FACULTY OF PSYCHOLOGY
AND EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES

The integration of provision for families with young children in relation to combating (child) poverty

Dorien Van Haute

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Michel Vandenbroeck
Co-supervisor: Prof. Dr. Griet Roets

A dissertation submitted to Ghent University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Social Work

Academic year 2017–2018

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Doctoral Advisory Committee

Prof. Dr. Michel Vandenbroeck (supervisor)
Ghent University, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy

Prof. Dr. Griet Roets (co-supervisor)
Ghent University, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy

Dr. Thomas Maeseele
OCMW Gent

Prof. Dr. Trudie Knijn
University of Utrecht, Centre for Social Policy and Intervention Studies

Prof. Dr. Danielle Dierckx
University of Antwerp, Centre on Inequalities, Poverty, Social Exclusion and the City

When leaving her position at the University, she was replaced by:

Dr. Joris De Corte
Ghent University, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy

Examination committee

Prof. Dr. Geert De Soete (chairman)
Ghent University, Dean of the faculty Psychology and Educational Sciences

Prof. Dr. Lieve Bradt
Ghent University, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy

Prof. Dr. Sarah De Pauw
Ghent University, Department of Special Needs Education

Prof. Dr. Peter Raeymaeckers
University of Antwerp, Centre on Inequalities, Poverty, Social Exclusion and the City

Prof. Dr. Wim Van Lancker
KU Leuven, Centre for Sociological Research

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Table of contents

CHAPTER 1 **15**
Introduction **15**

1.1 Introduction 17
1.1.1 The INCh-project 17
1.2 Building blocks 18
1.2.1 Inter-organisational networking 18
1.2.2 Combating child poverty 22
1.2.3 Dealing with personal information in local networks 24
1.3 Research problem and research questions 25
1.3.1 Effectiveness and efficiency 26
1.3.2 Discovering meaning-making and quality 26
1.4 Research context 28
1.4.1 Social and political context for developing local networks combating (child) poverty 28
1.4.2 Selection of cases 30
1.4.3 Description of the cases 31
1.4.4 Use of the cases 36
1.5 Strategies of data collection and data analysis 36
1.5.1 The local policy level 36
1.5.2 The social services level 37
1.5.3 The level of families in poverty situations 39
1.5.4 Performed interviews and observations 39
1.5.5 Qualitative content analysis 40
1.5.6 Ethical considerations 42
1.6 Content 42
1.6.1 Chapter 2 42
1.6.2 Chapter 3 43
1.6.3 Chapter 4 43
1.6.4 Chapter 5 44
1.6.5 Chapter 6 44
1.7 References 44

CHAPTER 2 **53**
Inter-organisational networks and the tricky question of network effectiveness **53**

2.1 Introduction 57
2.2 Different interpretations of effectiveness in inter-organisational networks 58
2.3 Research methodology 60
2.3.1 Research context 60

2.3.2 Data collection strategies 61
2.3.3 Strategies of data analysis 61
2.4 Research findings 63
2.4.1 Universal versus selective provision 63
2.4.2 Instrumental versus life world oriented approaches 65
2.4.3 Family-oriented versus child-oriented strategies 66
2.5 Concluding reflections 68
2.6 References 70

CHAPTER 3 77
Complexities in the exchange of private information: between care and control 77

3.1 Introduction 81
3.2 Inter-organisational networking and the integration of services: a need for sharing information and documentation 83
3.2.1 Practices of documentation and sharing information: creating a panoptic eye? 84
3.2.2 Practices of documentation and information sharing: creating supportive features in child and family social work? 85
3.3 Methodology 85
3.3.1 Research context 85
3.3.2 Data collection strategies 86
3.3.3 Strategies of data analysis 86
3.4 Research findings 87
3.4.1 Craving control and handling uncertainty 87
3.4.2 Using and misusing private information and trust 88
3.4.3 Constructing families as subjects and objects of intervention 90
3.4.4 Including and excluding families in poverty 92
3.5 Concluding reflections 93
3.6 References 95

CHAPTER 4 101
Complexities in the exchange of private information: between regulation and discretion 101

4.1 Introduction 105
4.2 Between regulation and discretion 106
4.2.1 The need for regulation 106
4.2.2 The need for discretion in street-level practices 107
4.3 Methodology 109
4.3.1 Research context 109
4.3.2 Data collection strategies 109
4.3.3 Strategies of data analysis 110

4.4 Research findings 110
4.4.1 Legitimacy to act 110
4.4.2 Deserving versus undeserving families 113
4.4.3 From individual to collective action 115
4.5 Concluding reflections 116
4.6 References 118

CHAPTER 5 125
Qualitative features of inter-organisational networks: perspectives of social workers and families 125

5.1 Introduction 129
5.2 Qualitative features in networks: accessibility, usefulness and availability 130
5.2.1 Accessibility 131
5.2.2 Usefulness 131
5.2.3 Availability 132
5.3 Methodology 132
5.3.1 Research context 132
5.3.2 Research methods 133
5.3.3 Research analysis 133
5.4 Research findings 134
5.4.1 Accessibility 134
5.4.2 Usefulness 136
5.4.3 Availability 138
5.5 Concluding reflections 141
5.6 References 142

CHAPTER 6 149
Concluding reflections 149

6.1 Introduction 151
6.2 The role of social work 151
6.2.1 Searching for social justice and human dignity 151
6.2.2 Realising social rights 152
6.2.3 Combating (child) poverty at the local level 154
6.3 The network as a reflection tool 156
6.3.1 The need for a democratic approach 158
6.4 Sharing and protecting private information with care 159
6.4.1 An ethical practice 159
6.4.2 Affordability and comprehensibility of support: respecting privacy and transparency 160
6.5 Bottom-up and top-down processes in networks combating (child) poverty 162

6.6 Policy recommendations 165
6.6.1 Macro level 165
6.6.2 Meso level 166
6.6.3 Micro level 167
6.7 The position of the researcher 169
6.8 Limitations and strategies for further research 170
6.9 References 172

Summary 179

Nederlandstalige samenvatting 201

Data Storage Fact Sheets 223

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Firstly, we situate the context of this dissertation and present the research project where this study was part of. Next, we explain the broader theoretical framework and key concepts that fulfill a central role in this study: inter-organisational networking, combating child poverty and the sharing and protection of private information. These building blocks then lead to a problem statement and two central research questions.

Theoretical references in the academic field of social work as an academic discipline and a practice have shaped our research perspective. They were determining for the ways we approached and studied the research subjects. In the concluding chapter, we more extensively elaborate on the impact of our findings on the meaning and role of social work practice and research.

1.1.1 The INCh-project

This study is part of the Integrated Networks to combat Child poverty (INCh-) project. This project was developed together with the University of Antwerp (Peter Raeymaeckers, Danielle Dierckx, Caroline Vermeiren & Charlotte Noël) and the University of Liège (Laurent Nisen & Nicolas Jacquet). Beginning in 2014, we engaged in a four-year study about local networks that aim to combat child poverty. At the start, we selected a pool of 20 cases across Belgium. Nine of them are situated in Flanders, three in Brussels, and eight in Wallonia. The INCh-project is funded by Belspo (Federaal Wetenschapsbeleid). The steering committee of the project, which included important stakeholders from the field, and the consortium between the research partners, provided a timely and critical consultation and evaluation of the development and progression of the research project.

The INCh-project consists of two major studies. A first study, that is conducted by the Universities of Antwerp and Liège concerns the governance of the 20 selected networks and the role of the coordinator, according to the typology of Span, Luijkx, Schalk and Schols (2012) and Span, Luijkx, Schols and Schalk (2012). This typology distinguishes three types of coordinating roles on a continuum ranging from top-down to bottom-up governance: the commissioner, the co-producer, and the facilitator.

This PhD research project is part of the second study from the INCh-project, that was conducted by the Universities of Ghent and Liège, and focusses on qualitative in-depth research on five local networks combating child poverty (three in Flanders - the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium - and two in Walloon - the French-speaking part of Belgium). Through this qualitative approach we wished to gain an in-depth insight into the perspectives, experiences, and meaning-making of local policy makers, social workers, and families in poverty. This part of the project focused on the interplay and diversity between the different network levels and the perspectives of network actors and participants in the networks. To examine the different levels of the local inter-organisational networks, a combination of different strategies and methods of data collection was used. The collaboration between the three universities was useful to integrate and compare research findings across diverse networks and work packages.

1.2 Building blocks

We sketch three major theoretical building blocks of this dissertation. A first represents the theme of inter-organisational networking in the field of social work practices. These inter-organisational networks form an important policy instrument in the combat against (child) poverty which represents the second theme. Therefore we also discuss how (child) poverty could be conceptualised and how strategies could be formed to combat it. The third theme discusses the exchange of private information in inter-organisational networks. This issue illustrates the complex functioning of networking when partners work together more intensively and how it affects the support that is offered to families (in poverty).

1.2.1 Inter-organisational networking

We studied local inter-organisational networks that are created to better organise and coordinate welfare provision. We define a network as a structure “consisting of three or more organisations that consciously agree to coordinate and collaborate with one another, used to deliver services, address problems and opportunities, transmit information, innovate, and acquire needed resources” (Kenis & Provan, 2009, p. 440). The construction of inter-organisational networks served as an important strategy to counter the fragmentation of services, which is one of the main challenges of striving for high-quality of social provision (Allen,

2003; De Corte, Verschuere, Roets & De Bie, 2017; Frost, 2005; Provan & Sebastian, 1998). Several dimensions mark this fragmentation:

- **Sectorial** segregation: Services often specialise in one single area (education, parent support, child care, financial problems, housing, etc.); yet families do not necessarily perceive these areas as separate 'needs', particularly in case involving families living in poverty. Although specialist services can add to the quality of provision, it must be acknowledged that needs related to health, housing, and employment, for example, are interlinked (Broadhead, Meleady, & Delgado, 2008; Lister, 2004).

- **Age** segregation: Needs and concerns of adults are sometimes considered as separate and different from children's needs and rights, resulting in separately designed services which reinforces sectoral segregation.

- **Subgroup or target group** segregation: This results in the creation of services that address specific subgroups, such as single mothers, migrants, families in poverty, or families with a special-needs child (see Mkandawire, 2005) and assumes that certain demographic characteristics correspond with certain needs.

- **Policy** segregation: Services can be governed at local, regional and state levels, making cooperation between services that are governed on different levels a real challenge (Statham, 2011).

- **Organisational** segregation: In some regions, services are separated into government-led provision, NGO's, and voluntary or community-led services; thus integration may mean collaboration between private and public partners (OECD, 2001).

Internationally, there exists a consensus that the integration of social services has the potential to function as an instrument that counters fragmentation and is more responsive to the needs of vulnerable families (OECD, 2015).

The movement towards networking and integration is conceptualised by different terms that are interchangeably used but may refer to different kinds of organisational configurations and methods of working together with different social welfare actors (Frost, 2005; Nolan & Nuttall, 2013; Oliver, Mooney & Statham, 2010; Roets, Roose, Schiettecat & Vandenbroeck, 2016; Rose, 2011).

Several authors have tried to unravel and define the different terms, such as partnership working (Asthana, Richardson, & Halliday, 2002), joined-up working (Warin, 2007), multi-agency working (Atkinson, Jones, & Lamont, 2007), interagency working (Statham, 2011), integrated working (Oliver, Mooney & Statham, 2010; see Nolan & Nuttall, 2013, Messenger, 2012; Statham, 2011). In this sense, Frost (2005) made a useful distinction by suggesting that the collaboration of services can be placed on a continuum, thus bearing different dimensions and levels of intensity. In this dissertation, the more general term 'inter-organisational networking' was used which allowed to cover the diverse forms of networking and collaboration that we saw emerging in the field, across the three networks of this study. Additionally, it is important to mention that in this study, the inter-organisational networks are all located on the local (municipal) level. The local level is particularly pertinent in relation to the argument of Provan & Milward (2001), who assert that "networks must be evaluated as service delivery vehicles that provide value to local communities in ways that could not have been achieved through the uncoordinated provision of services by fragmented and autonomous agencies" (p. 416). In Western and Northern Europe we find examples of integrated working that are established on the local level for families with (young) children: Family Houses in the Nordic (Scandinavian) countries (Abrahamson, Bing & Lofstrom, 2009; Kekkonen, Montonen & Viitala, 2012); Sure Start, Children's centres and Early Excellence centres in England, Réseaux d'écoute, d'appui et d'accompagnement des parents in France, Familienzentren in Germany, Huizen van het Kind en netwerken kinderarmoedebestrijding in the Flemish region of Belgium. In policy and practice, we found different developments in this trend towards integrated working according to more universal or targeted approaches in provision for families (in poverty). In regions with a standing tradition of universal services (the Scandinavian countries for instance, but also Belgium and the Netherlands), the integration will more often be guided by the concern for seedless transitions and services by existing provision (often with proportionate universalism as a guiding principle) and enhancing service quality by joining knowledge and experience. In regions with a tradition of targeted services or with a shortage of universally accessible early-years provision, attention is being directed to newly created integrated centres (such as Sure Start in England). There the integration seems to be more often driven by critical events that shape the political will for an area-based approach, not necessarily targeting poor families but often geographically located in poorer areas (Attree, 2004; Broadhead, Melaedy & Delgado, 2008; Whalley, 2007).

Despite the general tendency to integrate services, the rationales for this evolution may significantly differ from one country to another, leading inevitably to different understandings of what integration may mean (and to whom it may mean something to) as well as to different forms the integration may take. In sketching the main rationales, it should be noticed that integration of services does not necessarily mean that all these goals are met in daily practice. The socio-political drivers and rationales towards integrated working include:

- Reducing the complexity in governance and improving it by increased coordination of action (Hood, 2014; OECD, 2001).
- Assumptions that collaboration and integration of services will not generate extra costs but will increase economic efficiency through saving overhead costs, for example (OECD, 2001).
- Improving the effectiveness of services by stimulating the use of measures that correspond to shared priorities; helping to adapt programmes to local needs and contexts; creating synergies between governmental and local initiatives that can enhance their mutual impact (OECD, 2001).

Several other drivers could be distinguished that specifically look for the improvement of public services in order to provide better support for families:

- Improvement of the communication and coordination to create seamless and continuous support by partner organisations (Allen, 2003; Anthony, King & Austin, 2011; Messenger, 2012; Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2012; Statham, 2011), thereby aiming at closing the gaps and avoiding overlaps in social provision for families (Kekkonen, Montonen, & Viitala, 2012; McKeown, Haase, & Pratschke, 2014; Moore & Fry, 2011).
- Contributing to service quality by sharing the knowledge and expertise of different partners (Oliver, Mooney, & Statham, 2010; Rochford, Doherty, & Owens, 2014)
- Being responsive to the increased complexity of families' needs, communities and social problems that confront society (Moore & Fry, 2011).
- Promoting and safeguarding the wellbeing of children (Spratt & Callan, 2004).
- Increasing the accessibility for (heard-to-reach) families (Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2012) and therefore trying to stimulate parental involvement (Whalley, 2007).

- Possible strengthening of partnerships and building of stronger communities at the local level (Moore & Fry, 2011; Whalley, 2007).
- Inter-organisational networks that may help to support key life transitions, such as the transition from child care to primary school (Rochford, Doherty & Owens, 2014).

There are different approaches to the functioning and meaning of integrated working and collaboration between services presented in the scholarly literature in this field. We return to this issue when we present the state of the art of existing research, that inspired the formulation of the research problem and questions.

1.2.2 Combating child poverty

Social work practices and network interventions need to be responsive and reflexive in their (collective) provision of support for families in poverty. Since poverty is considered a violation of human rights, child poverty should also be approached as a normative social and political issue which is important to be aware of when researching it (Roets, Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2013). Social workers should also discuss the values and dilemmas in their responses to complex and wicked problems (Roets et al., 2016). By consequence, the choices that are made and the interventions that are developed by the network's coordinator and partners are never neutral and cannot be disconnected from the families (in poverty) they wish to serve. Therefore, we argued that the functioning of the networks and collaboration of different welfare actors should always be connected to the meaning-making of the actors involved and reasons why partners collaborate (in this case, combating child poverty). In this dissertation, we did not use a specific definition of child poverty, but indicated how we frame, approach, and account for it (Mestrum, 2011). As this is qualitative research, we did not aim to measure child poverty but needed to position ourselves against the value-driven concept of (child) poverty that we encountered in the field, in literature and policy, and to offer interpretations. We regard (child) poverty as a social problem and wicked issue, that requires a policy response on many different life domains (De Corte, Verschuere, Roets & De Bie, 2017; Rittel & Webber, 1973). Poverty is a complex and multidimensional problem that is characterised by a combination of lack of material and immaterial resources. Therefore, the welfare of children and the realisation of social rights is always connected to the welfare of the family as a whole, meaning that the needs of parents and children cannot be separated from each other.

Child poverty is a concept that is often referred to in policy (European Commission, 2013) and science (Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2015), but in the following chapters it will be clear that we deliberately put the word 'child' between brackets or refer more generally to 'families in poverty'. We do not wish to isolate the children from their parents, because certain risks might emerge when the concept of child poverty is used. First, it is noticeable that although the social investment state promotes investment in the form of social capital, this is often strategically targeted towards children (in poverty) (Esping-Andersen, 2005; Lister, 2003). Children and childhood are key to any successful investment, because these statuses have the potential to produce financially productive citizens, but also counter unequal opportunities in the labour market and later life. Additionally, due to the rhetoric that lies in the ideas and discourse of the social investment state, social work interventions are constructing the problem of poverty as one where both parents and children need to be activated, educated, and held responsible for it (Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2015; Van Lancker, 2013). But investing in children is seen as an investment in the future and therefore the approach risks detaching children's welfare from that of their parents (Lister, 2006). Therefore, although investing in high-quality child care services and programmes provide positive results, Esping-Andersen (2005) also stated that it is important to minimise the parental impact on those children who are born into unfortunate circumstances. Additionaly, in Belgium, the attention to and labeling of policy and practice has become child-centered, notably shifting from 'poverty' to 'child poverty'. Already, several actors in the field and on a policy level, warned about counterproductive consequences associated with this approach (Vandenbroucke, Vinck & Guio, 2014). For example, this awareness was noticeable when The King Baudouin Foundation commissioned a study on the different negative and positive ways child poverty could be framed when communicating about it and how this influences our envisioning and definition of the problem (Koning Boudewijnstichting, 2017). Similarly, the way in which the problem is defined will also define the interventions that are suggested. The use of child poverty threatens to individualise responsibilities and blame parents for falling short, and it may fail to acknowledge structural dimensions (Schiettecat et al., 2015). In creating a sentimental image of the child being at risk, society might search for an offender, leading to the distrust of parents: "This might happen particularly in the case of those parents who are seen as not fully capable of meeting the needs of their children, such as people in poverty" (Roose et al., 2013, p. 451). We argued that child poverty is a complex social and political problem that is in need of solidarity and social justice (Roets, Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2013).

1.2.3 Dealing with personal information in local networks

In this dissertation, the theme of dealing with private information in local networks serves as an example and illustration to capture the complexity of how practices and interventions may be highly effective from an organisational perspective; conversely, this could be undesirable from a service user perspective. In literature, as well as in social work practice, we noticed that the theme of exchanging information was a highly debated subject within a context of enhanced collaboration. From the beginning of our fieldwork and exploration of the networks, sharing personal information between social workers was always involved in the networks' discussions and practices. Sharing information and documentation is one of the prominent drivers for creating inter-organisational networks (Parton, 2008a; Reamer, 2005). Much attention has been devoted to the improvement of communication, the sharing of information to enhance the continuity of service delivery (Allen, 2003; Anthony et al., 2011; Statham, 2011), and the avoidance of striking gaps and overlaps in service provision for families (McKeown, Haase & Pratschke, 2014; Warin, 2007). Sharing information has the potential to prevent the receipt of conflicting information which often creates frustration on the side of social service providers, and it may also prevent a duplication of their efforts (Provan, 1997). Following this trend, Parton (2008a) described that social workers' activities are increasingly concerned with the gathering, sharing, and monitoring of information about the service users they come in contact with. Two major fields of tension in information sharing practices emerge and intensify in a context where inter-organisational networks are used to combat (child) poverty: a first concerns the tension between care and control, and a second concerns the tension between discretion and regulation.

It is noticeable that Western welfare states have recently expressed much more concern about what causes harm to children, implying a renewed priority given to child and family social work as a source of intervention in supposedly alarming situations such as children living in poverty (Parton, 2008b, 2011). In that vein, these developments might result in a subtle intensification in the power arrangements between social workers and families, coining social work as a possible instrument of surveillance and control (Spratt & Callan, 2004). Thus, rather than protecting children in poverty as supposed 'victims' of the so-called 'bad' education of parents, we argued that poor children are always children of poor parents (Mestrum, 2011). It is noticeable (particularly in the UK) that the pressure to share information primarily derives from a protection logic and implies the need for a higher control of children at risk (Lees, 2017; Thompson,

2013). The integration of social provision and exchange of information was seen as a critical response towards safeguarding children. In the UK, this policy was clearly driven by tragic events in child protection, such as the death of Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly (Broadhead, Meleady & Delgado, 2008; Messenger, 2012). The movement towards integrated working, can be seen as the expression of a genuine concern for the improvement of public services in order to better care for all families, including at-risk families. However, integrated working can also be perceived or implemented in order to enhance control over families, especially over families considered at-risk (Allen, 2003; Jeffs & Smith, 2002; Messenger, 2012). Many professionals are expected to gather and keep information on clients to facilitate the development of multi-agency interventions that engage the full range of their needs (Parton, 2008a). However, making sense of information is complex since the needs of children and families shift over time (Thompson, 2013). Documentation and information-sharing practices may provoke challenges and raise pertinent questions about how the flow of information between services is managed in the formation of a network. Provan (1997) stated that "in more integrated services information is likely to flow more freely" (p. 21). The manner in which information and documentation are shared, and for what purpose, is an important issue to consider particularly when the flux of information can be difficult to control between different network partners. Additionally, ethical questions are raised regarding how social workers are supposed to share information in inter-organisational networks, because this context often lacks ethical and privacy-related legislation (Busch et al., 2013). Although these inter-organisational networks pose challenging questions to practitioners in the field and literature has been critical to these developments towards sharing information and documentation, this was not a clearly debated topic at (diverse) policy levels. The newly created and top-down funded local networks, were not accompanied by new regulations on sharing and protecting private information.

1.3 Research problem and research questions

In the existing body of research, several studies focused on the effectiveness and efficiency of inter-organisational networks and on the quality of social service provision offered by these networks.

1.3.1 Effectiveness and efficiency

One element of the evaluation of integration and networking is the measuring and conceptualising of effectiveness and efficiency in the integration of social services in which outcomes are more broadly defined by policy makers (cost-effectiveness, evidence-based predefined outcomes, reach, etc.). This governance perspective, often to be found in sociological and social policy literature, preferably looks at the system or organisational level. It focuses on how integrated networks are organised or coordinated and analyses interactions between organisations and actors involved in the network. In this approach, network governance is considered as an essential to reinforce the integration and quality of a network. Research in this vein labels the degree of integration and collaboration as a scale on which effectiveness can be expressed, indicating that effective integration will translate in more effective social services (Provan & Milward, 1995; Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2012; Rosenheck et al., 1998). However, in literature and policy, the effectiveness of the collaboration is not always translated to whether these networks are also meanngful for the subject that the network is dealing with, namely, combating (child) poverty and therefore this vein of research needs to be complemented with studies looking at other perspectives, including service users' and social workers'.

The concept of effectiveness searches for a measurable output of social service delivery, but this needs to be complemented by normative questions about the criteria at stake (Kenis & Provan, 2009), as we cannot assume there exists a consensus about it (Roose, 2006). Effectiveness can be evaluated on different levels and by different actors and it should therefore be considered as a multidimensional variable (De Corte, Verschuere & De Bie, 2017; Provan & Kenis, 2008). There may be a tension between effectiveness at the organisational level and at the level of the service user, thus any decision about these criteria is a normative decision (De Corte, Verschuere & De Bie, 2017). For wicked issues, such as (child) poverty, Rittel and Webber (1973) argued that it is difficult to find objectifying criteria to evaluate the possible solution(s). This could be problematic, particularly because there exists a euphoria about these networks, which implies that there is a belief and expectation that inter-organisational networks are always beneficial, yet it is not necessarily clear what 'beneficial' may mean for different stakeholders.

1.3.2 Discovering meaning-making and quality

We argued that the approach focusing on effectiveness and efficiency may be in need of a normative framework that indicates what these networks may mean

for families in poverty and of the social workers that are concerned. Therefore, we adopted a central research focus centered on the meaning and quality of social work practices that are developed in a context of inter-organisational networking that aims to fight the social problem of (child) poverty. The functioning of networks should also be related to a position that is never neutral and is based on socially constructed problem definitions. All the inter-organisational networks share the same goal of combating child poverty, but enjoy much autonomy in shaping the structures, visions, and interventions towards families; thus major differences emerge between the networks. Therefore, an important issue is to explore how these local inter-organisational networks and their interventions are actually implemented, legitimized, and experienced in practice.

As a result, the literature on effectiveness needs to be complemented by studies that look into users' and social workers' meaning-making within these networks (De Corte, Verschuere & De Bie, 2017). It is not clear if families' needs and concerns are better addressed when agencies integrated their activities (Provan, 1997). Therefore, the evaluation of networks in deciding on what 'works', should always be connected to the meaning-making of participating actors, particularly taking into account the perspectives of families in poverty (Gillies, 2005; Walker et al., 2013). We adopted a holistic and in-depth approach wherein different perspectives on local networks and the social work practices they develop, are included. If quality is to be interpreted as the responsiveness of public services to the concerns and questions of families, this means that quality is a concept that is constructed in interacting with families and their children (Mooney & Munton, 1998; Roets et al., 2016). In addition, including the perspectives of families in poverty situations allows us to intervene in and be reflexive about existing assumptions and social constructions (child) poverty (Roets, Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2013).

The debate about quality risks being narrowed down to a question of accessibility of services and brings along the threat of assuming that service users will automatically benefit once a certain offer is created and once they have accessed services. This represents a risk that unresolved problems will be attributed to the responsibility of the individual family, as well as non-use of services. This could then mask problems of inadequate meaning of networks for particular potential service users. Indicating mere pursuit of accessibility can be problematic; the welfare state should develop a differentiated and high-quality supply of social services that is offered to all citizens in a diversity of situations (including situations of poverty and social exclusion) as a leverage to maximise the right to social services (Bouverne-De Bie, 2015; Roose, 2006;

Vandenbroeck, 2013). But despite the current emphasis on inter-organisational networking in provision for families, empirical research from the perspective of service users is still scarce (Atkinson, Jones & Lamont, 2007).

This leads to the following **research questions**:

> (1) How do local actors shape and give meaning to local inter-organisational networks that aim to combat (child) poverty?
>
> (2) How could local inter-organisational networks contribute to the quality of social provision from the perspective of social workers and families in poverty?

1.4 Research context

1.4.1 Social and political context for developing local networks combating (child) poverty

The Flemish or national government launched a project call on local networks combating (child) poverty where municipalities could apply for. It is important to mention that the studied networks received a top-down (financial) incentive to join the efforts in inter-organisational networks. On the Flemish and national governmental level, child poverty represents a policy priority, and this is visible in the growing attention to the formation of inter-organisational networks on the local level (Lieten, 2014). The former Flemish Minister for Poverty Reduction Ingrid Lieten funded the first pilot projects from 2011 to 2013. Afterwards in 2014, a budget of 4.5 million euro was made available to fund 70 projects in Flanders. The projects received a more structural funding from 2014 up until 2019. The means are divided based on the Child Poverty Barometer (Lieten, 2014). This tool is based on a set of seven indicators that reflect the risk of child poverty in a municipality. The indicators focus on children between zero and three years old; risks in domains of income, education and employment; and specific risk groups like single-parent families. The following indicators were used:

> **Indicator 1:** The number of people with a priority regulation in health insurance from zero to four years old compared to the number of citizens from zero to four years old. To avoid fluctuations, an average was used over the last three available years;
> **Indicator 2:** The number of single-parent families with children between zero and three years old compared to the total number of

families with a child between zero and three years old. To avoid fluctuations, an average was used over the last three available years;
Indicator 3: The poverty-index of Kind & Gezin;
Indicator 4: The education-poverty-indicator for early childhood education. To avoid fluctuations, an average was used over the last three available years;
Indicator 5: The number of persons that received a living wage or equivalent, compared to the number of households with children between zero and 17 years old. To avoid fluctuations, an average was used over the last three available years;
Indicator 6: The number of households with children between zero and two years old, where the reference person of the family and partner (if present) are unemployed compared to the total number of families that have children between zero and two years old; and
Indicator 7: The number of households with children between zero and three years old where one or both of the parents do not have an EU-nationality compared to the total number of households with a child between zero and three years old. (Lieten, 2014, p.10, own translation)

To obtain a score on the indicator, municipalities must be situated above the 75th percentile. Municipalities that scored a minimum of four out of seven risk indicators were evaluated as eligible for project funding.

On the national level, the former secretary of state for poverty reduction Maggie De Block allocated two million euro to break the cycle of child poverty, starting at the local level. She aimed to create local consultation platforms for social welfare actors to prevent and detect child poverty. The project proposal was called ‘Children First’ and is directed towards the Public Centres of Social Welfare (OCMW’s) in Belgium. In 2014, 57 projects were funded (POD Maatschappelijke Integratie, 2015). The year after, when Elke Sleurs was the secretary of state for poverty reduction, 1 million euro was provided to continue the projects upon submitting a new request for funding (Sleurs, 2015).

These policies led to a top-down focus on the local level of policies that aims to combat (child) poverty. Local governments together with social organisations are expected to take a leading and directing role in creating these local networks that aim to combat child poverty. Local actors have much autonomy in how these project means should be used.

1.4.2 Selection of cases

In a multiple case study (Stewart, 2012), we analysed the developments and perspectives of local actors and families with young children in three municipalities. Neuman (2011) stated: “Case study research is an in-depth examination of an extensive amount of information about very few units or cases for one period or across multiple periods of time” (p. 42). By using a purposeful sampling strategy, information-rich cases were selected to study in-depth (Patton, 2002). These cases offered an opportunity to learn much about issues that are of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry (Stake, 1994). The study of information-rich cases produced insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalisations (Patton, 2002). The multiple case study also helped to understand and explain the differences and similarities between cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2008). The selected cases for this dissertation were part of a broader pool of local networks that were selected for the INCh-project. The selection of cases was based on several motivations. First, they had to fit the inclusion criteria that were determined for the research project. Within these similarities we also looked for diversity between the cases and added extra criteria for the cases that were included in the second work package. The three cases were selected in the second half of 2014.

For the INCh-project, we developed the following inclusion criteria:

- The OCMW had to be one of the partners in the network, with the purpose to include networks that combine material and immaterial support.
- The network and its organisations must have worked with families with children in poverty, but not exclusively.
- The network had to consist of autonomous organisations that were different but with complementary functions, rather than an integration of these different functions in one single organisation.
- The child poverty rate per municipality or community had to be higher than the average rate, according to the Child Poverty Barometer [kinderarmoedebarometer] or an equivalent measurement.

In addition to the inclusion criteria, it was important to create a diverse sample of networks. Therefore, the following diversity criteria were also determined:

- Network location: in an urban or rural area, including networks in neighbourhoods within cities or networks spread over several communities;
- Size (number of organisations in the network);
- Historical embedding (instead of age of the network): the extent to which the different partners had a history of working together; and
- Sectoral diversity: the networks could focus on a certain domain (for example, health and education), as long as the majority of different networks focused on a range of domains.

In total, 20 cases were selected for the INCh-project. From that pool of 20 cases, five were selected to study in depth in the second work package. To select these cases from this sample, three additional criteria were created:

- Interesting practices and interventions that are developed in the network;
- Local actors who are willing to collaborate in a more intensive study (open to participative observation, interviews, and providing help in the form of contacting families and partners); and
- Network partners who intervene with a purpose to offer support for families, which enabled us to ask parents in poverty how they experience the actions taken by from the network.

It is challenging or even impossible to fully isolate the functioning of the network from the functioning of its individual member organisations. In this study we focused on the specific actions and interventions of the network as a whole while taking into account the 'regular' functioning of individual organisations.

1.4.3 Description of the cases

Network A

In this municipality, the policy on poverty reduction was mainly directed by the Public Centre of Social Welfare (OCMW). The policy documents of the municipality mentioned this subject less. The OCMW received funds for two projects: one from the call of the former Flemish minister of poverty reduction I. Lieten for the period of 2014 to 2019 and one from the call of the former secretary of state M. De Block for the period of 2014 to 2015. It was clear that the coordination and development of the project lies in the hands of the OCMW:

> Due to the existing dynamic on combating child poverty, in this project the OCMW will take on a directing role for the development, the

> implementation and evaluation of actions as well as for the coordination of the local network combating child poverty (Project Proposal for project I. Lieten Network A, 2014, p. 8).

