

W²: CUSTOMIZED WORK AND WELFARE PROGRAMS. AN ALL-IN CONCEPT

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1. Abstract

In this study, a blueprint for an all-in concept is developed aimed at achieving (labour) integration for those groups which – for various reasons – are the furthest removed from the labour market. This all-in concept covers the following: (1) the identification of various target groups and their needs, (2) a refinement of the concept of integrated programs, with a range of possible employment and support services and (3) elements of an organisational and policy framework in which the various services concerned can work together optimally. This concept of programs was called W². The label reflects the *synergy between work and welfare*. A program that encompasses both of these domains (to be interpreted in the broadest possible sense) has a better chance of success than the sum of the individual, partial services, hence the quadratic term. Conditions are attached to such synergies. In general the programs will be much longer than is the current practice with the Flemish employment agency VDAB (six months); they not only focus on the jobseeker but on all stakeholders in the system (services, intermediaries, employers); the objective is extended from 'formal employment' to a range of alternative forms of 'active citizenship' and the method is inclusive, integrated, participative, structured and coordinated.

The principles of the W² program can be summarised as follows. W² targets the weakest groups in the labour market: the unemployed, workers and temporary inactive workers who need more than just work-oriented services. The objective of the W² programs can be described as '*durable integration*'. W² entails a highly diversified support program with flexible combinations of services tailored to the individual in the following areas:

1. services which focus on the labour market (screening, mediation, competence development and career counselling);
2. material (income, debt mediation, housing etc.);
3. psychological (addiction, depression, etc.);
4. medical (health problems, disabilities, etc.);
5. social (family relationships, isolation, discrimination, etc.);
6. cultural (assimilation, emancipation, etc.).

Linear thinking should be abandoned for the dynamics of the programs. W² programs are interactive and cyclical and require a flexible approach with regular evaluations and adjustments. As far as the length of the programs is concerned, no limits should be set. On the contrary: long-term job coaching is necessary for this target group of the most vulnerable jobseekers, even after they have re-entered employment, for purposes of efficiency and to avoid relapse. Irrespective of the nature of the services, the philosophy of W² programs always consists of an investment in the human, material, psychological, social and cultural abilities of individuals and in the empowerment of this individual.

Key words:

Work; welfare; counselling; durable integration; empowerment; active citizenship

2. Study objectives

The key objective of this study was to develop an all-in concept aimed at achieving (labour) integration for those groups which - for various reasons – are the furthest removed from the labour market. The following elements were taken into account:

1. identifying the different target group(s) and their needs;
2. refining the concept of an integrated program;
3. developing an organisational and policy frame for optimum cooperation between the various services involved.

Clarification of key concepts

OCMW: Every city or municipality has its own 'Public Social Welfare Centre' (*Openbaar centrum voor maatschappelijk welzijn*, OCMW), which provides a range of social services and thus also contributes to the welfare of every citizen. Some OCMWs have been incorporated into a Social House.

Social House: The Social House (*Sociaal Huis*) is a one-stop-shop that citizens can address with questions about social services in their municipality, neighbourhood or district. There are also digital Social Houses.

Werkwinkel: The *Werkwinkel* or Job shop is the one-stop shop for all organisations that provide assistance when people are searching for a job. *Werkwinkels* are organised at local or intermunicipal level.

VDAB: Flemish Service for Employment and Vocational Training, the Flemish Public Employment Service.

VAPH: Flemish Agency for Disabled Persons (Vlaams Agentschap voor Personen met een Handicap)

OECD : Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development)

3. Methods and data

Two *theoretical frameworks* were combined to develop the W^2 concept. On the one hand we drew inspiration from the welfare theories of Amartya Sen and John Roemer. These state that active labour market policy does not consist of chasing the unemployed that are on the verge of settling on their laurels, but instead of investing in their human, material, social, psychological and cultural capital and enlarging their autonomous choices. The empowerment approach (see among others Van Regenmortel, 2002, 2010a, 2010b) ties in seamlessly with this. Empowerment on the one hand consists of accessing and developing the personal strengths of the target group and on the other hand providing access to the required resources in terms of social assistance and support. A commitment to full citizenship is the main theme here.

