

Briefing Document | VNR Belgium

2nd Voluntary National Review : BELGIUM



The Belgian French-speaking Youth Forum (Forum des Jeunes) is the official advisory body representing Belgian youth in the French-speaking Community. Founded in 1977, the Forum des Jeunes brings the vision of the young people to decision-makers and defends their interests and rights at the national and international level.

The Flemish Youth Council (Vlaamse Jeugdraad) is the official advisory body of the Flemish government on all matters concerning children and young people. Founded in 2002 the VJR represents the children, young people and youth organisations in Flanders and promotes their interests and reinforces their voice so they are heard and can actively influence policy.



I. MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING (SDG3)

Belgium is currently facing a mental health care crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic did not caused these problems, but it has exacerbated and intensified them. Available data indicates that depressive and anxiety symptoms have increased over the past two years, particularly among young people, and the crisis youth care services have been flooded with requests, especially in 2021¹. While we do not yet know the precise long-term effects, **it is unlikely that the damage incurred is temporary.**

A survey conducted by the Flemish Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry in March 2021 revealed that 23,749 children and young people in Flanders are on waiting lists for mental health assistance.² Zorgnet-Icuro estimates that more than **two-thirds of young people with a mental disorder in Belgium have to wait for over a year to receive professional treatment**³. These statistics are deeply concerning and demand urgent attention, leaving no room for disregard. Staff shortages, long waiting lists, and limited capacity in youth care services mean that many young people are left without the appropriate support.

Questions	<p>What concrete measures will Belgium implement to tackle the mental health crisis with a long term vision?</p> <p>How will Belgium improve its support for mental health assistance services?</p>
Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize the current situation as a crisis and swiftly develop a comprehensive master plan to address it⁴; • Prioritize prevention and early detection of mental problems⁵; • Support field services that are close to young people, especially in school settings and after school activities⁶; • Explore nature-based solutions (the sustainable management and use of nature for tackling societal challenge), also in the field of (mental) health⁷.

II. YOUTH HOMELESSNESS & HOUSING (SDG1, 10 & 11)

A significant proportion of the homeless population in Brussels and Flanders comprises young people, with 20% aged between 18 and 26 years old, and 25% of this group being under 18 years old. Moreover in Wallonia and Brussels, 26% of young people are or have been confronted with housing issues directly or indirectly⁸. The problem goes beyond mere homelessness; **it encompasses all children and young people in Belgium who lack a secure and stable living environment.** The Belgian governments' approach to homelessness addresses the issue broadly, but these plans lack prioritisation by the different levels of government and specific funding.

While the German-community in Belgium has good practices in terms of social housing, it is not necessarily the case in all three communities. The waiting list for social housing in Flanders currently exceeds 182,000 individuals, surpassing the available supply. Disturbingly, data from 2017 reveals that around one-third of these applicants are families with children. While the Belgian government acknowledges the efforts and plans of Brussels to increase the supply and quality of social housing, there is a significant lag in Flanders and **the available funding to build or renovate social housing is not adequately being invested for the most at risk population groups.**⁹

Questions	<p>What measures are being taken by the Belgian governments to address the issue of youth homelessness and ensure secure and stable living environments for children and young people?</p> <p>Considering the shortage of social housing in Belgium, what steps are the regions taking to solve this problem and increase the supply?</p>
Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate housing and homelessness in the political priorities in Belgium ; • Initiate proactive measures to increase the supply in social housing. This includes investing in the construction of new social housing units and implementing policies aimed at optimizing the use of existing housing ;

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- Put in place concerted local, regional and federal policies to simplify and make existing support services more visible.¹⁰

III. QUALITY EDUCATION (SDG4)

Overall, **education in Belgium is still lacking quality**, and most indicators used to assess the situation have not reached their targets yet¹¹. Various aspects such as the high rate of early school leavers, inadequate access to lifelong learning programs, and stagnating underachievement in reading contribute to the overall lack of quality. Moreover, there are **striking discrepancies between the three communities of Belgium**, the Flemish and German communities outperforming the French one.

A whole section of the VNR is dedicated to sustainable education. However, the emphasis should be put on environmental education, focusing on the interconnectedness of ecological systems and encouraging environmental stewardship. In the conclusion of the VNR report on SDG4, it is stated: "Education for sustainable development is a key lever that needs to be used more in the wider society." There are indeed some encouraging measures in the different communities of Belgium¹². However, our recent reports on **environmental education indicate that its implementation remains somewhat superficial and unequal throughout the country**. There is no strategic educational plan foreseen by the three ministers of education to implement environmental education, resulting in inequalities among schools throughout the country.

Young people want more initiatives on that matter. In study¹³, 91% of young people in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation requested sustainable education to be transversally implemented into the secondary school programme and earlier, and 74% claimed that they were not satisfied with their current curriculum.

Questions	What is going to be implemented concretely for achieving a good quality, inclusive and fair environmental education?
Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and implement a comprehensive climate curriculum in the three communities of Belgium that allows students to learn about climate (change) across all subjects, establishing a meaningful connection between climate and society; • Focus on the solutions related to the socio-environmental crisis, in a concrete way (e.g. by conducting projects at school) ; • Support schools in creating collaboration with professional external actors to discuss and debate around these matters, both financially and logistically.

