As regards employment and unemployment, France’s territorial disparities are greater than in neighbouring countries’. Territories’ current trajectories are continuations of their past trends, which the recent economic crisis has done little to change. First of all, such contrasts distinguish dynamic groups of regions and others structurally in difficulty. A second, metropolitan level is superposed on this first level of organisation of disparities: on the outskirts of the main urban centres, where employment is concentrated and whose areas of influence extend over an increasing proportion of the territory, residents must travel ever longer distances to get to their workplaces. Such disparities are all challenges to balanced spatial planning.

**Contrasting regional dynamics for decades**

**Employment growth closely connected with demographic dynamics**

In 2012, there were 4.9 million more jobs in Metropolitan France than in 1975. Employment growth, like population growth, was selective throughout the period: it was mainly concentrated in the periphery of Paris, on the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts, around the Toulouse agglomeration and in the south-eastern quarter of the country.

Conversely, less attractive areas in demographic decline (less densely populated areas in central and north-eastern France and in the interiors of Brittany and Normandy) have seen numbers of jobs decrease since 1975. At local level, evolutions in employment are closely connected with those in population, even though it is difficult to determine which leads to the other: the two are interdependent.

1. In 2015, there was a 24.9 percentage-point variance between the highest and lowest employment rates in France. Among neighbouring countries, the only equivalent variance was in Italy (24.8). If Overseas France is excluded from the calculation, the French variance (12.9) is lower than in Italy but is still higher than that in more homogeneous countries such as the United Kingdom (11.7), Spain (10.8) and Germany (9.0).
Conversely, industries in the west and southwest held up better. In areas in difficulty, decreases in stocks of jobs were partly compensated by the growth of the tertiary sector, mainly with regard to public sector jobs (4.5 million between 1975 and 2012 in France). However, in metropolitan areas, it was the productive tertiary sector that saw most development (+3.3 million jobs between 1975 and 2012 in France), in particular so-called “intellectual production” activities (design/research, management, advice to companies, etc.).

Territories between vulnerability and resilience
The macroeconomic changes at work for some forty years led to far-reaching territorial modifications. Whereas they previously stood out for their industrial, urban tertiary or rural agricultural characters, there is now, above all, a contrast between attractive tertiary areas on the one hand, chief among which are metropolises positioned on growth activities and the Mediterranean and Atlantic facades, and, on the other hand, areas focused on a less tertiarised productive economy and overall in difficulty.

Factors influencing growth are nonetheless multiple, and far from being reducible to territorial economic specialisation. Demographic dynamics, the effects of geographic location (the border advantage), for example, the form and history of an area’s productive fabric and the characteristics of its human capital are all parameters that influence its trajectory.
They help us understand why, during the recent crisis, not all employment zones orientated to a productive economy found themselves in difficulty. Although employment stagnated or fell in most of them, a few actually experienced positive, even sustained growth (in Pays de la Loire and the southwest in particular). In other areas, though (the northeast quarter and Limousin), the combination of these factors was rather less favourable, and they were more affected than was the case elsewhere.

In fact, territories’ pre-2008 growth trajectories continued on the same paths after the crisis was over: areas with the most fragile economies and lacklustre demographics were affected the most. The Grand-Est and Bourgogne-Franche-Comté regions lost 3.9% and 4.6% of their jobs respectively between 2007 and 2014, while employment stagnated or in some cases even progressed in the dynamic western and southern regions.

**The geography of unemployment is becoming increasingly stable**

Current territorial dynamics continue on from past trends, spatial disparities are therefore very stable. In 2014, unemployment rates in Metropolitan France varied from 4.8% (Houdan employment zone in Yvelines) to 17.9% (Agde-Pézenas employment zone in Hérault): a 1 to 4 ratio between the lowest and highest unemployment rates. If Overseas France is taken into account, where the unemployment rate runs as high as 34.4% (Saint-Laurent employment zone in French Guiana), the ratio rises to 1 to 7.

