Nowcasting the household income distribution

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• Since 1998, regular OECD data collection on income distribution and poverty (OECD IDD) based on national sources and comparable definitions

• Strong internal and external demand for IDD (e.g. COPE & its reports, *How’s Life?*, Inclusive Growth, Economic Surveys, G20, etc.)

• However, despite annual collection, information is not timely: average lag is 2-3 years...

• This limits the possibility to use distributive information in macro-economic assessments where timeliness is key requirement (e.g. *Economic Outlook, Going for Growth*)
Background and motivations

- Project seeks to *nowcast* household income by decile (in year T) in as many OECD countries as possible based on contemporaneous information through reduced-form econometrics.

- Once methodology has been thoroughly tested, estimates could be released regularly by the OECD in various forms (NAD household dashboard, MDLS, *How’s Life?*, ad hoc statistical briefs, G20 documents).

- In the very short term: working paper and feedback from experts in a variety of fora.
Nowcasting: basic principles

- **Objective**: Construct a predictive model that can be evaluated by out-of-sample (OOS) performance.
- **Parsimony**: A complicated model increases in-sample fit (R²) but may decrease OOS.
- **Credibility**: Meaningful coefficients.
- **Specificity**: The model must be decile-specific and possibly country-specific.
The dependent variable

- Average equivalised household disposable income per decile from IDD
- We consider two income series per country (waves 6 and 7)
- Linear interpolations used to cover gaps up to 3 years for countries lacking annual surveys and for earlier (pre-2000s) periods
- We also considered and tested a model to predict individual income’s components for each decile (i.e. wage, self-employment income, capital income, transfers received, taxes paid) but model performed less well than model for total income
Explanatory variables

- We created a group of 30+ predictors, drawn from national accounts and other official sources, that are timely and available for most countries.

- Examples: GDP, unemployment rate, mean net household disposable income (SNA), self-employment rate, wage rate, hours worked per worker, long-term interest rates, house prices, property income, share prices, current transfer received by households, taxes on business and on different kinds of households etc...
The predictive models

- We consider several predictive algorithms routinely used in AI:
  
  Random forest, Gradient boosting, Neural network, SVM

- We compare the results with those obtained from a log-linear model with variable selection (LASSO)

- LASSO model: For each decile we predict the growth rate of real household disposable income (defl. PCD):

  \[ \Delta_{t,t-1} \log y = \Delta_{t,t-1} X \beta_1 + \Delta_{t-k,t-k-1} \log y \cdot \beta_2 + \varepsilon \]

- Performance: we evaluated 1 year-ahead out-of-sample performance against observed growth rates and a naive ‘random walk’ model (forecasted growth=last observed growth)
Out-of-sample performance (growth rates)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Decile 1</th>
<th>Deciles 2 to 9</th>
<th>Decile 10</th>
<th>All deciles</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LASSO</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.60</td>
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<td>ANN</td>
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<td>0.19</td>
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<td>0.09</td>
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<td>SVM</td>
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<td>0.30</td>
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<td>DRF</td>
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<td>GBM</td>
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<td>-0.21</td>
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• All coefficients have the same sign across all income deciles (and all variables are ‘correctly’ signed)

<table>
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Estimated model

- Average OOS correlation in 2014 (across all deciles in 13 countries) is 0.59
- Fails to capture tails (and negative growth)
The estimated model easily beats the random walk
But D1 and D10 are the hardest to predict
Out-of-sample performance (growth rates)
Conclusions

- Nowcasting real changes in household income for various deciles is difficult because:
  - A complicated model is unstable
  - A simplistic model is inaccurate

- More research is needed to:
  - Better model the tails of the distribution
  - Better capture ‘regime changes’ (large deviations)
  - Better account for country heterogeneity

- On country heterogeneity:
  - other methodologies (microsimulations) may outperform regression-models but are difficult to implement in a consistent way and are much more demanding in terms of information
  - predicting the distribution from NA totals
Thank you!