For both projects, a financial top-down incentive was given to start a collaboration. It was not clear if and how the municipality would also financially support specific actions for reducing (child) poverty. In 2014, there were 438 births in the municipality with 9.60% percent births in disadvantaged families. This is higher than the level of the province, which was 6.40% (Kind & Gezin, 2014). In both the community as the OCMW, it was apparent that there existed a major priority on creating more child care and to make this service more accessible for vulnerable families. Also, increasing work opportunities and enlarging the availability of social housing were prior goals of the OCMW, which are also structural dimensions in combating (child) poverty. It is also important to mention in this description of the local context that the OCMW and the municipality together provided a contact point in the community that answered questions concerning welfare in a broad way for all citizens.

As already mentioned, this municipality received funds for two different projects. Because there was a clear difference between the two projects in actions, goals, members, and timing, we decided to focus on one project instead of both. We chose to select the project that fitted the selection criteria best, as mentioned earlier. The chose project was the one funded by I. Lieten (2014-2019). This network was built around individual support trajectories for families in poverty who had at least one child between zero and three years old. In addition, the network also organised monthly meetings with parents. To start the trajectory, the needs of the participating families were examined. Also a mini-rights research was also used to check whether parents and children received all the rights and benefits they were entitled to on many different life domains (e.g. housing, employment, leisure time, education, income, and mobility). The project also emphasised combining material and immaterial resources to combat (child) poverty. The partners were OCMW, Kind & Gezin, CKG, and CAW. In addition, a family support worker was employed to coordinate the individual support trajectories. The network had an interesting construction and dynamic, because it operated at different levels. On a micro (family) level, the network partners had case discussions on individual families and situations that dealt with making decisions, dividing tasks, and evaluating support and goals. On the level of the steering committee, the different organisations were all represented, but decisions were made for the network as a whole. The project itself focused on a broader target group than OCMW clients. It was targeted at reaching families in

the community that faced difficulties in multiple life domains and it even served as a condition for families to participate in the local network. As a framework for the support that was offered, the realisation of social rights was mentioned as an explicit goal and responsibility of the project.

Network B

Based on the environmental analysis of local policy documents from 2014, we offered an idea of the context wherein this network was developed. This small municipality was located in a rural area, although it also had to deal with features and problems that were found in larger cities, such as a high number of ethnic minorities, high unemployment, low average income, high residential density, and so on. This made it an interesting context to look at, because the number of local actors as well as the budget was more limited compared to larger cities, facing similar phenomena as these larger cities. In the environmental analysis, it was stated that one of the possible explanations for the average income being low in the municipality, was the very poor representation of women in the labour market. More specifically related to the network combating child poverty were the number of births in disadvantaged families. When we selected the municipality in 2014, the number of births in disadvantaged families (in relation to the total number of births) was 20.5%, while the average for the whole province was 11.3% (Kind & Gezin, 2014).

Several projects were launched in the municipality. Next to the funds received by former Flemish Minister of Poverty Reduction I. Lieten that lead to the development of a local network fighting child poverty (2014-2019), a two-year project named VOS [Vlaams Overleg Straathoekwerk] funded by the National Lottery also supported the establishment of the network (2014-2016). They additionally received a third fund for the development of a 'House of the Child' that focused on the provision of parenting support. The latter initiative was led by the Ministry of Welfare, Public Health, and Family in Flanders. The clustering of these projects created an interesting dynamic to examine, not only between different actors involved in the field, but more importantly, also between social services and families in poverty. The construction of the network also showed an interesting balance or tension between the focus on combating child poverty and providing parenting support. The three projects merged into one network that gathered all partners.

Project funds were primarily used to pay for staff and coordinate the network. The local municipality controlled the financial resources and also took on an explicit directing role in developing the local network. However, the municipality

decided at the beginning of the project to hire an external consultant to help them launch the network in the municipality in a more sustainable and rooted way:

> The formation of the network should be handled with care, because this should form the basis of a renewed and reinforced working. Hence, there is chosen to appoint an external expert who next to her expertise, may also guarantee a neutrality which may allow that the partners could express their expectations freely. (Project Proposal for project I. Lieten Network B, 2014, p. 21).

The consultant was designated to explore potential partners and to formulate a strategy to develop and support the network. None of the policy documents or project proposals includes an explicit definition or vision to combat (child) poverty, although the term was often mentioned. However, the development of a vision forms an important goal of the networks.

Due to the three projects, the network itself was thematically centred around combating (child) poverty and preventive parenting support. By creating a 'House of the Child', the network aims to provide a physical meeting place and contact point for families with children in the municipality. The network consists of a large amount of network partners (at the start 60 individual members) from sectors such as education, (preventive) parenting support, leisure time, health care and welfare. The supply is founded on the three main pillars of the House of the Child: (a) preventative parenting support, (b) educational support and (c) stimulating social cohesion and opportunities to meet. Network interventions such as play and meeting moments for parents and children, information moments, consultations, and trajectories for pregnant woman are offered to all families in the municipality.

Network C

The OCMW [Public Centre of Social Welfare] takes on a directing role regarding the local policy on (child) poverty and coordinates the project funds. With 3,319 births in 2014, on average 21.6% children were born into a disadvantaged family (Kind & Gezin, 2014). The local policy actors described combating (child) poverty as a wide-spread and complex challenge and mentioned the need for a shared and integrated approach. The choice was made to create a plan that clusters actions from diverse organisations and sectors wherein the OCMW simultaneously takes on the role of actor and director. This plan was mentioned as a powerful joint strategy to take action and adjust priorities regarding the fight against (child) poverty, such as a maximal application of the lowest rate in child

care and starting from a proactive rights-based approach. In addition, they aim to diminish the negative effects of poverty and enhance the wellbeing of parents and children. In the general strategy to combat child poverty, a combination of different life domains (income, housing, work and activation, learning, social relations and leisure time, and physical and mental wellbeing) forms the guidelines for goals and actions. In addition, it is a clear ambition to break the cycle of poverty, with a special focus on child poverty. This large municipality collaborates with many different partners and also uses a part of the budget to support local organisations and initiatives that may help realise the goals of the OCMW in the fight against (child) poverty. Therefore, a local project call was developed. Overall, a framework of children's rights was used to emphasise the attention for children, next to a more broad poverty-reducing strategy. Children's right to care, education, leisure time, family, and participation are highlighted in the policy plan.

In this research, we focused on the project 'Kinderen Eerst' [Children First] that was funded by the federal government, although the public centre of social welfare (OCMW) additionally supported the network financially by hiring an extra employee. Network C represents a project wherein actors from education and welfare worked together closely in the school context. At the beginning, the project was mainly organised in schools that had a vulnerable school population (high rate of poor families). The project started because teachers and caretakers at school fielded many complex questions from parents and children in poverty, which addressed issues that were broader than an educational context. Problems like homelessness, administration, jurisdiction, work-related problems, and debts confronted the school staff with questions that were difficult to manage from the position they were in. A general goal of the project was to detect and counter (structural) problems of families together with barriers that make social services inaccessible. By making these problems and barriers transparent, they could be subjected to (local) changes. Thus, in this project a welfare actor of the public centre for social welfare (OCMW), reaches out to the school and is present to support the school actors with these complex welfare problems they are confronted with. In this way, they tried to bridge the educational sector to the welfare sector by utilising the trust that parents have in the school staff. Because of this project, material questions are more often dealt with when these problems are discovered at school. The coordination of the project was mainly done by the OCMW, but the steering group was represented by the 'Huis van het Kind'. In this steering group, also three local policy makers were included from the education, welfare, and poverty reduction fields. In sum, the project aimed to

strengthen the link between education and welfare on different levels with the goal to combat (child) poverty.

1.4.4 Use of the cases

The three cases are used in varying ways throughout the chapters of this dissertation, depending on the research question that the different chapters focus on. On the one hand, these cases/networks were used an as important context factor to clarify emerging discussions and findings. On the other hand, they formed an important part of the findings when we confronted the networks with each other. Particularly in the chapters (3 & 4) about the sharing of private information, the individual practices and perspectives of social workers within the networks stood central, although the network interventions formed an important context factor. In the other chapters (2 & 5), the networks' functioning and construction fulfilled a central place in our findings. It was not our purpose to make a systematic comparison between the networks, but our aim was to relate them to each other to learn from the transfer of insights from one network to the other. In part 6 (Content) of this introductory chapter we explain in more depth what data were used in which chapters.

1.5 Strategies of data collection and data analysis

In this study we used different methods of data collection that can be broken down into three different levels: the policy level, social work level, and service user level. Creating interactions between the results of the research questions allowed us to confront the perspectives of social workers and policy makers with the perspectives of families in poverty and attempted to capture the dynamics between the researched levels. Below, we explained our approaches and methods to gather and analyse our data. By bringing together and triangulate multiple perspectives from several cases, a better and deeper understanding of the research subject was pursued (Patton, 2002).

1.5.1 The local policy level

The data collection that is performed on this level was mainly used to get more background information on the local and social policy context where the network was situated in. We used a document analysis and qualitative interviews with local policy makers to gather our data. Researching the local policy level could also contribute to a better understanding of the specific experiences of social workers participating in the network and experiences of parents.

Document analysis

From the start of the research we collected local policy documents regarding networking and integration of services in the fight against (child) poverty. These documents included local policy papers (of the municipality and the Public Centre of Social Welfare), project proposals, and vision statements of sectors and departments concerned, to name of few. We looked at the way how (child) poverty was conceptualised and how it was approached by policy measures and on what domains. The document analysis (Bowen, 2009) was mainly used to explore and familiarise ourselves with the local political situation of each municipality to have a better understanding of the context local networks are embedded in. It mainly served as background information and as an aid to construct our interview guide.

Semi-structured interviews

We used qualitative semi-structured interviews to question how local policy makers and their administrative and coordinating staff deal with the problem of (child) poverty. Within a framework of guiding questions and topics, the questions could differ according to the specific participant and context (Yin, 2008). The interviews were planned with key local social policy makers while using a snowball sampling strategy (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). We aimed to discover their conceptualisations and personal visions on (child) poverty and how this could be tackled in their municipality (from their position). Also, the vision on collaboration between local partners and the integration of social services was discussed during the interviews as well as the role and responsibility of the local policy level, the place (participation) of the service users and citizens in the development of the public policies, and questions concerning specific context and actions of the local network.

1.5.2 The social services level

On this level, we wanted to gain a better insight into networks functioning and how social workers experience this and reflect on this. By making use of qualitative interviews, there was more potential in capturing the complexity of perspectives held by participating actors (Yin, 2008). In addition, we made use of participative observation during network activities and meetings.

Participant observation

In this study, we considered participant observation of the research phenomenon as an appropriate research method to obtain a thick description of field experiences (Patton, 2002). Participant observation is a research method that

has its roots in ethnography (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Spradley, 1980). Therefore, the researcher participated in network meetings and activities in order to fully understand the complexities of this certain situation and phenomenon. This direct observation includes several advantages, such as being able to better understand and capture the context wherein people interact, personal contact with people in the setting, and moving and seeing beyond selective perceptions and routines of others (Patton, 2002). Accordingly, it allowed the researcher to observe what did not happen or was not discussed during these activities and meetings in the local networks. The participant observation was overt, so the network actors were aware of the researchers' participation and observation. The field notes were anonymous, so no names were used in gathering and analysing the data during the participant observation. These moments of observation included case discussions, large network meetings, meetings between parents, and steering groups. In this way, we gained a more in-depth understanding of the actual functioning, interventions, and dynamics of the network. Moreover, it was possible to notice the group dynamic and discussions that were held between the partners. We started with observing after the selection of the cases and continued during the course of the project. The observations were spread over time which allowed us to see changes and evolutions in the networks. We decided not to make use of audio or video recordings, but field notes were taken during the meetings and activities to be able to reflect on what emerged.

Semi-structured interviews

Next to the participant observation, we performed in-depth interviews with social workers and social welfare actors of the network (Neuman, 2011; Yin, 2008). In the smaller networks we were able to interview partners from all the organisations that were directly involved in the network. In the larger network, this was not possible. To deal with this limitation, we searched for a diverse selection of social workers and tried to recruit partners from different sectors (education, parenting support, integration, material support, civil services, etc.) and attempted to create a mix between volunteers and paid social workers. In getting to know the perspective of the network partners, we aimed to question them about the goals, purposes, and solutions that were formulated and developed by the networks and how they gave meaning to those items. We also questioned their underlying vision and definition of concepts such as poverty and child poverty and experiences in working together with other partners. Lastly, we closely connected to and reflected on the support they (collectively) provided to families in poverty situations.

1.5.3 The level of families in poverty situations

In this part of the study we questioned parents about how they experienced the interventions of the network and if and how they considered this supportive. The insights that we gained on the local policy level and the social services level could help us understand how families in poverty may experience support that networks aim to offer.

Semi-structured interviews

In a broad sense, we looked at how parents experienced these networks and its interventions. We aimed to examine what was supportive and valuable for parents and what worked for them. We also discussed subjects as their experienced needs and concerns, how they initiated contact with one or more of the partners, the kind of support they received, and the use of private information. Again, it was challenging to isolate and see how these were connected to the functioning of the network. It was not easy to get in contact with parents. In network A, the network support worker, who has a close relationship with parents, contacted them and asked if they wanted to participate to the research. The researcher also introduced the study in one of the meetings between parents that was organised by the networks. We strove for a diverse group of parents, that all joined the individual trajectory of the network for longer than one year. In this way, we were able to discover their meaning-making, together with how the contact with the network changed the situation of the family. In network B, the connection between the interventions of the network and the families was less intensive, and so it was also more difficult to invite parents for an interview. In this network, we chose to complement our interviews with parents who participated in the networks, with parents who did not. A reason for this was because some of the partners problematised the reach of the network; therefore, we wanted to discover these parents' needs and contacts with social services in the municipality. In network C, it was difficult to get in touch with parents. The social workers that were closely involved with them asked if they wanted to participate in the research, and only two parents agreed.

1.5.4 Performed interviews and observations

The numbers of interviews and participant observations differed across the three networks. Due to the unique identity of the networks and their functioning, our approach was adapted to the specific context we encountered.

Table 1: Overview interviews and observations

	Network A	**Network B**	**Network C**
Interviews with local policy makers	5	6	5
Participant observation	10	13	18
Interviews with social workers	8 + 1 focus group	8	7
Interviews with parents	11 + 1 focus group	4 + 8 (exploratory)	2

1.5.5 Qualitative content analysis

The data of this study were analysed through qualitative content analysis (Krippendorf, 1980). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) defined qualitative content analysis "as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 1278). This is an approach that increases the researcher's understanding and knowledge of a particular social phenomenon and may provide new insights about it (Krippendorf, 1980). It is argued that for this reason, qualitative content analysis is a good fit for case study research (Kohlbacher, 2006). In general, content analysis is used as a method to make sense of a large volume of qualitative material (textual documents), and it attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings (Patton, 2002, p. 453). Kohlbacher (2006) stated, "Qualitative content analysis takes a holistic and comprehensive approach towards analysing data material and thus achieves to (almost) completely grasp and cover the complexity of the social situations examined and social data material derived from them" (p. 16). This method aims to yield a condensed and broad description of the phenomenon by the use of particular categories (Elo & Kyngas, 2008).

This type of analysis entails the gathering of textual materials and selecting the unit of analysis. Afterwards the data material is read very thoroughly, and after

making sense of the data, an inductive or deductive approach is considered to develop initial categories and codes (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). In Chapter 3, we started from a directive approach. Therein, we linked our research material in connection with previously formulated, theoretically derived aspects of analysis (Mayring, 2000). Categories were then assigned to matching passages in the text (Kohlbacher, 2006; Mayring, 2000). This theoretical framework provides a framework for the categories and concepts used to work towards more empirical evidence (Neuman, 2011). Thus, a directed approach towards content analysis is often used in cases where the researcher wishes to research the data according to a structure of analysis that is based on previous knowledge, but in a new context (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). This is an approach to validate or enrich existing theories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In Chapters 2, 3 and 4 we started from an inductive category development. This approach builds from empirical observations and evidence towards more abstract concepts and theory (Neuman, 2011). Categories are step-by-step derived from the textual material and data that is taken into account (Mayring, 2000). In an inductive or conventional approach to content analysis, open coding is used to create abstraction and to allow categories to flow from the data (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). It is essential to develop the categories as close as possible to the material and to also formulate the categories in terms of the material (Kohlbacher, 2006; Mayring, 2000). Although we started from an more directive or inductive approach, both methods were combined through the analysis.

Qualitative content analysis is a context-sensitive method whereby the same texts (and their meanings, contents, and interpretations) can have several readings according to the specific contexts and research questions that are used (Krippendorf, 1980). It is also no linear process, because it is necessary to go back to the data (Elo & Kyngas, 2008) and examine if the categories are carefully formed and revised in the data analysis process by using feedback loops (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000) to filter out the main point of analysis in an iterative process (Kohlbacher, 2006). In addition, interpretations are supported by the use of quotes from the analysed material (Krippendorf, 1980). Given that different data sources (produced by observations, interviews, and document analysis) were combined, the external consistency and reliability of the study may increase (Huberman & Miles, 1994; Neuman, 2011).

1.5.6 Ethical considerations

In this dissertation, we choose not to disclose the names of the cases. We made this decision to protect the municipalities that participated and also to protect the participants within the networks (Neuman, 2011). During the study we ensured our respondents that their identity and information was confidential and that the data would be used in an anonymous way. It would be problematic if within the municipalities and networks respondents could discover from each other who said what. In this study, for example, we often referred to the function of the network coordinator; it would be too obvious if we would disclosed the network's location. The research proposal was approved by the ethical committee of the faculty. In addition, informed consent was systematically obtained for (the recording of) our interviews (Punch, 1994). Informed consent was not obtained during the participant observation, because the researcher had permission to participate, and the role of the researcher and the purpose of the observations were clear and overt to the participating network actors.

1.6 Content

1.6.1 Chapter 2

In this chapter, we explored the network dynamics that represented processes of inclusion and exclusion of families in inter-organisational networks combating child poverty. Therein, we challenged the technocratic idea that network effectiveness should be evaluated at the level of the network as a whole or on the organisational level, since little attention has been paid to a democratic approach to network effectiveness being evaluated on the level of welfare recipients. This shift in thinking led to our main research focus in this chapter: whether consensus about network strategies, as an indicator of network effectiveness, is desirable in the fight against (child) poverty. In our interviews with social workers and participant observations, we identified three central fields of tension that illustrated the complexity for local welfare actors in and across networks to create consensus on how to develop effective network strategies in dealing with child poverty: (a) selective versus universal provision, (b) instrumental versus life-world oriented approaches, and (c) child- versus family-oriented strategies. Discovering the in- and excluding effects of inter-organisational networks is crucial in a context of combating (child) poverty. This chapter was based on interviews with social workers and participant observations in network A and B, combined with two other networks of the INCh-

project that were not part of this dissertation, as they were analysed by our colleagues from Liège University.

1.6.2 Chapter 3

In this chapter, we elaborated on our research focus of dealing with private information. We questioned and discussed how social workers dealt with private information in the three studied local inter-organisational networks and what this means for the support that is provided for families in poverty situations. Although practices of sharing information and documentation between social work services are encouraged and recommended to create supportive features for parents and children, this development often results in undesirable forms of governmentality. Inter-organisational networking also creates controlling side effects because the exchange of information in networks of child and family services may wield a holistic power over families. Therefore, we used the Foucauldian concepts of the panopticon and pastoral power, which allows us to grapple with the major tension between support and control in the information- and documentation-sharing practices. A critical analysis of our interviews with social workers and participant observations revealed four central fields of tension in which social workers and their organisations must position themselves: (a) craving control and handling uncertainty, (b) using and misusing private information and trust, (c) constructing families as subjects and objects of intervention, and (d) including and excluding families.

1.6.3 Chapter 4

Closely related to the previous chapter, we further built on practices of sharing and protecting private information in network A, B and C. We focused on the discussions and implementation of regulation and discretion in practices for exchanging private information. Thereby both regulation and discretion revealed advantages and disadvantages that seem to compensate for each other. Through qualitative semi-structured interviews in combination with participant observation, we scrutinised the perspectives, strategies, and values of social workers in dealing with private information. Our analysis revealed three major themes: (a) legitimacy to act, (b) deserving versus undeserving families, and (c) from individual to collective action. Therein, we focused on how regulation and discretion in information sharing practices interact with the provision of support to families in poverty situations and affect the fight against (child) poverty.

1.6.4 Chapter 5

In Chapter 5, we described how literature and policy argue that networks serve as a convenient strategy to deal with fragmentation and complex multidimensional problems such as (child) poverty. However, we argued that a critical perspective towards this network euphoria is needed. In this chapter, we researched the (a) accessibility, (b) usefulness and (c) availability of networks as three important features of quality in social provision. Based on the perspective of social workers and families, we examined whether the creation of local networks contributes to the realisation of these quality features. By combining the perspectives of network members and families, an interactional and participative notion of quality is provided on the functioning of the inter-organisational network. The themes were further contextualised with examples from the three local networks that we studied.

1.6.5 Chapter 6

In the final chapter we discussed our general findings and conclusions across the different chapters. We elaborated on what these findings imply for social work practices and research followed by some key policy recommendations. To conclude, the role of the researcher was discussed, together with limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.

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CHAPTER 2

Inter-organisational networks and the tricky question of network effectiveness

ABSTRACT

In the international realm, inter-organisational networking is perceived as a highly relevant process in the creation of more effective ways of working that enable welfare organisations to deal with 'wicked issues'. Our contribution is based on research findings acquired during a qualitative research project in Belgium, in which we explored the network dynamics of four inter-organisational networks that were formed at the local level to combat child poverty as an exemplary 'wicked issue'. We challenge the technocratic idea that network effectiveness should be evaluated at the level of the network as a whole, and/or on the organizational level, since little attention has been paid to a democratic approach to network effectiveness being evaluated on the level of welfare recipients. This shift in thinking leads to our main research focus, referring to the question of whether consensus about network strategies to combat child poverty is a solid indicator of network effectiveness. We identify three central fields of tension that illustrate the complexity for local welfare actors in and across networks to create consensus on how to develop effective network strategies in dealing with child poverty: (1) selective versus universal provision, (2) instrumental versus life-world oriented approaches, and (3) child- versus family-oriented strategies. Our findings show that democratic disagreement in an open field of struggle between networks and network members may be vital in conceptualising network effectiveness, yet requires a normative and rights-oriented frame of reference that is guaranteed by both governmental and local policy makers.

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2.1 Introduction

In the field of social work, a growing interest in the creation of inter-organisational networks recently emerged as a means to organise social service delivery at the lower governmental levels (De Corte, Verschuere & De Bie, 2017; Frost, 2005; Roets, Roose, Schiettecat & Vandenbroeck, 2016). This development is generally perceived as a sustainable solution to the historical fragmentation of welfare services (Allen, 2003; Provan & Sebastian, 1998). As Frost (2005) asserts aptly, a highly specialised division of labor allows professionals to become "more specialist and more expert in their narrow fields" (p. 11). This has led to the creation of separate and categorical policy domains or areas (e.g. housing, welfare, employment, child services) in the provision of welfare services to citizens (Statham, 2011) and to fragmented problem-solving mechanisms and procedures (Hood, 2014). This fragmentation implies that welfare recipients, and especially those citizens who experience problems that are very complex and multi-dimensional in nature, encounter substantial obstacles or thresholds at the supply side of welfare provision, which prevents them from making use of, and benefiting from, the social resources and support provided by high-quality welfare services (Roets et al., 2016). In order to overcome these deficiencies in the fragmented supply of welfare services (Provan, 1997; Allen, 2003; Vandenbroeck & Lazarri, 2014), it is argued that more effective welfare services are enabled by the formation of inter-organisational networks (Weber & Khademian, 2008). Inter-organisational networking is consequently often developed when service providers are confronted with so-called 'wicked issues' (see Rittel & Webber, 1973), "which cut across a diversity of service areas and policy domains and are too complex to be dealt with by single welfare organisations" (De Corte, Verschuere, Roets & De Bie, 2017, p. 527). Inter-organisational networking and collaboration is therefore perceived as a process in which autonomous organisations are required to interact through formal and informal negotiation (Frost, 2005), and to jointly create more effective ways of working that enable them to deal better with the complicated 'wicked issues' that brought them together (Rose, 2011; Thompson & Perry, 2006). Hence, in order to realize a collaborative advantage that could not have been achieved by individual welfare actors and services alone, these organisations attempt to tackle gaps and overlaps in the provision of welfare services while taking into account the complex and wicked problems of citizens (Allen, 2003; Vangen & Huxham, 2013).

In this chapter, we discuss findings acquired from a qualitative research project in which the network dynamics of inter-organisational networks are explored that are formed with the aim of combatting child poverty at the local level in Belgium. Child poverty can be considered as an exemplary case of a so-called 'wicked issue' (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Since families in poverty situations are often confronted with a complex web of material and non-material problems which cut across a wide range of policy domains and service areas (Clarke & Stewart, 1997; Roets et al., 2016), the development of an inter-organisational or joined-up approach within the broad field of welfare services is considered to be a pertinent strategy to avoid these families falling through the cracks of welfare provision (Lister, 2003; Frost, 2005). Since the key element of these developments implies the delivery of "more coordinated and effective services for children, young people and families" (Moran et al., 2007, p. 143), our central aim in this contribution is to broaden the discussion about the tricky issue of network effectiveness.

2.2 Different interpretations of effectiveness in inter-organisational networks

The pursuit of inter-organisational networking is often presented as "a progressive solution that results in a more effective and thus less fallible welfare system" (Frost, 2005, p. 19). In general terms, the question of network effectiveness relates to the ability of networks to formulate and develop effective ways of inter-organisational networking and collaboration to reach their objectives (Vangen & Huxham, 2013). Network effectiveness has predominantly been conceptualised according to traditional performance measures, which mainly evaluate inter-organisational networks with a focus on results and outcomes of the network as a whole, and/or on the organisational level (Mandell & Keast, 2008). At the *level of the network as a whole*, effectiveness is about the ability of the network to survive as an autonomous inter-organisational entity. This relates to the stability of the network, the strength of ties between network members, and the network being able to provide a range of new or modified services to citizens. At *the organisational level*, network effectiveness is therefore about the benefits for each organisation that (voluntarily) invests resources on behalf of a common network objective. This relates to a self-interest to pursue their own agendas, to acquire scarce resources (e.g. funding but also expertise), to reduce costs, or to be recognized as legitimate and reliable partners by others (Provan & Milward, 2001).

In the existing body of research, nevertheless, a diverse range of scholars also assert that both interpretations of network effectiveness (on the level of the network as a whole and on the organisational level) might ignore the fact that, although all network members could provide excellent services on an individual or collective basis, there might still be groups of vulnerable citizens who are left unserved (or who do not have the experience of being supported) by the totality of network members (Provan & Kenis, 2008). They argue that this technocratic approach gives rise to situations of social exclusion, which are at odds with the principles of social justice and social rights that are at the heart of the social work profession (Ife, 2001; Sewpaul & Jones, 2005). These authors argue, therefore, that when considering the results or outcomes of inter-organisational networks with the aim of (re-)organising welfare provision to citizens, and especially to those who are confronted with wicked or multidimensional social problems, network effectiveness can also be primarily assessed at *the client level* (Bardach, 1998; McGuire & Agranoff, 2007; Provan & Kenis 2008; De Corte, Verschuere & De Bie, 2017). This is understood as the contribution that is made, by the totality of network members, to improving the living conditions and realizing the welfare rights of those being served or targeted by the network (Provan & Milward, 1995, 2001; De Corte, Verschuere, Roets & De Bie, 2017).

The fact that inter-organisational networks are expected to provide a surplus value to welfare recipients in ways that could have not been achieved through fragmented and autonomous agencies (Huxham, 2003) therefore reveals a subsequent question about the set of criteria, or the perspective, that is used to assess network effectiveness (Provan & Kenis, 2008). According to technocratic approaches that evaluate network effectiveness on the level of the network as a whole, and/or on the organisational level, an important factor of the evaluation of network effectiveness is the degree of consensus that is seen as a valuable indication/predictor (and precondition) for success between the different network members (Jacobsen, 2013; Benson, 1975).

> To obtain efficient cooperation between autonomous actors and thus results and impact, the actors need to have common subjective perceptions of which domain they are in, what objective they work towards, how they shall realize the objectives and the type and amount of resources they are expected to devote (Jacobsen, 2013, p. 857).

In traditional performance measure approaches, a lack of consensus is indeed presented as a difficulty in trying to help clients that face multiple and complex problems (Raeymaeckers, 2010). However, the shift in thinking about network

effectiveness therefore leads to our main research focus, referring to the question of whether consensus about network strategies to combat child poverty is a solid indicator of network effectiveness. In our study, we consequently examine network dynamics in their attempts to reach this consensus.

2.3 Research methodology

We explored four networks that aim to combat child poverty in four different municipalities in Belgium. Each network has its own unique construction. In order to investigate these networks, two researchers combined qualitative research methodologies for data collection: participant observation during the network meetings and activities; and qualitative interviews with actors of the network to explore the different network dynamics and the underlying assumptions of local welfare actors who were involved in these networks.

2.3.1 Research context

The four networks to combat child poverty are funded either by the regional or by the national governmental department responsible for poverty reduction. Networks A and B are located in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Network A is situated in a suburban municipality close to Brussels. This network consists of five partners that together combine the provision of material and immaterial support (e.g. welfare allowances, employment, parent support). It is targeted towards vulnerable families with a child initially between 0 and 3 years old, and aimed at developing individualized support trajectories for a maximum of three years, coordinated by a case coordinator. Network B is located in a small municipality in Flanders, and involves in total over 60 individual members. This network aims to provide parent support for all families with children in the community. Networks C and D are located in Wallonia, the French-speaking region in Belgium. Network C aims to provide childcare and parenting support for all families with children under three years old, with special attention paid to the creation of affordable and accessible services for families in need. Network D targets youngsters and teenagers, and aims to prevent early school leaving and bullying. It starts from a street-level approach to reduce the distance between service providers and users where the school is seen as a very important actor in the network. All networks operate in areas with higher than average numbers of families in poverty.

2.3.2 Data collection strategies

This multiple case study is ethnographic in nature, as data were primarily collected through participant observation (Spradley, 1980), and two researchers were involved in the relevant settings and activities of the networks (Nandhakumar & Jones, 1997) while relying on the guidance and support of the different members in our research team. In order to fully understand the complexities of situations, we considered participant observation of the research phenomenon as an appropriate research method to offer thick descriptions of field experiences (Patton, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The observations took place during meetings of the network actors. Documenting the discussions in detailed and contextualised ways during these meetings provided insight into the actual functioning, implementation, and value orientation of the networks. The participant observation was spread over a period of two years, which offered us the possibility of noticing changes and dynamics over time. The frequency of the observations was dependent on the frequency of the meetings of the networks. Our analysis is based on 8 moments of observation in Network A, 13 in Network B, 17 in Network C, and 11 in Network D. Each of these meetings took between two and three hours. None of the meetings or informal discussions were audio-recorded, but field notes were systematically taken. For participant observation, is it important to separate observation from interpretation when taking notes (Mack et al., 2005). Participant observation is often used together with other qualitative methods, which was also the case in this study. In so doing, the participant observation provides a context that allows us to understand the data that are collected through other methods (Mack et al., 2005). In addition, we conducted semi-structured interviews with central local network actors, to take into account the actors' perspective on a specific topic (Patton, 2002, p. 341). In Network A, four local network actors were interviewed, in Network B six, in Network C eight, and in Network D nine. The selected actors all have a significant role on the strategic level in shaping and steering the networks and their interventions. The interviews took between one and two hours. The research was approved by the ethical committee of the faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences in Ghent University, and informed consents were negotiated with, and obtained from, the research participants. The data emerging from these interviews were fully transcribed, and the names of all networks and local actors were anonymized.

2.3.3 Strategies of data analysis

We analysed the data through a qualitative content analysis. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) define this as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the

content of text data through the systemic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 1278). Qualitative content analysis takes in a holistic approach to grasp the complexity of what is studied, but at the same time tries to deal with this complexity by gradually reducing it (Kohlbacher, 2006). It is used as a sense-making effort that attempts to systematically analyse and identify core consistencies and meanings in qualitative research material (Patton, 2002). In a first stage of the process of data analysis, a conventional approach to content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was performed to analyse the data of the participant observation of the meetings of the local networks. This was used to describe a phenomenon allowing the categories and names for the categories to flow from the data; "researchers immerse themselves in the data to allow new insights to emerge, also described as inductive category development" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279). This analysis offered the researchers an in-depth understanding of the main categories - in our case, network dynamics and discussions - that emerged during the meetings of the local networks. We could capture these main network dynamics in three central fields of tension that illustrate the complexity for local welfare actors in and across networks to create a shared vision and consensus on how to develop effective network strategies in dealing with child poverty: (1) selective versus universal provision; (2) instrumental versus life-world oriented approaches; and (3) child- versus family-oriented strategies. In a second stage of the process of data analysis, a directed approach to qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was applied to analyse the interviews with social workers and policy makers. A directed approach mainly serves to refine, extend, and enrich existing research insights: "the goal of a directed approach to content analysis is to validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework (…) this has been referred to as deductive category application" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). We were elaborating on the research insights that were acquired during the first stage of data analysis, and applied our frame of reference in relation to the different levels and approaches of network effectiveness to further refine and enrich our research findings (Myring, 2000). This process of data analysis, in which we persistently triangulated different data sources (observations and qualitative interviews), allowed us to validate and cross-check our research findings. The validity and reliability of our research findings was also established through the prolonged engagement of the researchers, peer debriefing, and careful consideration in our research team (Morse et al., 2002).

