



Report of the 1st National VCSC meeting (Belgium)



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Meeting context and attendance

Location: VVSG office, Paviljoenstraat 9, Brussels

Date: 8 February 2018

Time: 1:30 pm – 3:30 pm

Attendees:

VCSC members:

An Coninx (KOMOSIE)

Kathy Jansen (STEBO)

Shirley Ovaere (VVSG)

Thomas Neefs (Samenlevingsopbouw)

Kristine Landuyt (OCMW Antwerpen)

Franky Thienpont (Netwerk tegen Armoede)

Bart Delbeke (Universiteit Antwerpen)

Annemie Bollen (SERV)

Roel Vermeiren (VEA)

Other stakeholders:

Jan Maris (Samenlevingsopbouw)

Veronique Vandeloo (Samenlevingsopbouw)

Project partners:

Liesbet Boussemaere (EANDIS)

Guy Reynebeau (EANDIS)

Kristof Vandenberghe (EANDIS)

Christoph Degendt (EANDIS)

Erik Laes (VITO/EnergyVille)

Apologies (VCSC members):

Bert De Wel (ACV)

Hanne Stevens (Netwerk tegen Armoede)

Presentation of the meeting

Meeting objectives

The meeting objectives were to:

- Present first findings from WP2 relating to the vulnerable customer survey and stakeholder interviews.
- Collect feedback on these first findings.
- Organise a brainstorm on the ASSIST action in the Flemish region.

Agenda

- Short presentation of the ASSIST project (objectives, activities, work packages) (5 min.).
- Presentation of the results of the WP2 vulnerable customer survey (20 min.).
- Presentation of the results of the WP2 stakeholder interviews (20 min.).
- Brainstorm on the ASSIST action in the Flemish region (1h 20 min.).

Stakeholder representation

Stakeholders represented at the meeting include:

- ✓ **EANDIS (distribution system operator).** Regarding energy poverty, DSOs have different responsibilities:
 - Working together with other parties (e.g. public welfare organisations (OCMWs), poverty organisations, etc.) to push back energy poverty.
 - Giving advice on rational energy use to vulnerable customers (amongst others).

- In the Flemish regulations, it is foreseen that the DSO takes the role of social energy provider of last resort (if customers are 'dropped' by commercial providers).
 - DSOs install budget meters for customers who have difficulties in paying their energy bills.
 - In case a customer with a budget meter still cannot pay the energy bills, the DNB works together with a local advisory commission (including the social worker responsible for debt mediation) to look for solutions adapted to the situation of the customer. Only after a negative advice of the LAC can the customer be disconnected from the grid.
- ✓ **KOMOSIE** (social economy umbrella organisation) coordinates a.o. the working of 29 organisations of 'energy cutters' ('energiesnoeiers', home energy advisor organisations working in the social economy). 20 of these organisations perform energy scans, 9 organisations are mainly concerned with implementing social home improvement actions. About 20.000 energy scans are performed on a yearly basis. There are 6 target groups that qualify for receiving a free energy scan (e.g. customers with a social tariff, customers with a budget meter, customers who rent at a price below a certain threshold value, customers in debt mediation who are at risk of being disconnected etc.).
 - ✓ **Netwerk tegen Armoede** (network against poverty) is an umbrella organisation of groups fighting against poverty. The Netwerk tegen armoede is active within a network of OCMWs and vulnerable customers. The network is lobbying for structural solutions to poverty problems. In its activities, the network always insures that the voice of the vulnerable customer is represented and heard.
 - ✓ **OCMW Antwerpen**. OCMWs (local social welfare organisations) are also active in the field of energy poverty. They perform many activities, e.g. organising a helpdesk, supporting people in the management of their debts (including energy debts), looking for adequate housing opportunities, etc.
 - ✓ **SERV** (socio-economic council of Flanders). The SERV is the main advisory body to the Flemish government on Flemish socio-economic policy. It represents trade unions and employer associations. In 2016, the SERV published an advice on Flemish energy poverty policy.
 - ✓ **STEBO** is a social profit organisation active mostly in the Limburg area in Flanders. STEBO carries out the free energy scans on behalf of Infrax, the local DSO. STEBO does not employ vulnerable customers in a role of 'energy cutters'.
 - ✓ **Universiteit Antwerpen** (University of Antwerp) is the Flemish partner in Belgium contributing to the publication of the energy poverty barometer.

