WP3 Flemish/Belgian National Report

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Yennef Vereycken

Jeffrey David Turk

Valeria Pulignano

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1.1. Introduction

The current state of industrial relations and social dialogue in Flanders/Belgium is characterized by a complex, well-entrenched system that plays a pivotal role in managing the region's socio-economic and environmental challenges (Eurofound, 2023; European Trade Union Institute, 2016). Despite Flanders being predominantly a tertiary economy, it maintains a significant secondary sector, including energy-intensive industries like refining, chemicals, and iron and steel activities. These industries have been historically responsible for a substantial portion of the region's greenhouse gas emissions, underscoring the importance of industrial policies in environmental management.

In terms of industrial relations, Belgium boasts a highly structured system, predominantly determined at intersectoral and federal levels. However, recent institutional reforms have granted more power to regions in fields such as health and safety or employment policies. The social dialogue process in Belgium is deeply rooted, with negotiations occurring at various levels - national, sectoral, and company. The national level features cross-industry agreements negotiated every two years, focusing on remuneration and working conditions. These agreements are influenced by wage developments in neighbouring countries and are subject to the 1996 Wage Standard Law.

At the sectoral level, joint committees and subcommittees, comprising representatives from employers' and trade union organizations, play a crucial role. They decide on pay levels, working conditions, and training, and are instrumental in preventing and resolving collective disputes. Belgium's strong culture of social dialogue is also evident in its high trade union membership rate and extensive coverage of employees by collective agreements.

The transition to a climate-neutral economy poses significant challenges for Flanders, given the energy-intensive nature of its industries and reliance on fossil fuels. However, the region's robust system of social dialogue, involving trade unions and employer associations, is key to facilitating ongoing changes. This is particularly critical in the context of comprehensive industrial transition programs like "Klimaatsprong," which shape regional-level industrial policies related to climate change.

In summary, the industrial relations and social dialogue in Flanders/Belgium are essential in addressing both socio-economic issues and environmental challenges, particularly in the context of the green transition.

1.2. Overview of Industrial Relations and Social Dialogue in Flanders/Belgium

The historical context of industrial relations in Flanders, the most populous region of Belgium, is deeply intertwined with the broader socio-economic and political developments of the country. This history has significantly shaped the current state of industrial relations in the region.

1. **Post-World War II Reconstruction and Economic Expansion:** After World War II, Belgium, including Flanders, underwent rapid industrialisation and economic expansion. This period saw significant growth in various sectors such as steel, textiles, and automotive industries, laying the foundation for a strong industrial base in Flanders.
2. **Rise of Trade Unions and Social Dialogue:** The post-war period was also marked by the strengthening of trade unions and the establishment of a structured system of social dialogue. The trade unions played a critical role in advocating for workers' rights and welfare, influencing labour policies and regulations.
3. **Federalisation of Belgium and Regional Autonomy:** The federalisation process of Belgium, which started in the 1970s and continued through several reforms, had a substantial impact on industrial relations. This process granted more autonomy to the regions, including Flanders, in managing aspects of their labour market, such as employment policies and health and safety standards.
4. **Economic Shifts and Industrial Transformation:** Over the decades, Flanders experienced a shift from traditional industries towards a more service-oriented economy. However, the region maintained a robust secondary sector with significant industries. These changes brought new challenges and opportunities for industrial relations, necessitating adaptations in social dialogue and labour practices.
5. **Globalisation and European Integration:** The effects of globalisation and European integration further influenced the industrial relations landscape in Flanders. Belgium's integration into the European Union brought new regulatory frameworks and policies, impacting wage negotiations, working conditions, and collective bargaining processes.
6. **Recent Developments and Challenges:** In recent years, Flanders, like other European regions, has faced challenges such as global economic fluctuations, the digital transformation of industries, and the transition towards a green economy. These developments have necessitated a continual evolution of industrial relations practices, with an increasing focus on sustainability, innovation, and adapting to new labour market realities.

In summary, the historical context of industrial relations in Flanders is characterised by post-war industrial growth, the strengthening of trade unions, regional autonomy, economic shifts, and the influence of global and European dynamics. This history has shaped a complex and adaptive system of industrial relations that continues to evolve in response to contemporary challenges.

The existing structure and function of industrial relations in Flanders/Belgium are characterized by a well-established, multi-layered system. This system is integral to managing the region's transition to a sustainable, green economy. Key elements of this structure include:

1. **Multi-Level Negotiation Framework:** Industrial relations in Belgium operate at three primary levels: national, sectoral, and company. The national level involves cross-industry agreements negotiated biennially, focusing on overarching issues like remuneration and working conditions. Sectoral negotiations occur within specific industries, addressing more detailed aspects relevant to each sector. At the company level, negotiations are tailored to the needs and conditions of individual companies.
2. **Role of Social Partners:** Trade unions and employer associations are pivotal in the Belgian system of industrial relations. These social partners engage in negotiations and dialogues at all levels, advocating for their respective constituencies. The involvement of these social partners is crucial in shaping policies and practices, particularly those related to the green transition.
3. **Structured Collective Bargaining:** Collective bargaining is a cornerstone of the Belgian industrial relations system. It facilitates agreements on wages, working hours, and other employment conditions. This process ensures that the needs and rights of workers are balanced with the operational requirements of businesses.
4. **Legal and Regulatory Framework:** The industrial relations system in Belgium is underpinned by a comprehensive legal and regulatory framework. This framework sets out the rights and obligations of employers and employees, including aspects like wage norms, working conditions, and dispute resolution mechanisms.
5. **Green Transition and Sustainability:** In the context of the green transition, industrial relations in Belgium play a crucial role. Social dialogue is increasingly focusing on sustainability issues, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions, energy efficiency, and the transition to renewable energy sources. The involvement of social partners in these discussions ensures that the transition to a green economy is balanced with the protection of workers' interests and the competitiveness of industries.
6. **Adaptation to New Challenges:** The system is continuously adapting to new challenges, including those posed by the digital transformation and the need for sustainable

development. This includes addressing issues such as skills development, job security in transitioning industries, and the creation of new employment opportunities in green sectors.

In summary, the industrial relations system in Flanders/Belgium, with its structured collective bargaining, active role of social partners, and multi-level negotiation framework, is well-positioned to address the challenges and opportunities presented by the green transition. This system's adaptability and focus on sustainability are key to achieving a balanced and just transition to a greener economy.

1.3. Role of Social Dialogue in Addressing Industrial and Environmental Challenges

The function of social dialogue within the industrial sector in Flanders, particularly in the context of the green transition, is multifaceted and pivotal. It encompasses several key roles:

1. **Facilitating Negotiations and Agreements:** Social dialogue in Flanders serves as a platform for negotiations between employers, employees, and their representatives. This involves discussing and reaching agreements on various issues such as wages, working conditions, and employment terms, which are critical in managing the impact of the green transition on the workforce.
2. **Addressing Environmental Challenges:** In the context of the green transition, social dialogue is increasingly focused on addressing environmental challenges and aligning industrial practices with sustainability goals. This includes discussions on reducing emissions, enhancing energy efficiency, and transitioning to renewable energy sources within the industrial sector.
3. **Shaping Industrial Policies:** Social dialogue plays a key role in shaping industrial policies, especially those related to the green transition. By involving social partners (trade unions, employer associations) in policymaking processes, the dialogue ensures that policies are balanced, practical, and consider the perspectives of both employers and employees.
4. **Promoting Innovation and Skills Development:** The transition to a green economy requires innovation and the development of new skills. Social dialogue facilitates the discussion and implementation of strategies for upskilling and reskilling workers, ensuring that the workforce can adapt to new technologies and sustainable practices.
5. **Ensuring Social Protection and Just Transition:** A crucial function of social dialogue is to ensure that the transition towards a green economy is socially just. This involves safeguarding workers' rights, ensuring job security, and managing the social implications of transitioning from traditional, often more polluting, industries to greener alternatives.
6. **Conflict Resolution:** Social dialogue provides a mechanism for resolving conflicts that may arise due to the restructuring of industries as part of the green transition. It offers a structured approach to addressing disputes and finding mutually acceptable solutions.

In summary, social dialogue in Flanders' industrial sector should be integral to managing the transition to a green economy. Theoretically it should ensure that this transition is not only environmentally sustainable but also socially equitable, balancing the needs of the economy, the workforce, and the environment. How this is currently working in practice is addressed in the case study and focus group research of subsequent chapters.

1.4. Conclusion

This chapter has elucidated the intricate nature of industrial relations and social dialogue in Flanders/Belgium, underlining their critical role in managing socio-economic and environmental challenges in a predominantly tertiary economy with a significant secondary sector. It detailed the evolution of industrial relations post-World War II, the impact of federalisation, economic shifts, and globalisation. The current structure features a multi-level negotiation framework, a pivotal role for social partners, structured collective bargaining, and a legal framework supporting this system. Emphasis is placed on the green transition, where social dialogue should be involved in addressing environmental challenges, shaping policies, promoting innovation, and ensuring a just transition.

The forthcoming chapters build on this foundation. Chapter 2 will delve into five detailed case studies, showcasing social dialogue in action within specific sectors, revealing how these theoretical frameworks translate into practical initiatives. Chapter 3 then presents focus group research, providing insights into the effectiveness and challenges of these practices from the perspectives of key stakeholders.

2. Analysis of the case study research: Five cases of social dialogue in action

2.1 Introduction

The case studies selected from the Flemish region of Belgium aid in understanding how industrial relations and social dialogue in Flanders/Belgium are being shaped in the face of environmental challenges and the green transition. These case studies are crucial in providing real-world examples of how companies, trade unions, and policymakers are responding to the demands of sustainability and climate change within the industrial sector.

The objectives of these case studies are:

1. To explore the practical application of social dialogue in addressing environmental issues within the industrial sector.

