



Prospective  
research

# **Is the issue of access to water in Brussels (un)resolved?**

# Key messages

- 1** Difficulties in accessing water affect homeless people as well as many households with a home. At least 100,000 Brussels residents are affected.
- 2** Public/collective facilities are residual, inadequate and unequal (particularly in terms of gender). Several municipalities have little or no infrastructure providing public access to water for hygiene (drinking fountains, public showers, toilets), and the drinking fountains that do exist in the region are closed during six months of the year.
- 3** The small number of accessible washing/showering facilities means that all but the most expensive facilities (€2.5 per shower) are constantly full, and many people are forced to “make ends meet” to wash themselves.
- 4** Contrary to popular belief, rich and poor households today consume the same amount of water per person, and this consumption does not seem to be affected by changes in water price.
- 5** The price of water in Brussels is higher than the true cost : consumers are generally paying for the treatment of rainwater and clear parasite water for which they are not responsible.

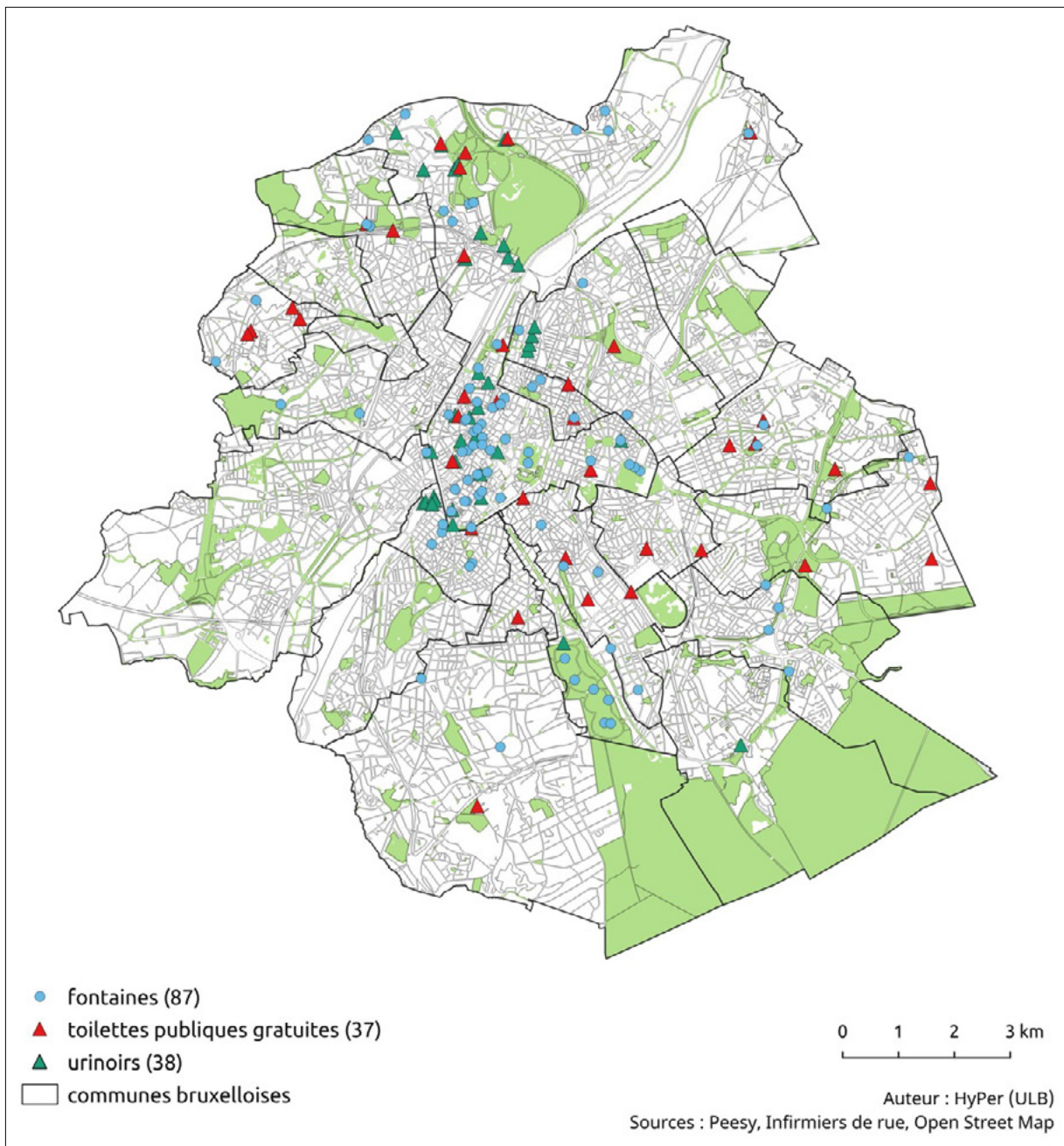
# Introduction/summary of the problem

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The aim of our project was to bring visibility to an underexposed problem in Brussels, namely water vulnerability, i.e. the difficulties experienced by people in accessing water for reasons linked to the cost of water, the characteristics of the housing (absence of toilet, shower/bathtub, absence of hot running water, cost accounting problems, leaks, etc.) or the lack of housing. Based on the available and extrapolated data, the number of people in a situation of water vulnerability has been estimated at a minimum of 100,000, i.e. around 8.2% of the Brussels population. This figure is widely underestimated and is likely to increase significantly in the coming months and years due to the current systemic crises (energy, ecology).

The Region offers few solutions for those affected. There are not enough drinking fountains, they are poorly spread out, are only available half of the year and sometimes only intended to fill a water bottle. Similarly, the supply of public toilets is inadequate, socially unequal (aimed primarily at able-bodied men) and poorly distributed over the territory (some municipalities have none at all). Lastly, the supply of free or low-cost (€1 or less) showers in Brussels is low in relation to demand, and is concentrated in the central-western part of the Region, particularly in and around the city centre.

# Introduction/summary of the problem



# Methods, approaches and results/body

Our research was based on a variety of quantitative methods (based on the limited data available, maps) and qualitative methods (field surveys with associations, prevention services, gym and swimming pool staff), as well as interviews with people who have difficulty paying their water bills (around twenty interviews).

Our findings are in line with those of other organisations (King Baudouin Foundation, the Federation of Social Services, Infirmiers de Rue, Enquête Méthos/SIA Partners, etc.), namely that there are various difficulties experienced by many households in paying their water bills. Nevertheless, our study reveals certain previously ignored aspects:

