BE-FAST

Data Infrastructure and Indicators for Fast Monitoring of Social and Labour Market

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Covid-19 pandemic fuelled the need for timely data and sufficient monitoring capacity for effective policymaking. In Belgium, the Working Group Social Impact COVID-19 (WG SIC) is hailed as a good practice: the group managed to disclose an unseen wealth of administrative data on short notice to inform policymakers and the policy process through regular reports and monitoring. Yet, despite such rapid progress several fundamental questions remained unanswered while the effect of the pandemic and the subsequent policy responses on the socio-economic conditions and living standards of specific, vulnerable groups in society were and still are poorly understood. Although the rapid disclosure of timely government data on labour market positions and benefit receipt was extremely helpful, the existing data infrastructure is not properly configured to monitor the impact of sudden shocks for several reasons: (1) data and indicators that are timely enough to swiftly monitor impact are supplied by separate government agencies and social security organisations at the aggregate level, which makes these data unsuitable to track transitions between social protection systems, while linked data at the individual level is only available with too long a delay to be useful for rapid monitoring. (2) While the household situation (e.g. having a working partner or not, or having children) is of key importance to gauge the living conditions of individuals, timely data concerns individuals rather than households. (3) Timely data includes information on those persons who are actually eligible to benefits or policy measures under current legislation, excluding those not entitled to social protection. This means that the degree of social protection and the impact of the pandemic on the income of those who fell through the cracks of the safety net remained elusive.

The BE-FAST project builds the necessary data infrastructure to rapidly monitor social and labour market developments to guide future policy responses. The project will pursue the research objectives by means of the following seven research activities:

1. We conduct a detailed review of existing, administrative data sources for the purpose of rapid socioeconomic monitoring;

2. We provide an overview of the potential indicators needed to cover all groups at risk, drawing on the expertise of the Combat Poverty Service in identifying groups at risk during the Covid-19 pandemic, in close collaboration with frontline and grassroots organizations and civil society stakeholders;

3. We conduct interviews with public and private data brokers to identify potential yet underused data sources, including high-frequency corporate and online data;

4. We evaluate and calibrate existing tools that have been developed before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, including nowcasting tools, and we examine to what extent they are reliable and useful for monitoring purposes;

5. We develop a dashboard of indicators to monitor changes in employment and transitions in and out of social security benefits, the use and take-up of social protections measures, and the share of individual not being entitled to any existing measure;

6. In close collaboration with representatives of social security institutions and data providers we provide a blueprint and a step-by-step guide on how to construct these and new indicators for future monitoring purposes;

7. We identify data gaps and 'red flags', and examine to what extent new data collection efforts can be carried out in the future to fill these gaps, including an assessment of the potential of the forthcoming Belgian online probability panel ACTS-OPP.

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All these activities will result in a socio-economic monitoring toolbox that will guide future policymaking and support academic research. The BE-FAST consortium consists of two academic partners (Centre for Sociological Research at KU Leuven and the Herman Deleeck Center for Social Policy) and the inter-federal institution Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service (CPS). CPS has close ties with poverty and grassroots organisations and other stakeholders across the country. They will translate their extensive practical experience with vulnerable populations into the data. We will work closely together to ensure that our scope is inclusive, with due attention for hard-to-reach populations and proper coverage of vulnerable groups that are currently underrepresented in the administrative data used to monitor the effects of the pandemic by the WG SIC. They will also be key in identifying data gaps.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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LINKS