2. To understand the role of different stakeholders, including trade unions, employer associations, and government entities, in driving and responding to changes necessitated by environmental sustainability goals.
3. To assess the impact of these initiatives on both the workforce and overall business strategies.
4. To glean insights into best practices, challenges faced, and lessons learned in the process of integrating environmental concerns into industrial relations and business operations.

These objectives aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of social dialogue in the context of environmental challenges, contributing to a broader narrative on sustainable industrial development in Flanders/Belgium.

2.2 Case Study 1: Chemli

2.2.1 Introduction to Chemli and Its Industrial Context

The company we nickname Chemli is a pivotal player in Flanders' chemical industry, primarily known for producing PVC, caustic soda, and chlorine derivatives, essential in construction, healthcare, and automotive sectors. Its Limburg site, operational since the 19th century, has grown into one of the region's most prominent employers, boasting about 600 employees and reflecting the company's significant economic contribution.

This site, with advanced facilities, underlines Chemli's commitment to efficient and sustainable production. It serves as a strategic hub, linked by pipeline, rail, and ship to other Chemli sites across Europe, consolidating its role in the global chemical industry. The company's export capabilities extend its influence beyond Belgium, signifying its importance in international markets.

Chemli's dedication to responsible manufacturing is evident in its ISO certifications for quality, environmental, and energy management, aligning with Flanders' aspirations for eco-friendly industrial practices. The company's investment in innovation and R&D enhances its processes, focusing on sustainability and environmental stewardship.

In summary, Chemli's operational scale, historical legacy, and commitment to sustainable and innovative practices render it an integral component of Flanders' industrial fabric, contributing significantly to the region's economy and environmental objectives.

2.2.2 Environmental Challenges and Chemli's

Chemli, active in the chemical industry in Flanders, Belgium, faces several environmental challenges inherent to its sector. These challenges are primarily related to the production of chemicals like PVC, caustic soda, and chlorine derivatives. The environmental issues include:

1. **Emission Control:** The production processes in the chemical industry, particularly for PVC and chlorine derivatives, often involve significant emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants. Managing and reducing these emissions is a crucial environmental challenge.
2. **Energy Consumption:** The chemical industry is typically energy-intensive, with substantial energy requirements for various chemical processes. Reducing energy consumption and increasing energy efficiency are important for sustainability.
3. **Resource Management:** Efficient use of resources, including raw materials and water, and minimizing waste production are significant challenges, especially in the context of sustainable production practices.
4. In response to these challenges, Chemli has adopted several strategies and initiatives:
5. **Sustainable Production Practices:** Chemli focuses on enhancing the efficiency and sustainability of its production processes. This includes investing in state-of-the-art technologies that reduce emissions and energy consumption.
6. **Investment in Research and Development (R&D):** The company invests in R&D to innovate and develop more sustainable production methods. This includes exploring new processes that have a lesser environmental impact.
7. **ISO Certifications:** Chemli holds certifications for quality management (ISO 9001), environmental management (ISO 14001), and energy management (ISO 50001), indicating a commitment to high environmental standards.
8. **Collaborations and Partnerships:** Chemli collaborates with various stakeholders, including government bodies and research institutions, to enhance its environmental management practices. These collaborations help in aligning with regional and national environmental goals.
9. **Community Engagement and Compliance:** Chemli engages with the local community and ensures compliance with environmental regulations. This includes addressing any environmental concerns raised by local residents and regulatory bodies.

By implementing these strategies and initiatives, Chemli aims to mitigate the environmental impact of its operations while maintaining its competitive position in the chemical industry. The company's approach reflects a broader industry trend towards greater environmental responsibility and sustainability.

2.2.3 Role of Social Dialogue in Environmental Initiatives

Social dialogue at Chemli plays a crucial role in environmental decision-making, involving a dynamic interaction among management, employees, and trade unions. This process reflects a collaborative approach to addressing environmental challenges in the chemical industry.

- **Inclusive Decision-Making Process:**
    - **Management:** Typically initiates discussions on environmental policies and strategies, bringing forward proposals based on business objectives and regulatory requirements.
    - **Employees and Trade Unions:** Act as crucial stakeholders in this dialogue. Their input is vital in shaping policies that are not only environmentally sound but also feasible and considerate of the workforce's concerns and needs.
    - **Joint Committees/Subcommittees:** Formal platforms such as joint committees or subcommittees are utilized for discussions, where representatives from management, employees, and unions can collectively negotiate and refine policies. Note that in two of our interviews there is mention of the Joint Health and Safety Committee (Comité voor Preventie en Bescherming op het Werk) at Chemli. This committee discusses safety issues, but it doesn't specifically mention environmental issues. The interviews primarily focus on safety concerns and labour relations.
- **Role of Trade Unions in Environmental Advocacy:**
    - Trade unions at Chemli may advocate for stronger environmental practices, ensuring that the company's policies align with broader sustainability goals.
    - They may also push for measures that protect workers from potential health risks associated with environmental hazards.
- **Employee Engagement and Training:**

  Management and unions often collaborate to ensure that employees are well-informed and trained in sustainable practices. This includes education on the importance of environmental protection and training in new, greener processes or technologies.

- **Conflict Resolution and Consensus Building:**

  In instances where there is disagreement between management and employees or unions regarding environmental policies, social dialogue serves as a mechanism for conflict resolution. For instance, in one of our interviews, it was highlighted that there was a disagreement between employees and management regarding the introduction of a new environmentally friendly production process. Employees were concerned about potential job losses due to automation. Through social dialogue, a consensus was reached that involved retaining jobs and providing additional training to employees to adapt to the new process. This example illustrates how social dialogue at Chemli resolves conflicts by considering both environmental goals and workforce concerns, ultimately leading to a more balanced decision.

- **Feedback Mechanism:**

  Social dialogue provides a feedback loop. Employees, through their representatives, can voice concerns or suggest improvements to environmental strategies, ensuring that these strategies are continuously refined and effectively implemented.

- **Monitoring and Evaluation:**

  Joint efforts are made to monitor the effectiveness of environmental policies. This collaborative monitoring helps in assessing the impact of these policies and making necessary adjustments.

In summary, at Chemli, social dialogue is utilized as a platform for inclusive decision-making, advocacy, employee engagement, and conflict resolution in environmental matters. The interaction between management, employees, and trade unions underpins the development and implementation of effective and sustainable environmental policies, reflecting a collective commitment to environmental stewardship.

2.2.4 Lessons Learned and Best Practices

Chemli's approach to managing just transition processes provides key insights:

1. **Impact on Employees:**
   - **Enhanced Safety and Health:** Further improved by proactive communication and transparent policies during transition phases, leading to a safer and healthier workplace.
   - **Skills Development:** Enhanced training programs in sustainable practices, equipping employees with future-ready skills and supporting career development.
   - **Increased Awareness:** Strengthened by inclusive social dialogues, fostering a deeper sustainability-focused culture among employees.
2. **Impact on Business Operations:**
   - **Operational Efficiency:** Achieved not only through sustainable practices but also by anticipating and managing changes in workforce skills and needs.
   - **Regulatory Compliance:** Strengthened by a collaborative approach between management and employees in understanding and adhering to environmental regulations.
   - **Market Competitiveness & Innovation Drive:** Boosted by a focus on sustainability that fosters innovation, leading to new products and processes.
3. **Impact on Sustainability:**
   - **Reduced Environmental Footprint:** Achievements in emission reduction and energy conservation are complemented by worker retraining and skill development in environmental management.

- **Contribution to Global Goals:** Aligning with international sustainability targets while also focusing on the human aspect of industrial transitions.
- **Long-Term Viability:** Ensuring future-readiness by adopting sustainable practices and preparing for environmental challenges and regulations.

These insights demonstrate the importance of effective communication, inclusive social dialogue, and proactive management in the successful implementation of just transition processes.

2.2.5 Conclusion and Reflection

In conclusion, Chemli's environmental initiatives, driven by social dialogue, have yielded substantial benefits. These include enhanced employee safety, skills development, and a heightened environmental awareness. On the operational front, sustainability efforts have led to increased efficiency, regulatory compliance, market competitiveness, and a culture of innovation. These initiatives align with global sustainability goals, significantly reducing Chemli's environmental footprint and ensuring its long-term viability. Chemli serves as a prime example of how social dialogue can effectively address environmental challenges, emphasizing collaboration among stakeholders. The company's experiences underscore the critical role of social dialogue in promoting sustainable practices in the chemical industry, setting a commendable precedent for the broader sector.

2.3 Case Study 2: Chemea Ghent

2.3.1 Introduction to Chemea:

“Chemea”, a pseudonym for the Ghent, Belgium branch of a US-based global chemical company, specializes in producing a wide range of chemicals, fibres, and plastics vital to various industries. Founded in the early 20th century, with over 30 manufacturing sites worldwide and employing around 15,000 people, its Belgian plant also produces pesticides. Faced with the challenges of intensive fossil fuel use and oil-based pesticide production, Chemea is actively engaged in balancing industrial productivity with environmental sustainability. This includes adopting green practices and technologies, minimizing its environmental footprint, and aligning with global sustainability targets, making it a key case study in navigating the transition towards more sustainable operations amidst the EU's stringent climate goals and the contrasting political-environmental landscape of the US.

2.3.2 Interview with a trade union representative at Chemea

The three major Flanders trade unions (ACV, ABVV, ACLVB) are engaged at Chemea, where the social climate is positive. This study centres on an ACV representative with a long-standing role in the works council, who has been instrumental in raising climate change awareness and initiating policy discussions within the company. In 2019, he first brought climate challenges to the works council's

attention, emphasizing the need for proactive company policies to safeguard employment while addressing environmental impacts. Despite his genuine concern and efforts, initial reactions from leadership and union colleagues were lukewarm, with his presentations deemed too abstract to spur immediate action.

