Chapter 2
Building Bridges: Community-Based Projects for Participation and Social Inclusion of Rural NEETs

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17

Abstract This chapter focuses on factors that facilitate community-based projects for providing effective and sustainable responses to the challenges faced by young people Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEETs) in rural areas and more specifically to promote their quality of life and social inclusion. In line with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (1977, 1979) and considering community-based projects as part of the exosystem, we aim to identify the barriers and constraints faced by projects targeting young NEETs in rural areas. As part of the collaborative research developed by the members of the "WG1—Rural NEETs Social Networks and Social Inclusion" of the Rural NEET Youth Network, we identified five promising community-based projects in Portugal, Italy, Sweden, North Macedonia, and Lithuania and conducted semi-structured interviews with the project coordinators. Our analysis showed that the identified projects take into account the different levels of the bioecological model and the need to involve how young people and local communities. Both these factors are crucial for their success and sustainability over time.

Keywords Rural NEETs · Youth inclusion · Quality of life · Participation · Community-based projects

2.1 Introduction

Young people's participation in the design and implementation of community-based projects is key to ensuring that such interventions are relevant to them. This is particularly important for those Not in Employment, nor in Education or Training (NEET), who often face exclusion and disengagement (Juvonen & Romakkaniemi, 2019). Inspired by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (1977, 1979), in this chapter, we look at the factors that facilitate community-based projects that can effectively support NEETs in rural areas in promoting their quality of life and social inclusion. Recognizing community-based projects as part of the exosystem, which encompasses formal and informal structures (such as the neighborhood) that influence people's lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Newman & Newman, 2020), we aimed to identify projects targeting NEETs and the barriers and constraints faced by community-based projects in rural areas. We looked at promising practices, here defined as an 'intervention, program/service, strategy, or policy that shows potential (or 'promise') for developing into a best practice' (Fazal et al., 2017: 387).

While there has been an increased interest in the conditions, factors, and experiences of NEETs, existing research is still limited to the perspective of NEETs in urban areas (Simões et al., 2022a) and lacks a clear focus on NEETs facing unique challenges including limited access to resources, lack of employment opportunities, and geographic isolation in rural areas (Simões et al., 2022b). Furthermore, as youth participation is a key dimension to understanding social inclusion in rural areas (Simões et al., 2022c), more research is needed to examine how and in which conditions community-based projects involve young people not only as

"participants" but as active elements in the development of responses that are relevant to them.

How do projects consider the different levels of the bioecological model in the design and implementation? How is the consideration of the different levels of this model related to achieving the goals of the project and making it sustainable over time? How are young people involved in the different stages of the project? We addressed these questions by focusing on the perspectives of those leading and facilitating community-based projects in rural areas. Based on empirical data, we argue that community-based projects providing effective and sustainable responses to the challenges faced by NEETs in rural youth (i.e., promising practices) are projects which facilitate youth participation, the involvement of the local community, the provision of targeted support and resources, and the development of networks and partnerships. The bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979) is used as a theoretical lens to look at these dimensions. Additionally, while our starting point is the mesosystem level, which refers to the connections between the different microsystems that an individual is a part of, in this chapter, we seek to look at the networks, relationships, feedback, and interaction mechanisms within and between systems and levels of the bioecological model.

2.1.1 Being NEET in Rural Areas: The Need for Youth Participation

Youth living in rural areas face several challenges related to limited access to education, limited decent and meaningful work opportunities, and increasing gender gaps (Simões et al., 2022b). Scholars have proposed possible strategies to address these challenges by focusing on facilitating environmentally friendly farming practices that help to develop a positive sense of professional identity, particularly among young women, and highlighting innovation capacity in agriculture-relate jobs (Unay-Gailhard & Bojnec, 2021; Unay-Gailhard & Brennan, 2022). Other approaches highlighted the importance of increasing educational and training opportunities overall and not just in the farming sector (Bojnec & Petrescu, 2021; Petrescu et al., 2022).