Areas with high unemployment (mainly in Overseas France, the northeast and along the Languedoc coast) have remained unchanged for several decades. The hierarchy even seems to be becoming a fixture. In the 1980s, classification of employment zones depending on their unemployment rates could well change between two censuses: it was not always the same employment zones that recorded the highest or lowest unemployment rates. This is becoming increasingly less the case: classification of areas depending on their unemployment rates remained almost unchanged between 2007 and 2014. Among the 32 employment zones (10%) recording the highest unemployment rates in Metropolitan France in 2007, 26 were still top of the list in 2014.

The areas that were already the most in difficulty were the most affected by the 2008-2009 crisis. However, for other areas, since the 1990s, the general rise in unemployment has led to a measure of spatial homogenisation of the phenomenon: the average variance in unemployment rates is diminishing.

**Typology of employment zones according to their unemployment rates (2012) and employment growth (1975-2012)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Map Representation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low unemployment and high growth</td>
<td>Employment zones in Yvelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low unemployment and weak growth</td>
<td>Employment zones in Houdan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High unemployment and weak growth</td>
<td>Employment zones in Agde-Pézenas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High unemployment and high growth</td>
<td>Employment zones in Saint-Laurent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate situation</td>
<td>Employment zones in Metropolitan France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data unavailable</td>
<td>Overseas regions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: An employment zone is a geographical area within which most workers live and work, and in which companies can find most of the workforce required to fill jobs on offer. Division into employment zones is a form of territorial breakdown adapted to local study of the labour market.*

“Among very big cities, only those in the west and south have seen above average employment growth.”
An issue: understanding territorial dynamisms

Nonetheless, any study of spatial disparities in unemployment remains incomplete if it does not take account of the evolution of employment. A low unemployment rate may reflect highly favourable dynamism in areas recording growth in employment (around Nantes, Rennes and Poitiers, and in the Alps). However, it may also signal an area’s decline if it goes hand-in-hand with weak growth or even a drop in employment and a negative migratory balance (as in central France, for example).

Similarly, analysis of employment growth in areas recording high unemployment rates reveals groups of areas with highly differentiated dynamics. The Mediterranean area and the northeast have equally high unemployment rates but are very different. In the Montpellier, Narbonne, Perpignan and Avignon employment zones, and as far as Montélimar, employment growth – in particular in the “presential” sector – is among the most dynamic since 1975, under the effect of sustained demographic growth. However, it has not managed to bring down the unemployment rate, due to almost constant influxes of new workers. There is also high unemployment in the Roubaix-Tourcoing, Cambrai, Maubeuge and Charleville-Mézières areas, but the migratory balance is negative and employment growth very weak. These are areas historically orientated to the steel and textile industries, where the percentage of industrial employment dropped from 52% in 1975 to 33% in 2012 (as against 37% to 31% at national level), without other sectors creating enough alternative employment. This example illustrates why several indicators, dynamics in particular, are required to observe territories and understand the challenges they are faced with.

Between 1975 and 2012, the number of workers 15-64 y/o increased from 22.1 to 28.3 million in France, an increase of 6.2 million workers that breaks down into 1.3 million full-time workers, 2.9 million part-time workers and 2 million unemployed workers: unemployment and part-time employment increased a good deal more than full-time employment.

Territorial disparities cannot therefore be solely perceived in terms of the employed worker/unemployed worker distinction: a number of intermediate forms of employment have developed, blurring the borders between employment and unemployment, and revealing other spatial contrasts.

For example, the proportion of part-time workers is particularly high in the southeast and on the tourist coasts (apart from the Côte d’Azur and Aquitaine).

This phenomenon is due to the major presence of tourism activities and services to the individual, and also, in the case of the Languedoc coast, a regional context of high unemployment. Observation of the quality of jobs created therefore leads to qualification of apparently favourable economic dynamism.

It is also in these areas that recruitments on so-called “durable” contracts (i.e. on CDIs (permanent contracts) or CDDs (fixed-term contracts) for more than 6 months) are proportionally less numerous; such contracts are mainly concentrated in the Paris Basin, large agglomerations and border areas in the north and east.

