



Belgian
Red Cross
Flanders



Annual report 2024

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Belgian Red Cross-Flanders: not just any NGO

The world is grappling with unprecedented challenges. 2024 was a year of extremes, marked by 108 natural disasters and a record-breaking number of floods. In Mongolia, temperatures plummeted to -46°C, while India faced relentless heat, reaching nearly 53°C — the highest ever recorded in the country. Extreme weather is no longer a distant issue. In Spain, Austria, Romania, and Poland, violent storms caused widespread destruction. Hundreds lost their lives in devastating floods, with many more suffering injuries.

The effects of climate volatility are being felt worldwide, underscoring the urgent need for resilience and proactive solutions. But natural disasters are not the only crises unfolding — ongoing armed conflicts in Russia and Ukraine, Israel and the Occupied Territories, and Syria continue to fuel humanitarian emergencies across entire regions.

These crises are deeply intertwined with broader global challenges, including the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic instability, growing societal polarization, and increasing migration pressures. And as always, the most vulnerable suffer the most. In Sudan, devastating floods forced already displaced refugees to flee once again. On Mayotte, a cyclone struck with force, first sweeping away the fragile self-built homes in impoverished neighborhoods.

It is for these individuals — those facing the harshest realities — that the Red Cross stands ready to act, delivering aid and support to those in urgent need.

Despite the many challenges, 2024 was a year of remarkable achievements for Belgian Red Cross-Flanders. Strategic changes allowed us to strengthen cooperation and improve efficiency, leading to key advancements in our work.

In 2024, Belgian Red Cross-Flanders once again made a remarkable contribution to society. A total of 21.557 new donors joined our network, bringing the overall number of donations to 407.390. One of the year's most memorable milestones came during Plasma Awareness Week, when we reached an all-time high — over 1.000 plasma donations in a single day.

This unprecedented level of participation marked the highest number of plasma donations recorded in Flanders since we began tracking data in 1972, even surpassing the previous peak set during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Alongside this achievement, we also registered 1.196 new stem cell donor candidates — each with the potential to support life-saving transplants in the future.



Our services to hospitals also hit a new peak, with over 99% of blood product orders delivered on time, ensuring timely patient care and preventing delays in life-saving treatments.

In 2024, we made a meaningful impact through our efforts in training and humanitarian support. A total of 47.960 individuals enrolled in our first aid courses, gaining essential skills that can save lives. At the same time, we provided shelter to 18.903 people facing difficult circumstances — including 2.165 temporarily displaced Ukrainians — offering them a safe place to stay for at least one night through Belgian Red Cross-Flanders.

Investing in scientific research fuels our progress. In 2024, the Transfusion Research Centre (TRC) filed several patents and secured its largest research grant ever — nearly 1,5 million euros — confirming that our focus on science as the driving force behind our growth remains the right strategy.

A historic milestone: On April 24, 2024, the Flemish Parliament granted Red Cross-Flanders legal personality, officially recognizing us as a 'Helper of the Flemish Government.' This unique status, distinct from NGOs and government agencies, will further strengthen our collaboration with public institutions, modernizing a law dating back to 1891 and paving the way for more impactful partnerships.

Looking ahead, our commitment remains strong: delivering better assistance, innovative solutions, and shaping a resilient future. With these successes, 2024 was a milestone year, and we are excited for what's next!

Enjoy reading!



Philippe Vandekerckhove
Chief Executive Officer,
CEO Belgian Red Cross-Flanders

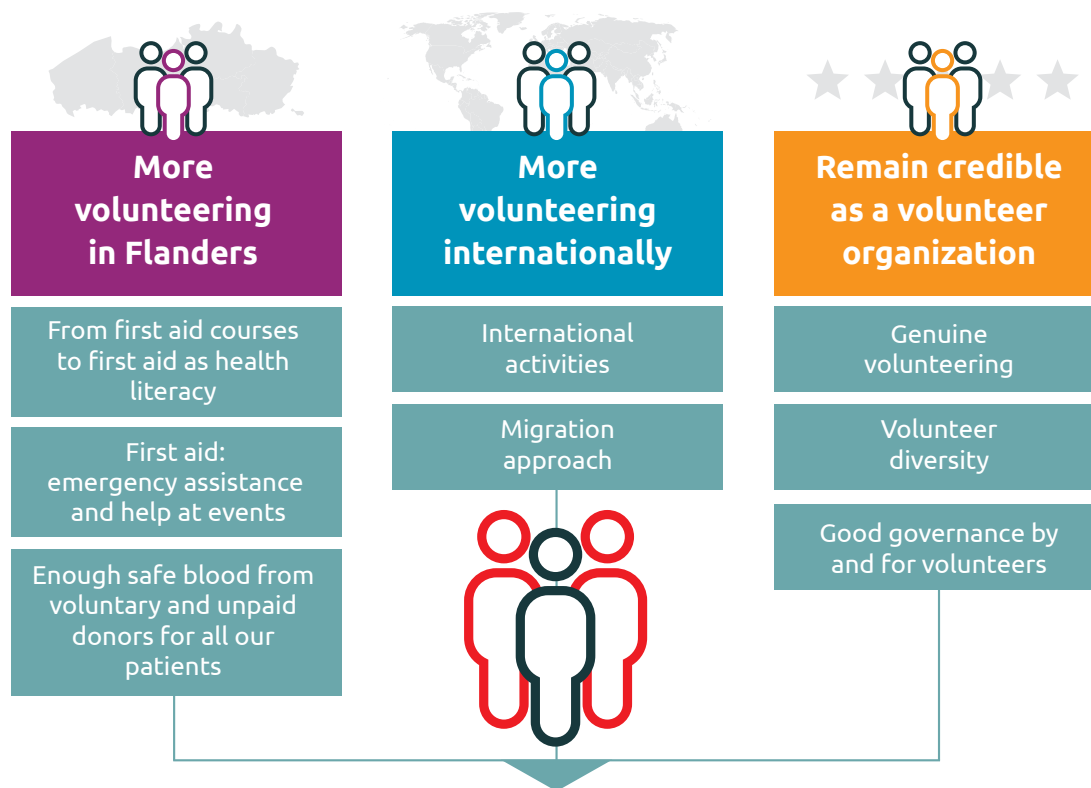


Hans Verstraete
Community President,
Belgian Red Cross-Flanders

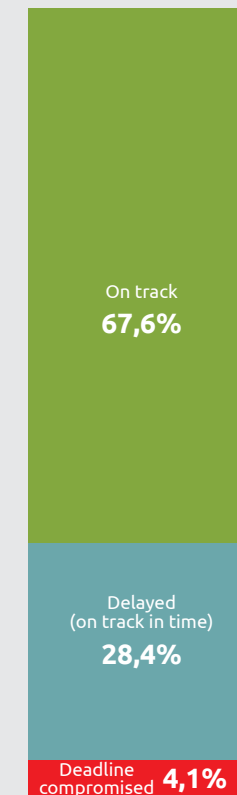
Strategy 2025: Keep connecting. Everyone can help someone.

