National Productivity Board

Annual report 2019

Contents

Executive summary

The decline in productivity growth in recent decades jeopardises the potential to raise living standards and create jobs. To understand the reasons for this decline and identify possible solutions, the European Council has recommended that Member States in the eurozone should each set up a national productivity board, an independent body responsible for monitoring productivity and competitiveness. The Belgian National Productivity Board, operational since May 2019, unites federal and regional experts and is now publishing its first annual report. The purpose of this report is to draw up an initial review of productivity developments in Belgium.

Productivity is defined as the value added created by one hour of labour. Its growth often goes hand in hand with rising employment: between 1991 and 2018, both the productivity of labour and the employment rate rose. Productivity is an essential element of the economy's competitiveness, especially in a small, open country such as Belgium. A competitive economy is defined as an economy that is able to produce a sustainable, inclusive growth in living standards. The economy's capacity for innovation is a long-term condition for this competitiveness.

Analysing the structural evolutions of the economy leads to the following primary observations:

- A sharp fall in labour productivity growth, from a yearly average of 4.3 % in the 1970s to 0.8 % in the period 2000-2018, intensified by the economic and financial crisis in 2008.

- A productivity growth based essentially on capital deepening (increasing capital per hour of work). The contribution of improvements to the efficiency with which production combines labour and capital, measured by the total-factor productivity, has always been lower than in neighbouring countries, falling to almost zero since the crisis.

- A diversity in productivity growth between companies. Some Belgian companies (often active internationally) are still among the best-performing at international level, achieving relatively high productivity growth. Conversely, the position of the least productive companies has weakened further during the period analysed – these companies have experienced lower growth than other, and especially than the most productive companies.

- A limited entrepreneurial dynamism, with relatively low levels of business creation and closure.

If these trends continue, the consequences will be significant. The growth of gross domestic product (GDP) determines growth in the revenues available to be shared between workers and investors and facilitates political trade-offs in the area of public finance.

Subsequent reports will examine sectoral and regional evolutions and the conditions that would encourage the development of an innovative economy in Belgium. Among these conditions, this report considers a favourable macroeconomic environment and an ecosystem characterised by an entrepreneurial, innovation-focused culture, well-functioning markets ensuring an optimum level of competition, well-functioning mobility, energy and telecommunications services and, finally, successful integration into the global economy.

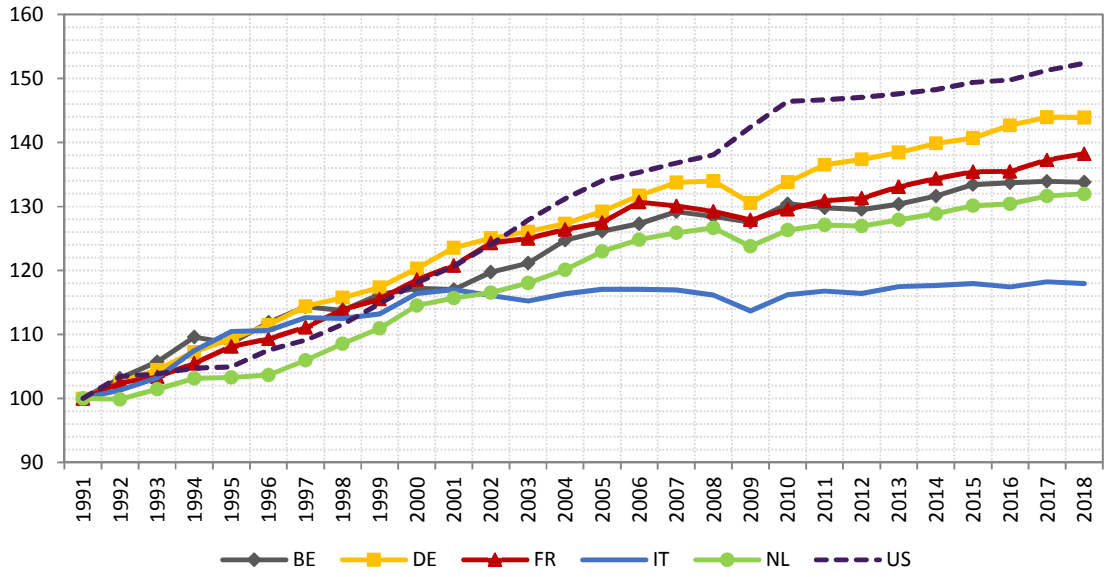
Introduction

In recent decades, Belgium, like many other developed countries, has seen a spectacular increase in prosperity, due primarily to the effects of a rise in productivity. Between 1970 and 2017, the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita rose by a factor of 2.3, a trend due entirely to an increase in labour productivity[1].

However, productivity gains have slowed considerably in recent years. This slowdown was exacerbated by the financial and economic crisis. This is not unusual, productivity generally drops during a recession before the underlying trend returns when the economy recovers. However, it is important to note that productivity growth remained very low after the global financial crisis, preventing the underlying growth to return to its pre-crisis level. This can be seen not only in Belgium, but in all the developed countries, and is known as the *productivity puzzle*. The productivity puzzle is reinforced by the fact that an acceleration in productivity growth might have been expected due to the recent development of key enabling technologies (KET) such as information and communications technology (ICT). And yet macroeconomic productivity figures show no sign of this[2].

Graph 1: Evolution of real GDP/hours worked 1991-2018

Index, 1991=100



Source: Ameco, DG ECFIN.

When comparing productivity growth across countries, we must keep in mind that countries where the level of productivity is lower can more easily exhibit stronger productivity growth by adopting technologies from the most productive countries (catching up). However, some countries with a productivity level comparable to Belgium's – the USA, for example – are able to achieve higher productivity gains.

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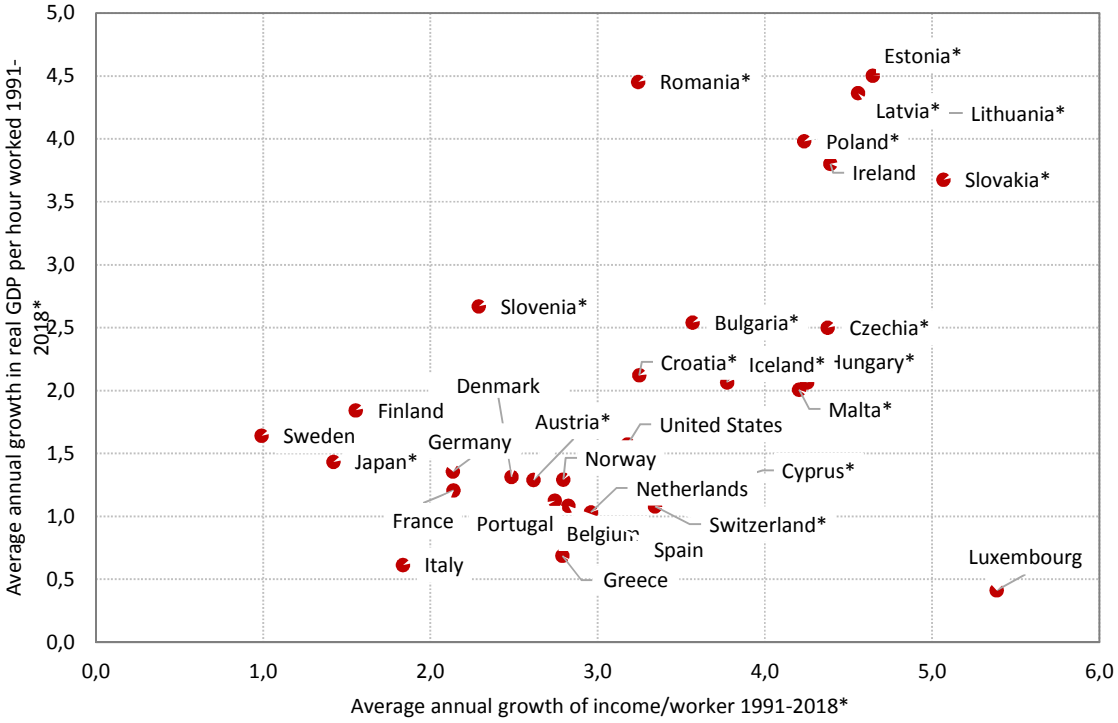
1 Per capita income is measured by real GDP per capita and labour productivity by GDP/hour worked. GDP/hour worked rose by 159 % over the period in question, while the number of hours worked per capita fell by 11 % (Ameco database).

2 This paradox is linked to the debate between tech optimists, for whom we are still only at the dawn of the technology revolution, and tech pessimists, for whom the direct positive effects of the digital transition have already taken place and the remaining effects will be much more difficult to achieve.

Continued low growth in productivity will have significant consequences. Indeed, GDP per capita determines per capita income to be shared between workers and investors. We can see that the countries with the highest productivity growth also recorded a greater increase in real labour income[3].

Graph 2: Correlation between the average annual growth in income per worker and real GDP per hour worked, 1991-2018*

In %



Note: the growth in income per worker is adjusted based on the national consumer prices index.

* 1991-2017 for Iceland, Switzerland and Japan; 1993-2018 for the Czech Republic and Poland; 1995-2018 for Bulgaria, Estonia, Croatia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Austria, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia; 2000-2018 for Malta.

Source: Ameco, DG ECFIN.

High productivity growth, and thus stronger economic growth, also widens the range of political choices available in the area of public finance.

As economic growth leads to an increase in tax revenue and a reduction in social expenditure, it allows governments to increase spending on health care, education, infrastructure investment and social security and/or reduce the tax burden. Sufficient growth in productivity is also a precondition for enabling a budgetary policy to react to recessions and asymmetric shocks[4]. A temporary deterioration in the budget situation is only financially viable if enough tax revenue (and thus enough growth) can be guaranteed in the long term.

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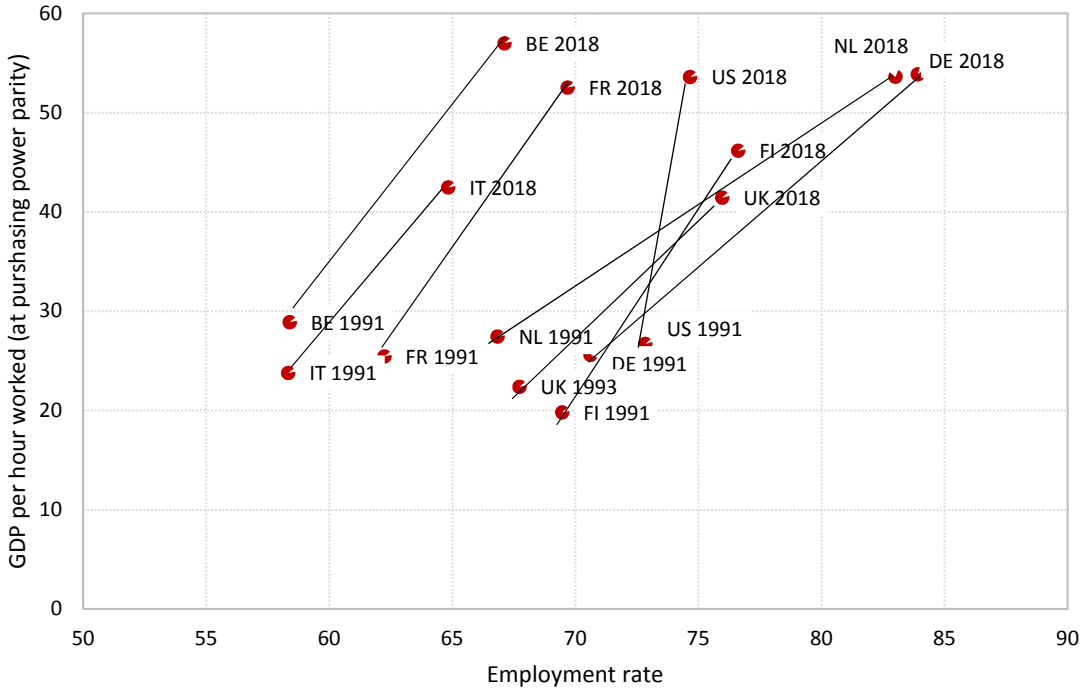
[3] It should be noted that the positive relationship between productivity growth and per capita income is seen most strongly in a number of Eastern European countries, whose economies are catching up with the more productive countries. However, the relationship remains positive even if these countries are excluded from the analysis.

[4] The impact of budgetary policy has intensified since the introduction of the euro, because the country's capacity to absorb shocks by adjusting exchange rates or conducting its own monetary policy has disappeared. These instruments are now located at the level of the eurozone.

In addition, the graph below shows that an increase in labour productivity does not necessarily have to threaten jobs. In each of the countries studied, a rise in labour productivity was accompanied by an increase in the employment rate between 1991 and 2018.

Graph 3: Correlation between employment rate and GDP/hours worked, 1991 and 2018
In % and at PPP



Employment rate = proportion of the population aged 15 to 64 in work (in %).
Source: Ameco, DG ECFIN.