While such strategies are undoubtedly needed, addressing rural NEETs' needs should also involve looking at how the physical, social, and cultural environments that young people live in contribute to their quality of life from a wider perspective (Ferreira et al., 2023). Such an approach involves looking at subjective and objective indicators of quality of life and well-being, including human health (e.g., physical, psychological), socioeconomic conditions (e.g., territorial, individual), as well as existing educational and employment opportunities (Ellena et al., 2021; WHO, 2012). Participation is often considered an overarching dimension that helps to improve young people's quality of life and promote their social inclusion, being, therefore, a key priority in several European policies (Ferreira et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, past research has suggested that young people do not feel heard by institutions and political actors, and their concerns and needs are often not considered relevant (e.g., Barret & Zani, 2015; Menezes et al., 2012). The feeling of disempowerment and exclusion from participation spheres is particularly high in young people from marginalized contexts and backgrounds (Barret & Zani, 2015), such as those living in rural areas. Participation is, in this sense, a key dimension to ensure the social inclusion of young people in rural, isolated, or deprived areas (Simões et al., 2022b).

Youth participation is best seen as a continuum ranging from mere attempts to manipulate the process from adults (e.g., decoration, tokenism), and consultation to youth-led initiatives (Hart, 1992, 2008). Relevant projects are, thus, those that are truly able to involve young people in the decision-making processes, are youth-initiated and directed, and in which the decisions are shared with adults. In this regard, previous studies have called for more participatory and inclusive contexts and processes when working with young people (e.g., Malafaia & Fernandes-Jesus, in press; Marta et al., 2022). Engaging young people in the design and implementation of projects targeting their needs is particularly needed when looking at the projects aiming at the quality of life and the social inclusion of NEETs in rural areas.

The nature of the initiatives targeting rural NEETs is another important dimension to consider. Local and bottom-up projects seem to facilitate addressing issues that are culturally, socially, and economically rooted within a particular geographical area or community (e.g., Jakes et al., 2015), ensuring that the project targets the challenges faced by the local community (Wildman et al., 2019). If participation in the community is important for people's well-being and quality of life (e.g., Melås et al., 2023; Wilkinson, 1991), there is a need to look at how projects and initiatives targeting rural NEETs can also facilitate and promote their participation and social inclusion. By social inclusion, we mean the "process of individual's self-realization within a society, acceptance, and recognition of one's potential by social institutions, integration (through study, employment, volunteer work or other forms of participation)" (Kovacheva, 2014: 2). Thus, quality of life and social inclusion of NEETs are not possible without supportive institutions and inclusive social networks. The bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979) offers us a lens to look at these dimensions from a comprehensive and interrelated perspective. Community-based projects exist within the intersection of multiple institutions, systems, and levels.

2.2   Identifying Community-Based Projects Across Europe: Our Approach

As part of our collaborative work within the WG1: 'Rural NEETs Social Networks and Social Inclusion' of the Rural NEET Youth Network, we mapped community-based projects targeting rural NEETs across Europe. Our methodological approach consisted of two main phases. In phase one, between June and September 2022, we

identified community-based projects focused on the social inclusion of NEETs in rural areas across Europe (Ferreira et al., 2023) through the application of an online survey. The survey was developed by WG1 members and comprised questions related to the characteristics, conceptualization, implementation, and evaluation of the community-based projects.

In total, we identified 43 projects from 14 countries across Europe (see Ferreira et al. (2023), for a detailed description of the projects). These projects focused on the social inclusion of young NEETs in rural areas and highlighted the role of young people's participation. Social inclusion and participation measures and policies at European and national levels tend to focus mainly on education and employment dimensions, and our mapping revealed the need to go beyond these categories, considering youth participation as a pathway to and an outcome of social inclusion. The process and results of the mapping phase were fully reported elsewhere (Ferreira et al., 2023).

More detailed information was needed to fully understand the factors and processes facilitating the implementation of the processes. Thus, the second phase of our mapping involved the selection of examples of promising practices that depicted: (a) a clear focus on youth in rural areas; (b) a community-based approach; (c) an orientation towards the engagement of the community; and (d) the existence of local partnerships. Data collection during this phase involved semi-structured interviews with coordinators of community-based projects meeting the above-mentioned criteria. The interview guide covered questions related to project development, sustainability, dissemination, and impact, as well as partnerships, collaboration, and how young people and the local community were involved. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by co-authors in their first languages between March and April 2023. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim (with an average duration of 1.5 h). All personal information gathered was protected with care and confidentiality required by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and research ethical principles. Participants were informed about the aim of the interview, that their participation was voluntary, and that they could refuse to answer any questions as well as withdraw from or leave the interview at any time without having to give a reason.