**A.** It offers a clearer picture of the determinants of household water consumption in Brussels, highlighting the unequal dimensions of progressive pricing (in force until the end of 2021) and its effects on households supplied by a collective meter (i.e. +/- 60% of households). It also establishes that the current price of water in Brussels is higher than the true cost.

**B.** Our research not only focuses on problems related to the payment of water bills, but also takes into account the various forms of difficulty in accessing water, e.g. households connected to a collective meter that do not receive a Vivaqua bill, self-rationing of consumption, lack of sanitary facilities in the home and insufficient public facilities. In the absence of public facilities (fountains, toilets, public showers), our surveys have shown that many people are forced to divert existing infrastructures (showers in sports halls, sinks/toilets in public institutions, taps in cemeteries, etc.), where access to water is both uncertain and precarious.

# Conclusions

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It is very difficult to lead a dignified life without access to water. However, the price of water has increased by 15% in 2022 at a time when many households were already struggling to pay Vivaqua's bills.

To offset this price hike, a social intervention scheme has been set up for "Beneficiaries of Increased intervention" (BIM/BVT), but this raises many questions regarding the cost of its implementation and the problems of non-use of rights it will entail.

Fortunately, a ban on cutting of end users from the water supply was finally approved for 2022.

On the other hand, access to water for homeless people continues to be a political non-issue.

# Policy recommendations

## 1. Keep water prices as low as possible

Water is a basic need recognised as a human right by the United Nations General Assembly. Given that water consumption in Brussels is low compared to other European cities, and there is no evidence that the water price has any effect on consumption, it seems logical to set the price as low as possible. However, this price is currently higher than the true cost insofar that consumers are largely paying for the treatment of rainwater and clear parasite water for which they are not responsible. The polluter pays principle is therefore not being applied, as the price of water is artificially inflated.

In addition, two factors are currently being considered that would further increase the price of water in Brussels. First, new environmental taxes (environmental and resource costs) are being studied. These taxes will have no beneficial effect on the environment (the price signal does not seem to work for water in Brussels) but will negatively impact low-income households, who will have to pay a new tax on a basic necessity. Second, Brugel would like to reduce the gap between domestic and non-domestic water prices (21.7% more expensive). The convergence of these two prices (which we believe to be unfounded) will mechanically increase household water bills.

Consequently, to guarantee the best possible access to this essential commodity, the cost of rainwater and clear parasite water treatment must be deducted from the price of water.

In addition, no new taxes should be introduced on water that would unnecessarily increase the price.

## 2. Increase the provision of public/communal facilities

Public toilets are notoriously lacking in the Brussels Region. An investment effort is needed, together with a budget for their upkeep. Partnerships could also be set up with public institutions and the hotel and catering industries to make their toilets accessible to the public.

