

Domo vzw Leuven: Family support by volunteers

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1 The initiative and its organizers¹

“How can we support disadvantaged families with young children in their daily life in order to enhance their development opportunities and to prevent possible abuse?” (Lieve and Adèle founders of Domo VZW Leuven²)

Domo vzw³ Leuven is an autonomous volunteer organization that offers support to disadvantaged families with children up to twelve years old in the Leuven area. Domo means at home, but it is also a Dutch acronym for ‘Door Ondersteuning Mee Opvoeden’, which means ‘co-parenting through support’. Their slogan is: prevention through presence. The organisation wants to support and encourage families as a ‘friend at home’ in difficult periods. The notion of ‘a friend’ highlights the importance of a bond, a confidential horizontal relationship. The model is based on the regular presence of a volunteer: one volunteer for one family visiting once a week at home over a longer period of about two years. The basic idea is to support parents to cope with difficulties of parenting in different possible ways, depending on the questions and needs of the families. Activities range from practical tasks like taking children from school to doing ‘fun stuff’ and more generally, offering some diversion, affection and stimulants across different domains of life. Doing so volunteers want to contribute preventively to the child’s wellbeing and chances in education. In the long run they hope to strengthen parents’ capabilities and broaden the social network of the family.

The two pioneers Lieve and Adèle started a pilot project in 1991 and Domo vzw Leuven was established officially in 1993. The organisation grew slowly and steadily. In 2013 90 volunteers were engaged with Domo to support 67 families in the broader area of Leuven. In total these families have 174 children (Domo vzw Leuven, 2014). In 2011 the average family has 3,60 children, far over the Flemish average of 1,76 that year (Verdonck, 2011). Some volunteers are not active in a family, but they support the organization in different ways. Since December 2013 three people work part time (16h/week) for Domo vzw Leuven, doing administrative, coordination and communication work.

Of all the people who ever volunteered about 10% were male and 90% were female. 55,4% of all volunteers are highly educated and 30% are students. Only a small minority of 9% is over 56 years old. Almost one third combines the volunteer work with a full time job. There is a lot of diversity in studies and employment. The average Domo volunteer stays around 13 months⁴ in the same family, but there

¹ This report is based on document analysis, in-depth interviews and a focus group. More information about methods used can be found in (Kazepov, Saruis, Wukovitsch, Cools, & Novy, 2014), accessible via <http://improve-research.eu/>. When information is drawn directly from one of the interviews, or when one of the interviewees is quoted it will be referred to as (I: Alias of the respondent). Input that emerged during the focus group discussion will be referred to as (focus group). The respondents allowed the researchers to use an alias that discloses their affiliation to the organisation. Appendix I provides an overview of all respondents. The authors want to express their gratitude to the interviewees for their participation and valuable input.

² Domo vzw made a DVD with an interview of the two pioneers reflecting on their experiences.

³ VZW (vereniging zonder winstoogmerk) is the juridical statute for a Non-Profit Association in Belgium

⁴ This is significantly lower than the two years average support relation described above. This is because Domo also sends volunteers to ‘parel-families’ (Parel stands for ‘perinataal aanbod region Leuven’. These are families who are expecting or just had a newly born child and can use some extra support in first months. This practice will not be further discussed in this report.

are outliers of a month (when the match between the volunteer and the family does not work) up to 4 years (when it seems inappropriate to stop the relationship).

The organisation targets families that are both deprived of socioeconomic opportunities and in need of family support related to the upbringing of young children. Besides these common traits there is a lot of diversity in family composition, origin, number of kids and needs. In 2013, 51% of the parents have the Belgian nationality, 45% have a nationality from outside the European Union and 4% are foreigners from within the European community. The demand for family support coming from non-Belgian parents is growing over the last years. The parents of Domo families are very diverse when looking at their level of education and knowledge of Dutch.

Over the last 5 years Domo initiatives emerged in other Flemish cities: Antwerpen, Sint-Niklaas and Hasselt (www.Domovlaanderen.org; Verdonck, 2011). Like the pioneers, several volunteers and promoters of Domo initiatives are people who work(ed) in in the field of child protection or family support and were in some way frustrated by the limitations of professional help.

Since the start of the initiative Domo distinguishes itself from professional help. The organization does not want to replace professional help. Domo wants to complement it or, if possible, prevent that professional help is necessary. The organization believes that screened, trained and supported volunteers can offer experiences and qualities that professionals cannot. While the latter are often limited by the problem posing method associated with their professional framework, Domo volunteers act as 'supportive friends'. Most professionals do not visit the people at home and if they do they are often perceived as a threat because they can separate the children from the parents or impose other sanctions (Nicaise & De Wilde, 1995). According to Domo, volunteers can contribute to the strength of the family and parents in a more flexible and less hierarchical way.

"We firmly believe that our unique model fills a void in the contemporary offer for family support. Our approach is an important engine in the fight against poverty of chances and its consequences on children" (Domo vzw Leuven, 2014: 2)

2 Basic information on the (local) context and the emerging problems

2.1 The Social Christian tradition

Throughout its modern history Belgium has nurtured a strong 'Social Christian' tradition of civil society initiatives (Martinelli, 2010). It covers a wide range of initiatives related to the catholic church and more broadly associations and organisations who act on the basis of catholic values such as compassion, charity and care for neighbours, families and communities. A milestone for this philosophical tradition for social action was the *Rerum Novarum* encyclical of 1891 by Pope Leo XIII. This Catholic answer to the rise of socialism aimed to provide solutions for the suffering and burgeoning social needs of the working class while avoiding that social mobilisation by the working class would undermine the established order. Its promoters envisioned a intermediate position of community between the isolated, lost individual and the hierarchical, impersonal state apparatus. The *Rerum Novarum* encyclical gave the right of existence to the Christian democratic movement and its ideas were very influential in the development of corporatist institutions in Belgium (Deleeck, 2008). Historically, this movement, while often being paternalistic and anti-socialist in its discourse and

approach, “had quite a critical stance and strong emancipatory and truly democratic connotations” (Martinelli, 2010: 26). Many, often local, church and parish initiatives developed progressive and empowering forms of community action.

Today the Social Christianity tradition still constitutes a substantial part of the third sector in Belgium and several other European countries. It is involved in a wide variety of community based and social work related activities, driven by both professionals and volunteers. The latter have always been very important to Social Christianity. The catholic church continues to play an important part, for instance through Caritas, but this tradition is not limited to church action. It can also be identified within pluralistic organisations concerned with social action and social policy related to themes such as: healthcare, childcare, care for the elderly, services for the poor and homeless, protection of refugees and solidarity with the global south (Ibid.).

2.2 A brief history of childcare services and preventive family support in Belgium

Historically, the provision of child related services in Belgium has been firmly embedded within the Social Christianity tradition. Childcare and family support has a long and rich history in which community care by volunteers have always played a crucial role (Vandenberghe, 2004). The first consultation bureaux⁵ related to early childcare and children’s health emerged around the start of the 20th century. They were established as private charities organized by women from the bourgeoisie and other women associations. In the early 1900s healthcare became increasingly important on the agenda of social movements and governments. At that time child mortality was very high, especially in poor families. A number of doctors played an important role in the early development of networks and the spread of knowledge which resulted in the establishment of the ‘League nationale Belge pour la Protection de l’Enfance du Premier Age’ in 1904. This Belgian league for the protection of new-borns supported local collaborations between doctors and charities that were mainly driven by volunteering women. Health, safety and hygiene were the three main concerns.

During the first world war, when the league was temporarily inactive, the National Help and Nutrition Committee (het Nationale Hulp en Voedingscomité - NHVC) was established and in 1915 it organised within its organisation the special department ‘Help and protection to the Work for Child Well-being’. This operation was assessed as very efficient, which gave rise to the idea that a public institution would be well-placed to coordinate consultancies, mother kitchens and education for young families. This idea was supported by the Belgian League for Child Protection and led to the establishment of the National Operation for Child Well-being (Nationaal Werk voor Kinderwelzijn – NWK).

In the 1920’s, most activities previously organised by local charities, were absorbed by social organisations and women’s movements, supported and regulated by public bodies. Although volunteers remained very important, this shift in organisation also implied professionalization and bureaucratic forms of control. The introduction of nurse-visitors in the 1920’s and of the ‘health book’ for every child in 1935 is emblematic in this regard. While national public bodies continued to play an important role in overseeing and supporting organisations administratively, the development of health insurance mutual organisations also played an important role in the development of primary care

⁵ Consultations were predominantly related to nutrition (several associations focussed explicitly on the provision of healthy milk), healthcare and hygiene. The relation to the church and the parish was often made explicit in the name and many consultations bureaux were organised in buildings owned by the church.

service (Vandenberghe, 2004). These corporatist bodies⁶ of the Belgian welfare state developed along the lines of large associative ‘pillars’: Christian, socialist and liberal. Despite their ideological differences, most childcare services remained embedded within the Christian inspired third sector tradition as an intermediate body between families and the state. Nonetheless, this ‘pillarization’ often resulted in harsh competition between services at the local level, which has been described as the ‘battle for the cradles’.

The period after the Second World War was one of progress in material conditions and medical sciences. Child mortality dropped while the organisation and quality of preventive childcare and child related services in general further improved and developed. As a result of the federalisation of the Belgian state⁷ in 1983 and 1984 the Flemish and Francophone Communities developed their own child care institutions and developed their own, often diverging policies (Vandenberghe, 2004). In Flanders the public institution ‘Kind & Gezin’ (Child and Family) was established. Preventive childcare was initially not mentioned explicitly as a core task of the organisation. This does not mean that it was not a concern at all as it was often regarded as an important aspect of services and organisations, but there was no overarching framework for it. In 2001 Kind & Gezin developed a first framework for coordinating different services covering different domains of children’s and family’s life (healthcare, pedagogy, child abuse...) under the title ‘preventive family support’. In the meantime volunteers continued to play an important role, but before the 1990s no official framework for the recognition of volunteers in childcare services existed. This framework was developed in a context of continuing professionalization and discussions on quality criteria. In this context the relevance of volunteers in the sector of welfare services was increasingly questioned (Vandenberghe, 2004).

The establishment of Domo (early 1990s) and their model for informal preventive family support by volunteers has to be understood in this historical context. From their practical experiences the Domo pioneers reacted against what they perceived as the need for a more integrated, holistic, preventive approach on the one hand and against what could be understood as the limits of professional help and/or a misrecognition of the importance of informal approaches on the other. In line with the Social Christianity tradition, Domo volunteers organized themselves to fill in an intermediary position between the individual families at risk of social isolation and the hierarchical, professional institutions of the corporatist welfare state. However, it should be noted that Domo has always profiled itself as an autonomous organisation that is not part of the Christian or any other pillar.

