Johan van der Valk (Statistics Netherlands)

Developing cross-border statistics

Topic 7 – Better statistics for a globalised world

Keywords: Cross-border statistics, Cross-border cooperation, international mobility

Introduction

The internal EU borders still prevent optimal economic development of countries. At least, this is what we assume since there is no hard data on this subject. Statistics Netherlands analysed the case of the production cross-border statistics. This showed that there is room for improvement.

This paper presents a proposal on this. In order to remove border obstacles, cross-border cooperation projects are carried out financed by EC funds (like INTERREG programmes).

Currently, the system ensures that within every project is measured how much money is spent on what. However, adequate measurement of the impact of these measures on the economic or social situation is mostly lacking. We know for instance what the costs were to build a bridge across a border river. But we do not know how many persons make use of the bridge to cross it and if this is for work or leisure. Impact assessments are currently carried out very limitedly. And when it is done, it is an incidental and ad hoc initiative. Analysis showed that structural monitoring of cross-border activities is rare.

Furthermore, the indicators and methods to calculate them vary from one project or one border region to another. As a consequence, international comparison is impossible. Despite that the situation is quite similar across the EU, international coordination of measuring cross-border activities is absent. We argue that the National Institutes (NSI's) are willing and able to collaborate in order to fill this g

Methods / Problem statement

Removing the negative effects of borders is a key element of social and economic EU policy. Border regions are typically in the periphery of the country far from the economic heart. As a consequence, these regions are vulnerable. Cooperation with regions across the border provides opportunities for economic growth. The level of movement of persons, goods and services across borders are signs of the actual effect of the borders. Therefore, it is important to measure this on a structural basis.

The European Statistical System does not provide cross-border statistics. NSI's produce statistics within their national boundaries. Eurostat coordinates the sources and methods for this data and disseminates the national contributions for the EU overview. Low regional information is scarce and measurement of interactions between countries is limited and cannot be assigned to specific borders.

As a consequence, cross-border statistics are not readily available. In the past, we have seen local initiatives to develop cross-border statistics. In most cases NSI's were partly involved to provide data. In some cases, they also played a coordinating role or collaborated directly. In almost all cases, these initiatives were incidental and ad hoc financed by temporary (EC) funds. Continuity is not guaranteed since the EC funds are limited in time and national authorities are not prepared to take over the financing because it has no priority.

Results / Proposed solution

We propose to set up an EU-wide network of NSI's that address the issue to develop harmonised methods to measure cross-border activities of persons, enterprises and goods. This should be done in close

cooperation with Eurostat in order to ensure the optimal use of international harmonised data, methods and infrastructures.

To make it cost-effective, we should make as much as possible use existing sources and methods. The products can be used to assess the local circumstances and monitor the impact of cross-border cooperation projects. The indicators should identify opportunities for cross-border cooperation, assess the obstacles for cross-border mobility and monitor the effects of measures. In addition this can be used to create a knowledge base which can be used to identify best practices at EU level.

This way one identify which cross-border opportunities are more rewarding, which obstacles are more difficult or easier to remove and measures are more successful than others. A key requirement to set up this network is to ensure the allocation of NSI's resources. The expertise and the willingness of NSI's to work and collaborate in this area is not the problem. This was proven by many local initiatives in the recent past. Currently, producing cross-border statistics is not part of the regular work programme of NSI's. These extra activities require substantial resources. Past experiences in this area have shown that this is not straightforward to

Conclusions

Border issues are important from EU, national and local perspective. Unfortunately, cross-border statistics are missing in the landscape of international statistics. NSI's are able and willing to work on this.

We argue that we should set up a network of NSI's that develop methods for producing cross-border statistics and disseminate them. NIS's will organise this in a cost-effective way by making optimal use of existing (inter)national sources, methods and infrastructures involving all relevant international organisations. Some methodological challenges should be mentioned. The indicators have to be available on low regional level. This implies that administrative sources are a most logical type of source to use. It is a challenge to produce international comparable indicators with this. In addition, a new type of source of high potential is so-called big data. These sources allow a lot of detail, is often internationally comparable.

However, the methods using this data for official statistics are still under development. The main organisational issue to solve is how to allocate resources for the extra activities that NSI's have to carry out. Providing cross-border statistics is not part of the regular work programme of NSI's. We have to find budget to cover for the extra workload.