These reasons mentioned above explain why productivity growth receives so much attention, not only at national level but also at European level. Convergence in GDP per capita between Member States – and thus convergence in productivity levels – is a key objective in the process of economic integration. Moreover, low productivity growth can contribute to increase the domestic and/or external debt burden and, when this becomes excessive, make it harder to reduce the debt, increasing the country's vulnerability in the financial markets.

In this context, in September 2016 the European Council called on Member States in the eurozone to set up independent national productivity boards responsible for monitoring developments in productivity and competitiveness and fostering national debate on these issues[5]. These national analyses should reinforce the adoption of the policies and reforms needed at national level and enhance the knowledge underpinning the EU's coordination of economic policy.

In Belgium, the European recommendation gave rise to the establishment of the National Productivity Board (NPB)[6]. The Board consists of 12 independent members appointed for their expertise and their specific economic experience. Half the members were nominated on the proposal of federal institutions and the other half on the proposal of the regions. Their task is to study the development of productivity

[5] Council recommendation of 20 September 2016 (2016/C 349/01) following the 2015 report by the five Presidents (Juncker, Tusk, Dijsselbloem, Draghi and Schulz, "Completing Europe's Economic and Monetary Union").
[6] 25 November 2018 act announcing the creation of the National Productivity Board (BOG 07.12.2018).

and competitiveness in Belgium, together with the impact and the implementation of relevant recommendations formulated by the European institutions. More precisely, the NPB's mission is to conduct studies and analyses of how productivity and competitiveness are evolving in Belgium; to carry out analyses of political challenges in the field of productivity and competitiveness; and to evaluate the consequences of political options in these areas.

This document constitutes the first report by the NPB. This is why its structure is different from the reports planned for the future. Having defined and explained the concepts of "competitiveness" and "productivity growth" in section 1, section 2 reviews Belgium's performance in this area. Finally, section 3 gives an overview of the factors that have an impact on productivity growth. The subsequent reports aim to examine the political challenges in more detail. The publication date for future reports will be brought forward to September so that these reports can be used as a contribution to the work of the European Semester.

1. Concepts

Competitiveness and productivity are generic concepts that are not always interpreted in exactly the same way. In accordance with the European recommendation, the NPB began its mission by adopting a broad vision of these concepts.

A competitive economy is defined as an economy that is able to produce a sustainable, inclusive growth in living standards. In other words, an economy able to achieve economic growth that goes hand in hand with social inclusion, respect for the environment and is economically viable. This is not the case, for example, if economic growth is accompanied by excessive domestic and external debt and a rise in interest rates, which threatens future standards of living.

All the aforementioned elements are important in order to consider a competitive economy, and their diversity makes them very difficult to evaluate using a single indicator. Traditionally, GDP per capita is used to measure living standards, though this indicator needs to be supplemented with other data to provide a complete picture of the extent to which growth is sustainable and inclusive[7]. However, this approach goes beyond the scope of this report, which emphasises economic growth and productivity growth.

Economic growth can be achieved in a number of ways[8]. For example, a country's residents can work more. If a relatively higher number of people work, or if the workers work more hours on average, the GDP per capita will increase. Another factor with a positive impact on GDP per capita is the productivity of labour, or the contribution to the value added generated per hour worked.

[7] This is why the 14 March 2014 act provided for indicators to be developed and updated regularly by the Institute of National Accounts (INA) to complement the GDP.

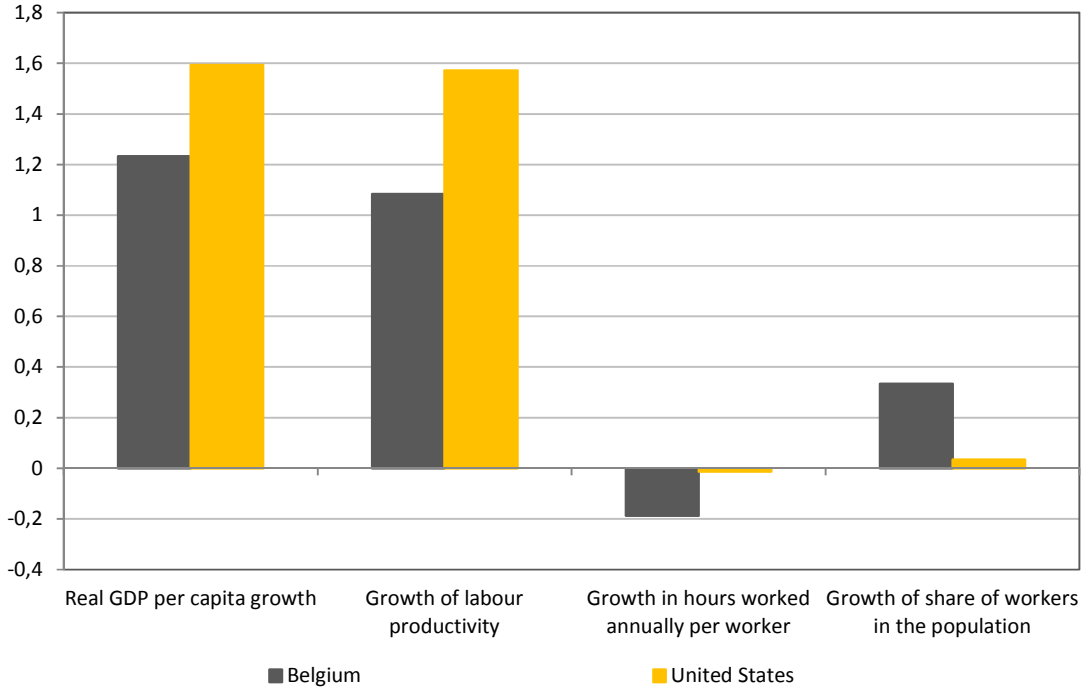
[8] GDP per capita can be obtained as follows :

$$\frac{GDP}{Population} = \frac{hours\ worked}{Population}\frac{GDP}{hours\ worked}$$

where $\frac{hours\ worked}{Population} = \frac{hours\ worked}{workers}\frac{workers}{Population\ of\ working\ age}\frac{Population\ of\ working\ age}{Population}$

Graph 4: Average annual growth in real GDP per capita between 1991 and 2018 broken down into growth in hourly productivity, growth in the average number of hours worked annually per worker and growth in the share of workers in the population

In %



Source: Ameco, DG ECFIN.

Although the proportion of the population in work increased further in Belgium than in the USA, the ratio remains significantly lower, so there is still potential for an increase in the average number of hours worked annually per capita, particularly by increasing the employment rate. However, as graph 4 shows, the biggest contribution to GDP growth per capita comes from the rise in productivity. Increasing the productivity of labour will be thus crucial. This increase can be achieved through capital deepening, i.e. using more capital per worker. This strategy has been one of the drivers of productivity growth in Belgium over recent decades. However, the falling marginal return on capital also imposes limits on this strategy. This is because the higher the capital intensity of an economy (a higher ratio of capital to labour), the lower the additional return on capital employed[9]. Consequently, in the long term, increases in capital will hardly generate any productivity gains. The only way of achieving sustainable growth is thus not to use more labour or capital, but to increase the efficiency with which labour and capital are used in the process of production, i.e. increasing total-factor productivity (TFP).

[9] It should be emphasised that this observation applies in particular to investments in physical capital. It has not yet been established whether investments in intangible assets (e.g. R&D or patents etc.) are also subject to decreasing marginal productivity.

ORIGINS OF PRODUCTIVITY GROWTH

Productivity growth is influenced by three elements: the composition of the labour force, the capital deepening of the production process and the innovation in the broad sense, which are measured by total-factor productivity (TFP).

The effect of the composition of labour captures the proportion of productivity growth due to changes in the characteristics of labour. When workers are more highly trained, they can use more complex capital and thus take on more complex production processes. This makes the production process more productive[10].

The effect of capital deepening corresponds to the increase in productivity due to the fact that workers have more capital, or higher-quality capital, for their production. This capital may consist of machinery, tools or other equipment, referred to as tangible assets, and patents, licences or software, described as intangible assets.

The effect of innovation, or TFP, measures the proportion of productivity growth that is due to improvements in the efficiency with which labour and capital are combined to carry out production[11].

TFP growth is due primarily to an economy's capacity to innovate and respond to major developments in technology. As indicated in section 3 of this report, this requires all players to adapt their behaviour – companies, individuals and public authorities. It is also important for a small economy such as Belgium to integrate into the global economy.

An innovative economy is not just important for productivity growth; it can also contribute to the sustainability and inclusiveness of this growth. Innovation offers many possibilities for job creation when enough effort is made to create products and services designed for new markets[12]. It also presents a response to many societal challenges. Consider the development of solutions to generate energy with lower CO_2 emissions; the search for new drugs; the use of new technologies in the field of medical monitoring to enable patients to leave hospital earlier or elderly people to stay at home for longer...

While important, however, innovation alone is not enough to guarantee the competitiveness of an economy. Certain conditions are essential to ensure innovation can translate into sustainable, inclusive growth. Increasing productivity and competitiveness requires transitions at all levels of the economy. Support measures are needed, because these transitions have a major impact on workers, companies and citizens.

For example, digital technology will affect many existing tasks to a greater or lesser extent, posing a challenge for worker integration into the job market. Moreover, the digital economy and globalisation are also accompanied by an increased concentration of economic power, resources and information, creating risks in terms of competition. Finally, internationalisation makes the Belgian economy more dependent on

[10] Measuring this effect properly requires detailed data about workers. This is why it is not often measured, but is included in the estimation of TFP. This comment also applies to measuring capital quality when the deflators are not hedonic.

[11] The TFP measured may vary a little in this case, given that it also captures all the inaccuracies in the labour and capital measurements together with the cycle effect on productivity.

[12] Producing existing goods and services more efficiently will not be enough to create jobs. Once the market for these products and services is saturated, it will no longer be possible to sell the additional production. If nothing else changes, this will lead to unemployment rather than inclusive growth.

decisions taken abroad... This makes it essential to create the conditions in which innovations can generate as many positive effects as possible and reduce the negative effects of the transition to a minimum. This requires adjustments to the regulatory framework at both national and international level, together with changes in other political fields such as education, training, the system of redistribution etc.

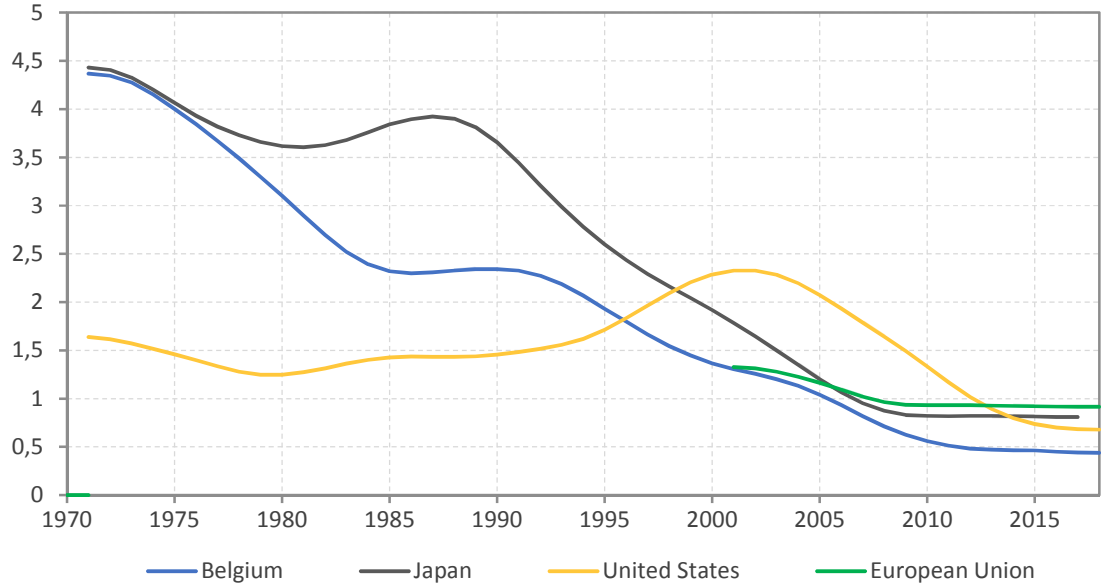
2. Findings

The productivity of the Belgian economy: long-term declining growth trend reinforced by the 2008 crisis

In half a century, the growth rate of living standards, measured by GDP per capita, has fallen sharply in Belgium from an annual average rate of 3.2 % in the 1970s to 0.6 % between 2010 and 2018[13]. This change is common to most advanced economies, but it is particularly marked in Belgium, resulting in a gap in living standards not only with the USA but also with the best-performing European economies in this area, such as Austria, the Netherlands and Denmark. Among OECD members, Belgium fell from 11th place in 1970 to 13th in 2018[14] in terms of GDP per capita.

Graph 5: Trend in hourly labour productivity growth

In %



Note: growth rate processed with the Hodrick-Prescott filter.
Source: Ameco, DG ECFIN, September 2019.