Besides theoretical frameworks, we also searched for *innovative practices* at home and abroad. On the one hand we continued building on the experience of many stakeholders in Flemish Labour Market Policy – VDAB as well as the Flemish Agency for Disabled Persons (VAPH), the OCMWs and third parties – which have experimented with innovative methods in the recent past. On the other hand we also looked across national borders, especially to the Netherlands and Finland, where they already have more experience in terms of integrated programs.

Methodological explanation

The *interest organisations* which contributed to this study were the Flemish Network of Associations which is a platform for the poor, the Forum of Ethnic-Cultural Minorities (a non-profit association) and the User Platform for Disability and Labour.

The following cases and methods were studied in *Flanders*:

- Stebo vzw in Genk: *VUURwerkt* method and the 'dual approach to work' method;
- vzw Leren Ondernemen in Leuven: A broad interpretation of activation of people in poverty;
- 'Activering Plus' project in the Province of Flemish Brabant: support for people suffering from increased psychological vulnerability;
- tendering activation counselling: outsourcing of care by VDAB for people with medical, mental, psychological or psychiatric problems (MMPP)
- 'Plug in Gaps' project: cooperation between the temporary employment sector and ATP/GTB (the specialized service for program determination and support of people with an occupational disability) with a view to activating people with disabilities; B, - 'Instant A': social employment agency for young people;
- 'Instant A+': social employment agency for people aged 50 or over;
- Rainbow Economy in Brussels: promotion of self-employed entrepreneurship among asylum seekers and refugees
- guidance project of vzw De Sleutel: guidance for people with drug problems;
- RESET: additional opportunities for people with disabilities and their escorts
- the socio-professional balance of the OCMW.

The following good practices in *other countries* were also studied:

- The Netherlands: 'labour broker' project: proactive approach of employers (Fontys Actief);
- Finland: the "Labour Force Service Centre (LAFOS) and DUURI, Helsinki's LAFOS centre

4. Findings

4.1 Who is eligible for W² programs?

The curative target group of VDAB - the so-called MMPP group with medical, mental, psychological or psychiatric problems - can be referred to as the *lower limit* of the target group for W² programs. The upper limit of the target group will inevitably consist of a 'grey area' because it is difficult to determine the intensity of this group's needs beforehand. Consequently VDAB will have to serve as a gatekeeper by means of a specialised, multidisciplinary screening. OCMW clients and inactive people also have to be included in the perspective of the target group(s) and their needs, in addition to the VDAB target groups.

This addition does not guarantee that all the potential clients for a W² program have been identified. That is why a *universal framework* would be preferential to a category framework. As a result the target group's heterogeneity 'as is' is respected. The universal criterion for defining the target group is: *the existence of other needs, which are not employment-related, for support*. In other words, every person with a vulnerable labour market position, who needs professional support in one or more areas, which are not labour market related, is eligible for the integrated W² program. By using the term "person with a vulnerable labour market position" – rather than 'jobseeker' – we have indicated that the integrated approach can continue after placement of the jobseeker, in order to ensure *sustainable labour market integration*. Moreover, people who are not (yet) looking for work, such as young people in special secondary education, part-time vocational secondary education as well as (ex-)prisoners should also be eligible.

4.2 Which needs does a W² program cater for?

The needs of this target group in terms of support are extremely diverse and may include the following: psychological-emotional well-being (e.g., treatment of depression) and specific welfare-related problems (e.g., debt mediation); basic education and experience; health (e.g., withdrawal from an addiction); the social and cultural context (e.g., breaking through isolation or discrimination). The appropriate response to these needs requires a very flexible and widespread range of services. The aim is to ensure the necessary margin for a comprehensive, individual, client-oriented approach.

4.3 What is the objective of a W² program?

The objective of the W² programs is not restricted to regular labour in the normal economic circuit, to the social economy and to workplace healthcare. Any form of labour, including 'participation' (care, volunteering, ...) should be included in the range of (intermediate) objectives. The ultimate objective, however, is always regular labour. A long-term perspective with attention to after-care and career counselling ensures that the target group is not 'sidelined' in a (labour)participation place, but instead is continuously given opportunities to learn and develop. At the same time these objectives may also include temporary work and self-employed entrepreneurship.

