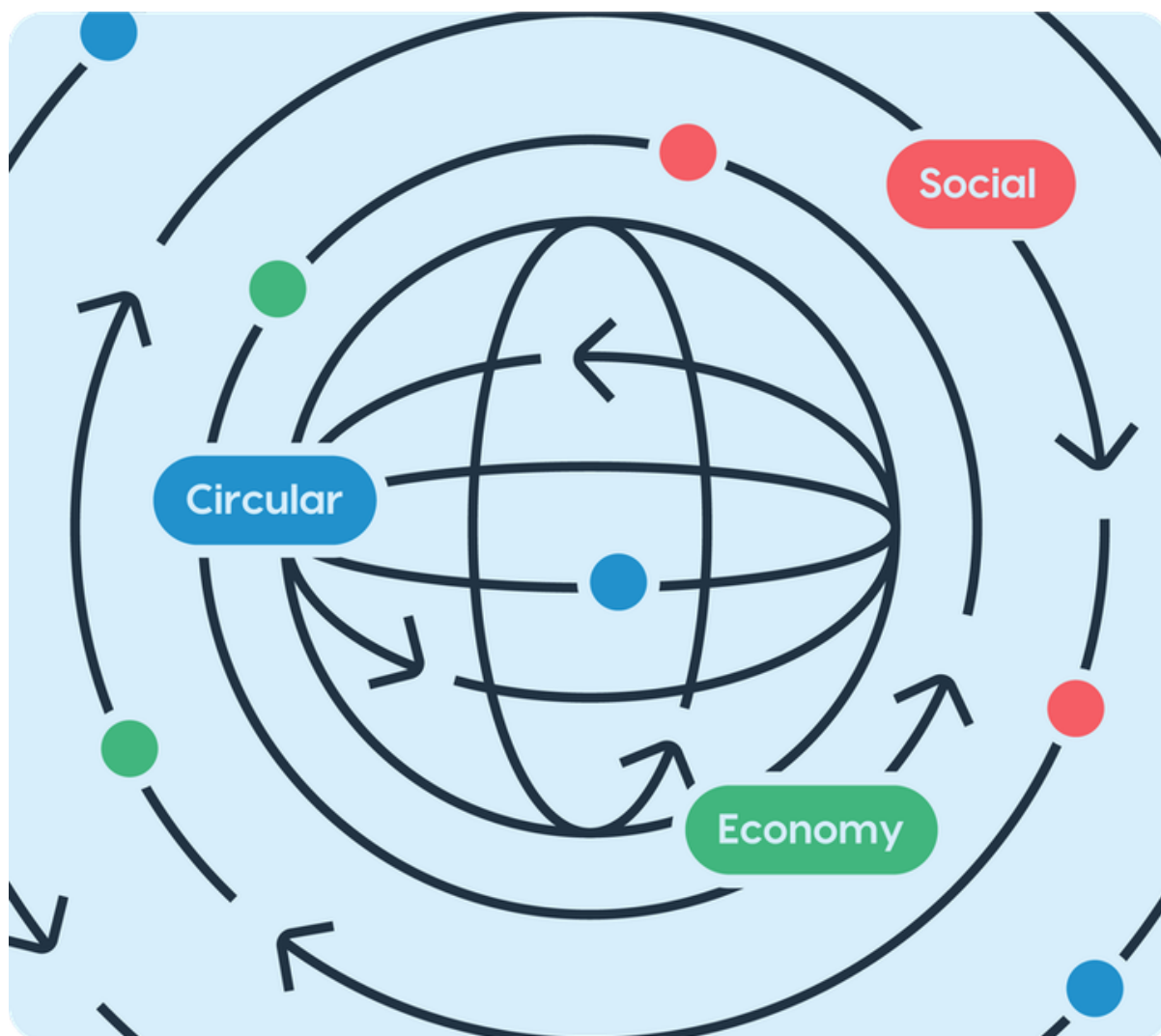


Circular and Social Economy Policy Profile

Belgium



This country snapshot is part of the international research partnership “Social economy embedding circular economy: Theory, practice and potential,” which examines the relationship between social and solidarity economy policies and circular economy policies at the national, regional, and municipal levels in 12 country-specific profiles.