As indicated in section 1, GDP per capita can be broken down into two ratios: hours worked per capita and labour productivity. Compared with its European partners, Belgium is characterised by a relatively low level of hours worked per capita, explained partly by a low employment rate, combined with a relatively high level of productivity. In 2018, Belgium was in 4th place among OECD countries in terms of productivity level, after Ireland, Luxembourg and Norway, climbing from 8th place in 1970[15].

[13] Unless stated otherwise, all figures come from the Eurostat database and were extracted in September 2019.
[14] OECD, labour productivity database, data extracted on 8 October 2019.
[15] OECD, labour productivity database, data extracted on 8 October 2019.

The slowdown in GDP per capita growth in Belgium since 1995 is due less to the change in hours worked per person than to the decline in the labour productivity growth rate. Having fallen continuously from 1970 to the mid-1990s, the hours worked annually per capita[16] gradually returned to growth, reaching an average annual growth rate of 0.3 % between 2010 and 2018. On the other hand, the productivity growth rate fell from an annual average rate of 4.3 % in the 1970s to only 0.3 % between 2010 and 2018.

The economic and financial crisis in 2008 reinforced the decreasing trend in productivity growth in most advanced economies, as it was followed by a period of low productivity growth, particularly in Belgium. In the pre-crisis period of 2000-2007, productivity rose in Belgium by an average annual rate of 1.4 %, the same pace as in the Netherlands, above the average for the eurozone and slightly behind the German rate. In the post-crisis period, on the other hand, from 2012 to 2018[17], the average annual productivity growth rate was 0.5 % in Belgium, compared with 0.6 % for the eurozone as a whole. Belgium also recorded a lower growth rate than its three main neighbouring countries.

Table 1: Average annual hourly labour productivity growth rate, total economy
In %

	2000-2018	2000-2007	2012-2018
European Union	1,2	1,6	0,9
Eurozone	0,6	0,7	0,6
Belgium	0,8	1,4	0,5
Germany	1,0	1,6	0,9
France	1,0	1,3	1,2
Italy	0,1	0,0	0,3
Netherlands	0,9	1,4	0,6
Finland	0,9	2,2	0,7
United Kingdom	0,9	1,9	0,5

Source: Eurostat, National Accounts, September 2019.

Given that 2019 is a year of occasional revision of the national accounts in all Member States, and that this review is subject to gradual release beginning in September and ending in late November at the earliest, it has not been possible to include the latest figures in this report. The sectoral analysis of productivity evolution is thus postponed until the 2020 report.

Breakdown of the productivity evolution: importance of capital deepening contribution and weakness of the TFP

As explained in the introduction to this report, TFP growth is the only instrument enabling sustained growth in living standards to be achieved. Breaking down the evolution of labour productivity reveals, however, that Belgium has a very low score in this area.

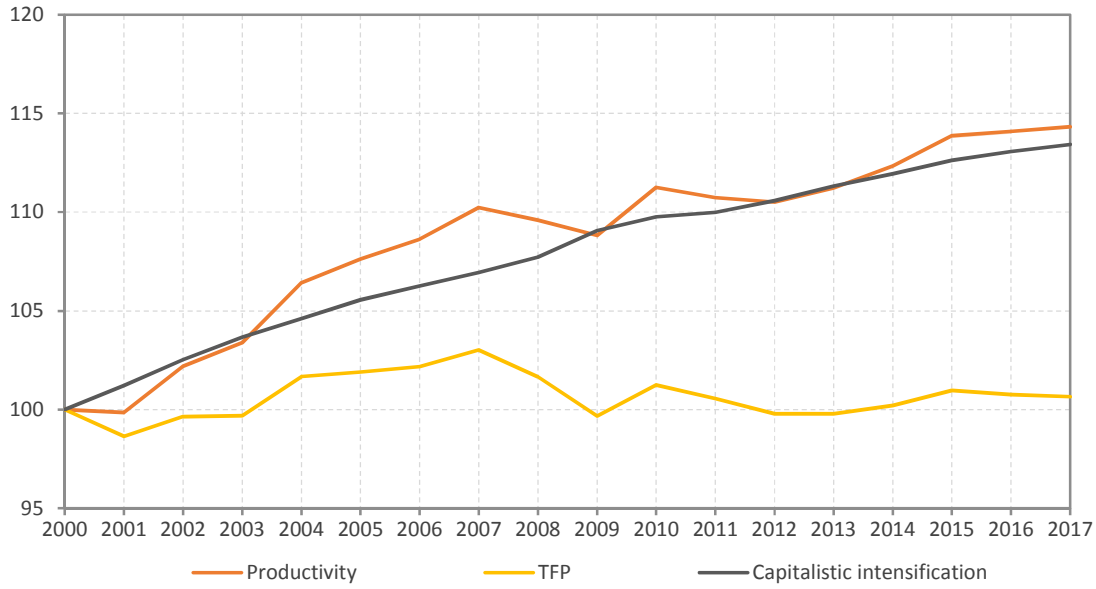
In Belgium, productivity growth relies essentially on capital deepening, i.e. increasing capital per hour worked. This observation is common to all the advanced economies. But the contribution of TFP between 2000 and 2017 was almost zero in Belgium, which is particularly low compared with the contribution recorded in the three neighbouring countries and the Scandinavian economies. Comparing the period from 2012 to 2017 with the period from 2000 to 2007 highlights a slowdown in the contribution of capital deepening, particularly with regard to information and communications technology (ICT) capital . Note that in this breakdown provided by the OECD, the effect of the labour force composition, which is generally low

[16] As a reminder, as indicated in section 1, Concepts, these hours worked per capita are the product of the hours worked per worker, the employment rate and the working-age population as a proportion of the total population.

[17] This period is preferable to the period 2010-2018 for estimating the recent productivity growth trend, as it eliminates the fluctuations due solely to the crisis.

but positive, is taken into account in the evolution of TFP. The contribution of technological progress or efficiency in the use of production factors is thus lower than it appears on the graph[18].

Graph 6: Contributions to productivity growth = capital deepening + TFP, Belgium
Index, 2000=100



Source: OECD, productivity database, data extracted on 29 July 2019.

Slow growth in the technical efficiency of most companies and low levels of entries and exits limit the growth of productivity within individual industries

Analyses based on corporate data clearly show that there are major differences between companies in terms of productivity level and growth in all countries, even within single industries. These differences also seem to be fairly persistent. The productivity growth of an industry can be broken down as the productivity growth of the companies of which it consists (intrinsic effect) and the evolution of these companies' market share, including business entries and exits (structural effect).

In Belgium, as in most other countries, the contribution of the intrinsic effect to sectoral productivity growth is greater than that of the structural effect. Consequently, improving companies' technical efficiency is the main element determining productivity growth within an industry. An OECD analysis for a limited number of countries shows that the evolution of the market share in favour of the most efficient companies (structural effect) has diminished in all the countries, suggesting a less efficient allocation of the available resources. This allocation appears less efficient in Belgium and France than in Denmark and Sweden, and less efficient in market services than in manufacturing[19].

The scale of the intrinsic and structural effects varies widely between manufacturing and market services. In manufacturing, the contribution to productivity growth in an industry made by increasing companies' technical efficiency is positive across the whole productivity distribution and increases with the level of

[18] To ensure international comparability, the OECD applies a common calculation method for capital stocks with harmonised ICT deflators that are different from those used in the national accounts.

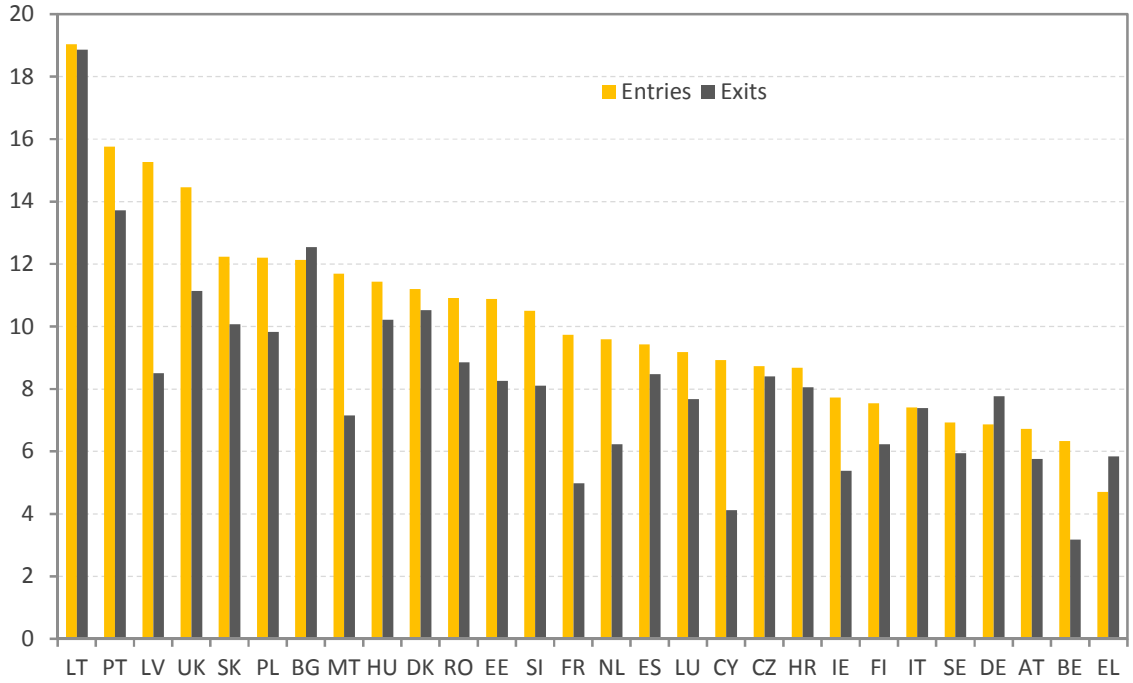
[19] G Berlingieri, P Blanchenay, S Calligaris and C Criscuolo (2017). "The Multiprod project: a comprehensive overview", OECD working documents on science, technology and industry 2017/04, published by the OECD.

productivity. In other words, the higher a company's technical efficiency, the higher its productivity growth. However, in market services, the contribution of productivity growth is almost always negative across the productivity distribution; it is only slightly positive[20] for the most efficient companies.

In comparison with other European countries, new companies in Belgium represent only a small proportion of the population of active businesses.

Graph 7: Business entries and exits

In percentage of the total number of active companies, average 2015-2017



Source: Eurostat, Business demography Indicators. This calculation only takes into account companies in the market economy (excluding holding companies).

The creation of new companies shows a clear downward trend[21] in Belgium, as in most other countries. Among all the European Union (EU) countries, Belgium is by far the one with the lowest number of companies ceasing operations. However, the number of closures relative to the number of active companies has recently seen a relatively sharp rise in Belgium. It appears that the weak dynamic of the Belgian economic structure in a context characterised by relatively low banking finance costs has made it easier to keep so-called zombie firms alive, i.e. companies whose activity does not structurally generates enough revenue to meet their financial costs[22]. Regardless of how these companies are defined, we see both a higher level of zombie firms in Belgium than in other OECD countries and an increase since the crisis. Moreover, companies seem to find it difficult to emerge from this status on a permanent basis. Keeping

[20] OECD (2019). In-depth Productivity Review of Belgium.

[21] This calculation does not take into account companies with no employees, the number of which has recently risen sharply in Belgium due to "corporatisation" (when freelance professionals and self-employed people create a company to reduce the taxes on their business legally). See B Coppens, R Schoonackers, L Van Meensel and S Van Parys (2018). "Recent international trends in corporate taxation: more competition or more convergence?", National Bank of Belgium, Economic review, September 2018, 99-135.

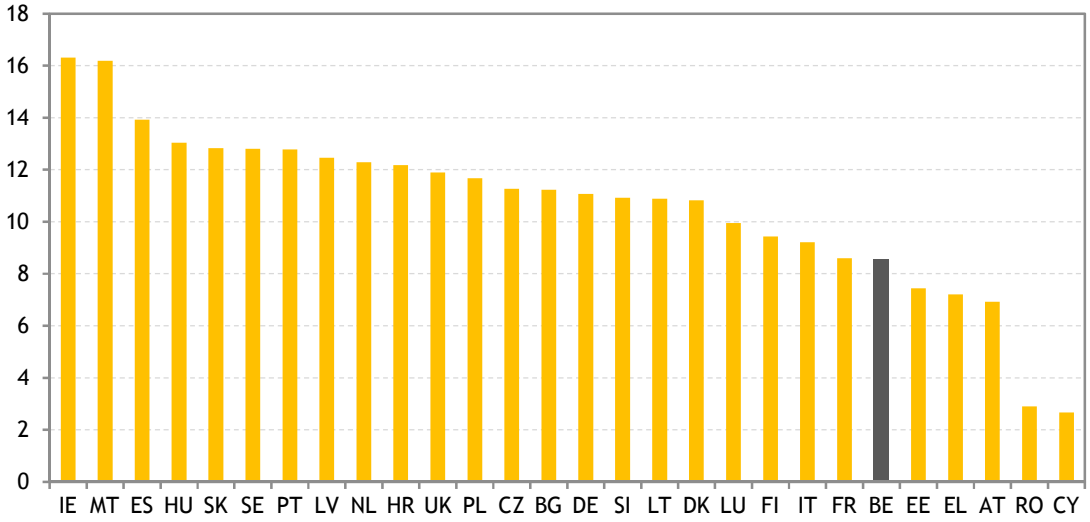
[22] See M Adalet McGowan, D Andrews, V Millot and T Beck (Managing Editor), 2018. "The walking dead? Zombie firms and productivity performance in OECD countries," Economic Policy, CEPR; CES; MSH, vol. 33(96), pages 685-736.

these businesses alive, with their generally low productivity levels, is a drag on the momentum of productivity growth and a barrier to the reallocation of resources towards more productive companies.