2.3 Child poverty in Belgium

Belgium has a strong basis to protect the well-being of young children: the system of social protection and redistribution is well developed and social inequality is relatively limited; there is an universal provision of preventive family support that succeeds rather well in reaching vulnerable families;

⁶ According to Vandenberghe (2004) the development of childcare services in this corporatist tradition offered important opportunities for women to take on important professional and public roles.

⁷ The Belgian state consists of a federal government, community governments for the three language communities (Flemish, the French and the German speaking community) and regional governments for the three regions (the Flemish, Walloon and Brussels Capital Region). The community institutions and governments are responsible for person-related matters, whereas the regional institutions and governments are competent for territorial matters. The Federal government is competent to all matters that are not devolved to the regions or language communities (Cantillon, 2011).

nursery schools have well educated staff and it is free and accessible for all; and the provision of early childcare services performs above the European average (Vandenbroeck, 2013). However, international comparisons on child poverty show that Belgium performs mediocre, while it used to be a 'best practice' in the 1980s (Cantillon et al., 2012). Today the point estimate is slightly below the EU15 average, but child poverty⁸ is still growing. In general, Belgium performs worse than Nordic countries and better than Anglo-Saxon and Southern countries. The upwards trend, which was particularly strong between 2005 and 2009, cannot be readily explained but it is generally attributed to the growth in household joblessness and a decline in the relative value of child benefits. Child benefits are not automatically coupled to rises in prosperity (Vandenbroucke, 2012; Cantillon et al., 2012). Based on the EU SILC 2010 24.2% of Walloon children live below the Belgian poverty threshold, compared to 10.8% of the children in Flanders. When using regional poverty thresholds we find 20.7% for Wallonia and 14% for Flanders (Vandenbroucke, 2012).

Formal child care and care of the new-born has been a language community competence (see footnote 6) for over several years (Cantillon et al., 2011). Recently the organization of the child benefits has been devolved to the regions as part of the sixth constitutional reform. It is the first split up of a classical social security instrument in Belgium. According to Cantillon and colleagues (2012) this devolution of competences offers several opportunities to reorganise this instrument and change the trend of growing child poverty after a long period of immobility at the federal level. Different possible changes like raising benefits or making access to benefits more universal are now seriously negotiated. However, due to the complexity and different political stances, the threat of immobility remains. Because the devolution of competencies requires increasingly more regional financing of these new competencies, especially Wallonia and Brussels face difficult challenges. Domo vzw Leuven is a Flemish organisation. Hence, in what follows, the focus is on the Flemish and Leuven context.

2.4 Child poverty in Flanders

Kind & Gezin (Child and family) is the agency of the Flemish government assigned with the wellbeing of young children and their families⁹. The organisation is active on the policy fields of preventive family support, childcare and adoption. This organisation gathers most of the official data on children and families. With regard to child poverty, two indicators are most common: (a) At risk of poverty, measured as the percentage of children living in households with an income below 60% of the Belgian or Flemish median income; (b) The deprivation index for children between zero and three years of age¹⁰. In 2012 the percentage of children at risk of poverty in Flanders, based on the Belgium threshold

⁸ The term child poverty is often used in policy documents and in practice, but it is more adequate to talk about children living in poor households. Figure 1 confirms this and indicates that the problem of children living in poor households should be regarded as a multidimensional phenomenon. In this regard Vandenbroeck (2014) stresses the importance of intergenerational approaches that target parents and children simultaneously.

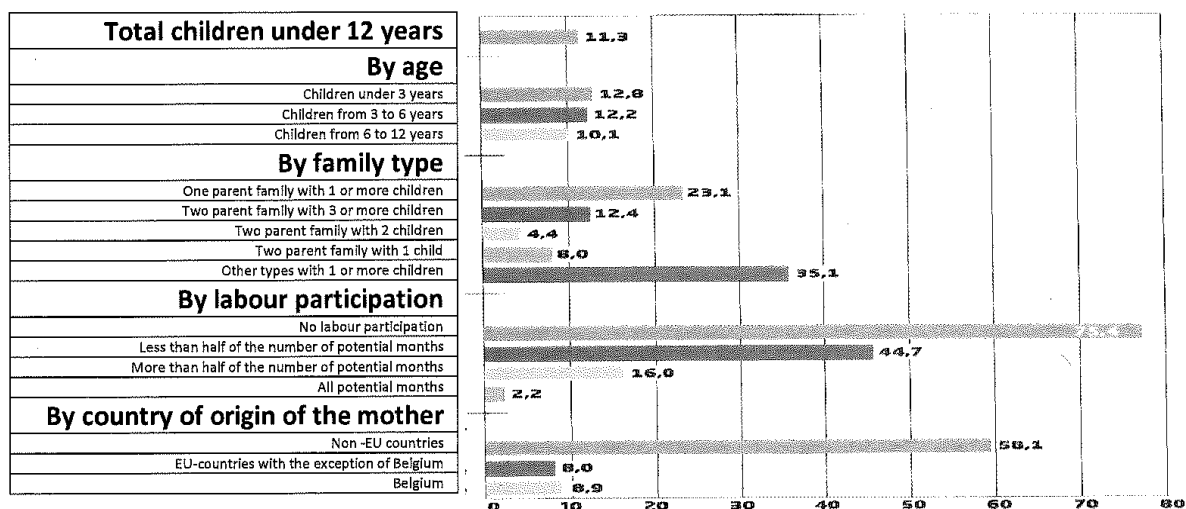
⁹ <http://www.kindengezin.be/over-kind-en-gezin/>

¹⁰ This index is based on surveys by Kind & Gezin. Families with very young children who fulfil three of their six deprivation criteria in these three years are considered to be deprived families with young children in year X¹⁰. The number of children born in deprived families in X, years X-1 and year X-2 is divided with the total number of births in these three years. The six deprivation criteria cover: disposable income, educational level of parents, labour situation of parents, stimuli for the children (like kindergarten), living conditions and health. Of course caution is needed as the survey is to a large extent based on the interpretation of Kind & Gezin nursing staff.

was 10,8%. The same year the deprivation index showed 10,45%. Both indicators show a strong growing trend. Over the last ten years it almost doubled (Kind & Gezin, 2014).

Figure 1 shows that the poverty risk is higher for children from a family with limited labour market participation and for children with a mother of non-Belgian descent. Also children from a big family have a higher risk at poverty. Living in a jobless household is the highest risk at poverty for children under 12 years of age. Growing up in poverty is mainly a ‘big city problem’ in Flanders. One third of all children growing up in a deprived family live in Flanders’ two largest cities, Antwerp or Gent, Flanders’ two largest cities (Kind & Gezin, 2012).

Figure 1: At risk of poverty for children under 12 years of age in Flanders living in a family with less than 60% of the median Belgian income in 2010



Source: Kind & Gezin, 2012: 107; based on FOD Economie and SILC 2011

Over the last year to the importance of child poverty on the public and political agenda rose. This has at least three reasons: (1) the steady growth of children born in deprived families; (2) the accumulation of knowledge on the impact of child poverty on children’s development changes (It is now generally accepted that the three first years are particularly important in this regard.); (3) there is a large consensus that there is nothing that can justify children living in poverty (‘no undeserving poor infants’).

2.5 Child poverty in Leuven

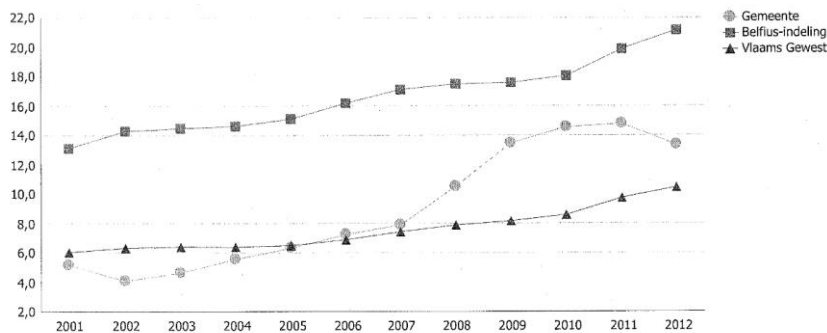
Leuven is a medium-sized city in Flanders with 98.074 inhabitants (2013). It is the administrative capital of the province Vlaams-Brabant¹¹. About 17% of its population is younger than 18 (19,5% for Flanders). The city has several centre functions for this region and it is internationally known for its university. It

¹¹ In the province Vlaams-Brabant the deprivation index of 5,7% for 2012 is remarkably low compared to the Flemish average of 10,45 %. This is explained partially by the fact that there are no real big cities in this province. Brussels is an independent region located in Vlaams-Brabant and is not included in this index.

is a rather rich city with high-income inequalities (Raad voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn van Leuven, 2007).

Figure 2 shows an evolution in this deprivation index, comparing different regions. The line with the dots shows the evolution for the city of Leuven. The line with the triangles shows the mean for the Flemish region (excluding Brussels). The line with the squares shows the average for six Flemish 'central cities'¹²: Oostende, Brugge, Gent, Antwerpen, Leuven and Hasselt.

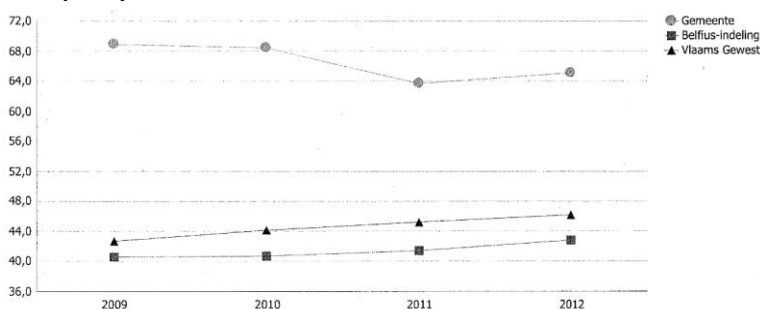
Figure 2: Percentage of births in deprived families in year x, year x-1 and year x-2



Source: <http://aps.vlaanderen.be/lokaal/pdf/gemeente-2013/Leuven.pdf>

This figure shows the growing percentages of births in deprived families in Flanders between 2001 and 2012. This growth has been stronger in the 'central cities', compared to the region as a whole. Curiously, this growth recently stopped in Leuven as the percentage declined from 14,8% in 2011 to 13,3% in 2012. The figure does make clear that the percentage of births in deprived families in Leuven is below the centre cities' average. It is a lot lower than Antwerpen (25,1%), Gent (20,3%) and Oostende (26,7%) and significantly higher than the smaller Brugge (7,7%) and Hasselt (10,4%) in 2012.