2.4 Research findings

2.4.1 Universal versus selective provision

This field of tension deals with the discussion about the target group and the question whether the network should serve welfare recipients in universal or selective ways: who benefits and who should benefit? Selectivity refers to the creation of criteria that determine whether welfare recipients have the right to a certain welfare state intervention, and entails a categorisation (division) between those who deserve this and those who do not meet specific conditions that give access to social service provision (Villadsen, 2007; Maeseele, 2012). This strategy, often in conditional ways, aims to direct public resources towards the most disadvantaged to maximize equality (Martin, 2010). A universal approach implies that all families have the right to make use of support that is provided, without conditions (Martin, 2010; Brady & Burroway, 2012). In the different networks, we observed how the network actors try to connect both poles of selective or universal principles and practices. Our cases show that both approaches are used for different strategies and goals that evolve in dynamic ways over time.

For example, Network A starts from a selective approach by targeting families in poverty. In this case, a social worker starts by systematically examining whether the family has been able to make use of all their rights, and this short investigation is structurally implemented at the beginning of each individual trajectory. However, this instrument is only used for a limited number of families (in this case 40), which raises questions about the accessibility of the network. Still, it is effective in reaching poor families and realising their rights on many different life domains. The network also develops a strategy to broaden this selective approach into a universal approach, since signals and problems that were discovered by implementing the examination of rights are dealt with on a broader local policy level. In this way, other members of the local community who are not included directly in the network activities may also benefit from the network. For example, the lack of social housing for larger families was presented to a local council where local housing policies were developed to tackle this problem. The impact of the network, therefore, goes beyond the selective approach where every citizen can potentially benefit from the network activities.

Other examples could be observed in Networks B and C. These networks started from a rather universal approach, that was initially used as a strategy to include

vulnerable parents in the network. Network C's objective was to promote accessibility and affordability for poor families in a newly created childcare facility. Even though this is formulated as an aim, the network stated that they faced difficulties in reaching these families. This finding was perceived as deeply problematic by some of the network actors. In this network, a partner suggested developing a new strategy to overcome this problem, namely using a selective approach instead of a universal approach to fulfill the objectives of the network. Another partner also reflected on this problem and mentioned that in some ways, inequalities in the child care system are reproduced, due to the fact that the facility doesn't reaches the target group which they are supposed to reach from the beginning. This partner therefore seems to suggest that processes of social exclusion are reproduced by the network, due to the non-participation of vulnerable parents. Network members claim that the realisation of welfare rights and redistribution of means becomes problematic. To prevent the exclusion of vulnerable families, the network decides to create an income-related system in their childcare facility to increase the affordability of their services and decrease the threshold for poor families. As they argue: "we have to make sure that stronger families don't oppress the vulnerable ones" (own translation). The network still defends a universal approach as they aim to serve a socially diverse group and avoid stigmatisation.

Network B started from a universalist approach, by creating a 'House of the Child' as a low-threshold provision to enable all families with children to contact all other welfare organisations of the network. Still, the network struggled to reach vulnerable parents, and the network coordinator made this repeatedly explicit during the network meetings. The inequality of use was not only seen as a problem of non-participation, but also as an issue of assigning the means of the network. A partner of the network defended a more targeted approach to tackle child poverty and challenged this universalist approach. This person contested: "Are the funds that are acquired for combating poverty actually used for this group in particular? Or do all the resources and benefits go to families who do not live in poverty?" (own translation). This discussion was also raised in another network meeting, and the principle of proportionality was mentioned to defend the idea that the budget should also benefit the well-being of families in poverty. Nevertheless, the coordinator of the network stated that: "It should not become a House of the 'problem' Child instead of a House of the Child", to underpin the argument that a selective and targeted approach would create a stigmatising label. The selective approach might paradoxically produce an inaccessibility for all families, and more particularly might scare families in poverty.

2.4.2 Instrumental versus life world oriented approaches

In order to develop high quality provision for families by dealing with fragmentation and sectoral segregation (Vandenbroeck, 2013), some authors argue that the wellbeing and concerns of parents and children in poverty situations need to be considered as multidimensional, with reference to providing material as well as immaterial support including issues of health, housing, employment, and education (Lister, 2004; Allen, 2003; Broadhead et al., 2008). The networks in our study made different choices in providing resources to parents and children: some were taking into account the aspirations, life worlds, and concerns of parents and children in poverty situations (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). Others developed welfare services in more instrumental ways, meaning that the outcomes of the interventions were defined beforehand by the social workers, without consulting the families about their definition of problems and solutions (Roose et al., 2013).

In Network A, for example, the needs of each individual family served as the starting point of the trajectory. The support offered was developed on the basis of dialogue and negotiation about the questions and needs of the family. Consequently, on many occasions material as well as immaterial resources were provided, and many different life domains were covered, acknowledging the multi-dimensionality and complexity of the problems of trying to realize welfare rights on several life domains, including housing, childcare, employment, and allowances. Multidimensionality served as a precondition to be included in the network. This may indicate that a more instrumental and conditional approach may be prior to the life world oriented approach.

Another example manifests itself in Network B, which aimed to be a new gateway for families in relaying questions from parents to social work organisations. Additional attention was paid to the inclusion of poor families in newly developed parent support initiatives. Yet, defining the needs of families in instrumental ways (i.e., their need for parent support) may have contributed to their exclusion, as Network B faced difficulties in reaching poor families. For example, the coordinator told the partners that she received 33 questions, mostly from parents who don't live in poverty, that were mainly educational and relational in nature. One could wonder if the instrumental definition of concerns (as primarily educational) created this problem, in cases when poor families did not consider their problem as educational or relational, but as material in nature. Structural

dimensions of combating poverty, like housing and employment, were indeed not included domains of action in Network B.

Network D started from a street corner work approach to reach vulnerable citizens. The importance of outreach was stressed by the partners and coordinator as “it helps our provision to understand the needs of our potential users” (own translation). Even though this was the explicit starting point, according to the coordinator, the strategy changed - due to financial reasons - from a multidimensional approach to a specific mission, life domain, and target group. At present, the interventions are mainly situated in domains of youth and school (to prevent early school leaving and bullying). This resulted in the fact that some of the network partners did not and could not fully commit anymore to deal with other life domains, even when these issues seemed to be vital for the families involved. One partner formulated this as follows: “If we don’t start over the whole process, we cannot be sure that we are not excluding some families according to the fact that we do not engage in a more in-depth analysis of what is at stake” (own translation). The switch to a focus on youth and school also led to a disengagement of partners who did not work in these specific fields, as they were aware that this evolution would exclude people.

2.4.3 Family-oriented versus child-oriented strategies

Eradicating child poverty figured prominently on the social policy agenda. Government strategies accordingly invested in ensuring that policies and services improve children’s lives, and a wide range of welfare practices have consequently been developed. However, poor children are always children of poor parents (Mestrum, 2011; Schiettecat et al., 2016), because the well-being of children is intrinsically affected by the poverty situation and socio-economic circumstances and resources of the households in which children live (Lindquist & Lindquist, 2012). In this sense, realizing children’s rights in poverty situations is always interrelated with a progressive and proactive realization of the welfare rights of their parents (see Ife and Morley 2002). This field of tension influences the rationales, strategies and actions that are directed towards families and children. Even though the wellbeing of the child was the starting point of these networks, different practices were developed within and across the networks in relation to the family as a whole.

In some of our interviews with local policy makers (Networks A and B), a social investment paradigm was present in (child) poverty reduction strategies. Children, in this vein, were considered as potentially worthwhile and beneficial

social investments. This was argued in Network A because of the higher potential of breaking the cycle of poverty if the interventions were targeted towards young children. The problem was framed as a problem of inequality and interventions aimed at closing the gap between the rich and the poor at a young age, to prevent children from falling behind in school and in participation in leisure time activities. The coordinator of this network stated that this may have a bigger return to society and that children will get more experiences to build on. In Network B, a focus on talent development appeared to be one of the drivers to invest in children. One of the welfare actors explained that it was a matter of following the political and scientific discourse in his choice to target young children and even claimed that targeting, for example, a 14-year-old would not make a difference in the effort to break the cycle of poverty. In this way, the needs of older children and also of parents were not taken into account, and so they risked exclusion from the network's focus.

The focus on children may equally well be used as a strategy to include all family members. Some of the network actors in Networks A and B, for example, argued that it is less stigmatizing if the well-being of the child serves as a starting point for interventions. They argue that parents don't have to feel targeted because they are poor. A local welfare actor of Network B argued that the child represents the key to the other family members, because they would be more willing to cooperate with services in general when interventions were concerned with the child. This strategy was used to include all family members. In Network A, having a child aged between 0 and 3 years old was an explicit precondition of being included. While this policy choice directly targets children, the actions taken by the network partners affected the well-being of all family members, because structural dimensions like housing, employment, social support, financial support, etc., impacted on the family as a whole. Policy makers in Network A stated that it was crucial to include the context of the child, because children who grow up in a family in poverty experience fewer chances and increased exclusion in multiple life domains.

In Network C, a change in staff occurred and, as a consequence, the support offered also changed over time. The original aim of the network was to provide a multidimensional approach, including childcare and parent support by pediatric nurses and social workers. After a while, the team evolved and consisted predominantly of pediatric nurses (instead of social workers). The network therefore gradually focused more on childcare than on parent support, even though they received questions from parents that deal with very complex and difficult situations.

2.5 Concluding reflections

Our results show that it was difficult to find consensus on a strategic level within and between networks in relation to the question of which position to take in these three fields of tension. We observed differences in interpretation and operationalisation of the concepts that represent and capture these fields of tension. Although the four local networks all shared the same overall goal and purpose - i.e., combating (child) poverty - major differences appeared in their strategies. Our findings show how their search for a shared vision and consensus alternates with disagreements and that network goals and strategies were regularly challenged, renegotiated, and changed in organic ways over time. A point of discussion and tension in the network meetings appeared repeatedly when network members became aware that their strategies simultaneously seemed to include some families yet exclude others, especially with reference to the question of whether the network activities benefitted the well-being of families in poverty situations (see Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000). On occasions when the existing consensus on a strategic level in networks leads to processes of exclusion, embracing disagreement and dissensus might therefore be vital and significant. As Lubeck (1998) asserts:

> Finding comfort in consensus, may make us too sure that what we know is best for ourselves is also best for others. Uncertainty, by contrast, is unsettling, it makes us wonder, listen and try new things. It opens up the possibility that things can be other than they seem. (p. 290)

These insights, however, also imply that the dominant interpretation of network effectiveness should be approached critically for representing a technocratic approach (see Lister, 2003). A technocratic approach to network effectiveness indeed assumes that 'what matters is what works', which may obscure discussions on what 'working' may mean for welfare recipients or for the social workers who are supposed to 'solve' a problem without having contributed to its definition (Allen, 2003; Frost, 2005; Roose et al., 2013). There might be a tangible risk involved in this technocratic approach, that creates a democratic deficit (Biesta, 2007) "as there is no openness for democratic debate about the ways in which social problems are constructed, by whom, and why" (Vandenbroeck, Roets & Roose, 2012, p. 549). Such an openness for democratic debate requires that the rather implicit assumption, that a strategic consensus between the network members is a condition for network effectiveness, is questioned. This democratic approach is inspired by an attempt to take the plurality of concerns and wishes of both children and parents into

account when the network develops strategies and activities to combat child poverty (Roose et al., 2013). Democratic disagreement and contestation between networks and network members might be equally well considered as vital and meaningful in terms of getting the discussion going about how to develop network strategies to combat child poverty while incorporating the concerns of families that might benefit from the network activities (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009; Roets et al., 2016).

In order for these disagreements to be productive, however, it is necessary that a common frame of reference is adopted, a common ground on which these disagreements can be discussed. This common ground cannot be anything but ethical. De Corte, Verschuere, Roets and De Bie (2017) argued recently that this pursuit of a potential surplus value for welfare recipients "reveals an important question about the normative frame of reference, that guides network actors when they collaborate" (p. 531). As networks inevitably include and exclude families, and this also affects families in poverty, we argue that (local) governments necessarily need to claim a mandate in safeguarding a normative frame of reference that is doing justice to the fight against child poverty. In Belgium, rights-oriented principles have been pivotal in the past. Hence, we argue that it is important for local governments to not just rely upon pragmatic managerial assumptions when developing and implementing social policies. Rather, their role needs to be justified from an ethical point of view. This is because we recognise local governments as the most appropriate (public) agency to reconcile the interests and differing views of those citizens that experience a common environment, and to determine and implement (social) services that affect them (Chandler, 2010). Moreover, we observed recurrent waves of decentralisation in many welfare states with the aim of granting local authorities a greater set of tasks and responsibilities for realising the social rights of citizens (De Vries, 2000). Nevertheless, we acknowledge the danger that such decentralisation towards the local level might equally undermine the equal treatment of citizens that live in different municipalities (Martin & Guarneros-Meza, 2013). According to a rights-based approach, "poverty "inhibits" the realisation of rights and it violates human dignity" (Dean, 2015, p. 141), yet "brings the symbolic and mobilising potential of rights discourse directly to bear on the issue of poverty" (Dean, 2015, p. 141). By consequence, the government could also be held co-responsible and accountable for the support of welfare recipients by the network of local child and family services. This reminds us that we could question the dominant 'network euphoria' (Kenis & Provan, 2009) wherein the creation of a network is, by definition, considered as a good thing that will inevitably produce more favorable outcomes for citizens as well as for

those organisations that are participating in the network (Frost, 2005; De Corte, Verschuere & De Bie, 2017).

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CHAPTER 3

Complexities in the exchange of private information: between care and control

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we discuss how the flow of private information about children and families in poverty situations is managed in inter-organisational networks that aim to combat child poverty. Although practices for sharing information and documentation between child and family social work services are highly encouraged and recommended to create supportive features for parents and children, this development often results in undesirable forms of governmentality. Inter-organisational networking also creates controlling side-effects because the exchange of information in networks of child and family services may wield a holistic power over families. We theorise this issue by using the Foucauldian concepts of the panopticon and pastoral power, which allows us to grapple with the major tension between support and control in the information and documentation sharing practices of social workers. A critical analysis of our empirical data reveals four central fields of tension in which social workers and their organisations must position themselves: (1) craving control and handling uncertainty; (2) using and misusing private information and trust, (3) constructing families as subjects and objects of intervention, and (4) including and excluding families.

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3.1 Introduction

Influenced by broader historical developments and contemporary pressures, child and family social work is often organised in categorical and fragmented ways at the inter-organisational and policy levels (Statham, 2011; Rochford et al., 2014). The well-intended idea of providing a differentiated supply of social services for families (Mkandawire, 2005), however, implies that welfare recipients often encounter substantial obstacles or thresholds at the supply side of welfare provision, preventing them from benefiting from high-quality social services (Roets et al., 2016). Moreover, welfare recipients increasingly seem to suffer from "the complex and multidimensional character of social problems in contemporary Western welfare states" (De Corte et al., 2016, p. 4). In research, this phenomenon is referred to as 'wicked issues', "which cut across a diversity of service areas and policy domains and are too complex to be dealt with by single welfare organisations" (De Corte et al., 2016, p. 4). In recent decades, many countries have therefore initiated a countermovement of inter-organisational networking to fill the gaps in social work service provision and to overcome deficiencies in the institutional division and distribution of welfare knowledge (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014; Provan, 1997; Allen, 2003). Also in the field of child and family social work, many efforts have been made to create inter-organisational networks that involve a wide range of locally embedded social work actors (see Roets et al., 2016; Allen, 2003; Frost, 2005; Garrett, 2008; De Corte et al., 2016). In this development, inter-organisational collaboration and the integration of services are perceived as systemic and sustainable solutions for the current and historical fragmentation of services (Allen, 2003; Anthony et al., 2011). It is argued that inter-organisational networking across many different actors in service provision may generate and cluster the necessary knowledge and resources to provide a productive and progressive response to better meet the multiple needs of children and families (Hood, 2014; Provan & Kenis, 2008).

In this chapter, we explore insights emerging from a research project on inter-organisational networking, which is perceived by policy makers as a productive strategy for tackling the wicked issue of child poverty in Belgium. Given that an extensive body of international research shows that child poverty has remained a stubborn, complex and multi-dimensional problem in most Western societies (Platt, 2005), policy makers in Belgium and beyond believe that the struggle against child poverty may benefit from the creation of inter-organisational

networks between a wide range of local social work services targeting children and families (INCh-project, 2014). In the international realm, it is important to note that although families are supposed to make use of social services provided by these inter-organisational networks on a voluntary basis, our research project reveals that some of the child and family social work services being involved in the networks tend to acquire an orientation being rooted within a child protection discourse rather than in a child welfare discourse (see Spratt, 2001; Parton, 2008b; Roose et al., 2013). In this context, we focus more in particular on the increasing pressure that emerges in these inter-organisational networks to document and share information about parents and children among public services (Bellamy et al., 2008; Richardson & Asthana, 2006; 6 et al., 2005). Concerning the sharing of information, the network members depend on their own organisational rules, protocols and background, so the local network, and the families it serves, are confronted with different approaches and regulations. There is currently no shared governmental policy on information sharing practices in the networks in Belgium (see Parton (2008b) for a critical analysis of how the relationship between parents, children, professionals and the state have changed in children's services in the UK, for example due to priority given to the accumulation, monitoring, and exchange of electronic information), and by consequence no standardised way of working between the services.

In what follows, we therefore explore the complexities, dilemmas and side-effects that emerge in inter-organisational networks of child and family social work services when they are handling the gathering, sharing, and (mis)use of information about children and families in poverty. More specifically, we focus on the major field of tension between supporting and controlling families in these information sharing practices. Frost (2005) raises this matter when he argues that inter-organisational networks may be "formed as practices that can 'see everything', 'know everything' and 'do anything', and thus they produce a 'holistic power' to discipline and control every aspect of welfare recipients' lives" (p. 19), particularly in the case of documentation and information sharing. In this contribution, we theorise this issue inspired by Foucault's (1975, 1993, 2001) notions of the panopticon and pastoral power. In the chapter, this tension between support and control serves as an analytical framework to analyse our empirical data.

3.2 Inter-organisational networking and the integration of services: a need for sharing information and documentation

In the configuration of inter-organisational networks, the sharing of information and documentation has been noted as an essential aspect (Reamer, 2005; Parton, 2008a). Much attention has been devoted to the improvement of communication and to the sharing of information to enhance the continuity of service delivery (Allen, 2003; Anthony et al., 2011; Statham, 2011) and to avoid striking gaps and overlaps in service provision for families (Warin, 2007; McKeown et al., 2014). The pressure on sharing information also derives from a protection logic and the need for a higher control of children at risk (Lees, 2017; Thompson, 2013). It has been argued that sharing information and documentation prevents the receipt of conflicting information, which often produces frustration on the side of social service providers because it results in a duplication of their efforts (Provan, 1997). Many professionals are expected to keep extensive data sets on clients to facilitate the development of multi-agency interventions that engage the full range of their needs (6 et al., 2005; Parton, 2008a).

Nevertheless, documentation and information sharing practices may provoke challenges and raise pertinent questions about how the flow of information between services is managed in the formation of a network, because “in more integrated services information is likely to flow more freely” (Provan, 1997, p. 21). The manner in which information and documentation are shared is an important issue to consider, given that the flux of information can be difficult to control, particularly in a movement towards the inter-organisational networking in the field of child and family social work. Moreover, making sense of information “is complex, with the needs of children and families often shifting” over time (Thompson, 2013, p. 191). In this context, we observe a major field of tension appear between controlling versus supporting families in the documentation and information sharing practices of social workers. The assumption that children and families inherently benefit from documentation and information sharing practices is questionable since these child and family social work practices may also have undesirable side-effects and downsides. Support and control, however, often appear together and operate in a field of tension.

3.2.1 Practices of documentation and sharing information: creating a panoptic eye?

Documentation and sharing information can lead to a reduction in freedom and an extension of surveillance over parents and children (Jeffs & Smith, 2002) and may interfere with their autonomy and right to privacy. When documentation and information sharing results in a narrow monitoring of clients, it can create renewed family policing and practices of surveillance. We can deepen this discussion by considering the notion of the panopticon. In its architectural form, the panopticon was designed by Bentham as a more efficient form of prison. With its central watchtower and its translucent cells, one guardian could overlook all of the cells. However, the panopticon, as Foucault (1975, 2001) analysed it, lies in the idea that each of the inmates can be watched all of the time, not in the question of whether he or she actually is. This is the disciplining power of the panopticon: the knowledge that one can be watched. It is achieved by the constant presence of light in the cells, in contrast to the dark in the central watchtower. It is the lack of reciprocity in the perspective of the guardian and the prisoners, however, that exercises the disciplinary power of the panopticon in which the guardian can see everything without being seen.

Here, the question emerges of the extent to which an inter-organisational network of welfare services may also create the effect of a panopticon. In its metaphorical meaning, the panopticon can be used for its relevance in grasping that continuous observation and supervision are possible in a network at all times. This is made possible by an increased flow of information: documentation and information sharing in social work is a possible instrument of control and surveillance and a medium through which professionals can exercise power in the practice of assessing, judging and documenting, particularly when they are brought together in a network (Roets et al., 2016, 2017). The permanent visibility and observation lead to the automatic functioning of the disciplinary power. Supervision is exercised by individual professionals and social workers; however, it is not situated and individualised within one person but, rather, in a structure that makes it more anonymous and independent of those exercising control. In this sense, it is not clear who is watching what at what time; thus, children and families remain unaware of the precise nature of their visibility. Therefore, the surveillance is based on a system of permanent observation and registration in which documentation and information sharing may function as a method of exercising power, as “the documentation somehow detaches the statements from the people who have made them and transforms them into

external or objective “facts”. In other words, the written word seems to give special weight and authority to the statement” (Alasuutari et al., 2014, p. 99).

3.2.2 Practices of documentation and information sharing: creating supportive features in child and family social work?

Inter-organisational networks are, however, primarily installed to create supportive effects for children and parents in poverty situations. A supportive intention is clearly not necessarily in contrast to a controlling effect. This is perfectly illustrated by the concept of pastoral power proposed by Foucault. This concept implies a beneficial power, using the metaphor of the shepherd and his flock of sheep (Vandenbroeck & Bouverne-De Bie, 2006; Foucault, 1993; Golder, 2007). For the shepherd to fulfil his duty, he must protect and care for each individual sheep to lead it to salvation. To be able to account for and guide the sheep and protect them from misfortune, the shepherd must know all of the information about each sheep. For him to know about each of the sheep’s situations, Foucault (1993) argues, each individual must examine, verbalise and publicly ‘confess’ his or her behaviour and thoughts. This illustrates that the caring and protecting intention and the controlling effect appear together; moreover, disciplining power is used in somewhat implicit ways as the effect of care, rather than of mistrust and explicitly controlling intentions. This raises the question of the extent to which the relationship between networks of child and family social work services and children and families in poverty situations can be considered a form of pastoral power.

3.3 Methodology

3.3.1 Research context

A qualitative research approach, which is considered a relevant research strategy to study social work practices and their underlying theoretical assumptions within their respective social contexts, is adopted in our research project (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Our qualitative research project includes three relevant cases studies (Yin, 2008) of documentation and information sharing practices in the field of child and family social work. It involves three local, inter-organisational networks of social work services that are constructed to combat child poverty. These networks are situated in three diverse cities in Belgium. They are not self-supporting but, rather, funded by regional or national governments; however, they maintain great autonomy in the construction and

development of strategies, partnerships and interventions oriented towards families in poverty. It is important to note that for the construction of these networks in Belgium, no formal changes in information sharing regulations were made. Within the networks, documentation and information are gathered and shared across different life domains by varying organisations. The case selection was based on a diversity of the networks in age, location (urban & rural), size, methods and social work organisations.

3.3.2 Data collection strategies

Our empirical research results from an ongoing qualitative research project in which different research strategies were combined. First, the researcher engaged with ethnographic research (Spradley, 1980). A participant observation was performed during meetings with all of the social work services involved in the networks, and case discussions were followed up and documented in two networks. They were spread over a two-year period, and the frequency depended on the frequency of the meetings of the networks. The meetings or informal discussions were not audio-recorded, but field notes were taken. This fieldwork was used to gain insight into and be involved in actual practices of documenting and sharing private information in the networks. The analysis is based on 8 moments of observation in Network A and 13 moments in Network B, which each took between two and three hours. In network C, there were no case discussions to observe. To deepen the knowledge that was gathered during the ethnographic fieldwork, 23 semi-structured interviews and one focus group were conducted with social workers who participate in the network: in network A, 7 individual interviews were conducted; in network B, 9 interviews and one focus group with members of the steering group of the network were conducted; and in network C, 7 individual interviews were conducted with social workers. The interviews took between one and two hours, and the focus group lasted 2.5 hours. The interviews were fully transcribed and anonymised. The entire research project was approved by the ethics committee of the university, and informed consent forms were systematically obtained.

3.3.3 Strategies of data analysis

The data were analysed based on a directed approach to qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The goal of a directed approach to content analysis is to validate, reconsider, and refine a conceptual framework or theory while relying on empirically based feedback loops, which enable newly identified categories to emerge (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This directed approach to content analysis served to enrich an in-depth understanding of the theoretical

conceptualisation of the tension between support versus control in handling private information in inter-organisational networks of social workers (see Myring, 2000). We performed a cross-analysis of our interview data and field notes across the three case studies, which allowed us to identify four underlying themes in the data: (1) craving control and handling uncertainty; (2) using and misusing private information and trust, (3) constructing families as subjects and objects of intervention, and (4) including and excluding families.

3.4 Research findings

3.4.1 Craving control and handling uncertainty

Whereas social work services and social workers often struggle with a lack of control over families, others radically embrace uncertainty in the ways they develop strategies in the network. In particular, when families are difficult to contact and not willing to open up, network partners explain they interpret this distance as a need for more and intensive support and guidance. In a specific case discussion, the network coordinator, a welfare worker and a nurse express their worries because they do not succeed in reaching a certain family, particularly because the family no longer wants to receive support. Moreover, the family moved out, and the network partners did not know its new address. The discussion circles around the question of whether it is legal to trace their new home address in the national register. They are concerned about the father's irresponsible behaviour in deliberately breaking the contact and refusing any meddling in his family situation. The partners discuss their observation that the child has bruises, and they assume that the justifications being offered were not consistent and credible and suspect the father of being responsible for abusing the child. Having this said in the group and having all of the arguments displayed, they state that they do not want to leave the situation as it is, based on arguments such as "Emergency breaks the law?" and "If we can get in again, then we can move on". The "we" in the last sentence is important to note because it implies that the social workers want to proceed, even if doing so is against the will of the family/father, and they prioritise their own craving for control. Participation of families is voluntary, but if they there are concerns of abuse than participation may become more coercive.

Our research findings, however, also indicate that the collective concern in networks not only can evolve into a controlling approach but also enables networks to embrace uncertainty when they act. Although an increasing control

and monitoring mechanism emerges, the joint efforts may also result in an extra sensitivity for the difficulties that parents may experience. In this example, a nurse hears from another partner that a certain mother isn't doing well, which stimulates her to ask the mother how she feels and wants to provide extra attention and support:

> When a partner of the network says: "Oh yes, Helen [a mother] didn't go to work those times". Then you think like: hmm, maybe she feels a bit down or maybe she is struggling with something? I'm going to focus on that next time I see her, asking: how do you feel about going to work, and would you prefer staying with the children instead of taking them to day care?

Here, the moments of consultation between the different network members challenge the diversity of services and social workers to handle the pressures of social policy imperatives and the range of managerial and procedural measures that aim to regulate social work practices. The role of the coordinator in this process seems crucial when this coordinator takes a fierce stance in reminding the network members of the principles of social justice and the realisation of welfare rights. As one of the network partners explains:

> We get together and look at: "What did we already realise, where do we still need to focus?". I think that's very important, that someone is in charge of this. Every service has its busy periods, and then, there are things that you don't dwell on in a family, like looking after their rights. "Oh, we still need to do this!" Well, that's important for me, that you know someone keeps an eye on it, keeps it going.

Although many network actors work under great time pressure due to performance-driven management systems and managerial policy values, for example, the joint moments of consultation enable a more open-minded search process and attention to the concerns of families when they engage in a collective effort to realise support for families.

3.4.2 Using and misusing private information and trust

A second field of tension can be situated as using and misusing information and trust. In this sense, one of the networks aims to make a clear separation between "controlling" and "supporting" network partners. To that end, only certain network partners are allowed to exchange confidential and private information that is acquired on the basis of the trust of the families. For example, the coordinator

made a construction that blocks the exchange of private information between actors who give financial assistance and actors who only engage in providing immaterial resources. Whereas social workers who are in charge of providing financial assistance are bound by policy regulations and must control the family's right to this assistance to avoid social fraud, family support workers will not share information about social fraud that could have negative financial consequences. They only find it legitimate to share this information with the coordinator who will not punish families:

> In fact, we may say everything to the coordinator, but we don't tell everything to the social welfare worker. For example, when a mother says she's single and we know after a home visit that a man lives there, that makes a difference in the financial situation... We don't tell what people entrust us with because we have a duty to professional confidentiality at our home visits too.

The family support workers note that they will not punish families if they commit financial fraud because they want to prioritise the families' wellbeing and want to respect the confidence of the family and not scare it away. In their view, the information, and the exchange of it, only becomes damaging when it reaches the ears of a partner who will intervene with a punishment. By making this artificial separation, however, we observe that supportive social workers strongly underestimate their controlling effect on families in handling private information. Moreover, the network partners who officially have been designated a controlling function disagree with making this boundary in information exchange. They consider it unfair that the partners from the network would hide this sensitive or even damaging information from them, even if the family could lose their financial assistance. They clearly prioritise combating social fraud above keeping the trust of the family due to their attempt to embrace both individual and collective concerns in our society. In this example, their willingness to punish becomes clear:

> **Welfare worker:** I don't think Peter [the coordinator] can keep it a secret, don't misunderstand me. If Peter thinks that they live together, then he should report that to us. … Ultimately, it's not Peter who will withdraw the financial assistance or that income or extra support or whatever.
> **Interviewer:** At that certain moment, is the trust from families in Peter lasting?
> **Welfare worker:** Lasting. Maybe it's going to be damaged for a moment but not that badly.

Simultaneously, they (mis)use the trust relationship that the family support workers have with the family to discover more private information. For them, a boundary between controlling and supporting actors is beneficial if the exchange in information between both is possible. It is interesting to observe that the network partners all presume that a clear distinction between controlling and supporting actors should be made but for very different reasons and both pushing the balance between support and control towards the other end of the spectrum. Nevertheless, the main problem here is that private information and trusting relationships with the families are used and abused without an explicit dialogue with the families about these matters, which refers to our third research finding.

3.4.3 Constructing families as subjects and objects of intervention

In the three networks, the level of transparency in the flow of private information varies widely. Some practitioners treat parents as subjects of intervention and remain loyal to the principle of transparency of their motives and of what they (will) do, whereas other practitioners approach the families as objects of intervention. In a first example, we observe that confidential information between network partners is being shared in a very subtle yet dubious manner. During a network meeting, the partners discuss that it is a pity that they are formally not allowed to receive any feedback after they have referred a family to a certain organisation. A welfare worker suggests that to know whether the family actually followed this referral, they can use the code: “Le Beaujolais nouveau est arrivé” (The new Beaujolais has arrived), whereupon the entire group starts laughing. This shows that network partners actually have the desire to transmit confidential messages that travel in the network without the families being aware of this dynamic. In this way, they avoid the duty to professional secrecy, but also the right to privacy which creates a higher surveillance over families. When information is incomplete, only a small hint between network partners is enough to keep an extra eye on the family or to cause an extra intervention by a partner. On another occasion, the school is worried about the children in a certain family they suspect from having a drug problem and attempt to make use of another partner’s knowledge and mandate (in this case the police) to verify their concern which causes an extra intervention:

> They [the school] know that we [the police] do unexpected house visits; they also know that we know things, especially concerning drugs and

> what the family is doing. So, yes, in that sense, we can approach the parents a bit easier.

Thus, if the school does not dare to ask the parents themselves, it is enough to say to the police “We are worried about that family” to keep an eye on it and to perform an extra house visit. In this case, the family also remains unaware of who actually initiated this intervention and for what reason:

> If the school mentions it, that doesn’t mean that we’re going to say that it comes from the school. But, actually, we look into our own files: “Did we already go there in the past?” Or was there a violation before?”. So, we work from there, to make sure that they still trust the school.

Not being transparent is mainly used as a strategy to keep the trust of parents and to be able to support them. In this case, we observe the opposite effect occurring since another network actor, comes by to control the family. It is not an exchange of formal facts, but it is a worry that is expressed by the school which may lead to a serious intervention by the police and have major consequences for the parents and children. We observe that for families, it is often very unclear who works together with whom, and what occurs is out of their control and is possibly not supportive, but coercive.