In total, five initiatives were included in the second phase. The projects came from Italy, Portugal, North Macedonia, Lithuania, and Sweden. Our analytical procedure was inspired by qualitative content analysis (Bryman, 2016) and guided by our research questions. A few co-authors (Fernandes-Jesus, Ferreira, and Ellena) prepared an analysis grid with a set of categories (e.g., resources/factors that facilitated the project development; strategies used to engage young people; types of partnerships) that was then completed by the co-authors responsible for conducting the interviews (Barbosa, Ellena, Tuna, Jonsson, Kvieskienė). Three co-authors (Ferreira, Ellena, Fernandes-Jesus) were then involved in comparing and contrasting the different responses, which were then checked by all co-authors.

Table 2.1 Selected community-based projects

Name	Status	Target group	Institutions	Funding
Policoro Project Italy	Ongoing	Young NEETs (15–29 years)	National offices of the Italian Episcopal Conference and other Christian-oriented youth associations	Italian Church
À Volta das Conversas Portugal	Ended (03/2021 to 07/2022)	Wider local Community; Youth (15–24 years); Early school leavers	Between (Ass. Entretodos)—network of professionals constituted as a non-profit association	National government funds
Youth up North Sweden	Ongoing	Young people in rural areas	Boden, Dorotea and Arjeplog municipalities	Kamprad Family Foundation and the Stenbeck Foundation
Sustainable Local Wine North Macedonia	Ongoing	Wider local community; Young people in precarious work (20–34 years)	Slow Food Bitola Macedonia—Local association or community organisation	European funds, Self-funded, Private Company
Youth Home Lithuania	Ongoing	Institutionalised young people in the process of residential autonomy	Turn to the Children—NGO	Own funds

2.2.1 Promising Community-Based Projects

The five initiatives identified below (see Table 2.1) are considered promising practices. Specifically, they are sustainable projects that consider young people's participation as a key dimension in their approaches.

The 'Policoro' project (Italy) [1] was founded in 1995 through a collaboration between three national offices of the Italian Episcopal Conference, and it is still ongoing. It aims to address youth unemployment in Southern Italy as well as in inland and rural areas by offering a 3-year scholarship to young people who want to become community animators and contribute to the development of their communities. Community animators build partnerships with local stakeholders to help vulnerable youngsters enter the labor market by creating concrete activities (e.g., a 3-year training program, during which they receive a scholarship and a work contract; micro-businesses). The project has achieved various outcomes, such as establishing a national network of young individuals, promoting them as a resource for their region, and initiating successful local enterprises and initiatives.

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[1] https://www.progettopolicoro.it/

The 'À volta das conversas' (Portugal) [2] project aimed to promote the well-being of young people through the development of their social and emotional skills that can be mobilized to prevent mental health problems, encouraging their collective organization and action as a group and strengthening their mutual support and resilience. The voluntary participation of young people in the project allowed for the identification of problems, the selection of appropriate actions, and the implementation of solutions from a bottom-up perspective, resulting in the creation of a series of impactful activities within their community. In terms of individual impact, the young people developed essential skills and were empowered, which helped them to improve their self-esteem.

'Youth up North' (Sweden) [3] is a 3-year initiative launched in 2020 to build long-term, systemic, and sustainable change in rural areas at the municipal level. The initiative focuses on empowering young people and promoting their entrepreneurial spirit, creativity, and innovation. It also aims to create cross-sector collaborations between civil society, business, and municipalities to shift power relations at a local level, allowing young people to influence their local community. This initiative has resulted in positive outcomes such as the employment of youth coordinators, the establishment of local youth clubs, and the inclusion of youth participation in the political agenda of municipalities.

The 'Youth Home' project (Lithuania) [4] developed by the 'Turn to the Children' organization started in 2016. It aims at providing social care services and psycho-social assistance to young people who have lost parental care as well as employment services to those growing up in social-risk families to help them to be prepared for independent living. Assessments were carried out, and participants gave positive feedback about the project, thus becoming promoters of the project within the community.