Figure 3: Total amount of childcare places (capacity) in relation to the target population 0-2,5 year olds (in %)



Source: <http://aps.vlaanderen.be/lokaal/pdf/gemeente-2013/Leuven.pdf>, online

Looking at the total amount of childcare places in relation to the target population of 0-2,5 year olds in figure 3, it how that the capacity for childcare is remarkably high in Leuven (Line with dots), compared to the Flemish average (triangles) and the six centre cities (squares).

¹² Cluster of cities for statistical purposes based on the function in their region in terms supra local attraction, number of centre functions and economic activity. More information online:

Different indicators of child poverty and services show that Leuven is doing rather well in the Flemish context. Although there is a real problem of child poverty and a need for family support in Leuven one could argue that Domo vzw did not necessarily emerge as a pragmatic response to a severe problem situation, where it is most needed. Instead it seems that the innovative response emerged from a well-developed network and expertise of childcare and family support that already existed in the Leuven area. This grew at least partially around the Gasthuisberg University Hospital, which has large departments specialised in children. One of the pioneers of Domo vzw volunteered in such a department.

3 Genesis of the initiative

“We should be able to do more preventive work. Couldn’t we, as volunteers in a family, take some weight of the shoulders of parents in stressful home situations in order to prevent extreme reactions towards their children? We could do so much just by being present and giving people the feeling that they’re not standing alone.” (Lieve and Adèle founders of Domo VZW Leuven)

In the 1980s Lieve Picard was the chair of the family board of the city of Leuven for three years. She resigned to take on extra studies in family sciences and sexology. Afterwards she returned to the family board, but now in the workgroup on child abuse. In the same period she worked as a freelance researcher for professor Wilfried Dumon, an expert in family sociology at the Centre for Sociological Research in Leuven. There she gained academic expertise on the topic of child abuse. She learned that a lot of direct causes for child abuse have to do with stress situations, relational problems, social isolation, a painful childhood of the parents. In other words: too much weight on the shoulders of parents. Through these experiences Lieve started to look for preventive strategies. Instead of curative approaches, she imagined a friend at home or a helpful neighbour that could support parents for example by taking kids of school once a week or somebody who listens once in a while.

In the late 1980s Lieve and Adèle met at a gathering for alumni. Adèle was a volunteer at the university hospital Gasthuisberg at the unit patient support for infants. She felt very frustrated when she saw that these young kids had to return to problematic families after treatment. She wanted to be able to do more. Learning about Lieve’s background and expertise, she asked her to do something together.

Lieve and Adèle believe that stress related problems tend to have more extreme consequences for the future of the children under conditions of poverty and social exclusion compared to other families who have more resources and more support from family and friends. This observation made Lieve and Adèle think about the possibilities of using volunteers to lighten the daily burden of vulnerable and deprived families. After consulting experts at the University Hospital Gasthuisberg and the Confidential Doctors Centre for Child Abuse (Vertrouwensartscentrum Kindermishandeling), they started a pilot project early 1991.

The basic idea was to visit families at home on a regular basis by the following basic principles: do not impose your will, just be present, listen without judging, do things together, give attention to the children, support and exchange experiences. The first experiences were evaluated positively. The families and volunteers involved rose rapidly to twelve volunteers for ten families. The need for an organizational structure emerged. In 1993, with financial support of the Koning Bouwdewijn Stichting and gifts, Domo vzw Leuven was established. This juridical structure made it possible to get recognized as an autonomous volunteer organisation by the Flemish community in 1994.

During the early years, new volunteers came predominantly from the pioneers' personal network. In 1996 the number of volunteers and the social network of the initiative grew further after an intense promotion campaign. With (limited) annual financial support of the large third sector organization Welzijnszorg, Domo was able to rent a small headquarters with room for a secretariat and meeting room from the year 2000 onwards.

Over the years the organisation also turned to leisure activities, cultural participation and vacations for children and their family. They received occasional financial support from the Flemish government and the city of Leuven to do so. With gifts from sympathizers Domo gradually gathered a library for books and games (Verdonck, 2011). In response to the growing administrative burden, due to the growth of the organisation and the high demands of the Flemish volunteer policy, Domo appointed a part time coordinator in 2006 (Eeman & Van Regenmortel, 2012). Since December 2013 three people work part time (16h/week) for Domo vzw Leuven, doing administrative, coordination and communication work.

It took a while to gain trust from professional organisations working with similar families, despite the fact that the pioneers were already known in the sector and that they had some support from the academic and medical world. A lot of effort was put in explaining the added value of the model and to take a clear position in relation to other services. Domo volunteers were, and still are, very active in local boards and networks. Over the years Domo became well known and appreciated in the sector of family support, first in Leuven, later in Flanders. Domo received the prize 'Excluding Poverty' from Welzijnszorg in 2007. They received €12.500 and the symbolic support of the then present minister of welfare and families Inge Vervotte. After this, many new volunteers found their way to the organization (I: Representative Domo vzw Leuven).

In 2008 Domo tried to make the connection between the 'student city' Leuven and the many families in a vulnerable position. A project was started to make students volunteer in families as a form of internship experience. This resulted in several internships, new volunteers and two master theses that shed light on different parts of the organization: (a) the experiences of volunteers (Schotten, 2010); (b) whether Domo's goals were met (Foubert, 2011). This project was awarded with the prize of the Fund Jeanne Van Quickenborne in 2010.

In the meantime in Antwerp and Sint-Niklaas professionals in family support and/or child services perceived a lack of unconditional low threshold support in their sector. They also found it very hard to organize this with professionals because of the strict performance criteria and heavy administrative requirements imposed on professionals. Through their sector they learned about Domo which inspired them to gather volunteers and do something similar. In 2010 volunteers in Antwerp started a new chapter of Domo, based on the model of Domo vzw Leuven. In the following years new Domo chapters were started up in Hasselt and Sint-Niklaas. In Hasselt employees of the province co-initiated and supported the idea to develop a Domo.

Other groups and municipalities across Flanders are showing interest as well. In 2011 Domo Volunteer Ingrid Verdonck (2011), a former teacher in social sciences at university college, took the 20th anniversary as an occasion to write a comprehensive book about the organisation. It is an important document for communication with all kinds of possible partners: donators, municipalities, volunteers who want to set up a new Domo. The organisation has grown up and concluded that their model "is ready for export" (Verdonck, 2011: 76). However they are still learning and deliberating about the best way to do this. Besides processes of dissemination and growth, things are also changing in the sector

of preventive family support. In the near future, the Flemish government will fund Domo structurally. These evolutions will be discussed further in the section six on governance challenges.

The most recent internal, structural reorganization of Domo vzw Leuven was implemented in 2011, after a period of growth. The master thesis of Schotte (2010) on the experience of volunteers provided inspiration. Sketching an image of the contemporary volunteer that attributes more importance to the personal learning experience, Schotte suggested that more elaborate and professional training and support was needed, as well as deliberation structures and activities that spoke more directly to the engagement of volunteers.

The organisation implemented a new structure with four thematic groups: (a) the working group 'volunteers' recruits, trains, supports and evaluates the volunteers for their work with the families. This group is steered by the Domo coordinator; (b) the working group 'leisure' supports volunteers in their search for appropriate possibilities of sport, games and other leisure activities for the children, parents or the whole family; (c) the working group 'communication and fundraising' provides the internal and external communication tools such as the interactive website and direct mailing. They also concerned with structural fundraising; (d) the working group 'policy' is the think tank that sets out the directions for short- and long term actions. They attribute special importance to the changing context and the possibilities for exporting the Domo model.

4 The activities and organization

4.1 The model and its theoretical underpinnings

Domo's main activities can be described most generally with the general concept 'family support'. The organisations targets deprived families that have children under twelve years of age in the broader area of Leuven. Their approach is 'holistic' in the sense that it recognizes that a variety of dimensions in the child's life interact and is relevant for its well-being, such as leisure activities, housing, school, the situation at home and the well-being of the parents. The Domo approach is also informal and demand oriented. The activities of volunteers can be very diverse and can target the child, parents and the surroundings of the family. They often include: playing with the children, going to a cultural activity with the family, attending a doctor's visit together with a parent or helping out at home. In general activities are about: strengthening social networks of children and parents; presence, small encounters and exchange between a family and a volunteer; doing things together; focussing on the talents of the family and family members (focus group).

The basic model is as follows. One volunteer visits one family once a week for a few hours for about two years. This relatively long one-to-one relationship with the same person is an indispensable ingredient of the Domo recipe. The anonymity of the family, i.e. the fact that only the Domo coordinator and the volunteer knows the full name and address of the Domo family, is also a very important element of the model. Anonymity is guaranteed in order to do away with thresholds for participation and avoid stigmatization and shame (Verdonck, 2011).

"Our approach is a pure form of participation, volunteers only enter those domains that families give access to." (Representative of Domo Hasselt during focus group)

Domo's vision starts from the conviction that parents are the most important actors nurturing young children. It is common for parents to experience periods in which they find it difficult to provide the necessary warmth, security and structure for their children. It means that the 'burden' is bigger than the 'capacity' to cope with parental obligations (Bakker et al., 1998). Domo believes that volunteers can offer such social support in order to lighten the 'burden' and add 'capacity'.

Domo distinguishes itself from professional help. It wants to complement or prevent professional help, focussing more on the daily life aspects and the questions and strengths of parents and children through presence in their own life environment. Verdonck (2011) argues that the 'prevention through presence' is supported by the 'presence theory' developed by Andries Baart (2001). For the positive focus on the strengths of children and parents, Domo refers to the 'Talent in Action' theory by Luc Dewulf (2009).

The organisation believes that professional help related to family support is in most case problem oriented and experienced as very threatening by the families because they associate it with the possibility that children are forcibly taken away from them. This has been confirmed by the research of Nicaise and De Wilde (1995) and by the participants of the focus group. Keeping in mind the history of preventive family support and the genesis of Domo in part two and three of this report it is important to reiterate that Domo emerged before family support grew into the more integrated field of services and policies that it is today. Hence, many of the child-protection services that focused on crisis situations such as child abuse were not in touch with more supportive services and preventive childcare in the 1990s. This explains the intermediary position Domo took, which would prove to be visionary. Representatives from Domo agree that the evolutions in the field of preventive family support are very welcome. This field has already changed a lot and did away with some of the negative effects caused by professional services they were very critical of (I: Spokeswoman Domo vzw Leuven, focus group).

Today Domo continues to attribute a lot of importance to the distinctiveness of their model and their autonomy and independence from public administration and professional services. In relation to the families, this position offers at least three interrelated advantages that are part and parcel of their approach:

- The first is the absence of paperwork, which makes it much easier to build a bond in a spontaneous way. Professionals have often a delineated task description and time frame. Domo volunteers do not. This has consequences for the possibility of implementing quality criteria and evaluation mechanisms. Although Domo is not against this in principle, they believe that it does not fit their model well and would have adverse effects on the relationship between the volunteers and families.
- The second is implied in the principle of one volunteer one family once a week for an average period of two year. It is very difficult for a professional organization to guarantee such continuity. Vulnerable families often see different social workers and other professionals, which makes it rather difficult to build a durable relation of trust and reciprocity.
- The third has to do with the kind of support provided. Domo recognizes that professional help is often needed and sometimes indispensable, but the organization is convinced that in many cases something more and different is needed as well: a conversation, a helping hand, a shoulder to lean on, going somewhere together, etc... In other words, things that professionals cannot provide in an unconstrained, spontaneous manner.