In 2010, it was efficiency (doing things right). In 2015, effectiveness (doing the right things). And through the years 2015 to 2020, we are firmly committed to innovation. Where do we put our focus? Today, we live in a world where inequality between people is growing. In which more and more disasters affect the weakest. In which social cohesion takes a hit. As Belgian Red Cross-Flanders, we want to provide an answer to this in our new strategy. Stand ready: no fewer than 13.000 volunteers. And 2.000 employees. Together they form the engine of our aid organization. Reliable, flexible and robust. This is our plan for 2025.

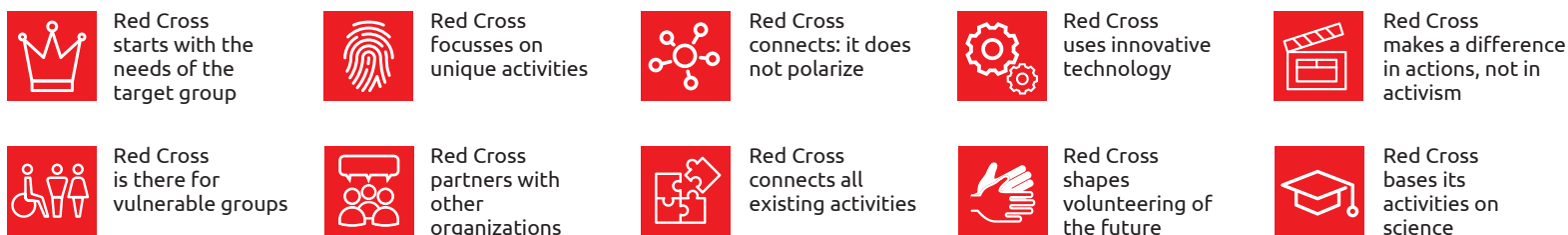
More volunteering in society 3 focus areas



Status projects Strategy 2025: Q4 2024



(added) value of the activities measured against 10 pillars



Reflecting on a remarkable 2024

In 2024, Belgian Red Cross-Flanders once again demonstrated its unwavering commitment to serving society. Through a wide range of initiatives, campaigns, and projects, we made a tangible difference in the lives of thousands — both within our borders and beyond. The figures below offer a powerful glimpse into the scale and impact of our efforts over the past year.

Blood activities

21.557

new donors

407.390

donations



1.196

new stem
cell donor candidates

Record

1.000+

plasma donations in a single day
during Plasma Awareness Week



Research

9

articles from the Centre
for Evidence-Based
Practice (CEBaP) were
published in scientific
journals



3.400+

blood products issued by the biobank
for scientific research and education,
of which

more than 1.000

were for scientific research within the
Transfusion Research Centre (TReC)



Reflecting on a remarkable 2024

Help in Flanders

182

disaster repatriations



18.903

applicants (including 2.165 Ukrainian temporary displaced persons) who received at least one night's shelter from Belgian Red Cross-Flanders

47.960

registrations for first aid training courses



64.000

patient contacts at events



Library service for hospitals and care institutions (Zorgbib)

446

lending points

34 new agreements concluded with care facilities for setting up a lending point

62.000

lenders reached

Reflecting on a remarkable 2024

Global assistance

20 countries received support from our department International Cooperation



€ 1.214.000

was raised through public funding for emergency aid

1,5 tons

of emergency aid supplies (including face masks, gloves, and specialized equipment for blood services) were donated to the Lebanese Red Cross



500+

people trained in international humanitarian law

Highlights of 2024

Record

The year 2024 was marked by important milestones and new initiatives that broadened both the impact and reach of Belgian Red Cross-Flanders. One standout achievement came during Plasma Awareness Week, when we recorded over **1.000** plasma donations in a single day — a new record. The annual 'Bloedserieus' blood drives also saw notable growth, with **11.232** students participating, reflecting a **13% increase** compared to 2023.

Reception centers

By the end of the year, Belgian Red Cross-Flanders operated **23 reception centers**. New developments included the opening of a center in Ypres and the launch of an autonomous reception initiative for families in Zutendaal, managed by the Lanaken reception center. Meanwhile, the center in Sijsele and the emergency village in Mechelen were closed.

Interventions

On the intervention front, 2024 saw a productive collaboration with International Cooperation to deliver relief supplies to Lebanon. We also opened a new ambulance base in Lier, in the province of Antwerp, on February 1. This site will serve as a model for future expansion aimed at strengthening disaster response capabilities. Recognizing the growing focus on mental health, we integrated Social Intervention Service (SIS) into Preventive Aid Actions, adding a crucial layer of psychosocial support to our emergency efforts.

Youth Housing

In youth housing, the year began with **five Belgian Red Cross-Flanders centers** — Alseberg, Heusden-Zolder, Leopoldsborg, Sint-Niklaas, and Westakkers — coordinating shelter as part of Fedasil's Winter Plan. This phase concluded in the spring, but by year's end, youth accommodation had resumed at four locations, overseen by reception centers in Heusden-Zolder, Menen, Leopoldsborg, and Houthalen-Helchteren. Additional temporary capacity was created through external emergency centers in Brussels, under the coordination of the Ariane reception center in Sint-Lambrechts-Woluwe. These efforts reflected our ongoing adaptability in response to shifting needs.

Restoring Family Links

Finally, Belgian Red Cross-Flanders launched two innovative pilot projects with the ICRC under the Restoring Family Links program, each focused on digital transformation. The first project aimed to simplify and streamline administrative processes, while the second introduced a new digital matching system, connecting internal databases — with plans to include external partners — to enhance the speed, accuracy, and scope of searches for missing persons.





Belgian Red Cross-Flanders shines at the Gentse Feesten

At the 2024 Gentse Feesten, the dedication of Belgian Red Cross-Flanders did not go unnoticed.