Business exits (such as leaving an industry or liquidation) generally contribute positively to productivity growth, because companies that have ceased operations often had a productivity level below the industry average. Start-ups are more likely to have a negative impact in the year they enter an industry, because their productivity is also generally lower than the industry average. However, as they learn, and as less productive companies shut down, new businesses make a positive contribution to productivity growth in the years following their entry to the industry. Productivity growth within industries in Belgium is thus limited both by the low number of entries from new companies and by the low number of closures[23].

Graph 8: High-growth firms

In percentage of the total number of companies, 2016



Source: Eurostat, Business demography Indicators. This calculation only takes into account companies with at least 10 employees active in the market economy (excluding holding companies). A high-growth firm is defined as a company with more than 10 employees and a staffing level increasing by more than 10 %.

Apart from the number of new businesses, the development prospects for young companies can also have an impact on productivity growth. High-growth firms, and particularly the youngest among them, known as "gazelles", have recently received particular attention. Belgium also seems to be behind the rest of Europe in terms of its percentage of high-growth firms. Moreover, only a third of these companies are new businesses[24].

As in many other countries, the consequences of the international financial crisis were negative for the productivity growth of most companies in Belgium. The crisis raised the entry barriers for new companies, resulting in a reduction in the number of start-ups, though new entrants had a higher average initial

[23] M Dumont, G Rayp, M Verschelde and B Merlevede (2016). "The contribution of start-ups and young firms to industry-level efficiency growth", Applied Economics 48(59), 5786-5801; J De Mulder and H Godefroid (2018). "Slowdown of productivity: findings and tentative explanations" National Bank of Belgium, Economic review, December, 51-66; OECD (2019), In-depth Productivity Review of Belgium; G Bijnens and J Konings (2018). "Declining Business Dynamism in Belgium", Small Business Economics, pp 1 - 39.

[24] J De Mulder, H Godefroid and C Swartenbroekx (2017). "Up or out? Portrait of young high-growth firms in Belgium", National Bank of Belgium, Economic review, December, 93-113. No data is available for young high-growth firms (gazelles) in Belgium, meaning that no international comparison is possible.

productivity level than before the crisis. In addition, more young companies with low productivity levels were forced to cease operations[25].

This decline in business dynamism, measured by a drop in the numbers of high-growth firms, start-ups and reallocations of resources from low-productivity companies to high-productivity companies, is not unique to Belgium; it has also been seen in other countries, such as the USA. The explanation for the phenomenon must therefore lie among factors affecting other countries as well as Belgium[26], such as the role of ICT and global production networks, or the extent to which the market power of the major global corporations has increased[27].

As already mentioned, there are large differences in productivity between companies within individual industries. Like in the majority of OECD countries, the divergence in productivity has intensified in Belgium, with the least productive companies growing more slowly than median companies and especially the most productive businesses. Relative to other countries, the most productive Belgian companies have essentially seen higher productivity growth than companies with average productivity[28].

Some Belgian companies are still among the best-performing at international level, achieving relatively high productivity growth, particularly in the manufacturing sector. These are generally companies that also operate internationally. Importing and exporting companies appear to have the highest productivity, not only in Belgium but in most countries. Even if they are not directly involved in export or import activities, the suppliers closest to companies operating internationally also have higher levels of productivity[29].

Productivity and external relations: strong insertion in international trade and global value chains

Belgium's integration into global trade, evaluated by the rate of exports and imports penetration, is one of the highest among the European economies. The small size of the economy, the limited availability of raw materials and the specialisation of certain activities make these international exchanges essential for economic growth and improving the well-being of the population.

Belgium, a small, open economy with a central position in Europe, is thus highly integrated into global value chains. The proportion of domestic value added in exports is therefore lower than in other larger or less-integrated European economies, as shown in the following graph.

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[25] M Dumont, G Rayp, M Verschelde and B Merlevede (2016). "The contribution of start-ups and young firms to industry-level efficiency growth", Applied Economics 48(59), 5786-580.

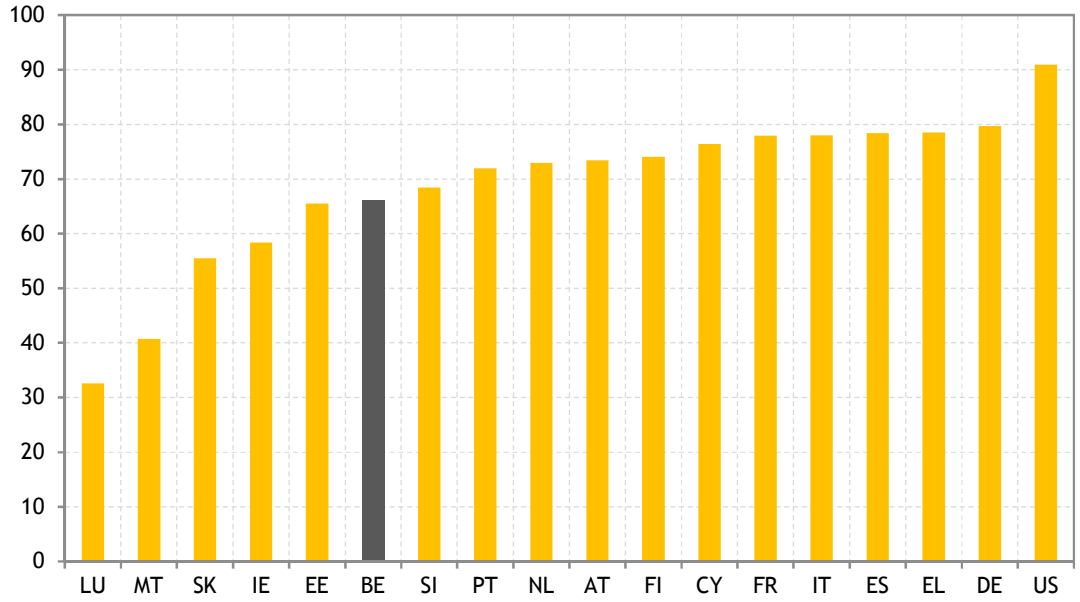
[26] G Bijnens and J Konings (2018). "Declining Business Dynamism in Belgium", Small Business Economics, pp 1 – 39.

[27] J De Loecker and J Eeckhout (2018). "Global Market Power", NBER Working Paper 24768.

[28] J De Mulder and H Godefroid (2018). "Slowdown in productivity :findings and tentative explanationsn", National Bank of Belgium, Economic Review, December, 51-66; OECD (2019), In-depth Productivity Review of Belgium.

[29] M Verschelde, M Dumont, G Rayp and B Merlevede (2016). "Semiparametric stochastic metafrontier efficiency of European manufacturing firms", Journal of Productivity Analysis 45(1), 53-69 ; E Dhyne and C Duprez (2017). "The world is a village: the integration of Belgian firms into the world economy", National Bank of Belgium, Economic review, September, 25-36; OECD (2019), In-depth Productivity Review of Belgium.

Graph 9: Proportion of domestic value added in exports - 2016
In percentage of the total



Source: OECD Statistics on Trade in Value Added, data extracted on 5 August 2019.

A more detailed analysis[30], excluding re-exports, shows that the insertion of Belgian exporters into global value chains helps generate value added and employment throughout the economy, directly for the exporters themselves and indirectly for their domestic suppliers of intermediate goods and services. In all, it is estimated that a third of Belgium's GDP and employment is directly or indirectly linked to exports. The benefits of taking part in global value chains thus depend on the competitiveness not only of exporters but also of their domestic suppliers.

The competitiveness of Belgian companies relative to foreign companies is thus a condition for growth, and is all the more important since membership of the eurozone means it is no longer possible to adjust for any losses of competitiveness with changes to the exchange rate. This competitiveness can be expressed through prices and/or product quality. Generally, the more products tend to be standardised, the more competition is expressed in terms of price. Upgrading products, which can be achieved through innovation and gains in TFP, thus reduces the price sensitivity of the demand for these products.

In terms of external competitiveness, the capacity of Belgian companies to be present at foreign markets is an important signal. This can be evaluated via export market shares, measured as Belgian exports as a proportion of the world exports. Between 2000 and 2018, these market shares fell by 20 %. The fall is lower than the one recorded by France (-26 %), but significantly higher than the reductions observed in the Netherlands (-11 %) and Germany (-1 %)[31].

Belgian exports increase more slowly than world trade because they are not oriented towards the markets and products with the most dynamic growth and/or because they face competition from production in other countries in their traditional markets. The traditional markets for Belgian exporters are mainly the

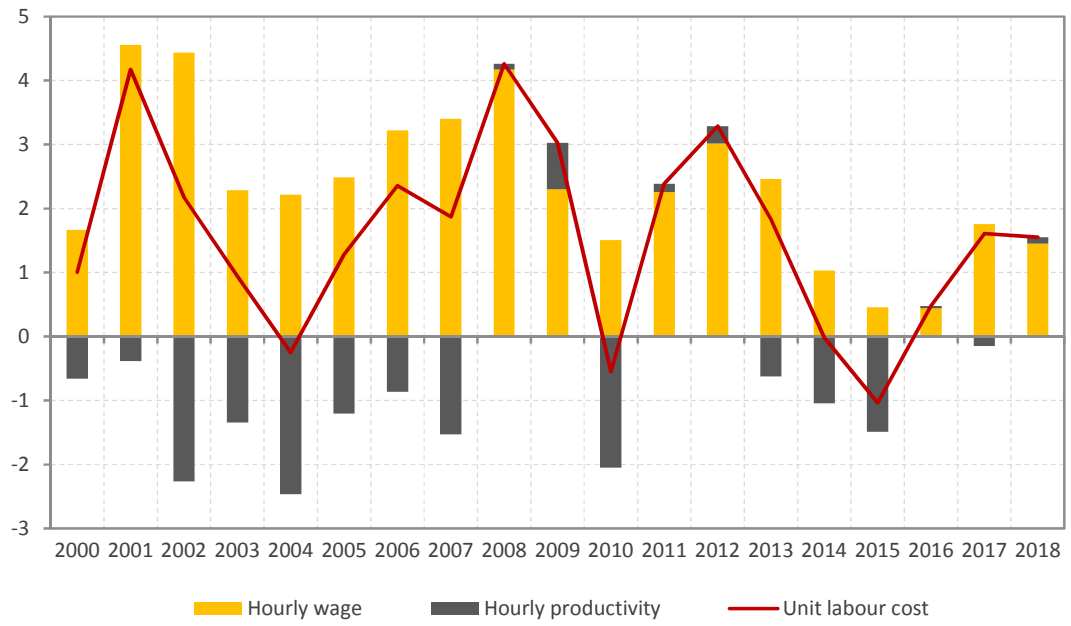
[30] Michel, B, Hambÿe, C and Hertveldt B (2018), "The Role of Exporters and Domestic Producers in GVCs: Evidence for Belgium based on Extended National Supply-and-Use Tables Integrated into a Global Multiregional Input-Output Table", NBER Working Paper, n°25155, forthcoming in Ahmad, N, Moulton, B, Richardson, J and van de Ven P, "The Challenges of Globalization in the Measurement of National Accounts", NBER.

[31] Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure data, Eurostat, extracted on 19 August 2019.

European countries, and in particular the three main neighbouring countries. Exports to European Union countries in 2018 represented 70 % of Belgium's total exports of goods and services, and exports to the three neighbouring countries represented 41 %[32]. In relation to its potential export markets[33], Belgium recorded a much more limited loss of about 4 % for the period 2000-2018.

Among the cost factors likely to influence price competitiveness, the labour cost per unit produced is one element to take into account, with the costs of capital and intermediate consumption (raw materials including energy, business services etc.) as the other determinants of production costs. Its evolution depends on the evolution of hourly wages and hourly productivity. If wages grow more slowly than productivity, the unit labour cost falls, while it increases if wages grow faster than productivity. Between 2000 and 2018, the average annual growth rate in unit labour cost was 1.6 %, higher than rates observed in the European Union and the eurozone and in any of the three major neighbouring countries. But the unit cost in Belgium grew rapidly mainly at the beginning of this period. Between 2012 and 2018, the growth rate of the Belgian unit labour cost fell back to 0.7 %, below the rates in the European Union, the eurozone, Germany and France. Despite this, the slowdown in productivity growth made it harder to maintain cost competitiveness, as shown by the rise in the unit labour cost over the last three years (see graph below). Hence, TFP gains are particularly important in this respect, because they support productivity growth and thus facilitate improvements in cost competitiveness without excessive pressure on wage developments, but they are also the fulfilment of innovation efforts, offering the possibility of conquering new markets and exporting products for which demand is more influenced by quality.