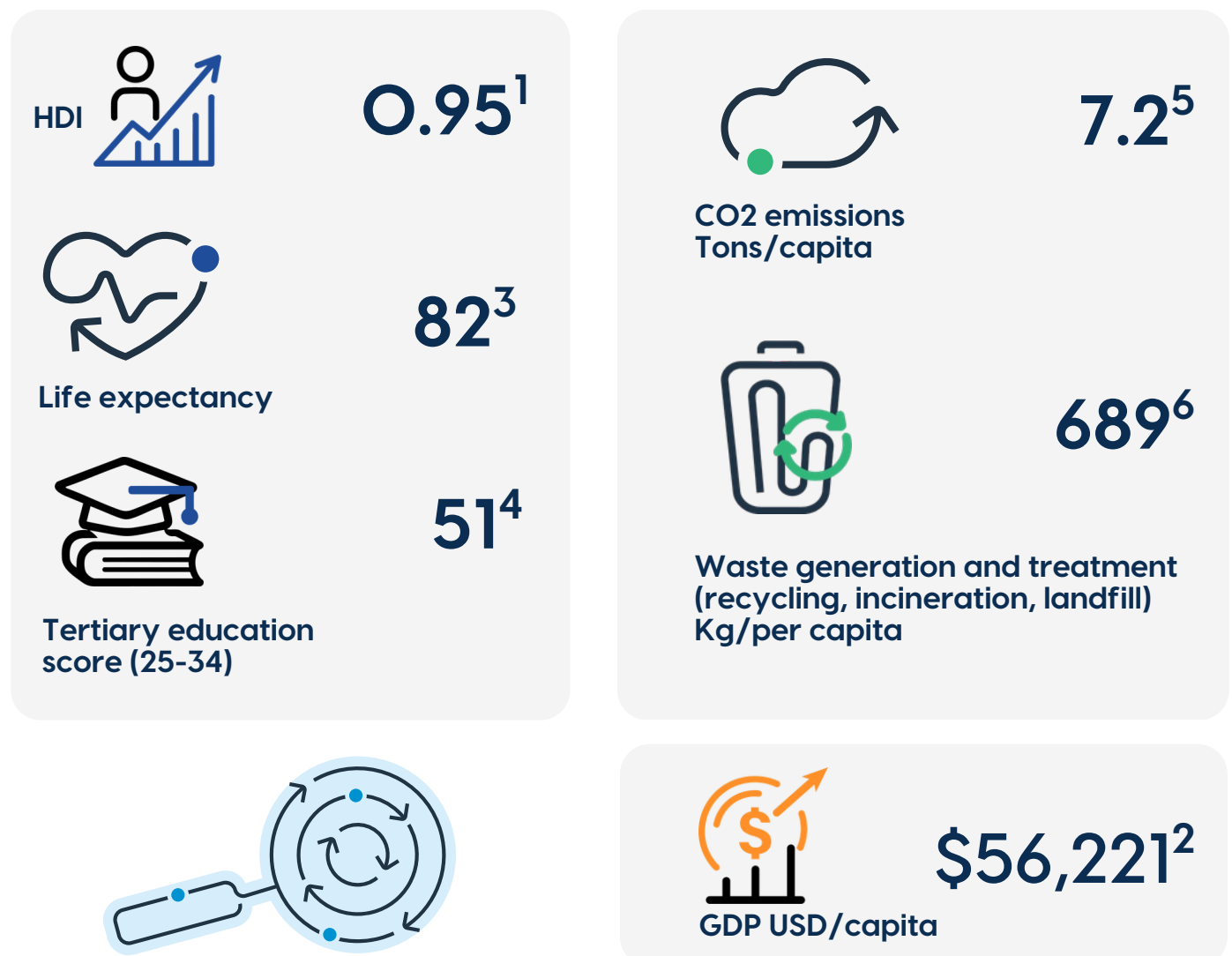


A multi-level governance model

In Belgium, circular economy (CE) and social economy (SE) policies interact within a multi-level governance system, primarily driven by regional authorities. In regions such as Brussels, policy initiatives have begun to connect circular resource management with social inclusion objectives, reflecting growing opportunities for integration.

Country context

Socio-economic indicators can promote a deeper understanding of Belgium's context. With a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.95, the country ranks among the highest in the world for health, education, and living standards. CO₂ emissions per capita are higher than the global average of 4.8 tons per year, and Belgium ranks 7th out of 38 OECD countries for waste generation.



● Circular economy

At the federal level, the Action Plan for the Circular Economy (2021–2024)⁷ defines the circular economy as one that “provides for basic human needs while operating within the planet’s biophysical limits. By maintaining the use value of products, components and materials for as long as possible in the economy – through intelligent product design, reuse and/or shared use of products, repair, reconditioning, spare parts recovery or recycling – the circular economy ensures the long-term sustainability of economic activity by ensuring the extraction and consumption of natural resources, the emission of waste and pollutants, and the use of land stays within planetary limits⁸.” The Brussels-Capital Region Circular Economy Program 2016–2020 defines CE as a “system of exchange and production, at every stage in the life cycle of products (goods and services), which aims to increase the efficiency of resource use and reduce environmental impact, while enhancing the well-being of individuals⁹.”