“Being a social worker or counsellor it is always a very one sided relationship. You tell everything to me, but I don’t talk about myself. You cannot be on the same level and that is often a difficult starting point.” (Representative OCMW Leuven during focus group)

Domo volunteers do not start from a clear diagnosis, a problem or pre-set goals and output criteria. The idea is that they try to respond to what the family members themselves indicate as important and desirable (Verdonck, 2011). The bottom line is being present in a positive, supportive way.

“Preventing aggravation is already a valuable asset” (Volunteer Domo Hasselt during focus group).

Instead of focussing on visible, measurable changes in the short term, the model focuses on so called ‘sleeper-effects’ in the medium and long term (Verdonck, 2011). To support the importance of long-term, tailored support Domo refers to the work of the American psychiatrist Howard Dubowitz and colleagues (2009) on preventing of child abuse. Dubowitz argues for participation of the family in making decisions on family support and to focus on the strengths of the family in a relatively long term voluntary relationship with those who support¹³. Domo also refers to the work of the famous American economist James Heckman (2004) on the importance of investing in disadvantaged children, from early on and over a relatively long period.

“They all say: do it early, do it long and do it based on trust” (I: Representative Domo vzw Leuven).

Although there is a growing academic support for such preventive approaches, measuring impact and effectiveness of family support by volunteers is “anything but evident” (Vandenbroeck et al., 2012). Some research attempted to examine the effectiveness of Home-start, an international and originally British organization that supports parents with young children in ways very similar to Domo (Verdonck, 2011, Foubert, 2011, www.home-start.org.uk). Different researchers used different methodologies and indicators (see for instance Gibbons & Thorpe, 1989; 2004; Sweet & Appelbaum, 2004 ; Asscher et al., 2008). The results are mixed and cautious. These studies do confirm that parents appreciate this kind of support and that it has a positive influence on their sensitivity to parenting issues. Also it seems that the actual time spent in a family and the intensity of the support is an important variable.

However, the effectiveness measured in terms of bringing about changes in behaviour of children and parents cannot be proven directly. Also, most of the time some positive effects were observed in the Home-start group compared to people who do not receive support, but these effects were not significantly different from the third group that received more ‘classical’ formal forms of support from professionals. In response, several authors have argued that the effects have to be measured over a longer period of time than has been done by the aforementioned research. A recent study (Hermanns et al., 2013) after three year follow up shows more clearly positive results.

¹³ Over the years, Domo has drawn on different researches and theoretical contributions on family support and poverty that support their approach. The anniversary book by Verdonck (2011) and the roadmaps for new Domo’s that were developed together with the research centre HIVA of the university of Leuven (Eeman & Van Regenmortel, 2012) offer an overview of the key Flemish and Dutch contributions that support the Domo model.

“Taking into account that the design of this study only allows for tentative conclusions, these findings suggest long lasting changes of home visiting by volunteers, offering support on domains that families themselves bring forward” (Ibid.: 682).

Compared to the other groups, the Home-Start group showed more improvement in parenting (responsiveness) and less child internalizing and externalizing behaviour problems (opposition defiant behaviour, affective problems and anxiety problems).

4.2 The goals of the organisation

The Domo vision and mission are translated into three core tasks: 1) Working on and with the ‘appreciation of self’, the skills and the confidence of parents and children; 2) Social support, being a friend at home; 3) To repair and broaden the social network (for instance through cultural participation, sport, play, vacation...) (Verdonck, 2011).

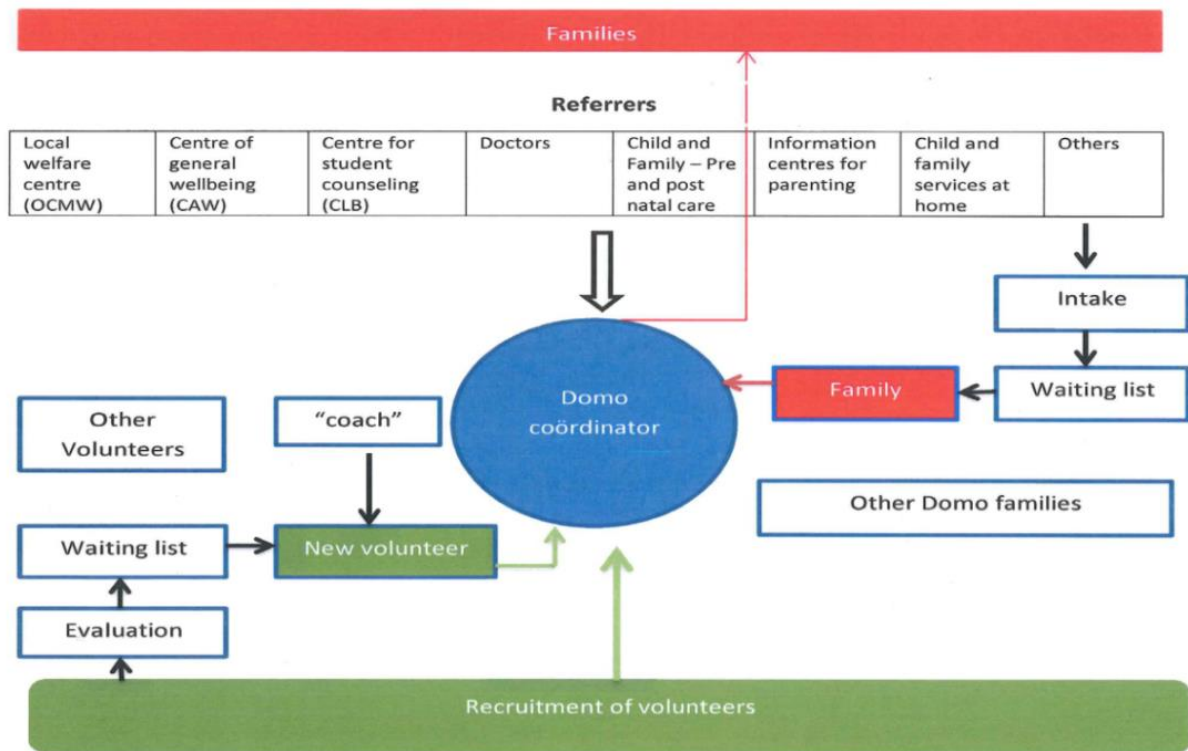
In her master thesis Tine Foubert (2011) analyses the realisation of these goals set by Domo vzw Leuven based on the experiences of volunteers and families. In most cases the volunteer and the family do build up a trust relationship that helps to work on the appreciation of self. Most parents say that they feel supported and strengthened. Also, many volunteers succeed in guiding families to new activities ranging from cultural activities to youth camps etc. However, volunteers and families are more hesitant when it comes to the goals of strengthening parenting competencies and broadening the social network of the family. According to Foubert, these goals should be stressed more. She suggests that more support for the volunteers in these matters is necessary.

4.3 Connecting volunteers with families

Figure 4 shows how the ‘match’ between a volunteer and a family comes about. In most cases an organization or concerned individuals refer a family to Domo. About 16% is referred to Domo by local childcare and home-support organisations. The network of perinatal care and support in the Leuven area (Parel) refers over 17%. Other regular referrers are: the local welfare centre, the University Hospital Gasthuisberg, Centres for study counselling and doctors. In several cases the question for support comes when professional support trajectories are finished. The Domo coordinator takes on these requests and talks to the referrer to gather more information about the family and their situation. She has to make a first assessment about whether Domo can offer meaningful support to this family¹⁴. If the family receives or received professional help, the role of a volunteer is discussed with the service provider. If a family is on a waiting list for professional help, Domo will not engage with them, because this may lead to confusion for the family and between the volunteers and service providers. Also, during this waiting period, the information about the family is likely to be unclear, which makes it more difficult for the coordinator to assess whether a Domo volunteer can offer the right form of support.

¹⁴ The most important criteria are: the parents are not undocumented (as the complexity of the situation is regarded to be too much of a burden on individual volunteers), parents are willing to participate, there are justified questions for family support, the family has a weak social network, the problems should not be too heavy for an individual volunteer, it is a situation of deprivation in the broad meaning of the word and the families live in the Leuven area.

Figure 4: The ‘match’ between family and volunteer



Source: Verdonck, 2011: 62, author’s translation

In the following days the coordinator contacts the family to have a conversation with the parent(s) in order to explain the model and to see whether the parents are receptive to the idea. The willingness and request for help from the family is very important, even if it remains difficult to accept help because this is often considered shameful. If they agree to engage with Domo, the coordinator looks for a volunteer who is willing to engage with that particular family.

Families are then put on a waiting list. Based on this list with some basic information about the family, a volunteer can apply for a family. Before a volunteer enters a family, the coordinator visits the family at home for a preparatory talk. The coordinator also has a take-in conversation with potential volunteers where she asks questions about the motivations and background of the candidate volunteer.

4.4 Critical reflections on the Domo model

Domo gained a lot of support from volunteers and different actors in policy, academia and the professional child care sector. Still, several sources expressed criticisms on the Domo model and its theoretical underpinnings.

Respondents from academia and the professional sector claim that there is a real risk that volunteers (more than professionals) will adopt a charitable approach to the ‘families in need’ (which, as discussed above, was characteristic to the early practices of preventive childcare in the tradition of Social Christianity). Despite good intentions and the contribution a caring presence may make to prevention, it will not strengthen the position of the parents and children. This problem could be anticipated by

screening procedures and support for volunteers, but the risk remains and it is very hard to control this within the Domo model.

Others are critical about the concept of empowerment and strengthening individuals that is put forward by the Domo model (without referring explicitly to the activities of Domo). It is argued that the personal one-to-one relationship and the focus on privacy is not suited to account for the structural causes of the deprived situation. The 'voicing of needs' happens essentially through a relationship between the family and the volunteer. In the Domo model empowerment is mainly understood as socio-psychological process, aimed at strengthening self-confidence and focussing on good things and accomplishment (Domo vzw Leuven, 2014). It should be noted that empowerment is used in different ways and the way it is used by Domo puts less stress on structural, rights based and collective mobilisation dimensions which are also often associated with empowerment (see for instance Moulaert et al., 2005).

