Surplus accounting is a method for evaluating trends in how a firm's productivity factors (intermediate inputs, capital, land, labour) are performing and how the productivity gains are redistributed between agents in the economy. We applied this method on a database of 164 Charolais-area suckler cattle farms running from 1980 to 2015. Over this 36-year period, the cumulative productivity surplus (PS) increased at a low rate of +0.17%/year. We observe a constant expansion in labour productivity whereas other factor productivities have shrunk. Farmers struggle to protect their revenues, and direct support-policy payments climb sharply. The bulk of the cumulative economic surplus has been captured downstream – 64% downstream of the cattle value chain as a drop in prices, and 22% downstream of other value chains (chiefly cereals). The simple fact that farmers' incomes are stagnating is a clear indication that they are net losers in this distribution of productivity gains.

These macrotrends manifestly mask relatively significant interfarm and year-on-year variabilities that warrant further investigation in future studies. Government subsidies to farming are designed to support a number of objectives (to support farming income, to support price competitive agrifood supply chains, to curb food price inflation, etc.), yet in the case of the beef sector, producers have captured practically none of this support. Livestock is more than just a sector of the economy producing market goods – it also plays a pivotal role in territorial land occupancy and rural development in less-favoured pasture-based zones where few if any viable alternatives exist. To stem the decline in value-added created by livestock farming and improve livestock farmer profits (without redistributing their share down to other agents in the economy), one solution could be to more actively couple farm outputs to territory, via localized bioregional farming practices (fattening livestock locally) and quality labels. The challenge is for livestock farmers to capture a share of the fast-growing services value component of food consumption, for example, through new marketing chains or cooperatives. The variability of individual livestock farmers' trajectories should be explored through econometric studies to analyze size/growth/productivity/income relationships. The quantification and economic evaluation of the services provided by livestock farming remains a major challenge for the sector, particularly for livestock farmers.