- ✓ **VEA** (Flemish energy agency). VEA follows up the implementation of numerous policy instruments aimed at alleviating energy poverty, e.g. take-up of subsidies and grants for energy efficiency improvements to homes by vulnerable customers, evolution in the number of vulnerable customers dropped by a commercial energy provider, evolution in the number of budget meters installed, following up on the social renovation grant, etc.
- ✓ **VVSG** (organization of Flemish cities and communities). VVSG supports municipalities and cities on their energy poverty strategies (advice); works together with DSOs to support the working of local advisory committees (LACs); and participates in working groups/sounding boards on energy poverty (in the context of consultations when new policies are being negotiated).

Feedback on consumer survey and stakeholder interviews

- The survey was completed as the end of an energy scan around four cities/communities in Flanders.
- The vulnerable customer survey is not based on a statistically representative sample.
- As such, the results have to be interpreted with caution. The results give certain indications about vulnerable customers, but no definitive conclusions can be drawn from it.
- The result showing that 89% of the respondents state that they can heat their dwelling adequately has to be interpreted as a subjective statement. It is possible that vulnerable customers have already grown accustomed to lower levels of heating comfort. This result is therefore not representative of an 'objective' level of heating comfort in the dwellings of vulnerable customers.

Policy issues as revealed in the stakeholder interviews

The stakeholders present at the meeting agreed to the following main statements on energy poverty policy in Flanders, as revealed during the WP2 stakeholder interviews.

- Energy poverty is only a derived consequence of living in poverty more generally. Living in poverty entails living in dwellings of poor quality, and this entails high energy demand.
- There are also a number of structural reasons for energy poverty problems in Flanders: poor quality of buildings (especially those buildings on the market for people with low incomes), high share of vulnerable customers on the rental

market (with 'split incentive' problems: owners have to invest in energy efficiency measures, while the tenants enjoy the benefits of those investments, and generally cannot afford a higher rental price if the owner decides to recuperate the energy-efficiency investment).

- About 1 million dwellings in Flanders do not comply with the minimum required standards of the residential code. For most of these houses, minor adjustments are in order, but for about 350.000 the problems are structural (e.g. moisture problems). Often it would be better to demolish these existing buildings and build a new dwelling (rather than investing in renovation measures). Most vulnerable customers live in this type of dwelling, other (structural) problems have to be addressed more urgently than energy-related investments.
- Most vulnerable customers are renting an apartment or a house of poor quality. In addition, in Flanders the private rental market is dominated by small-scale owners (i.e. owners having one or only a few properties on the rental market). Compared to a situation where rental dwellings are owned by big corporations this makes it more difficult to take structural improvement measures in the Flemish rental market.
- Poor households generally have difficulties to pay monthly bills for numerous items (e.g. rent, telecom, food, transport, etc.). One should first understand how and why these households decide on which bills to pay first. For instance, the threat of disconnection is higher for telecom than for energy, since in Flanders there is the system of the social energy provider of last resort (i.e. the DSO). This system therefore tends to work in a counterproductive way: because the vulnerable customers know that they will not be immediately disconnected from the electricity or gas grid, when faced with budget constraints they often decide to pay the other bills first.
- Over the last few years, the energy bill for residential consumers has been on the rise. There are a number of reasons: the transition to renewable electricity is financed via the electricity bill, the system of free kWh has been abolished, etc.
- Furthermore, the tendency has been to increase the 'fixed' part of the electricity bill (e.g. a yearly fixed surcharge on the electricity bill to pay for the debts incurred by subsidising green electricity production, recent proposals to move towards a capacity-based distribution tariff), whereas energy bills should be related to the amount of energy you consume (so that energy savings also 'pay off'). Increasing the 'fixed' part of the energy bill is generally detrimental to vulnerable customers (who generally consume less energy).