5 The innovative dimension of the initiative

As suggested by the literature about social innovation, Domo's experience has been analysed through three basic components (Gerometta, Häußermann and Longo 2005; Moulaert *et al.* 2005): (a) The satisfaction of basic social needs (content dimension); (b) the transformation of social relations (process dimension); (c) the empowerment and socio-political mobilization (linking the process and content dimension). This indication has been applied to Domo's innovative experience:

5.1 Content dimension (addressing social needs)

Domo volunteers address what they, the referrers and the families themselves¹⁵ perceive to be the need for informal family support in 'deprived families'. These families are understood to have a rather weak social network where the 'burden' to cope with the challenges of parenting exceeds the 'capacity' to do so (Dewulf et al., 1998). In order to strengthen the capacity of the parents to deal with possible stressful situations, Domo volunteers aim to address a range of needs that are pointed out as important by the families themselves. This variety of concrete needs is very diverse. In most cases they relate to daily activities of parents (playing with children, taking children from school, having a good conversation between chores at home).

Overall, the support scheme aims to prevent child abuse and enhance the education and life chances of the children. In the process, Domo vzw Leuven reaches families that are understood to be relatively socially isolated and very often not familiar with the possibilities for social and cultural participation in the broad sense.

¹⁵ The extent to which these families perceive themselves to be deprived is a matter of discussion. According to Domo representatives, not all parents fully understand what Domo wants to do from the start and in some cases it is rather painful for parents to ask for help in this way. Nonetheless it is fair to say that all families at least acknowledge that they can use some help in their family situation because the agreement of parents is a crucial element in the screening procedure for a Domo family (see also part 4 of this report).

5.2 Process dimension (changing social relations)

The idea of being a friend at home for deprived families, which are sometimes at risk of social isolation, is very much oriented towards transforming social relations. Here we discuss different social relations that Domo aims to influence through its interventions in order to address the social needs identified above: (a) the relation between a family and a volunteer; (b) the relation with 'society' in term of cultural participation and contact with formal institutions; (c) the social network of the family.

The first is the relation between the volunteer and the family. Domo connects people who have the ambition to work with children and deprived families with families who agree that family support might be helpful. Both parties aim to develop a relation of trust that respects the privacy of the family. Throughout the period of support parents are always recognized as the most important actor for the well-being of their children. Consequently, and this is crucial, the volunteer-family relation also aims to be beneficial to the parents-children relationships (for instance by preventing stress situations or by doing new activities).

The way the relationships between a volunteer and a family is forged bypasses common limits of professional help, namely: fixed working hours and administrative obligations, result orientation, an uneven power relation and discontinuity of the contacts. This allows volunteers to better work at the pace of the family and to be more sensitive for their experiences. The support is demand oriented and requires for the parents to interpret and voice their own needs in an informal dialogue with the volunteers. Hence, Domo argues that their support scheme, in contrast to most professional support schemes, is based on more horizontal and reciprocal relationships between those who support and those who receive support.

Secondly, Domo is concerned about the relation between the family and society in general. This is mainly understood in terms of participation in cultural activities (like going to the theatre together with the parents or finding a summer activity for the kids) and in terms of having contact with formal institutions (for instance attending a parent-teacher meeting at school or replying to official correspondence). Here volunteers will try to encourage and support the family in these specific forms of social and cultural participation, which are understood to relieve stress, strengthen self-esteem and prevent possible future problems.

Thirdly, Domo aims to strengthen the social network and social capital of the families. Between social scientists there has been a lot of discussion on how to use the concepts of social network and social capital in social policy and services, which makes the success in reaching this aim difficult to assess¹⁶. Although Domo recognizes the diversity of their families, they generally suppose that deprived families are socially isolated, that they have a weak social network (Verdonck, 2011; Domo vzw Leuven, 2014). Others argue that this is often not the case and that this observation of a weak network stems from a biased appreciation of families' social relations and a theoretically flawed understanding of social capital. Interviews with volunteers (I: Volunteer Domo Sint-Niklaas; focus group) show that they have a hard time broadening the network of families and that they find it difficult to position themselves in relation to friends and relatives that also support the families. In short, the vision of what 'strengthening the network' means remains rather fuzzy. Examples of how Domo volunteers try to do it in practice include: participation in leisure activities and informing parents about services, such as

¹⁶ For critical overviews of the discussion on social capital see DeFillipis (2001) and Mayer (2003).

maternity care and civil society organisations that offer affordable and reliable babysit-services, that can enable parents to make more time for their family, friends or other activities.

5.3 Empowerment dimension

Empowerment as understood by Domo is focused on broadening the horizon of families in order to contribute to broadening their life options. Domo aims to bring this in practice with their model of prevention through presence. Being present for vulnerable people is understood here as to expose yourself to and to submerge yourself into the environment of people in order to know this way of living from the inside. This recognition of the situation of vulnerable groups is argued to create space for processes of empowerment, i.e. processes that strengthen people, organizations or communities to gain control over their own situation (Driessen & Van Regenmortel, 2006; Verdonck, 2011). The importance attributed to participation should also be understood in this way: going out, feeling yourself comfortable amongst peers, try new things; these are all small steps that challenge and strengthen a person (Brumange, et al., 2009). The recognition of the strengths of the family by volunteers and their compliments on what they do well is also meant to have an empowering effect.

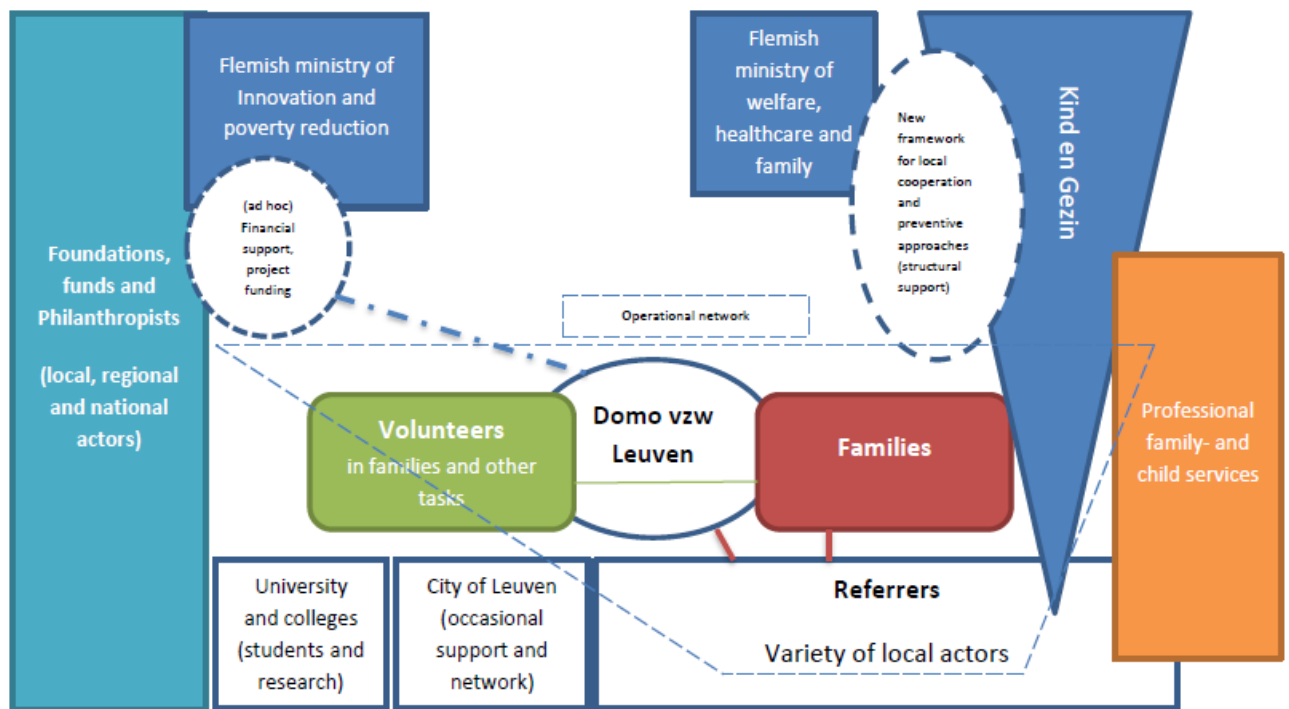
The Domo experience is, however, framed within a particular understanding of empowerment (Driessen & Van Regenmortel, 2006). This understanding of empowerment is mainly socio-psychological, aimed at strengthening self-confidence and focussing on good things and accomplishments (Domo vzw Leuven, 2014). The needs of the family remain predominantly a privatized matter. Its relation with public institutions are mediated by an intermediate actor - the Domo volunteer - who steps in when the family lacks the resources or social/community network to address this need. It is an approach that corresponds with a family centred conception of welfare and is hence in line with the Christian-Democratic philosophy. This approach puts less stress on structural, rights-based and collective mobilisation dimensions of empowerment (see for instance Moulaert et al., 2005). That being said, as an organisation Domo aims to signal concerns to policy makers and other organisations that represent families in need by writing to members of parliament, speaking on study days, engaging in projects with different partners and so forth. In that sense the organisation takes on the structural, political dimension of empowerment by acting as a kind of lobby group for children in poverty in order to influence policy (without being linked to one specific political party).

In more concrete terms the support offered by Domo is understood to be empowering to the extent that (a) it succeeds in strengthening the parenting capabilities of parents and prevent harmful conflicts within the family; (b) the offering of new perspectives, leisure activities and different forms of support (like playing games or working on language skills) for the children and parents have a positive influence on their educational chances in the long run; (c) it helps vulnerable families to assert their rights and strengthen their capabilities to do so themselves in the future; and (d) Domo is able to defend the interest of children in poverty and influence policy in their interest.

6 Institutional mapping and governance relations

This chapter maps the governance relations surrounding Domo vzw Leuven. Figure 5 displays the main actors that are directly or indirectly involved with the initiative.

Figure 5: Governance actors and relations



Source: Authors' elaboration from desk analysis, interviews and focus group

6.1 A partner in the local network for family support, leisure and poverty reduction

The key actors of this practice of preventive family support at home in the Leuven area are: (a) the autonomous volunteer organisation Domo vzw Leuven, (b) the families that decided to engage with Domo volunteers and (c) a variety of local actors (doctors, schools, professional in family services,...) that refer families to Domo (see also figure 4 in part four of this report). This operational network, indicated with the dotted line in figure 5, developed over more than twenty years of discussions and cooperation. According to people from Leuven and Sint-Niklaas, the new Domo in Sint-Niklaas faces challenges today that are very similar to the early years of Domo Leuven (I: Representative Domo vzw Leuven and Volunteer Domo Sint-Niklaas).