Institutional framework

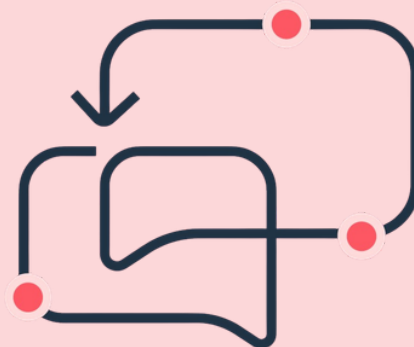
Several federal ministries share the responsibility for the circular economy: The Federal Public Service (FPS) for the Economy helps shape policies around sustainable production, ecodesign, and economic incentives. The Federal Public Service for Public Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment is involved where circular economy issues affect environmental regulation and waste & materials policy, and the Federal Institute for Sustainable Development (FISD) supports the federal coordination of sustainable development which overlaps with circular economy goals. In practice, many responsibilities for environmental policies are devolved to the regions; the federal government plays a very broad coordinating role, including ensuring consistency with EU policies.

● Social economy

Belgium has no official national definition of social economy.

At the federal level, cooperatives can be recognized as social enterprises if they meet the criteria on social purpose, governance, and management, as set out in the Companies and Associations Code (Article 8:5).

At the regional level, the definition of social economy varies. While common principles include prioritizing social goals over profit, democratic governance, and sustainability, each region places a slightly different emphasis on governance, social impact, and economic efficiency.



The Regional Economic Transition Strategy ("Shifting Economy") of the Brussels-Capital Region defines the social economy as "economic activities producing goods or services, carried out by companies with a social purpose, mainly cooperatives, associations, mutual societies or foundations, for which the social or societal objective of the common good is at the origin of the business activity¹⁰." It emphasizes the importance of social objectives in statutes and democratic governance.

The Flemish Region (Decree of February 17, 2012) tends to frame social economy primarily through the lens of social entrepreneurship and labour-market inclusion, emphasizing "well-defined social added values" and the "quality of relationships"¹¹, based on win-win partnerships, equality, and transparency.

The Walloon Region (Decree of November 20, 2008)¹² adopts a broader socio-political and more historically conception in its cooperative and associative tradition, centered on democratic governance, the primacy of labour over capital, and the "socio-economic development of the Walloon Region".

● Social economy



Institutional framework

At the federal level, the Federal Public Planning Service (PPS) Social Integration, Fight against Poverty and Social Economy focuses on social integration, poverty reduction, and social economy while the Ministry of Social Affairs/Public Health has responsibilities linked to welfare, mutual societies and social protection. Many responsibilities for the social economy are devolved to the regions. For example, in the Brussels-Capital Region, the “Bruxelles Économie et Emploi” has a dedicated directorate for the social economy.



Cooperatives

Following the reform of the Companies and Associations Code (CSA) on May 1, 2019, Belgian cooperatives were modernized and were asked to comply with international cooperative principles. This entailed a change of status, with a new legal form called “Société Coopérative” (SC), replacing the former SCRL and SCRI structures¹³.

In 2021, 19,607¹⁴ cooperatives were active in Belgium and 56% of them operated as a Cooperative company with limited liability (SCRL) and 20% as a Cooperative company with unlimited liability (SCRI). The exact number of cooperatives in Belgium remains unclear as several cooperatives still need to update their statutes under the CSA and several others have converted to non-cooperative legal forms. Within this landscape, 829 organizations currently hold the status of “approved cooperatives,” an official recognition granted to certain activities in strategic sectors such as energy, food, and housing. This designation provides several advantages, including tax incentives.



Although relatively few in number, cooperatives play a noticeable role in the Belgian economy. They represent about 1% of all active businesses and contribute around 3% of the country’s GDP¹⁵. A 2024 study by the National Council for Cooperation, Social Entrepreneurship, and Agricultural Enterprises (CNC) also found that one in eight of 11.7 million Belgians is a member of one or more cooperatives¹⁶.

Altogether, cooperatives in Belgium employ 24,298 people. They are particularly active in energy, food, housing, health, and personal services sectors¹⁷.