Every summer, our incredible volunteers ensure that festival-goers can enjoy the celebrations safely and worry-free. With four strategically placed first-aid posts and a team of around 60 committed volunteers, we provided round-the-clock assistance, helping hundreds of attendees throughout the event.

In 2024, for the first time, a team from Social Intervention Service (SIS) was present at our first-aid stations. These volunteers offered psychosocial support to victims, their families, and even festival staff — adding a valuable new dimension to our assistance efforts. Over the past year, SIS volunteers have worked hard to strengthen and structure this service, proving its importance in both preventive and crisis response situations.

From treating wounds to offering a listening ear after traumatic events, Belgian Red

Cross-Flanders is an organization that supports everyone in need.

A heartfelt thank you to all our volunteers for their dedication and hard work — your commitment to medical care and psychosocial support truly makes a difference. Together, we'll keep improving, growing, and ensuring the best possible assistance. ■

Publication date: July 2024





Bloedserieus sets a record in 2024: more locations, more donations!

What started as a small student-led initiative in 1990 has grown into a major annual event. Each academic year, Belgian Red Cross-Flanders encourages thousands of students to donate blood across student cities, always with the strong support of local student associations at universities and colleges. 2024 was a record-breaking year for Bloedserieus, both in terms of locations and total donations!

Bloedserieus 2024: 13% increase in donations

Over the year, with spring and autumn campaigns, an impressive 65 collection events took place. In total, 11.232 students rolled up their sleeves to donate — 13% more than in 2023!

This success is critical for maintaining blood supplies, especially for negative blood types, which are currently at low levels.

“With Bloedserieus, we want to introduce students to blood donation in a familiar environment,” says Abdelkebir El Makhoulfi, project manager for the campaign. “We hope to inspire them to continue donating, not just blood, but also plasma, at our donor centers.”

Thanks to student engagement and community support, 2024 was an exceptional year for Bloedserieus — a testament to the growing impact of young donors! ■

Publication date: December 2024





2024: a record year for plasma donations in Flanders



Belgian Red Cross-Flanders successfully met its plasma collection targets in 2024, but self-sufficiency remains a long-term goal

While Flanders is fully self-sufficient in blood, ensuring supply for all blood groups, stocks of rarer blood types can sometimes run low. Fortunately, no shortages occurred in 2024, thanks to the dedication of thousands of volunteers, professional support, and a loyal donor base.

Plasma donations are rising, but Flanders still relies on imports

The demand for plasma — the vital yellow liquid in blood containing proteins, hormones, vitamins, and essential nutrients — has been growing for years and will continue to rise. Plasma is not as widely recognized as blood donation, and unlike blood, Flanders is not yet self-sufficient, requiring imports from abroad to meet demand.

Plasma saves lives. It plays a critical role in treating patients with severe burns, coagulation disorders, and certain (auto) immune diseases. Additionally, plasma-

based medications are essential for many life-saving treatments.

2024 plasma donations reach new heights

"In 2024, Belgian Red Cross-Flanders launched several campaigns, which clearly had a strong impact," says Philippe Vandekerckhove, CEO of Belgian Red Cross-Flanders. 160.812 liters of plasma were collected — up from 153.154 liters in 2023. The number of plasma donors increased by 13,2%.

While this growth is promising, plasma donation must continue to expand to meet a rising demand. To reach its 2025 targets, Flanders and Brussels will need a significant increase in new donors.

Belgium aims to reduce its dependence on foreign plasma to ensure the affordability and stability of plasma-based medicines. "We must increase plasma collection by 5% in 2025," Vandekerckhove adds. "That's why Belgian Red Cross-Flanders is continuously looking for new donors." ■

Publicatiedatum: januari 2025





180 companies join 'Onderneming met een Groot Hart' in 2024

Businesses step up for life-saving plasma donations

The 'Onderneming met een Groot Hart' campaign, launched in May 2024 by Belgian Red Cross-Flanders in collaboration with VOKA, continues to gain momentum. The initiative aims to boost plasma reserves needed for life-saving treatments and medications. An impressive 180 companies have signed up, showcasing the business community's collective commitment to supporting healthcare in Flanders.

Plasma: an essential resource for life-saving care

Each year, the demand for plasma increases, highlighting its vital role in treating patients with immune disorders, severe burns, and other critical conditions. "Plasma is literally vital," explains Professor Daan Dierickx, hematologist at UZ Leuven. "Its potential for life-saving treatments is enormous, but we need enough donors to meet the demand."

Belgian Red Cross-Flanders aims to reduce dependence on foreign plasma imports and eventually become 100% self-sufficient, just as it is with blood.

Corporate engagement drives impact

"We're thrilled that 180 companies have joined 'Company with a Big Heart' — a testament to the incredible power of collaboration within the business world," says Fritz Schiltz, Director of Policy Support & Projects at Belgian Red Cross-Flanders.

Leading companies like Sanofi have actively participated in the initiative. "As a company committed to making an impact, we encourage our employees to support social projects like this," says Evi Dekegel, communications manager at Sanofi. "This is our sixth consecutive year motivating employees to donate plasma at various Red Cross donor centers — during working hours," she adds.

The call to action continues

Through 'Company with a Big Heart,' VOKA and Belgian Red Cross-Flanders invite businesses to inspire employees to donate plasma — whether individually, or as a team, during lunch breaks, or even as a team-building activity. Companies can easily participate in the project by registering on the Belgian Red Cross-Flanders website. After registration, the company receives a unique link and a promotional poster with a QR code to facilitate participation for employees.

Recognizing corporate commitment

Every participating company receives the 'Onderneming met een Groot Hart' label, showcasing its dedication to social responsibility. Daily tracking ensures visibility, with companies ranked by the percentage of employees who donate. In May 2025, top-performing companies per donor center will be awarded 'Onderneming met een Grootste Hart'. ■

Publication date: October 2024





Belgian Red Cross-Flanders delivers global relief efforts

Belgian Red Cross-Flanders continues to play a vital role in providing emergency aid worldwide in response to natural disasters and severe weather events. With a commitment to swift and effective humanitarian assistance, the organization supports communities in crisis.

Emergency relief

Extreme rainfall in Burundi

In 2024, Burundi experienced devastating floods and landslides caused by extreme rainfall, affecting 217.000 people and displacing 100.000 residents. The disaster led to the outbreak of cholera, further worsening conditions for those impacted. The Burundi Red Cross reported the destruction of 19.250 homes, 209 classrooms, and 40.000 hectares of farmland.