Graph 10: Contribution to the unit labour cost = hourly wage – productivity
Annual growth rate as a percentage



Note: the productivity growth rate is shown as a negative, because it reduces the unit labour cost.
Source: Eurostat, National Accounts, data extracted on 2 August 2019.

[32] Balance of payments data, Eurostat, extracted on 26 August 2019.
[33] This is the market share by volume estimated based on the Belgian export growth ratio for each partner country over the growth in imports for these countries. Data from the Federal Planning Bureau's June 2019 Economic Perspectives.

As emphasised in the European Commission's 2019 Country Report on Belgium, published as part of the European Semester, "restored productivity growth is essential to preserve external competitiveness and ensure future economic growth in the context of an ageing population."

3. Levers for productivity growth

The slowdown of productivity growth documented in the previous section occurred during a period of profound transformation in production processes associated with both the increased internationalisation of these processes and the development of digital technologies and the knowledge economy. These elements certainly influenced the evolution of productivity, but many other factors also played a role. These factors are mostly complementary, meaning that actions must be taken simultaneously across a wide range of fields. These sources of growth can be stimulated by a variety of economic policies, some in the hands of regional authorities (such as industrial policies including regional support programmes for innovation and research, professional training assistance policies, public infrastructure in road, port and airport infrastructure, regional regulations), the communities (such as higher education and basic research), the federal government (including fiscal and special taxation policy, public investment such as funds for rail transport, federal regulations) and supranational institutions (such as some European support programmes, supervision of budgetary or monetary policy), sometimes with limited room for manoeuvre. This first report from the National Productivity Board merely presents a brief overview of the main productivity levers.

To identify sources of productivity growth and the different economic policy levers associated with them, it may be useful to restate that the productivity of an economy such as Belgium reflects the efficiency with which the various production units (private companies or the public sector) of which it consists combine the different factors of production (labour, knowledge, physical capital, intangible capital, material and immaterial inputs) to create a product or provide a service.

These production units can increase their efficiency by enhancing the quality of their production factors (investing in training[34] and/or tangible or intangible capital, constantly seeking better domestic or foreign suppliers etc.), improving the way in which these factors are combined within the production unit (improved production processes, better management, specialising in particular activities) or developing new products or services with a higher level of value added. However, they will only make these investments if they are operating within a framework that offers them enough incentives and a favourable environment, and if they have access to a sufficient level of high-performance infrastructure.

Beside improving performance within each unit, an additional mechanism for increasing the aggregated productivity of an economy lies in a better allocation of the available resources (labour, capital, financial resources) in favour of the most productive production units, leading to a process of creation and growth among the most efficient (new) units and of shrinkage or disappearance among the least efficient units. This process of creative destruction must be fluid enough to allow an optimum, rapid reallocation of resources released by declining units towards growing units. However, in addition to better resource allocation, it is important to allow firms that are lagging behind in terms of technology but whose long-term viability is not immediately undermined, to compensate (at least partially) for their disadvantage with a better distribution of technological advances.

[34] Companies are not solely responsible for training investment. Individuals also have a role to play in terms of their education and individual training choices throughout their careers.

All economic players must contribute

Naturally, firms play an essential role, because they must make the best use of the production factors available to them, while the continuous evolution of the world around them (such as technological developments, for example) requires constant adaptation and innovation in a variety of areas. Meanwhile, all (potential) workers must have the appropriate skills (in other words, enough human capital[35]) to be able, now and in the future, to respond to companies' needs, not only to earn enough income for themselves but also to contribute to creating wealth in the economy.

The various players must also complement each other. Companies depend on the efficiency of other companies and the availability of sufficiently qualified labour. Workers, in turn, will be more motivated to retrain and develop their skills if they see that this kind of investment is worthwhile, which is most often the case when innovative companies offer interesting employment opportunities for qualified staff. Finally, the public authorities have a major impact on the behaviour of businesses and employees: a sufficiently stimulating framework, a favourable environment and efficient infrastructure can contribute significantly to higher productivity gains.

Stimulating the development and spread of innovation in companies and making public authorities more efficient

Innovation capacity in private-sector companies is essential for increasing the productivity of an economy. Innovation may involve a company developing better processes and products itself or adopting improvements from elsewhere. Moreover, given the constantly shifting economic conditions in which businesses operate, innovation emerges as a continuous process. By innovating, a company can gain competitive advantage over its domestic and foreign counterparts in the sector, or avoid lagging behind its innovative competitors. In a competitive market, companies that are slow off the mark will lose out in the long term.

Similarly, the public sector must use its resources optimally to provide the services required at the quality level expected by the public and for the lowest cost. This means adopting an innovation approach similar to that of the private sector. The increased use of digital technology in the public services, for example, offers wide-ranging prospects for improving the efficiency of various administrations.

These optimisations can span across all possible aspects of activity.

Human capital

In a knowledge economy, the potential for productivity depends increasingly on workers' knowledge and skills. The quality of initial education plays an essential role here, both in terms of the knowledge acquired and the soft skills enabling it to be used during working life. The future productivity of the Belgian economy is thus linked to investments in education agreed by the population and the performance of the education system, which must be open to all. Investment in training both by companies, whether they are in the private or the public sector, and by individual workers, in terms of skills acquired on the ground and continuing training, are a second vector for productivity growth whose effects can be felt more quickly. These investments enable workers to keep their knowledge up to date with the needs of the market, including new digital skills, and to change jobs more easily. In a context of technological change, the ageing

[35] Human capital represents the stock of knowledge incorporated in the labour factor. It thus represents both the educational level of each worker and all the skills they have acquired throughout their career, whether technical or interpersonal. Some of these skills are transferable when the worker changes jobs.

of the working population and lengthening careers, these investments are necessary both to stimulate productivity – technological changes must be accompanied by an upgrade of workers' skills so that the developments can have their full effect on productivity – and to ensure economic growth is inclusive. Without the support of a redistributive system, the section of the population that would be unable to acquire the new skills required in the job market would be excluded from work and could not reap the benefits of economic growth.

Capital investments

Having the best machinery, intangible assets, raw materials, intermediate products and services of better quality is also a means of increasing the quantities produced or the intrinsic quality of production. Harmonising different production processes and improving business management can also help boost business' productivity.

Investing in a better stock of tangible and/or intangible assets such as software or databases enables a company to move towards best practice in its industry by acquiring or developing the best technologies currently available. While these improved technologies are generally specific to a company's industry, some technical innovations (general-purpose technologies) can potentially lead to derivative innovations that benefit the whole economy. Like the widespread post-war electrification of industrial production processes or the adoption of computers during the 1980s and 90s, future developments such as the digital economy, artificial intelligence and the use of robotics offer huge potential for productivity growth across the whole economy.

Investments in fixed or intangible capital on one hand and human capital on the other should not be seen as substitutes for each other, with companies having to choose between them; they are mutually complementary and need to take place simultaneously. To take full advantage of a new technology, it is not enough for a company to acquire it or develop it in-house in order to achieve substantial productivity gains. Innovation cannot be technological alone; it must be accompanied by investment in staff skills or managerial innovations, including reorganising the company's working procedures or even redefining its activities.

Optimal process organisation

Outsourcing non-essential activities can also improve a production system's performance by enabling companies to specialise in what they do best. Similarly, easy access to higher-quality inputs, or access under better conditions, whether they are produced locally or internationally, also contributes to improving business' productivity. This easy access requires high-performance transport and communications infrastructure, enabling companies to engage in a continuous exchange of information and products, and can be facilitated by concentrating economic activities in clusters and/or economic development centres. Apart from the commercial exchanges they generate, developing these centres or clusters can also encourage the spread of innovations, as companies imitate each other's best practices, or the joint development of technological innovations.

New products and services

However, innovation in businesses is not limited to developing or adopting new production technologies or new modes of organisation. Developing new products or services for new markets constitutes the final source of productivity growth. While this mode of development can be particularly profitable, though, it is also very risky. The transition from product development to economic success is not easy. This mode of innovation, sometimes described as radical or disruptive by contrast with incremental innovations that improve existing products or processes, is linked partly to the entry of new economic actors (entrepreneurs,

start-ups) and partly to the dynamism of the economic structure. While disruptive or radical innovations can be introduced by established companies, they often come from new economic players. This means it is important to have a sufficient level of creation and growth of innovative new companies, which can be supported by policies favouring entrepreneurial culture and innovation. In addition, the arrival of new companies significantly affects the competitive pressure on existing companies and thus their own incentive to innovate.

Innovation often requires research and development (R&D), but devoting resources to R&D is not enough. The efforts made must also lead to concrete applications and thus increase productivity. Moreover, as R&D effort is by definition risky, particular attention must be paid to its funding, considering the use of venture capital for example.

Universities and public research centres are also major players in the Belgian research ecosystem, both for their contributions in terms of basic research and through spin-offs and the many collaborations between companies and educational and research institutions. These enable the results of research to be circulated and exploited in the markets. The public authorities can also play an important role in spreading technology.

In short, the development and distribution of innovations within the domestic production network, whether the innovations relate to processes, management or products and services, requires an ecosystem characterised by an entrepreneurial and innovation-focused culture favourable to the development of these innovations, in which interactions between public authorities, companies and universities or research centres play an essential role (*the triple helix*).

Given the importance of companies' R&D efforts for the growth of the whole economy, the public authorities also intervene to support these efforts with direct grants and tax incentives. It is important that these means of support are well-designed to maximise their positive effects, given the constraints on the public finances. Thanks to public intervention, the private sector can share the risks involved in developing new products or technologies, leading to innovations that would not have occurred without this intervention. The public authorities are also directly responsible for a proportion of the R&D carried out in the country. In general, this R&D tends to be basic research with no direct economic goal in mind, but it is very important as a contribution to the stock of knowledge and a starting point for future innovations in various fields.

Productivity also depends on various environmental factors

A favourable macroeconomic environment

By offering high-quality services, including services that contribute to a country's innovation ecosystem, such as education and research institutions, the public sector helps ensure the smooth operation of the economy and reinforce its potential for growth. However, the public authorities also have other roles to play.

The benefits mentioned above can only materialise in a favourable environment. Companies and employees have no incentive to invest in improving their future performance if they cannot benefit from it later, or if the benefits appear too uncertain. In this context, the global macroeconomic situation of the economy in question plays a major role. A stable, balanced, well-performing economy creates trust in companies and individuals, encouraging them to invest for the future, e.g. in fixed assets, R&D or education and training. In addition, a favourable environment offers the government financial room for manoeuvre, enabling it to influence the behaviour of companies and individuals with direct and/or indirect incentives. An economy that is performing well overall and growing sufficiently, combined with the appropriate use of

labour and capital resources available, can increase productivity. Monetary and budgetary policy thus has a role to play in creating economic conditions that are favourable for innovation.

A number of international agreements have been signed to slow climate change. The EU's commitments have been distributed between its Member States. Belgium (and its regions) must therefore meet short- and medium-term targets covering renewable energy, energy efficiency and greenhouse gas emissions. This ecological transition implies not only challenges, but it can also offer new opportunities for developing an economy's productivity. Existing techniques considered efficient until recently (for production or transport, energy processes etc.) are becoming less and less sustainable, meaning that a great wave of innovation is required in many areas. Here too, the companies with a head start in this process that are able to make these innovations profitably will benefit from competitive advantage over companies that wait too long.

Markets that function well

The operation of the economy is also influenced by various regulations, which sometimes focus on contradictory objectives. These regulations may be desirable if they are tailored to the objective to be achieved, such as protecting consumers, labour or the environment. But unnecessarily strict standards, obligations and rules hinder the smooth operation of the economy without providing additional protection.

Competition regulations are particularly important. In this area, there is a delicate balance to be struck between having a regime that encourages companies in a market to innovate by enabling them to earn a fair profit from their investments and the need for new players to be able to challenge them, preventing existing companies from abusing their advantage to the detriment of consumers or other companies and their employees. Moreover, excessive protection given to one industry through inappropriate regulation can have potential negative consequences on economic activity as a whole, particularly in industries downstream from this industry. The competition framework must also take into account the risk that innovations will result in excessive market concentration, as is the case for example in the digital field and the platform economy, dominated by a few large players[36].

The development of an economy's productivity can thus also benefit from a regulatory framework that favours business creation. In addition, regulation should not unnecessarily hinder or delay the disappearance or restructuring of companies. Although these events can have painful consequences in the short term, especially for employees, regulations in this area should not be made too restrictive to avoid discouraging business creation or expansion. The disappearance of uncompetitive companies releases productive resources (labour and capital) that may ultimately be reusable productively in other existing or newly created companies, thus increasing overall productivity.

In this respect, it is also important for labour market regulations to allow labour to be reallocated quickly from declining companies and activities to (new) companies and growing activities. This may of course require the workers concerned to change careers or retrain, emphasising once again the important role of continuing training for an economy's productivity. Supporting these transitions requires a specific framework to be put in place (help with reintegration into the workplace, right to training etc.) to ease these changes and keep all workers employable.