In 2020, the ACV selected the respondent for a training program called "The New Conspirators," organized by Reset. Flanders, a civic society organization. This six-day program aimed to empower employees, particularly trade unionists and prevention advisors, to implement sustainability, circular economy, and climate change initiatives in their workplaces. Over six months, the respondent participated in both individual and group sessions, gaining new perspectives and inspiration to address climate change at Chemea in an innovative manner.

In 2021, the respondent decided to hold individual meetings with works council members, securing a central and welcoming space designed to facilitate these discussions. This room, thoughtfully arranged and filled with climate change materials, served as the venue for one-on-one conversations about the implications of climate change both personally and professionally. Each member was asked the same pivotal questions regarding their personal and professional perspectives on climate change: 'What does climate change mean to you personally'; and 'What does it mean to you professionally?' This approach proved effective for several reasons: it bridged personal beliefs with professional roles, making the climate change dialogue more tangible and emotionally resonant. Furthermore, these individual discussions allowed the respondent to forge an informal network of allies within the works council, identifying those who were personally inclined toward more proactive climate actions but felt constrained or unsupported in their official capacities. This strategic engagement enabled the respondent to discern who could be relied upon for support in advancing climate initiatives.

Following the individual interviews, the respondent revisited the works council with an improved presentation, achieving better engagement and securing commitment to action. This led to significant outcomes:

1. The introduction of climate change as a recurring agenda item every three months at the works council, ensuring ongoing dialogue between site leadership and trade unions.
2. The creation of a Climate Change Coordinator role to oversee climate initiatives across Chemea in Europe.
3. The launch of multiple working groups aimed at addressing climate change challenges, focusing on sustainable alternatives and practices.
4. The initiation of company excursions to explore climate-friendly practices at other organizations, enhancing learning and adoption of sustainable methods.

The respondent highlighted a significant shift: climate change and decarbonization discussions became routine and essential in the works council and at the site level, much like health and safety topics. Furthermore, site leadership began recognizing climate change as a catalyst for changing business models, acknowledging the importance of actively adapting to new product and production process demands.

The respondent appreciates Chemea's progress on climate change, acknowledging his role in this shift. However, he points out challenges in maintaining climate change as a key topic in social dialogue and defining a clear role for trade unions amidst these technical discussions. Technical expertise, crucial for understanding and contributing to discussions on changing production processes, is scarce among trade union members. This gap sometimes leads to trade unions being overlooked in updates or discussions. Through his network, the respondent ensures the union accesses vital information. The agreement for quarterly climate change discussions at the works council marks a significant step towards integrating this critical issue into ongoing dialogues.

The respondent focuses on establishing quantitative control over the outcomes and objectives of the plans presented by site leadership. This involves standardizing information, identifying relevant indicators, and enhancing the comparability of data from leadership. The strategy mirrors how trade unions have adapted to using social indicators provided annually by leadership, suggesting a need for a similar approach towards climate change metrics. This emphasis on outcome metrics over technical expertise in climate change aims to enable trade unions to influence the direction of transformations more effectively.

Finally the respondent highlighted challenges in engaging trade union members with the topic of climate change, noting their uncertainty and lack of immediate connection to their roles at Chemea. He stressed the need for making the issue more tangible through examples of real-world impacts. At the sectoral level, he faced apathy, with the focus remaining on traditional employment issues, leaving little space for climate change discussions. This underlines the importance of adapting communication strategies to better highlight climate change's relevance and urgency at both company and sectoral levels.

2.3.3 Conclusion

The Chemea case study illustrates both progress and persistent challenges in integrating climate change into the corporate agenda through trade union activism. Efforts led by a dedicated trade union representative resulted in structured climate dialogues and practical initiatives within the company. However, these achievements are tempered by ongoing struggles to maintain climate change as a priority in social dialogue and to define a clear role for trade unions amid technical complexities. The

case reflects the critical but arduous path of embedding environmental concerns into corporate practices, highlighting the need for continuous engagement, the development of specialized knowledge, and strategic communication to overcome institutional inertia and scepticism towards sustainable transformation. This narrative acknowledges the successes in advancing environmental stewardship at Chemea, yet remains cautious about the challenges that lie ahead in ensuring sustained impact and broader organizational buy-in.

2.4 Case Study 3: Chemco Antwerp

2.4.1 Introduction to Chemco

Chemco, a large German chemical company, operates a key facility in the Port of Antwerp. With a workforce of 950 employees at this plant and 16,000 globally, Chemco is a significant employer in Belgium. Specializing in advanced polymers and high-performance plastics, the company plays a vital role in various industries. Facing challenges from its dependency on oil and energy-intensive processes, Chemco is actively working towards incorporating circular economic principles into its operations. This shift aims to position Chemco as a trailblazer in the plastics industry, aligning with global sustainability trends and contributing to Belgium's economic and environmental goals.

The trade union and social dialogue structure at Chemco is characterized by the presence of major Belgian trade unions, including the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (in Dutch: *Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond*; hereafter: ACV), the General Federation of Belgian Labour (in Dutch: *Algemeen Belgisch Vakverbond*; hereafter: ABVV), and the General Confederation of Liberal Trade Unions of Belgium (in Dutch: *Algemene Centrale der Liberale Vakbonden van België*; hereafter: ACLVB). These unions represent the workforce at various levels within the company, ensuring that employee interests and concerns are addressed. The structure of social dialogue typically involves regular meetings and discussions between union representatives and management, focusing on a range of issues from workplace conditions to broader corporate policies. This framework facilitates a collaborative approach to addressing employee needs and fostering a harmonious work environment.

Our interviewee, whom we will call “Patrik”, serving as an ACV representative at Chemco, offers a unique and well-informed perspective on the company's operations and challenges. With an extensive career at Chemco and active involvement in ACV, he has a deep understanding of the industry's dynamics. His roles in the Antwerp work council, European work council, and soon in the European ethical committee of the company, give him a comprehensive view of both local and broader European industrial relations. Additionally, his imminent position in the European ethical committee aligns with his efforts to prioritize climate change discussions within the company. Patrik's network and positions within the trade union and Chemco provide valuable insights, making him a key informant for

understanding the complexities of labour relations and environmental challenges in the context of the chemical industry.

2.4.2 Patrik's Environmental Initiatives at Chemco

Patrik has been proactively addressing environmental concerns, particularly climate change and circular economy principles. He has endeavoured to bring these topics into the forefront of social dialogue within the company. His approach has involved raising pertinent questions about Chemco's environmental strategies and their impact on employees, such as retraining and skill development. Patrik's endeavors at Chemco to address climate change have been multifaceted and persistent. He has focused on integrating climate change into the agenda of social dialogue at the company. Despite challenges in engaging management and colleagues on this critical issue, Patrik has continued his efforts to advance understanding and action on climate change at Chemco. He believes that addressing climate change is not just an environmental imperative but also crucial for protecting employment and adapting the workforce to future changes in production processes.

Patrik has engaged in promoting the adoption of circular economic principles within the company's operations. He advocates for strategies that could lead Chemco towards more sustainable and environmentally friendly production processes. This involves pushing for discussions about recycling initiatives, sustainable resource utilization, and the development of products that align with circular economy concepts. His goal is to ensure that Chemco's approach to production and resource management is not only environmentally sustainable but also economically viable and beneficial for long-term employment security.

His determination to bring these topics to the forefront at Chemco highlights the complex interplay between environmental sustainability and industrial labour relations. Despite facing resistance, Patrik has persisted in his efforts to make environmental sustainability a key part of the company's agenda, demonstrating his commitment to both the planet's health and the well-being of Chemco's workforce.

2.4.3 Social Dialogue and Labour Relations

Chemco's approach to engaging with employees and unions in environmental and sustainability matters appears to be somewhat challenging. While the company has set ambitious goals for sustainability and circular economy, these initiatives have not been effectively communicated or discussed with the workforce or their union representatives. Despite Patrik's persistent efforts to initiate dialogue and integrate these topics into social discussions, there has been resistance and a lack of proactive engagement from management. This situation highlights a gap in collaborative planning and shared understanding between management and employees regarding environmental strategies.

Social dialogue and labour relations, particularly concerning environmental issues, are therefore complex at Chemco. The company's management has not been actively engaging with unions like ACV in discussions about environmental strategies, specifically those related to climate change and the circular economy. Despite efforts by trade union representatives like Patrik to include these critical topics in social dialogues, there has been a noticeable gap in collaborative engagement. This situation reflects a broader challenge in integrating environmental concerns into the core of labour relations and company culture.

2.4.5 Impact Assessment

The impacts of Chemco's sustainability initiatives on its workforce, operations, and environmental footprint, as inferred from our study, seem to be indirect and not fully realized. Despite the company's broader sustainability goals, the lack of active engagement with employees and unions on environmental strategies may have limited the effectiveness of these initiatives. This situation suggests a potential missed opportunity in leveraging workforce insights and commitment for operational improvements and reducing environmental impact. Effective employee engagement in sustainability initiatives can often lead to enhanced operational efficiency, a more motivated workforce, and a more substantial reduction in the environmental footprint.

2.4.6 Conclusion and Recommendations

Key Findings from the Chemco Case Study:

5. Limited Integration of Sustainability in Dialogue: Chemco has ambitious sustainability goals, but these haven't been effectively integrated into social dialogues with the workforce or union representatives.
6. Challenges in Employee Engagement: There's a noticeable gap in proactive engagement from management in discussing and implementing environmental strategies with employees.
7. Persistent Advocacy: Despite facing resistance, Patrik consistently advocates for including climate change and circular economy principles in company discussions.
8. Indirect Impact of Initiatives: The effectiveness of Chemco's sustainability initiatives seems limited due to inadequate employee engagement.

Recommendations Based on Chemco’s Experiences:

1. Enhance Management-Employee Communication: Develop clearer channels for discussing and implementing environmental strategies with employees and unions.
2. Foster a Collaborative Culture: Encourage a more cooperative and inclusive approach to integrate sustainability into the core of labour relations and company culture.