As a structural partner, Belgian Red Cross-Flanders, together with the federal government, mobilized a total of € 300.000 (€152.000 from the government and €150.000 from its own Emergency Relief Fund). These funds helped provide food, clean drinking water, and emergency shelter. A team of 280 Red Cross volunteers worked tirelessly to coordinate evacuations, deliver first aid, distribute sanitation kits, and inform communities about essential health precautions. ■



€ 300.000
280 volunteers
19.250 homes destroyed

€ 150.000
8,2 million people on the run



One year of conflict in Sudan

Since 2023, the conflict in Sudan has caused widespread devastation, displacing 8,2 million people — 6,5 million internally and 1,8 million seeking refuge in neighboring countries such as Chad, Egypt, South Sudan, and Ethiopia. Sudan was already facing economic instability, climate change, and persistent drought, further amplifying the humanitarian crisis. Today, 24,8 million people are in urgent need of assistance. To support relief efforts, Belgian Red Cross-Flanders has allocated € 150.000 from its Emergency Relief Fund to aid the Sudanese Red Crescent. This funding is being used to provide first aid and medical care, food and essential medicines, emergency shelter and basic necessities. Beyond direct aid, Belgian Red Cross-Flanders has urged adherence to international humanitarian law, ensuring that vulnerable populations receive protection and assistance. Given that the crisis remains largely underreported, the organization continues to call for greater awareness and global attention to this unfolding humanitarian disaster. ■



Publication date: April 2024

More volunteering internationally

International activities



Severe weather in Spain

The powerful DANA storm that swept across the east and south of the Iberian Peninsula caused severe destruction, with the central part of the Valencia region and the eastern area of Castilla-La Mancha among the worst affected. In total, 78 municipalities suffered significant damage, with Valencia bearing the brunt of the storm's impact. During the first few days, as infrastructure collapsed, approximately 40.000 people were left without electricity, while more than 3.000 had to seek refuge in emergency shelters. Belgian Red Cross-Flanders quickly mobilized support, raising € 364.000 to aid relief efforts. Thanks to donations from Flanders and other regions, the Spanish Red Cross was able to provide emergency shelter for 4.293 people, distribute more than 150.000 meals, and supply 40.000 hygiene kits to the communities most in need. In addition to these vital resources, nearly 9.000 emergency interventions were carried out by response teams, ensuring medical care, evacuations, and support for those impacted by the disaster. ■



€ 364.000



150.000 meals



40.000 hygiene kits



€ 200.000



Storm Boris in Central and Eastern Europe

In September 2024, Storm Boris brought devastating flooding to Central and Eastern Europe, severely impacting communities in Romania, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Poland. To support those affected, Belgian Red Cross-Flanders allocated € 200.000 from its Emergency Relief Fund, distributing € 50.000 to each of the four countries. In response to the crisis, national Red Cross associations in these regions launched appeals for additional support to strengthen relief efforts. The funding was used to provide emergency shelter and psychosocial assistance to victims, ensuring they had a safe space to recover. It also facilitated the distribution of essential supplies, including food, blankets, beds, and hygiene materials, addressing the immediate needs of those displaced by the floods. Additionally, cash assistance was provided to families who had lost their homes and belongings, helping them navigate the difficult road to recovery. ■



Publication date: April 2024

More volunteering internationally

International activities



Number of people in need in the Middle East at least doubled

The ongoing escalation in Lebanon has significantly increased the number of people in urgent need across the Middle East, with the affected population at least doubling. Millions of individuals in Gaza, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and the West Bank rely on humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross for essential aid, including food, water, shelter, and medical care.

In response to the growing crisis, Belgian Red Cross-Flanders, with the generous support of citizens, donated €200.000 to the International Red Cross (ICRC) in 2024 to assist victims and displaced persons in the conflict zone. Beyond financial contributions, Belgian Red Cross-Flanders also provided logistical support to the Lebanese Red Cross. With the help of a federally organized flight, crucial relief supplies were transported to Lebanon, ensuring aid reached those most in need. These supplies included 100.000 face masks, 40.000 gloves, 300 body bags, and a specialized refrigerator for blood storage, a vital addition to the 13 blood transfusion centers operated by the Lebanese Red Cross. ■



 € 200.000

 100.000 face masks

 40.000 gloves





CEBaP

Webinar on evidence-based guideline development for Libyan medical students

On April 25, 2024, Emmy De Buck, Director of the Centre for Evidence-Based Practice (CEBaP), delivered an engaging and interactive lecture on guideline development to a group of aspiring medical scientists from Benghazi University in Libya. The webinar was part of a series organized by the International Journal of First Aid Education, aimed at fostering both primary and secondary research in the field of first aid and first aid training. During the session, Emmy provided a comprehensive overview of how evidence-based guidelines are developed, highlighting the significance of adapting them to specific geographical and cultural contexts. She also guided students in locating existing systematic reviews and established guidelines, helping them understand the criteria for evaluating their quality.

The medical students were highly engaged, actively discussing examples of systematic reviews and debating the strengths and weaknesses of guidelines of varying quality. Many expressed curiosity about their potential role in secondary research and sought insights into how they could contribute. In the final portion of the webinar, Emmy introduced the activities of both CEBaP and [Cochrane First Aid](#), offering students an opportunity to explore further resources and research initiatives. ■

Publication date: May 2024.





Looking back: the Red Cross reception center in Sijsele

After four years of providing refuge, the Red Cross reception center in Sijsele closed its doors in 2024. The 464 residents were safely relocated to other centers across Flanders, while some found permanent housing, many choosing to stay near Sijsele. Red Cross staff embraced new professional opportunities at nearby reception centers, continuing their mission of humanitarian support. Meanwhile, volunteers — who played a vital role in the center — are now engaged in new efforts to assist those in need elsewhere in society.

Together with a dedicated Red Cross volunteer, we reflect on a reception center that felt like home, not only for its residents but for everyone who contributed to its work and warmth.

Marleen Pollet has been a Red Cross volunteer since 2015. When she heard on the radio that a Red Cross reception center was opening in Sijsele, she immediately signed up. She became a pillar of support at the center, staying involved until its first closure in 2016. However, when the center reopened in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, Marleen returned, ready to help once again.

As a resident of Sijsele and a passionate volunteer, Marleen worked alongside staff to support those in need. Her contributions ranged from organizing activities for

children, assisting with homework, helping in the center's shop, and guiding residents in their search for housing — even accompanying them to the local fruit and vegetable market.