Numbers of
Cooperatives

19,607



Coop Employees

24,298

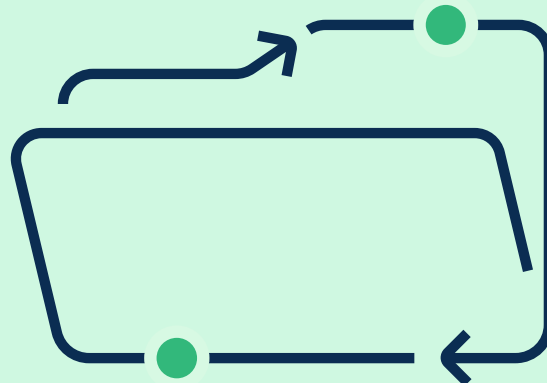


Coop Members

1.5 M

● Public policies

CE and SE convergence



The federal level in Belgium has limited scope for action regarding social and circular economy policies, as competencies for economic development, waste management, and sustainability are largely devolved to the regions. Still, federal initiatives play an enabling role. The Federal Sustainable Development Plan (2021)¹⁸ promotes eco-design, repairability, and recycled materials, while supporting social entrepreneurship through awareness campaigns and incentives. Financial tools, such as the Program Act of 2003¹⁹ and the Recovery and Resilience Plan (2021)²⁰, mobilize resources for social and circular projects. They provide funding for social and circular projects, especially those that create inclusive jobs for marginalized groups, and offer guidance and provide regulations to support the social side of the circular transition.

The Brussels-Capital Region stands out as a frontrunner in connecting social enterprises with circular strategies. The Regional Circular Economy Program²¹ (PREC) includes initiatives such as public procurement, support for material reuse and repair, and funding for innovative circular and social economy projects. The Resource and Waste Management Plan²² offers social enterprises free access to collected materials for repair, reuse, and dismantling, while also modernizing extended producer responsibility. The Good Food Strategy²³ connects waste reduction with urban agriculture, supporting pilot projects for composting and biodigestion. Other recent strategies that offer concrete support while actively engaging social actors in circular practices include Go4Brussels 2030²⁴ and the Shifting Economy Strategy, which strengthen this integration through labeling schemes, sustainable procurement policies, and targeted support for democratic enterprises.

In Flanders, the Circular Flanders initiative, together with the Department of Work and Social Economy, has supported the creation and development of 12 circular hubs²⁵. These hubs aim to structure the local circular and social economies by creating a network of circular initiatives and services with social impact.

At the municipal level, programs, such as Anderlecht's Climate Action Plan²⁶, translate these initiatives into concrete local services—including low-cost resale points for reused items, potentially involving social economy actors through public procurement or partnerships.



● Zoom in on Brussels

The Brussels-Capital Region stands out for its comprehensive, integrated and multidimensional approach, which combines regulatory tools, economic support, and capacity-building measures to promote a transition that is both circular and socially inclusive.

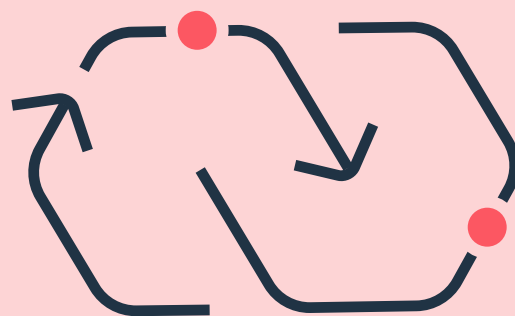
Circular economy principles are embedded across multiple policy areas. The Resource and Waste Management Plan (2018–2023) and the Reuse Roadmap (to 2025)²⁷ prioritize reuse and recycling, giving social enterprises access to collected materials. Circularity is also reflected in climate and energy policies, including the Brussels Renovation Strategy (2030–2050)²⁸ and Regional Air-Climate-Energy Plans²⁹, which promote sustainable construction and redirect surplus goods to social enterprises. Food strategies, such as Good Food I & II, further integrate cooperatives and local actors into circular food systems.

Long-term governance plans, such as Go4Brussels 2030 and the Regional Sustainable Development Plan, institutionalize these efforts. Key initiatives, such as the Shifting Economy strategy, link social and environmental performance to grants through the Exemplarity Decree, while financing tools, such as CoopCity³⁰, Coop US³¹, Citiz US³², and Prove Your Social Innovation (PYSI)³³, support projects combining circularity and social impact. Examples of this financial support include textile recycling (Precious Fibers), citizen-led energy (Brupower³⁴), and waste heat recovery. The Regional Circular Economy Program (PREC) further drives reuse in textiles, IT, and bulky waste in partnership with social enterprises.

