

4.3. Belgian Ageing Studies

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Project | Belgian Ageing Studies (BAS) |
| Organisation | Belgian Ageing Studies Group at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Hogeschool Gent |
| Research location | Brussels, Belgium |
| Cooperation partners | Various local and national authorities and healthcare institutions across 170 municipalities in the Flanders region |
| Team | Three professors, two postdocs, five Ph.D candidates and students |
| Funding sources | Vrije Universiteit Brussel and national research grants |
| Website | http://www.belgianageingstudies.be/ |

ORGANISATIONAL BACKGROUND ●●●

The Belgian Ageing Studies (BAS) project is developed and conducted by researchers at Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Hogeschool Gent in collaboration with the provincial government of West Flanders, local authorities and members of local senior organisations. It is a participatory research programme designed with and for older people to create opportunities for active ageing in Belgium. The main aim is to support the process of creating evidence-based, age-friendly communities through involving older people in policymaking decisions. The project started in 2004 and currently involves 170 municipalities in Flanders. Within these municipalities are advisory boards consisting of older people's organisations and local stakeholders; there are around 8,000 older volunteers and more than 80,000 participants aged over sixty.

FUNDING ●●●

Within the group there are three people who are funded by the university (three professors) and other staff are paid through external funding. The group also regularly attracts national and international university research grants. They have explicitly not sought to be paid by the organisations in which they carry out their research, such as municipalities, to maintain their status as neutral researchers without a political agenda. This has been done despite various requests from municipalities to host a project in that specific municipality.

PROBLEM BEING ADDRESSED ●●●

The research team tries to support vulnerable groups within society, particularly older people, to give them more influence over policy. The societal relevance that the BAS project aims to achieve comprises:

- support for the process of age-friendly policy-making at the local level;
- broadening of ageing issues to include social and political aspects rather than merely medical issues;

- potential for involving older people in research and policy-making;
- creation of social networks of local stakeholders;
- offering local authorities explanations and possible intervention strategies to tackle aspects of disadvantage and exclusion within the older population.

The team provides a survey tool to measure living conditions and aspects relating to the quality of life of older people at the local level, such as housing conditions, care, social networks, neighbourhood aspects, volunteer/social/cultural/political participation, frailty, physical and mental health and social exclusion. The team engages older people as central actors (peer-research) in their research and promotes evidence-based policy at the community level by providing input and mobilising knowledge for planning and inclusive policy programs. Currently, such fragile groups are often excluded. The main purposes of the BAS project are:

- To provide a survey instrument to measure the living conditions and aspects of quality of life of older people at the community level, including a wide range of aspects such as housing conditions, feelings of loneliness, care, social networks, neighbourhood aspects, volunteer/social/cultural/political participation, frailty, physical and mental health, feelings of being unsafe, social exclusion;
- To engage older people as central actors in research and policy planning;
- To promote evidence-based policy at the local level by providing input and mobilising knowledge for planning and inclusive policy programmes;
- To provide and enable open access for municipalities, local and regional authorities, societal stakeholders, and older adults to access the data and publications;
- To create opportunities for active ageing at the local level, and to support the process of creating age-friendly communities;
- To examine trends in specific municipalities by conducting follow-up studies;
- To create engagement among all societal actors by means of a community network.

An example: In 2007 one municipality implemented the BAS research project. At the end of the project that municipality received figures covering a wide range of aspects such as housing conditions, feelings of loneliness, care, social networks, neighbourhood aspects, physical and mental health and feelings of being unsafe. An important finding was that a substantial number of older adults were facing feelings of loneliness and the municipality developed a neighbourhood project to tackle this by means of volunteers. These volunteers help older people with minor issues and assist them by providing information in areas where regular caregivers do not provide support. In 2014, the interventions were evaluated and the number of people facing feelings of loneliness had reduced significantly. In response, the municipality organised a post for a 'mobile civil servant', who visits old people in their homes.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND SOLUTION ●●●

The project has been developed in collaboration with the Flemish Provinces, 170 municipalities, advisory boards comprising older people and other local stakeholders. In total over 8,000 older volunteers have been recruited and more than 75,000 older people are participating in the studies in Belgium. The innovativeness of the Belgian Ageing Studies lies mainly in its participatory research methodology. Older adults are not merely seen as the target group for the

study, but also as active participants and actors in developing the research, carrying out the study, evaluating the project, and developing policy plans based on the study findings. This is a specific method of 'peer-research' developed by the group. This method involves older people not only as research participants, but also as essential partners in the research project. A central aspect of the project involves the training of these older volunteers, as well as the process of monitoring by a supervisor, who is also an older volunteer. These volunteers are engaged in the project from beginning to end, including feedback on the results of the study.

In a joint creative process involving older people, civil society organisations, senior advisory boards, local authorities and other stakeholders, a research system was developed which created the potential to facilitate innovation and social change in municipalities and policies on ageing. In the late 1980s, the team first created this approach and it has been further developed over the past decades. The method is published in SAGE Methodology. The main principle is based on two steps. First, the target group is analysed and investigated to identify the issues they are facing. Intervention then takes place through providing solutions and bringing the issues onto the agenda of policymakers. The second step takes place after a couple of years; the actions and interventions are evaluated and reported back to the local municipalities.

GRAND CHALLENGE BEING ADDRESSED ●●●

The group considers it important to include fragile groups, in this case the elderly people, in policymaking, particularly in regard to policies that concern these groups themselves. They also wish to further deepen the understanding of informal learning as a concept. As such, the grand challenge seems to revolve largely around creating inclusive and reflective societies in light of ageing populations.

RESPONSIBLE RESEARCH AND INNOVATION ●●●

The project supports a shift away from the view that older people are merely passive consumers towards a view of older people as active participants and actors in society; diverse groups of older people are involved in the study (most vulnerable older adults and the oldest old) who are often the most under-represented in ageing studies and the BAS project has stimulated local authorities to put a number of aging-related themes on the local policy agenda. The research team emphasises that only things that have societal relevance need to be done, and they even refuse payments from the target groups concerned or politicians. Their rationale is: 'we can write a project proposal, wait a year, recruit a Ph.D student and then start, or we can just start directly with our own resources, within the group'. Their experience is that when financing from the (local) government is offered, demands relating to the content are also added to the research request. They do not want this, so generally reject funding that is offered for requested research.

The engagement of stakeholders is based on the recruitment of volunteers. This is done directly by using some form of snowball sampling (a friend knows a friend) or calls for volunteers through newspaper publications. Information acquired from the studies is presented to all actors involved: volunteers, municipalities, provinces, members of local parliaments, mayors, etc. The researchers try to interact with these stakeholders as closely as possible. The volunteers appreciate their close contacts with the research team, particularly since it gives them a voice and allows them to talk to the professors. Sometimes issues are identified that raise problems and the team has to deal with these. Such issues are occasionally taken out of context by journalists, who present these aspects as more important in the media, even though the issue had not been the focus of the report.

The municipalities (or provinces) that participate receive the raw data. The reports are free and the scientific findings are published in peer-reviewed journals that are not open, and also in public media (sometimes there is money in a project for open access publishing). Even though their peer-research concept is published, the team is somewhat protective when other groups want to use their validated method. Other researchers can use it, but under contract from this research team, because the team wants to guarantee the quality of their methods.

The Belgian Ageing Studies have five important target groups and audiences: older people, professionals working with and for older people, policymakers, researchers and the wider audience. These people are reached through six important channels: press releases, local presentations in each participating municipality, articles in journals (national and international), books, seminars (national and regional), website (in Dutch, French and English). At specific time points during the research project, the municipality gives press releases to communicate to the wider audience (approximately three or four press releases in each municipality). At the end, the results of the study are presented to participants, older people and stakeholders in each municipality. Every participating municipality can also access – in addition to the presentation and open access data, a report that explains the implications of the results. BAS also communicates the results of the studies to a national and international audience.

The scientific importance of the BAS project and its societal relevance are closely intertwined, as the study was initially developed to support the process of developing age-friendly policies at the municipality level. Rich data collection and the scale of the data set are opening up a wide range of opportunities to gain deeper insights into a number of aspects which are relevant in an ageing society. It also offers opportunities for comparing municipalities against specific benchmarks, such as averages for Flanders, the province, comparable municipalities and cities. Prominent differences between municipalities in regard to particular findings also call for further in-depth research in order to understand local dynamics and contextual factors influencing these particular outcomes.

EVALUATION AND DISSEMINATION ●●●

The research team is relatively small and works independently of the municipalities. The research shows a feasible approach to including fragile groups in policymaking and making policies that are also supported by society. A number of foundations, support groups and interest groups have originated from their activities. The research team has many years of experience and has generated many publications and approximately ten Ph.D theses. Publications include e.g. eleven scientific monographs in national publications, five contributions to scientific monographs with international referee system, 34 articles in scientific journals with international referee system in journals such as *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* and *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*, eleven articles in monographs with national referee system, eighteen articles in journals with national referee system and eight reports of research projects submitted to the subsidising organisation after conclusion of the activities.