

Summary of Discussion

Workshop 8

From administrative registers to impacts of the European Social Fund operations

The participants of the session agreed that there is a huge potential to increase our knowledge about the impact of the ESF funded operations. The opportunities to enhance understanding about the impacts of public policies have increased recently mainly due to two developments. One is the development of the counterfactual impact evaluation methods and the other is increased access to administrative data. The CIE methods allow obtaining credible evidence about the impact of the public policies. Good data is key to CIEs and using administrative data for CIEs has many benefits. The data is already collected, it can be quickly accessed and it contains a huge amount of information at an individual level. What is particularly relevant for CIEs is that the administrative data sets contain information not only about people that benefited from the ESF operation, but also data on the control group.

However, there many challenges. Accessing administrative data for research is not easy in many countries. The process can be long and cumbersome, and sometimes not possible altogether. Another challenge is to keep the confidential data safe and in conformity with data protection rules. Administrative data contains information about individuals, and special care should be taken to minimize the risks that these people could be re-identified. The participants also mentioned that data protection rules often are not clear and that interpretation of these rules varies greatly not only across the EU Member States but also across regions and even organizations within a country. Another important challenge is to ensure good coordination between all involved parties, especially between data providers, policy makers and evaluators, which is essential for conducting a CIE. In addition, care should be taken to avoid the “tunnel vision” when the evaluation is guided by availability of data and not by what is important.

The participants have also identified the most important priorities for action. The number one priority is to increase access to administrative data. To achieve this it is especially important to clarify the data protection rules and standardize data access procedures. Other priorities include strengthening the evaluation capacity, disseminating good practice, better planning of CIEs and improved coordination between involved parties. The participants also discussed the possibilities to promote benchmarking and meta-analysis of the ESF CIEs at an EU level. Finally, the number of CIEs of the ESF operations is still low and more efforts are needed to have more and better evidence of the ESF financed operations.