Finally, apart from well-organised markets for products and employment, we should note that these transitions require smooth-running financial markets, and particularly the right allocation of the financial

[36] GAFA: Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon.

resources available, through both bank credit and venture capital, enabling investment to be funded on behalf of established companies and new players to enter the market.

High-quality infrastructure

The competitiveness of an economy also depends largely on its performance in the areas of mobility, energy and telecommunications. For example, optimum mobility is important both for commuters and for the supply of inputs and products. Energy and telecommunications providers, meanwhile, are both essential inputs for the production process.

The performance of mobility, energy and telecommunications services is determined by several factors, including infrastructure quality. Network infrastructure (telecommunications and broadband, energy, transport) of sufficient quality and scale for the deployment of ultra-fast digital networks, a suitable continuous energy supply and appropriate mobility management all help make economic activity possible, and are thus essential to achieve productivity growth.

The intensity of exchanges with the rest of the world

The productivity and innovation capacity of an economy, especially in a small country such as Belgium, can also benefit greatly from its integration into the global economy. However, the increasing internationalisation of the economic system brings a number of potential downsides alongside the advantages. For example, the economy and the employment market may depend heavily on decisions taken abroad (e.g. by multinationals). To minimise these risks, an appropriate regulatory framework (national and international) is necessary to guarantee fair competition and a level playing field.

If an appropriate framework is in place, globalisation can greatly improve the advantages of a competitive economy. The ability to access imported inputs under the best possible conditions enables the companies that transform these inputs to improve their productivity, but imports provide also a significant incentive for national producers of inputs of the same kind, given the higher level of competition they are faced with. While this form of competition is often seen negatively in public debate, it is nevertheless useful in encouraging national producers to innovate. Taking part in exports is also linked to companies' productivity. Only the most productive companies are able to sell their production in foreign markets. Having companies in the country that are close to the global technology frontier of their industry is thus essential to maintain external balances in the long term. The Belgian economy and Belgian companies also benefit from flows of direct foreign investment. Multinational companies that establish a base in Belgium can constitute channels for technology transfer, enabling Belgian companies to access technologies developed in other countries. Finally, international flows of people are also a potential source of productivity gains, enabling an economy to attract available talents.

An important facilitating role for economic policy

A number of factors that influence productivity are common to many advanced economies, while others or more or less specific to Belgium. This is partly why the government has little or no impact on a number of determinants. In addition, the Belgian government acts within a specific institutional framework: Belgium is part of the EU and the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), which brings both advantages and constraints. Our country is also a federal state, with authority divided between the federal level and the federated entities.

However, measures can still be taken in a variety of areas to contribute to stronger productivity growth. The next reports from the National Productivity Board will pay particular attention to these factors and

examine how Belgian economic policy can create a more favourable framework in which the potential for innovation and its adoption can be maximised to reinforce productivity growth in the near future.

Activity report

The Board

Creation of the Board

Following the report "Completing Europe's Economic and Monetary Union" prepared by the "five presidents" (22 June 2015), the Council of the European Union adopted a recommendation on 20 September 2016 encouraging the Member States to create national productivity boards. Creating these boards aims to reinforce competitiveness in the long term so that economies become more resilient and better able to recover quickly from economic shocks. The role of the productivity boards is to analyse competitiveness in the broad sense, enhance the knowledge base and inform the national debate in order to strengthen support for policies and reforms.

In Belgium, the National Productivity Board was officially established on 14 May 2019 in accordance with the 25 November 2018 act announcing the creation of the National Productivity Board (published in the Belgian Official Gazette 7 December 2018), transposing the European recommendation.

Mission of the Board

The Belgian National Productivity Board is tasked with:

- conducting studies and analyses of how productivity and competitiveness are evolving in Belgium ;
- carrying out analyses of political challenges in the field of productivity and competitiveness ;
- evaluating the consequences of political options in these areas.

In conducting these missions, the National Productivity Board can establish contacts with national productivity boards in other Member States, communicate publicly as required, obtain appropriate access to the information available from public administrations and consult stakeholders.

The National Productivity Board carries out its missions within the framework of the European Semester, including assisting the European Commission in collecting data and helping governments prepare the national reform programme.

The National Productivity Board publishes an annual report.

Composition of the Board

The National Productivity Board is managed by an Office consisting of :

- a president, proposed by the secretariat of the Central Economic Council (CEC) and
- two vice-presidents, one proposed by the National Bank of Belgium (NBB) and one by the Federal Planning Bureau (FPB).

The Office decides the agenda of meetings and the choice of subjects that will be examined by the Board.

The National Productivity Board consists of 12 members, six at federal level and six at regional level:

- Siska Vandecandelaere (CEC)
- Luc Denayer (CEC)
- Catherine Fuss (NBB)
- Tim Hermans (NBB)
- Chantal Kegels (FPB)
- Joost Verlinden (FPB)

- Caroline Ven (Flemish Region)
- Joep Konings (Flemish Region)
- Marcus Dejardin (Walloon Region)
- Bernard Jurion (Walloon Region)
- Astrid Romain (Brussels-Capital Region)
- Luc Hens (Brussels-Capital Region).

FPS Economy provides the secretariat for the Board.

The members of the Board and its secretariat are appointed by the King.

2019 activities

Board meetings

The National Productivity Board met four times in 2019 :

- 14 May 2019: inaugural meeting in the presence of the Federal Minister of Employment, the Economy and Consumers ;
- 12 June 2019: discussion on the Annual Report ;
- 5 September 2019: discussion on the Annual Report ;
- and 18 October 2019: approval of the Annual Report.

External activities

In addition to the meetings of the National Productivity Board, a number of activities were organised by external organisations with participation from members of the Board, including :

- 11 June 2019: presentation of the Board to the OECD (Brussels) ;
- 16 September 2019: GEE-OECD joint workshop: R&D and innovation policies for the marketplace (Lisbon) ;
- 15 October 2019: presentation of the NPB to the LIME group (Economic Policy Committee) (Brussels) ;
- 14 November 2019: DG ECFIN workshop on national productivity boards (Brussels) ;
- and 22 November 2019: presentation of the Annual Report to employers' and employees' representative bodies (Brussels).

Glossary: Country codes

BE : Belgium	LU : Luxembourg
BG : Bulgaria	HU : Hungary
CZ : Czech Republic	MT : Malta
DK : Denmark	NL : Netherlands
DE : Germany	AT : Austria
EE : Estonia	PL : Poland
IE : Ireland	PT : Portugal
EL : Greece	RO : Romania
ES : Spain	SI : Slovenia
FR : France	SK : Slovakia
KR : Croatia	FI : Finland
IT : Italy	SE : Sweden
CY : Cyprus	UK : United Kingdom
LV : Latvia	US : United States of America
LT : Lithuania	

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Appendix : Advice Central Economic Council

Saisine

L'article 4 de la loi du 25 novembre 2018 portant création du Conseil National de la Productivité prévoit dans son paraphe 2 que les études et les rapports de cette institution puissent faire l'objet d'un débat au sein du Conseil central de l'économie, préalablement à leur publication. Si ce dernier souhaite formuler un avis, cet avis sera joint en annexe lors de la publication de l'étude ou du rapport.

Le rapport annuel 2019 sur la productivité a fait l'objet d'une présentation au Conseil central de l'économie le 22 novembre 2019. À l'issue de cette présentation, la sous-commission « Conseil de la productivité » a rédigé le présent avis.

Le projet d'avis du Conseil Central de l'Economie portant sur le rapport annuel du Conseil national de la productivité de décembre 2019 est adopté à l'unanimité par l'assemblée plénière le 16 décembre 2019, après un vote à distance.

1. **Considérations préliminaires : Importance de l'appropriation des questions de productivité et de compétitivité**

Le Conseil Central de l'Economie (CCE) tient à rappeler que la mise en place de conseils nationaux de la productivité au niveau de l'Union européenne[37] pour suivre les évolutions et alimenter le débat national dans le domaine de la productivité et de la compétitivité doit notamment permettre l'appropriation des politiques au niveau national et l'enrichissement des connaissances sur lesquelles s'appuie la coordination des politiques économiques dans la zone euro et l'Union européenne.

C'est dans cette perspective que dans son avis de mars 2017[38], le CCE estimait qu'une appropriation large et effective fondée sur une discussion permanente avec les interlocuteurs sociaux et les instances du dialogue social est indispensable pour que la stratégie voulue d'un débat sur la productivité et la compétitivité puisse générer une implication réelle de leur part et orienter de manière judicieuse les politiques en ces domaines à tous les niveaux de décision.

Le CCE a une pratique longue et utile de dialogue sur le thème de la compétitivité et sur les déterminants de l'évolution de la productivité, notamment dans le cadre de la loi juillet 1996 relative à la promotion de l'emploi et à la sauvegarde préventive de la compétitivité de 1996 et révisé en 2017. A cet égard, la présence du secrétariat du CCE au Conseil national de la productivité (le CNP) et la perspective d'établir des rencontres régulières avec le Conseil national de la productivité sont importantes. Elles donnent l'occasion aux experts du CNP de confronter leurs analyses avec le point de vue des interlocuteurs sociaux sur les différentes thématiques examinées. En corrolaire, le CNP a l'opportunité de connaître les résultats du dialogue social qui se déroule dans notre pays qui impactent la conduite de la politique socio-économique du pays.

Le ralentissement des gains de productivité donne lieu à de nombreux débats sur les causes et sur les moyens de sortir de cette atonie. Pour le CCE, le défi sociétal consiste à soutenir des gains de productivité tout en veillant, grâce à l'apport du dialogue social à tous les niveaux de décision, à ce qu'ils aient un impact positif sur la prospérité de la population, le renforcement de la cohésion sociale et la soutenabilité environnementale. Les gains de productivité représentent une condition nécessaire mais non suffisante à

[37] http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10083-2016-INIT/fr/pdf
[38] https://www.ccecrb.fgov.be/dpics/fichiers/fr/doc17-670.pdf

l'amélioration de la compétitivité. Ils sont le fondement d'une amélioration des revenus réels, de baisses des prix relatifs et d'un accroissement de recettes fiscales pour le gouvernement. Grâce aux gains de productivité, les entreprises peuvent aussi accroître leur rentabilité, laquelle est déterminante pour les investissements futurs. Ces différents éléments sont nécessaires pour qu'une augmentation de la productivité puisse donner lieu à une amélioration de la compétitivité.

Des domaines importants analysés par le CNP relèvent en Belgique de la responsabilité partielle ou exclusive des Régions ou des Communautés. Dans le cadre de sa mission, le CNP pourrait faire preuve de l'ouverture nécessaire pour connaître et discuter les analyses menées par les instances du dialogue social des entités fédérées. Les différents Conseils économiques et sociaux du pays ont une expérience en ces domaines. Ils sont aussi le lieu privilégié pour assurer une meilleure diffusion de l'information entre les différents niveaux de pouvoir, une plus grande transparence et rechercher le consensus entre les interlocuteurs sociaux sur les politiques à mener.

2. Le rapport du Conseil national de la productivité

L'objectif du premier rapport annuel est de définir l'état de la connaissance sur la productivité et la compétitivité. Il doit permettre d'en apprendre davantage sur les sources de la croissance de la productivité et d'identifier les causes de son ralentissement.

Pour le CCE, il est essentiel que le rapport annuel du CNP rassemble l'état du consensus entre ses membres sur le diagnostic et l'analyse des enjeux politiques en matière de productivité et de compétitivité.

3. Les concepts de compétitivité et productivité

Pour le CNP, la compétitivité est caractéristique d'« une économie capable de produire une croissance durable et inclusive du niveau de vie ». En d'autres termes, une économie capable de réaliser une croissance économique suffisamment soutenue pour permettre d'assurer l'inclusion sociale, le respect de l'environnement et la viabilité financière. Ce n'est pas le cas, par exemple, si la croissance s'accompagne d'un endettement intérieur et extérieur excessif et d'une hausse des charges d'intérêts, qui menacent le niveau de vie futur.

La définition de compétitivité définie par le CNP se rapproche de la définition du CCE telle qu'elle est exprimée dans le Rapport Emploi Compétitivité. Il s'agit d'une définition large qui va au-delà des questions de productivité. Le CCE rappelle l'importance de veiller à la cohérence des concepts employés, notamment pour éviter les possibles interférences avec la loi de 1996 en vertu de laquelle la formation des salaires et les négociations collectives y afférentes relèvent de la compétence exclusive des interlocuteurs sociaux.

Ces clarifications sur les concepts et la réaffirmation des prérogatives des interlocuteurs sociaux sont importantes aussi dans la perspective des contacts noués par les conseils de productivité de l'ensemble de la zone euro afin de procéder à des échanges de vues et de bonnes pratiques. Elles permettent également d'encourager les discussions sur la productivité et la compétitivité dans les Etats membres, tout en tenant compte des dimensions plus larges de la zone euro et le pilotage de la coordination des politiques socio-économiques voulue par le Semestre européen.

