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Measuring spatial mobility with the European Union Labour Force Survey: The case of intra-European migrants

One of the founding principles of the European Union is the freedom of movement of workers. The diffusion of skills through occupational and geographic mobility is seen as a central factor to enhance the productive capacity of firms and to put regions or national economies on a higher growth path. Furthermore spatial mobility has the potential of fostering social-cultural integration in the European Union, strengthening European identity and intercultural networks. While it is clear that too little mobility may mean reduced adaptability, untapped employment opportunities and competitiveness, too much mobility, especially from the young and highly educated, may distort national labour markets and generate considerable social costs.

Empirical data on this phenomenon as well as theoretical reasoning is still inadequate. By making innovative use of the European Union Labour Force Survey this paper contributes to the understanding of intra-European migration, the socio-economic characteristics of the migrants and their migration decision-making.

Originally the EU LFS was not intended to measure spatial mobility. For the analysis of migration flows this paper makes use of the variable “country of residence one year before the survey” which has been included in 1996. This variable should be treated with some caution, because of e.g. national different methods to select population samples, interrupted time series and high non-response rates. As a consequence this paper will use a pooled data set including all cases of spatial mobility between 1996 and 2006: Not the absolute figures will be studied but the level of distribution of socio-economic characteristics.

To address the question of intra-European migration flows, the paper estimates the selectivity of European out- and return-migrants of the different European member states separately and in intra-European comparison. For out-migration the paper focuses on immigration information collected in the EU LFS by all EU-15 countries on immigrating citizens from one of the other member states. To assess the selectivity of emigration flows, the paper compares this group with the citizens remaining in their home country. Similarly, the study investigates the selectivity of return migrants by comparing them with those migrants who continue to stay in one of the other member states.