- The financial instruments available for energy-efficiency improvements are not taken up by vulnerable customers because of numerous barriers (e.g. administrative burdens, upfront expenditure needed, etc.).
- Energy poverty policy in Flanders is predominantly aimed at alleviating the symptoms of energy poverty, as opposed to tackling the causes at the root of the problem. According to some, this symptomatic treatment is even counterproductive:
 - E.g. there is a social 'safety net' (the DSO as energy provider of last resort), but the tariff charged by the DSO is based on the average of commercial tariffs available in Flanders so the customers could in fact save money if he/she would chose for the cheapest option on the market;
 - E.g. the installation of a budget meter (in case the customer has debts with the DSO) stigmatizes the customers and acts as a further barrier for lifting these customers out of the 'poverty trap'.
- Energy poverty policy is the subject of an 'ideological' battle in Flanders. On the one hand, there are those who believe that measures to alleviate energy poverty (e.g. zero interest energy loans for efficiency improvements) should be an integral part of the regular economy (i.e. commercial banks providing the loans); on the other hand there are those who believe that these measures should be part of social policy. As it is now, energy poverty policy is part of social policy (e.g. 'energy houses' providing the zero-interest energy loans, free energy scans provided by social economy organizations), but there are proposals circulating to cut back the subsidies to the social sector for energy poverty alleviation. Also, DNBs in Flanders are under pressure to focus exclusively on core activities (i.e. managing the distribution grid).

Results of brainstorm on ASSIST action in Flanders

Background

Flanders already has a network of 'energy scanners', who have a profile very similar to the HEA-role envisaged in the ASSIST project. These 'energy scanners' are people who live or have lived in a vulnerable situation (so called experts by experience) and receive a 4-day training course by EANDIS. They give energy advice to vulnerable consumers. The system and the funding is imposed by the government, the practical implementation is coordinated by the DSOs.

The energy scan is a free and exclusive product for people who are in one of the following situations:

- Protected consumer (e.g. people enjoying certain welfare benefits, people with health restrictions, etc.);
- People who will be secluded from energy supply;
- People with an active energy 'budget meter';
- People with a low income;
- People who rent a home from public services (social housing);
- People who rent a house on the private market for less than 462,75€;
- People who are in debt mediation for energy debts;
- People who receive guidance by public services because they can't pay energy bills;
- People with certain health impediments (formally: people who have a certain code by the health insurance fund (code starting with "1")).

There are different types of energy scans, with different fees for the DSO.

- *Basic energy scan*: Home visit to detect opportunities for energy saving, both behavioral as well as structural:
 - Analysis of the house and electrical appliances;
 - Give tips how to lower the energy consumption, per room;
 - Make a report for the vulnerable customer with more practical tips;
 - Installation of a free 'energy saving package' (e.g. radiator foil, LED lamp, water saving shower head, tube insulation).
- *Follow-up scan type 1*: for vulnerable customers with really high energy bills:
 - Suggestion of additional modifications to the house/appliances;
 - Additional installation of small energy saving materials
 - Give information about how the free energy market works and guide the VC to the 'V-test' (where you can test, based on your energy consumption and location which energy provider is the cheapest).
- *Follow-up scan type 2*:

- People who have the intention to renovate: insulation of the roof, new energy-efficient windows, energy-efficient heating.

As the funding is done by the DSO, the cost is calculated in the energy bill of all grid users. Including the vulnerable consumers. The funding is also limited to the 3 types mentioned above, so there's no room for additional guidance of the vulnerable customer in the current situation. In addition, most vulnerable customers (about 80%) receive only a basic energy scan, without any follow-up.