Le rapport du CNP est en ligne avec le CCE lorsqu'il considère que la croissance de la productivité est une condition nécessaire à la fois pour que (1) les travailleurs et les investisseurs profitent des avantages de la croissance économique et (2) pour être en mesure de dégager les marges budgétaires permettant d'élargir la palette des choix politiques possibles et ainsi relever les grands défis de notre temps, tels que le vieillissement de la population et le réchauffement climatique.

4. Les constats

La deuxième partie du rapport du CNP analyse les performances de la Belgique en termes de productivité. La Belgique, comme l'ensemble des économies avancées, a enregistré un ralentissement généralisé de la croissance de la productivité, et ce dès le début des années 2000. Il a cependant été plus prononcé en Belgique que dans l'UE. La croissance de la productivité a été plus vive dans l'industrie manufacturière que dans les services marchands, ce qui, dans un contexte de tertiarisation de l'activité économique, pèse dans une certaine mesure sur la croissance de la productivité agrégée.

4.1. Analyse des niveaux de productivité

Dans la mesure où l'accent est mis sur la croissance de la productivité, le CCE estime qu'une analyse plus poussée pourrait être réalisée par rapport aux niveaux de productivité. En effet, la Belgique pourrait être confrontée à des écarts de croissance de productivité avec ses principaux voisins qui s'expliqueraient par la proximité de la frontière technologique[39]. La "frontière technologique" renvoie à l'utilisation de la meilleure technologie disponible (dans un certain domaine de production) à travers le monde. Un pays qui se situe en deçà de la frontière peut, par imitation des technologies existantes, accroître rapidement sa productivité. Un pays qui, par contre, se situe sur la frontière technologique, doit s'employer à la déplacer par le développement d'innovations.

4.2. Traitement statistique

Les différents indicateurs utilisés dans les études et rapports du CNP devraient être définis de la manière la plus précise possible et leurs choix justifiés au regard des concepts visés. Le calcul et l'interprétation des gains de productivité doivent être minutieux et contextualisés, spécialement lorsqu'on procède à des comparaisons internationales et à des analyses des processus à mettre en œuvre ou des comportements des agents socio-économiques. Depuis plusieurs années, l'OCDE et l'Union européenne développent des efforts pour améliorer l'examen et la comparabilité des statistiques de productivité. Ces travaux sont grandement nécessaires dès lors que les données de base restent le principal obstacle au développement d'indicateurs comparables de la productivité. Il est important que les décideurs politiques et les interlocuteurs sociaux soient davantage impliqués dans la façon dont les statistiques disponibles de productivité sont utilisées et dans la manière dont elles peuvent être interprétées.

A ce sujet, le CCE a pris connaissance des problèmes méthodologiques et des difficultés d'accès aux données de haute qualité auxquels le CNP a été confronté. Le CNP a demandé des clarifications à l'Institut des comptes nationaux à la suite d'importantes révisions d'indicateurs de la comptabilité nationale. A la suite de ces clarifications, le CNP indique qu'il examinera dans ses rapports ultérieurs les dynamiques de la productivité pour les différentes régions du pays et branches d'activité. Le CCE souhaite que des analyses particulières soient menées pour les secteurs du commerce, les transports et l'hôtellerie et l'impact du commerce électronique et des achats transfrontaliers.

5. Leviers de croissance de la productivité

La troisième partie du rapport du CNP identifie les sources de croissance de la productivité, les différents leviers de politique économique qui y sont associés ainsi que les acteurs concernés par leurs mises en œuvre.

Pour renforcer la compétitivité, sans pression excessive sur l'évolution des salaires et/ou de l'emploi et la qualité de l'emploi, il convient selon le CCE de soutenir les gains de productivité basés sur l'innovation et les stratégies d'amélioration des compétences. Il est essentiel que ces politiques soient coordonnées entre

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[39] Biatour, B., & Kegels, C. (2008). Les déterminants de l'innovation dans une petite économie ouverte: le cas de la Belgique. Bureau federal du Plan (Belgian Federal Planning Bureau), Working Paper, 11-08. et J. De Mulder et H Godefroid, Ralentissement de la productivité : constats et tentatives d'explication, Article publié dans la Revue économique de Décembre 2018.

les différents niveaux de pouvoir et étroitement associées avec un mix de politiques pour pouvoir déboucher sur un processus vertueux de gains de productivité mis au service du développement de l'ensemble de la société. Ce mix politique concerne notamment les politiques industrielles, commerciales, technologiques, de concurrence, de régulation financière, macroéconomiques, sociales et environnementales. Développer des produits innovants et de nouveaux marchés tels que ceux liés à l'environnement, renforcer la qualité des produits existants, améliorer la qualité des services au début et à la fin de la chaîne de valeur permet aux exportateurs de se soustraire aux pressions concurrentielles des pays à bas salaires et d'accroître leur marge de fixation des prix en devenant aussi moins sensibles aux fluctuations des prix des matières premières.

Au niveau macroéconomique, une industrie plus productive peut également accroître ses parts de marché à l'international, renforçant ainsi la croissance macroéconomique[40]. Pour le CCE, les leviers destinés à renforcer la productivité globale des facteurs doivent jouer un rôle important dans le relèvement des perspectives de croissance de la productivité. La productivité globale des facteurs incorpore ce qui permet d'améliorer la combinaison productive travail/capital, c'est-à-dire le progrès technique au sens étroit (l'innovation), les économies d'échelle, les externalités positives (p.e. knowledge spillovers ou diffusion des connaissances), les améliorations de l'offre de travail, une meilleure gestion, l'amélioration de l'offre de produits, etc. A cet égard, Il est important que les investissements en R&D produisent le plus de résultats économiques possibles, ce qui mérite de retenir l'attention dans de nombreux pays développés et en particulier en Belgique.

6. Le CCE invite le CNP à examiner plus en profondeur les problématiques suivantes :

En plus d'aborder la productivité et les facteurs explicatifs de son évolution, le CCE estime que le rapport du CNP pourrait s'enrichir en mettant en évidence les leviers institutionnels et politiques qui orientent les gains de productivité vers une logique d'économie compétitive telle qu'elle est définie par celui-ci, c'est-à-dire dans une logique d'inclusion sociale, de respect de l'environnement et de viabilité financière.

De cette façon, le rapport du CNP accorderait plus d'importance à la diversité des leviers à disposition des autorités publiques pour promouvoir la productivité. Il faciliterait, par exemple, la conception d'une politique économique active par les pouvoirs publics à travers plusieurs leviers : orientation des demandeurs d'emploi, investissements verts, soutien à l'innovation et aux clusters, etc.

6.1. La gouvernance

Pour le CCE, il est fondamental que la Belgique se dote d'une vision stratégique partagée en matière socio-économique qui donne du sens à l'action des autorités publiques et une perspective aux citoyens et aux entreprises dans un contexte de développements majeurs, tels que des évolutions technologiques (incluant la numérisation de l'économie), la montée de nouveaux concurrents au niveau mondial, les changements climatiques et la décarbonisation nécessaire de l'économie et les changements démographiques. Une telle vision doit se concevoir à travers la coordination des niveaux politiques de notre pays et le respect des spécificités socio-économiques de chaque région. Les différents niveaux de pouvoir doivent mieux utiliser les organes de coordination existants et renforcer la transparence de ceux-ci, notamment vis-à-vis des interlocuteurs sociaux.

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[40] Inversement, l'internationalisation a aussi un effet positif sur la croissance de la productivité. La concurrence internationale crée en effet des incitants à l'innovation ; elle élargit également le marché potentiel et permet ainsi aux entreprises de réaliser des économies d'échelle (et de récupérer de cette façon les frais de l'innovation) ; et l'internationalisation (au sens large) fait en sorte que les entreprises ont accès à des intrants meilleur marché et de meilleure qualité, côtoient des connaissances et des savoir-faire et s'instruisent au contact des entreprises internationales concurrentes et d'autres entreprises de la chaîne de valeur mondiale.

Dans cette perspective de vision stratégique partagée, les travaux menés par les interlocuteurs sociaux, notamment dans le cadre de l'élaboration du Rapport emploi-compétitivité, mettent en exergue les objectifs de politique que sont la cohésion sociale, la création de richesse, la soutenabilité environnementale, la soutenabilité des finances publiques et l'équilibre de la balance des opérations courantes, conditions sine qua non pour créer une société prospère et durable.

Les interlocuteurs sociaux ont identifié les défis socio-économiques prioritaires pour l'économie belge qui doivent être traités avant tout, selon eux, par les autorités fédérales et régionales. La transition énergétique vers une économie bas carbone -tout en garantissant la sécurité d'approvisionnement et des prix compétitifs- et la politique de mobilité plus durable et plus fluide figurent parmi ces défis prioritaires.

6.2. Le rôle du secteur public dans le fonctionnement du marché

Une bonne réglementation réconciliant divers objectifs de façon équilibrée est importante. De nombreuses réglementations visent à atteindre des objectifs économiques, sociaux et/ou environnementaux, de protection des consommateurs et des travailleurs etc. Elles doivent simultanément faciliter l'amélioration des droits fondamentaux des travailleurs et des citoyens, la protection de la santé et de l'environnement et éviter un impact négatif sur la vitalité des entreprises (Focus « Vers une réglementation qui réalise les objectifs politiques à un coût minimal » du REC 2018-2019).

Pour éviter une concurrence déloyale avec des entreprises étrangères soumises à des législations moins contraignantes dans ces domaines, il est souhaitable de promouvoir une gouvernance et des relations commerciales qui garantissent un level playing field pour les entreprises.

L'avis de la Commission de la concurrence de 2018[41] souligne le rôle important de l'Autorité belge de la concurrence dans la poursuite des pratiques anticoncurrentielles (p.ex. les cartels et les abus de position dominante) et pour contrôler les principales opérations de concentration et de fusion. En comparaison avec les autres pays européens, les moyens mis à la disposition de l'Autorité sont insuffisants pour remplir correctement ses missions. Le CCE plaide pour un renforcement des moyens de l'Autorité belge de la concurrence, en particulier au vu de la nouvelle compétence de l'Autorité, à compter du 1er juin 2020, concernant les abus de position de dépendance économique (B2B) (loi du 4 avril 2019).

6.3. La transition énergétique

La transition énergétique vers une économie bas carbone doit permettre de respecter les limites environnementales et les engagements environnementaux de la Belgique tout en garantissant des prix énergétiques compétitifs pour les entreprises sensibles aux prix de l'énergie et en concurrence avec des entreprises étrangères, et abordables pour les citoyens (et plus particulièrement pour les moins favorisés). La transition énergétique et les choix du gouvernement sur le mix énergétique doivent garantir la sécurité d'approvisionnement. C'est à ces conditions que la transition énergétique pourra contribuer, dans le cadre d'une économie mondiale, à la consolidation d'une société durable et d'activités économiques garantissant des emplois de qualité et une croissance de la valeur ajoutée dans l'économie nationale. Dans leur contribution au Plan national Energie climat 2021-2030, les interlocuteurs sociaux balisent les recommandations relatives aux différentes dimensions concernées : la sécurité d'approvisionnement ; un marché européen de l'énergie entièrement intégré ; l'efficacité énergétique et la gestion de la demande ; la décarbonisation ; et la recherche et le développement.

[41] COMMISSION DE LA CONCURRENCE, AVIS CONCERNANT LA REFORME DU LIVRE IV DU CODE DE DROIT ECONOMIQUE (CCE 2018-1680 DEF MED), 15/06/2018.

6.4. Une mobilité plus durable et fluide

La Belgique est confrontée à un défi majeur en termes de mobilité plus durable et fluide. L'accessibilité (durable) des zones économiques et résidentielles ne s'améliore pas, en grande partie à cause de l'augmentation constante de la congestion du trafic et d'une offre d'alternatives encore limitée. Les embouteillages freinent la prospérité économique et pèsent sur le bien-être de la population. Ils participent au changement climatique et ont un impact négatif sur la qualité de l'environnement, laquelle est importante pour la santé publique des générations actuelles et futures. Il y a nécessité pour le pays d'élaborer une vision interfédérale de la mobilité comportant des domaines d'actions concrets et bénéficiant d'un large soutien sociétal. L'absence d'une vision interfédérale de la mobilité engendre en effet une politique de mobilité incohérente et inefficace et freine les investissements nécessaires dans l'infrastructure de transport et le développement de l'offre de mobilité. La politique de mobilité durable, doit « poursuivre simultanément les objectifs suivants : donner aux citoyens un accès abordable, sûr et efficace aux biens et services, aux lieux de travail et à la vie sociale; permettre aux entreprises d'accéder de manière concurrentielle, sûre et efficace à leurs matières premières et de fournir leurs biens et services de la même façon et de minimaliser l'impact de la mobilité sur l'environnement et la santé publique » (REC 2018-2019).