Finally, the 'Sustainable Local Wine' project (North Macedonia) [5] aimed to support young wine producers to stay or return to rural areas. The project impacts include direct and indirect benefits for young farmers and for the agricultural sector overall, as well as contributions to the sustainability of rural areas. The project offered opportunities for training, investment planning, and marketing strategies to young people, motivating them to either continue their family's wine production or pursue studies in enology to innovate in the field.

Overall, these five projects represent promising practices of community-based projects who have put youth participation at the heart of their action. They were implemented in quite different contexts and with different goals. Nevertheless, they share some common aspects discussed in the following sections.

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[2] https://www.between.pt/projetos/a-volta-das-conversas

[3] https://flyttatillboden.se/en/a-countryside-where-young-people-want-to-live/

[4] https://atsigrezk.lt/seimynos/jaunimo-namai

[5] http://www.slowfood.mk/

2.2.2 Contextually Grounded Projects

Our interviewees highlighted local-based, tailored, and individualized approaches, which are considered to be strengths and distinctive aspects of these projects. Whilst these projects were developed based on the identification of contextual needs, European and national policies, and measures have helped to create the conditions and access to the resources needed for the implementation of these projects. For example, the 'Youth Home' was described as a project aligned and inspired by national policies, but the access to structural funding was key in its initial implementation phases. Nevertheless, the approach to the project was very much adapted and inspired by lived experiences, training, and knowledge of those involved. Similarly, the 'Sustainable Local Wine' project was designed following new legislation in North Macedonia, which has facilitated the development of the project. In a way, this project caught the wave or the period when the law for spreading wineries across the country was enforced, and this was an actual opportunity for practical implementation of the factual changes in the Law. Conversely, the changes in the law directly influenced the success of the project. Thus, even when the projects are funded within a policy and are aligned with European and national priorities, they seem to follow other sources of inspiration and are often developed based on the identification of needs and funding in a way that supports these needs.

The 'Policoro' and the 'À volta das conversas' are two interesting examples of projects that were not driven by top-down measures and interventions. According to the interviewee from the 'Policoro' project, this initiative was completely bottom-up and grounded in local needs:

> The project is not specifically coordinated with national or regional policies. It stands as a parallel alternative to other measures and interventions. However, its strength lies in being extremely rooted in the local community and territory by providing tailor-made designs. In this context, it dialogues with different institutions, including municipal ones, while establishing a collaborative partnership (Policoro, Italy).

Likewise, 'À volta das conversas' has developed its methodology inspired by the 'Children's Parliaments', a methodology that aims to facilitate children's rights and participation (Tolson, 2022). This project invested in strong partnership-building with local institutions and experts on the topic of mental health and created spaces for youth participation. Additionally, while there is a lack of measures and policies targeting rural areas (Petrescu et al., 2022), the 'Youth Up North' project provides an example of how local organizations are addressing rural challenges without the existence of national policies directed towards young people in rural areas or rural NEETs. However, to achieve the aim of contributing to long-term, systemic, and sustainable change *with* and *for* young people in the Swedish rural inland, the change processes of the 'Youth Up North' have been deliberately integrated into existing and established municipal structures. One specific example of such integration is the establishment of a youth coordinator, one young person from the local community who has been employed by the municipality to promote change in line with the needs and wishes of their peers.

2.2.3 Centering on Youth Participation

While each project depicts unique characteristics, they all represent a significant attempt to engage young people both in the design and implementation phases as well as in peer-to-peer activities. In the 'Policoro' project, young people are involved as community animators and as beneficiaries of the activities. Community animators are proposed and selected locally. Afterward, they are engaged in the training and design process involving other young people through building a relationship of trust based on a peer-to-peer learning approach. Although a strong involvement of young people was also foreseen in the 'À volta das conversas' project, their participation was more prominent during the various planning stages, and young people were also involved in developing the methodology. This project is described as a continuous process of planning, implementation, and evaluation, and young people provide feedback that is taken into consideration to improve the methodology. This methodology places participation as its main dimension, and the project's vision is "to hold this space for participation and at the same time allow the participants themselves to become potential facilitators of the participatory space." (À volta das conversas, Portugal). Participation is then an outcome of the project, but also the means throughout the project is developed (Rosa & Fernandes-Jesus, 2021).