Purely quantitative observation of employment (stocks of jobs and number of creations) must therefore be put in perspective with quality of employment, in order to provide data enabling development of sustainable quality economic growth in the territories.
Urban centres that concentrate employment and increase their influence over other areas

We can therefore identify territorial groups displaying contrasting dynamics with regard to unemployment, the geography of which has remained stable for several decades. There is a second way of interpreting disparities, in the form of a “centre-periphery” gradient between urban centres that concentrate jobs, the most qualified ones in particular, peripheries that receive most demographic growth, and sparsely populated areas increasingly under the influence of centres. Although disparities between regional dynamics are stable, imbalances in the distribution of employment and workers are growing in urban areas and their surroundings.

Concentration of employment in large urban areas: “structural effect” and “size effect”

In 2012, 81.5% of jobs in Metropolitan France were located in large urban areas, as against 78.0% in 1975. There was very high concentration of employment in large urban areas between 1975 and 1990. It has since dropped off slightly, however: the proportion of employment located in large urban areas increased by +0.19% a year between 1975 and 1990, as against +0.08% a year between 1990 and 2012. Although employment has generally been concentrated in large urban areas since 1975, it is mainly because of a so-called “structural” effect. After intermediate professions, it is jobs in management and the higher intellectual professions, socio-professional categories over-represented in large urban areas, that have most increased in number over the past few decades (+3 million jobs between 1975 and 2012). Over the same period, farmers’, blue-collar workers’ and craftspeople’s jobs, all of them less concentrated, have decreased in number (-3.3 million). The overall modification of the structure of employment, connected with transformation of the economy, has therefore mainly benefited large urban areas.

There are two theses to explain the favourable situation of large urban areas in terms of employment growth. The first refers to a “size effect”: it is because some cities reach sufficient size or density to create agglomeration economies (diversity of resources, positive interactions, economies of scale, capitalisation), that more than cover the costs linked to their size (traffic jams, pollution, etc.), that they have an advantage over other areas. Metropolisation should therefore be encouraged in order to support employment growth.

The second casts doubt on the existence of any link between a city’s size and its economic performance: territorial employment growth is explained instead by the effects of specialisation, dependence on past trajectories, regional integration and territorial organisation. Very large urban areas (i.e. over 500,000 inhabitants, except for Paris) have seen higher employment growth than other areas, with 1% average annual growth since 1975, as against a national average of 0.57%.

Evolution of numbers of jobs by zoning category in urban areas, 1975-2012

Notes

7. According to INSEE, a large urban area is a contiguous group of municipalities without pockets of clear land, made up of an urban centre (urban unit) providing over 10,000 jobs, and rural municipalities and/or urban units (periphery) where at least 40% of the resident population with jobs work in the centre or in the municipalities around it. There are 242 large urban areas in France.

8. Paris, which is in a category of its own, recorded average annual employment growth of 0.5% between 1975 and 2012. Even though this was half as much as other very large urban areas, it nonetheless represents a gain of over a million jobs.
At first glance, this evolution would appear to confirm the metropolisation thesis. However, cities that have overall enjoyed more dynamic growth are in very heterogeneous situations: economic growth was highest in a few agglomerations in the west and south (Rennes, Nantes, Bordeaux, Toulouse and Montpellier), whereas others, among these very large urban areas, saw growth lower than the national average (Saint-Étienne, Rouen, Douai-Lens and Lille). In addition, other smaller urban areas experience high employment growth, almost all of them located southwest of a Cherbourg-Lyon line. Therefore, disparities in employment growth in urban areas cannot simply be put down to their size, and are highly dependent on regional contexts.
A growing gap between location of jobs and workers

Concentration of employment in urban areas, and more specifically in their centres, goes hand in hand with a strong movement of peri-urbanisation on the part of the population, which has been going on for several decades now.

At employment zone level, jobs and population tend to concentrate in a limited number of areas: since the 1970s, the country’s economic and demographic potential has been concentrated in dynamic areas (see above).