In the early years of Domo, professional organisations were more suspicious about Domo's untrained volunteers because they might disturb the balance in the family and undermine the work of the professional social worker. Domo received criticism on their "vague method", the unwillingness to share information and the lack of measurable result (I: Volunteer Domo vzw Leuven). As time passed, organizations noticed positive effects of Domo's informal support to families and they realized that volunteers did not aim to replace professionals. Domo thus became a partner in the network of family support and the fight against poverty in Leuven, but it required a long process of learning and building trust amongst different actors. It is noteworthy that several Domo volunteers are, or have been active in some of these professional organizations. They wear 'different hats', which has contributed to the 'embedding' of Domo within these local networks.

The current chairwoman of Domo vzw Leuven gives three main reasons for this evolution. Firstly, volunteers of Domo have been involved in boards and meetings of other organisations for a long time.

“We are very active in boards and networks related to family support and also a little bit on leisure participation because we believe this is very important. It is very important to anchor yourself locally” (I: Representative Domo vzw Leuven).

Secondly, as the organization had to fight to earn recognition early on and because they work with volunteers, they had to reflect carefully about their position, ambitions and responsibility. As the pioneers and many volunteers are people from the professional sector who are frustrated with its limits and want to do more, the relation and position towards other actors in the sector have always been a very important aspect of the strategy and identity of the organisation.

The third reason is that the field of child services itself evolved over time and that cooperation between different professional and volunteer networks is now more part of the organizational culture compared to twenty years ago). This trend, which is observable beyond Leuven, cannot be attributed directly to the efforts of Domo, but on the local scale Domo worked to contribute to a cooperative culture between different organisations and networks in order to develop better preventive approaches.

“It is crucial to be honest to ourselves and to our partners about what we can and what we cannot do, about the families we can accept and the ones we cannot accept. We dare to say it if we think we cannot do it and if we believe it would not be good for the family or for our volunteer. In that case professional help may be more appropriate. I think the others respect our honesty when we reject families. Sometimes I have the feeling on local boards that organizations still think: ‘Hey, these are our poor families, we will protect them’. I think it is more important that organizations recognize their own capacities and core business and work together” (I: Representative Domo vzw Leuven).

With regard to coordination of services and communication between partners, the relations with big players in the sector, like Kind & Gezin, have been difficult from time to time. According to Domo members this has partly to do with their own insistence on autonomy and the distinctiveness of their model. On many occasions Domo received questions about this: “What is so new about your model? Why do you need a separate organisation for this? Would it not be better to embed Domo within the structure of Kind & Gezin?”. But the tensions with Kind & Gezin also have to do with differences between professional organisations and volunteer organisations.

“One time they asked us to come to a meeting on a Tuesday morning, only a week in advance! So I have to take up a holiday. I do not think they have bad intentions, but they just do not think about these things.” (I: Representative Domo vzw Leuven).

Overall the relationships with the (public) institutions concerned with family support are evaluated positively. They can exchange expertise and support each other when needed.

“We work together well. They send people to us, but we also consult them from time to time when our volunteers are confronted with problems that are too severe for them to tackle” (I: Volunteer Domo vzw Leuven).

The (local) ‘embeddedness’ of Domo vzw Leuven also is reflected in the impressive number of donations and supporters they have managed to gather. These supporting actors, visualised as the light blue rectangle on the left in figure 5, include amongst others: the Flemish government, the Province Vlaams-Brabant, Leuven, the local welfare centre, Kind & Gezin, Rotary Club Rotselaar, Faculty Club Leuven, Bank foundations, Koning Boudewijn Stichting, Music for life and last but not least

many individuals who donate and volunteer (Domo vzw Leuven, 2014). For a long time public support covered not more than a quarter of the organizations' expenses. These expenses mainly consist of reimbursements of travelling costs for volunteers, education for volunteers, the rent for their office, communication and all kinds of working materials. In some periods public support was virtually nothing¹⁷.

For Domo vzw Leuven, gathering private resources has always been part of their organisation. It is necessary to guard the autonomy of the organisation. Public resources are welcome, but only when they are not required to change their model. Some elements like the absence of paperwork and the privacy of the family are considered non-negotiable. In practice this means that Domo refuses to give the full name of the family and a specific description of the activities with the family to other organizations or governments. Domo is very much aware that policy makers use structural subsidies to steer the organization for their purposes. Therefore, the organisation was, and still is, sceptical about the recent opportunities for structural subsidies (see below). The chairwoman of Domo Leuven believes that new Domo chapters (and volunteer organisations in general) should not wait for public support to start up their activities. If they keep waiting they might never start. She explains that after all the strength of working with volunteers is that you *can* operate independently of government funding.

“People tend to forget, a lot of the professional help is fully subsidized by the government. But the government will not subsidize a volunteer organization for 100%, that is part of the reason why it emerges as a volunteer organisation. Our government prefers to fund short-term and innovative projects, but this is the wrong decision if you want to solve child poverty. That is how we see it and if you want to change something despite of the government you will have to learn how to deal with that and you don't expect immediate public support. What you do is trying to trigger the government and in the mean time you make sure that they cannot hold you back so you try to find other ways, other private resources” (I: Representative Domo vzw Leuven).

6.2 Governance dynamics beyond the local level

Evolutions and processes beyond the Leuven area influence the governance context of the Domo experience. Over the last decennium, changing orientations and approaches in the professional and political realm regarding family support turned out to be beneficial for the recognition of Domo as 'a good practice', but also hold some threats for the organization and the dissemination of its model. Here we briefly describe four evolutions that influence governance relations of the Domo initiative: the renewed attention for child poverty; the new decree for preventive child care; the discourse of 're-socializing care' coming from the ministry of healthcare and family; the start-up of new chapters of Domo. These evolutions all coincide with a more general evolution towards a more directive role for local governments in the policy fields of family support and the fight against (child) poverty (focus group). Part seven of this report returns to these evolutions, discussing how they present(ed) concrete governance challenges for Domo vzw Leuven.

Firstly, over the last decennium there has been a growing interest in the fight against child poverty, which shows in new funds and policy briefs in Flanders but also across Europe (Vandenbroeck, 2014

¹⁷ For years the support from the city has been 200 euros. This is the same amount people get if they organize a neighbourhood gathering in their street.

for a discussion of the advantages and pitfalls of this evolution). For Domo this growing public attention for children in poor families is regarded as a positive thing because it is their core business. However, most focus group participants are critical about the ways in which this is operationalized. They observe that the Ministry for Innovation and Poverty Reduction and funds like the Fund for Child Poverty are mainly about new and short-term projects. Domo, on the contrary, believes that the fight against poverty and investment in vulnerable families need long-term projects with practices that have proven their worth. In general, two critiques on government action are recurrent in the interviews and focus groups. The first has to do with the short-term vision of politicians that value symbolic victories with new projects higher than “boring, long term investments”. The second has to do with a “fetish with numbers, with measuring and controlling outcomes” (focus group). Domo and its partners argue that it should be more about process instead of (measurable) results. Representatives of public administrations argue that their governments are increasingly pursuing a coordinating and facilitating role instead of a directive one and that they have become more open to consider other indicators of impact than those based on measurable factors, an argument accepted by Domo representatives.

“We agree, that this focus on quantification used to be very prevalent in our administration and it is still the case in various policy fields. But in our field [child poverty] we have made the shift to more qualitative indicators and knowledge that emerges from the organisations in the field. We realize that local knowledge and the possibility to work across different domains of the clients lives is what often makes the difference in practice ” (Representative of Flemish administration on poverty matters during focus group).

Secondly, the decree for preventive family support was approved by the Flemish parliament in November 2013. This decree attributes a lot of attention to ‘Huizen van het Kind’ (Houses of the Child), the new format for coordination of child related services at the local level. This is not necessarily a physical building, but a network that aims for better cooperation and coordination in the fragmented local service landscape¹⁸. Participation in this network will be a precondition for structural funding. The decree explicitly recognizes the ‘accessible, mobile offer of preventive family support for future families and families with children’ (Vlaamse Regering, 2014), referring to Domo and similar initiatives.

Thirdly, the policy discourse on ‘re-socialising care’ impact on the set of governance relations in which Domo is embedded. The Flemish government describes the re-socialization of care as

“A shift within the organization of care which strives for people with a handicap, with chronic illnesses, vulnerable elderly, youngsters with behavioural and emotional problems, people who live in poverty... to let them take their own, meaningful place in society with all their possibilities and vulnerabilities. Supporting them in this where needed and to integrate them as much as possible in societal life. Concepts that play an important role in this regard are amongst others: deinstitutionalization, community care, empowerment, working in strength - and context sensitive ways, demand orientation and respite care” (Departement Welzijn, Volksgezondheid en Gezin, 2013: 1).

After a question on the subsidies for Domo in a parliamentary commission for Welfare, Family and Poverty Policy the Flemish minister of Welfare, Healthcare and Family Jo Vandeurzen replied:

¹⁸ www.huizenvanhetkind.be

“For those who do not yet realise, it is the case that these kinds of approaches absolutely match with our vision of re-socializing care” (Vlaams Parlement, 2014).

Fourthly, not only external changes, but also the success of the Domo formula itself – more volunteers, more families and the dissemination of the model - poses new coordination challenges that will be discussed below. At the time of data collection, Domo was in a period of “reflection and negotiation” (I: Volunteer Domo vzw Leuven) about how to organise coordination and cooperation between the different chapters of Domo.

7 Governance challenges

The following SWOT table (Tab. 1) summarises the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of Domo vzw Leuven based on the desktop analysis, interviews and focus group. The #n indicate the connection with a governance challenge (described below).