More drinking fountains are needed, while ensuring that they are well distributed throughout the region (no districts without public water fountains), that they are open all year round and that they are designed for different types of use (not just filling a water bottle in summer).

Lastly, all existing public and community shower facilities must be maintained and the development of new services in existing structures (gyms, swimming pools, educational establishments) should be encouraged. Furthermore, it is essential to guarantee the existence of free services and cap the price charged, as €2.5 showers are underused.

The supply of public facilities (drinking fountains, toilets, public showers) in Brussels must be increased, thinking in terms of the

# Policy recommendations

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Region as a whole rather than segmented by municipality. Other European cities offer inspiring models (Paris, Nantes).

### **3. More attention for the difficulties encountered by households**

When considering water-related measures for households, it is essential to bear in mind that more than half of all households have a collective meter. For these households, support measures are often more complicated, if not impossible, to implement.

To help households (fitted with individual meters) experiencing difficulties paying their water bills, it should be possible for them to receive a monthly interim bill by post or electronically if they request one from Vivaqua (without having to go through the Doccle platform).

Lastly, we recommend the creation of a regional service capable of making a fast, free diagnosis of a home's sanitary infrastructure. Its mission would be to identify the presence of a leak in a dwelling (or in a building in the case of a collective meter), carry out any minor repairs and determine the person responsible for major repairs in rented accommodation (the tenant or the landlord).



# List of publications

**Deligne, C. et al. (2020).**

*La vulnérabilité hydrique ou la nécessité de repenser une continuité entre le logement et l'espace public.* Le Soir, 28/11/2020.

**Bacquaert, P & Marziali V. (2020).**

*L'aridité des communs : visages de la vulnérabilité hydrique.* Bruxelles en Mouvements, 304 (January-February).

**Deligne, C. (2020).**

*Abondance de pluie, rareté de l'eau.* Bruxelles en Mouvements, 304 (January-February).

**May, X. et al. (2021).**

*Pourquoi ne pas en finir avec la tarification progressive de l'eau à Bruxelles. (Why not do away with tiered water pricing in Brussels?)* Brussels Studies [Online], General Collection, no. 156, uploaded on 9 May 2021.

**May, X. et al. (2021).**

*Formes, facteurs et importance de la vulnérabilité hydrique dans une métropole européenne, Le cas de Bruxelles.* EchoGéo, 57, EchoGéo, 57, EchoGéo, 57, EchoGéo [Online], 57 | 2021, uploaded on 15 October 2021.

**May, X. et al. (submitted).**

*Le prix de l'eau à Bruxelles ne respecte pas le principe pollueur-payeur,* soumis à Brussels Studies.

**Bacquaert, P. et al. (forthcoming in 2022).**

*Vulnérabilité hydrique et compromis de coexistence à Bruxelles,* Espaces et Sociétés, 186-187.

**Bacquaert, P. (2022, gone to press).**

*Déserts et dégels des fontaines d'eau potable à Bruxelles.* Cahiers de La Fonderie, 54.

**Deligne, C. (2022, gone to press).**

*Le prix de l'eau, ça n'existe pas !* Cahiers de La Fonderie, 54.

**Deligne, C. (2022, gone to press).**

*De l'eau dans la maison ? Pas si vite !* Cahiers de La Fonderie, 54.

**Deligne, C. (2022, gone to press).**

*Les dessous de l'eau quotidienne à Bruxelles.* Cahiers de La Fonderie, 54.

**Bacquaert, P. & Richelle S. (2022).**

*Corps sales, ville sèche.*  
(Created for radio, 3x25 minutes)

# The authors & project

Chloé Deligne is a research associate of the FNRS at ULB. Based on her training as a historian and geographer, she has spent many years conducting interdisciplinary research projects on all aspects of water in Brussels. The HyPer project has brought together a geographer (Jean-Michel Decroly), an economist (Xavier May), sociologists (Pierre Lannoy & Valentina Marziali) and a historian (Pauline Bacquaert) to examine the difficulties of access to water, especially for hygiene purposes, in Brussels at the start of the 21st century. This is an underestimated yet crucial public health issue.

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Through the Prospective Research programme, the Brussels-Capital Region is hoping to fund research projects from a dual perspective: to provide a solid regional prospective vision; to build solutions to the specific challenges it will face in the years to come. The solutions proposed by the funded projects must take into account Brussels' urban complexity as well as the Region's environmental, social and economic transition objectives. The programme targets researchers in human science as much as researchers in exact or applied science.

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