In Brussels, social economy enterprises are supported through a range of regional funding instruments, including cooperative finance tools (e.g. Coop Us and Citiz Us, which mobilized approximately €5.4 million³⁵) and public investment mechanisms such as finance & invest.brussels³⁶. No consolidated estimate of total regional financing is publicly available.



● More information



Social and solidarity economy and the circular economy in Belgium

- [Federal sustainable development plan](#) (2021)
- [Program Act of April 08, 2003](#)
- [Resource and Waste Management Plan](#) (2018-2023)
- [PREC - Regional Circular Economy Program](#) (2016-2020) – Evaluation program
- [Go4Brussels Strategy](#) 2030

Regional federations and circular economy networks

- The Belgian cooperative federation [ConcertES](#) supports social and cooperative enterprises
- [CoopCity](#) supports social and cooperative entrepreneurship in Brussels
- [Solid'R](#) has created a label for social economy enterprises active in the circular economy
- Fédération belge de l'économie sociale et coopérative ([Febecoop](#))



Find out more about social and circular economy policy convergence in 12 countries in [PortailCoop's Circular Economy collection](#). [PortailCoop](#) is the largest digital library on cooperative research in the world.

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● Notes and references

¹ (2023) [UNDP Human Development Index and its components](#)

² (2024) [Worldometer: GDP per capita](#)

³ (2023) [UNDP Human Development Index and its components](#)

⁴ (2025) [OECD Education at a glance](#) - The “25–34-year-olds with tertiary education” score measures the share of young adults who have completed higher education (college, university, or an equivalent post-secondary degree); higher scores are generally associated with stronger Human Development Index (HDI) outcomes.

⁵ (2024) [Our world in data: CO₂ emissions per capita](#)

⁶ (2025) - [The Senseo Global Waste Index](#) score compares waste management performance across the 38 OECD countries based on waste generation, recycling, incineration, and landfill rates, with higher scores indicating a lower environmental impact.

⁷ [Action Plan for the Circular Economy \(2021–2024\)](#)

⁸ [Plan d'action fédéral pour l'économie circulaire \(2021-2024\)](#)

⁹ [Programme régional d'Économie circulaire \(2016-2020\)](#)

¹⁰ Executive Summary of the Regional Strategy for Economic Transition 2022 – 2030, [Shifting economy. Brussels](#)

¹¹ [Décret du 17 février 2012](#) relatif à l'appui à l'entrepreneuriat dans le domaine de l'économie sociale et à la stimulation de l'entrepreneuriat socialement responsable

¹² [Décret relatif à l'économie sociale](#), 20 novembre 2008

¹³ (2021) [Cera KU Leuven: Belgian Cooperative Monitor](#)

¹⁴ Febecoop: [The Belgian Cooperative Monitor 2021, les coopératives en chiffres](#)

¹⁵ (2021) [Cera KU Leuven: Belgian Cooperative Monitor](#)

¹⁶ [Économie Sociale](#) - Coopératives

¹⁷ [Économie Sociale](#) - Coopératives

¹⁸ [Le Plan fédéral de développement durable 2021-2026](#)

¹⁹ [Loi-programme du 8 avril 2003](#)

²⁰ (2021) [Le Plan pour la reprise et la résilience de la Belgique](#)

²¹ [Regional Circular Economy Program](#)

²² (2025) [Resource and Waste Management Plan](#)

²³ [La stratégie Good Food 2 - 2022-2030](#)

²⁴ [Go4Brussels 2030](#) : plan stratégique pluriannuel

²⁵ [Circular works!](#)

²⁶ [Plan Action Climat 1070 Anderlecht](#)

²⁷ Feuille de route réemploi; [Priorités à l'horizon 2025 pour la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale](#)

²⁸ [Rénovation.brussels: rénover ensemble pour une vie durable; stratégie rénovation 2030-2050](#)

²⁹ [Brussels Regional Air-Climate-Energy Plan](#)

³⁰ [Coop Citz: Centre d'entrepreneuriat social et coopératif à Bruxelles](#)

³¹ [Coop US](#) - Un financement pour les coopératives bruxelloises

³² [CITIZ US](#) - un prêt au service des entreprises sociales

³³ [Innoviris.brussels](#)

³⁴ [Brupower](#)

³⁵ [Shifting Economy Brussels: rapport d'activité 2023](#)

³⁶ [Finance & Invest Brussels](#)