4.4 Good practices mapped

We have analysed ten Flemish and Dutch good practices. The emphasis was on innovative counselling practices targeting 'people who are quite far removed from the labour market' and which try to respond to one or more of the identified needs. Methodologies and tools as well as insights into success factors and bottlenecks were found to often be restricted to organisations, local networks and/or final reports of projects for which the resources are missing to continue to implement them in full or to implement them in regular operations. This study once again highlighted good practices and integrated their strengths in an umbrella concept. The practices studies show that one should work concomitantly with the target group, with potential employers as well as with the intermediaries (mediators). The need for a universal, inclusive approach of the target group (instead of a category approach) thus is completed with an inclusive approach of all the stakeholders who play a role in achieving the target group's (labour) participation.

a) Support of the target group

The following figure is a schematic representation of the W² program and shows the different phases in the support of the target group. The figure represents the mooring of a ship, whereby the emphasis is first and foremost on work in the docks to ensure a solid foundation. During the traction process the emphasis is on the integrated approach in terms of work and welfare, which is symbolised by the pilotage services, until the jobseeker is ready to move to the safe haven of social inclusion and development, either to the inland navigation of the social economy or to the open seas of the normal economic circuit. Further guidance in terms of work and welfare can then continue to be an important point for attention with a view to durable integration.

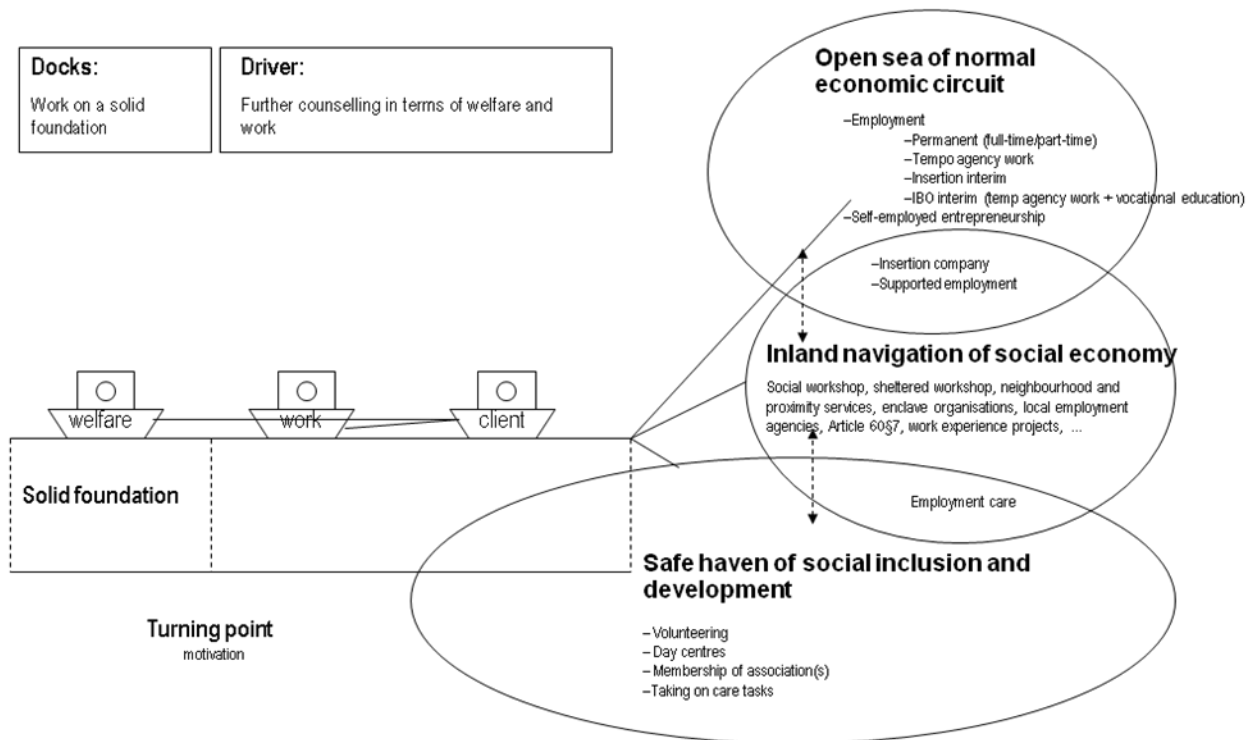


Figure 1 Schematic representation of the W² program (Steenssens, Sannen et al, 2008)

