Data Ecosystem for Better Regulation in the Social Sector: the Case of School Meals Policy in Romania

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Abstract: This paper examines the current gaps in FAIR-aligned administrative registers enabling evidence-based policy making in the social sector, with a focus on school meal programs in Romania. The main focus is on the Food Support Program from the Ministry of Education, which was adopted yearly by the enactment of emergency ordinances. Problem formulation in the substantiation notes, as well as subsequent monitoring and evaluation exercises, could be enabled by analyzing relevant data based on interoperable registries. These are currently managed by the Ministry of Labor and Family (National Authority for Child's Protection and National Agency of Payments), Ministry of Investments and European Funds, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and own records administered by the Ministry of Education. This paper highlights the need to align the multidimensional side of vulnerabilities addressed by different programs focused on reducing the early school-leaving rate or increasing school participation. Individual-level data contained in administrative registers represent an unparalleled source of information to be used when new policies are drafted and planning in-depth ex-ante or ex-post assessment of enacted legislation. A careful analysis of the quality of substantiation notes accompanying program enactment is provided, with a zoom in on problem formulation, overall goal and general and specific objectives. Concluding remarks bridge research to practice, as they consider several ways to reduce the administrative burden for relevant local stakeholders in the fields of education and social protection. Subsequent recommendations are also made in relation to the EU-funded programs managed by the Ministry of Investments and European Funds as a way to increase the effectiveness of funds spending.