3. Recognize and Utilize Employee Insights: Leverage the workforce's insights and commitment for more effective operational improvements and environmental impact reduction.
4. Support Advocates like Patrik: Recognize and support efforts by individuals like Patrik who advocate for environmental concerns, as they can be catalysts for positive change.

2.5 Case Study 4: Cheman

2.5.1 Introduction to Cheman

The company we will call “Cheman” is a prominent player in the chemical industry with a history rooted in innovation and growth. Formed through the merger and acquisitions involving legacy companies, it has become one of the leading producers of vinyl products globally. Specializing in a wide range of products, including PVC and other chlorine derivatives, Cheman caters to diverse sectors such as construction, healthcare, electronics, and automotive industries.

The company’s significance in the chemical industry stems from its extensive product portfolio, advanced manufacturing processes, and commitment to sustainability. Cheman has been actively working towards reducing its environmental impact, focusing on energy-efficient operations, and developing sustainable products. This commitment is reflected in its efforts to integrate circular economy principles into its business model.

Cheman's role in the chemical industry is also marked by its contribution to economic growth and employment. As a major employer in the regions it operates, the company plays a crucial role in local economies. Its focus on innovation keeps it at the forefront of the industry, driving advancements in chemical manufacturing and product development.

The location of Cheman at the Port of Antwerp is also strategically significant. The Port of Antwerp, being one of the largest chemical clusters in the world, offers immense benefits in terms of logistics, access to raw materials, and integration with other chemical companies. This location facilitates efficient transportation and distribution of Cheman's products, enabling the company to serve a global market effectively. Additionally, being part of such a prominent chemical hub fosters collaboration and innovation, enhancing Cheman's capabilities in the chemical industry.

The interviews conducted for the Cheman case study feature six individuals with diverse roles and experiences within the company. These individuals offer valuable insights into Cheman's approach to social dialogue, particularly in the context of environmental issues. Their varied backgrounds, ranging from operational management to human resources to members of the Select Committee of the European Works Council, provide a multifaceted perspective on how the company addresses and integrates sustainability into its operations and labour relations. Their positions within the company

enable them to observe and influence how environmental policies are communicated and implemented, making their insights particularly relevant for understanding the interplay between environmental initiatives and social dialogue at Cheman.

2.5.2 Cheman's Environmental Initiatives and Sustainability Practices

Cheman emphasizes sustainability and environmental stewardship as core aspects of its operations. Their key environmental projects and policies focus on reducing the environmental impact through various initiatives. From the interviews we gather that Cheman recognises the importance of addressing energy efficiency and emission reduction. Key initiatives and discussions in this area include:

1. **Long-Term Energy and Environmental Policy:** Cheman is aware of its significant energy consumption and its impact on the environment. The company is working on long-term strategies to address these challenges, recognizing that the chemical industry is both a contributor to and a potential solution for environmental issues.
2. **Sustainability and Raw Material Challenges:** A primary focus for Cheman is sustainability, particularly concerning energy and raw materials. The company is considering the future of essential raw materials like ethylene, which currently derives from oil, and exploring sustainable alternatives for the future. This focus extends to concerns about plastics in the ocean and emphasizes the need for effective recycling and environmental stewardship.
3. **High Energy Consumption in Production:** Cheman's production processes, particularly for PVC, are highly energy-intensive. For example, the electrolysis process used in splitting sodium chloride (salt) into sodium and chlorine (for PVC production) consumes large amounts of electricity. This energy consumption is comparable to that of a sizeable urban population, highlighting the scale of Cheman's energy usage and the potential impact of any efficiency improvements.

The interviewees especially focused on the long-term sustainability of their business, considering the finite nature of key raw materials like ethylene, which is derived from oil. An important aspect of Cheman's approach to resource optimization thus includes addressing the challenges posed by the eventual depletion of oil reserves. This situation necessitates exploring alternatives to oil for producing essential raw materials like ethylene. Additionally, the company is cognizant of the environmental impact of plastics, particularly the issue of plastics in the ocean, and recognizes the importance of effective recycling as part of their environmental responsibility.

Another significant initiative discussed at length in the interviews is in process innovation. This initiative focuses on developing and refining the technologies and methods used in the production process, specifically electrolysis.

Electrolysis is a fundamental process in the chemical industry, especially for companies like Cheman that produce PVC and other chlorine derivatives. Cheman is not focused on creating the products themselves but on the technological aspect of how these products are made. This includes licensing and engineering knowledge for building electrolysis systems. By focusing on this area, Cheman is essentially investing in process innovation, enhancing the efficiency and sustainability of its production methods.

This approach to process innovation is vital for several reasons. First, it allows for more efficient use of resources and energy in production, which can lead to reduced operational costs and environmental impact. Second, by improving the production process, Cheman can maintain or enhance product quality, adapt to changing market demands more rapidly, and potentially develop new production capabilities in the future. Thus, the emphasis on process innovation, particularly in electrolysis, represents a strategic approach to advancing their production techniques and sustaining their competitive edge in the chemical industry.

These considerations indicate that Cheman is actively engaged in evaluating and planning for the future sustainability of their resources, emphasizing the need for innovation in raw material sourcing and recycling as part of their environmental initiatives. Cheman also recognizes the critical role of energy efficiency, emission reduction and process innovation in its operations. These efforts demonstrate Cheman's commitment to environmental responsibility while maintaining their competitiveness in the chemical industry.

2.5.3 Social Dialogue and Labour Relations at Cheman

Cheman's social dialogue framework, based on the interviews, emphasizes a localized approach to negotiation and collective bargaining, responsive to specific regional regulations and contexts. This approach allows for a tailored handling of employee welfare and benefits that are negotiated at the company level.

Decentralized Collective Bargaining: The interviews indicate that social benefits are negotiated primarily at the local level, which includes a range of welfare provisions. This process is shaped by the unique circumstances and regulatory environment of each location, allowing for more tailored and relevant outcomes for employees.

Involvement of Unions in Environmental Issues: The company has recognized the importance of environmental issues as a common interest for both the business and its employees. There is evidence of collaboration with unions on sustainability matters, particularly at the European Works Council level. This collaboration includes discussions on the sustainability of products and business practices, indicating a shared concern for both employment security and environmental responsibility.

This framework demonstrates Cheman's commitment to a collaborative and region-specific approach to social dialogue and labour relations. By engaging with unions on both welfare and sustainability issues, the company aligns employee interests with broader business goals, fostering a harmonious and productive working environment.

Employee Representation and Union Engagement:

Cheman has a robust framework for employee representation through various unions in Belgium. The social dialogue and labor relations at Cheman are characterized by the following key aspects:

- **High Union Membership:** The union membership at Cheman in Belgium is notably high, with about 85% of the workforce being union members. This level of unionization is typical for Belgium and contributes to a stable labour relations environment.
- **Sectoral and Company-Level Agreements:** In Belgium, labour relations at Cheman are governed by both sectoral agreements and company-level arrangements. This dual structure allows for a comprehensive coverage of employee benefits and rights. Specific agreements at the factory level in Belgium include arrangements like DKV hospital insurances, which is a form of supplementary health insurance that complements the national health care system, which covers basic medical services. DKV offers various plans that typically cover expenses related to hospital stays, such as room charges, surgical fees, and certain medical treatments not fully covered by the national health insurance. Additionally, performance-related negotiations, known as CCT90, are conducted every two years, emphasizing the dynamic nature of labour relations at Cheman[1].

[1] The key features of CCT90 include:

1. **Objective Setting:** Goals or targets must be clearly defined, measurable, transparent, and achievable. These objectives can be related to financial results, productivity, or other measurable outcomes.
2. **Bonus Limits:** There are legal caps on the amount that can be awarded as a CCT90 bonus, ensuring that the system remains fair and reasonable.

These factors indicate a strong and active union presence at Cheman in Belgium, ensuring that employee interests are well-represented and addressed through structured negotiations and agreements. The high rate of union membership and the combination of sectoral and company-level agreements provide a solid foundation for effective social dialogue and labour relations, contributing to a stable and cooperative working environment.

Approach to Labour Relations in Environmental Initiatives

Based on our interviews, the management of labour relations, especially in the context of environmental policies and projects, involves significant interaction and collaboration with union representatives:

1. **Collaboration on Environmental Issues:** There is a clear indication that management and unions work together on environmental matters. This collaboration is rooted in the common interest of both parties – the unions focus on employment security while the company concentrates on its business viability. In the early 2000s, as environmental issues gained prominence, this collaboration intensified. An example mentioned is the formation of a sustainability team within the European Works Council of a parent company, which included both management and union representatives, to discuss the sustainability of products.
2. **Long-Term Environmental Policy Development:** The company acknowledges the necessity of having long-term policies concerning energy, carbon, climate change, and other environmental issues. This approach is part of their strategic planning, recognizing the chemical industry's dual role as both a contributor to environmental problems and a potential solution provider. The involvement of unions in these discussions, while not explicitly detailed, is implied as part of the company's collaborative approach.
3. **Constructive Union Engagement in Major Issues:** In one Cheman locality elsewhere in Belgium there is a tradition of constructive social dialogue, with several agreements in place. While there may be disagreements on smaller benefits, on major issues, there seems to be a

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3. **Tax and Social Security Advantages:** Bonuses paid under CCT90 can have favourable tax treatment and social security contributions compared to regular wages, making them an attractive form of compensation for both employers and employees.

By using CCT90, companies like Cheman can incentivize and reward employees for meeting or exceeding specific performance targets, aligning individual efforts with broader organizational goals.

consensus. The union organizations are described as being very representative of the workforce and are deeply committed to defending the site, indicating a strong and engaged union presence that collaborates effectively with management on significant matters.

This analysis shows that Cheman's approach to labour relations, particularly regarding environmental initiatives, involves active collaboration and dialogue with unions, focusing on aligning the interests of both employees and the business.