Having seen many residents come and go, the reception center became her second home. The local police officer even joked that she might as well change her official residence to the center, given how much time she spent there.

Marleen found deep enrichment in working with people from different cultures and admired the incredible resilience of the residents. The respect and gratitude she received gave her positive energy, and she misses the diversity the center brought to Sijsele. She encourages everyone to be open, engage in conversation, and embrace



the power of volunteering — a truly rewarding and eye-opening experience. Now, Marleen is considering continuing her volunteer work at another Red Cross reception center, ensuring her dedication to helping those in need remains as strong as ever.

Under the enthusiastic leadership of center manager Sophie Roobrouck, the Red Cross reception center in Sijsele has provided temporary shelter to 1.541 applicants for international protection over the past

four years. The majority were single men, but the center also welcomed families, unaccompanied minors, and single women. Throughout this time, around twenty Red Cross volunteers — including Marleen — offered their ongoing support. ■

Publication date: August 2024



Emergency Reception Center Ariane's 2nd anniversary: a beacon of hope and dedication

The Emergency Reception Center (ERC) Ariane in Sint-Lambrechts-Woluwe marked its second anniversary in 2024, celebrating two years of dedicated service to asylum seekers. Established through a partnership between the Brussels-Capital Region, Fedasil, and the Belgian Red Cross-Flanders, Reception Service for Asylum Seekers (ERC) Ariane has provided essential shelter and support to thousands of displaced individuals.

Initially designed to accommodate Ukrainians fleeing the war, the center was set up with seven floors and four wings, with a planned maximum capacity of 60 residents per floor per wing. Although the number of Ukrainian residents remained limited to 250, the remaining space was opened to applicants for international protection from various parts of the world. In addition, the center provided short-term lodging for 95 individuals arriving in Brussels before being assigned to reception centers across Belgium.

ERC Ariane offers high-quality temporary accommodation, focusing on residents' arrival, stay, and eventual departure.

The dedicated team not only assists with administrative procedures but also supports individual needs and organizes daily activities. Over two years, the center has become a beacon of refuge for around 35.000 people, offering them stability during a challenging transition. In February 2024, the shelter housed residents from 55 different nationalities, reflecting its role as a truly international haven.

Operating in English, ERC Ariane employs more than 100 staff members representing 45 nationalities, with a third of the workforce coming from countries experiencing conflict. This diversity fosters inclusion, cooperation, and resilience within the team, enriching the center's environment. Throughout their stay, approximately 800 residents have taken Dutch lessons, and 30 babies have been born in the shelter, making it their first home. Each month, Umami's catering team prepares an average of 50.000 meals, while the center distributes around 2.000 linen packages to meet essential needs.

Looking ahead, ERC Ariane remains committed to its mission of providing refuge, dignity, and support to those



in need. Backed by Belgian Red Cross-Flanders Reception Center for Asylum Seekers headquarters, its staff continues to uphold the values of compassion, solidarity, and resilience that define the center. The unwavering dedication of everyone involved has made ERC Ariane a vital pillar

of humanitarian aid, and all members of the community deserve heartfelt appreciation for their commitment to improving lives. ■

Publication date: June 2024



A giant greeting card at the Reception Center Linkeroever

The end-of-year celebrations are a time of reflection, connection, and hope for the future. At the Belgian Red Cross-Flanders reception centers, this period is filled with warmth and festivity, where residents come together to cook, share meals, and celebrate.

Preparing traditional dishes from their home countries brings comfort and familiarity, while sharing these flavors with others fosters a deep sense of community. This rich culinary diversity became the inspiration for a special creative project at the Reception Center Linkeroever.

Residents, neighbors, volunteers, and staff collaborated with Antwerp illustrator Juliane Noll to transform the large wall of the reception center's restaurant into a vibrant dining scene. During a workshop, participants were invited to reflect on the kitchen and dinner table essentials they could not do without. Their ideas, guided by Juliane, were brought to life on the wall, creating a stunning mural that captures the heart of shared meals and togetherness.

The finished piece is more than just a beautiful work of art; it stands as a testament to cultural

diversity, storytelling, and human connection. The scene of people cooking, tasting, and enjoying one another's company reflects the warmth and unity that thrive within the center. This mural is, in essence, a giant greeting card — an expression of hope for a peaceful and joyful world. ■

Publication date: January 2024.





Assisted return of Belgians from Lebanon: Elke's experience

October was a busy and demanding month for the Intervention Service, as volunteers from the Relief Service, Logistics Unit, and Social Intervention Service (SIS) worked tirelessly to assist 148 Belgians returning home from Lebanon. Their assisted return was carried out over three nights, ensuring their safe journey back.

Elke, a volunteer with Social Intervention Service (SIS), was present at the third return operation on October 10, 2024, and recounts her experience: "My name is Elke, and I've been a volunteer with the Social Intervention Service (SIS) in Antwerp for about five years. Before joining SIS, I was active in emergency services in Olen, where I provided preventive assistance. My deep interest in psychosocial support led me to transition to SIS — a decision that I remain grateful for.

Recently, I was asked to help with the return of Belgians from Lebanon. We received an emergency call just 24 hours in advance, asking who was available. This was my first time participating in such an

operation, and I was eager to help. We departed from the Kempen region in the evening, heading to the military hospital in Brussels, where we received a warm welcome and a detailed briefing from military personnel about the night ahead. My role was to greet, support, and accompany the returnees, ensuring they felt safe and, if needed, reuniting them with their families. One elderly man, visually impaired and in urgent need of medical care, required special assistance. He was transported separately by ambulance, and I was assigned to stay with him, guide him through the medical process, and make sure doctors had the correct medical details.

Communicating was uncertain at first, but fortunately, he spoke English, having lived in the United States for many years. We spoke in a mix of English and French, and I could only imagine the fear of being ill, nearly blind, and forced to leave home so suddenly. My goal was to reassure him throughout the night — helping him understand every step of the process while ensuring his medical needs were met.

Later that night, once medical care was completed, my SIS colleagues arranged his transport home, checking that he had everything he needed for the coming days. When I returned to the team, most of the other returnees had already been assisted. We held a joint debriefing before heading home.

The van ride back was quiet, with soft music playing and some of us had drifted to sleep. I lay in bed that night with mixed feelings — grateful that we could help so many people, yet concerned for the future of those in Lebanon and other conflict zones.

This experience strengthened my belief that even the smallest act of kindness can make a difference. A few days later, a SIS staff member reached out for a follow-up conversation. Though I had nothing specific to report, I appreciated the support and care provided to volunteers."