Even though there is room for improvement and additional experimentation in the context of the ASSIST project, the VCSC members **stressed that the ASSIST action should preferably also be carried out (at least in part) by the existing network of energy scanners:**

- The **energy scanners have already received an intensive training** on how to approach vulnerable customers and giving advice on energy saving. It is unrealistic to expect that volunteers can acquire the same level of expertise and skill as required;
- Carrying out the ASSIST action based on the efforts of volunteers **would send a wrong political message that the existing system of energy scans** (which are paid for by the DSO, a cost that is ultimately socialized to all electricity users through the electricity bill) **could be replaced by the action of volunteers.**

The VCSC members also **unanimously decided that the fee foreseen for their participation in the VCSC meeting (i.e. 1000 euro pp.) should be used to support the ASSIST action.**

Methodology

The brainstorm was organized as follows:

- 7 sheets were prepared to collect ideas (on post-its) related to the ASSIST action in Flanders in the following areas:
 - Target group:
 - Who to approach? (i.e. specific sub-groups of vulnerable customers)
 - How to approach the target group?
 - Training:
 - Modifications to the existing training?
 - How to enroll new candidates for the training?

- Energy scan:
 - Focus of the scan?
 - Follow-up of the scan?
 - Reporting?
- The VCSC members and additional stakeholders were divided into three groups.
- Each group was presented with the sheets of one of the three above-mentioned domains, and was given the opportunity to collect and discuss ideas.
- After 20 minutes of working on one sheet, the groups were rotated to work on a different sheet. This was repeated after another 20 minutes, so that each group had the opportunity to express ideas on each of the domains.
- At the end of the brainstorm, all idea sheets were collected and exposed on a large table. Each participant was given 5 green and 5 red stickers. These stickers were used to vote: green stickers indicating a good idea that should be explored in the context of ASSIST; red stickers indicating a bad idea that should not be further explored.

It was made clear to the participants that at the present stage, we were mainly looking for ideas. The vote should clearly be seen as consultative only; no guarantees were given that the ASSIST action would be composed of the preferential elements as revealed by the voting procedure.

Outcomes

The following paragraphs explain the ideas and the results of the voting.

Target group

Who to approach?

Newcomers to the country (e.g. those seeking asylum). This target group can be approached through the 'lokale opvanginitiatieven' ('local reception initiative'). (special point of attention could be to explain functioning of the thermostat)



Inhabitants of social housing dwellings.



Young people from vulnerable situations that are going to live on an independent basis (e.g. coming from special youth care). They can be approached through the 'inleefhuizen' (support for young people organized by the local OCMW) or the 'ecohuizen'.



Single-parent households with low incomes.



Seniors (>65 years). Probably a large potential for energy saving but difficult to motivate.

[no votes]

Vulnerable customers with an exceptionally high energy use (this can be detected by the DSOs).

[no votes]

Poor owners of dwellings. (usually their dwellings are of very low quality so behavioral energy saving measures might not be the most effective way to lower energy use)

[no votes]

Use the existing target group of energy scans.



How to approach the target group?

The following ideas all received one positive vote:



OCMW (local social welfare organizations)

Youth care institutions (for approaching young people as a target group)

Neighborhood approach (in priority areas with high poverty rates)

Local food banks

DSOs, using their communication channels

Using a 'sexy', 'surprising' approach with tempting prospects (similar ideas: stressing comfort improvement (next to financial gains), communicate in a visual way)

A 'chain' approach (each vulnerable customer participating in the ASSIST action can bring in another customer for a small reward)

The following ideas all received one negative vote: 

School (for approaching young people as the target group)

Management of social housing company

Health insurance fund

Training

Modifications to existing training?

How to motivate people in a correct way by demonstrating the link between the actions undertaken and the impact on the energy bill. Give a realistic picture of what can be achieved and how to achieve it.



Training on technical skills. Ensuring sufficient technical support (e.g. technical coach, list of FAQs)



Scanning use of water, giving advice on water savings.



Speaking the language of the vulnerable customer.



Training how to carry out small reparations that will help with energy savings.



Training about how to improve living conditions in general, energy saving behavior, and measuring effects of the interventions.

[no votes]

Training on how to approach different target groups.

[no votes]

How to enroll new candidates for the training?

Use the existing network of energy scanners, at the very least in an advisory role.