IV. MOBILITY (SDG11)

Although we acknowledge the existence of encouraging measures in Belgium related to national mobility¹⁴, much improvement is still needed to achieve a quality public transport system. **Young people often regret the high reliance on cars and believe that more measures should be implemented to discourage car use¹⁵**, such as (1) developing public transport, primarily in rural areas, by organising wider and more regular service, (2) ensuring that transports are accessible to people with disabilities, and (3) perfecting intermodality by improving connections between bus and train¹⁶.

There is also still much to be done regarding sustainable ways of traveling abroad. **The offer of sustainable means of transport, especially for young people, is still lacking ambition**. Cars or even planes are often preferred (even for small distances), as shows a recent survey in the Wallonia and Brussels¹⁷. While these two means of transport are much more polluting, they are also much cheaper than the train, due to diverse reasons (the tax system for company cars in Belgium is still very advantageous¹⁸, the kerosene tax in Europe still inexistent¹⁹, etc.). While some plans exist to make trains more attractive in Europe (like the Interrail program), their number and ambition is still insufficient. And yet 77% of the young people questioned in Wallonia and Brussels would like to use the train more to travel abroad.

Questions	<p>Given our need for rethinking mobility, why is Belgium not boosting the use of trains more intensively?</p> <p>How are you going to address the problem of unfair tax regulations that make polluting means of transport more attractive in terms of price, such as company cars?</p>
Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abolish unfair tax systems (company cars in Belgium, kerosene in the EU); • Propose ambitious plans for letting (young) people travel in a sustainable way (affordable, clean, and secure); • Promote rail travel offers and regulate air travel advertisement.

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¹ Mental Health of Belgian Population : update 15.03.2022.

https://fdn01.fed.be/documents/82ba2aea7fc5ebaf88cdea0ef6755f3c/20220315_GEMS_MAG%20%281%29.pdf

² « Wachttijden voor jeugdhulp zijn ontploft », De Standaard, 17.11.2021. https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20211117_93783420

³ « De mythes voorbij », Zorgnet-Icuro, 2021. https://www.zorgnet-icuro.be/sites/default/files/Zorgnet%20Icuro%20-%20Public%20mental%20health%20-%20brochure_web-Spreads.pdf

⁴ Advies 2301, Mentaal Welzijn, Vlaamse Jeugdraad, 01.02.2023. <https://vlaamsejeugdraad.be/nl/adviezen/mentaal-welzijn>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Mémoire « Être Jeune en 2021 », Forum des Jeunes, 25.10.2021. <https://forumdesjeunes.be/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Memorandum-Etre-Jeune-en-2021.pdf>

⁷ Impact de la nature sur la distribution de la santé mentale, Sciensano, 2017-2021. <https://www.sciensano.be/fr/projets/impact-de-la-nature-sur-la-distribution-de-la-sante-mentale>

⁸ Avis officiel, « Et toi, tu sais où dormir ce soir ? », Forum des Jeunes, 09.03.2022. <https://forumdesjeunes.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Avis-sans-abrisme-2022-Forum-des-Jeunes.pdf>

⁹ Advies 2302, Wonen, Vlaamse Jeugdraad, 01.03.2023. <https://vlaamsejeugdraad.be/nl/adviezen/wonen>

¹⁰ Avis officiel, « Et toi, tu sais où dormir ce soir ? », Forum des Jeunes, 09.03.2022. <https://forumdesjeunes.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Avis-sans-abrisme-2022-Forum-des-Jeunes.pdf>

¹¹ Belgium's VNR Report, 2023.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Avis officiel, "L'éducation en question : quelle place pour l'environnement ?", Forum des Jeunes, 12.12.2022.

<https://forumdesjeunes.be/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Avis-Education-a-l-Environnement-Forum-des-Jeunes.pdf>

¹⁴ Belgium's VNR Report, 2023

¹⁵ Rapport « Donne ta voix pour le climat », Forum des Jeunes, 27 mars 2022. https://forumdesjeunes.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Donne-ta-voix-pour-le-climat_Rapport-final.pdf

¹⁶ Mémoire « Être Jeune en 2021 », Forum des Jeunes, 25.10.2021. <https://forumdesjeunes.be/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Memorandum-Etre-Jeune-en-2021.pdf>

¹⁷ Consultation, "Remettons la mobilité internationale sur les rails!", Forum des Jeunes. (Official position to be published, summer 2023) <https://forumdesjeunes.be/actualites2/remettons-la-mobilite-internationale-sur-les-rails/>

¹⁸ Les voitures de société: diagnostic et enjeux d'un régime fiscal (article), Xavier May, Thomas Ermand et Nils Hooftman, 2019. <https://journals.openedition.org/brussels/2366#tocto2n11>

¹⁹ "Sur le Front : Pourquoi le train est-il toujours plus cher ?" (broadcast), France TV, 2023. <https://www.france.tv/france-5/sur-le-front/4557199-pourquoi-le-train-est-il-toujours-plus-cher.html>