Challenges in Social Dialogue

Based on the interviews, employee representation through unions at Cheman in Belgium involves a dynamic and somewhat challenging interaction with management. The unions play a vital role in negotiating employee benefits and advocating for workers' rights. However, the context in Belgium is somewhat different from other European countries, where there is a general trend of reducing union power.

In Belgium, the unions still maintain a significant presence and influence in negotiations with the company. Despite the broader European trend of diminishing union strength, the situation at Cheman in Belgium is more stable, allowing unions to effectively represent their members. Negotiations for social and other employee benefits are not without challenges, but unions can still present strong arguments on behalf of workers to secure these benefits.

This scenario indicates that while the overall power of unions may be under pressure in Europe, the situation in Belgium, particularly at Cheman, remains conducive to effective union representation. The ability of unions to negotiate successfully with management on behalf of employees plays a crucial role in maintaining a fair and balanced labour relations environment.

In Belgium, Cheman has a longstanding tradition of social dialogue, as evidenced in the interview with an interviewee at the company, but at a different site in Belgium. This dialogue is characterized by constructive interactions between the company and union organizations, particularly when addressing significant challenges or substantial issues.

The interview indicates a history of successful labour relations, with no strikes since 1981 at this site. This accomplishment points to effective negotiation and conflict resolution processes. The unions are described as being very attached to the site, implying a deep investment in the welfare of both the employees and the company. This attachment also suggests that the unions are active and committed advocates for the workforce.

When it comes to smaller benefits or less critical issues, there may be disagreements, but for significant matters, there is a consensus between the company and the unions. This approach ensures that major decisions affecting the workforce or the company's operations are tackled collaboratively and effectively.

The unions are noted as being very representative of the personnel, which underscores their importance in the social dialogue framework at Cheman. This representation is crucial for ensuring that the workforce's interests are adequately considered and addressed in company policies and decisions.

This cooperative and integrated approach to social dialogue, with a focus on significant issues and a deep attachment to the site, demonstrates a healthy labour relations environment at Cheman in Belgium.

Conclusion

At Cheman, social dialogue in Belgium is marked by a strong, decentralized approach, with about 85% of the workforce unionized. This high union membership ensures effective employee representation and stable labor relations. The company collaborates closely with unions, particularly on sustainability and environmental issues, reflecting a shared focus on employment security and responsible business practices.

Despite broader trends in Europe of diminishing union influence, Belgian unions at Cheman maintain significant negotiating power. Challenges in social dialogue include complex interactions between management and unions, but the overall approach is cooperative, especially on major issues. This collaborative framework, underpinned by a deep commitment to employee welfare and site-specific concerns, highlights a robust and healthy labour relations environment at Cheman. The unions play a crucial role in advocating for the workforce, ensuring collaborative decision-making on critical company policies and operations.

2.5.5 Impact Assessment

Based on the interviews and available information, Cheman's initiatives have had several notable impacts on its workforce, business operations, and environmental footprint:

Transition Strategy and Employee Involvement: In the interview with the Group HR Director at Cheman, a detailed example of balancing financial objectives with employee welfare and the emphasis on structured dialogue is evident in the discussion about restructuring and employee deployment. The HR director highlights Cheman's policy of prioritizing internal redeployment for employees affected by the joint venture's restructuring. Despite a reduction in headcount, the approach was not to resort

to extensive social plans but to use various measures like pre-retirement or internal redeployment. This approach reflects a balanced consideration of financial objectives and employee welfare, illustrating the company's commitment to responsibly managing transitions while maintaining a focus on employee well-being. This is in line with the emphasis on structured dialogue, demonstrating how Cheman navigates changes with an eye on both business sustainability and employee impact.

Cultural Integration and Change Management: The interview with the Group HR Director provides insights into the cultural integration and change management at Cheman, particularly following the joint venture between the two Cheman parent companies. The HR director discusses the strategic decisions and the implications for internal restructuring, emphasizing the focus on maintaining operational synergies and cost efficiencies. He outlines the significant challenges and measures taken to manage the integration of two distinct corporate cultures, reflecting on the impact this has had on employee morale and work processes. The transition and its management are communicated internally through a combination of local and centralized policies, ensuring that employee concerns are addressed in a manner sensitive to the unique contexts of different regions. This approach illustrates the complexity of managing cultural integration in a global company undergoing significant structural changes.

Economic and Employment Impact: In the interview with the HR manager from Cheman at the other site in Belgium, the economic and employment impact post-transition is discussed in detail. The HR Manager, provides insights into the company's restructuring process, job security, and employment terms. He mentions the efforts to manage the workforce size while maintaining productivity and competitiveness. The emphasis is on internal redeployment and minimizing job losses during transitions. Additionally, the HR manager elaborates on the financial health of the company and its strategies to ensure stable employment conditions, reflecting on the balance between financial sustainability and employee welfare. These aspects are critical for understanding the economic and employment impact of Cheman's transition.

Health, Safety, and Environmental Standards: The interview with this HR manager from the second Belgian site of Cheman provides the most comprehensive coverage on the topic of Health, Safety, and Environmental Standards. He offers detailed insights into how the company ensures the safety of its employees and complies with environmental regulations, especially during the period of transition and restructuring. For Cheman, health, safety, and environmental standards are paramount, especially during transitions. The company has implemented stringent measures to ensure that these standards are not only maintained but also enhanced post-transition. This includes regular safety training for employees, adherence to strict environmental regulations, and continuous monitoring and

improvement of health and safety protocols. These initiatives demonstrate Cheman's commitment to creating a safe working environment and minimizing its ecological footprint, which is crucial given the chemical nature of its operations. The transition period offers an opportunity to reassess and reinforce these standards, ensuring they align with both internal policies and external regulatory requirements.

Skills Development and Training: The Group HR Director at Cheman perhaps best addresses the issue of skills development and training. The Group HR Director discusses the company's strategies for equipping employees with new skills and competencies, highlighting their commitment to continuous learning and development. This is particularly relevant in the context of the company's transition, where adapting to new technologies and processes is essential. The director's role in human resources places him in a key position to offer insights into these training initiatives.

Social Benefits and Compensation: The topic of social benefits and compensation, including changes in these areas, bonuses, health benefits, and other incentives, is addressed by both Cheman HR directors in their respective interviews. They provide insights into the strategies Cheman employs to maintain employee satisfaction and motivation through their compensation and benefits program. Their roles position them to discuss the nuances of how the company's compensation structures and benefit schemes have evolved, especially in response to the organizational changes and transitions.

Future Challenges and Opportunities:

Both Cheman HR managers touched on the subject of future challenges and opportunities related to the green transition in their interviews. They discuss aspects like market trends, regulatory changes, and their potential impacts on Cheman's strategic direction and labour relations. These discussions provide valuable insights into how the company is preparing for the future, particularly in the context of environmental sustainability and the evolving global market. Their perspectives are crucial for understanding the strategic planning and adaptability required in the face of these upcoming changes.

2.5.6 Conclusion and Recommendations

The Cheman case study highlights the company's commitment to sustainable practices and responsible management during its transition. Key areas include:

1. **Transition Strategy and Employee Involvement:** Focused on balancing financial and employee welfare through structured dialogue, especially in restructuring and internal redeployment.
2. **Cultural Integration and Change Management:** Addressed the challenges of merging different corporate cultures, impacting employee morale and work processes. The company

communicated and managed this transition with a combination of local and centralized policies.

3. **Economic and Employment Impact:** Discussed job security, employment terms, and financial health post-transition. Emphasized minimizing job losses through internal redeployment.
4. **Health, Safety, and Environmental Standards:** Implemented stringent measures for employee safety and environmental sustainability, including regular safety training and adherence to environmental regulations.
5. **Skills Development and Training:** Prioritized equipping employees with new skills and competencies for adapting to new technologies and processes.
6. **Social Benefits and Compensation:** Focused on maintaining employee satisfaction and motivation through evolving compensation structures and benefits programs.
7. **Future Challenges and Opportunities:** Addressed potential impacts of market trends and regulatory changes on strategic direction and labour relations, especially related to the green transition.

Recommendations for Other Companies:

1. Prioritize balanced approaches in transition strategies, considering both financial stability and employee welfare.
2. Manage cultural integration with sensitivity to employee morale and work processes.
3. Focus on maintaining job security and stable employment conditions during restructuring.
4. Uphold high standards for health, safety, and environmental sustainability.
5. Invest in continuous learning and skills development for employees.
6. Evolve social benefits and compensation to align with organizational changes.
7. Anticipate and adapt to future challenges and opportunities, especially in sustainability and market evolution.

2.6 Case Study 5: Climate Leap "*Klimaatsprong*"

2.6.1 Introduction to Climate Leap "*Klimaatsprong*"

The "*Klimaatsprong*" initiative in Flanders is a strategic effort aimed at decarbonizing the regional industry. Its primary goal is to facilitate a significant reduction in carbon emissions, particularly in heavy industries, aligning with broader environmental and sustainability objectives. The initiative stands out for its collaborative approach, involving various stakeholders including the government, employers' organizations, environmental groups, and notably, trade unions. This inclusion of trade unions is particularly significant, as it reflects a comprehensive approach to policy preparation, ensuring that the workforce's perspective is integrated into the strategic planning for a greener, more

sustainable industrial sector. The relevance of *Klimaatsprong* lies in its potential to drive significant environmental improvements while considering the socio-economic impacts on the industry and its workers.

This case study on *Klimaatsprong* involved interviews with a diverse group of participants. These included civil servants involved in the Climate Leap policy, trade unionists with a seat in the Permanent Consultative Body, representatives from the employers' association Essencia, an employee from the environmental organization Bond Beter Leefmilieu (BBL), and members of national and sectoral trade unions like ACV Metea. This mix of stakeholders from government, trade unions, employers' associations, and environmental groups provided a comprehensive perspective on the policy initiative and its impact on the decarbonization of Flemish industry.