In other situations, incomplete information and subtle signals are used, rather than displaying the entire stories. This arises from a caring logic: if too much information is spread to other partners, then some network actors believe this may be harmful. In a specific situation, for example, the care coordinator of the school is very cautious with the information that she notes in the child’s personal record. A new child in the school suffered before from bullying and is afraid of going to school. The care coordinator expresses her concern to pay attention to the situation without colouring the image of the child in advance. For the wellbeing of the child, she is not fully transparent to the partners:

> If I’m going to write down everything I know and the teachers see this, no matter how you turn it, she is going to adapt a certain attitude. She is coloured in her vision of that child in advance, and that is bad. The only thing I do say is: “Support socially and emotionally, keep an eye on him, don’t lose him. Look at the context.”

The tricky issue of transparency regarding families is also at stake in relation to the network’s meetings and moments of consultation. An informed consent is

signed at the beginning of the trajectory in the network, but is further in the process no longer subject of discussion. There is a lack of systematic feedback to parents about what the actors of the network discussed together; thus, the network partners have doubts about the degree to which the parents are sufficiently well informed. Some members view this as a problem and want to change this:

> They know we have these moments of consultation, but recently, we wondered: “Shouldn’t we go first to the parents to tell them: We are going to discuss this and that.” Because many parents, when they agree to our network interventions, so much is said there, and they don’t remember or don’t pay attention. I think half of the people don’t have a clue about what we are doing. And we thought recently: “Shouldn’t we go to the parents or telephone them before we are going to have this discussion together? Or even letting them participate”.

These considerations raise important questions about the debate with families themselves. Making them part of the negotiations and making them aware of the flow of private information in the network may be a strategy to consider. Additionally, for many of the network partners, asking for permission is still an important issue to consider, to give control back to the parents. Nevertheless, we observe in the networks that we study that this is strongly dependent on the individual practitioner’s values.

3.4.4 Including and excluding families in poverty

In all of the networks, network members reflect on how families perceive the network in relation to the controlling and supporting roles of network actors. Although this often occurs unintentionally, they are aware of the fact that the network itself and the practices of sharing information have an influence on the types of families that feel comfortable with the network and, consequently, rely on the network for support. There are elements that suggest that the reasons for the, often unintentional, exclusion of certain families can be situated in the construction of the network and particularly in the overall fear and distrust of families in poverty with regard to social services as such may also play a significant role. The network seems to intensify this experience of the families, given that they are aware that the network partners share information about them. The inherent distrust of families, however, is also something that is being recognised as a relevant and legitimate issue. In this example, the interconnectivity between network partners leads to a certain fear, and a mother

refused the support of the network because of the possible involvement of one organisation that brings back bad memories of past experiences:

> There was a mother that said: “I have, from childhood, been institutionalised and have had bad experiences with social services.” And then, you have to explain how the network operates: “We collaborate with Kind & Gezin [Child & Family] and with CAW [Centre for general welfare work] if necessary”. And she totally panicked about CAW. Then, I told her that it was also possible to do it without CAW, that we were not going to involve this organisation if she didn’t want it and ensured her that we only work on a voluntary basis.

The fear of families, as the reason why they refuse interventions of the network members, may also be legitimate in the context of interventions that lead to the out-of-home placement of their children by child welfare and protection services. Families in poverty that engage in an individual support trajectory of the network are described as families that have nothing to hide and do not distrust the services. One of the coordinators described this dynamic as a, however problematic, ‘natural selection’ of the participants in the networks. Some network partners discuss this issue during one of the meetings:

> One of the partners opens the discussion: “Families that have a lot to hide will not participate in a trajectory like this. They don’t want anyone close to them and prefer a more distant approach”. Another network partner replies: “We had a couple of families like that, and after four months, they just fled and moved out.” The overall consensus emerges that this happens not because of the network as such but because social work is coming too close and gets to know too much about the situation of the families.

3.5 Concluding reflections

The growing commitment to inter-organisational networking between welfare services to tackle the wicked issue of child poverty leads to an increasing pressure for child and family social work practices to document and share information about parents and children. However, documentation and information sharing practices may provoke pertinent challenges in relation to how the flow of private information between services is managed in the networks as well as the complexities and side-effects of this effort, particularly because

"information is likely to flow more freely" (Provan, 1997, p. 21). In that vein, it might be interesting to consider how this flow of information is dealt with in other national contexts such as the UK. Parton (2008b), for example, describes the emergence of the preventive-surveillance state which relies on the monitoring and sharing of private information in children's services to ensure that no children fall through the net. As these practices might create a panoptic eye, Parton (2008b) argues that the purpose, goal and ground on which to intervene and exchange private information is important to consider and needs justification. Although it may be desirable for the welfare state or welfare actors to acquire and share private information as efficiently as possible, our research shows that this desirability is not necessarily experienced as supportive by children and their parents as welfare recipients.

While relying on the Foucauldian concepts of the panopticon and pastoral power, our analysis reveals four central fields of tension in which child and family social workers and their organisations must position themselves: (1) craving control and handling uncertainty; (2) using and misusing private information and trust, (3) constructing families as subjects and objects of intervention, and (4) including and excluding families. In the vein of the metaphor of pastoral power, the shepherd (the practitioner who possesses confidential information) is confronted with the question of how the sharing of information, when revealed to the other partners of the network, can be either harmful or beneficial for the sheep (the families). This metaphor refers to a tension between the commitments to data sharing and to privacy, and it is not easy to build a comprehensive arrangement between the two (6 et al., 2005). Our results reveal that the need to control and intervene often results from a logic of care and concern for families. It is remarkable to observe that social work and welfare actors mainly develop strategies with good intentions but unintentional and even coercive side-effects often emerge, for example, when the shepherd is losing members of the flock or when the sheep are punished for their behaviour. It is however important to acknowledge that the intention of a certain action or strategy may differ from the actual effects it will cause.

We therefore argue that a broad, flexible and ethical framework on a national level might make sense when it enables local networks and practitioners to further construct and discuss how they deal with information in collaboration and negotiation. This framework can be used as a touchstone and reflection tool in practices of exchanging information in local networks. We therefore argue that it is undesirable to formally protocol and pre-structure these practices. Rather than fixed and standardised regulations, a more pedagogical, dialogical and

transparent negotiation between network partners and families can be suggested. An essential part of such a broad an ethical framework is being transparent towards families. When we translate this to the concept of the panopticon: how reciprocal are the views of the guardian and those who are watched? The creation of a panoptic eye can imply that service users cannot dissociate themselves from the web that is formed by the network, particularly when people do not know what is being done above their heads. The results show that practices of information sharing are sometimes intentionally kept un-transparent and invisible. Even if this is done with good intentions, we may wonder what this means for families; where are their possibilities to (re-)act, judge, think, disagree with and resist what they experience as unsupportive and intrusive social work interventions? It is important to see, and reflect on, these (one-sided) power-relationships, particularly in the construction, interpretation and implementation of (national) protocols and guidelines. There is a risk to normalise the pastoral power that is created by gathering and exchanging private information. This implies that social workers should consider what information is essential to properly become familiar with the diverse concerns and needs of children and parents, which requires well-reasoned decision-making in each situation (Reamer, 2005). Rather than believing in 'on size fits all' solutions, there is a need to provide tailor-made support for families. Our research also reveals that documentation and information sharing strategies, and the interventions of inter-organisational networks that follow from these practices, should actually contribute to the development of local anti-poverty strategies that are beneficial for the well-being of both children and parents.

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CHAPTER 4

Complexities in the exchange of private information: between regulation and discretion

ABSTRACT

In this contribution, we focus on the question of how social workers actually deal with the complexity of sharing private information in three local networks of social provision that aim to combat child poverty. Building on the existing discussions and implementation of regulation and discretion in practices for exchanging private information, both regulation and discretion reveal advantages and disadvantages that seem to compensate for each other. Through qualitative semi-structured interviews with social workers in the network, in combination with participant observation, we scrutinised the perspectives, strategies and values of social workers in dealing with private information. Our analysis reveals three major themes: (1) legitimacy to act, (2) deserving versus undeserving families and (3) from individual to collective action. Therein, we focus on how regulation and discretion in information sharing practices interact with the provision of support to families in poverty situations. We conclude that a rights-based approach can be crucial as a normative value orientation and as a point of reference to help find this position between regulation and discretion in relation to the exchange of private information.

Based on: Van Haute, D., Vandenbroeck, M., & Roets, G. (submitted). Complexities in the exchange of private information in inter-organisational networks: between regulation and discretion. *British Journal of Social Work.*

4.1 Introduction

In the European realm, many efforts have been made to integrate social services for vulnerable groups through the development of inter-organisational networks of social services (OECD, 2015). It is argued that inter-organisational networking allows services to be responsive to the multi-dimensional nature of social problems in holistic ways, in contrast to fragmentation within sectors and services (Beresford & Croft, 2001). This trend towards inter-organisational networking is shaped by many different drivers and rationales, such as improving communication and coordination to provide a seamless provision (Allen, 2003; Messenger, 2012; Statham, 2011), aiming at closing the gaps and overlaps between social services (Moore & Fry, 2011), and realising more (cost) effective and efficient provision and higher accessibility (OECD, 2015; Rosenheck et al., 1998). To accomplish inter-organisational networking in the field of social work, the sharing of information is put forward as one of the essential aspects (Parton, 2008; Reamer, 2005). As Bellamy, Raab and 6 (2005) assert, “trends in public services require more extensive sharing of information about users of those services” (Bellamy et al., 2005, p. 51; Richardson & Asthana, 2006). Especially for children who are considered as being ‘at risk’, it is argued that effective information sharing is politically and morally required to see the bigger picture of a situation and to better protect them (Thompson, 2013). This is often facilitated by electronic information sharing systems (Pithouse et al., 2011).

In this chapter, we focus on the question of how social workers actually deal with the complexity of sharing private information in a local network of social provision aimed at combatting child poverty. The implementation of a policy aimed at the development of inter-organisational networks of social services in local authorities is seen a dominant strategy in response to the complex and multi-dimensional problem, or wicked issue, of child poverty (De Corte et al., 2016; Hood, 2014). In poverty reduction strategies, however, we consider it to be a vital challenge to acknowledge that the well-being of children in poverty is predominantly affected by the socio-economic background of the households in which those children are born, because they are economically dependent upon the adults of the household in which they live (Lindquist & Lindquist, 2012). According to this approach, the well-being and welfare rights of parents and children are intertwined and might therefore benefit from a multi-dimensional and family-centred approach (Schiettecat et al., 2015). We therefore situate our research findings in relation to the question of whether the sharing of information

in these inter-organisational networks relates to the provision of support for families and whether this enables the realisation of their welfare rights.

In what follows, we first discuss the insights on this topic in the existing body of social work research, in which a field of tension emerges between the procedural and formal regulation of how information should be exchanged and the informal exchange of information and discretion of social workers. Both regulation and discretion seem to prove their value in this discussion, and both are put to the test in the context of how private information about families is exchanged in enhanced inter-organisational networking. Second, we rely on our qualitative research to offer more in-depth insight into the perspectives, strategies and values of social workers in relation to the rules and policies that structure their work in dealing with private information. Indeed, "do they seek to work in line with rules, do they work around rules reluctantly, or do they actively seek to circumvent these rules and only comply when they feel they cannot avoid them?" (Evans, 2013, p. 740). Based on our qualitative analysis, we identify and discuss three major themes: (1) legitimacy to act, (2) deserving versus undeserving families and (3) from individual to collective action.

4.2 Between regulation and discretion

The exchange of information and documentation in inter-organisational networks is complex, because it takes place through formal procedures as well as informally (Evans, 2013; Frost, 2005). Social work relies on regulations and procedures, as well as on discretion and street-level professional judgements (Bellamy et al., 2008). It is, however, remarkable that the existing body of social work research shows that arguments for and against regulation and discretion are made, which implies that regulation leads to discretion and that discretion often leads to regulation when it comes to the tricky issue of how private information can be exchanged.

4.2.1 The need for regulation

The context in which social workers are supposed to share information in inter-organisational networks raises ethical questions, especially because inter-organisational procedures and dialogues often lack ethical and privacy-related legislation (Busch et al., 2013). Nevertheless, inter-organisational networking is often directed by managerial models concerned with risk and accountability (Parton, 2008; Wastell et al., 2010). It is therefore argued that standardisation in

regulation may warrant credibility, transparency, accountability, consistency, legitimacy, uniformity, predictability, effectivity, quality, justification and evaluation (Evans, 2013; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016; Torczyner, 1991). It may, so it is argued, also reduce the risk that clients will be subjected to the power of the individual and moral judgement of social workers (Ponnert & Svensson, 2016). The pressure for social workers to share information of great sensitivity often stems from the desire of social policy makers to protect citizens, and more particularly, children who are considered as being 'at risk' (Bellamy et al., 2005; Lees, 2017; Roets, Roose, Schiettecat & Vandenbroeck, 2016), which also results in an increasing regulation and proceduralisation (Featherstone et al., 2012).

In constructing the protocols for information sharing on a local level, however, the research shows that social workers need to negotiate their access to information in the complexity of reaching an agreement for this protocol and in the implementation of it (Webb & Vulliamy, 2001; Frost & Robinson, 2007). Therefore, it remains unclear whether such formal safeguards should include the possibility of reconciling privacy with the processes of documenting and information sharing implemented in street-level practices (Roose, 2006). Moreover, it is argued that the aim to reduce risks by relying on regulation may also lead to a reduction in addressing the needs and concerns of families (Pithouse et al., 2011). Pre-structured and categorical questions risk dismissing the bigger picture and the narrative of children and their parents (Ponnert & Svensson, 2016). Information systems may also fail to recognise the dual nature of information by honouring cognitive information over the emotional aspects of information (Lees, 2017). Regulation also ignores the dynamic nature of information and the fact that its meaning is always contextualised (Thompson, 2013). This contributes to the marginalisation of the consideration of the familial, social and relational contexts of children and families in poverty and leads to the atomised and fragmented nature of the information that is required (Hall et al., 2010). Furthermore, researchers have argued that newly constructed formal procedures that guide the actions of social workers might be problematic if families are not fully aware of these procedures. This lack of transparency in the rules and procedures is perceived as problematic (Bellamy et al., 2005).

4.2.2 The need for discretion in street-level practices

Should rules be followed because they are rules, or should rules be used as a way of achieving a greater goal, such as promoting the welfare of citizens? Following the law is predictable and transparent, but social work scholars have

therefore argued that the implementation of rules requires discretion (Evans, 2013). As formal regulations are inherently the subject of informal practice (Pithouse et al., 2011), discretion gives space to professional judgement in making decisions and in interpreting and negotiating the rules (Evans, 2013; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016). As Hood (2014) asserts, the bureaucratisation and formalisation of complex problems and practices may interfere with professional expertise, and little attention is paid to unpredictable dynamics (Parton, 2008; Wastell et al., 2010). According to several social work scholars, discretion (e.g. bending or breaking the rules) is required in social work practices to respond to a variety of changing needs and concerns of clients and service users, in order to be responsive to the complexity of social problems and real-life situations (Carson et al., 2015; Evans, 2013; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016). In this way, discretion could be seen as a way to make sense of the particular situations and circumstances between social workers and clients (Carson et al., 2015).

However, discretion within the local street-level management of information may entail challenges as well. Sometimes, information is not shared when it probably would benefit welfare recipients, whose problems are thus not fully recognised, and consequently, an appropriate social work intervention is not performed. On the other hand, personal information may be shared in ways that are not justified, when sharing information in informal ways has a negative influence on the value of privacy and on the ways in which welfare recipients are treated and controlled (Bellamy et al., 2008). Discretion might also entail a risk of paternalisation by making moral judgements to distinguish between the deserving and undeserving, as highlighted by Lipsky (Ellis, 2011; Kirton et al., 2011; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016). Furthermore, acting as a social worker for the best interest of the client also includes this moral imperative which may disempower families (Evans, 2013). These informal practices may lead to very particular solutions that do not always guarantee the realisation of the welfare rights of families in poverty situations, prevent structural strategies in dealing with poverty (Dean, 2015; Lister, 2004), and discredit the principle of equality in (public) service delivery (Bellamy et al., 2008; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016). It is therefore argued that informal practices can also be problematic due to a lack of transparency and consistency in realising rights-based public services (Roets et al., 2016).

4.3 Methodology

4.3.1 Research context

Our study includes three cases in Belgium to capture practices for information sharing. It concerns three local networks of provision for families and children aimed at combatting child poverty. Each network is funded by regional or national governments, yet the networks maintain a substantial level of autonomy in the construction and development of strategies, partnerships, actions and interventions towards families in poverty. In the case of Flanders, the development towards inter-organisational networking did not produce a difference in the national legislation on informative sharing, nor did it introduce ICT systems. The cases are selected on the basis of the diversity of the networks in age, location (urban and rural), size, methods, coordination, normative orientation and social work organisations. Network A is situated in a suburban municipality close to the capital. It consists of five different partners that provide welfare allowances, parent support and preventive health care. It is targeted towards vulnerable families with a child between 0 and 3 years and aims at developing individualised support trajectories, coordinated by a case coordinator. Network B is located in a small municipality and involves over 60 individual members. This network focuses on the universal provision of parental support. Network C is located in a city and aims at constructing a bridge between schools and welfare organisations, focusing on both material and immaterial support for families.

4.3.2 Data collection strategies

The first author performed a participant observation which originates from ethnographical research (Spradley, 1980). This fieldwork and direct observation helped to provide a better understanding of the context and actual practices of sharing private information in the networks. It also allows an examination of what actually happens in practice, in addition to what is formulated on paper (Patton, 2002). The analysis is based on eight moments of observation in Network A and 13 in Network B, which each lasted between two and three hours. The observations were done during meetings of the network members and case discussions in two networks (A and B). They were spread over a period of two years, and the frequency depended on the frequency of the meetings of the networks. The meetings or informal discussions were not audio-recorded, but field notes were taken. In the third network C, there were no case discussions to observe, and communication between the partners was mainly done one on one.

We combined this method with qualitative interviewing. Therefore, we conducted 23 semi-structured interviews and one group interview with social workers who participated in the network. We performed seven individual interviews in network A, nine interviews and one group interview in network B, and seven individual interviews in network C. The interviews lasted between one and two hours, and the group interview lasted 2.5 hours. The interviews were fully transcribed and anonymised. The entire research project was approved by the ethical committee of the faculty of our university and informed consents were systematically obtained.

4.3.3 Strategies of data analysis

The participant observation and semi-structured interviews allowed an exploratory and inductive approach to data analysis (Patton, 2002). The data were analysed though a qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980). In this analysis, we used an inductive approach to content analysis, and "this process includes open coding, creating categories and abstraction" (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007, p. 109). In a first step, we discovered different categories within the interviews on the broader subject of sharing and protecting personal information. The open coding analysis was performed case by case. Afterwards, we integrated the results within overlapping and similar categories across the three cases. In a second step, we analysed our field notes from the observations during the network meetings and case discussions, and integrated them into the categories that were already discovered in the interviews and created new additional categories if necessary. We discuss the field of tension between regulation and discretion in information sharing practices by using three major themes: (1) legitimacy to act, (2) deserving versus undeserving families and (3) from individual to collective action.

4.4 Research findings

4.4.1 Legitimacy to act

According to some of the network actors, their legitimacy to act and intervene in families' situations depends on the question of whether information is obtained formally or informally. Sometimes, practitioners are already (unintentionally) informally aware of private information, without the family knowing this. Social workers experience this as a difficulty, because they feel it is inappropriate to take action. We illustrate this by an example, which shows that the possibility for social workers to take action depends on the parents' willingness to open up

about their story. As a strategy, the network partners rely on the actor who is formally aware of the information to encourage the parent to give their permission to share it. In this example, the nurse asks the coordinator to convince the mother to talk to her about what she is experiencing so that the nurse can support the family:

> For example, the mother tells Charlotte [the coordinator]: “I’m pregnant”, but she doesn’t say anything to me. She’s not obliged to tell it to me, but in the meantime, we have a problem. She’s pregnant, and maybe we need to install some further support for her. But I can’t say anything, because she didn’t tell it to me, you see? … Mostly, I ask Charlotte: “Ask her if you can tell me?”

Striving for transparency, in this case, trying to make formal what has been informally communicated between partners, is used as a way to legitimise interventions from the network based on confidential information. In another case, the coordinator first tells the partners that the mother will explain the problem, but only a few moments later, she explains the problem herself. She shares with the group that this mother lost her child at five months of pregnancy. The nurse asks:

> “Would she [the mother] tell it to me? I’ll see if she starts to talk about it herself or not. She doesn’t know that I know it, so I can’t start talking about the issue myself. I will go on a house visit.”

It is clear that the house visit is an intentional strategy of the nurse to formally obtain this information for herself, so that she can work on these concerns together with the mother. In this way, the sharing of information in the network’s case discussion may provoke an extra intervention by the nurse, in trying to provide extra support for the mother, even when the mother did not spontaneously share her story and did not ask for extra support.

As another example, the network coordinator tells a partner: “I may have come across some things, that I’d better not have heard”. In this example, the information does not come from the family itself, but from a school teacher (who is not a network member). The information, which indicates domestic violence, causes a dilemma: “What should we do with that? How can we intervene when we shouldn’t have known this already?” In the past, the mother had told the network actors that everything was all right, but this new story seemed to be consistent with the partners’ impression that recently, it had become harder to

reach the family. As a solution, the network coordinator tried to encourage the teacher from the school who had shared this private information to do something about it and to take action: “So we asked, is it possible to discuss with the family that you told this to us? Because otherwise, we cannot do anything”. Again, the information seems to only give the network partners the power to intervene when it is transparent to the families that they are aware of the confidential information. The coordinator of the network explains how she would react in the future:

> Since we had that one situation, we say clearly: “Did the family give you permission to tell this, because otherwise we can’t do anything with it”. We would rather not hear it, than to know it without having the possibility to do something with it.

In situations in which the network members have a duty to report information about social fraud or abuse, it is noticeable that being explicit about the kind of information you (do not) want to receive formally or informally could prevent difficult situations, particularly in relation to families. One actor argued that it is wise to be transparent about one’s own position and obligations towards parents and children. He states that it is important to respond to and think about these matters in advance as a practitioner, because once the information is communicated, it could have severe consequences for the family:

> You can’t say: “You may tell it to me”, only to say afterwards: “Oh, but you shouldn’t have told me that”. Be honest and check out for yourself if you have a duty of professional secrecy or not. And if you don’t have it, you should act like they do in those American police series: “Madam, I’m arresting you and know that all you say could be used against you”.

An extra complexity to the search for legitimacy is added, because the networks have no shared formal protocol on the exchange of private information. Social workers tend to refer to their own organisational backgrounds and rules when it comes to professional secrecy, but they do not always enable them to make judgements on how to deal with private information in a network. In this process, some social workers state that consulting families and asking for their permission serves as a good point of reference and as a way to legitimise the exchange of confidential information. In that way, there is a constant process of negotiation about what is private and what is not.

4.4.2 Deserving versus undeserving families

The interplay between regulation and discretion in dealing with private information also influences families' realisation of welfare rights, because they are affected by the conceptualisations of deserving versus undeserving families. Information may serve as an instrument for the realisation of social rights, but also as an instrument to prevent support. It is clear that formal criteria and conditions, as well as the personal visions of the social workers, strongly influence the way in which private information is handled. The normative framework of the individual social workers, which is made explicit during the network's meetings, has an influence on the interventions that are performed towards families, but when they are the subject of discussion, the interventions can be adjusted and critiqued by the network partners, who may judge and act from another framework. For example, a social worker from the public centre for social welfare found out that a mother who depends on a welfare allowance gave her teenage daughter 70 euro as monthly pocket money. The social worker argued that this mother spoiled her daughter and that the pocket money should be reduced. According to her, 30 euro a month should be enough: "They go to McDonalds, and those are expensive burgers. My children don't get that much pocket money". She clearly disapproved of the spending pattern of the mother and argued that therefore the mother did not need a reduced rate for child care for her little son, which implies a strong financial consequence for the family. In this example, it is noticeable that the vision and judgement of that individual social worker has an influence on how a family is treated and expresses a form of conditionality that separates deserving from undeserving families. The other members of the network who participated in the case discussion did not resist the decision not to assign the reduced rate for childcare. However, the coordinator rejected the decision and claimed the reduced childcare rate for the mother. In this example, it is clear that the different individual perspectives and frameworks of the partners may clash. Eventually, the mother was allowed the reduced childcare rate because the situation was the subject of discussion in the network, and therefore, the initial decision to refuse support could be rejected. Such network discussions are valuable, according to some of the partners, because they enable reflection and the receipt of feedback on how they judge families or situations. Later, in an interview, the coordinator asserted that providing support should not be dependent of the individual frames of reference, but refers to what is universally and structurally captured as social rights:

> No, there shouldn't be too much discussion about that. She [the mother] has the right to it, end of discussion. If you think that she has the right to

> it or not, that doesn't matter. … You can't say: "she deserves this and that"; then, you cannot treat everybody in the same way.

As the coordinator indicated, the network may serve as an instrument to transcend the individual normative frameworks in trying to create a more equal treatment of families. But in relation to realising social rights, a difficulty emerges that relates to whether the network partners are allowed to exchange private information and to what extent this is desirable. In a context in which rights are more bound to formal criteria and conditions, families need to prove their eligibility in order to claim their rights. In a network, the need to formally prove your eligibility for support as a client creates pressure on professional secrecy. One respondent proposed that the network partners need to trust each other's word and judgement to provide support for the parent, without doing a social investigation. The following example concerns a school that is not allowed to share the personal information of families with a public centre for social welfare on which they financially depend to provide warm meals for their children. The school wants to provide meals for poor children, without having to show formal proof, such as the identities of the children in need, in order to obtain a refund for the meals:

> We shouldn't say that it concerns family X, Y and Z. No. "We have ten children like this and now you [public centre for social welfare] have to trust me that I, as a school principal, will take care of the fact that those ten children will get their warm meal." … Without a social inquiry: "You need to trust me".

An emerging ethical debate relates to the question of whether we need to transcend professional secrecy (and the right to privacy) for people 'in need' if professional secrecy blocks the provision of support and the realisation of welfare rights. An informal approach relying on trust, without giving the other partners formal proof and information, can be used as a strategy to find a way around (the violation of) professional secrecy and privacy in order to realise the social rights of families. Nevertheless, if decisions are based on trust and on the judgement (the individual normative framework) of the social worker, rather than on formal proof and criteria (social investigation), this approach risks being more dependent on goodwill and charity. In such an approach, parents will not be in a position to claim their rights, which may also contribute to the unequal treatment of poor families (deserving vs undeserving). Other professionals are in favour of performing a social inquiry, because relying on the judgement of a social worker could make it easier for families to cheat or could make it easier to suspect

families of cheating. Some actors mentioned that in a small municipality, one cannot prevent others from questioning the families' needs: "What? Are you giving the child from that family hot meals? You are crazy, he [the father] works and makes good money, he's fooling you! … They've done a cruise on the Nile".

4.4.3 From individual to collective action

In the national legislation, as well as in the networks, no new formal regulation on information sharing practices has been implemented. Some partners claimed that this makes it difficult to work together. For example, when there is a debt problem in a family, often, several organisations (i.e. child care and school) are confronted with the same problem. These network members argue that the problem should be handled together, but on the condition that the sharing of information between the partners that face the same problem of a family is allowed. An actor explains the need for a concrete solution in practice, where discussions about real life situations need to be possible. According to him, abstract solutions would not solve the problem, at least not quickly enough to provide support for the families and to realise their rights. In addition, another network member explained that the sharing of information between partners is necessary to change situations and to take action: "If you are not going to talk about it, then not much is going to happen with it, right?" It seems that the problem is shared, but the interventions and solutions are not. There appears to be less confidence that individual social workers will take sufficient action or will provide a sufficient solution than if these actions and solutions were shared by the network. Although professional secrecy is formally regulated, a social worker stated that these boundaries are flexible and need to be pushed further to solve the problem: "There are some lines you cannot cross, but you always have some space to play. Playing safe does not solve the problem. You need to bend the rule, but you never know where you going to end." He indicated that this necessary form of discretion is a risk. As a strategy, anonymous case discussions are also used in one network. Although, in a small community, according to the social workers, it appears that anonymity in case discussions is not always possible, especially when multiple actors are involved with one family. A situation may sound so familiar that anonymity is not ensured. However, this fact is ignored by the partners, and the lack of anonymity is not openly acknowledged in the group:

> They are telling stories, and they didn't say one name. And then I think: "You are talking about that household." And then you listen a bit more and think: "Absolutely sure that it's about them". But that isn't said and

> that's not necessary, I think… Because eventually, everyone who sits there has to deal with the duty of professional secrecy and privacy of the people with whom they work.

Sharing information with other professionals who are also bound to the duty of professional secrecy is considered less problematic by most of the network members, even if they all have different backgrounds, goals and purposes. The information that is 'anonymously' exchanged about a family may not be helpful to work with on an individual basis, because social workers recognise that they cannot act or intervene based on this information (see the first theme, *legitimacy to act*). Some of the actors stated that their duty of professional secrecy does not allow them to talk about this in the network, even if the different network partners know that they are working with the same family. The following example shows different interpretations of what is considered private information. A family support worker replies to a question of the coordinator about a mother they both support, yet her colleague seems to disapprove of her decision to reveal it:

> The coordinator asked: "Did Sarah already give birth?" and then I, well, then I said: "Yes". But I didn't know if it was a girl or a boy, I just… I just heard she gave birth. And then my colleague said: "But you have a duty of professional confidentiality!" Then I told her: "Yes, but the coordinator also supports Sarah and knew that she would be giving birth any time soon."

Case discussions such as this one allow individual signals and problems on a micro level to be gathered and addressed in more structural ways on a meso or macro level. In one of the networks, housing problems are, for example, dealt with as a structural social problem, because poor housing is a problem that is shared by many families. The (problem of the) realisation of social rights is consequently debated on a local policy level. The strategy of trying to search for the structural dimensions in problems is a way to collectivise that does not have to deal with the impossibility of sharing private information on an individual level and does not risk violating the right to privacy.

4.5 Concluding reflections

As the discussion in the literature and in our empirical research has already revealed, it is clear that regulation needs discretion, and discretion needs regulation; further, finding a good balance between the two might always remain

a challenge. Nevertheless, we add an extra dimension to this discussion by pointing to the question of the ways in which these processes of regulation and discretion in inter-organisational networks provide support and realise the welfare rights of poor families. We find the addition of this dimension to be legitimate, considering that the interventions of the social workers in the network are targeted at combatting (child) poverty. In that vein, a rights-based approach can be crucial as a shared and normative value orientation between the network partners. This approach does not claim to resolve the tension between regulation and discretion, but serves as a point of reference to help find this position between regulation and discretion in relation to the exchange of private information. Indeed, standardisation and regulation might be useful for ensuring equality, but it might be equally effective in preventing a differentiated approach and responsiveness to families' needs. It is important for social workers that they do not see and treat families as a homogenous group, because one size does not fit all. Our analysis shows that social workers refer to the different preferences and needs of clients when it comes to the exchange of private information. Also, the degree of agency of and negotiation with the client is often mentioned. This challenges the protocols and rules, which prescribe a standardised approach (Pithouse et al., 2011). Our results indicate that discretion may facilitate and enable the realisation of support and rights, but it also risks paternalisation, moralisation and violations of the right to privacy if the clients are not involved in this process (see the theme, *deserving versus undeserving families*). In the absence of regulations, depending on the individual judgement and framework of the social worker would be problematic, especially when these practices stay under the radar. Street level strategies may attempt to resolve the deficiencies of the system in realising the rights of vulnerable families, but it may also block a solution on a political level, as well as collective action (Aronson & Smith, 2011; Hogget, 2006; Fine & Teram, 2013).

We therefore argue that the realisation of social rights requires space for contradiction and a public debate about individual and collective interests and needs, including on the local level (Dean, 2015; Hubeau, 2009). Our research reveals that transparency in regulation and discretion constitutes a precondition to achieving this. In all three themes, a recurring search for transparency is noticeable in order to create a dialogue about the processes for the exchange of private information: transparency towards families to strive for legitimate interventions, transparency between partners on how families are and should be supported, and transparency in finding shared solutions and responsibilities in the network. The network structure, as well as its coordinator, may have the potential (and the power) to create the space to rethink and counter the decisions

and interventions that are carried out by the network partners on the condition that they are overt and transparent. Particularly in a network structure, the use of information, and as a consequence, the use of regulation and discretion could be made a subject for debate and reflection. Therefore, the coordinator could act as a mirror that reflects on, and watches over, the frame of reference that is used, as well as on how the rules are applied. This is especially important in the case of actors who decide that they do not want to follow the rules or want to control families or develop a conditional attitude towards families. In this searching process, the coordinator of the network might be an agent of social justice and change by facilitating a public debate. Moreover, the network partners need to work together with families in an attempt to understand their definitions of their situation and their concerns. Thus, in addition to the position of the coordinator in a network, giving attention to the client's perspective will challenge regulations as well as discretion, as the question of whether families experience the interventions as supportive may serve as an important reference point (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). Again, this is only possible when practices and intentions are made transparent and open for negotiation.