Tab.1 – The SWOT analysis of the Domo vzw Leuven experience: contents, processes and context

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Domo vzw Leuven	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Domo vzw Leuven is firmly embedded in local formal and informal networks. The organisation succeeds in finding volunteers. Domo established good relationship with a variety of actors that refer families to them. In the student city Leuven, they have good relationships with the university and colleges who provide young interns, volunteers and master thesis’s. - Domo delivers a service that is complementary to statutory service.#2 - Volunteers support families in ways professionals cannot. The absence of paperwork and the continuity of the volunteer-family relationship are two important strong points they have on professionals. - It is a voluntary non-stigmatizing service. The one-on-one relation with a volunteer is considered to be less threatening and stigmatizing for families. Domo volunteers reach and exchange information with different types of families in a deprived situation that are often rather isolated and averse to services. - Domo volunteers work in a demand-oriented manner. The family can and should voice their needs and questions. This approach recognizes them as actors of change and focusses on their strengths and resources. #3 - The organisation and the Domo model is well documented, which allows them to articulate and communicate their identity in order to simultaneously spread and guard their model. #1 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There are inherent limits to an autonomous volunteer organisations. Domo faces new challenges that are increasingly difficult to tackle with only volunteers and limited means. #1,#7 - Depending strongly on volunteers and private gifts it is difficult to guarantee their offer to volunteers and families. For instance, subsidized day trips were cancelled when donations stopped. - The organization experiences some difficulties regarding the growing demand from non-Belgian families.#4 - Domo pursues a multi-dimensional, holistic approach , but it is difficult to see how the Domo model makes it possible for problems with structural causes to escape the domestic realm. The understanding of empowerment is predominantly socio-psychological and kept within the volunteer-family relationship. Hence, the organisation developed little means and no systematic procedures to tackle and politicize the structural dimension of families’ deprived situation. #3, #6 - Domo vzw Leuven has difficulties to coordinate and control the implementation of their model in other localities. #1,#7 - Because of growing demand, Domo Leuven was forced to demand a temporary client stop because waiting lists were becoming too long. #1 - Some fundamental elements of the model, like the rejection of output criteria and the absence of

		paperwork make the model vulnerable for critique.
Context	Opportunities	Threats
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Over the last years Domo is widely recognized as a ‘good practice’. The fight against poverty and the importance of preventive approaches are high on the policy agenda. Domo also fits very well in the current ‘re-socialising care’ paradigm of the Flemish Minister for well-being, healthcare and family. #6 - Structural subsidies have recently become a possibility for the near future. #8 - The ‘houses of the child’ and other evolutions towards coordination at the local level offers opportunity for better coordination and cooperation between child and family services. #2, #3 - Being well connected to the university and colleges offers important resources for evaluation and evidence based reorganisation. #7 - More and more volunteers an municipalities show interest in the Domo model which offers opportunities to spread the model and its vision. #1 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - As the organization keeps on growing and the model spreads to other localities, the need for a supra-local structure and professionalization emerges, but at the moment it is very difficult to reach consensus on these topics, which puts pressure on the volunteers and the organizations. #1, #7 - In some regards Domo risks to become a victim of its own success. Being an autonomous volunteer organisation that is growing they have difficulties to: (a) manage a growing demand and administrative burden (b) remain attentive to the needs and demands of volunteers. (c) The organization believes that it is impossible to grow further without extra resources. #1, #8 - Over the last years, the average volunteer does not stay long enough. This perceived as a risk for loosing knowledge and consistency within the group of volunteers. #7 - The devolution of competences to the local level (Houses of the child) and to society (re-socializing care) through flexible models risk to put a heavy burden of responsibility on organizations like Domo. In practice volunteer organizations have a rather weak bargaining position. A lot might depend on whether local authorities take responsibility or not (active subsidiarity). #6

Source: our elaboration from document analysis, interviews and the focus group

7.1 Mainstreaming social innovation

To understand the different challenges related to mainstreaming it is sensible to distinguish between mainstreaming as the growth of Domo vzw Leuven and mainstreaming as the spread of the Domo model beyond Leuven. As to the former, the growth of the organization puts pressure on the qualities of the small-scale volunteer organisation in which this model was originally developed. Firstly, under these changing circumstances it is increasingly challenging to connect the offer and demand for support in a good match between volunteer and family and avoiding waiting lists (#5 equal access). This is important because it concerns the relationship of support between families and volunteers. Furthermore, waiting lists and bad matches might affect the future position of Domo as a partner of local referrers. Secondly, as the organisation grows the relations between volunteers change as well and Domo revised its organisational structure to cope with this.

Mainstreaming, understood as the spreading of the model beyond Leuven, only became a real challenge recently (over the last five years). Domo has been spreading the word about their model in order to raise support and since their organisation received awards and grew, its representatives were

often asked to explain their model on study days and on other occasions. As a result, new volunteers in different localities contacted the organisation, saying that they wanted to set up their own Domo chapter. In this regard the development of clear quality documents about their model and its challenges proved to be very valuable, for instance the book by Verdonck (2011), a road map for new Domo chapters and a document about the theoretical underpinning of the model by Eeman and Van Regenmortel (2012).

“We will never say that people have to start up a Domo. But if volunteers in other municipalities want to start up a Domo, using our model, we are of course willing to help them. That is how it went”(I: Volunteer Domo vzw Leuven).

The establishment of new chapters is regarded as a positive and desirable evolution and Domo vzw Leuven wants to offer support to new Domo chapters, especially in the start-up phase. However this evolution also presents challenges for the organisation. The new responsibilities and demands for time and energy that come with supporting new Domo chapters puts pressure on the volunteers.

Being the original chapter, Domo Leuven takes up the task of guarding the model and the name. Domo Leuven has some authority in this but there are no formal, standardised procedures or deliberation mechanisms to execute this authority. Here tensions arise between local interpretations and applications of the model and the expertise and ways of doing things developed over time in Leuven. One of these discussions had to do with the organisation of collective daytrips with all Domo volunteers, parents and children. Some Domo chapters think this is a good activity to strengthen the families' networks and to create a good atmosphere between volunteers. Domo Leuven is convinced that these activities do not fit in the Domo model that focusses on the one-to-one relation and the privacy of the families. Hence, they ask other Domo's not to organize such activities. In practice, hence, it is not easy to figure out who should make the final decision about these matters.

It is not clear how free different local organisations that have adopted the name Domo should be in developing their activities. Different interpretations and applications of the model arise in different local contexts (despite the available documents). Local partnerships give rise to certain opportunities that might not be present or deemed desirable in other localities. In Hasselt, the idea to start-up a Domo chapter grew from a project coordinated by the Province Limburg. Hence, Domo Hasselt has strong ties with people from the Province. This is very different from how Domo Leuven started. Here again tensions arise around issues of autonomy and what activities should be part of a Domo or not.

It emerged from the case study that the volunteer organisation experiences difficulties to spread and guard the model at the same time. The organization is searching for a supra-local structure or coordination mechanism. At the moment of finalising this report (January 2014), this process is still ongoing. Earlier Domo Leuven supported the idea of a network of autonomous not-for-profit organizations. Today, after many discussions, Domo Leuven favours the development of a supra-local structure. This would create scale advantages (especially for administrative tasks) and possibilities to share resources. This could decrease the burden on local Domo chapters and would also have advantages for control and coordination. Other Domo chapters understand and acknowledge these advantages but they also fear that it might reduce their autonomy. Negotiations are ongoing and they are influenced by recent opportunities for structural subsidies. To find ways to spread the model in a

way it is not co-opted or changed in unwanted ways, Domo contacted SAMMAN¹⁹. This organisation has the complex task to include all four autonomous Domo chapters in a learning and growth process to develop common ground (Domo vzw Leuven, 2014).

Finally, when talking about the challenge of mainstreaming it has to be taken into account that 'the mainstream' of policy strategies and services for poverty reduction and family support changed over the years. Today the Domo model (or at least certain elements from this model) is more attractive for policy makers as it fits in the vision of 're-socializing care' and intensified coordination and cooperation at the local level.

7.2 Governing welfare mix: avoiding fragmentation

When Domo was established, they were criticised for adding to the fragmentation of services because they insisted on their distinct model and the autonomy of organisation, especially from big publicly funded organisations. Over the years, this perception has changed. Today Domo's autonomous stance is generally regarded as a strength as long as the organization is embedded in a strong, facilitating network. This situation is called 'accountable autonomy' (Fung, 2004). It is believed that coordination and cooperation between specialised organisations can overcome organisational fragmentation (I: Representative Domo vzw Leuven; focus group). This conviction is also central to the 'Huizen van het Kind' model developed by Kind en Gezin for the Flemish government. Structural funding will be possible under the condition of being part of a local network and platform (The house of the child). Local authorities can play an important coordinating role in these local networks but this is not necessarily the case. During a study day on the implementation of this model it became clear that it serves both budgetary and coordination purposes and that it aims to contribute to a clear offer of services for potential clients.

Simultaneously with the 'Huizen van het Kind' model and the vision of re-socializing care which is about better cooperation between professionals volunteers and families, the Flemish decree for Preventive Family Support aims to overcome fragmentation between providers and approaches in order to develop effective and efficient preventive strategies. Although sceptical at first, Domo vzw Leuven is positive about this decree. The requirements for official recognition are based on their practice and it respects the focus on process rather than outcome. For Domo this evolution holds opportunities for local cooperation and the growth of their organization, but there is also the danger of being confronted with responsibilities and expectations that are not realistic for a volunteer organization and that will put pressure on the Domo model (see also #6). This threat is the biggest for the new chapters of Domo in municipalities where local governments will not take up their responsibility. In short, the stress on local autonomy and cooperation is regarded as an opportunity, but dependence on local politics is also regarded as a threat.

¹⁹ SAMMAN is a social enterprise, which describes its approach for social change with the concept 'Slow Philanthropy'. SAMMAN means 'together' in Swedish. Their slogan is 'Together more social impact'. They are specialized in "supporting good causes and people who want to support good causes". www.samman.be

7.3 Governing welfare mix: developing a participatory governance style

The procedures to start up a support relation between a Domo volunteer and a family (explained in part four of this report) explicitly aims to establish a non-imposed, participatory relationship between the family and the volunteer. The appreciation of the position and opinion of people in a deprived situation is central to Domo's approach. Volunteers avoid the hierarchical relationships that are mostly implied in a relationship with professional social workers (focus group). The parents are regarded as the most important actor and specialist when it comes to raising their children. The volunteer can make suggestions and bring up alternative ways of approaching issues but in general the support given depends on what the families themselves ask for. The idea and hope is that the volunteer and family develop a relationship of trust in which many issues and possible activities can be discussed in an informal, horizontal manner. Hence, giving a voice to the members of deprived families in the support scheme is crucial to the Domo model.

However, this form of participation by the target group seldom leaves the domestic, private sphere, which confirms the predominantly psychosocial conception of empowerment that is pursued (see part four and five of this report). Members of the families are not in the position to influence the governance of Domo as such. They are also not expected to be concerned about this, but first and foremost focus on their family). Also, as a result of importance attributed to privacy, it is not part of the model that families or parents voice their concerns collectively as (deprived) Domo family.

In theory, parents from Domo families could later become Domo volunteers themselves, which is rather exceptional in practice.

As far as the volunteers are concerned, given that Domo only employs three part time employees for administrative and coordination tasks, the organisation still depends predominately on volunteers and participation of volunteers in the strategic positioning and daily operation of the organisations is crucial. In 2011, Domo implemented a structure of different working groups to ensure meaningful participation of volunteers. This remains an important point of attention (Domo vzw Leuven, 2014). New challenges arise here as the organisation grows and the model spreads (see also #1).

7.4 Equality and diversity

As mentioned before, Domo aims to avoid the hierarchical relationship between families and those providing social support and assistance that they deem characteristic of professional family support. Domo only sends a volunteer to families who have approved of this. The volunteers focus on creating a relationship of trust with families and maintain the parents in their privileged and central position in the process of raising their child. One could argue that this stance embodies a strong sense of equality between families and volunteers.

