Brussels: Neighbourhoods as Generators of Integration

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**Introduction: Deprived areas in Brussels**

When the geographical and historical context is taken into account, spatial concentration of poverty in Belgium can be expected in three situations: working class areas in the nineteenth-century inner city belts, in industrial regions, and recent social housing estates. The second one is not relevant in the Brussels context.

As a result of the industrial revolution, the working class neighbourhoods form compact inner city areas with a large supply of low quality housing. Today, this housing constitutes a residual private rental sector (residual because it lies at the bottom of the quality range of housing and because one applies for accommodation in this sector when excluded from all other sectors). In the early 1960s, the rapid extension of the middle class and the suburbanization process required the attraction of guestworkers to replace the Belgian population in the lower positions of the urban labour and housing markets. These neighbourhoods are thus characterized by relatively high levels of immigrant concentration. The residual housing sector is partly related to suburbanization, since many abandoned inner city dwellings were converted into rental flats. The selective character of both suburbanization and the housing market processes results in the concentration of the poor population in these inner city neighbourhoods. Deindustrialization and post-Fordist polarization further explain the impoverishment of the population in these areas. In Brussels, this inner city deprived zone is sometimes called the ‘poor crescent’. It encompasses nearly one-fifth of the population and since the end of the 1970s it is a clear-cut concentration zone of poverty and immigration (Kesteloot *et al.*, 2002).

In Belgium, most social housing estates are unproblematic. Belgium has never had a postwar housing crisis and the very much-encouraged promotion of self-construction made large social housing building programmes unnecessary. Interwar estates, frequently garden city-like, provided small, but decent housing and are still much appreciated. The few deprived social
housing estates fall in two categories. Some are part of a postwar slum eradication programme and are built on the land released by the clearances in the inner city. Most of these are high-rise to buffer the substantial land prices, which have to be calculated into the rents. In other cases, high-rise estates are built in the periphery. They reflect a poor interpretation of the postwar ideas on modern urbanism. In Brussels, social housing represents 7 per cent of the total housing stock, but around 55 per cent of the households are eligible. As long as social housing was attractive because of low rents and fairly good quality, the housing associations could select the better applicants and reject the others into the private rental sector.

However, the economic crisis of the 1970s and the processes of polarization of the past 20 years have gradually transformed these neighbourhoods into new areas of deprivation: the traditional clientele of the social housing association, the lower middle class and the working class, have a much more fragile financial situation than before the crisis. A second explanation is a shift in the allocation priorities: devolution of social housing policy in the wake of the Belgian federalization process has generated a restrictive application of the allocation rules (away from political clientelism) by the Regions, which facilitated access to social housing to vulnerable population groups. Basically, access to social housing is limited by an income maximum that varies according to household size. Allocation is based on a set of social priorities and the order on the waiting list. In Brussels, these rules give precedence to single parents, disabled persons, households in substandard housing, young families with at least two children and to a lesser extent, the elderly.

Finally, high-rise estates rapidly lost their attractiveness. In order to avoid empty dwellings and income losses, housing associations, who tended to let to Belgians with a regular income, had to accept less desirable applicants. In many cases, high-rise estates offer large apartments to compensate for the very limited supply of these in the private rental sector, and they consequently attract large households from immigrant origin. In their eyes, access to these high-rise apartments is considered as a significant improvement to their housing situation. To other tenants and to the outside world it sometimes appears as a ghettoization process and it unleashes debates on social mix.

The Marolles and Kersenhoek in the Brussels context

The peripheral social-housing estates, although never as large as in other countries, and the poor crescent of Brussels, reflect the neighbourhood contrast sought after in the URBEX research design. However, the selection of the neighbourhoods had to take earlier similar research in Brussels into account (Figure 12.1). In a study on the spatial dimension of poverty, funded by the Belgian federal government, two much larger inner city areas had already been studied, namely Kuregem, in the central part of the poor