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CHAPTER 5

QUALITATIVE FEATURES OF INTER-ORGANISATIONAL NETWORKS: PERSPECTIVES OF SOCIAL WORKERS AND FAMILIES

ABSTRACT

In existing social policy and social work research, it is argued that the formation of inter-organisational networks of social services serves as a convenient strategy to deal with fragmentation and multidimensional problems, such as the wicked issue of (child) poverty. However, we argue that a critical perspective towards this strategy is needed. In this contribution, we research the (1) accessibility, (2) usefulness and (3) availability of networks as three important features of quality that emerge in the interaction between social workers and families. From the perspective of social workers and families in poverty situations, we examined how social services that collaborate in local networks contribute to the realization of welfare rights of parents and children in poverty situations. We found that the networks try to provide a contact person which fulfills an active informational function to increase the accessibility of services. Second, we found that the way in which the supply of the network is (pre-)structured may influence the experienced usefulness of the network. Finally, we discovered that local networks that aim to combat (child) poverty still struggle to make structural resources available for families who are in need.

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5.1 Introduction

In recent decades, Western welfare states have striven to integrate services for (young) children and their parents (Department for Education, 2014; Kekkonen, Montonen & Viitala, 2012), with special attention for vulnerable families (OECD, 2015). It is often seen as a solution for the fragmentation of social services (Hood, 2014). This is especially important when dealing with the wicked issue of (child) poverty, which manifests itself in many different life domains (like housing, labor and healthcare) that are often linked to each other and interdependent (Broadhead, Meleady & Delgado, 2008). The historical fragmentation of social services makes it difficult to be responsive to the multidimensional character of (child) poverty (Allen, 2003). Fragmentation is situated on different levels including sector, age, target group, type of organisation (e.g., private vs. public), and policy level (Geinger et al., 2015), which could lead to inconsistent support (Carey, 2015).

Consequently, it has been argued that a policy on different areas is required to counter the fragmentation of social services. An integrated approach has the potential to be more responsive to complex social problems such as poverty, than a solution based on the artificial division in sectors and services (Beresford & Croft, 2001). Whereas an extensive body of international research shows that child poverty has remained a complex and multidimensional problem in most Western societies (Lister, 2006; Lindquist & Lindquist, 2012), this perspective on poverty is now reflected in a broader focus to the integration of interventions (Barrientos, 2011). In research and policy, there is a general consensus that partnerships among social work services may warrant more sustainable answers to better meet the multiple needs of families in poverty (OECD, 2015; Smith et al., 2008). In that vein, inter-organisational networking between public services has been introduced as an attempt to support agencies and professionals in dealing with complexity and in overcoming the obstacles to collaboration (Hood, 2014). In that regard, the creation of inter-organisational networks between a wide range of social work services is considered to be a convenient strategy to combat wicked problems, since inter-organisational networking might produce particular possibilities such as dealing with social exclusion (De Corte et al., 2017).

However, a critical perspective towards network euphoria is needed (De Corte et al., 2017). Despite the emphasis on inter-organisational networking and

integration in the field of social work, the understanding and implementation of it is ambiguous (Frost, 2005). Different approaches to inter-organisational networking indeed seem to cover different effects, realities, organisational and strategic configurations and methods of working together (Statham, 2011). This suggests that the way in which these service-delivering networks are constructed and the choices that are being made may have an influence on the question of whether families will eventually experience the network interventions as supportive in the realization of their welfare rights. In the literature, we are inspired by three aspects to research the quality of support in social work: the accessibility, usefulness, and availability of social services (De Corte, 2015; Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). In our qualitative analysis, we explore and connect the perspectives of both parents and social workers in relation to their experiences with the networks to see how welfare rights might be effectively realised in this interaction. Finally, we discuss which elements and conditions in the networks may have the potential to contribute to this.

5.2 Qualitative features in networks: accessibility, usefulness and availability

In this section we discuss the conceptualization of how the concepts of accessibility, usefulness and availability as three important aspects of the quality of social services that aim to combat (child) poverty, which we frame as a violation of human rights (Dean, 2015). For social workers, these quality features might enable them to identify and analyse the multiple barriers and thresholds that children and parents in poverty situations may experience in realising their welfare rights (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014; Bouverne-De Bie, 2015).

We will focus on three quality criteria that are the result of an interaction and negotiation process between social workers and services, and families. In other words, it is not because existing services are coordinated in efficient and effective ways in a local network of service delivery that they are available, usable, and accessible for families living in poverty (Provan, 1997; De Corte et al., 2017). Rather than, for example, passively providing a door on which to knock, a more interactive mode of creating quality could be striven for, such as creating new entry points, signposts and outreach strategies in the community (Clarke, 2004). In that sense, social provision is not pre-structured yet is committed to being responsive to the questions and concerns of families who are living in poverty, with reference to “the quality of being present” in their often

complex lifeworld (Roets et al., 2016). Based on our literature review, we first explain the meaning of these quality features.

5.2.1 Accessibility

Accessibility refers to the (lack of) thresholds for when care is needed, such as an inadequate knowledge of the offered supply and support (Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2003). It is important for families to have reliable information on which to base their decisions (Mooney & Munton, 1998). For instance, obstacles such as complex procedures, waiting lists, and language barriers may exclude parents and children (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). Ensuring the accessibility of provision for both parents and children by tackling sectorial segregation and fragmentation is considered crucial in providing resources and services that help to alleviate the negative effects of poverty (Vandenbroeck, 2013). Outreach social work, for example, might function as a key strategy to manage and tackle the obstacles that prevent families from having access to services and it could be seen as a practice of accessibility that allows further reflection on processes of in- and exclusion in public service delivery (Grymonprez, Roose & Roets, 2017).

5.2.2 Usefulness

The quality aspect of usefulness refers to the extent to which clients experience care as supportive in the realization of their welfare rights, which relies on an exploration of their questions, concerns, life worlds, skills and language (Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2003). Services and their functioning need to make sense for families who are confronted with poverty and social exclusion and need to be attuned to their concerns. Thus, a participatory and democratic policy in social services may be crucial (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). In that vein, poor children are always children of poor parents (Mestrum, 2011). Research demonstrates that the well-being of children is not isolated, but predominantly affected by the socio-economic background of the households in which those children are born and live (Lister, 2006; Lindquist & Lindquist, 2012). Children are economically dependent upon the adults of the household. Therefore, combating child poverty requires reflection about the ways in which the realisation of children's rights is always interrelated with a proactive realisation of the welfare rights of their parents (see Lister, 2006; Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2014). In that sense, combating child poverty can only be responsive and useful when it is embedded in a broader, systemic social welfare approach (McKeown et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2008) that takes into account questions of both parents and children.

5.2.3 Availability

The concept of availability refers to the existence of a supply and to the fact that social services can be called upon to ask social care workers for help (Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2003). In inter-organisational networks that aim to combat child poverty, the availability of resources on the supply side covers different services in several life domains, because "households in poverty show deficits along many dimensions of wellbeing at the same time" (Barrientos, 2011, p. 242). Concerns related to income, health, housing, employment, social networks, etc. should be taken into account, since families do not necessarily perceive these areas as separate 'needs', especially in the case of families living in poverty (Allen, 2003; Broadhead et al., 2008; Lister, 2004). Consequently, the families' lack of both material and immaterial resources are important to consider in poverty reducing strategies (Lister, 2004). In addition, it is important to mention that for families in poverty, who are sometimes less mobile than more affluent families, qualitative services should be located near where they reside (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). The lack of available services such as child care may result in parents competing with each other to have access (Abrassart & Bonoli, 2015).

5.3 Methodology

5.3.1 Research context

This study includes three local networks that aim to combat child poverty which are located in Belgium. All the networks are funded by the regional or national government, so the networks could all employ a coordinator. Network A is situated in a suburban municipality that consists of five partner organisations. Together they combine social services such as welfare allowances, employment, parental support and administration. It is targeted towards vulnerable families with a child between 0 and 3 years old and aimed at developing individualized support trajectories for a maximum of three years, coordinated by a case coordinator. Network B is located in a small municipality and involved at the beginning in total over 60 individual participating social workers. This network aims to provide parent support and creates a physical meeting place ("House of the Child") for all families with children in the community. Network C is characterized by the connection of the education and welfare sectors. In this network, a welfare worker comes to the school to support poor families who suffer from financial and material difficulties and questions. In addition, the

researchers searched for networks that have a direct connection with parents, in order to be able to question them about the network.

5.3.2 Research methods

Because the research took place in three diverse cases with diverse interventions with families, we used different approaches to engaging with the perspective of families and social workers. In network A, the researcher conducted 10 individual semi-structured interviews with parents and one focus group with five parents who participated in the network. In addition nine social workers in the network were individually interviewed and there was one group discussion. The interviews were combined with participant observation in network meetings and activities (Spradley, 1980). This was done to better understand the complexities of our subject of interest (Patton, 2002). No recording devices were used during the participant observation, but field notes were systematically taken. This network organizes case discussions, without parents but with their consent. The researcher attended six case discussions that took between 1.5 and 3 hours. In network B we interviewed four different parents that attended play and meeting moments that were organized by the network. The interviews took between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. In addition, we performed eight exploratory interviews with parents who attended a food distribution service. These interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes. On the level of the social workers, we interviewed eight different network partners. Also in this network, we performed a participant observation (n=12), during network meetings and anonymous case discussions. In network C the research method is mainly focused on the participant observation (n=14), where a welfare worker from the Public Centre of Social Welfare comes to the school to answer welfare questions of children and their parents. In network C, we only had the opportunity to interview two parents. The interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes. On the social work level, seven individual interviews were performed. The research was approved by the ethical committee of the faculty, and for all interviews informed consent was systematically obtained.

5.3.3 Research analysis

In the process of data analysis, a directed and conventional approach to qualitative content analysis were combined to analyse the interviews with parents and social workers (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Initially, an inductive approach was used for the thematic analysis, wherein categories were developed through open coding from the data material (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Mayring, 2000). In a next step, we confronted the themes that were derived from

the inductive analysis with theoretical insights and literature about qualitative features in social services. Three main corresponding themes – accessibility, usefulness and availability – were selected in this process. In addition, these themes were used to analyse the interviews again, now from a more directed approach to analyse the quality of social provision that functions as an inter-organisational network. This approach mainly serves to refine, extend, and enrich existing research insights: "the goal of a directed approach to content analysis is to validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). This process of data analysis allowed us to relate the perspectives and experiences of parents and social workers to each other to see how these three quality features might be effectively realised in this interaction. Even though the local networks share the same goal of combating (child) poverty, there are large differences between their approaches. To show the diversity between the networks and structures, we illustrate each theme with examples.

5.4 Research findings

5.4.1 Accessibility

In order to access services and receive support on one or more life domains, it is important to look at where and how the network members (and the social services they represent) meet families. In all three networks social workers try to increase accessibility of services, but the approach of the network and its context varies widely. Network A shows that having a low threshold contact person where people feel safe and comfortable telling their story is of great value in accessing formal support. This network clearly chooses to employ a family support worker that supports families very closely. The value of this person is described in the following example of a young student that became pregnant. The student's land lady couldn't bear that she was pregnant and wanted to raise the rent. This would lead to eviction, because the student didn't have enough money to afford increased rent. The mother-to-be found herself in a really vulnerable situation and turned to the family support worker for the network, of who she felt was her only option for support:

> The only option I had was Leah [the family support worker]. There where I go, because I don't know where else to go. The land lady said to me: "You can't live in the flat, you take advantage of the system, the electricity is expensive, the water is expensive and then you and your

> baby.". That hurted so much. I called Leah, they only and first reflex I had in my mind was [to call] her. Leah said: "I'm coming to you, stay calm, I'll be right there".

Contacting the family support worker from the network protected her from eviction in a very precarious situation. Particularly when parents have no social network to count on, being able to contact and access formally organised support is crucial. According to most of network A's partners, the network's interventions must be targeted to families who don't find the way to support themselves. Also families stress the importance of having someone to ask for help when they need it. In this network, outreach is a key element in the strategy to contact vulnerable families and to increase the accessibility of services. The partners describe families that participate in the network as families that are isolated and badly informed about social services. One actor argues that these families lack someone to ask for support: "I think that a large part of being poor is not knowing enough people to ask something to". The network takes responsibility for this problem by employing a family support worker to create a contact person that guides the support for families. One of the partners hopes that the contact with this professional, could then facilitate the accessibility of other organisations. Most of the partners of network A observed that families have better access and more contact with social welfare services since they participated in the network. However, the accessibility is mainly facilitated by one family support worker, and may become fragile if this person falls away. For a more structural embedding of a contact point, one actor hopes that there will be an accessible place(or office) in the municipality where every citizen can search for help for every sort of question. For him, there should exist an accessible contact point in the community: "So even if they look for a plumber, that they can go there and say: I'm looking for a plumber and I don't know where to go".

Also, professionals (from all the networks) who function as a contact person for families, express the need to have a (multidimensional) contact person that supports them, too. In particular, they explain the need for someone that has a strong informational function and could facilitate the contact with other services. The accessibility of services could increase due to a better exchange of the knowledge that network partners possess. This finding was very apparent in network C. This network is characterized by making a strong connection between welfare actors and school actors. According to the actors at the school, who initially hear the stories of the parents and their children, they spend much time trying to find the right answers and services to support the children and their parents in diverse life domains. By making a structural and informational

connection with a social worker, an additional and complementary knowledge base is brought into the school context. Consequently, the actors from the school can receive much quicker the necessary information that facilitates their way through the landscape of social services and accessing them much more quickly:

> For families it is important that they know where to go and that they don't lose time. That it is all dealt with very quickly, because if we have to do it all, than it takes a long time because you don't know the right persons.

This may decrease the complexity of finding the right services for social workers, and consequently, also for families. The link between education and welfare is highly valuable, because now, more attention is going to making material and financial support accessible when such needs and questions are discovered in a school context.

5.4.2 Usefulness

In this part of the results, we focus on how families' and social workers assessment of the extent to which the network and its interventions are adapted to the concerns of parents and children. Our findings indicate that the way in which the supply of the network is framed and organised has an impact on the experienced usefulness of the support.

In the interviews with families from network B, it was noticeable that the way in which the network's offer (activities and interventions) are framed and labeled, may pre-structure the questions that were asked and concerns that were shared by parents. In this network, interventions towards families are focused on parenting support, although the composition of network partners represents sectors and services that go far broader. Furthermore, it is important to note that the building where the activities for families took place is called "House of the Child". It was noticeable that parents also viewed the support as centering around the child. They argued that the questions and concerns they would share with the network partners therefore would be connected to the support for the children and their parents. Also, the network partners framed the support in this way. One of the mothers told that a professional invited her to come to a play and meeting moment that was organized by the network: "When she saw my little son, she said: Yes, you should come by once … He is going to enjoy it". She was approached for being a mother of a young child and joined the meetings for her son. She said she wouldn't go there for herself: "If I hadn't had my son, I don't think I would go there. No I don't think so". This shows that the network

may fail to be useful for other questions and concerns that families struggle with. Two other mothers had the same impression and would also categorise their questions and concerns according to their interpretation of the networks' supply and focus. When we asked about support for other life domains (such as housing and income), it was something these mothers wouldn't consider asking because of how they perceived the offered support: "They say they only know it is for children and not for anything else" (translator). So although the expertise and services of the network partners extend far beyond parenting support, this was not reflected in the interventions. The mothers said they would appreciate it if the network would make it more clear that support and supply goes beyond parenting support and felt inhibited to ask this themselves. Consequently, the pre-structured supply of the support by the network may limit the experienced usefulness of the network. In addition, many of the interviewed social workers problematised the focus on parenting support, because they situated the problem of (child) poverty more broadly, including, for example, housing, employment, debts, stigmatization and administration. Most of the network partners therefore found it necessary to take the local concerns of families as a starting point and evaluated the questions that are dealt with in the network as not very useful. For example, one of the partners was disappointed that the discussion was centered on children being potty-trained or not in child care, rather than the lack of affordable child care:

> It reminds me of one of the first meetings, where we talked about general needs in the community. Many said: "child care". Of course there is child care, but not in every neighborhood. And how can you finance child care better? … Do you need to look for an alternative to provide child care? ... but that's something else than saying: "What are you going to do if children aren't potty-trained?", then you deal with individual problems.

During this network meeting, it was noticeable that the (after school) child care facilities complained that they hadn't enough staff to assist the children going to the toilet and to refresh their clothes. They were thinking about making children being potty-trained a condition to access their facility. We see that in this discussion, the needs of the social services are being put central instead of the concerns of parents and children, which frustrated some of the actors. In most of the interviews with social workers, it was clear that non-participation of families is noticed or problematised and suggestions raised that the vision and interventions should be more responsive to experienced needs of families.

> What is actually the most important aspect? Is it mainly employment, housing, education or something else? And what can we do for these families? Because everyone works on his own island. … It would be good if we could sit around the table and reflect on: "What is happening/is going on in our municipality? What are the needs of the people and how can we engage ourselves?

The partners in network A state that the network's interventions should be broadened, because they describe combating poverty as a shared responsibility between services that provide material, social and emotional support. The combination of partners who provide material and immaterial support is also seen as important, because thereby families facing diverse needs could all be supported. This network starts its interventions with an explicitly multidimensional approach. Therefore, the network developed a procedure through which the social rights of families could be assessed. So therein, the partners investigate in a very structured way which welfare rights are (not yet) realised within different life domains (e.g. housing, child care, education, financial contributions and leisure time activities). The network's coordinator mentions two reasons why they chose this approach. First, proactive rights research is important, because these families don't always get what they are entitled to and extra efforts from social workers are needed. Secondly, it is practical and concrete, which helps families on a short term basis. This network aims to discover what families are in need of and don't set a boundary to that. Most of the families in network A felt comfortable in a situation in which they didn't have the feeling that they needed to categorise their questions and concerns. One parent experienced this approach strongly:

> It is like a Visa for us, you see? It fits every problem and that is thanks to the network. … At the beginning [before they were in contact with the network] it was only the social assistant and us and that's it. But the network, that has no limits.

Starting from a multidimensional framework on the supply side that looks at actual needs may imply a bigger potential for families to experience the offered support as useful.

5.4.3 Availability

Partners notice that not all necessary resources for families are available, even if support is provided by a whole network of partner organisations. It seems that

the formation of a network does not fill all the gaps in provision, due to structural shortages and legal restrictions. Our results indicate that if local networks that aim to combat child poverty want to contribute to the availability of social services(resources), the alignment of the existing offer of social provision as such will not be enough. Often, network partners have the feeling that in the local network they still don't have all the necessary tools and means available to help families in a structural way. Even though some of the networks made an effort to be responsive to multiple needs, there are some areas where they lack the power to make a substantial difference for families in poverty. This is also noticeable in network A. According to parents and network members, a first big concern is the shortage of available high-quality, affordable housing. Many of the families indicate that they still face difficulties in finding a decent and affordable place to live:

> I explained to them that I was looking for an apartment, because this one is not suited for my children. There are problems with the heating, with this, with that. Mary [a family support worker from the network] wrote it down, but since then nothing. … She asked me: "Did you find an apartment?". I said no. She said: "Okay, we are searching but aside from that, still nothing."

Parents argue that there is little progress on the waiting list for social housing and little accessibility to the private housing market, despite their contact with the network. Still, the network attempts to make small changes awaiting a more structural solution, like the following example illustrates:

> Thanks to the network I knew that I had the right to financial incentives, for example for housing. I have a right to 50 euros a month that supports the rent. But to get that, you need to live in the municipality for a certain period and you also need to be subscribed for social housing. That was something I didn't knew.

In addition, families mention that it is difficult to find a job, even though they are in contact with employment agencies. Language and diploma requests, but also discrimination and lack of child care or affordable transportation are elements that hinder finding an employment. Also the lack of financial means is a persistent problem for the families involved. For them, many problems could be avoided if they had bigger income. Life domains such as housing, employment and income get attention in network A, but therein the network struggles to make

a substantial change for families. The network partners acknowledge this problem, but problematise the lack of (financial) power of local authorities.

The concept of availability refers to the existence of a supply and to the fact that social services can be called upon to ask for help (Roose & De Bie, 2003). Due to legal restrictions and conditionality of social rights, families face difficulties to receive the support they are in need of. We give an example of network C. Therein, a staff member at the school and a staff member at the Public Centre of Social Welfare joined their efforts to support families in vulnerable positions. But although connections are made between partners, these families with young children couldn't rely on any support because they don't have the right to it. In network C, many actors experience this with families from Eastern European countries who stay in Belgium for a longer period, but need to be financially self-supportive. Due to European legislation, these families cannot rely on the Belgian social security system (unless they have been employed). If families choose to rely on financial support, as a consequence they will risk losing their residence permit. One of the school staff members said that in these cases, collaboration with the Public Service of Social Welfare is even disadvantageous, considering the risk for parents, but informs families about the choice they have. Children have the right to education, but when there are no structural resources available when families are in need of it, one of the actors feels there is no other way than relying on charitable support:

> When children don't bring food to the school, are you going to say as a school and as a supervisor: "Well, that's too bad"? In practice, many people in the field are confronted with it and troubled by it, who try to provide something with their own means, or that of a non-profit organisation or goodwill of someone to provide food, jackets, etc.

Thus, she found herself as a social worker dependent on political choices that could make support available. The social workers are directly confronted with these problems, but feel powerless. The network's coordinator explains that making the connection between the domain of welfare and education should be done on different levels and to different degrees. On the level of (local) social work, partners feel they are not always able to make a structural change for families in poverty, even when they collaborate with each other:

> It helps, I think, in the short term. But changing the situation structurally? That seems like an overambitious goal. For example in our job, it is important that we don't strive for it, or else you will get a burn-out. ... It

should definitely be the policy goal, but for people who work on the field, you need to feed on the little successes.

5.5 Concluding reflections

In the integration of services, we consider it relevant to examine the quality of the provided services in those networks. Creating qualitative features in the individual member organisations such as accessibility, usefulness and availability remains crucial, but in this study we examined whether the network as a whole contributes to the creation of these qualitative features in their attempt to realize the welfare rights of families in poverty. Nonetheless, it is challenging to see which features could be attributed to the network itself, because the functioning of the network stays strongly connected to the functioning of the individual social services that are involved (Petch et al., 2013). Therefore, the difficulty of isolating what is specific to the functioning of the network could be seen as a limitation of the study.

Our results nonetheless show that network euphoria too often assumes that the realization of welfare rights on a local level is only a matter of a more efficient and effective coordination of the existing services. What is often missing, however, is the challenge for social work services to make sense of their availability, usability and accessibility for families. Our findings indicate that in order to create accessible support, it is important that families are actively approached and informed about the social support that the network offers. The network partners take responsibility and actively seek to overcome obstacles of accessibility within and between services. Thus, the participation of families is seen as a maximal interpretation of accessibility and fight against exclusion and isolation (Clarke, 2004). Taking parents' concerns as a starting point for actions and interventions in networks could be seen as a key strategy to increase the usefulness of social services, while starting from a pre-structured supply may inhibit this. Overall, we discovered that starting from the perspective of families and actively engaging with their life worlds and concerns is a fruitful strategy in striving for available, useable and accessible support that is organised by networks. The service user' perspective could serve as a guide that mirrors whether families experience the interventions as supportive and where networks fall short. In fact, a participatory interpretation of quality could be developed. Creating a democratic form of partnership with parents could be an added value in reflecting about and constructing quality social services. "Thinking about what works in se is not instrumental, however, democratic practice is about getting the

debate going about where, when and why it does not work, without blaming clients and while staying committed" (Roose et al., 2013, p. 454). The construction of a local inter-organisational network serves the opportunity to rethink the structure and quality of services that are provided, together with families. However, the social workers in the networks need to find a balance between general goals (that serve the collective wellbeing) and specific goals (that are adjusted to specific concerns). In this respect, a collective idea of quality in inter-organisational networks could be developed, based on general principles such as accessibility, usefulness and availability (but also the realisation of social rights) wherein also individual and more diverse and collective preferences could find a place.

In this research, working on availability does not necessarily imply that there is a shortage of social services, but may also refer to the (lack of) available structural resources that are offered by those services such as financial support, qualitative and affordable housing and employment. Our research shows that in the formation of inter-organisational networks that aim to combat (child) poverty, local networks struggle to create extra available resources, even if they put much effort into it. Our research findings therefore indicate that the local level could be best suited to provide support that is adjusted to families' concerns, but this level may lack the decisive power and means to combat poverty in all life domains. Different actors question if and to what extent this is the responsibility of the local level. Poverty is a problem of structural inequality that needs a structural response (Ridge & Wright, 2008), and the question remains whether this can adequately be tackled only at the local level. Poverty reduction and fighting inequality therefore should be seen as a responsibility of different governmental levels and actors. Giving too much responsibility to the local level could be a risk; due to the fairly large autonomy of local authorities. Also, if there are large differences between municipalities in poverty reduction strategies, the principles of quality and equality could be treated differently among them. There is also a risk of depoliticizing the problem of poverty and social inequality at higher governmental levels, together with the public debate about it.

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CHAPTER 6

Concluding reflections

6.1 Introduction

In this research project, we critically studied three local networks that aim to combat the social problem of (child) poverty and questioned how these networks are constructed and what this may mean for families in poverty. By using different research methods, such as participant observation and qualitative interviewing, we strived to integrate diverse perspectives to capture the complexities and interactional nature of the local networks. Even though the networks were financed in a top-down way, their character was dynamic and organic. As this is a PhD in the field of social work, we firstly elaborate and reflect on the role of social work with regard to these inter-organisational networks that strive to combat (child) poverty. Therein we argue that there is a need to develop and reflect on a normative framework that is based on central social work principles. In addition, the goal of realising social rights is discussed, together with the position of the local level in the fight against (child) poverty. Furthermore, we elaborate on the complexity of dealing with private information, the potential of the network as a reflection tool, the need for adopting a democratic approach, and the necessity of bottom-up and top-down processes for democracy. We end with formulating policy recommendations, discussing the position of the researcher, and describing limitations and strategies for further research.

6.2 The role of social work

6.2.1 Searching for social justice and human dignity

Following De Corte, Verschuere, Roets and De Bie (2017) and based on our central research findings, we argue that inter-organisational local networks need a normative framework as a touchstone and guideline for their actions, goals and interventions. Lorenz (2008) argues that social work (research) is, on the one hand, occupied with the improvement of effectiveness and efficiency of interventions and on the other hand should deepen reflective and qualitative approaches. In this research, we aimed to include the perspective and meaning making of network actors and families in poverty on the quality of the interventions. Thereby, we argue that the functioning of the networks should also be related to the position of social work that is never neutral and is based on socially constructed problem definitions (De Corte et al., 2017; Mestrum, 2011; Roets, Roose, & Bouverne-De Bie, 2013). The inspiration for a normative framework can be found in the international definition of social work, as it serves

as a value base for networks that aim to combat the social problem of (child) poverty. The global definition of social work was formulated and approved in 2014 by the International Federation of Social Workers:

> Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. (IFSW, 2014)

Fragmentation of social services could be resolved by pursuing inter-organisational networking, but the goal is not the network as such. The network should be a leaver to realise what fragmented services may fail to do; that is providing comprehensive, supportive and qualitative social services for families (in poverty situations) and to a further extent realising social justice, human dignity and social rights. It is important that social workers are aware of how policies (and practices) are framed and how (sometimes taken for granted) value-driven ideas and social and political positions are embedded in social welfare policies (Cousins, 2013). The importance of this normative framework and the central concepts that shape it, will be recurring themes throughout this concluding chapter and will be further elaborated in the following paragraphs.

6.2.2 Realising social rights

In the international realm, there is a consensus that poverty should be considered as a violation of human rights (Ife & Morley, 2002). Therefore, a rights-based approach is suggested to realise social justice and human dignity. In the context of poverty reduction policies shifting towards combating child poverty, a rights-based approach recognizes that the wellbeing of children is always connected to the wellbeing of their family and that material and immaterial support cannot be separated (Mestrum, 2011; Lister, 2006; Sandbaek, 2013). In some of the networks we studied, a rights-based approach was explicitly used to guide the networks vision and actions. Still, it was noticeable that although the network partners tried to provide support on life domains such as housing, employment and (mental) health care, the leverage to make a structural change was limited. Due to for example inadequate capacity of social housing, discrimination on the labour market, waiting lists in social services, and legislative barriers local actors struggled to support families in poverty. Social

rights "can provide a meaningful basis for social resistance to poverty and oppression" (Dean, 2000, p. 151). However, in contrast with classic individual rights, realising social rights cannot be claimed, but asks for governmental commitments (Bouverne-De Bie, 2015; Dean, 2000; Hubeau, 1995). The formulation of realising social rights as an intention causes that how social rights could be fulfilled is dependent on the extent that public recourses and provision permits (Dean, 2008). When structural support is not available or when redistribution of financial means is insufficient, these rights become very vulnerable (King, 2000; Rigaux, 1994). Thus, the way in which social rights are formed and conceptualised, is not strictly fixed. Social rights can be interpreted in a minimalist way or in a maximalist way, where these rights are used as a leaver to contribute to (the right to) human dignity and change the ruling social relationships (Hubeau, 1995; Bouverne-De Bie, 2015; Maeseele, 2012).

Questions regarding the social justification for the provision of public resources and public aid, are also led by the debate on the deservingness of this support (Cousins, 2013, p. 1253; Maeseele, 2012). This debate may lead to an exploration of which values and ideas guide the redistribution of material capital. When rights become increasingly conditionalised and selective, exclusion is legitimized by the construction of a particular view on social citizenship (Dwyer, 2004; Cox, 2000). This suggests that a rights-based approach does not necessarily show much solidarity or imply a structural approach to combat poverty (Bouverne-De Bie, 2003). Still, if networks are guided by a framework of social justice and human dignity, this could play a crucial role in providing supportive practices and in the conceptualisation of social rights. Such a rights-based approach fundamentally implies a participative approach, where people are not reduced to objects of intervention and a shift in power to define the problem is realised (Bouverne-De Bie, 2003). Social rights are socially constructed through the naming, claiming and recognition of needs, concerns and lifeworld of people in poverty, whereby social injustice could form the basis for this public negotiation process of transforming needs into rights (Dean, 2013). Although the (financial) resources and legislative power were limited at the local level, the rights-based approach may create a multi-dimensional perspective on poverty as well as the possibility to problematise structural processes of social inequality between citizens.

A good practice that we encountered in our research in network A was the 'mini rights examination'. This mini rights examination lists all the rights of families on a checklist and covers life domains of income (financial rights), housing and environment, transportation and mobility, education, health and leisure time. This

rights research includes the needs and concerns of children and parents together. Moreover, the instrument serves as a basis for the negotiation and dialogue with families. From the start of the individual trajectory, this list is checked and discussed together with parents, so they also become well-informed about their rights.

A rights-based approach is always connected to other policy levels, as it is a public responsibility. Public actors are bound to fulfill the objectives and obligations of the government. For that reason, it is important having the Public Centre of Social Welfare [OCMW] as an actor in the network and more general in (child) poverty reduction strategies. It enables the provision of material and immaterial support in the realisation of social rights. The OCMW is also legally bound to the realisation of the right to human dignity (De Bie & Vandenbussche, 2016) which emphasises the need or a least desirability for a rights-based approach in public service delivery. So relating to the OCMW as a central public actor in combating (child) poverty, it could be very meaningful to integrate a rights research (as explained above) into the obliged social research that is performed if families want to receive support of the OCMW. In this way, the controlling function may also be used as a lever for social protection and inclusion. Interestingly, we saw that in one of the networks, also other organisations adopted the rights research as a tool in their vision and provision of support for families which could strengthen the realisation of the right to qualitative social services (Raeymaeckers & De Corte, 2016).

6.2.3 Combating (child) poverty at the local level

We argued that inter-organisational networks should be considered as an instrument to combat the social problem of (child) poverty and not as a goal in itself. Across the three local networks, we studied how the social problem of poverty was constructed and which strategies were developed. We focused on practices that were situated on a local level, which was by consequence determining for our findings. This context influenced the way in which combating (child) poverty is performed, but it also influenced its challenges, limitations and chances. De Rynck (2016) asserts that in Belgium, the local level is used to enable and execute more centralised policies and therefore local governments are representatives of the state of a specific territory while at the same time forming a unity. Simultaneously, a decentralisation movement is embedded where the local government is given space to take autonomous initiative and develop tailor-made policies and innovative practices (De Rynck, 2016).