However, the growing percentage of non-Belgian families and especially families with a non-EU migration background is a challenge for volunteers, who are often not used to working with parents and children of foreign descent and see their cultural models of raising children challenged. For instance: parents of non-EU descent sometimes do not play games with their children²⁰ in a way that the volunteers would expect or the division of labour between husband and wife in the household is

²⁰ To be sure, this is not only or always observed in families from foreign descent, but according to volunteers they see this more often in these families.

different. Volunteers often regard these situations as strange or problematic because in their understanding it diverges from how 'a good functioning family' is perceived in Flanders. Even when they realize that this is not necessarily a key problem, volunteers feel uneasy talking about it and it becomes a threshold in developing a relationship of trust with the family.

Volunteers also experience that developing a personal relationship is more difficult when language barriers are big. In practice the development of a horizontal trust relationship often emerges from having regular conversations and getting to know each other better. Some volunteers experience that this is more difficult when a lot of energy goes into understanding what the other person wants to say. Also, families that arrived in Belgium only recently sometimes have other needs, like specific administrative support, which not all volunteers can provide. For instance, some parents might be more interested in support for filling in tax forms or looking for a job, while volunteers want to work on child related matters.

This reality forces the organisation to reflect about their values and support for volunteers and about possible thresholds for non-Belgian families that were not yet recognized as such before. Not all volunteers have the same opinion about opening up the organisation for families of foreign descent (I: Volunteer Domo vzw Leuven). Nonetheless, recognizing and working with this growing cultural diversity within Domo is an important challenge for the organisation if it wants to support all children at risk of poverty in their region (see also #5).

7.5 Uneven access

Domo vzw Leuven emerged in the Leuven context under specific circumstances that are described above. For several years this specific innovative form of preventive family support was only available in the Leuven context. Over the last five years it is being developed in other Flemish municipalities (see also #1).

The Domo coordinator who uses specific profile characteristics to make this decision grants access to social support. The screening of families and volunteers are an important part of the Domo experience, hence access is only equal for volunteers and families that meet a variety of criteria. Potential volunteers are assessed for their motivations and experiences in order to select people with the right skill- and mind-set for giving informal family support. The assessment of referred families concerns the willingness of the family to receive support, but also whether there is a need for family support that can be addressed by a Domo volunteer and whether these families are indeed socially and economically deprived. Families who are in need of informal family support, but dispose over substantial resources and a well-developed social network will probably not get access to the Domo services (I: Representative Domo vzw Leuven). In that sense, Domo does not aim to guarantee universal access for all families in need of support, but it targets those families who lack the resources for other forms of preventive support. In accordance with the tradition of Social Chistianism (Martinelli, 2010) Domo aims to take an intermediate position as volunteers (community members) between the isolated, deprived individual and the institutions of the hierarchical, impersonal state apparatus.

Circumstances and opportunities also play a role. Access is not guaranteed, it is dependent on the availability of volunteers that match the profile of the family in need of support. Hence, the organization is sometimes forced to work with waiting lists. Keeping waiting lists to a minimum is

regarded to be an important challenge. Moreover, even when there are enough volunteers, the match with a particular family is very important. Families with a different cultural background or a limited knowledge of the Dutch language (or a language spoken by volunteers) have lower chances to access if volunteers with the appropriate skill set (language, able to work in a positive way with cultural diversity) are not available (see also #4 Equality and diversity).

7.6 Avoiding responsibility

Domo volunteers feel they are taking on responsibility that professionals are not able to. They believe that professionals who are paid by the governments cannot play a role as a friend at home. This is a responsibility that can only be taken by friends, family, neighbours, communities or volunteers. For Domo vzw Leuven, the autonomy of their organisation and model are therefore very important. For that reason, they do not feel that they are helping governments to avoid their responsibility. However, governments and other service providers also have a big responsibility when it comes to the fight against poverty and the development of preventive approaches. In this context, Domo will try to convince other actors to act in what Domo perceives to be in the interest of deprived families with children living in poverty. The organisation tries to play a signalling role to policy, by raising awareness about child poverty and approaching policy makers on these matters (I: Representative and volunteer Domo vzw Leuven). While Domo presents itself as an expert in this specific niche activity of informal family support, it does not pretend that this is the only way to fight against child poverty. The organisation is very much aware that poverty is a multi-dimensional problem, which also has structural factors and causes (for instance related to decent housing, education and employment) which largely fall outside the direct scope of support activities by Domo volunteers (I: Volunteer Domo vzw Leuven). Hence, Domo believes in a shared responsibility by many partners and they acknowledge that governments have an important coordinating and subsidizing role to play.

It did not emerge from the focus group or interviews that governments are avoiding responsibilities with regard to child poverty and family support. Domo and similar initiatives will receive more structural funding in the near future. Before that, there was not a clearly articulated relationship of subsidiarity. The organisation grew in a bottom-up manner, taking on an intermediate position, independent from policy.

The government approach of re-socializing care, which is explicitly about redistributing the responsibility between state, families and service providers, is generally regarded as positive as it seems to recognize the added value of the Domo model. All focus group participants agreed with the need to activate and coordinate local knowledge and informal resources, but they also noticed potential threats for the quality of services and the role of clients if this is not embedded in a policy framework that delivers the necessary resources (i.e. active subsidiarity). Hence a shared responsibility between different partners (which implies a government who takes on a more coordinating role)- is regarded to be desirable but only under conditions of active subsidiarity, meaning that an increase in capacity and responsibilities should be met with sufficient means in order to avoid that the burden on volunteers would become too big. While current government and administration seems to agree with this, such an engagement cannot be guaranteed in the long term (focus group). Furthermore, it is not a secret that the vision of re-socializing care also serves budgetary purposes of reducing expenditures. This was recognized but not criticized during the interviews or focus group.

7.7 *Managing intra-organisational tensions*

Throughout the report a variety of organisational challenges have been identified such as: managing and supporting volunteers in a growing organisation, coordinating between different Domo chapters, adapting the organisation to a growing diversity of families in need of support, etc.

However, the governance challenge of intra-organisational tensions as understood by the ImPRovE definition is specifically about conflicts of interest within the organisation with regard to the position of people in poverty and the primary goals of the initiative. Based on the material gathered during this research no intra-organisational tensions were identified within Domo vzw Leuven. During the period of observation there has been mention of tension between different chapters about whether certain group activities would fit the Domo model or not (see #1). While this touches on the crucial element of privacy and poses an important challenge of guarding the model, these disputes appear to be relatively small in the face of the overall agreement amongst Domo chapters about the model and its method.

7.8 *Enabling legal framework*

There is a clear difference in the approach to governance between the Domo model and the nowadays-dominant ideas of evidence based policy and New Public Management. The fact that Domo insists on the irreplaceable role of volunteers in their model, the refusal to share private information about the families and the use of assessment forms and the great scepticism towards output results are in conflict with governance based on numbers and funding based on standardized output criteria. This helps to explain why Domo has always guarded its autonomy, because they would not be able to hold on to these principles once they would become part of a large public subsidy scheme.

It seems that this has changed over time. Within the relatively new frameworks of 're-socializing care' and 'preventive family support', the roles of governments, local (volunteer) organisations and other service providers are framed in a way that might relieve this tension. New legislation and policy strategies related to family support, child poverty and informal care are generally understood as enabling by Domo vzw Leuven. However, the organisation remains sceptical as a lot of uncertainty about the implementation in practice and responsibility of local governments remains.

The legislation regarding volunteer work puts a significant administrative burden on the organisation, but respondents did not express any big problems or dissatisfaction in this regard.

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Appendix: Methods

Document study

Three in depth interviews

- Volunteer Domo Leuven and author of the book 'Over the doorstep' written for 20th anniversary of Domo vzw Leuven. (I: Volunteer Domo vzw Leuven)
- Chairwoman of Domo vzw Leuven. (I: Representative Dome vzw Leuven)
- A former volunteer of Domo vzw Leuven who wrote her master thesis in pedagogical sciences on how Domo reaches its own goals. She is a founding member of Domo Sint-Niklaas. (I: Volunteer Domo Sint-Niklaas)

One focus group with ten participants:

- **Pieter Cools:** Researcher – Moderator
- Volunteer Domo Leuven and author of the book 'Over the doorstep' written for 20th anniversary of Domo vzw Leuven.

- A staff member of Welzijnszorg Vlaams Brabant. She is a social worker that cooperated with Domo Leuven in previous projects.
- Volunteer for Domo Leuven. She supports a family.
- Executive employee for Kind & Gezin. She replaces Wannes Blondeel the co-author of the new decree for preventive family support.
- Executive on Child Poverty and poverty in general for the Flemish Government.
- Team coordinator social service for the Local Welfare Centre (OCMW) Leuven specialized in child poverty.
- Representative for the minister for Innovation and Poverty reduction Ingrid Lieten. He designed the network Innovatiefabriek (Innovation Factory) and calls and subsidy schemes for social innovative initiatives. He is also a professor public management sciences, specialized in ageing populations at the VUB, University of Brussels.
- A volunteer and coordinator of Domo Hasselt. She also works for the Province Limburg
- Coordinator and co-founder of Domo Hasselt

Domo vzw Leuven hosted the focus group. It lasted for about two hours and a half (19u-21u30).

Other sources

- DVD of an interview with the founding mothers Lieve and Adèle.
- The researcher attended the provincial study day for 'Huizen van het kind' for Vlaams Brabant.

ImPRovE: Poverty Reduction in Europe. Social Policy and Innovation

Poverty Reduction in Europe: Social Policy and Innovation (ImPRovE) is an international research project that brings together ten outstanding research institutes and a broad network of researchers in a concerted effort to study poverty, social policy and social innovation in Europe. The ImPRovE project aims to improve the basis for evidence-based policy making in Europe, both in the short and in the long term. In the short term, this is done by carrying out research that is directly relevant for policymakers. At the same time however, ImPRovE invests in improving the long-term capacity for evidence-based policy making by upgrading the available research infrastructure, by combining both applied and fundamental research, and by optimising the information flow of research results to relevant policy makers and the civil society at large.

The two central questions driving the ImPRovE project are:

How can social cohesion be achieved in Europe?

How can social innovation complement, reinforce and modify macro-level policies and vice versa?

The project runs from March 2012 till February 2016 and receives EU research support to the amount of Euro 2.7 million under the 7th Framework Programme. The output of ImPRovE will include over 55 research papers, about 16 policy briefs and at least 3 scientific books. The ImPRovE Consortium will organise two international conferences (Spring 2014 and Winter 2015). In addition, ImPRovE will develop a new database of local projects of social innovation in Europe, cross-national comparable reference budgets for 6 countries (Belgium, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Spain) and will strongly expand the available policy scenarios in the European microsimulation model EUROMOD.

More detailed information is available on the website <http://improve-research.eu>.

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