A heartfelt thank you to all the volunteers who contributed to this operation! Your dedication, compassion, and hard work truly change lives.



Want to learn more about relief efforts in Lebanon? Read about the emergency supplies delivered to the Lebanese Red Cross [here](#). ■

Publication date: October 2024



Strengthening volunteering: a priority for future governments

“More volunteering in society must be a priority for future governments,” emphasized Philippe Vandekerckhove, CEO of Belgian Red Cross-Flanders, in an opinion piece published in Trends on July 31, 2024. The article underscores the critical role of volunteering in building a resilient and engaged society.

Governments must take an active role in encouraging and supporting voluntary engagement through policies that facilitate participation. This call to action aligns with our organizational values and commitment to social engagement.

Belgium ranks high in global volunteering, yet there is room for growth. Volunteers are often seen as a cost, but their contributions are invaluable — enhancing well-being, social cohesion, and public services. Research even shows that countries with strong volunteer networks experience less polarization and are more resilient to crises, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Volunteers make a difference every day — whether providing first aid training to 50.000 people or donating blood and plasma, helping nearly 100.000 patients annually. Their dedication is both cost-effective and socially impactful.

To strengthen volunteering, Vandekerckhove outlines three key priorities:

1. Protect genuine volunteering – Prevent commercialization that could undermine the social value of volunteer work.
2. Create a central volunteer platform – Enable quick connections between people in need and volunteers, especially during crises.
3. Reduce administrative burdens – Make it easier for organizations to recruit and retain volunteers.

Volunteers are the backbone of a thriving society. Belgian Red Cross-Flanders urges future governments to see volunteering not as an expense, but as an investment in social resilience and solidarity. Full article available [here](#). ■

Publication Date August 2024





CEO of Belgian Red Cross-Flanders receives the Order of the Flemish Community

On July 11, 2024, during the annual Flemish holiday, the Minister-President of Flanders presented the prestigious Flemish Community Awards. These awards, granted after a thorough evaluation of each candidate's achievements, recognize individuals who have made exceptional contributions to society.

Among this year's distinguished recipients was Philippe Vandekerckhove, who has served as Chief Executive Officer of Belgian Red Cross-Flanders for over two decades. His dedication and leadership have played a crucial role in shaping the organization's humanitarian mission. The Minister-President emphasized the significance of the laureates' contributions, highlighting their impact on the development and reputation of Flanders.

Expressing his gratitude, Vandekerckhove accepted the award on behalf of the entire Belgian Red Cross-Flanders community, acknowledging the tireless efforts of 2.000 staff members, 13.000 volunteers, over 34.000 citizen volunteers, and 185.000 blood and plasma donors. He reflected on the organization's wide-ranging activities,

which include providing life-saving blood and plasma donations, offering shelter for asylum seekers, delivering first aid at public events, responding swiftly to disasters and crises, and supporting various social initiatives such as the library service for hospitals and care institutions (Zorgbib). This distinguished honor recognizes the profound impact of his work and the collective dedication of those who contribute to the humanitarian mission of Belgian Red Cross-Flanders. ■

Publication date: July 2024.



Hans Verstraete appointed as new community president of Belgian Red Cross-Flanders

Hans Verstraete, former CEO of KBC Insurance and a veteran of the insurance sector, has been appointed Community President of Belgian Red Cross-Flanders. His official introduction took place during the States General, a gathering of all department chairs and board members of the organization. Also in attendance was Minister Caroline Gennez, who expressed her enthusiasm about working alongside Verstraete in his new role.



With 12.500 volunteers, Belgian Red Cross-Flanders is the largest volunteer organization in the region.

Verstraete's transition from the corporate world to the humanitarian sector is striking. Following a career spanning more than 35 years — with leadership roles at Nateus, Ethias, and KBC — he chose in 2021 to devote his time to Belgian Red Cross-Flanders as a volunteer. He began as vice-chairman and now steps into the role of community president.

"The best insurance for Flanders is a strong Red Cross," Verstraete remarked. He praised the organization's drive and professionalism and expressed his ambition to apply his expertise in

strategy and management to help future-proof Belgian Red Cross-Flanders. He emphasized a shared commitment with volunteers and staff to strengthen the organization's ability to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

CEO Philippe Vandekerckhove also welcomed the new appointment, noting that a solid organizational foundation is essential in times of crisis and for providing medical aid. "With Verstraete at the helm," he said, "Belgian Red Cross-Flanders is well-positioned to continue expanding its social mission." ■

Publicatiedatum december 2024



2024 plaster campaign sets new fundraising record for Belgian Red Cross-Flanders

Following a bold shift in strategy in 2023, Belgian Red Cross-Flanders swapped its iconic sticker sales for plasters — and the change proved to be a resounding success. After more than sixty years of selling stickers, thousands of volunteers embraced the new approach with energy and optimism, resulting in nearly 400.000 plasters sold and close to € 4 million raised.

Building on that momentum, the 2024 campaign exceeded all expectations, thanks in part to a new ambassador: beloved singer Camille Dhont. Camille, who appeared on the packaging in her popular cartoon persona, lent both star power and heartfelt support to the initiative. “I’m deeply honored to be the ambassador of the Belgian Red Cross-Flanders Plaster Campaign,” she shared at the launch. “Belgian Red Cross-Flanders is an extraordinary organization working tirelessly to help others. Through this campaign, we can all make a difference and support the efforts of our local Red Cross

branches. I encourage everyone to buy a plaster and stand with their community.”

Running from April 18 to May 2, 2024, the campaign saw enthusiastic participation across Flanders. Volunteers from the 217 local branches took to busy intersections, parking lots, shopping centers, and department stores. Plasters were also available via selected retailers and online through the Belgian Red Cross-Flanders website. Just like the year before, the design featured an oversized plaster from which smaller strips could be cut, now with resealable zip-lock packaging for added convenience. Each set cost € 10, with every euro going directly to local branches for crucial investments — ranging from first aid training materials and ambulances to emergency post supplies and community-focused programs.

The results speak for themselves: over 405.000 plasters sold and more than € 4 million raised — an all-time



high. The campaign’s success was powered by the tireless dedication of volunteers who hit the streets in more than 200 towns and cities, often supported by their families, friends, and community members. ■

Publication date: May 2024





Belgian Red Cross-Flanders gains legal personality

The Flemish Government has officially granted legal personality to Belgian Red Cross-Flanders, marking a significant step forward in its longstanding collaboration with the humanitarian organization. This milestone, enacted through a decree unanimously approved by the Flemish Parliament on April 24, 2024, reinforces Belgian Red Cross-Flanders' unique role as a 'Helper of the Flemish Government'.