The wellbeing of children is always connected to the wellbeing of the family they live in, but is also more broadly connect to the communities, society, and collective wellbeing (Cousins, 2013). In this conclusion, we argued that the networks should engage with children and their parents to approach the wellbeing and rights of both children and parents as intrinsically interrelated. Still, including parents in network interventions and strategies could be interpreted in an individualistic and undesirable way. Fighting (child) poverty and social exclusion should not be restricted to supporting better parenting skills (Gillies, 2005) or activation to the labour market, because this would stress the individual responsibility of parents to prepare their children to achieve well in a meritocratic society (Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2015). By focusing on parents or parenting support, social work risks to be predominantly focused on intervening in the private sphere of parents and children, and solely concerned with the lack of individual competences, instead of including tackling societal structures (Schiettecat et al., 2015). On the contrary, we wish to acknowledge that combating (child) poverty also asks for a structural approach, including when the focus of the strategy is situated on the local level. Even if the networks struggle to provide structural support, the research showed the importance of adopting this structural thinking in the networks' structure, goals and discussions.

> A more constructive approach would involve viewing parenting as an embedded, situated process, amenable to change only through social and material circumstances (Gillies, 2002). From this perspective, policymakers would have to recognise and address the crucial significance of power relationships and inequality in sustaining 'cycles of deprivation'. (Gillies, 2005, p. 87)

Structural inequalities and diverse circumstances of families should be recognised. Parents and children in poverty would benefit more from solving wider political and structural problems with a focus on redistributing material resources and power (Schiettecat et al., 2015). Social work should carefully consider the position it takes in a context of combating against (child) poverty, and may choose to contribute to a more structural problem construction and structural solutions.

> Lifeworld circumstances are shaped by society. It is primarily a social policy task to create conditions in which lifeworld coping patterns can develop. For instance, employment, youth, family and housing policies are necessary. … Social work and social care is professionally involved in this political

> discourse, due to its structural dependency on these issues. (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009, p. 137)

In the fight against (child) poverty and in the creation of local networks, a tension appears between the local and central government. We don't claim that local networks are solely responsible and able to combat the social problem of (child) poverty, and therefore it is very important to see where local initiatives meet other policy levels. Structural redistributive policies that could tackle inequality and social exclusion of vulnerable families are mainly located on the federal and Flemish governmental level. The (financial) instruments as well as the responsibility to combat inequality between individuals and in structures, goes way beyond the local level and is definitely in need of a collective responsibility. Still, the focus on combating poverty at the local level risks to narrow down the political debate about it on higher governmental levels. Therefore, putting the child central and putting the local level central, bears the risk to depoliticize strategies of poverty reduction (Schiettecat et al., 2015).

The Flemish and national government stimulates the local government to take on a more directing role for sectors such as child care, social housing, and parenting support, but without changing the existing regulation the discretion of local policy actors becomes quite limited (De Rynck, 2016). In addition, it is important for local networks to consider that each organisation and sector has a specific relation and dynamic between the local and central governmental level and that these are not always aligned. Moreover, at the Flemish or national government, the formation of a local network and multi-disciplinary collaboration is not always prioritized to the shaping of individual organisations and sectors (De Rynck, 2016). These local networks consist of a diverse pool of public and private actors to enable the realisation of the right to social services (Raeymaeckers & De Corte, 2016). However, public actors do not always have a grip on the internal policies and strategies of private and voluntary organisations which is challenging in the strive towards a shared strategy to combat a social problem such as (child) poverty (Verschuere & De Corte, 2014).

6.3 The network as a reflection tool

Inter-organisational networks provide the opportunity to collectively (re)think and reflect about the social problem of poverty and how this could be tackled at the local level. In this sense, the network could be used as a forum for debate where social problems are defined and visions are discussed (De Corte et al., 2017).

The possibility to collectively discuss social problems and formulate solutions could prevent social workers going underground with their actions, which contains the risk of not being transparent, nor being (publicly) accountable for their interventions (Pithouse et al., 2011; Roets, Roose, Schiettecat & Vandenbroeck, 2016). The development of a network structure that enhances communication potentially installs the opportunity to create a shared responsibility with regard to a particular social problem, platforms for mutual learning and a forum for collectively discussing social problems (De Corte et al., 2017).

The network provides a structure wherein different perspectives can be confronted. This was particularly clear in researching the network dynamics, where we discovered three fields of tension in the attempt to build a local network: (a) selective versus universal provision, (b) instrumental versus life-world oriented approaches, and (c) child- versus family-oriented strategies. It was noticeable that partners did not always agree on how to position themselves in these fields of tension, but also across the networks different positions were taken. However, as we discussed in Chapter 2, this dissensus is not necessarily negative or undesirable. As Lubeck (1998) asserts:

> Finding comfort in consensus, may make us too sure that what we know is best for ourselves is also best for others. Uncertainty, by contrast, is unsettling, it makes us wonder, listen and try new things. It opens up the possibility that things can be other than they seem (p. 290)

On the strategic level, we found that the dissensus between partners (for example on the target group or sector) rendered processes of inclusion and exclusion of families more visible. The moments of dissensus showed where and how the networks struggled to reach families (in poverty), and showed which groups were left unserved. In a technocratic approach, dissensus may risk being evaluated as negative for the network, but in a context where the network aims to combat child poverty, it is crucial that actors reflect on how the network could have an including or excluding effect and why. We do not claim that networks should include all citizens, but it is necessary to be aware of which families the network serves and which families not. Recognising the network's excluding effects is valuable, because this may enable the formation of future actions and strategies at the local social policy level that could target families that are not (yet) reached by the network's interventions.

6.3.1 The need for a democratic approach

Reflecting on social work practices is also useful in the discussion on network effectiveness. The evaluation of network effectiveness is complex, as what is effective may have different meanings for different stakeholders and could be evaluated on different levels (Provan & Milward, 2001; Kenis & Provan, 2009). We suggest a democratic approach that is able to critically challenge dominant conceptions of what effectiveness means (Lister, 2003) and that implies a dialogue on the normative stance that include the meaning making of service users and of the social workers who are supposed to 'solve' a problem and thus need to have contributed to its definition (Allen, 2003; Roose et al., 2013; De Corte et al., 2017). It is problematic when "there is no openness for democratic debate about the ways in which social problems are constructed, by whom, and why" (Vandenbroeck et al., 2012, p. 549). This may construct a democratic deficit (Biesta, 2007). We argued that it is important to create space for the democratic character of social work practices when partners collaborate in a network. Yet, the democratic value of these network discussions between partners could be expanded, particularly in the attempt to cover a plurality of concerns and wishes of parents and children in developing strategies to combat (child) poverty (Roose et al., 2013). This would also entail taking into account the agentic coping mechanisms that parents living in poverty already use. What could be evaluated as an effective service-delivery by network partners, may very well be undesirable for service-users and vice versa. Our study showed for example that local networks can create subtle forms of surveillance (Van Haute, Roets, Alasuutari & Vandenbroeck, 2018; Jeffs & Smith, 2001) and therefore Notredame (1998) argues that we should not take integration for granted, as service users may also benefit from a more fragmented organisation of services. He asserts that fragmentation may create the space for families to use a diverse set of strategies and coping mechanisms and that this agency to manipulate decreases when services operate as a radar without boundaries. In this sense, Notredame (1998) mentions that integration of interventions in different life domains should not be taken for granted in social work practices (at the operational level), thereby strongly referring to the fact that the integration of support and interventions should never be coercive.

Involving democratic participation and dialogue with families in the construction and definition of needs is important, as this is a political and powerful act (Ife, 2009). More progressively, it could be meaningful to combine a top-down and bottom-up approach in the construction and definition of rights too (Ife & Fiske, 2006), which would give concrete substance to the concepts of social justice and

human dignity. Parents should be included in the construction and defining process of network goals and actions, otherwise they will be excluded before the interventions are even performed. In sum, democratic debate is necessary in order to discuss the meaning of what 'works' and for whom (Vandenbroeck et al., 2012). This is important to be aware of, because the perspectives and voices of families are often only indirectly represented by the social workers that join the network meetings. Participation of families in the processes of defining, developing, monitoring and evaluation, could be approached not only as a route to quality, but also as a measure of it (Beresford & Croft, 2001). Networks that explicitly took into account the perspectives of families, were often better able to provide responsive support, because:

> They [service users] are not primarily concerned with the effectiveness of services, but with improving their lives and how arrangements for support can help to make this possible (Beresford & Croft, 2001, p. 307).

Beresford and Croft (2001) stress that creating qualitative and supportive services always is a two-way process between social workers and users, respecting diversity. However, the open-endedness of starting from a lifeworld orientation faces the danger that practices may lose itself in arbitrariness (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). Therefore, it is important that a democratic approach in networks about practices, needs, and rights should be guided by a normative framework based on principles of social justice and human dignity.

6.4 Sharing and protecting private information with care

In this section we discuss how practices of sharing and protecting information in inter-organisational networks, as well as respect for privacy may be guided by an ethical and shared framework, with respect for transparency, trust, and agency in relation to the families who share their stories. We argue that bearing such an ethical framework in mind, a more desirable or ethical position could be found in the balance between care and control and between regulation and discretion.

6.4.1 An ethical practice

In our research it was noticeable that dealing with private information is not a clear-cut and obvious given. Sharing or protecting information is guided by formal

procedures, but also needs interpretation according to the specific situation. Therefore, we discussed the tension between discretion and regulation. Social workers often mentioned that one needed to have a good share of common sense when applying regulations on professional secrecy in specific situations and that deciding on protecting or sharing information is seen as an individual task. Despite the fact that social workers often judge individually in matters of dealing with personal information, a value based and commonly shared framework was felt needed in this process. We argue that having common sense is not enough. It should be clear on which values and principles this seemingly undefinable and intuitive concept is based in order to see what guides social workers' considerations and interpretations. Dealing with professional secrecy and private information is a strongly normative matter and therefore needs an ethical and value driven frame of reference that exceeds the frame of reference of the individual social worker and relies on collectively shared values. Again, we refer to the international definition of social work, as it could help to shape an ethical framework to reflect on individual decisions and interpretations, based on principles of social justice and human dignity. In line with our view that a network that aims to combat (child) poverty needs a normative reflection tool, this could also be applied to information sharing practices that result from it.

We discussed that confidential information is a powerful instrument, also in relation to the provision of support for families. The networks could play an important role in exploring the individual normative framework of social workers on how they deal with private information, for example by case discussions. Once these frameworks are made explicit, practices of sharing and dealing with information could be subjected to discussion and scrutiny by other network partners. Also with regard to the realisation of social rights, the research indeed shows that the network may serve as an instrument to transcend the individual normative (often intuitive) frameworks in trying to get a more equal and fair treatment of families, for example in trying to counter a division between deserving and undeserving families in poverty. Therefore, also a shared decision-making process and responsibility could be installed (Spratt, 2001). Simultaneously, the professional secrecy may block the search for a collective approach that is shared by different network partners.

6.4.2 Affordability and comprehensibility of support: respecting privacy and transparency

It is key that privacy is treated with respect, because revealing and exchanging private information should always be considered as a symbolic cost that families

pay (Bouverne-De Bie, 2015) or even a symbolic violence. In this sense, we refer to the *affordability* of the provided support when social services operate in a network structure (including its practices of information sharing) and which is evaluated as an important condition in the realisation of qualitative social work practices (Roose & De Bie, 2003).

Social work is positioned between the private and public sphere. As a consequence, a tension or dual mandate arises between support and control when intervening in the private lives of families in poverty (Lorenz, 2008; Spratt & Callan, 2004). Particularly in a context of inter-organisational networking and practices of sharing confidential information, the tension between care and control intensifies. The political discourse on sharing private information aims to protect children from harm, prevent terrorism and enhance safety increases the pressure on social workers (Pithouse et al., 2011). These expectations on the sharing of private information not only pressures social workers, but also the relationship with their clients. When boundaries between supporting and controlling families become blurred, this may reflect a paternalistic governing view (Gillies, 2005). Social workers may question whether supporting parents is an instrument to serve a goal that is defined by the public sphere and how this is balanced with the individual needs and rights of the client. In recent years, this balance can be increasingly characterised as 'child-centric', e.g. less concerned with families and more focused on individual children and their needs (Hall, Parton, Peckover & White, 2010). The political legitimacy to intervene in families' lives may become more individualistic and protective (Parton, 2008), rather than more socially just and equal (Featherstone, Broadhurst & Holt, 2012). This is described in the following examples, which illustrate that the finality of the interventions and information exchange may be supportive, but may also be punitive. In the first example, inter-organisational networking and the exchange of information between partners is used as a policy goal to detect social fraud. In 2017, The secretary of state for social fraud Philippe De Backer introduced a pilot project that wants to control and punish people that receive a minimum income, if they would lie about the composition of their family. In this project, public services that provide these social benefits will now collaborate more intensely with water and electricity companies. By exchanging and comparing information between the data bases about the family composition and the consumption of electricity and water (data mining), suspicious situations can be detected (De Backer, 2018). However, international studies show that the non-take up of social rights and benefits is much higher than social fraud (Dubois, 2017). In that sense, an opposite example that illustrates a possible finality in network interventions could be found in the search for the automatic and

proactive realisation of social rights, that is also dependent on (the exchange of) confidential information. These examples illustrate that the use of information on families in poverty can be used for different goals, which may strongly influence the delicate relation between support and control. In these situations, it is important to discover and be aware of the normative framework that shapes finalities and guides interventions.

An instrumental approach is problematic in a context of inter-organisational networking when information exchange and contacts between social workers and finalities of interventions are not transparent for families (Spratt & Calan, 2004). When these practices are not transparent and the decisions and reasons of social workers are not openly discussed with families, the *comprehensibility* of network interventions could be impaired for clients (Roose & De Bie, 2003). Some of the social workers in our study used transparency to keep the trust of the families they work with, while other social workers described transparency in the network structure as a possible threat that could scare parents away. The trust of families forms a condition to share their story, even when their privacy is formally protected by professional secrecy. Without transparency, strategies cannot be discussed and the agency of service users may be undermined. As explained in the 3th and 4th chapter, we question the possibilities of families to (re-)act, judge, think, disagree and resist when practices of information exchange are not transparent. Comprehensive interventions serve as a necessary condition for families to make sense of these practices and its consequences and to create qualitative support (Roose & De Bie, 2003).

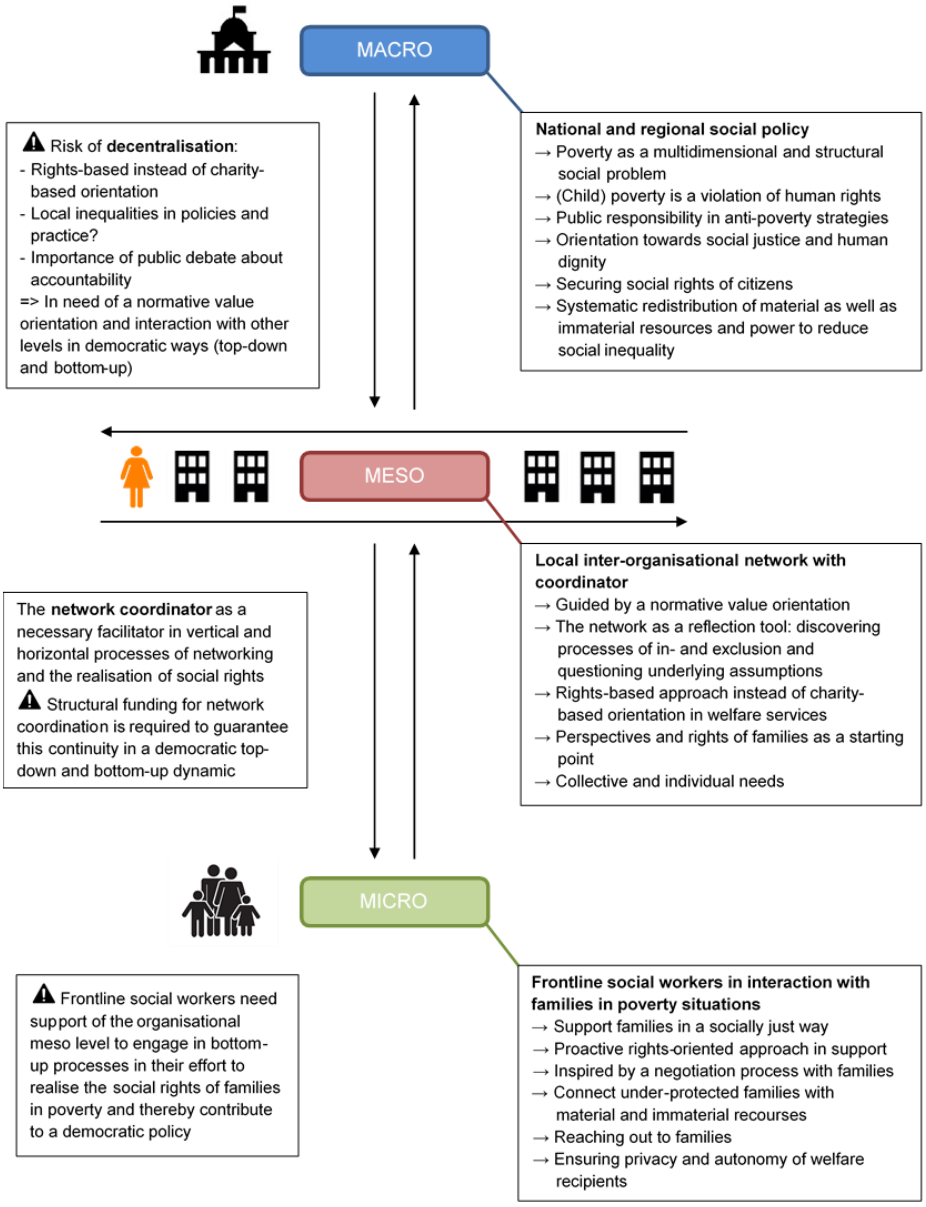
6.5 Bottom-up and top-down processes in networks combating (child) poverty

The use of and reflection on a normative framework in local networks that aim to combat (child) poverty, can be translated to different practice and policy levels. Based on our findings, we argue that a framework that centralises the commitment to pursue social justice, human dignity and social rights for citizens, including families in poverty situations, could be differentiated on a macro, meso, and micro level. Therefore, we developed a scheme (see figure 1 below) that visualises the meaning of such a value framework at these three levels, as well as the need for interaction between the levels.

In the scheme we situate horizontal and vertical processes. The horizontal arrows in the figure at the meso level refer to processes and dynamics of

networking between organisations and sectors at a local level. The meso level questions how anti-poverty strategies can be developed in the relationship between local social policy and local welfare actors that participate in the network structure, that is often coordinated by a network coordinator. However, we found that in a context of combating (child) poverty, stimulating local actors to collaborate and to develop anti-poverty strategies (on a horizontal level) to realise the social rights of families in poverty, cannot be separated from the commitment of the government and interventions of frontline workers (the vertical level). This insight is particularly valuable in a decentralization movement to the local level. In this study, we stress the vertical processes between the macro, meso, and micro level. In the figure, the vertical dynamic relates to how anti-poverty strategies should be developed in democratic ways in the relationship between the macro level (social policies developed by the government), the meso level (the local organizational and inter-organisational level, coordinated by a network coordinator), and the micro level (frontline social work and welfare actors in interaction with children and families in poverty situations). This dynamic indicates that both a top-down and bottom-up approach is required in the realization of social rights. In addition, we argue that the network coordinator could be a crucial actor to ensure these vertical processes, as well as the horizontal processes between local actors, to guarantee the democratic character in developing and implementing social policy. In the next section we will discuss this scheme in depth by the development of policy recommendations on the macro, meso, and micro level.

Figure1: A normative framework in inter-organisational networks that aim to combat (child) poverty



6.6 Policy recommendations

Based on our research findings and the figure above, we elaborate on the policy recommendations and structured these according to a differentiation between the commitment to pursue social justice, human dignity and social rights for citizens, including families in poverty situations, on a vertical level (macro, meso and micro level) and on a horizontal level (meso level).

6.6.1 Macro level

On a macro level, the commitment to develop anti-poverty strategies requires that welfare states continue to accept their public responsibility in the development of anti-poverty strategies that are established according to a social justice orientation (Boone, Roets & Roose, 2018). This commitment requires that welfare states critically pursue a constitutive rights-based notion of mutual solidarity and collective responsibility in securing the rights of citizens, being rooted in the idea of social security and social protection (Dean, 2015). These principles imply that poverty cannot be reduced to an individual problem, but is perceived as a structural societal problem that requires social policies that contribute to a systematic redistribution of resources and power in their efforts to reduce rather than create and reproduce social inequalities (Ridge & Wright, 2008). To recapitulate, it is therefore important to situate the emphasis of the Flemish as well as national government on the development of local, inter-organisational networks in that search for social justice. The decentralisation of public responsibilities to the local level does not prevent the necessity of a continuous, democratic and public debate about situations of poverty. The stimulation of inter-organisational networking therefore requires a normative value orientation. The public responsibility of the welfare state to realise social justice and human dignity requires the realisation of social rights, and thus both a top-down and bottom-up commitment to do so.

In that vein, it requires that the national and Flemish government are aware of the fact that the decentralization of a public policy mandate to the local level may create social inequalities between local authorities, if there is no democratic debate and accountability of the locally developed policies and practices to the national or Flemish level. Conversely, the macro level should be held accountable for their decisions, actions and motivations in relation to the realisation of social justice and human dignity. Ife and Fiske (2006) assert that “rights only make sense if there are corresponding responsibilities for others to protect, secure or realise those rights” (p. 297). The decentralisation movement

may disguise the role and responsibility of the central government by directing the focus to the local level. Thereby, also redistributive policies may become more camouflaged and structural lacks in provision for families remain unsolved.

In order to combat the multidimensional problem of (child) poverty, it is necessary to combine material and immaterial support for families according to an approach that takes into account multiple life domains, such as housing, employment, health and leisure time participation. Our research shows, however, that also funding mechanisms on the national and Flemish government level can enable a rights-oriented provision of welfare services on the local level. Yet local inter-organisational networks are often funded on a temporary and project-oriented basis, which may disrupt the long-term and complex work that needs to be established on the local level. Developing a dialogue and sustainable strategies between different sectors and organisations takes time and effort. Additionally, this process is not static but evolves in a dynamic way according to the challenges it is confronted with. Structural funding is, in that sense, necessary to guarantee the continuity of the coordination and implementation of local inter-organisational networks, and to enable the development of a rights-oriented vision and practice.

6.6.2 Meso level

The meso level represents the local governmental and organisational level. This level also connects individual support of families with broader social and political structures and decisions. In relation to the normative value orientation of local inter-organisational networks, Warin (2007) argues that inter-organisational networking often seems to be more concerned with papering over the cracks than with reconstructing the foundations. In the context of this restructuring of child and family provisions in Flanders, the question particularly remains "whether social work organisations question their own underlying assumptions and rationales rather than focusing on organizational reform" (Roose, 2006, p. 4–5). Accordingly, we argue that a normative framework is crucial, to avoid a depoliticizing of the public realm of our welfare arrangements. As such, the necessary public debate surrounding the social and political features of social work, relating to the part played by social structures and political forces in producing, amongst others, situations of poverty and social inequality, easily disappears (Roets et al., 2016). The network coordinator may be a necessary facilitator to support vertical and horizontal processes of networking and the realisation of social rights. In this sense, structural funding for network

coordination is required to guarantee this continuity in a democratic top-down and bottom-up dynamic.

In our view, the challenge for social work is to engage with a rights-based understanding of child and family services, in which rights are constituted through the naming and claiming of needs and concerns of children and parents in poverty situations that need to be projected in the public forum of political debate (Dean, 2013). Taking the perspective of families is necessary as a starting point to develop shared goals. It could be helpful to start from this perspective that puts the rights and concerns of families prior to the needs of the (individual) partner organisations. This is also a useful starting point when partners do not find a common goal or consensus. It is a strategy to transcend the self-interest of organisations.

In that sense, we argue that coordinating and shaping the local inter-organisational network should be considered as a reflection tool for each of the organisations and frontline welfare actors involved, as well as for the inter-organisational network as a whole. We found that moments of consensus and dissensus are valuable and interesting to reflect about the network's functioning. In addition it is important to know what the network covers and where the network is limited, since welfare recipients might fall through the cracks of local welfare provision. By bringing local partners together, the construction of the network could form an instrument where there is collectively thought and discussed about the support that is offered on a local level and to who this is offered. Inter-organisational networking provides the possibility to work on the one hand with individual needs of parents and on the other hand to work on collective needs that are shared by a group of citizens in the community. In that sense, forming a network between local partners may lead to discovering the gaps and the overlaps in the supply and to stimulating the creation of continuous support for families. So next to making the necessary services and resources available for families (for example child care, housing and employment), it is also important to make the supply accessible and to search for and overcome barriers.

6.6.3 Micro level

To support families who are isolated and under-protected in a socially just way, Marston and McDonald (2012) assert that, while making an analysis of poverty situations and interrelated social problems, the role of the frontline social worker in the political sphere is about a political engagement towards social justice, acting as an interpreter and mediator for competing worldviews. Networks have

the potential to make connections with families, to bring them more easily into contact with formal and informal and material as well as immaterial sources of (social) support. In a context of poverty reduction, frontline social workers could play a significant role in supporting and informing families proactively. This is also crucial in relation to realising social rights. Outreach practices seem significant in making connection with the concerns and life worlds of both children and parents in family situations. In that vein, gaining an in-depth understanding of the meaning-making and strategies of families, including both children and parents, in poverty situations seems crucial. The realisation of rights requires that frontline social workers do not only try to understand the perspective of families in poverty situations to explore whether they experience the network and welfare actors interventions as supportive, but also interpret and negotiate with families whether their strategies of meaning-making are in line with a social justice orientation (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009; Roets, Roose & De Bie, 2013). Families might be alienated from what is socially just, and this requires a respectful negotiation and sometimes a confrontation of worldviews (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). In that sense, attention for low threshold contact points in the community to get in contact with families might serve as important strategies. However, if local networks combating (child) poverty want to contribute to a socially just society, they should go beyond merely referring and fulfilling a dispatching function between partners. By starting from a rights-oriented client perspective, the networks are better able to connect to the experienced needs and concerns of clients, and at the same time strive for a more just society. When the focus and supply of networks are pre-structured, there is a risk that the meaning-making and life worlds of parents and children in poverty situations are discredited and dismissed which could fail to be responsive to a multi-dimensional problem such as (child) poverty.

In the development of responsive practices, however, taking care of privacy and professional secrecy in local networks is crucial. In a context of networking it is important to be transparent and to work in confidential ways to keep the trust of families and to treat them with recognition and respect. Privacy must be respected and the information should be dealt with in an ethical and socially just manner. Ensuring anonymity needs to be treated with care, particularly in small municipalities. The autonomy and agency of families must be ensured in practices of exchanging private information, wherein attention should go to creating a dialogue with families.

What frontline social workers do at the micro level, should also be seen as part of a vertical process, because frontline social workers need support of the

organisational meso-level to engage in bottom-up processes in their effort to realise the social rights of families in poverty and thereby contribute to a democratic policy.

6.7 The position of the researcher

As a researcher, the theme of poverty and poverty reduction was very dear to me. Since I was a third year student at the university, I volunteered in a self-advocacy organisation of poor families. In this organisation, the voice of people in poverty is what leads the organisation and its functioning. These experiences gave me an insight in the lifeworld of people in poverty and the social injustice they encounter. It made me more conscious and made me reflect about processes of (social) exclusion and inequality. In addition, it served the opportunity to connect to and see how individual stories and situations were always interrelated to structural social and political dimensions, which is important to consider in a context of combating (child) poverty.

My past experiences in this field motivated me to critically look for which practices could be supportive and desirable for families in poverty situations and which practices are not. In a context of inter-organisational networking, my perspective was strongly focused on the subject that guided the collaboration, namely (child) poverty. Therefore, a strong reflection to the level of families was made, together with the search for their meaning making. At the same time, being in a position that researches (child) poverty sometimes made me feel uncomfortable and insecure, because it made me conscious about how research and knowledge development is inevitably a practice of power. Due to this ethical question, I wondered if I, as a researcher, could frame, interpret and conclude the research data and findings in a right way. Discussions with other researchers and practitioners in the field helped to reflect on and question my own position, the research findings, their interpretations and to not take this for granted. At the same time, my background as a volunteer in this field supported me because it allowed me to better see, analyse and understand the complexities of the research phenomenon. It also triggered the critical voice inside me during the interviews and participant observations, reflecting on what these answers, discussions or practices could mean for families in poverty.

This study and the choices that were made, have an impact on the societal debate about the subject the study is dealing with. It is important to acknowledge that social work research is inherently normative, rather than value free. My

position and perspective is rooted in the discipline of social work, thus the research focus as well as the findings and conclusions are situated in this framework. The attention going to core principles of social work (such as social justice, human dignity and social rights) originated from my educational background, the INCh-project, my experiences from being part of a self-advocacy organisation of people in poverty, the work of colleagues and the practices that developed in the field. Social work research always intervenes in (and possibly changes) existing assumptions about social problems, and therefore it is also politically charged (Bouverne-De Bie, 2015; Roets, Roose & De Bie, 2013). The research and its outcomes are not neutral (for practice and policy) in a way that the production of knowledge and, by consequence, the recommendations that are formulated, were also influenced by the practices that were chosen to study. In the introduction of this dissertation, I clarified the (theoretical) perspective and research methods to open and subject my perspective to further scrutiny.

6.8 Limitations and strategies for further research

We experienced that a network is a complex construction, that is deployed for a complex problem. It was difficult to get a grip on the processes and dynamics of inter-organisational networks, because of the many different partners connected to each other in these networks, with each their own specific background, organisations and sectors. The actual processes of collaboration and exchange of information are organic and take place between many different actors and may carry different characteristics. They are also dynamic and may change over time. The network itself and its concrete processes are by consequence large and complex and it was challenging and time-consuming to capture these. In addition, the development and functioning of the local networks were all unique, as well as their contexts and communities. The participant observation was a helpful method to merge into the networks and to get a grip on their specific identities. The observations took place during network meetings and activities, but this was still limited in the sense that the researcher was not able to observe many of the (informal) individual contacts between the partners in their daily practices. To complement the observation, the qualitative interviews could provide a more general view on concrete experiences and reflections of the actors in the network on a certain moment in time. It is worthwhile to mention that we performed the interviews with all the partners from the same network in the same period, because we noticed that the networks were dynamic over time. Still, these networks are open-ended, dynamic and organic in nature which made

it complex to research. We were limited in the amount of interviews and within the three networks, it was not possible to interview all parents, all local policy makers and all the network partners, particularly in large networks. Moreover, in a network it is also methodologically challenging to draw a line between who is part of the network, as these boundaries are often vague.

A second limitation is that we only interviewed parents and not their children. In researching a network that aims to combat child poverty, it could be argued that children should be questioned about their meaning of the network interventions (Ife & Morley, 2002). We did not want to underestimate the agency and reflections of children, we chose to interview parents because they play an important role in providing material and immaterial resources for their family (children) and will developed certain strategies to seek for extra support if these resources are not sufficient. And even if strategies are in the first place more targeted to children, parents are very often the intermediate stop if the network actors want to engage with their children (who are minors). It could be interesting to actively scrutinise the meaning making of children in future research.

Thirdly, the networks and their development is dynamic and therefore it might be interesting to further research on the long term how families experience the networks interventions and constructions. As this research is cross sectional, a longitudinal approach could be suggested for further research. In addition, it would be worthwhile to research the effectuation of their social rights. The meaning making and subjective feeling of families could also be complemented with a study of what these networks actually mean for the material needs and income of families. Although these networks aimed to combat (child) poverty, this research did not attempt to quantify and measure their poverty reducing effects. Of course, in order to research the network's influence on families' material wellbeing, it should also be acknowledged that redistributive policies dominantly take place on a higher political scale that transcends the local level.

Considering the practices of information sharing, it would be interesting to explore in more depth concrete cases on how stories (information) are constructed and deconstructed and how they flow within the networks. In this way, we may discover how the narratives of families travel through the network structure and how this journey of information is shaped by both social workers and families in poverty situations. In addition, it would be interesting to see how this connects to interventions and more importantly to how the travelling of the story of a family (and in what form) relates to the realisation of social rights of citizens. This could provide a more in-depth view into the dialogical nature of

constructing narratives between social workers and families given a certain situation or time. Simultaneously, this perspective could provide a more detailed look on how the field of tension between support and control and the field of tension between discretion and regulation is dealt with in concrete situations. Information is a very powerful instrument, but unequal power relationships exist between families and social workers. However, it will be challenging to search for and see the information flows between different actors, because this could be very intrusive. Additionally, information sharing practices who aim a proactive realisation of social rights could be researched in the future.

Next, we often questioned the role of the coordinator when we discussed our findings. The position of the coordinator may be crucial in collectively reflecting on the network's functioning and interventions. We argue that the coordinator can play a crucial role in developing horizontal processes of collaboration between diverse organisations and sectors to combat (child) poverty and realise the rights of families. However, this could be even more relevant in vertical processes of combating (child) poverty, particularly regarding our research focus. Implementing a rights-based approach is to be found at the macro, meso, and micro level and the coordinator could play an important role in ensuring these top-down and bottom-up processes between these levels. We suggest to research how the position of the network coordinator could play a role in realising a democratic and socially just social policy.