Similarly, the 'Youth Home' and 'Youth Up North' projects highlighted the engagement of young people in the design, implementation, and dissemination of the project. For example, 'Youth Up North' followed an interactive four-step model inspired by a youth-centered approach that involved co-creation with youth and adult stakeholders. The initiative evolved, shifting from focusing mainly on the inclusion and influence of young people to challenging the ageism of adult-centric discourse and practices that actively exclude them. As part of this approach, one of the young participants is employed by the municipality and serves as a point of reference for their peers. A different approach was taken by the 'Sustainable Local Wine' project, which seems to have involved young people mainly in the implementation phase of the project. Nevertheless, young people were also instrumental in mobilizing, activating, and motivating other young people to participate in developing the necessary changes pursued by the project.

The ability to create generative partnerships and intense community involvement were very salient strengths of these projects. For the "Policoro" project, this factor was essential, as the community animators had the tasks of being present in the community and involving all associations and institutions in the planning of concrete activities: 'One of the strategies that have been used over the years, which has also been very successful, is to be present as community animators within the various realities that constitute the community.' (Policoro, Italy).

Interestingly, the 'Youth Up North' initiative has also focused on supporting cross-sector collaborations locally between civil society, business, and the municipality, as well as intergenerational collaborations between young people and local/regional discussion-makers. The 'À volta das conversas' involved schools and NGOs with expertise on the subject as partners. Involvement of the extended

community and families was envisaged in the project but, unfortunately, not fully feasible due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The involvement of the youth's families and related support institutions (e.g., schools, employment services, companies, and municipalities) was key for the 'Youth Home' project. Equally important was the involvement of the municipality and experienced local consultants. Finally, in 'Sustainable Local Wine' numerous partners were involved, although mainly related to the agricultural sector of interest.

2.2.4   Facing Barriers and Constraints

Based on our analysis, these projects have encountered three types of barriers and obstacles. The first one includes barriers associated with the lack of motivation and interest from young people, who are described as being in psychological distress and lacking the will to be engaged. According to our interviewees, this is due to some extent to a lack of confidence in their abilities and partly associated with a lack of trust in the system and institutions. This issue is particularly evident in three out of the five projects ('Policoro', 'À volta das conversa' and 'Youth Up North'): "Some of them [young people] were very disengaged and had low self-esteem, many fears, and a lack of motivation. Initially, it was challenging to engage them because they were skeptical and disbelieving." (À volta das conversas, Portugal).

Another type of barrier is related to the social representations that young people have about rural areas. Rural areas are not seen as attractive to young people such as urban areas (Unay-Gailhard & Brennan, 2022; Unay-Gailhard & Bojnec, 2021), which contributes to many of them refusing the idea of being involved in community-based initiatives and further blocking their participation in these projects. For instance, the 'Youth Up North' project highlighted this sort of social barriers when trying to engage young people locally in the municipalities. The negative images and discourses of rural residents and of rural areas as socially homogeneous were described as having a direct implication in the way young people engaged in the change process by censoring or limiting themselves: "Young people are so pragmatic in the inland that it becomes boring to have visionary workshops because the young people stop themselves so early in the imaginary process." (Youth Up North, Sweden). This was also highlighted by the 'Sustainable Local Wine' project, which encountered young people enrolled in traditional agricultural practices who also lacked the motivation to move ahead with their ideas.

A third type of barrier relates to the lack of resources and supporting institutions, such as schools. This is again well-explained by the Swedish project. Most of the inland municipalities of the Swedish north do not have an upper secondary school, meaning that young people typically either leave or commute for many hours a day to go to school, making it very difficult to reach the school precinct:

> Then we can talk about those who don't go to school, the NEETs, but we must also remember that in [location] there is no high school. So, most of the young people move away when they are 15 years old, and they have been incredibly difficult to reach. So, I

would say that our challenge in terms of age has been that as soon as young people do not have a natural place, such as a school to go to, it is very difficult for a project like this to reach them. (Youth Up North, Sweden).