Motivation is a crucial factor to activate and support the target group. This has an intrinsic and an extrinsic component. The search for possibilities to mobilise in the best possible way the strengths of the participant enhances the intrinsic component, whereas a genuine perspective on (labour) participation and development which entails an effective improvement of the current situation will boost the extrinsic component. ‘Work-’ and ‘welfare’-related services are the two pillars that need to be developed simultaneously. The intensity of the need for care determines whether a phase of exclusive care and assistance needs to be precede (a combined program of) employment counselling activities. The aim is to develop a *solid foundation*, a secure platform, as a necessary starting point. An important point for attention in this activation process is the gradual development of *social solidarity*, the appropriate response to and involvement of social and cultural contexts and the recognition of a broad interpretation of the term ‘labour’. The notion of ‘process’ refers to:

- an iterative conception of the program, which takes into account the variability of the needs of the individual and the circumstances in which s/he finds him/herself;
- the use of flexible time limits;
- flexible and warm transfers between all the stakeholders.

b) Support on the demand side

The activation and support on the *demand* side relates to the level of an individual jobseeker (e.g., by working with portfolios, intensive case-related job hunting and mediation, administrative support and care) as well as to the level of the entire target group (e.g., through support when developing and implementing diversity plans in companies, informing people about employment measures and actively creating employment for the target group). The creation of win-win situations, representing the jobseeker’s interests and those of the company is paramount.

c) Support of the intermediaries

As far as the activation and support of *mediation and counselling services* - the intermediaries - are concerned, the inclusive approach to the target group requires a broad, integrated accessibility that goes beyond the identification, approach and counselling (‘grabbing’) of the target group. This also involves a sustained adequate support process based on familiarity (‘understanding’). Integrated accessibility therefore relates to:

- the capacity of the service providers;
- reaching target groups in the right places and adopting an outreach approach;
- conducting appropriate, meaningful communication;
- tapping into the world of jobseekers and into the conditions in which they live (e.g., through physical proximity in neighbourhoods and districts, engaging para-professionals with a personal experience of exclusion, acting in an informed manner based on an understanding and research of the world they live in).

Furthermore, an adequate *cooperation model* is required to involve all the stakeholders who play a role in achieving the target group’s (labour) participation. Success factors include (time to develop) networks, knowledge of other actors, a shared vision and structured cooperation in terms of complementarity (no parallel circuits).

Finally, the analysis shows that comprehensive customised counselling requires a lot of competences from the counsellor, as well as *time* and a wide *margin of maneuver*. An 'empowering' labour organisation ties in with these requirements and is characterised among others by the fact that it offers opportunities for competence development by means of education, team and peer learning and the development or application of appropriate techniques and tools. These include an adequate set of instruments for process evaluation (in addition to result evaluation) and for screening.

4.5 Finland

We also looked at Finland for inspiration. Some years before this study a program for people who require multiple forms of support in a partnership between several public and private stakeholders was developed here. In addition to a number of similarities with the Flemish labour market (including the finding that an approach which only focused on work was insufficient for specific target groups, the need for collaboration with other partners, experimenting with the outsourcing of services for which no in-house expertise is available) there are also a number of differences. One difference relates to the experience of the LAFOS centres. The cooperation between employment services and social services at local level, between work and welfare in Finland is already highly developed in some regions. The three structural partners are the 'local job centres', the 'municipal social services' and the Social Security Administration. A number of third party networks, offering complementary services, operate around this structure. They work in *multidisciplinary* teams with expertise in various domains: health, welfare, housing, income, psychological counselling, community work, sports, etc. In Finland an integrated, holistic approach is used, which is modelled on the methodology of case management, with a *tandem of 'work' and 'welfare' counsellors* for each customer. The programs 'can' last several years, because the objective is 'durable integration' in the long term. The LAFOS centres thus enjoy a good reputation among their clients.

