In search of indicators to support the ‘perfect cluster’
Where evaluation theory collides with policy practice
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Introduction

The concept of geographically concentrated ‘clusters’ of firms, research institutions and other organisations became popular in economic development policy circles during the 1990s, following the publication of Michael Porter’s (1990) Competitive Advantage of Nations. Today there is widespread acceptance of the need to design policies that nurture and support cooperative relationships among groups of firms and other agents to boost competitiveness and innovation. Despite the widespread use of cluster policies as cornerstones of regional and national competitiveness policy, the practice of cluster evaluation remains challenging. The lack of clear evaluation criteria, methodologies, and instruments for evaluating cluster policies has led to fragmented evaluation practice and a lack of consensus on the notion of what would constitute an effective cluster, which is accompanied by a lack of robust evaluation evidence.

Addressing these challenges necessitates the coming together of academic expertise and analysis with the real-time and evolving work of policymakers and practitioners. This paper makes a contribution in addressing this shared challenge and moving the cluster evaluation state-of-the-art forwards.

Method

At least five elements to the cluster evaluation challenge can be identified, all of which require dialogue between academic experts, cluster policy-makers and cluster practitioners if they are to be appropriately addressed:

1. capturing the more qualitative ‘human element’ (or cooperative dynamic) that is essential building a successful cluster
2. converting emerging academic analyses into pragmatic indicators/approaches that have feasible data requirements in practice
3. selection and combination of techniques and tools as appropriate to different circumstances
4. approaches to deal with complexity from the interactions that exist across policy levels, instruments and initiatives
5. a stronger emphasis on the contribution of indicators and evaluation to policy steering, rather than the more common narrowly focus on audit.

These cluster evaluation challenges are being addressed through a unique experience that has brought together academics, policy-makers and cluster practitioners from around the world through a working group of TCI (the global network for clusters and innovation).

Conclusions

- The TACTICS project has been instrumental in developing new, indicators and data collection methods that respond to the challenges of measuring not only the results of collaborative activity, but also the processes of collaboration. In short, the process of collaboration.
- Collaboration as an approach is not limited to cluster programmes, but increasingly important and underpinned by policy approaches. Thus, these advances will be relevant not only for those working on clusters and cluster evaluation issues but also other phenomena focused on collaborative approaches.

Results

This process has resulted in the development and validation of an evaluation framework based on an understanding of what would constitute a ‘perfect cluster’ which is accompanied by a series of evaluation principles.

These two outputs are currently guiding the development of a specific question bank for cluster evaluation, which is being field tested in several countries in order to develop a comprehensive evidence base, with the intention of being disseminated in the Global Network for Clusters and Innovation. It is expected that these results will likely be tested in a range of contexts, and that a working group can be established for further development.

Principles to Guide Evaluation

- Evaluating cluster characteristics - a useful tool for contextualizing cluster policy, a basis for evaluation
- Evaluating the effectiveness of cluster interventions
- Capturing evidence against why (what happened and why)
- Evaluating the extent of cross-cluster collaboration
- Evaluating the extent of the cluster’s impact
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The different locations where the survey will be tested:


different countries and regions

Selected References


...four dedicated participatory workshops have been organized (in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Poland and Spain)...

...each bringing together 20-40 participants from academia, policy and cluster practitioners from across Europe.

At the most recent TCI conference in Daegu, South Korea over 60 participants contributed to a cluster evaluation lab.

Specific sessions have also been held at three annual global conferences of the TCI network.

The regular nature of these activities and the centrality of a proportion of the people involved have facilitated a progressive process of identification and exploration of cluster evaluation challenges that has integrated theoretical and practical considerations. This has enabled the development of a common understanding of challenges and progress towards an approach for addressing some of these issues.