Recruit the 'single points of contact' for a street, area, neighborhood (coupled to the specific target group)



Recruit people from academia, universities, research, VEA, SERV, DSOs etc. to give them the opportunity to acquire practical knowledge on their policy field.



Recruit people that have already received an energy scan, and who have implemented at least one recommendation.



Use the VCSC members.

[no votes]

Use the employees of the 'energy houses' as coaches.

[no votes]

Use a 'tandem' of an official energy scanner + a volunteer.



Use the volunteers of the project 'Energy and poverty' coordinated by Samenlevingsopbouw.



Recruit from the network of 'buddy's' organized by the local OCMWs.



Recruit from the budget guides.



Energy scan

Focus of the scan?

A step-by-step approach, using a trajectory of multiple house visits, gradually building up trust.



A holistic approach: water use, energy use, living conditions, etc.



Build in a link with the official energy scan (type 2) for energy-efficiency investments.



Use 'nudging' techniques.



Follow-up of the scan?

A step-by-step approach, using a trajectory of multiple house visits if needed. Intensive guidance.



Linking actions to amount of euros saved (compared to a baseline: what would have happened without the action).



Engage people with the promise that they can at least save e.g. 250 euros by participating in the ASSIST action, on the condition that they agree to carry out certain free actions, under the active guidance of the HEA. If the target is not reached, participants get the remaining money. This can be financed by using the budget foreseen for rewarding the VCSC members (i.e. 10.000 euro).



Using an app (like 'Smappy') to give feedback on energy use (note: this strategy will only be useful for certain target groups – i.e. those that have access to the internet or a smart phone)



Organizing a contest among the participants in the ASSIST action with a reward for the ones that achieve the highest amount of energy savings.

[no votes]

Linking the ASSIST action to the future 'home pass' (starting from 2018, the 'home pass' will centralize all information regarding a particular dwelling in one central location).

[no votes]

Using the smart meter as a follow-up instrument.



[showing vulnerable customers how to read their electricity meter was considered to be important however]

Reporting?

Focus on the demands of the vulnerable customer: what does he/she find important for his/her dwelling, what can be improved? Use of a standardized checklist only as a back-up, to bring up issues that might otherwise escape from the attention of the vulnerable customer.



Customized reporting for specific target groups (e.g. social housing, tenants, etc.)



Use a follow-up tool designed specifically for the ASSIST action.

[no votes]

Follow up of the meeting

The ideas discussed during the brainstorm will be taken into account when deciding on the ASSIST action in Flanders. The VCSC members will get feedback on the ASSIST action, including the reasons why certain ideas were retained or rejected.

It is possible that the ASSIST project team will reach out to certain members of the VCSC to help out in the ASSIST action (on a voluntary basis).

The VCSC members will be notified of the publication of ASSIST deliverables.

The 2nd meeting of the VCSC will be organized in the between March-May 2019.

Conclusions

Flanders already has a network of 'energy scanners', who have a profile very similar to the HEA-role envisaged in the ASSIST project. These 'energy scanners' are people who live or have lived in a vulnerable situation (so called experts by experience) and receive a 4-day training course by EANDIS. Even though there is room for improvement and additional experimentation in the context of the ASSIST project, the VCSC members **stressed that the ASSIST action should preferably also be carried out (at least in part) by the existing network of energy scanners.** The ASSIST project can be seen as offering a space for experimenting with new promising approaches that might later on be implemented in a structural way.

The most promising ideas for the ASSIST action revealed as a result of a brainstorm appear to be:

- Working with specific target groups: young people, newcomers to the country, or social housing residents in particular.
- Recruitment of candidates for the action should draw upon existing roles and networks, depending on the specific target group.
- Training should start from a technical base, but go beyond that in order to speak to the motivations of a particular target group.
- The ASSIST action itself should be implemented as a trajectory, a step-by-step approach helping vulnerable customers to identify problems in their dwellings, identify possible solutions for these problems, select the most relevant solutions from adapted to their specific needs/situation, and help with the implementation of those solutions.
- Show the results of the action in terms of euros saved.

Annexes

- Slideshow presentation given at the meeting