In contrast, within employment zones, at municipality level, employment tends to concentrate while inhabitants move out to the peripheries of urban centres. Such movements in opposite directions result in a growing spatial variance between places of work and places of residence, which poses major problems as regards matching workforces with employers’ needs.

Above all, this affects the peripheries of major cities, the Parisian region and metropolises in the western half of the country most of all, with municipalities only providing 100 jobs for every 150 employed resident workers, those working within urban centres.

So-called “isolated” municipalities have the most balanced job/employed resident worker ratios, evidencing a measure of autonomy in local ecosystems, which also tends to diminish under the effect of less densely populated areas’ growing dependence on jobs in neighbouring centres.

In a context where unemployment is rife among blue-collar workers, growing distance from jobs increasingly concentrated in urban centres constitutes a major challenge.

Growing dissociation between places of residence and workplaces

“The general increase in mobility is a major issue in spatial planning, one that and poses territorial, environmental and social challenges.”

Longer commuter journeys to urban centres

A consequence of the increasing geographical distance between jobs and workers’ places of residence, commutes have grown longer over the past few decades, both in distance travelled and time taken (+6 kilometres on average between 1982 and 2008, but only +2 minutes9). Journey times have increased for all categories of workers, but not to the same extent: although managers and higher intellectual professions have by far the longest journeys to their workplaces (median time of 22 minutes in 2012), it is blue-collar workers who have seen their journey times increase the most (+2 minutes since 2006, as against +1 minute for all workers, making a median journey time of 15 minutes in 2012).

Note

Generally speaking, commuter travel increased significantly between 1990 and 2012: the percentage of employed workers living and working in the same area decreased across the country during the period concerned. This means that the various categories of areas are increasingly connected by workers’ daily mobilities. The attraction of jobs located in large urban centres has increased everywhere, for workers living in their peripheries, in smaller urban centres, and also in the less densely populated areas surrounding them. Mobilities between one urban area and another have also increased. We are witnessing an increase in urban polarisation that leads centres of all sizes to become more and more attractive to workers living on their peripheries.

This phenomenon may partly be explained by the peri-urbanisation of workers who previously lived and worked in centres: areas polarised by urban centres are extending owing to the fact that many workers are moving to outlying municipalities where there are fewer traditional jobs on offer without new jobs in the “presential” sector necessarily being created. This being so, workers’ daily commutes to their workplaces reveal major systems of territorial interdependences. The overall increase in mobility has become a major issue in spatial planning, one that poses territorial, environmental and social challenges.

**Towards balanced spatial planning**

France displays major disparities with regard to employment and unemployment, some of which continue at the same levels while others increase. Their structural character does not make them any easier to reduce, and it is not enough to organise the migration of inhabitants of areas in decline to the most dynamic urban areas where jobs are created.

Such migration, in fact, increases territorial inequalities with regard to employment, while how much it benefits workers is open to debate. Certain areas enjoy demographic and economic dynamism, while others have spent decades suffering persistent unemployment and a declining manufacturing sector. In urban areas, concentration of employment is at loggerheads with the population’s peri-urbanisation, which leads to longer commuter journeys and difficulties in accessing employment in the peripheries of urban centres and in sparsely populated areas.

These observations give rise to fundamental questions with regard to spatial planning, which go beyond the strict context of employment and unemployment: they require thought to be given to a combination of policies on economic development, housing and access to public services ensuring balanced spatial planning that enables economic actors in each territory to create employment locally.

**FIND OUT MORE**

The Observatoire des territoires (Territories Observatory’s) report is a CGET publication. The full version is available online on the websites www.cget.gouv.fr and www.observatoire-des-territoires.gouv.fr.

In addition to being downloadable, most of the 2016 report’s indicators are available to you in the Observatoire des territoires website’s interactive cartography section.

If you have any questions, please contact CGET’s Bureau de l’Observatoire des territoires (louise.haran@cget.gouv.fr).

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**Note**

10. The areas studied are zoning categories in urban areas (at constant zoning: ZAU 2010).