Overall, the barriers identified by participants are more often structural and related to the lack of resources that facilitate young people's engagement with community-based projects. Even the lack of interest and motivation is described as being associated with a lack of opportunities in rural areas, which further explains disengagement.

2.2.5   Sustaining the Project over Time

The five projects shared a keen interest in finding solutions that would ensure the sustainability of activities and enable participants to carry them out by themselves. The key factor in achieving this sustainability is the ability to build partnerships with various stakeholders within the community. For example, in the 'Policoro' project, the sustainability of the proposed activities is ensured by the strong alliances with the local entities involved as well as by the presence of the community animator, should they wish to do so after 3 years. Similarly, the 'À volta com as conversas' is strongly orientated towards the project continuity and sustainability, and that is why the project also seeks to involve school teachers and train young people to take over the leadership and facilitation of the project. Despite the initial low participation, the impact of some community activities attracted young people in the following year, allowing the project to continue to exist autonomously without the involvement of the organization that implemented the project in the first place.

Furthermore, the 'Sustainable Local Wine' project suggested that partnerships and involvement of professional experts and volunteers were critical to ensuring the project's sustainability over time, more than financial resources. Similarly, interinstitutional cooperation was essential to the success of the 'Youth Home' project, which involved schools, companies, mental health centers, and other organizations in the project. Partnerships with private and international stakeholders, such as the Norwegian Lions Club, were important to guarantee the quality and regularity of salaries for the technicians involved in the project: "Inter-institutional cooperation is of great value because by consolidating it, we can create a support network for young people and more productively solve the difficulties that have arisen in the life path of young people." (Youth Home, Lithuania). The creation of the steering group in the 'Youth Up North' project also encouraged policymakers to talk about young people's participation and facilitated the development of the project over time.

We have gathered some of the municipalities' top decision-makers, who are forced to every two months have two hours in their calendar every day to talk about young people's influence. That, I think, has created a lot of ripple effects, which was not our idea from the beginning, but was more of a necessity. (Youth Up North, Sweden)

Importantly, as highlighted in the previous quote, such space was important to overcome the barriers faced by the project, contributing to its sustainability over time.

2.3   Conclusion

In this chapter, we have looked at community-based projects and how they facilitate the social inclusion and participation of rural NEET youth. Taking the bioecological model as a lens, we conclude that these selected projects take into account the different levels of the bioecological model and that the barriers mentioned are partly related to the difficulties in mobilizing interactions between different levels (e.g., supporting institutions) (Trickett & Rowe, 2012).

Furthermore, our analysis suggests that the most sustainable projects are those that are tailored and locally based. The local dimension of the community-based projects was associated with greater community engagement and youth participation (Malafaia & Fernandes-Jesus, in press; Marta et al., 2022). These projects are alternatives to other existing initiatives in the community, seeking to fill the gaps created by the mass responses of policies designed at a macro level without considering the specificities of the local context.

The ability to create and consolidate partnerships (e.g., intergenerational collaborations, extended community and families; supportive environment by institutions such as schools and municipalities) is one of the greatest strengths and potentials of the analyzed projects and the one that creates the best conditions for its implementation and sustainability over time.

To ensure such sustainability, it is necessary to consider the different levels of the bioecological model and, importantly, how they relate to each other. Therefore, it is essential to consider the exosystem (e.g., social networks, community support institutions, etc.), as well as how the elements within this level interact with the different levels.

Indeed, the continuous and collaborative dialogue with different public and private institutions is indeed a transversal feature of all five projects, demonstrating the importance of local support systems and institutions to promote social inclusion and quality of life (Kovacheva, 2014). The projects also revealed the importance of developing local and bottom-up initiatives that are rooted in the cultural, social, and economic specificities of the community (Jakes et al., 2015; Wildman et al., 2019), complementing top-down national interventions that provide standardized responses that are not culturally and contextually grounded in a territory. However, European/national policies and measures help to create the conditions that facilitate access to the resources needed to implement projects (e.g., Youth Home; Sustainable Local Wine).

The five projects describe several attempts to engage young people in both the design and implementation phases and to facilitate peer-to-peer activities. In this regard, the community-based projects highlighted the need for youth-led projects to

avoid the adult-centered vision of project development in which younger generations are often regarded as mere beneficiaries (Ferreira et al., 2023; Malafaia & Fernandes-Jesus, in press).