Les autres domaines d'action concernent entre autres : une réflexion sur le système de mobilité actuelle et l'intégration des différents modes dans une perspective de développement de la multimodalité, le renforcement de l'attractivité du transport de personnes et de marchandises par voie ferrée, le renforcement du régulateur ferroviaire, le renouvellement des flottes publiques, une plus grande attention pour la mobilité douce, la nécessité d'investissements pour optimaliser l'infrastructure de transport ; la mise en œuvre des technologies au service d'une gestion flexible/modulable du trafic et une révision de la fiscalité de la mobilité[42].

6.5. Les investissements stratégiques

L'investissement public – dans les infrastructures, la recherche, l'éducation, la santé – est un puissant levier ainsi qu'un pilier du progrès économique et social. Il permet non seulement d'accroître la demande et de créer des emplois aujourd'hui, mais aussi, en catalysant l'activité privée, de soutenir l'innovation et d'améliorer les compétences, d'augmenter la capacité de croissance à long terme de l'économie et de répondre aux besoins des citoyens.

Le CCE observe que le rapport annuel du CNP accorde à l'investissement public un rôle limité. La question de l'intervention publique est traitée principalement à travers l'angle du besoin en infrastructures et du financement dans la R&D. En ce qui concerne ce dernier point, il est important de s'interroger sur une manière plus efficace d'assigner l'aide à la R&D[43]. D'autres investissements sont également indispensables pour améliorer la productivité. Le capital humain, notamment, peut être soutenu au moyen d'investissements dans l'enseignement et la formation continue. Dans l'avis relatif au Pacte national pour les investissements stratégiques, le CCE rappelle que pour profiter au maximum des effets bénéfiques du

[42] Si un système de redevance kilométrique intelligente est instauré pour tous les véhicules, il doit déplacer la fiscalité de la possession vers l'utilisation d'un véhicule. Plusieurs conditions devront être remplies : le système doit être harmonisé pour l'ensemble du territoire belge sans empêcher les régions d'appliquer des tarifs différenciés ; la redevance doit être fixée en fonction de la congestion, de la pollution atmosphérique et de l'utilisation de l'infrastructure ; il convient d'effectuer une analyse des conséquences sociales d'une telle redevance et des mesures adéquates qui doivent être prises dans ce cadre ; il faut continuer à investir dans les transports publics avec une excellente couverture et une infrastructure adaptée, afin d'offrir une alternative fiable à la voiture individuelle (Avis PNEC, 2019).

[43] Voir par exemple FPB(2019), Tax Incentives for Business R&D in Belgium – Third Evaluation (https://www.plan.be/uploaded/documents/201905070904440.WP_1904_11894.pdf).

pacte, celui-ci doit s'intégrer dans une politique économique générale de stimulation de la croissance durable et des investissements privés, de développement de l'emploi et de renforcement du bien-être social. Une hausse des investissements, et en particulier des investissements publics, doit viser à stimuler tant la croissance économique à court terme que la croissance économique potentielle à long terme. Le CCE insiste sur la nécessité d'investissements clé dans l'énergie, la mobilité et l'agenda numérique, mais aussi dans la santé et les soins de santé, l'enseignement, la formation continue, les garderies d'enfants ou encore les dépenses actives pour l'emploi.

6.6. L'éducation et la formation continue

Le rapport du CNP relève le rôle joué par l'éducation et la formation dans le processus d'accumulation du capital humain. Ce facteur est essentiel pour stimuler la productivité et la capacité d'innovation. L'accès à une éducation de qualité pour tous est un moyen efficace pour renforcer la cohésion sociale, lutter contre la pauvreté et promouvoir l'égalité. Le CCE insiste sur l'importance d'une insertion durable sur le marché du travail et, dans ce cadre, sur l'importance des qualifications et compétences pour la sécurisation des parcours professionnels et la réponse aux besoins de recrutement des entreprises. Des moyens suffisants doivent être dégagés pour permettre à chacun l'accès au marché du travail, aux formations et à l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie sans discrimination fondée sur l'âge, l'origine, le sexe ou le niveau d'instruction ou de qualification. A ce sujet, les tableaux de bord présentés dans le focus du REC 2018-2019 sur la « Formation continue » (CCE 2019-2102) reprennent un ensemble de chiffres sur la formation continue (indicateurs financiers et taux de participation)[44]. La participation à la formation continue constitue une responsabilité partagée entre les employeurs, individus et pouvoirs publics.

Les interlocuteurs sociaux identifient une meilleure adéquation de l'offre et de la demande sur le marché du travail comme un défi prioritaire pour l'économie (REC 2018-2019). En effet, l'économie belge est confrontée à un problème structurel d'inadéquation sur le marché du travail. D'un côté, de nombreux postes restent difficiles à pourvoir. De l'autre, des groupes spécifiques de la population continuent d'éprouver des difficultés à être intégrés au marché du travail. Ce phénomène se révèle être en Belgique un frein sérieux à l'activité économique et une menace pour la cohésion sociale. En outre, il risque encore de s'aggraver en raison des changements technologiques et démographiques et des transformations liées à la transition environnementale auxquels l'économie devra faire face. Le problème d'inadéquation sur le marché du travail reflète un dysfonctionnement de ce marché et des institutions qui l'encadrent (comme le système d'enseignement et de formation, les transports, les organismes de placement etc.), dysfonctionnement qui risque de s'approfondir en raison du contexte technologique, social et démographique changeant et qui constitue une barrière à l'emploi non négligeable pour certains groupes de la population. Relever le défi de l'inadéquation sur le marché du travail implique donc de travailler sur plusieurs domaines, y compris en dehors de ce marché même, en mobilisant tous les acteurs concernés : employeurs, travailleurs, monde associatif et pouvoirs publics. L'objectif visé étant de garantir un développement économique inclusif où la création d'emplois et de valeur bénéficie à toutes et à tous de manière juste.

6.7. Le dynamisme entrepreneurial

Il importe de vérifier, sans pour cela remettre en cause les objectifs qui président à leur établissement que les règles qui régissent l'organisation de l'économie - notamment sur les marchés de produits et le marché du travail ou dans le fonctionnement des administrations publiques - ne constituent pas des freins inutiles à l'émergence de nouvelles activités, de nouveaux acteurs, de nouveaux modes de production, etc. Stimuler

[44] Les tableaux sont disponibles sur :
https://www.ccecrb.fgov.be/dpics/fichiers/2019-10-25-01-43-50_doc192102fr.pdf#page=27

l'entrepreneuriat, et en particulier l'entrée de nouvelles firmes à haut potentiel et la sortie des firmes les moins efficaces, peut améliorer la productivité. Ceci s'avère crucial particulièrement pour les services marchands. De plus, une concurrence accrue peut aussi être un incitant supplémentaire à innover, en vue de maintenir son niveau d'efficacité.

A cet égard, le CCE suggère que le CNP examine dans quelle mesure l'adaptation du cadre règlementaire s'impose pour faciliter l'entrée de concurrents potentiels ou la sortie des entreprises peu efficaces, ainsi que pour permettre aux entreprises de se développer et de mettre en place des conditions favorables à l'accroissement de l'efficacité.

Le CNP souligne la présence importante d'entreprises « zombies » qui complique le fonctionnement des entreprises existantes et la création de nouvelles entreprises. Leur manque de moyens financiers les oblige à moins investir dans le progrès technologique, ce qui freine à son tour la croissance de la productivité pour l'ensemble de l'économie. Le personnel de ces entreprises accumule quant à lui un retard technologique étant donné ce manque d'investissement dans l'innovation. Cela soulève plusieurs questions : dans quelle mesure, la législation relative aux faillites, les mécanismes efficaces de détection des risques, les possibilités de restructuration et l'accompagnement social des travailleurs permettent des perspectives économiquement viables et socialement acceptables pour ces entreprises ? Le CCE invite le CNP à se pencher sur ces questions et à aborder le sujet des entreprises zombies avec discernement. Il rappelle que la disparition d'entreprises non productives s'accompagne d'effets négatifs pour les travailleurs et les entreprises concernés qui peuvent s'avérer persistants s'ils ne sont pas pris en charge de manière appropriée. En outre, il signale qu'il peut être préférable de privilégier la réorganisation des sociétés zombies au potentiel de croissance clairement démontré (notamment par le biais d'une acquisition et d'investissements nécessaires pour améliorer leur productivité) plutôt que la sortie directe du marché.

Concernant l'effet de la crise économique et l'impact négatif de la crise financière sur la productivité belge, le CCE estime qu'il conviendrait d'examiner en quoi celle-ci a affecté l'évolution de la productivité belge. Depuis la crise, de nombreuses initiatives ont été prises dans le secteur financier belge dans le but de stimuler des projects positifs visant à rendre l'économie plus durable. Il est important de poursuivre ces évolutions positives et d'éviter que les erreurs du passé ne se reproduisent.

6.8. Innovation et diffusion

L'innovation tient une place centrale dans le rapport du CNP de même que dans les travaux du CCE. Tous deux s'accordent sur la nécessité de traduire l'innovation en croissance durable et inclusive. Les innovations sont importantes non seulement pour relever le niveau de vie, mais aussi pour renforcer la cohésion sociale.

Le CCE estime toutefois que le rapport se montre peu explicite sur la formule qu'il met en avant pour promouvoir le développement de l'innovation et sa diffusion, à savoir un « *écosystème caractérisé par une culture entrepreneuriale et d'innovation propice au développement de ces innovations dans lequel les interactions entre pouvoirs publics, entreprises et universités ou centres de recherche jouent un rôle essentiel (triple hélice)* ». Il invite le CNP à approfondir davantage ce concept, en explicitant notamment le rôle qui est attendu des différents acteurs et les conditions dans lesquelles leurs interactions devraient se produire.

Les travaux du CCE montrent que pour parvenir à une croissance suffisante de la productivité et de l'emploi, il est souhaitable de miser à la fois sur un plus grand nombre d'entreprises, de taille suffisamment grande, qui peuvent créer de nouvelles connaissances et des innovations radicales et ainsi déplacer la frontière technologique. Les travaux du CNP pourraient notamment se pencher sur les questions qui suivent. Quelles sont les causes du manque de valorisation de la R&D en Belgique malgré l'intensité de R&D relativement élevé ? Quel pourrait être le cadre institutionnel propice au développement des innovations garantissant que les facteurs de production se déplacent vers les entreprises les plus productives ?

Le fossé séparant les entreprises les plus productives et les autres pose aussi la question de la diffusion des connaissances et des techniques de production de ces entreprises productives vers le reste de l'économie. Le CCE désire qu'une attention particulière soit accordée à la manière dont la diffusion peut être stimulée.

Certains facteurs inhérents aux processus d'innovation rendent par ailleurs une intervention publique souhaitable. Les risques élevés, les coûts irrécupérables, l'incertitude des marchés, l'impossibilité de s'approprier pleinement les résultats de la recherche et les retombées positives constituent des éléments qui conduisent à des investissements inférieurs à ce qui est socio-économiquement souhaitable.

Pour améliorer la diffusion de l'innovation, il peut être profitable de continuer à stimuler les partenariats entre centres de recherche publiques et le secteur privé en veillant toutefois à un partage juste des profits et des risques qui y sont associés.

6.9. Les chaînes de valeur

Le rapport du CNP souligne l'analyse des chaînes de valeur, à côté des études traditionnelles de performances à l'exportation. La productivité tend à être plus élevée dans les entreprises directement intégrées aux chaînes de valeur mondiales. A travers le processus de division internationale de la chaîne de création de valeur, certains services se révèlent étroitement imbriqués dans la production et dans les échanges internationaux de biens industriels. A cet égard, ils constituent un enjeu essentiel de la compétitivité extérieure de l'économie qui méritent l'attention du CNP.

7. Le CCE : lignes directrices pour faire face aux défis socio-économiques de la Belgique

Le Rapport Emploi-Compétitivité 2018-2019 identifie les défis socio-économiques à relever par notre pays permettant de promouvoir la compétitivité nationale, telle qu'elle est définie dans le même rapport[45]. Le point de départ des travaux du CCE est l'identification des principaux objectifs politiques que sont la cohésion sociale, la création de richesse, la soutenabilité environnementale, la soutenabilité des finances publiques et l'équilibre de la balance des opérations courantes, conditions sine qua non pour créer une société compétitive.

Le CCE a identifié un certain nombre de défis socio-économiques importants pour l'économie belge. Il s'agit de l'innovation, de l'économie circulaire, d'une sécurité sociale soutenable, de l'adéquation sur le marché du travail, des prix à la consommation et des prix business-to-business, de la transition énergétique vers une économie bas carbone et d'une mobilité durable et fluide.

Le Conseil s'est également attaché à approfondir différents facteurs à mobiliser pour relever lesdits défis. Pour chaque facteur, un « focus » propose des mesures concrètes de politique socio-économique à mettre en œuvre et/ou les principes qui devraient guider cette mise en œuvre. Ces focus concernent la bonne réglementation, la formation continue, le développement de la multimodalité, l'énergie et le climat, le développement des entreprises à forte croissance, l'e-gouvernement.

[45] CONSEIL CENTRAL DE L'ÉCONOMIE (2019), *Lignes directrices pour faire face aux défis socio-économiques de la Belgique*, CCE 2019-2100. Disponible sur : https://www.ccecrb.fgov.be/p/fr/697/