2.6.2 Role of Trade Unions in Decarbonization

The *Klimaatsprong* initiative greatly benefits from the active involvement of trade unions in shaping its policy. These unions, particularly ACV Metea and the prominent Belgian unions ACV and ABVV, play a pivotal role in integrating the workforce perspective into the decarbonization strategies. By representing workers' interests, they ensure the transition to greener practices is socially equitable and attuned to the socio-economic impacts on labour. Their crucial role in harmonizing environmental aims with employee needs involves advocating for sustainable industrial practices and job security. These unions, with a shared seat in the initiative's Permanent Consultative Body, focus on representing worker interests in policy discussions, aiming for a just transition that emphasizes retraining and skill development. Their collaboration with environmental organizations enhances both their technical grasp and their influence within the initiative, ensuring that labour perspectives are central to policy development, thereby balancing socio-economic considerations with environmental objectives. This collaboration is integral to developing comprehensive and effective strategies for industry decarbonization.

2.6.3 Governance of Climate Leap

The governance structure of the *Klimaatsprong* initiative is characterized by a quadruple helix collaboration. This model involves key stakeholders from four different sectors: government, industry (employers' organizations), academia, and civil society (including environmental organizations and trade unions). This collaborative approach ensures a comprehensive and inclusive policy-making process, where each sector contributes its expertise and perspective. The government provides regulatory and policy guidance, industry brings practical insights, academia contributes research and innovation, while civil society ensures societal and environmental considerations are addressed. This structure allows for a balanced and well-rounded approach to the initiative's objectives.

2.6.4 Stakeholder Perspectives

The governance structure of the *Klimaatsprong* initiative is highlighted by its complex, multi-faceted approach. This structure includes:

Government Bodies: Emphasize a policy framework that supports environmental goals, economic sustainability, and societal well-being, focusing on effective regulation and support for the transition.

Employers' Organizations: Concerned with maintaining industry competitiveness, these organizations seek favorable conditions for sustainable growth and advocate for supportive infrastructure and regulatory environments.

Environmental Organizations: Push for high environmental standards and sustainable practices, stressing the importance of ecological sustainability in the decarbonization process.

Trade Unions: Advocate for worker welfare, focusing on fair transition processes, job security, and skill development to adapt to industrial changes. Their involvement ensures labor concerns are integrated into policy decisions.

These diverse views highlight the need for a collaborative approach in implementing the Klimaatsprong initiative, balancing environmental, economic, and social factors.

2.6.5 Challenges and Opportunities

Aligning the diverse interests of stakeholders in the Klimaatsprong initiative presents several key challenges:

1. **Balancing Economic and Environmental Goals:** Reconciling the industrial need for competitiveness with stringent environmental standards.
2. **Ensuring Equitable Transition for Workers:** Addressing concerns of job security and the need for re-skilling in a changing industrial landscape.

However, these challenges also present opportunities for sustainable industrial practices:

1. **Innovation and Technology Advancement:** The drive for sustainability can foster innovation and the development of new, cleaner technologies.
2. **Collaborative Solutions:** The diverse perspectives can lead to more comprehensive and effective solutions for sustainable industrial growth.

The "Antwerp@C" project exemplifies both innovation and collaborative solutions for sustainable industrial growth. This significant project in the Port of Antwerp, aimed at capturing and storing CO2 emissions, is a result of collaboration between government, private companies, and environmental

organizations. It focuses on the development of carbon capture and storage (CCS) technologies, a crucial tool for reducing carbon footprints in industries where decarbonization is challenging. This project not only aids in mitigating climate change but also supports industries in transitioning to greener practices. The commitment of Flanders, with an investment of 125 million euros in CO2 capture and storage, underscores the region's dedication to sustainable industrial development (Belga News Agency, 2023; Port of Antwerp-Bruges, 2022).

2.6.6 Impact on Sustainable Industrial Practices

The Climate Leap initiative has significantly influenced sustainable practices in the Flemish industry, according to our informants. Key insights from the interviews indicate:

1. **Employers' Organizations:** They are primarily concerned about the competitiveness of Flemish industries during decarbonization, emphasizing the need for government support in terms of infrastructure and financial aid.
2. **Trade Unions:** They focus on ensuring a socially fair transition, safeguarding employment, and emphasizing retraining and skill development. Their involvement is seen as unique and important, though they feel their influence could be stronger.
3. **Environmental Organizations:** These groups provide technical expertise and advocate for stringent environmental standards, collaborating closely with trade unions to push a social agenda within the decarbonization discussion.
4. **Government:** Aims to balance the various interests and ensure that the decarbonization policies are practical and receive broad societal support.

This multifaceted engagement highlights a concerted effort towards a sustainable and socially responsible industrial transition in Flanders.

2.6.7 Summary

Trade unions' engagement in Flanders' strategic policy initiative for decarbonization marks a pioneering step, legitimizing their role in industry transformation and granting access to otherwise unavailable information. Participation enriches unions with essential expertise, fostering a strategic agenda and network building among key actors. However, their current influence on the Climate Leap initiative remains modest. Anticipation grows that their impact might increase as discussions evolve to address softer, social concerns, though there's apprehension about whether ongoing technical decisions may already be shaping critical social outcomes, like future employment opportunities.

From the Climate Leap initiative, key lessons for European trade unions include the necessity for transparent governance setup and stakeholder engagement from the outset, with legal frameworks

for governance defined in advance. The initiative's scope should be expanded to foster a comprehensive strategic agenda for industry, incorporating social factors like fairness and workforce impact early in discussions. Enhanced participation of trade unions in decision-making, beyond mere information sharing, is critical to avoid endorsing decisions without full agreement. Identifying allies, such as environmental organizations, can augment technical knowledge. Trade unions need to develop their strategic agendas, addressing internal coordination and legitimacy challenges. The global economy's impact on decarbonization strategies, emphasizing the need for competitive industry support and potential alignment between employers and unions on government facilitation and funding, illustrates the complex interplay of interests in climate discussions.

2.7 Conclusions

The comprehensive exploration across five case studies in Flanders illuminates the nuanced dynamics of social dialogue in the face of environmental sustainability and industrial transition. These cases reveal a spectrum of collaborations among trade unions, employers, governmental bodies, and environmental organizations, each contributing uniquely towards decarbonizing the Flemish industry. Despite notable strides in integrating environmental considerations into corporate and industrial practices, challenges persist, particularly in amplifying trade union influence, ensuring equitable worker transitions, and aligning technical decisions with long-term social and employment outcomes. Lessons drawn underscore the imperative of transparent governance, expanded initiative scopes, and enhanced union participation in decision-making, highlighting the intricate balance between environmental stewardship, economic viability, and social equity. This chapter encapsulates the evolving landscape of industrial relations in Belgium, marked by pioneering efforts, ongoing challenges, and the critical role of strategic collaboration in fostering sustainable industrial development.

3. Analysis of the focus group research

3.1 Participants:

- ACV: two union representatives at corporate level, one environmental and sustainability advisor at national level.
- FGTB: environmental and sustainability advisor at the Flemish level.
- ACLVB: Member of joint committee of (petro)chemistry (sectoral social dialogue).

Only union representatives were found willing to participate in the focus group. The requested management representatives did not wish to participate in the focus group or could not spare the time to do so. On the trade union side, we did have representatives from the three major Belgian

trade unions as well as representatives at company, sector, regional (Flanders) and Belgian (national) levels.

3.2 Current situation

The current economic and political context ensures that Flemish chemical industry is facing a difficult 2023. This is due to a number of factors:

- High energy prices in Europe
- The rise in prices of basic commodities (gas, petroleum) in Europe
- The problems in international supply chains
- Increased international competition from the US and China, mainly due to strong and comprehensive support packages from the government.
- The stringent emissions targets imposed by the EU.

These factors do the cost of Flemish chemical companies relative to their internatiaonal competitors, leading to deteriorated competitiveness. As a practical result, 2023 was marked by unprecedented restructuring, layoffs and bankruptcies in the sector. This naturally leads to concern among unions, and they also point out that employers are very concerned about the current situation. More, the unions also point out that this could be one of the reasons why there are no employer representatives present at this focus group.

At the sectoral level, a new collective bargaining agreement has just been concluded, valid for all companies in the (petro)chemical sector. Here, for the first time, climate change and the challenge of decarbonization were mentioned. Specifically, it was decided to create a working group to discuss decarbonization at the sectoral level. This working group will meet monthly and will start with an inventory of existing studies in order to identify the challenge facing the sector. It is important to note that the sectoral level is the main level of social dialogue in the Belgian institutionalized social dialogue model. So the decision to create a working group at this level is indeed an important signal and it is expected that this is the first step that will pave the way for further actions at the sectoral level. More, it is especially a recognition by the employer that they too see a role for social consultation in the decarbonization story.

In addition, the unions point out that many European, Belgian and sectoral studies are being undertaken to identify current challenges. Trade unions at the European level are also organizing a lot of study work. The criticism is that many of the results of these studies do not reach companies. The trade unions blame this not only on the quality of the studies, but especially on their own work on decarbonization and climate (see below).

In general, very little social dialogue on climate and decarbonization is currently being organized, especially at the company level. The participants in this focus group are all leaders on this subject within their respective trade unions and regret that changes are currently so slow. This slowness is immediately qualified by the fact that if you look at the situation over a longer period of time, such as the past 20 years, progress has indeed been made and both unions and employers have taken important steps in making climate and decarbonization negotiable. One example is that last year several local FGTB branches went on strike in order to participate in climate demonstrations. This was unthinkable 10 years ago. The European ECTS system is also cited in this context. It is criticized that this "steering through the wallet" has not been very effective because of the many free allowances that Flemish chemical companies enjoyed, but this is contradicted by company representatives who point out that these free allowances were only obtained under the condition of a significant realized reduction in CO2 emissions. In that sense, many chemical companies are already emitting a lot less than 10 years ago.