Throughout the world, the Red Cross holds a special status — not as an NGO nor a government body, but as a neutral humanitarian partner working alongside public authorities in times of crisis. While Belgian Red Cross-Flanders has operated with its own administrative structure under the umbrella of the Belgian Red Cross, the absence of formal legal personality had long posed challenges, particularly in terms of decision-making and accountability.

With this new legal framework, the Flemish Government lays the groundwork for a closer, more structured cooperation with Belgian Red Cross-Flanders in addressing the growing threat of natural disasters, emergencies, and conflict-related humanitarian needs. Minister-President

Jan Jambon called the decision “an important breakthrough,” explaining that it modernizes the organization’s legal framework and simplifies its operations. “This will strengthen the link between our government and Belgian Red Cross-Flanders and help ensure its long-term effectiveness,” he said.

The decree also brings practical advantages: it unifies the various non-profit entities previously required for eligibility under funding rules, and streamlines key activities like first aid training, youth programs, and scientific research within the competencies of the Flemish region.

CEO Philippe Vandekerckhove welcomed the recognition, noting that the decree allows Belgian Red Cross-Flanders to execute its mission more efficiently and expand its reach. “This is a historic milestone,” he said. “It not only simplifies our administrative structure, but also reaffirms our enduring commitment to support people in need — whether in peacetime or conflict.”

In addition, the decree modernizes the legal basis of Belgian Red Cross-Flanders — the previous one dates from 1891 —

and simplifies administration by bringing together various non-profit organizations, which had to be established due to subsidy requirements, under one legal entity. This offers greater efficiency and cohesion in the performance of important tasks such as training, youth work and scientific research, all within the Flemish regional competences. Flemish Minister of Welfare, Public Health, and Family Hilde Crevits echoed these sentiments, describing Belgian Red Cross-Flanders as a “socially essential” organization. “With this decree, we’re giving Belgian Red Cross-Flanders the formal recognition and operational power it needs to continue saving lives,” she said. “It’s not just symbolic — it empowers the organization to carry out its mission even more effectively.” ■

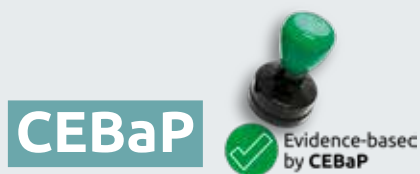
Publication date: May 2024





Belgian Red Cross-Flanders publishes 15 scientific articles in 2024

In 2024, researchers from our Centre for Evidence-Based Practice (CEBaP), Centre for Research on the Third Sector (CeRTS), and Transfusion Research Centre (TRC) published a total of 15 articles in respected scientific journals. These publications reflect our ongoing commitment to advancing knowledge in evidence-based care, blood transfusion science, and the role of the nonprofit sector. Below, you'll find a curated selection of highlights, with links to the full articles for further reading.



Hydrate to donate: how simple drinks can help prevent fainting after blood donation

Some blood donors experience lightheadedness or even fainting after donating — an unpleasant side effect that can discourage future donations. Fortunately, [studies](#) show that staying well-hydrated before donating can significantly reduce this risk. Drinking 250 to 500 ml of water beforehand has been shown to help stabilize your circulation and reduce post-donation dizziness. Isotonic drinks can also be effective, particularly after leaving the donation center, as they help restore electrolyte balance. Light amounts of caffeine or salty-sweet combinations, such as a lemon drink with a pinch of salt, may offer additional support. These are simple, low-cost strategies that can make a noticeable difference in how donors feel post-donation. While more research is needed to fully understand their benefits, the early findings are encouraging — and they underscore the importance of preparation for a safe and comfortable donation experience. ■

What's the best drink to prevent dehydration after exercise?

Intense physical activity, particularly during sporting events, can lead to significant dehydration. To identify the most effective fluids for rehydration, CEBaP conducted a two-part systematic review. The [first part](#) focused on carbohydrate-electrolyte (CE) solutions — commonly known as sports drinks — while the [second part](#) explored alternatives such as milk, coconut water, and beer. The findings showed that CE drinks and low-fat cow's milk have a positive impact on fluid balance when compared to plain water. Coconut water offered no clear benefit beyond that of water, and beer was not recommended due to a lack of reliable evidence. While CE drinks and milk proved effective, clean drinking water remains a solid and affordable choice for preventing dehydration. These results offer practical guidance for rehydration strategies, particularly in the context of first aid and athletic performance. A well-chosen drink can make all the difference in recovery. ■



Systematic overview of friendly visits by volunteers to combat loneliness in senior citizens

Through its 'Library service for hospitals and care institutions' (Zorgbib) initiative, Belgian Red Cross-Flanders is taking action to address loneliness and social isolation among older people. In this project, volunteers visit isolated senior citizens, bringing books and other library materials, and creating meaningful moments through conversation, shared games, or reading together. To assess the scientific foundation of this approach, CEBaP carried out a [systematic review](#) examining the impact of friendly volunteer visits on loneliness and social isolation in senior citizens. Drawing from 13 relevant studies, the review found that while the concept holds promise, the available evidence is limited and inconclusive. The quality and consistency of the research were not strong enough to confirm clear benefits for reducing loneliness, enhancing social connection, or improving overall well-being. The findings underscore a critical need for more rigorous, high-quality studies across diverse settings to better understand how and when friendly visits can make a measurable difference. Nevertheless, even in the





absence of robust evidence, such visits continue to offer a hopeful and compassionate means of connection for many senior citizens. This review highlights the importance of pursuing further research into effective, evidence-informed strategies to address the growing challenge of loneliness among older people. ■



Why voluntary plasma donations are more effective

[This publication](#) underscores the critical role of voluntary non-remunerated plasma donations (VNRD) in the European Union, especially at a time when changing regulations could make paid donations more common. The evidence strongly supports keeping voluntary non-remunerated plasma donations as a central policy, as it offers several key advantages.

- First and foremost, it promotes donor and patient safety. Studies show that paid donations are associated with greater health risks for donors and a higher likelihood of plasma contamination.
- Secondly, countries that rely on voluntary plasma collection experience slower increases in the cost of plasma-derived medicines, ultimately benefiting patients and healthcare systems alike.
- Finally, voluntary systems are more resilient during crises. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, unpaid public collection programs proved far more stable, while paid systems saw a steep decline when monetary incentives were removed.