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Summary

1. Introduction

On different policy levels, as well as in research, a growing consensus has emerged to prioritise the fight against child poverty. Child poverty is a multidimensional problem and a wicked issue that requires a policy response in many different life domains (De Corte, Verschuere, Roets & De Bie, 2017; Rittel & Webber, 1973). However, the historic fragmentation of social services is a major difficulty affecting policies, social workers and families in situations of poverty. This fragmentation occurs on different levels including sector, age, target group, type of organisation (e.g. private or public) and policy level (Geinger, Van Haute, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2015). Many attempts have been made to overcome the fragmentation of services, notably stimulating the construction of inter-organisational networks with special attention for families in poverty (Allen, 2003; De Corte, Verschuere, Roets & De Bie, 2017; Frost, 2005; Hood, 2014; Provan & Sebastian, 1998). In Western and Northern Europe, we find examples of integrated working for families with (young) children (Adolfsen, Martinussen, Thyrhaug & Vedeler, 2012; Department for Education, 2014; Kekkonen, Montonen & Viitala, 2012) and this trend is also noticeable in Belgium with, for example, the development of local networks combating (child) poverty.

We studied three local networks of provision for families that aim to combat (child) poverty. Despite the emphasis on inter-organisational networking and integration in the field of social work, the understanding and implementation of inter-organisational networks remains ambiguous (Frost, 2005). Different approaches to inter-organisational networking indeed seem to cover different effects, realities, organisational and strategic configurations and methods of working together (Statham, 2011; Messenger, 2012; Nolan & Nuttall, 2013). Networks may have different shapes and strategies, although they share the same goal of combating (child) poverty. In that way, network dynamics and functioning depend on network construction.

A shift in terminology is noticeable in poverty-reducing strategies, where attention to and labelling of policy and practice has become more child-centred, notably shifting from ‘poverty’ to ‘child poverty’. Several actors in the field and on a policy level have warned about the counterproductive consequences that may be associated with this approach, such as the risk of blaming parents (Koning Boudewijnstichting, 2017; Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2015; Vandenbroucke, Vinck & Guio, 2014). In this study, we argue that poverty is a

complex and multidimensional problem that is characterised by a lack of both material and immaterial resources (Lister, 2004; McKeown, Haase & Pratschke, 2014). The welfare of children and the realisation of social rights are therefore always connected to the welfare of the family as a whole, meaning that the needs of parents and children cannot be separated from each other (Lister, 2006). Social work practices and network interventions need to be responsive and reflexive in their (collective) provision of support for families in poverty (Anthony, King & Austin, 2011). This holistic approach is characterised by connections to the multidimensional and complex nature of the problem, rather than to the artificial fragmentation in sectors and organisations (Beresford & Croft, 2001). In addition, the concerns of families in poverty are often situated in many life domains, such as housing, employment and health, and are often linked to each other (Broadhead, Meleady & Delgado, 2008). Next to redistributive measures, it is necessary to guarantee qualitative social services for parents and children to alleviate the negative effects of poverty (Vandenbroeck, 2013).

To research the meaning of inter-organisational networking in the combat against (child) poverty, we also focused on the exchange and protection of private information. The theme serves as an example to illustrate the complexity of how practices and interventions may be highly effective from an organisational perspective, but may, conversely, be undesirable from the service users' perspective. The interests of network partners and families could differ from or even oppose each other (De Corte, Verschuere & De Bie, 2017). Sharing information and documentation is one of the prominent drivers for creating inter-organisational networks (Parton, 2008; Reamer, 2005). Much attention has been devoted to the improvement of communication and sharing of information to enhance the continuity of service delivery (Allen, 2003; Anthony et al., 2011; Statham, 2011) and to avoid the striking gaps and overlaps in service provision for families (McKeown et al., 2014; Warin, 2007). However, dealing with private information is never neutral. Social work is positioned between the public and private spheres, which causes a tension between care and control (Lorenz, 2008; Spratt & Callen, 2004) and in a context of increasing information sharing this tension may intensify.

2. Research problem and research questions

Measuring and conceptualising the effectiveness and efficiency in the integration of social services is one component of integration and networking evaluation. This governance perspective, often found in sociological and social policy literature, tends to look at the system or organisational level. It focuses on how

integrated networks are organised or coordinated and analyses interactions between organisations and actors involved in the network, but this approach does not necessarily inform us about the meaning-making of families reliant on these networks (De Corte, Verschuere & De Bie, 2017). Research in this vein labels the degree of integration and collaboration as a scale on which effectiveness can be expressed, indicating that effective integration will translate to more effective social services (Provan & Milward, 1995; Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2012; Rosenheck et al., 1998). However, in literature and policy, collaboration effectiveness does not always translate into whether these networks are also meaningful for their objective, namely, combating (child) poverty. The normative question about the criteria to express network effectiveness is often marginalised (Kenis & Provan, 2009). Nevertheless, effectiveness is a multi-dimensional concept that could cause a tension between effectiveness at the organisational level and at the service user level (De Corte, Verschuere & De Bie, 2017; Provan & Kenis, 2008). Any decision about these criteria is a normative decision (De Corte, Verschuere & De Bie, 2017). For wicked issues such as (child) poverty, Rittel and Webber (1973) argue that it is difficult to find objective criteria to evaluate the possible solution(s). This could be problematic, particularly because a sense of euphoria surrounds these networks, which implies the belief that inter-organisational networks will always be beneficial.

We therefore adopted a central research focus on the meaning and quality of social work practices developed in a context of inter-organisational networking that aims to fight the social problem of (child) poverty. Network functioning should also be related to a position that is never neutral and is based on socially constructed problem definitions. All inter-organisational networks share the same goal of combating (child) poverty, but enjoy much autonomy in shaping the structures, visions and interventions towards families; thus major differences emerge among the networks. Therefore, an important issue is to explore how these local inter-organisational networks and their interventions are actually implemented, legitimised and experienced in practice by parents and social workers. As a result, the literature on effectiveness needs to be complemented by studies that look into users' and social workers' meaning-making within these networks (De Corte, Verschuere & De Bie, 2017). It is not clear if families' needs and concerns are better addressed when agencies integrate their activities (Provan, 1997). Therefore, the evaluation of networks in deciding what 'works', should always be connected to the meaning-making of the participating actors, particularly taking into account the perspectives of families in poverty (Gillies, 2005; Walker et al., 2013). For this reason, we embraced the discussion about

the experienced quality of social services in inter-organisational networks aiming to combat (child) poverty and how this relates to the realisation of social welfare rights. If quality is interpreted as the responsiveness of public services to the concerns and questions of families, this means that quality is a concept that is constructed in interaction with parents and their children (Beresford & Croft, 2001; Mooney & Munton, 1998; Roets, Roose, Schiettecat & Vandenbroeck, 2016). We explored if and how a local network could answer families' questions and concerns and questioned if the families felt supported. The welfare state should develop a differentiated and high-quality supply of social services offered to all its citizens (Bouverne-De Bie, 2015; Roose, 2006; Vandenbroeck, 2013), but despite the current emphasis on inter-organisational networking in provision for families, empirical research from the service-user perspective is scarce (Atkinson, Jones & Lamont, 2007).

This led to the following **research questions**:

> (1) How do local actors shape and give meaning to local inter-organisational networks that aim to combat (child) poverty?
>
> (2) How could local inter-organisational networks contribute to the quality of social provision from the perspective of social workers and families in poverty?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research context

For this study, we considered three local networks aiming to combat (child) poverty that are funded by either the Flemish or national government in Belgium. To select the networks, we constructed inclusion and diversity criteria. Below, we provide a short description of the selected networks:

Network A

This network was built around individual support trajectories for families in poverty who had at least one child between the ages of zero and three years old. The network also organised monthly meetings with parents. Each trajectory started with a mini-rights research that is used to check whether parents and children received all the rights and benefits they are entitled to in many different life domains (e.g. housing, employment, leisure time, education, income and mobility). The project emphasised combining material and immaterial resources

to combat (child) poverty. The partners are represented by OCMW, Kind & Gezin, CKG, CAW, Welzijnsschakels and Lus vzw. In addition, a family support worker was employed to coordinate the individual support trajectories. The project is coordinated by the OCMW and the funding made it possible to employ a family support worker. The network functioned at a micro (family) level (with case discussions) and at the level of the steering committee where decisions were made for the network as a whole. The realisation of social rights was mentioned as an explicit goal and responsibility of the project.

Network B

In this rural municipality, several projects were clustered to form a network combating (child) poverty and providing preventive parenting support. With the creation of a 'House of the Child' (in Dutch 'Huis van het Kind') the network aimed to provide a physical meeting place and contact point for families with children in the municipality. The network consists of numerous network partners (starting with 60 individual members) from sectors such as education, (preventive) parenting support, leisure time, health care and welfare. Several network interventions were organised (e.g. play and meeting moments for parents and children, information moments, consultations and trajectories for pregnant woman) and offered to all families in the municipality. The local municipality took on a directing role and project funds were primarily used to pay for staff to coordinate the network.

Network C

Network C represents a project wherein actors from education and welfare (OCMW) worked closely together in the school context. The project started because teachers and caretakers at school were confronted with many complex questions from parents and children in poverty, which addressed issues broader than the educational context (e.g. homelessness, administration, jurisdiction, work-related problems and debts). This network aimed to strengthen the link between the sectors of education and welfare on different levels with the goal of combating (child) poverty. The aim was also to detect and overcome (structural) barriers that make social services inaccessible for parents and children. This project allows material questions and problems to be addressed more often when they are discovered at school. The OCMW was the primary coordinator of the project, but the steering committee was represented by the 'Huis van het Kind' wherein three local policymakers were included from the fields of education, welfare and poverty reduction.

3.2 Methods of data collection

In this study we used different data collection methods that can be broken down into three different levels: the policy level, the social work level and the service user level. By bringing together and triangulating multiple perspectives from several cases, a better and deeper understanding of the research subject was pursued (Patton, 2002).

- At the local policy level, a document analysis (Bowen, 2009) was conducted, together with semi-structured interviews with local policymakers. This study was mainly used to get more background information on the local and social policy context in which the network was situated. Researching at the local policy level also contributed to a better understanding of the specific network dynamics, experiences of social workers participating in the network and experiences of the parents. We looked at the way (child) poverty reduction strategies were performed and how they were situated in local social policy. Also central in this study was the formation of inter-organisational networks and collaboration in the municipality.
- At the social worker level, we wanted to gain a better insight into network functioning and how social workers experience and reflect on this. We made use of qualitative interviews to capture the complexity of perspectives held by the participating actors (Yin, 2008) and performed a participant observation (Spradley, 1980). The participant observation included meetings of network partners (e.g. network gatherings and case discussions) and network activities for families (e.g. parent meetings and open consultations). The interviews focussed on their meaning-making of network functioning, combating (child) poverty, the support they (collectively) provided to families in poverty situations and information sharing.
- At the level of families in poverty, we questioned parents about how they experienced the network interventions and if and how they considered this supportive. We aimed to examine what was valuable for parents and what worked for them. We also discussed subjects including their experienced needs and concerns, how they got in contact with one or more of the partners, if the support they received was supportive, and the use of private information.

The research proposal was approved by the ethical committee of the faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University. In addition, informed

consent was systematically obtained. The number of interviews and participant observations are shown below. The numbers vary across the three cases because each of the networks has their own unique construction and functioning. The number of interviews was, for example, dependent on the number of actors and families participating in the network and their willingness to participate in the research. The number of participant observations was dependent on the number of organised network meetings.

	Network A	**Network B**	**Network C**
Interviews with local policy makers	5	6	5
Participant observation	10	13	18
Interviews with social workers	8 + 1 focus group	8	7
Interviews with parents	11 + 1 focus group	4 + 8 (exploratory)	2

3.3 Method of data analysis

The data of this study were analysed through qualitative content analysis (Krippendorf, 1980). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) defined qualitative content analysis as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p. 1278). It was therefore important to transcribe the interviews literally. This is an approach that increases the researcher’s understanding and knowledge of a particular social phenomenon and may provide new insights about it (Krippendorf, 1980). It is argued that, for this reason, qualitative content analysis is a good fit for case study research (Kohlbacher, 2006). In general, content analysis is used to make sense of a large volume of qualitative material (textual documents), and it attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings (Patton, 2002, p. 453). To analyse a large quantity of qualitative data, a qualitative content analysis is used to grasp and cover the most important meanings, connections and complexities (Kohlbacher, 2006).

Afterwards the data material is read very thoroughly, and an inductive or deductive approach was considered to develop initial categories and codes (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). In this study, we combined both strategies throughout the different chapters. In a deductive approach, we linked our research material with previously formulated, theoretically derived aspects of analysis (Mayring, 2000), to validate or enrich existing theories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). With an inductive approach, categories are derived step-by-step from the textual material and data taken into account (Mayring, 2000). In an inductive or conventional approach to content analysis, open coding is used to create abstraction and to allow categories to flow from the data (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This approach builds from empirical observations and evidence towards more abstract concepts and theories (Neuman, 2011). Qualitative content analysis is not a linear process, because it is necessary to go back to the data and examine whether the categories are carefully formed and revised in the data analysis process by using feedback loops (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000).

4. Research findings and conclusions

4.1 A normative framework for local networks combating child poverty

We argued that the functioning of the inter-organisational networks we studied should also be related to the position of social work that is never neutral and is based on socially constructed problem definitions (De Corte, Verschuere, Roets & De Bie, 2017; Mestrum, 2011). Next to the need to include the perspective of participating actors and families to explore what 'working' may mean, we argued with De Corte, Verschuere, Roets and De Bie (2017), that inter-organisational local networks need a normative framework as a touchstone and guideline for their actions, goals and interventions. Since poverty is considered a violation of human rights (Ife & Morley, 2002), child poverty should be approached as a normative social and political issue that is important to be aware of when researching it (Roets, Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2013). The inspiration for such a normative framework could be found in the international definition of social work, as it serves as a value base for networks that aim to combat the social problem of (child) poverty. The global definition of social work was formulated and approved in 2014 by the International Federation of Social Workers, and the principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity are central (IFSW, 2014). It is important that social workers are aware of how policies are framed and how value-driven ideas (sometimes taken for granted) and social and political positions are embedded in social welfare policies (Cousins, 2013). The open-endedness of starting from the individual

needs and concerns of families faces the danger that social work will lose itself in arbitrariness (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). This risk can be countered by the use of a normative framework to guide practices based on shared principles.

4.2 Using a rights-based approach

Social rights are an important instrument for the realisation of social justice and human dignity. In the context of poverty reduction policies shifting to focus on child poverty, a rights-based approach recognises that the wellbeing of children is always connected to the wellbeing of their family and that material and immaterial support cannot be separated (Mestrum, 2011; Lister, 2006; Sandbaek, 2013). In two of the networks we studied, a rights-based approach was explicitly used to guide network vision and action. Still, it was noticeable that although the network partners tried to provide support in life domains such as housing, employment and health care, the leverage for structural change was limited. Moreover, the realisation of social rights cannot be claimed, but requires governmental commitment (Bouverne-De Bie, 2015; Dean, 2000; Hubeau, 1995). These rights become very vulnerable when social policy does not pursue a redistribution of financial means (King, 2000; Rigaux, 1994). Thus, the way in which social rights are formed and conceptualised is not strictly fixed. Social rights can be interpreted in a minimalist way or in a maximalist way, where these rights are used as a lever to contribute to (the right to) human dignity and change the ruling social relationships (Bouverne-De Bie, 2015; Hubeau, 1995; Maeseele, 2012).

A good practice we encountered in our research was the ‘mini rights research’. This mini rights research lists all the rights of families (parents and children) on a checklist and covers the life domains of income, housing and environment, transportation and mobility, education, health and leisure time. This instrument serves as a basis for the support of and negotiation with families. With regard to the realisation of the right to social services and other social rights, it is very meaningful to have the OCMW as public actor (with a public responsibility) in the network (De Bie & Vandenbussche, 2016).

4.3 Combating (child) poverty at the local level

This study focussed on local-level practices, which determined our findings because it influenced the encountered challenges, limitations and chances. Combating (child) poverty asks for a structural approach, because an approach that focuses on supporting better parenting skills would stress a one-sided and

individual responsibility for parents (Gillies, 2005; Schiettecat et al., 2015). It is risky and undesirable to approach a social problem such as (child) poverty with a pedagogical solution or answer, because it situates the cause of the social problem with the individuals that suffer from it (Bouverne-De Bie, 2015; Vandenbroeck, Coussée & Bradt, 2010). On the local level, it is also necessary to acknowledge the structural social inequalities and life circumstances confronting families in poverty (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009), which could help contribute to the realisation of social justice, human dignity and social rights. However, the (financial) instruments and the responsibility to combat inequality between individuals and in structures go way beyond the local level and definitely require a collective effort and responsibility. Redistributive policies that could tackle inequality and social exclusion of vulnerable families are mainly located on the federal and Flemish governmental level. Social work is strongly dependent on structural policy measures (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). Our research showed that the local level does not possess enough (financial) resources and power to meet families' needs. Still, the focus on combating poverty at the local level risks narrowing down the political debate about poverty at higher governmental levels. As already mentioned, the interaction with other (and higher) policy levels is crucial to keep the debate going about reducing (child) poverty. Decentralisation shifts the directing role from the Flemish and central government to the local level, but this is not always accompanied by a shift in leverage to the local level to make structural changes possible.

4.4 Ensuring top-down and bottom-up processes

As already mentioned, the use of and reflection on a normative framework in local networks aiming to combat (child) poverty is needed, but we additionally argue that efforts to pursue social justice, human dignity and social rights for citizens could be differentiated on a micro, meso and macro level. We situate horizontal and vertical processes in these three different levels. The processes and dynamics of networking between partner organisations, often led by a coordinator, could be situated at the meso level, where anti-poverty strategies can be developed on a horizontal level. However, we found that in the context of combating (child) poverty, stimulating local actors to collaborate and to develop anti-poverty strategies (on a horizontal level) cannot be separated from the macro and micro levels. This insight is particularly valuable in a decentralisation movement. The vertical dynamic relates to how anti-poverty strategies should be developed in democratic ways in the relationship between the macro level (social policies developed by the government), the meso level (the local organizational and inter-organisational level, coordinated by a network coordinator) and the

micro level (frontline social work and welfare actors interacting with children and families in poverty situations). This dynamic indicates that both (democratic) top-down and bottom-up approaches are required for the realisation of social rights, and we argue that the network coordinator is a crucial actor to ensure these processes. The discussion of public responsibility and accountability also needs to be ensured between the three levels. The normative framework and (pro-active) rights-based approach could serve as a guide to inspire the negotiation with families in poverty. Thus, it is also important to stimulate the persuasion of a democratic policy on the micro level.

4.5 The network as a reflection tool

In our research we found that local networks have the potential to reflect on the existing offering and construction of common actions and interventions. Inter-organisational networks provide the opportunity to collectively (re)think and reflect about the social problem of poverty and how this could be tackled at the local level. In this sense, the network could be used as a forum for debate to define social problems and discuss visions (De Corte, Verschuere, Roets & De Bie, 2017). The network provides a structure where different perspectives could be confronted. This was particularly clear in researching network dynamics, where we discovered three fields of tension in the attempt to build a local network: (a) selective vs. universal provision, (b) instrumental vs. lifeworld oriented approaches and (c) child- vs. family-oriented strategies. It was noticeable that partners defended different interests and visions, but that these positions could also strongly differ across the networks. These strategies also changed over time. On the strategic level, we found that the dissensus between partners (e.g. regarding target group or sector) rendered processes of inclusion and exclusion of families more visible. The moments of dissensus showed where and how the networks struggled to reach families (in poverty), and showed which groups were left unserved in the existing offerings or in the organised interventions of the network. Recognising the network's excluding effects is valuable, because this may enable the formation of future actions and strategies at the local social policy level that could target families not (yet) reached by the network's interventions.

4.6 The need for a democratic approach

A democratic approach to the debate about network effectiveness is valuable. The evaluation of network effectiveness is complex, as the term may have different meanings for different stakeholders and could be evaluated on different

levels (Provan & Milward, 2001; Kenis & Provan, 2009). Yet, the democratic value and potential of these discussions between partners could be expanded, particularly in the attempt to cover a plurality of the concerns and wishes of parents and children in developing strategies to combat (child) poverty (Roose et al., 2013). Parents should be included in the construction and defining process, otherwise they will be excluded before the interventions are even performed. Democratic debate is necessary to discuss the meaning of what 'works' and for whom (Vandenbroeck, Roets & Roose, 2012). The participation of families in the processes of defining, developing, monitoring and evaluation could be approached not only as a route to quality, but also as a measure of it (Beresford & Croft, 2001). By acknowledging a strong dialogical dynamic between social workers and families, the discussions of effectiveness may become less self-evident and more embedded in the lifeworld of service users. Our study showed that local networks can create subtle forms of surveillance (Jeffs & Smith, 2001; Van Haute, Roets, Alasuutari & Vandenbroeck, 2018) and therefore Notredame (1998) argues that we should not take service integration for granted, as service users may also benefit from a more fragmented organisation of services. He asserts that families' agency to manipulate decreases when services are more integrated, emphasising the fact that the integration of support and interventions should never be coercive.

4.7 Sharing and protecting private information

Our study showed that dealing with private information in networks is not a clear-cut and obvious given. Sharing or protecting information is guided by formal procedures and regulation, but also needs interpretation and judgement according to the specific situation. It was often mentioned that, as a social worker, one needed to have a good share of common sense when applying regulations on professional secrecy in specific situations. Despite the fact that deciding to protect or share information is seen as an individual task, a value-based and commonly shared framework is needed for this process. It is noticeable that dealing with private information is a strongly normative matter and therefore requires an ethical frame of reference based on collectively shared values that exceeds the frame of reference of the individual social worker. Again, we refer to the international definition of social work, as it could represent the central finality to shape individual decisions and interpretations based on principles of social justice and human dignity. In line with our view that a network aiming to combat (child) poverty needs a normative reflection tool, this could also be applied to information-sharing practices (e.g. case discussions). Practices of dealing with information could be subjected to discussion and scrutiny by other

network partners, together with how these practices influence the realisation of social rights.

Social work is positioned between the private and public spheres, which causes a tension or dual mandate between support and control of the private lives of families in poverty (Lorenz, 2008; Spratt & Callan, 2004). The political discourse on sharing private information aims to protect children from harm, prevent terrorism and enhance safety, which increases the pressure on social workers (Pithouse et al., 2011). However, it is key that privacy is treated with respect, because revealing private information should always be considered as a cost that families pay (Bouverne-De Bie, 2015). The political legitimacy of intervening in families' lives may become more individualistic and protective (Parton, 2008) rather than more socially just and equal (Featherstone, Broadhurst & Holt, 2012). The finality of social work interventions in the exchange of information may be supportive, but it may also be punitive. Sharing confidential information could be used to detect and prevent social fraud. However, international studies show that not taking up social rights and benefits is much higher than social fraud (Dubois, 2017). An opposite example that illustrates a possible finality in network interventions could be found in the search for the automatic and proactive realisation of social rights that is also dependent on the exchange of confidential information. The use of information about families in poverty could be used for different goals and finalities, which strongly shapes this balance between support and control. In these situations, it is important to discover and be aware of the normative framework that guides the rationales and interventions.

An instrumental approach is problematic in the context of inter-organisational networking when information exchange and contacts between social workers and finalities of interventions are not transparent and comprehensive for families (Spratt & Calan, 2004). Our study showed that transparency is used by social workers to win the trust of families, while other social workers argued that transparency in the network structure was a possible threat that would scare parents away. The trust of families is a condition for sharing their stories, and this dialogue creation is crucial because through such dialogues parents' questions and concerns become visible (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009; Pithouse et al., 2011). We question the possibilities for families to (re-)act, judge, think, disagree and resist when these practices are not transparent. It is important that there is space for negotiation and that the ownership of the story and information stays situated with families, particularly because these practices could imply a strong controlling effect. Gathering private information should be approached as a tool to support families and not as a strategic goal of the network. In practices

of exchanging information it is important that the privacy, transparency, trust and agency of families is respected.

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Nederlandstalige samenvatting

1. Inleiding

Zowel op verschillende beleidsniveaus als in de wetenschap bestaat er een groeiende consensus om kinderarmoede hoog op de beleidsagenda te plaatsen. Armoede is een multidimensioneel probleem dat strategieën vergt in diverse beleidsdomeinen (De Corte, Verschuere, Roets & De Bie, 2017; Rittel & Webber, 1973). Dit leidt echter vaak tot een gefragmenteerde dienstverlening, die haaks staat op een degelijke ondersteuning van gezinnen. Deze fragmentering stelt zich op verschillende niveaus, waaronder sectoraal, op het vlak van leeftijd en doelgroep, tussen organisaties (bijvoorbeeld privaat-publiek) en op het niveau van het beleid (Geinger, Van Haute, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2015). Dit vormt een belangrijk knelpunt waar zowel het beleid, sociaal werkers als families met jonge kinderen in de praktijk dagelijks mee worden geconfronteerd. Verschillende inspanningen werden geleverd om deze fragmentering tegen te gaan, waaronder het stimuleren van geïntegreerde lokale netwerken van sociale voorzieningen, met aandacht voor gezinnen in armoedesituaties (Allen, 2003; De Corte, Verschuere, Roets & De Bie, 2017; Frost, 2005; Hood, 2014; Provan & Sebastian, 1998). Tijdens de laatste decennia wordt in Westerse welvaartsstaten voornamelijk gestreefd naar de integratie van voorzieningen voor ouders van (jonge) kinderen (Adolfsen, Martinussen, Thyrhaug & Vedeler, 2012; Department for Education, 2014; Kekkonen, Montonen & Viitala, 2012). Ook in België is dat het geval, bijvoorbeeld via de ontwikkeling van lokale netwerken kinderarmoedebestrijding.

Dit doctoraat in het sociaal werk onderzoekt drie lokale netwerken van voorzieningen voor gezinnen met (jonge) kinderen die als doel hebben (kinder-)armoede te bestrijden. Wat onder netwerkvorming en geïntegreerd werken begrepen wordt, is echter niet eenduidig (Frost, 2005). De verschillende benamingen en uitwerkingen dekken verschillende realiteiten, organisatorische en strategische configuraties en methoden van samenwerken (Statham, 2011; Messenger, 2012; Nolan & Nuttall, 2013). De netwerken die ontstaan nemen verschillende vormen aan, ook al hebben zij allemaal hetzelfde doel, namelijk (kinder-)armoede bestrijden. De doeltreffendheid van en dynamieken binnen de netwerken zijn echter afhankelijk van de manier waarop ze uitgewerkt zijn en daarom moeilijk te veralgemenen.

Daarnaast stellen we een verschuiving vast in de terminologie van het armoedebestrijdingsbeleid en in de praktijk, namelijk van armoede naar

kinderarmoede. Aan deze nieuwe manier van framing van het armoedeprobleem zijn toch enkele risico's verbonden, zoals het culpabiliseren van ouders (Koning Boudewijnstichting, 2017; Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2015; Vandenbroucke, Vinck & Guio, 2014). In deze studie argumenteren we dat kinderarmoede een structureel en multidimensioneel probleem is dat bestaat uit een tekort aan materiële en immateriële middelen (Lister, 2004; McKeown, Haase & Pratschke, 2014). Het welzijn van het kind is afhankelijk van het welzijn van het gezin als een geheel, waardoor een gezinsbrede benadering geprefereerd wordt om armoede te bestrijden (Lister, 2006). De publieke dienstverlening dient dus een responsieve benadering te bieden die tegemoet komt aan zowel de noden en bekommernissen van het kind, als aan die van het gezin in zijn geheel (Anthony, King & Austin, 2011). Zo'n allesomvattende aanpak kenmerkt zich door aan te sluiten bij de multidimensionele en complexe aard van het probleem, eerder dan een oplossing die aansluit bij de artificiële opdeling in sectoren en diensten (Beresford & Croft, 2001). Bovendien situeren de bekommernissen van gezinnen in armoede zich op verschillende levensdomeinen (vb. wonen, werk en gezondheid) en zijn deze vaak gelinkt aan elkaar (Broadhead, Meleady & Delgado, 2008). Naast herverdelende maatregelen is het ook nodig om een kwaliteitsvolle dienstverlening te waarborgen voor ouders en kinderen om negatieve effecten van armoede te verlichten (Vandenbroeck, 2013).

Om de betekenis van deze netwerken te onderzoeken, leggen we een extra focus op de uitwisseling en bescherming van persoonlijke informatie. Dit thema is exemplarisch voor de complexiteit van netwerkpraktijken tussen partners en betrokken gezinnen; want hoewel informatie-uitwisseling zeer effectief en efficiënt kan zijn voor het netwerk, kunnen deze praktijken onwenselijk zijn voor gezinnen. De belangen van netwerkpartners en die van gezinnen kunnen verschillend of zelfs tegenovergesteld zijn aan elkaar (De Corte, Verschuere & De Bie, 2017). Het delen van informatie en het verbeteren van de communicatie tussen partners vormt een belangrijke drijfveer om een netwerk te vormen (Parton, 2008; Reamer, 2005). Daarnaast gaat veel aandacht uit naar het verhogen van de continuïteit tussen diensten (Allen, 2003; Anthony et al., 2011; Statham, 2011) en het wegwerken van overlap en lacunes in de ondersteuning van gezinnen (McKeown et al., 2014; Warin, 2007). De omgang met vertrouwelijke informatie is echter geen neutraal gegeven voor gezinnen. Het sociaal werk positioneert zich tussen de publieke en private sfeer, waardoor een spanning ontstaat tussen ondersteuning en controle (Lorenz, 2008; Spratt & Callen, 2004). In een context waarbij informatie-uitwisseling toeneemt, dreigt deze spanning zich niettemin nog te versterken.

2. Probleemstelling en onderzoeksvragen

Een element in het onderzoeken en evalueren van integratie en netwerkvorming van dienstverlening is het meten en conceptualiseren van de effectiviteit en efficiëntie van een netwerk. Deze bestuurlijke blik op voornamelijk het organisatorische en systemische niveau van een netwerk wordt eerder teruggevonden in sociologisch en sociaal beleidsonderzoek. Deze benadering bekijkt hoe netwerken georganiseerd en gecoördineerd worden, analyseert de interacties tussen de netwerkpartners, maar leert ons weinig over de betekenisverlening en situatie van burgers die beroep doen op sociale diensten (De Corte, Verschuere & De Bie, 2017). Bovendien wordt aangenomen dat de netwerkintegratie als graadmeter kan dienen voor de effectiviteit van een netwerk, waarbij een betere netwerkintegratie ook een effectiever netwerk betekent (Provan & Milward, 1995; Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2012; Rosenheck et al., 1998). In de literatuur en in het beleid wordt de effectiviteit van de samenwerking echter niet altijd vertaald naar de vraag of dergelijke netwerken ook betekenisvol zijn voor het doel van deze samenwerking, namelijk het bestrijden van (kinder-)armoede. De normatieve vraag over de criteria om effectiviteit aan af te meten, wordt vaak gemarginaliseerd (Kenis & Provan, 2009). Nochtans is effectiviteit een multidimensioneel concept, waardoor er een spanning kan ontstaan tussen effectiviteit op het organisatieniveau en het cliëntniveau (De Corte, Verschuere & De Bie, 2017; Provan & Kenis, 2008). De keuze voor de criteria om netwerkeffectiviteit te beoordelen is dus een normatieve keuze (De Corte, Verschuere & De Bie, 2017), maar voor complexe problemen zoals (kinder-)armoede, is het echter moeilijk om objectieve criteria op te stellen (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Dit kan problematisch zijn in een context waarin er een grote euforie leeft over interorganisationele netwerken en waardoor er in het beleid vaak aangenomen wordt dat netwerken steeds voordelig zijn.

Om aan dit probleem tegemoet te komen, gaan we op zoek naar de betekenis van de kwaliteit van de dienstverlening zoals ervaren door gezinnen in armoede en naar de betekenis van de netwerken die als doel hebben (kinder-)armoede te bestrijden. Het functioneren van deze netwerken is nooit neutraal, maar gebaseerd op sociaal geconstrueerde probleemdefinities. De netwerken krijgen een grote autonomie in het vormgeven ervan, waardoor ook grote verschillen tussen netwerken onderling vast te stellen zijn die de relatie met gezinnen (en hun betekenisverlening) mee zullen bepalen. Om die reden onderzoeken we allereerst hoe deze interorganisationele netwerken worden geïmplementeerd, gelegitimeerd en ervaren in de praktijk door sociaal werkers en gezinnen. De

literatuur over netwerkeffectiviteit dient aangevuld te worden met onderzoek over de perspectieven en betekenisverlening van sociaal werkers en gezinnen (De Corte, Verschuere & De Bie, 2017). Het is namelijk niet altijd duidelijk of de noden en zorgen van gezinnen beter ondersteund worden wanneer diensten gaan samenwerken (Provan, 1997). De evaluatie van wat 'werkt' zou daarom steeds verbonden moeten zijn met de betekenisverlening van de betrokken actoren en gezinnen in armoede (Gillies, 2005; Walker et al., 2013). Omwille van deze reden kiezen we voor een benadering die de kwaliteit van de diensten centraal stelt en nagaat hoe dit gerelateerd is aan het realiseren van sociale rechten. Als kwaliteit gezien wordt als de responsiviteit van sociale dienstverlening voor de noden van gezinnen, dan betekent dit dat kwaliteit een concept is dat geconstrueerd wordt in interactie met gezinnen (Beresford & Croft, 2001; Mooney & Munton, 1998; Roets, Roose, Schiettecat & Vandenbroeck, 2016). We onderzoeken of en hoe een lokaal netwerk een antwoord kan bieden op hun bekommernissen. De vraag of de gezinnen zich daadwerkelijk ondersteund voelen staat hierbij centraal. De welvaartstaat is er namelijk toe gehouden een kwaliteitsvolle sociale dienstverlening te verzekeren aan zijn burgers (Bouverne-De Bie, 2015; Roose, 2006; Vandenbroeck, 2013), maar ondanks de nadruk op samenwerking is er weinig empirisch onderzoek naar het perspectief van de gebruikers (Atkinson, Jones & Lamont, 2007).