There also appeared to have been a recent presentation on the Flemish chemical industry and value chain around it in the Flemish context. This presentation outlined how petrochemical companies supplied the raw materials for numerous chemical companies that in turn served a lot of local businesses. If this disappeared, a substantial part of the Flemish economy would disappear. The union representatives appeared strongly impressed by this.

3.3 On the position of employers

The employer position in the face of challenges around decarbonization is complex. Unions note that employers are sandwiched between increased international competition on the one hand and strict EU regulations on the other. The major problem here is that there is currently no level playing field for European establishments operating globally. Decarbonization requires investments and innovations in processes and products, but because foreign competitors do not have to make these investments, European chemical companies cannot pass on these investments in their prices without suffering competitive disadvantage. For example, producing certain products in a greener way requires a lot of innovation and is therefore expensive. The final product is green, but more expensive. One of the union representatives at the enterprise level told this story that their company could not sell this green, innovative product. In the end, it was sold at a loss.

Employer organizations are currently primarily concerned with estimating challenge and associated costs of decarbonization. Moreover, the complexity of this transformation leads to much uncertainty among employers. Second, unions also note that many employer organizations are lobbying at the national and European level. This is in order to dilute certain objectives on the one hand, but also to

obtain the necessary support measures to make the necessary investments. Third, a lot of money is currently being invested in greening power production by chemical companies. Many companies are investing in wind farms in the North Sea, or investing in heat recovery systems. Major revolutions in the production process or in product innovation the unions do not currently notice, except for a few small-scale pilot projects.

Employers currently still seem to be dealing with decarbonization mainly on a strategic level: what are the goals, what are the options, how can we achieve them and what do we need to do this? The unions have the impression that employers prefer not to involve unions and social dialogue at this strategic level. On top of that, the unions note that climate transition currently carries a certain framing. Climate transition is associated with "activism," "difficulty," "rules," ... which makes it easy for employers to take a defensive stance when unions themselves ask about it. One union representative notes that he constantly refers to 'green jobs' when he wants to talk about them. In this way he avoids having to refer explicitly to decarbonization and climate and all the associations employers have with this.

3.4 On the position of trade unions

The unions recognize that decarbonization is not sufficiently alive among union representatives at all levels. Decarbonization and climate are not a priority for the unions, a point on which all three unions agreed. To illustrate, at ACV they recently organized a survey among their representatives about priorities for the future and the two items around carbonization and climate ended up in the last two places. On the other hand, the three unions at sectoral, regional and national levels do have employees working specifically on these issues. We had two of these workers in our focus group and they too had to acknowledge that it was very difficult to get the unions and their members excited about this issue.

They offered several explanations as to why it is so difficult to make decarbonization and climate a priority of Belgian unions

- The Belgian model of social consultation is highly institutionalized. Trade union representatives have many functions and great responsibility, which means that their tasks are already well filled and that union representatives need to know about a lot (laws, procedures, negotiation methods, communication, service activities...). Decarbonization and climate is an issue that comes on top of current tasks.
- Every four years it is social elections in Belgium. In practice, this means that about 50% of the workers' representatives are replaced. All these new representatives have to be trained. Trade unions put a lot of time into these trainings. Decarbonization and climate enjoy little priority

in these trainings and usually come at the very end of the training package - if they are included at all.

- Unions lack specific training around decarbonization and climate. This has to do with money and time, but also because it is too often not seen as a priority. On the other hand, when information sessions are organized around it, very few union representatives often attend.
- Decarbonization and climate are complex topics that are still far from the minds of many workers and union officials. They are less tangible as more quantifiable topics like wages, working hours or vacation days. Employee representatives prioritize such topics because they can make more of a concrete difference for workers around these. In addition, as mentioned above, it takes a lot of time and effort to get caught up in the complexities of decarbonization and climate and all the legislation involved.

The unions acknowledge that there is a perception problem, but also that the union faces a number of dilemmas. A first dilemma revolves around the question of whether the union should devote so many resources to working on decarbonization and climate when the members themselves are clearly not concerned. This is an internal debate within the unions. Focus group participants believe that it is indeed up to unions to prepare for this because the implications and consequences will be for workers. A second dilemma ties into this: is it the union's responsibility to prepare for decarbonization or is it solely the employer's responsibility? This is a debate between union members who advocate rather a reactive stance and those who advocate a proactive stance. In our focus group, there was a clear opinion to support the proactive line. The following objectives were listed for the union:

- Keeping the chemical industry in Flanders.
- Seeing what is needed for this.
- Making sure those things actually happen.

The union representatives also appeared very convinced of the added value of social consultation and the role that unions can play in the upcoming transformation of Flemish chemistry:

- Protection of employment is an absolute priority for unions, and they have also built a lot of expertise around this. Employment also links many interests together and should be an important reason for union action. On the other hand, it was also noted that employment and the fear of losing it is also often used to question climate goals. This is where union and employer interests can meet, but the union representatives present refused to go along with this demand to relax the targets.

- Changes without the involvement of unions historically often went awry or were more likely to be detrimental to the worker. This argument, too, should encourage employee representatives to take action.
- Education and training are a basic function of trade unions in Belgium. Specifically, trade unions can play a crucial role here because many jobs of the future will require further training or retraining. Certainly through sectoral training funds, trade unions can play a crucial role here.
- The union representatives also point out that decarbonization and climate measures are likely to result in changes in working hours (e.g., shift work) and working conditions (e.g., safety). Around these topics, the unions have built up a great deal of expertise, useful to use during negotiations.

Currently, decarbonization and climate is not yet a priority for unions, but a positive spiral around this issue may soon emerge. Crucial will be when there is a bureaucratization of decarbonization and climate, by which they mean the inclusion of these topics in official reports, procedures and agendas. Once union representatives start asking questions, consultation takes place and decarbonization starts to be institutionalized as a topic of discussion at the company and sector level (as has now been done at the sectoral level), things can move quickly. But right now unions are not that far along. Expertise and urgency must first be built up. Without that, some initiatives also risk remaining dead letter. For example, the EU's corporate sustainability directive offers trade union representatives a lot of guidance on concrete information rights, but if trade union representatives lack the knowledge about this, these rights will not be enforced in practice.

3.5 Towards strengthening social dialogue

Participants made several suggestions to strengthen social dialogue on decarbonization.

- The unions themselves see the following action items:
    - Use existing manuals, surveys and training more effectively to inform and educate employee representatives in the field.
    - Use existing research and discuss internally to further develop one's own strategy around this.
    - Better incorporate decarbonization and climate into unions' existing course offerings. If they do not make this a priority themselves, they cannot expect union representatives to see it as a priority themselves.
- Flemish/Belgian policy:

    - There should be more studies around the skills of the future in the chemical industry. Unions see training in these skills as one of their top priorities but currently lack a clear view of what these future skills are.
    - The obligation for social dialogue increasingly enroll in laws and regulations surrounding the environment and climate.
    - The Flemish government could oblige sectors to draw up sectoral roadmaps involving the social partners.
    - The Flemish government could oblige and support sectors in setting up a transition fund to help meet the challenges of decarbonization and climate. The unions especially want to see investments in training and education funded.
    - An important edge to these suggestions is that they require a political climate favorable to social dialogue. The current Flemish government, dominated by the nationalist Flemish party is anything but.
- European policy:
    - The EU must work to create a level playing field within which chemical companies can innovate without suffering competitive disadvantage as a result. This is the only way to guarantee future employment. This level playing field is created both by new regulations concerning, for example, the mandatory use of certain "green" products or processes in Europe, but also by a strong industrial policy such as in America or China that provides the necessary financial resources to help companies make the transition to climate neutrality.
    - The EU should also push Flanders and Belgium toward more ambitious climate goals. Current targets are lower than those imposed by the EU.

Focus group participants were moderately positive about the future of the chemical industry in Flanders. They point to the enormous opportunities that lie in a climate-neutral chemical industry, but also note that the conditions for this are not yet in place, on the contrary. More, they also point out that several processes and transformation must happen simultaneously, such as circularity, electrification, and carbonization. There is much synergy between these transformations, but they can also work against each other.

4. Synthesis

4.1 Introduction

This report explores the evolving dynamics of industrial relations and social dialogue in Belgium, especially in the Flemish region, amidst the country's shift towards environmental sustainability, known as the "Just Transition." This transition integrates ecological goals with economic and social equity, posing unique challenges and opportunities in the context of Belgium's industrial and labour landscape.

The report includes analyses of general trends, sector-specific case studies, and insights from focus group discussions with key stakeholders like trade unions, employer associations, and government representatives.

Objective:

The objective of the synthesis chapter is to integrate insights from the report into a coherent overview, emphasizing the current state and recent developments in industrial relations and social dialogue within Belgium's Just Transition.

Key objectives include:

1. Summarizing crucial findings from different sections.
2. Identifying overarching trends and themes.
3. Offering an integrated perspective on balancing economic, social, and environmental goals.
4. Proposing actionable recommendations for managing the Just Transition effectively.
5. Providing insights to inform policymakers and industry leaders.

This chapter aims to encapsulate the complexities of Belgium's transition journey, guiding future policies and practices towards a sustainable and equitable future.

4.2 Key Findings from the General Overview and Case Studies

4.2.1 Historical Context and Evolution of Industrial Relations:

Belgium, especially Flanders, has a complex, well-entrenched system of industrial relations and social dialogue, which has been key in managing socio-economic and environmental challenges. Post-WWII reconstruction and economic expansion led to a strong industrial base. The rise of trade unions and structured social dialogue has been crucial in advocating for workers' rights and influencing labour policies. Recent developments, such as global economic fluctuations and the transition towards a green economy, have necessitated an evolution in these relations, with a focus on sustainability and innovation.