A number of structural barriers and barriers related to the lack of resources and opportunities in rural areas were identified as hindering young people's participation in the projects. Firstly, the lack of motivation and interest of young people is linked with a lack of confidence in their abilities and/or a lack of trust in the system and institutions (e.g. Policoro; À Volta das Conversas; Youth Up Nrorth). The second type of barrier is related to the image of rural areas, which are not considered attractive for young people, and to the lack of motivation for traditional agricultural practices. Finally, the third barrier is related to the lack of resources and supporting institutions.

In conclusion, the projects we have discussed demonstrate the importance of combining the local dimension with the centrality of young people's participation as a way of overcoming barriers and sustaining the project over time. In light of our findings, effectively engaging rural NEETs in community-based projects is complex and the factors contributing to these challenges are multi-faceted.

An important limitation of our study is the convenience sampling approach used, but given that we were not interested in best- or good-practices, we are confident that these five projects are examples of promising practices. An additional limitation of our work is that we emphasize only the perspective of adults involved in community-based projects targeting rural young NEETs.

2.3.1 New Research Developments

Our results highlighted the importance of rethinking the way research agendas are defined, not only upstream, in the definition of priority lines of funding at different scales—European, national, and local, but also downstream, in the process of design, implementation, and evaluation of processes, through some key actions.

- **Involving rural NEETs in research.** Young people should be involved in research processes: (a) in the definition of funding priorities, in order to meet their needs and expectations and (b) in the different stages of project development, from design to implementation and evaluation, in order to overcome the adult-centric vision which often characterizes research on young people. *Research should focus on the voices and perspectives of rural NEETs and involve young people as co-researchers or support and fund youth-led initiatives and projects.*
- **Connecting and building bridges within the community.** Our analysis of five different projects has shown the importance of community involvement and how it can increase the impact of projects in the territory. These bridges, mobilizing and linking local resources and partnerships, allow projects to respond to the problems, needs, opportunities, and specific potential of each territorial context.

In this process, it is also important to promote the participation of young people in planning and defining what is important for their communities. *Research should consider a participatory diagnostic phase involving local actors.*

- **Taking into account the diversity and plurality of the youth condition.** Top-down programs and priority agendas are based on and reproduce a uniform and homogeneous vision of what it means to be young. Our findings highlight the importance of assessing community-based projects, rooted in the territory, that promote young people's participation and social inclusion through a more personalized and tailor-made approach, focusing on the diverse profiles of young people. *Research should go beyond the one-size-fits-all view of youth and take into account its pluralities in terms of gender, ethnicity, place of residence (urban/rural), migration background, etc.*
- **Exploring further the bioecological model framework.** Research should also seek to build a more comprehensive analysis by looking at the different levels of the bioecological model rather than just focusing on the perspective of individuals, institutions, or policies. Given our findings, effectively engaging rural NEETs in community-based projects is complex, and the factors contributing to these challenges are multilayered. *Research should, therefore, consider exploring the different layers of the bioecological model.*

2.3.2   Policy Recommendations

In terms of policy recommendations, our results inform approaches to rural NEETs that are grounded on their needs and active involvement. Specifically, we recommend that:

- **Considering the differences between EU Members.** European policies implementation. In the European context, projects should consider the range of cultural and socioeconomic differences among EU Member States where rural youth experience different forms of rurality (Bæck, 2016).
- **Developing local and bottom-up projects.** The projects covered by our research efforts revealed the importance of developing local and bottom-up projects that are rooted in the cultural, social, and economic singularities of each community (Jakes et al., 2015; Wildman et al., 2019), contrasting with the top-down a-specific national interventions that offer standardized responses, not culturally and contextually grounded in a territory.
- **Foster partnerships.** Establishing partnerships is crucial for the implementation and sustainability of the project over time. To ensure such sustainability, there is a need to consider the different levels of the bioecological model and, importantly, how they relate to each other. Therefore, while it is essential to consider the exosystem (e.g., social networks, community support institutions, etc.), it is also key to look at how the elements within this level interact with the different levels proposed by the bioecological model (from micro to macro).

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