Though further research is warranted, current findings make a compelling case: voluntary donations lead to safer, more affordable, and more reliable plasma supplies. The long-term public health benefits are undeniable. ■

Measuring the size of the ‘Third Pillar’: a global dataset

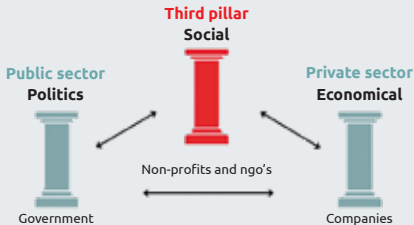
This groundbreaking [study](#) is the first to comprehensively chart the size of the third sector — comprising non-profit organizations and volunteer work — across 120 countries. Also known as the ‘third pillar’, this sector plays a vital role alongside both the public and private spheres, and its impact is far-reaching. Globally, the third sector accounts for 5,1% of total employment, and 13,4% of adults participate in volunteer activities.

The dataset opens up new avenues for exploring how the third sector influences broader societal outcomes. Countries with a larger third pillar appear to have weathered the COVID-19 pandemic more effectively and tend to report higher levels of well-being, health, civic participation, and social trust.

Yet the study also highlights key challenges. Many countries still lack comprehensive data, and existing measurement methods require refinement to ensure consistency and reliability. The researchers suggest that time-based metrics may offer a more accurate picture of sector size than traditional value-based approaches.

This dataset represents a major step forward, offering valuable insights to inform public policy and guide future research into the essential role of the third sector worldwide. ■

Three pillars for a balanced society





TReC

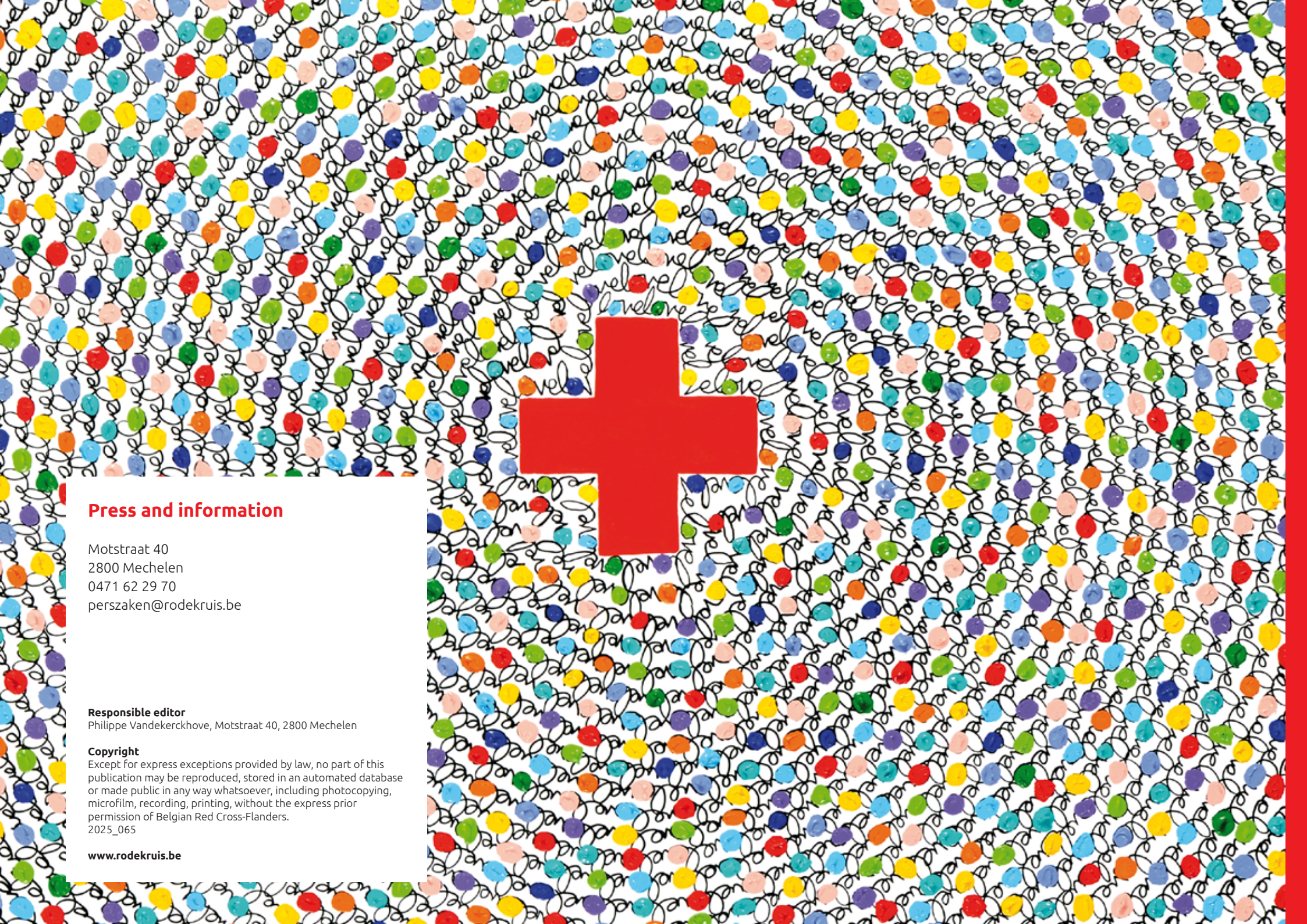
Towards standardized platelet lysate production in Europe: an initiative of the European Blood Alliance

Platelet lysate (hPL), derived from platelet donations unsuitable for transfusion, is rich in proteins and growth factors and serves as a valuable cell culture medium in laboratory settings. It plays a crucial role in the advancement of cell and gene therapies. At Belgian Red Cross-Flanders, we are committed to maximizing the value of every blood donation, which includes the responsible development, production, and application of hPL.

To ensure safety and efficacy, hPL must be produced under rigorous quality standards. Consistency in production is essential — not only within Belgian Red Cross-Flanders but across Europe. Standardization of hPL manufacturing is a top priority, and under the leadership of the European Blood Alliance, we have contributed to a publication advocating this shared vision. It underscores the need for closer collaboration among European blood establishments to harmonize production methods and support continued medical innovation.

You can read the publication [here](#). ■





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