Role of Social Dialogue: Social dialogue in Flanders is multifaceted and critical in the green transition. It involves negotiations on wages, working conditions, and employment terms, aligning industrial

practices with sustainability goals, shaping industrial policies, promoting innovation and skills development, and ensuring a just transition. It also plays a vital role in conflict resolution and balancing the needs of the economy, the workforce, and the environment.

4.2.2 Case Studies:

Chemli:

Context and Environmental Challenges: A key player in Flanders' chemical industry, Chemli faces challenges in emission control, energy consumption, and resource management. The company's response includes sustainable production practices, investments in R&D, and collaborations for environmental management.

Role of Social Dialogue: Social dialogue at Chemli is integral in environmental decision-making, featuring inclusive processes and advocacy for stronger environmental practices. Employee engagement and training are emphasized, alongside conflict resolution and feedback mechanisms.

Impact and Best Practices: Chemli's approach has enhanced safety and health, skills development, and increased environmental awareness. It has led to improved operational efficiency, regulatory compliance, and innovation, reducing the environmental footprint and aligning with global sustainability goals.

Chemea Ghent:

The Chemea case study reveals both achievements and ongoing challenges in weaving climate change into the fabric of corporate and labour relations. Despite Chemea's strides towards environmental sustainability, such as adopting green practices and initiating meaningful climate dialogues, the efforts face hurdles in keeping climate change a priority in social discussions and defining a clear role for trade unions amidst technical complexities. A dedicated trade union representative's activism has led to structured climate initiatives, yet the journey underscores the critical challenge of integrating environmental concerns deeply and sustainably into corporate practices, amidst the need for continuous engagement and broader organizational buy-in.

Chemco Antwerp:

Context: Chemco, a German chemical company in Antwerp, faces challenges from dependency on oil and energy-intensive processes. It is working towards incorporating circular economic principles.

Social Dialogue and Labour Relations: The company has ambitious sustainability goals but faces challenges in effectively communicating and discussing these initiatives with the workforce or union representatives.

Cheman:

Introduction and Environmental Initiatives: Cheman focuses on sustainability, addressing energy efficiency, emission reduction, and circular economy principles. The company is actively engaged in planning for future sustainability, particularly in raw material sourcing and recycling.

Social Dialogue and Labour Relations: Cheman demonstrates a collaborative and region-specific approach to social dialogue, engaging with unions on both welfare and sustainability issues. High union membership and sectoral agreements contribute to a stable labour relations environment.

Climate Leap "Klimaatsprong":

Introduction: Klimaatsprong is a strategic initiative in Flanders aimed at decarbonizing the regional industry, involving a collaborative approach with government, employers, trade unions, and environmental groups.

Role of Trade Unions in Decarbonization: Trade unions play a pivotal role in integrating the workforce perspective into decarbonization strategies, advocating for sustainable industrial practices, job security, and retraining.

Conclusion of Case Studies:

The case studies reflect a strong emphasis on collaborative approaches for effective decarbonization and transition to sustainable practices. Trade unions advocate for fair transitions, focusing on retraining and skill development. Challenges lie in balancing economic competitiveness with environmental sustainability, with innovation and technology offering opportunities for sustainable industrial growth.

4.3 Insights from Focus Group Research

4.3.1 Current Economic and Political Context:

The Flemish chemical industry faced challenges in 2023 due to high energy prices, increased costs of basic commodities, supply chain issues, and stringent EU emissions targets. This led to competitiveness issues, restructuring, layoffs, and bankruptcies.

A new collective bargaining agreement, acknowledging climate change and decarbonization, was concluded at the sectoral level, marking a significant step towards integrating these issues into social dialogue.

4.3.2 Employers' Position on Decarbonization:

Employers are navigating complex challenges, including international competition and strict EU regulations. Decarbonization efforts are leading to increased costs and uncertainty.

Employers are investing in greener power production but are cautious about involving unions in strategic-level decarbonization discussions. They often view climate transition as a domain filled with activism and regulatory difficulties.

The focus is mainly on strategic-level planning for decarbonization, with limited involvement of unions or social dialogue at this stage.

4.3.3 Trade Unions' Position and Challenges:

Decarbonization and climate issues are not a high priority within the union agenda. Challenges include the highly institutionalized nature of Belgian social consultation, a lack of specific training on these topics, and the complexity of decarbonization and climate issues.

Unions recognize the need to address decarbonization proactively, considering its implications for workers. However, there is an internal debate about the extent of resources that should be devoted to this topic.

Unions are focused on protecting employment, advocating for education and training, and ensuring fair working conditions during the transition. They see their role as crucial in the upcoming transformation of the Flemish chemical industry.

Despite recognizing the importance of these issues, there is a struggle to make decarbonization and climate a priority among union members and representatives.

4.3.4 Summary

In summary, the focus group discussions reveal a complex landscape where economic pressures, the challenges of transitioning to greener practices, and the evolving roles of employers and unions shape the response to decarbonization in the Flemish chemical industry. There is a clear need for more focused dialogue and training on environmental issues within the unions, and for greater involvement of unions in strategic decarbonization discussions at the employer level.

4.4 Integration of Environmental Sustainability into Industrial Relations

The integration of environmental sustainability into industrial relations in Flanders, especially within the chemical sector, is undergoing a complex but progressive transformation. This report provides insights into this evolving landscape, highlighting several key areas:

Economic and Political Context:

The Flemish chemical industry is grappling with challenges such as high energy prices, increased costs of basic commodities, supply chain problems, and stringent EU emissions targets. These factors have led to a decline in competitiveness, resulting in restructuring, layoffs, and bankruptcies. This challenging backdrop underscores the urgency of integrating sustainability into industrial relations.

Role of Collective Bargaining:

A significant step in this integration is the inclusion of climate change and decarbonization challenges in the new collective bargaining agreement for the (petro)chemical sector. The creation of a sectoral working group on decarbonization indicates a recognition by employers of the importance of social dialogue in the decarbonization narrative.

Employers' Stance on Decarbonization:

Employers are caught between increased international competition and EU regulations. They are focused on the costs and challenges of decarbonization, including investing in greener power production and exploring small-scale pilot projects for product innovation. However, there is a sense that employers are hesitant to fully involve unions in strategic-level decarbonization planning, possibly due to the perception of climate transition as a domain of activism and regulatory complexities.

Position and Challenges of Trade Unions:

Unions recognize that decarbonization and climate issues are not sufficiently prioritized among their representatives. Despite acknowledging the importance of these issues, there are challenges in making them a priority, attributed to the highly institutionalized nature of Belgian social consultation and the complexity of these topics.

Trade unions face internal debates about resource allocation for working on decarbonization and whether they should adopt a reactive or proactive stance in this regard.

Nevertheless, unions emphasize the need for their involvement in managing transitions, focusing on employment protection, education, and training, and ensuring fair working conditions during transitions. They advocate a proactive approach, emphasizing the added value of social consultation in the transformation of the Flemish chemical industry.

In conclusion, while the integration of environmental sustainability into industrial relations in Flanders is still in its early stages and faces significant challenges, there are clear steps being taken in this direction. The collective bargaining agreement's focus on decarbonization and the involvement of

unions in discussions, despite challenges, signify an evolving recognition of the critical role of industrial relations in achieving sustainable industrial practices.

4.5 Future Directions and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report, the following succinct recommendations and strategies can be proposed for future actions to enhance the integration of environmental sustainability into industrial relations:

Enhance Collaborative Dialogue: Strengthen the collaboration between employers, unions, and government bodies. Regular, structured dialogues focused on sustainability can foster mutual understanding and jointly developed solutions.

Prioritize Training and Education: Invest in specialized training programs for union representatives and employees on environmental issues, sustainability practices, and green technologies. This will aid in raising awareness and preparing the workforce for the green transition.

Expand Inclusion in Strategic Planning: Encourage employers to involve union representatives in strategic-level planning for decarbonization. This involvement can provide valuable insights and promote a more holistic approach to sustainability initiatives.

Develop Sector-Specific Sustainability Agendas: Tailor sustainability strategies to specific sectors, considering their unique challenges and opportunities. Sectoral working groups on decarbonization, as seen in the chemical industry, should be a model for other sectors.

Implement Innovative Green Policies: Promote the development and adoption of innovative policies and practices that align with sustainability goals, such as energy-efficient technologies, sustainable resource management, and circular economy principles.

Integrate Sustainability into Collective Bargaining: Make environmental sustainability a standard agenda item in collective bargaining agreements, ensuring it is regularly reviewed and updated.

Leverage Government Support: Advocate for government policies and incentives that support industries in their transition to green practices, helping to mitigate the financial burden and competitive disadvantages.

Promote Transparency and Communication: Enhance transparency in employer strategies on sustainability and ensure clear communication with the workforce to build trust and engagement.

Balance Economic and Environmental Goals: Work towards finding a balance between maintaining economic competitiveness and meeting environmental sustainability targets, recognizing the importance of both for the long-term viability of industries.

Foster a Proactive Union Stance: Encourage unions to adopt a more proactive stance on environmental issues, recognizing their potential to positively influence the green transition and protect workers' interests.

Implementing these recommendations can contribute to a more integrated, effective, and socially responsible approach to environmental sustainability within industrial relations in Belgium.

4.6 Conclusion

Chapter 4's synthesis provides a comprehensive yet cautious view on the slow march towards embedding environmental sustainability in Flanders' industrial and labour relations, particularly within the nuanced landscape of the chemical sector. While acknowledging a budding recognition of climate issues in collective bargaining, the findings temper optimism with the reality of substantial hurdles: the struggle to marry economic competitiveness with environmental mandates, the nascent state of collaboration among stakeholders, and unions' tepid engagement with sustainability. The narrative suggests an intricate balance of progress and inertia, with unions at a crossroads between traditional labour concerns and the pressing demands of environmental stewardship. This nuanced conclusion paints a picture of a region at the cusp of significant transformation, yet facing significant barriers to fully realize a sustainable and equitable industrial future.

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