Onze **onderzoeksvragen** zijn:

> (1) Hoe geven lokale actoren vorm aan lokale interorganisationele netwerken die als doel hebben (kinder-)armoede te bestrijden en wat is hun betekenisverlening?
>
> (2) Op welke manier draagt dit bij aan de kwaliteit van de hulp- en dienstverlening vanuit het perspectief van gezinnen in armoede?

3. Methodologie

3.1 Onderzoekscontext

Voor deze studie onderzochten we drie lokale netwerken kinderarmoedebestrijding die via Vlaamse of federale projectsubsidies tot stand kwamen. We selecteerden drie netwerken die aan bepaalde inclusie- en diversiteitscriteria moesten voldoen. In wat volgt, geven we een korte beschrijving van de drie geselecteerde netwerken:

Netwerk A

Dit netwerk organiseert individuele begeleidingstrajecten aan huis voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen (0-3 jaar) die in armoede leven. Daarnaast worden er maandelijks ouderbijeenkomsten georganiseerd. Het individueel begeleidingstraject start met een minirechtenonderzoek waarbij gezinnen gescreend worden op verschillende levensdomeinen (vb. wonen, vrije tijd, mobiliteit en werk) om na te gaan of ze hun (sociale) rechten verkrijgen. De partners van het netwerk zijn OCMW, Kind & Gezin, CKG, CAW, Welzijnsschakels en Lus vzw. De coördinatie wordt opgenomen door het OCMW. Door de projectsubsidie kon ook een gezinsbegeleider/coördinator aangeworven worden. Het netwerk fungeert op concreet gezinsniveau (met o.a. casebesprekingen), alsook meer structureel op het lokaal beleidsniveau (in een stuurgroep).

Netwerk B

In deze landelijke gemeente worden verschillende projecten gebundeld om een netwerk te vormen rond kinderarmoedebestrijding en preventieve gezinsondersteuning. Onder de noemer van een Huis van het Kind zorgt dit netwerk voor een fysieke ontmoetingsplaats en aanspreekpunt voor ouders met (jonge) kinderen. Het netwerk bundelt een groot aantal organisaties (bij de start 60 individuele deelnemers) uit sectoren als onderwijs, (preventieve) gezinsondersteuning, vrije tijd, gezondheidszorg en welzijn. Acties zoals infomomenten, spel- en ontmoetingsmomenten, een prenataal traject en zitdagen worden opengesteld naar alle (aanstaande) ouders in de gemeente. De coördinatie gebeurt vanuit het gemeentebestuur, die ook door de inzet van een coördinator/gezinsondersteuner een groot deel van de uitvoerende taken op zich neemt.

Netwerk C

Netwerk C vormt een project waarbij schoolpersoneel en actoren van het OCMW gaan samenwerken, vanuit de schoolcontext. Vooral in scholen met een hoog aantal kinderen in armoede krijgen (zorg-)leerkrachten en brugfiguren met complexe vragen van ouders en kinderen te maken (vb. dakloosheid, werkloosheid, administratieve problemen en schulden). Het netwerk heeft als doel de brug te maken tussen welzijn en onderwijs en kiest ervoor om een welzijnswerker van het OCMW naar school te laten komen om ondersteuning te bieden bij deze vragen. Daardoor worden ook materiële vragen behandeld als deze ontdekt worden op school. De coördinatie van het project wordt voornamelijk opgenomen door het OCMW, maar valt ook onder de stuurgroep

van het Huis van het Kind in de gemeente. In deze stuurgroep zetelen o.a. de schepenen van welzijn, onderwijs en armoedebestrijding.

3.2 Methoden van dataverzameling

Op drie verschillende niveaus werd er data verzameld: op het lokaal beleidsniveau, het sociaal werkniveau en het niveau van de gezinnen. Voor elk van deze niveaus werd op een verschillende manier data verzameld:

- Op het lokaal beleidsniveau werd een documentanalyse (Bowen, 2009) uitgevoerd, samen met semigestructureerde interviews met lokale beleidsmakers. Deze studie werd voornamelijk uitgevoerd om de lokale beleidscontext te exploreren en de sociale inbedding van de verschillende netwerken te kunnen begrijpen. Dit ter ondersteuning van onze interpretaties van de netwerken en dynamieken die elk op een unieke manier ontwikkelden. Tijdens de interviews stond het thema (kinder-)armoedebestrijding centraal (en welke plaats dit inneemt in het lokaal sociaal beleid), net als netwerkvorming en samenwerking binnen de gemeente.
- Op het sociaal werkniveau werd een participerende observatie (Spradley, 1980) uitgevoerd, samen met semigestructureerde interviews (Yin, 2008) met sociaal werkers die deelnamen aan het netwerk. Voor de participerende observatie werden verschillende bijeenkomsten tussen de netwerkactoren (vb. vergaderingen & casebesprekingen) bijgewoond en indien mogelijk ook concrete interventies naar gezinnen (vb. ouderbijeenkomst & zitdagen). De interviews met sociaal werkers focusten op de werking en zingeving van het netwerk, (kinder-)armoedebestrijding, de ondersteuning aan gezinnen in armoede en informatie-uitwisseling.
- Op het niveau van de gezinnen werden semigestructureerde interviews afgenomen om te onderzoeken hoe ouders het netwerk en de netwerkinterventies ervaren. We trachtten te achterhalen wat dit betekent voor de ondersteuning van hun gezin en of het netwerk hiermee (beter) tegemoet komt aan de door hun ervaren noden en vragen.

Het onderzoek werd goedgekeurd door de ethische commissie van de faculteit en informed consents werden systematisch gebruikt. Hieronder geven we het aantal interviews en momenten van de participerende observatie weer. Deze aantallen variëren overheen de netwerken, omdat elk van deze netwerken een

unieke werking en constructie hebben. Het aantal interviews per netwerk en per niveau was onder meer afhankelijk van het aantal actoren in het netwerk, maar bijvoorbeeld ook van het aantal gezinnen die we konden bereiken en die bereid waren om mee te werken. Het aantal momenten van participerende observatie was afhankelijk van het aantal bijeenkomsten die door het netwerk georganiseerd werden.

	Netwerk A	**Netwerk B**	**Netwerk C**
Interviews met lokale beleidsmakers	5	6	5
Participerende observatie	10	13	18
Interviews met sociaal werkers	8 + 1 focusgroep	8	7
Interviews met gezinnen	11 + 1 focusgroep	4 + 8 (exploratief)	2

3.3 Methode van data-analyse

De data van het onderzoek werden geanalyseerd via een kwalitatieve inhoudsanalyse (Krippendorf, 1980). Het is een methode waarbij de inhoud van de tekstuele data geïnterpreteerd wordt door het systemisch coderen en identificeren van thema's en patronen in de data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Daartoe was het van belang om alle interviews letterlijk te transcriberen. Deze methode draagt het potentieel in zich om het begrip en de kennis te verhogen over een bepaald sociaal fenomeen en kan er ook nieuwe inzichten over verschaffen (Krippendorf, 1980). Om die reden leent een kwalitatieve inhoudsanalyse zich goed voor case study onderzoek (Kohlbacher, 2006). Voor de analyse van een groot volume kwalitatief onderzoeksmateriaal wordt via deze methode getracht om de belangrijkste verbanden en betekenissen te

identificeren en tegelijk de complexiteit ervan te vatten (Patton, 2002; Kohlbacher, 2006).

Na het lezen van het materiaal, kozen we voor een inductieve of deductieve aanpak om de initiële codes en categorieën te bepalen (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). In deze studie combineerden we beide strategieën doorheen de verschillende hoofdstukken. Bij een deductieve benadering wordt het onderzoeksmateriaal in verband gebracht met vooraf bepaalde concepten en categorieën afgeleid uit bestaande theoretische inzichten (Mayring, 2000). Daardoor kan een bestaande theorie gevalideerd of uitgebreid worden (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Bij een inductieve aanpak worden de codes en categorieën afgeleid uit het materiaal en de observaties (Mayring, 2000). De data wordt open gecodeerd en na het herhaaldelijk lezen van het materiaal kunnen categorieën ontdekt worden (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Deze methode vertrekt van empirisch materiaal om tot meer abstracte concepten en theorieën te komen (Neuman, 2011). Kwalitatieve inhoudsanalyse is geen lineair proces, maar er wordt door middel van een feedback lus teruggekeerd naar de data om na te gaan of de categorieën zorgvuldig gevormd en uitgewerkt zijn (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000).

4. Onderzoeksbevindingen en conclusies

4.1 Een normatief kader voor netwerken kinderarmoedebestrijding

De positie die het sociaal werk inneemt in deze netwerken is niet geheel vrijblijvend en gebaseerd op sociale probleemconstructies (De Corte, Verschuere, Roets & De Bie, 2017; Mestrum, 2011). Naast de nood om het perspectief van participerende actoren en gezinnen te includeren om te ontdekken wat een goed werkend netwerk en effectiviteit voor hen betekent, argumenteren we samen met De Corte, Verschuere, Roets en De Bie (2017) dat deze lokale netwerken een normatief kader nodig hebben als een toets en leidraad voor hun doelen, acties en interventies. Een normatief waardenkader is noodzakelijk wanneer netwerken tot doel hebben tussen te komen in een sociaal probleem zoals (kinder-)armoede, want (kinder-)armoedebestrijding is ook een normatief concept (Roets, Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2013). De inspiratie voor zo'n kader kan gevonden worden in de internationale definitie van sociaal werk, omdat het gemeenschappelijke waarden kan bieden aan praktijken die nooit neutraal zijn. Deze definitie werd geformuleerd in 2014 door de Internationale Federatie van Sociaal Werkers en principes als sociale rechtvaardigheid, mensenrechten, collectieve verantwoordelijkheid en respect voor diversiteit

staan hierin centraal (IFSW, 2014). Het is belangrijk dat sociaal werkers zich bewust zijn van onderliggende sociaal-politieke assumpties en waarden die vormgeven aan het sociaal beleid en daaraan gekoppelde interventies (Cousins, 2013). Ook wanneer individuele noden en zorgen van gezinnen als uitgangspunt genomen worden, kan het sociaal werk zichzelf verliezen in willekeur (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). Dit gevaar kan vermeden worden door het hanteren van een duidelijk maatschappelijk project en normatief kader.

4.2 Een rechtenbenadering hanteren

Sociale rechten vormen een belangrijk instrument om sociale rechtvaardigheid en menselijke waardigheid te realiseren. Ook in een context waarin er een verschuiving plaatsvindt van armoede naar kinderarmoede, erkent een rechtenbenadering dat het welzijn van kinderen altijd verbonden is aan het welzijn van het gezin in zijn geheel en dat zowel materiële als immateriële ondersteuningsbronnen nodig zijn (Mestrum, 2011; Lister, 2006; Sandbaek, 2013). In twee van de bestudeerde netwerken werd een rechtenbenadering gebruikt om de visie en acties vorm te geven. Ondanks de inzet van deze benadering om bijvoorbeeld ook te ondersteunen op vlak van wonen, werk en (mentale) gezondheidszorg, bleef structurele verandering beperkt. Het realiseren van sociale rechten is niet afdwingbaar, al is de overheid wel gebonden tot het leveren van een inspanningsverbintenis om deze rechten te verwezenlijken (Bouverne-De Bie, 2015; Dean, 2000; Hubeau, 1995). Sociale rechten worden echter zeer kwetsbaar als het sociaal beleid geen herverdeling van financiële middelen nastreeft (King, 2000; Rigaux, 1994). De invulling ervan is dus geen vaststaand gegeven. Sociale rechten kunnen op een minimalistische (eerder symbolische) manier ingevuld worden, maar kunnen ook maximalistisch ingevuld worden waarbij ze ingezet worden als hefboom om sociale rechtvaardigheid en gelijkheid te realiseren (Bouverne-De Bie, 2015; Hubeau, 1995; Maeseele, 2012).

Een goede praktijk uit één van de netwerken was het minirechtenonderzoek. In dit onderzoek staan de sociale rechten van gezinnen (ouders en kinderen) opgelijst en wordt er voor levensdomeinen als huisvesting, gezondheid, mobiliteit, inkomen en onderwijs nagekeken of deze rechten verwezenlijkt worden. Dit instrument vormt de basis van de ondersteuning en dialoog tussen ouders en sociaal werkers van het netwerk. De betrokkenheid van het OCMW als publieke actor (met een publieke verantwoordelijkheid) in het netwerk is hierbij van belang om het recht op maatschappelijke dienstverlening en andere

sociale grondrechten te helpen verwezenlijken (De Bie & Vandenbussche, 2016).

4.3 Armoedebestrijding op lokaal niveau

Deze doctoraatsstudie concentreert zich op het lokale niveau, wat ook meteen een bepalende factor was voor de verkregen resultaten omdat het een invloed heeft op de ondervonden uitdagingen, beperkingen en kansen. Kinderarmoedebestrijding heeft een structurele aanpak nodig, want een aanpak die focust op het verbeteren van opvoedingsvaardigheden legt de verantwoordelijkheid eenzijdig bij de ouders van het kind (Gillies, 2005; Schiettecat et al., 2015). Het is riskant en onwenselijk om een sociaal probleem als (kinder-)armoede te benaderen met een pedagogisch antwoord, omdat het de oorzaak van het sociaal probleem bij de individuen legt die met dit probleem geconfronteerd worden (Bouverne-De Bie, 2015; Vandenbroeck, Coussée & Bradt, 2010). Ook op lokaal niveau is het nodig om deze structurele sociale ongelijkheden en levensomstandigheden waar gezinnen in armoede in leven, te blijven erkennen (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). Het lokaal niveau kan in zijn aanpak en acties nog steeds trachten bij te dragen aan het besef van sociale rechtvaardigheid en menselijke waardigheid, en het realiseren van sociale rechten. Het bestrijden van (kinder-)armoede betreft tegelijk een collectieve verantwoordelijkheid en reikt daarmee verder dan het lokaal beleid. Het beleid dat een herverdeling mogelijk kan maken om sociale ongelijkheid tegen te gaan, situeert zich voornamelijk op het federaal en Vlaams niveau. In die zin is het sociaal werk ook in sterke mate afhankelijk van structurele beleidsmaatregelen (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). In het onderzoek werd ook duidelijk dat het lokaal niveau niet voldoende (financiële) daadkracht heeft om gezinnen in al hun noden tegemoet te kunnen komen. Zoals reeds gesteld is de interactie met andere beleidsniveaus van cruciaal belang om het publiek en politiek debat over armoedebestrijding open te houden. Decentralisering zorgt voor een verschuiving in de regierol van het bovenlokale naar het lokale niveau, maar dit gaat niet altijd gepaard met een verschuiving van hefbomen naar het lokale niveau om structurele verandering mogelijk te maken.

4.4 Bottom-up en top-down processen garanderen

Zoals eerder gesteld is de nood aan een normatief kader in praktijken die (kinder-)armoedebestrijding tot doel hebben noodzakelijk, maar we argumenteren ook dat het engagement om sociale rechtvaardigheid, menselijke waardigheid en sociale rechten te realiseren gedifferentieerd moet worden op een macro-,

meso- en microniveau. We stellen dat strategieën van armoedebestrijding op een democratische wijze vorm dienen te krijgen, waarbij een interactie plaatsvindt tussen het macroniveau (nationaal en regionaal sociaal beleid), het mesoniveau (lokale interorganisationele werking), en het microniveau (frontlinie werkers in interactie met gezinnen in armoede). Het lokaal netwerk en de samenwerking tussen partners onder leiding van een coördinator kan gesitueerd worden op het mesoniveau, waarbij strategieën van armoedebestrijding op een horizontale wijze ontwikkeld worden. Toch dienen we, in een context waarbij netwerkontwikkeling in de strijd tegen (kinder-)armoede op het lokaal niveau gestimuleerd wordt, de verticale interactie tussen deze drie niveaus te verzekeren. Deze dynamiek wijst erop dat een top-down en bottom-up aanpak nodig is in het realiseren van sociale rechten en daarmee ook sociale rechtvaardigheid. De verwezenlijking van sociale rechten dient, zeker bij decentralisering, teruggekoppeld te worden naar de publieke beleidsverantwoordelijkheid op nationaal en regionaal (macro-) niveau. Daarnaast stellen we dat de netwerkcoördinator een cruciale rol vervult om deze verticale processen (tussen macro-, meso- en microniveau) en horizontale processen (tussen lokale partnerorganisaties) te verzekeren en het democratische karakter in de ontwikkeling en implementatie van het sociaal beleid in te bedden. De coördinator kan een cruciale rol spelen in het stimuleren en waarborgen van deze top-down en bottom-up processen. Ook de discussie over de publieke verantwoordelijkheid en verantwoording tussen de drie niveaus moet verzekerd worden. Het normatief kader en een (proactieve) rechtenbenadering dient als leidraad die ook geïnspireerd wordt door de dialoog met gezinnen in armoedesituaties. Vanuit het microniveau is het dus van belang om een belangrijke bottom-up beweging te stimuleren in het nastreven van een democratisch beleid.

4.5 Het netwerk als reflectie-instrument

In ons onderzoek stellen we vast dat netwerken op lokaal niveau het potentieel hebben om te reflecteren over het bestaande aanbod en over het uitwerken van gezamenlijke acties en interventies. Het netwerk kan daarom een belangrijk reflectie-instrument zijn dat de mogelijkheid biedt om collectief na te denken over het sociaal probleem van armoede en hoe dit bestreden kan worden. In die zin kan het netwerk gebruikt worden als forum waar probleemdefinities, visies en acties bediscussieerd kunnen worden (De Corte, Verschuere, Roets & De Bie, 2017). Het netwerk biedt dus een structuur waarin verschillende perspectieven geconfronteerd worden met elkaar. De verschillende netwerken werken strategieën uit om (kinder-)armoede te bestrijden, maar zijn vrij om hier zelf vorm

aan te geven. De netwerkdynamieken tonen duidelijk de zoektocht van netwerken om positie in te nemen op drie spanningsvelden in dit constructieproces: (1) selectief versus universeel, (2) instrumenteel versus leefwereldgeoriënteerd en (3) kind- versus gezinsgericht. Daarin werd duidelijk dat partners verschillende belangen verdedigen en verschillende visies uitdragen, maar dat overheen de netwerken deze posities ook sterk kunnen verschillen van elkaar. Het onderzoek toont aan dat de netwerken een bepaalde strategie uitwerken, maar dat deze ook veranderlijk is doorheen de tijd. Net door dit collectief reflectieproces en het samenbrengen van verschillende perspectieven werden mechanismen van in- en uitsluiting ontdekt in het bestaande aanbod, maar ook in de acties en interventies die de netwerken organiseerden. Dit inzicht is zeer waardevol in het vormgeven van het gemeentelijke lokaal sociaal beleid. De tekortkomingen van het netwerk kunnen hierbinnen mogelijks opgevangen worden.

4.6 Nood aan een democratische benadering

In relatie tot het effectiviteitsdebat is het waardevol om een democratische benadering te hanteren. Effectiviteit kan verschillende invullingen krijgen door verschillende partijen, dus om te kunnen bepalen wat ‘werkt’ dient hier ook een debat over gevoerd te worden (Provan & Milward, 2001; Kenis & Provan, 2009). Het democratisch potentieel of karakter van netwerken mag benadrukt worden, niet alleen tussen partners, maar ook in het bijzonder naar gezinnen toe in een poging om hun diverse noden en zorgen mee te nemen in strategieën die als doel hebben (kinder-)armoede te bestrijden (Roose et al., 2013). Het is belangrijk dat ouders en kinderen betrokken worden in het definiërings- en constructieproces, om te vermijden dat ze uitgesloten worden nog voor er interventies uitgevoerd worden. Dit democratisch debat is nodig om de betekenis van effectiviteit te achterhalen, voor wie en onder welke condities (Vandenbroeck, Roets & Roose, 2012). Het deelnemen van gezinnen aan dit proces kan beschouwd worden als een weg naar kwaliteit, maar ook als een toetssteen ervan (Beresford & Croft, 2001). Netwerken kunnen dus ook de kans bieden om de betekenis van effectiviteit, als het concreet functioneren van het netwerk, in te bedden in de concrete leefwereld en situatie van de gezinnen die het netwerk omsluit. Hiermee wijzen we op een sterke dialogische dynamiek tussen hulp- en dienstverlening en gezinnen. Daarbij hoort ook het in vraag durven stellen van de wenselijkheid van integratie en netwerken voor gebruikers. Netwerken kunnen namelijk subtiele vormen van controle uitoefenen (Jeffs & Smith, 2001; Van Haute, Roets, Alasuutari & Vandenbroeck, 2018) en daarom pleit Notredame (1998) ervoor om deze netwerkvorming niet als

vanzelfsprekend te beschouwen, want gezinnen zouden ook baat kunnen hebben bij een meer gefragmenteerde dienstverlening. Hij stelt dat gezinnen minder vrijheid en handelingsmarge hebben om hun eigen strategieën te volgen wanneer diensten geïntegreerd zijn en argumenteert dat deze netwerkvorming op het gezinsniveau nooit dwangmatig mag toegepast worden.

4.7 Informatie-uitwisseling

Op vlak van informatie-uitwisseling toont het onderzoek aan dat het beschermen of delen van informatie geen eenduidig gegeven is. Een spanning viel op in de omgang met vertrouwelijke informatie die enerzijds geleid wordt door formele regelgeving en anderzijds door de interpretatie en beoordeling van deze regels naargelang de specifieke situatie die zich voordoet. Diverse participanten uit het onderzoek gaven aan dat sociaal werkers een goede dosis gezond verstand nodig hebben om een goede inschatting te kunnen maken over de manier waarop er met informatie omgegaan moet worden. Ondanks het feit dat deze afweging en interpretatie soms zeer individueel gemaakt wordt, is het nodig om een normatief en gedeeld waardenkader te hanteren in dit proces. Het expliciteren van collectief gedeelde waarden in een ethisch kader zorgt ervoor dat praktijken en beslissingen minder afhankelijk worden van het individueel waardenkader van de sociaal werker. De centrale finaliteit van dit kader kan ook teruggevonden worden in de internationale definitie van sociaal werk. In lijn met het idee dat deze netwerken kinderarmoedebestrijding kan dienen als een normatief reflectie-instrument, kan dit ook toegepast worden op informatie-uitwisseling in netwerken (vb. tijdens case overleg). Het omgaan met informatie tussen partners kan onderling bediscussieerd worden, alsook hoe informatie-uitwisseling zich verhoudt tot het realiseren van sociale rechten van gezinnen.

Sociaal werk situeert zich tussen individuele noden en het publieke belang, waardoor een dubbel mandaat ontstaat tussen ondersteuning en controle van gezinnen (in armoede) (Lorenz, 2008; Spratt & Callan, 2004). Deze spanning tussen controle en ondersteuning wordt nog versterkt door het politieke discours dat gevoerd wordt over het delen van private informatie, waarbij de druk op sociaal werkers toeneemt om informatie uit te wisselen in het kader van veiligheid, preventie en terrorismebestrijding (Pithouse et al., 2011). Toch is het cruciaal dat sociaal werkers privacy blijven respecteren, omdat het vrijgeven van persoonlijke informatie steeds een kost is die gezinnen moeten betalen (Bouverne-De Bie, 2015). Het politieke discours en rationale om te interveniëren in de private sfeer van het gezin is eerder individueel en beschermend (Parton, 2008), dan sociaal rechtvaardig van aard (Featherstone, Broadhurst & Holt,

2012). De finaliteit van sociaal werk interventies (in de uitwisseling van informatie) kan zeer ondersteunend zijn, maar ook bestraffend. Het kan bijvoorbeeld gebruikt worden om sociale fraude te bestrijden. Anderzijds tonen internationale studies aan dat de non-take-up van sociale rechten veel groter is dan het plegen van sociale fraude (Dubois, 2017). Informatie zou ook ingezet kunnen worden om sociale rechten proactief (en automatisch) te realiseren. De finaliteit waarmee beslissingen worden gemaakt over het uitwisselen van informatie beïnvloedt sterk de balans tussen ondersteuning en controle. Het is dus van belang om het gehanteerde normatief kader te ontdekken en te expliciteren in interventies naar gezinnen toe.

De contacten tussen sociaal werkers en de reden waarom ze informatie uitwisselen met elkaar is echter niet altijd transparant en begrijpbaar voor gezinnen (Spratt & Calan, 2004). Dat stelden we ook vast in ons onderzoek, want enerzijds werd transparantie door sociaal werkers ingezet om het vertrouwen van gezinnen te winnen, terwijl andere sociaal werkers argumenteerden dat transparantie in de samenwerkingsverbanden gezinnen net zou afschrikken. Het vertrouwen krijgen van gezinnen is van groot belang in het samenwerken met gezinnen die in armoede leven en in het construeren van een dialoog om hun zorgen en vragen te kunnen ontdekken (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009; Pithouse et al., 2011). We stellen in vraag wat de mogelijkheden zijn van gezinnen om te reageren, te oordelen, te denken, het oneens te zijn en zich te verzetten als praktijken van informatie-uitwisseling niet transparant zijn. Vooral omdat deze praktijken een sterke controle kunnen inhouden is het van belang dat er ruimte is voor overleg en dat men het eigenaarschap van informatie bij het gezin blijft situeren. Het verzamelen van vertrouwelijke informatie zou benaderd moeten worden als een strategie om gezinnen te ondersteunen, maar niet als een doel waar het netwerk op zich beter van wordt. In praktijken van informatie-uitwisseling is het van belang dat privacy, transparantie, vertrouwen en eigenaarschap van gezinnen gerespecteerd worden.

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Data Storage Fact Sheets

STUDY 1

% Data storage fact sheet
% Name/identifier study: study local policy makers
% Author: Dorien Van Haute
% Date: 17 juni 2018

1. Contact details
==========
1a. Main researcher

-
- name: Dorien Van Haute
- address: FPPW, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium
- e-mail: Dorien.VanHaute@UGent.be

1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)

-
- name: Prof. Dr. Michel Vandenbroeck
- address: FPPW, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium
- e-mail: Michel.Vandenbroeck@UGent.be

If a response is not received when using the above contact details, please send an email to data.pp@ugent.be or contact Data Management, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.

2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet applies
==========
* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are reported:

Van Haute, D. (2018). The integration of provision for families with young children in relation to combating (child) poverty. (Doctoral dissertation)

Van Haute, D., Roets, G., Baeck, I. & Vandenbroeck, M. (2017). *Kinderarmoedebestrijding in de sociale beleidspraktijk: ervaringen van gezinnen in* armoede. In P. Raeymaeckers, N., Charlotte, D., Boost, C., Vermeiren, J.,

Decoene en S., Van Dam (Eds.), Jaarboek Armoede & Sociale Uitsluiting 2017, pp. 91-102, Leuven: Acco.

* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply to?:

Semi-structured interviews with local policy makers and local policy documents

3. Information about the files that have been stored

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  - [X] file(s) containing analyses. Specify: Working documents and files with an overview and of the thematic analysis, results and local policy analysis
  - [X] files(s) containing information about informed consent
  - [ ] a file specifying legal and ethical provisions

```
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  - [X] responsible ZAP
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STUDY 2
% Data storage fact sheet
% Name/identifier study: study social workers
% Author: Dorien Van Haute
% Date: 17 juni 2018

1. Contact details
==========
1a. Main researcher

-
- name: Dorien Van Haute
- address: FPPW, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium
- e-mail: Dorien.VanHaute@UGent.be

1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)

- name: Prof. Dr. Michel Vandenbroeck
- address: FPPW, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium
- e-mail: Michel.Vandenbroeck@UGent.be

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* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are reported:

Van Haute, D. (2018). The integration of provision for families with young children in relation to combating (child) poverty. (Doctoral dissertation)

Van Haute, D., Roets, G., Alasuutari, M., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2018). Managing the flow of private information on children and parents in poverty situations: creating a panoptic eye in inter-organisational networks? Child & Family Social Work. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12433

* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply to?:

Semi-structured interviews with social workers and field notes from participant observations

3. Information about the files that have been stored

==========

3a. Raw data

---

* Have the raw data been stored by the main researcher? [X] YES / [ ] NO

If NO, please justify:

* On which platform are the raw data stored?
  - [X] researcher PC
  - [X] research group file server
  - [X] other (specify): Written field notes from participant observation

* Who has direct access to the raw data (i.e., without intervention of another person)?
  - [X] main researcher
  - [X] responsible ZAP
  - [ ] all members of the research group
  - [ ] all members of UGent
  - [X] other (specify): Server administrator of the department

3b. Other files

---

* Which other files have been stored?
  - [ ] file(s) describing the transition from raw data to reported results. Specify: ...
  - [X] file(s) containing processed data. Specify: Transcriptions of interview recordings and field notes from the participant observations
  - [X] file(s) containing analyses. Specify: Working documents and files with an overview and summary of the thematic analysis and results
  - [X] files(s) containing information about informed consent
  - [ ] a file specifying legal and ethical provisions
  - [ ] file(s) that describe the content of the stored files and how this content should be interpreted. Specify: ...
  - [ ] other files. Specify: ...

```
* On which platform are these other files stored?
  - [X] individual PC
  - [X] research group file server
  - [ ] other: ...

* Who has direct access to these other files (i.e., without
intervention of another person)?
  - [X] main researcher
  - [X] responsible ZAP
  - [ ] all members of the research group
  - [ ] all members of UGent
  - [X] other (specify): Service administrator of the
department
```

4. Reproduction

```
============================================================
* Have the results been reproduced independently?: [ ] YES
/ [X] NO
* If yes, by whom (add if multiple):
   - name:
   - address:
   - affiliation:
   - e-mail:
```

STUDY 3
% Data storage fact sheet
% Name/identifier study: study families in poverty situations
% Author: Dorien Van Haute
% Date: 17 juni 2018

1. Contact details
==========

1a. Main researcher

- name: Dorien Van Haute
- address: FPPW, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium
- e-mail: Dorien.VanHaute@UGent.be

1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)

- name: Prof. Dr. Michel Vandenbroeck
- address: FPPW, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium
- e-mail: Michel.Vandenbroeck@UGent.be

If a response is not received when using the above contact details, please send an email to data.pp@ugent.be or contact Data Management, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.

2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet applies
==========

* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are reported:

Van Haute, D. (2018). The integration of provision for families with young children in relation to combating (child) poverty. (Doctoral dissertation)

Van Haute, D., Roets, G., Baeck, I. & Vandenbroeck, M. (2017). *Kinderarmoedebestrijding in de sociale beleidspraktijk: ervaringen van gezinnen in* armoede. In P. Raeymaeckers, N., Charlotte, D., Boost, C., Vermeiren, J., Decoene en S., Van Dam (Eds.), Jaarboek Armoede & Sociale Uitsluiting 2017, pp. 91-102, Leuven: Acco.

* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply to?:

Semi-structured interviews with parents

3. Information about the files that have been stored

3a. Raw data

* Have the raw data been stored by the main researcher? [X] YES / [ ] NO

If NO, please justify:

* On which platform are the raw data stored?
  - [X] researcher PC
  - [X] research group file server
  - [ ] other (specify): …

* Who has direct access to the raw data (i.e., without intervention of another person)?
  - [X] main researcher
  - [X] responsible ZAP
  - [ ] all members of the research group
  - [ ] all members of UGent
  - [X] other (specify): Server administrator of the department

3b. Other files

* Which other files have been stored?
  - [ ] file(s) describing the transition from raw data to reported results. Specify: ...
  - [X] file(s) containing processed data. Specify: Transcriptions of interview recordings
  - [X] file(s) containing analyses. Specify: Files reporting thematic analysis and results
  - [X] files(s) containing information about informed consent
  - [ ] a file specifying legal and ethical provisions
  - [ ] file(s) that describe the content of the stored files and how this content should be interpreted. Specify: ...
  - [ ] other files. Specify: ...

* On which platform are these other files stored?
  - [X] individual PC
  - [X] research group file server
  - [ ] other: ...

* Who has direct access to these other files (i.e., without intervention of another person)?
  - [X] main researcher
  - [X] responsible ZAP
  - [ ] all members of the research group
  - [ ] all members of UGent
  - [X] other (specify): Service administrator of the department

4. Reproduction

==========

* Have the results been reproduced independently?: [ ] YES / [X] NO
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   - address:
   - affiliation:
   - e-mail: