



The Research Group
Cosmopolis Centre for Urban Research

has the honor to invite you to the public defense of the PhD thesis of

Liesbet De Backer

to obtain the degree of Doctor of Interdisciplinary Studies

Title of the PhD thesis:

Social network development and access to social support of unaccompanied refugees in their transition to adulthood

Curriculum vitae

Liesbet is a PhD researcher at Cosmopolis, Centre for Urban Research, part of the Department of Geography.

She has a multidisciplinary background in Orthopedagogics, Science of Arts and Archaeology. Before joining Cosmopolis, she worked in a socio-cultural organization in Brussels for a number of years.

Promotors:

Prof. dr. Bas van Heur

Prof. dr. Ilse Derluyn (UGent)

The defense will take place on
Tuesday, September 5, 2023 at 3pm in auditorium D.2.01

Members of the jury

Prof. dr. Lena Imeraj (VUB, chair)

Prof. dr. Gily Coene (VUB, secretary)

Prof. dr. Gerrit Loots (VUB)

Prof. dr. Elaine Chaise (University College London)

Dr. Floor Verhaeghe (UGent)

Abstract of the PhD research

Through their provision of social support, social networks are key sources in the promotion of participation of newcomers in the receiving society. Social support also proves to have a positive impact on the mental health of newcomers. Although there is an extensive body of literature focused on the formal and informal social networks of unaccompanied refugee minors post-resettlement, this existing research fails to explicitly address this population's transition to adulthood (despite the fact that such a transition is known to pose meaningful challenges to their resettlement process). Furthermore, there is very little research on networks of organizations working with newcomers. In my project, I consider how unaccompanied refugees' informal and formal networks and access to social support evolve throughout their transition to adulthood; and identify the main factors that hinder collaboration within the network of organizations working with unaccompanied refugees in Belgium. To answer these questions, two studies were developed. Study one, which takes a qualitative, longitudinal, action research approach, focuses on evolutions in the informal and formal support structures of a panel of fifteen unaccompanied refugees throughout their transition to adulthood. Study two, drawing on in-depth interviews with 17 representatives of organizations responsible for the accommodation and support of unaccompanied refugees before and around their transition to adulthood, examines these organizations' collaboration patterns. In my analysis, I draw on the caringscapes/carescapes framework and aim to reveal the temporal and spatial dynamics and the resource and service context that impact participants' support structures. Study one reveals that high mobility in participants' reception, care and residential trajectories, but also their difficulties in accessing certain leisure activities, schools and workplaces, hamper their development and maintenance of informal ties. Study one furthermore demonstrates how participants' access to formal support is impeded (especially in the Brussels context), and identifies several barriers (i.e., limitations in the cultural sensitivity and customization of care, financial and language barriers and low accessibility of Brussels' public services). Study two reveals that collaborations within the network of organizations would benefit from improved information exchange, case transfer and case coordination and identifies shortcomings in five different but interrelated domains that engender interprofessional collaboration: timely and adequate diagnoses; knowledge of all service providers; sufficient capacity; informal trust relationships between professionals; and cultural competence of professionals. In this thesis, I combine these insights together to offer advice for both policy and practice. Concrete recommendations, regarding for example mobilization of young refugees' informal support structures, improvement of their access to the (Brussels) housing market and enhancement of the cultural competency of formal actors working with unaccompanied young refugees, are put forward in order to improve these young people's socio-economic participation in society.