-up, in order to adapt the resettlement programme to the specific needs, questions and expectations of the refugees themselves. Questioning the resettled refugees about their evaluation of their migration trajectory and the support given to them throughout the entire process can provide us with very valuable information about which life domains needs extra attention and support and which sources of support are valuable to them are still missing.