5. Conclusions and policy implications

5.1 Towards a blueprint of Flemish work and welfare programs

The W² model targets the weakest groups in the labour market, who require more than services related to the labour market. These services include screening, mediation, competence development, and career counselling, i.e., services which are part of VDAB's regular services.

The principles of the W² program can be summarized as follows.

1. The *target group* is not defined in a limitative manner, but includes all job seekers, workers and temporarily inactive workers, whose need for support also relates to other services than labour-related services.
2. This implies - in addition to the aforementioned labour-related services - a highly diversified range of support services in the following domains:
 - material (income, debt, housing etc.);
 - psychological (addiction, depression, etc.);
 - medical (health problems, disabilities, etc.);
 - social (family relationships, isolation, discrimination, etc.),
 - cultural (assimilation, emancipation, etc.).

These are flexible combinations of services, tailored to the individual's needs. Rather than developing parallel circuits we are in favour of maximum cooperation with the regular services that are already being offered. But this is subject to shared objectives and adapted coordination mechanisms, in line with the case management method.

3. Whatever the nature of the services, the philosophy of W² pathways remains investing in the human, material, emotional, social and cultural assets of individuals and empowering the individual. The key question in any intervention is, to what extent does it contribute to the expansion of the individual's '*capabilities*' (as defined by A. Sen), particularly in terms of labour and 'active citizenship'.
4. The objective of the W² programs can be described as 'durable integration'. But this concept is a broad interpretation, even for the 'work' dimension. In addition to regular and social employment, 'care through work', volunteer work and any other form of 'social participation' are legitimate stepping stones (and not just formal, paid employment). Simultaneously the 'durable integration' objective means that projects cannot (always) be ended when the jobseeker is employed.
5. The notion of linear thinking has to be abandoned for these programs and these target groups. The uncertainty in many areas, including the risk of failure, requires a very flexible approach with regular evaluations and adjustments. For some jobseekers a preparatory pathway will be necessary, consisting exclusively of welfare services (in order to create the necessary solid foundation, so that a labour-related

program becomes feasible). Experience has shown though that this is not always the case. In some cases, a work program can contribute to a smoother and faster integration from day one. No limitations can be set in terms of the duration of the programs. On the contrary even: long-term job coaching, even after employment, is necessary to avoiding a relapse in the case of the most vulnerable jobseekers.

5.2 Organisation and financing

We conclude with some recommendations as to the organisational and financial aspects of the W² programs, at the level of the Flemish Community and at the local level.

At *Flemish* level we recommend the creation of a dedicated interdepartmental consultative body, which can periodically be extended with the umbrella organisations of various target groups. In addition, a permanent W² Task Force within the Department of Work and Social Economy will have to be responsible for supporting this central consultation group, as well as national and local networks. The task force would be responsible for developing a strategic vision, information and raising awareness, developing methods and instruments, exchanging experience and knowledge and the monitoring of the W² programs.

Cooperation at local level should take into account the diversity of the field that they are operating in. Ideally, an integrated operation of the Job shop (*Werkwinkel*) and Social House (*Sociaal Huis*) can also form the backbone of the local W² program. In other cases, networks will have to be created.

Most likely VDAB, with its expertise in terms of screening and the allocation of programs, will remain the gatekeeper of the program. This does not, however, imply a monopoly. In principle it should be possible, even at the local level, to assign the coordination of the program to several accredited directors, which are as close as possible to their respective target groups. These directors can be welfare organisations and labour market stakeholders.

A final recommendation is that the allocation and funding of the W² programs should not be subject to the existing tendering mechanisms. The heterogeneity, complexity and unpredictability of programs, the fact that quality control takes precedence over quantitative objectives and cooperation over competition means that these programs cannot be reconciled with market forces.

Full reference of study report(s) and or paper(s) and other key publications of the study summarised here

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