

YOUTH POLICY



APPLICATION OF THE INTERVENTION:
BEST-PRACTICES WITH RURAL NEETS





COST Action CA18213
Rural NEET Youth Network:
Modeling the risks underlying rural
NEETs social exclusion

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INTRODUCTION: STRATEGIES, POLICIES, PROGRAMS AND PROJECTS FOR YOUTH RURAL NEETs¹

ŠTEFAN BOJNEC

CLAUDIA PETRESCU

Relatively few studies have investigated the strategies, policies, programmes, and projects concerning rural NEETs (namely, young people living in rural areas neither in employment nor in education or training). This special issue of *Quality of Life Journal* is dedicated to fulfilling this gap in the literature. It contributes case studies from European Union (EU) member states. The primary purpose of this special issue is to approach and discuss the various strategies, policies, programmes, and projects applicable to youth rural NEETs.

This special issue edition has sought to gather research papers (or critical, theoretical analysis on selected topics) covering NEETs strategies, policies, measures, programmes, and projects. These highlight the success factors and scope for transferability of good (or, how to avoid bad) practices. To that end, they examine pertinent labour market and NEET situations which can help to explain the context, reasons, and baseline for the various strategies and policy measures being implemented. They also cover assessment of NEET strategies by focusing on formal education, training and skills development, and active employment policies, in particular the role of Youth Guarantee in local/rural employment. Various other relevant factors are considered/examined, including: assessment of the NEET policy measures and results; objectives, target groups, geographical and sectoral scope in different economic activities, financial, legal and institutional frameworks; results and lessons learned, including adaptations due to crisis; domestic and international programmes, as well as numerous projects and instruments; difficulties and constraints; and, finally, assessment of the success factors and transferability of projects and strategies thereof.

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The original papers focus on strategies, policies, programmes, and projects regarding vulnerable and socially excluded rural youth. However, they are especially focused upon intervention practices for youth rural NEETs, the various risk factors facing NEETs, and the various types of intervention being utilised to combat NEET status amongst varying populations and demographics across Europe.

A preliminary version of the selected articles included in this special issue have been presented as a national fiche, based upon work from COST Action CA18213 Rural NEET Youth Network: Modelling the risks underlying rural NEETs social exclusion, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology); www.cost.eu.

In the article *Policy and Practical Lessons Learned Regarding Youth and NEETs in Slovenia*, the country's strategies, institutions, policies, domestic and international programmes, projects, and other measures deployed to tackle the NEETs' predicament are highlighted. Special focus is paid to those residing in rural areas. The Youth Guarantee (and in particular, active employment policy measures) play a crucial role in bridging the gaps for those who are structurally and long-term unemployed, and especially for rural NEETs. Whilst the percentage of rural NEETs in Slovenia is modest, the hidden, unregistered NEETs are, of course, as important as those who are formally registered.

The case study from Spain is described in the article *Youth Policy Adaptation in the Spanish Rural Context: A Case of Study of Youth Policy Programs*. Its focus is on youth policies, specificities, and policy constraints towards rural areas. It thereby brings attention to pilot experiences and partnerships between local stakeholders and policy implementation.

The article covering Ireland draws attention to NEET strategies in relation to formal and non-formal youth education and training. *NEET Strategies in Post-Recession Ireland: Reflections on the Importance of Connecting Formal and Non-Formal Educational Supports* extrapolates the links between the 2007–2008 global economic crisis and high unemployment rates for youths in Ireland, but also later improvements and their possible driving forces. It is observed that both the construction and agriculture sectors largely absorbed early school leavers into related apprenticeship programs. The later success story towards actual and potential NEETs has been driven by formal education, non-formal education and training, and considering feedback provided by those most impacted.



The Romanian experience in NEETs and rural NEETs is presented in the article *Implementation of the Youth Guarantee Programme in Romania*. The article aims to establish links between youth unemployment and NEETs, education, skills and experience, and employment. It has also highlighted the importance of apprenticeship, training, and life-long learning. Based on the investigation of the Romanian Youth Guarantee Programme implementation in the 2014– 2020 period, the main challenges and barriers in the implementation are identified. There are some similarities with other investigated countries, for instance: a lack of coordination of measures between institutions at similar and different levels; problems related to hidden NEETs; and, a lack of partnership between local authorities and different local stakeholders.

In addition to the articles published in the Quality of Life Journal, the 2nd deliverable of WG2 has been produced by the following contributors:

Elena Marta, Adriano Mauro Ellena, Daniela Marzana, Corrado Celata, Nadia Vimercati, and Antonella Rocca describe the labour market and NEET policies and projects in Italy using a person- and territory-centred approach in order to combat social exclusion in relation to the pandemic. Since NEETs are composed of heterogeneous and complex groups, this can be a reason for the importance of hidden NEETs (i.e., those that are excluded from official measures). They argue for a greater role of NGOs fighting against social exclusion of vulnerable young people in different territories and socio-cultural heterogeneity.

Heidi Paabort and Kerli Kõiv present practical reasons and NEET support mechanisms in Estonia which are implemented through the Youth Guarantee and its support system, as well as the STEP programme which assists young people in returning to school or the labour market.

Victor Juc and Maria Diacon provide an overview of interventions and good practices regarding NEETs in the Republic of Moldova as a case study for non-EU member states. Whilst the NEET concept is relatively new, there are also problems related to the lower level(s) of development, (rural) poverty, and their largely hidden and unknown profile.

Finally, Bahanur Nasya presents NEETs policies and measures for Austria, underscoring the importance of apprenticeship training and prevention measures, and moreover different types and areas of interventions at the national level in the areas of education, training, dropout, youth coaching, and federal and local responsibility. In addition, related policies and projects are explained with a case study of Carinthia also being included.



POLICY AND PRACTICAL LESSONS LEARNED REGARDING YOUTH AND NEETS IN SLOVENIA²

ŠTEFAN BOJNEC

The article highlights the Slovenian strategies, institutions, policies, programmes, projects, and measures in tackling the NEETs, particularly the rural ones. The Youth Guarantee, and particularly active employment policy measures at a national level implemented via regional offices for employment work together to play a crucial role in bridging the gaps for the structurally and long-term unemployed in general, and especially for rural NEETs who are in transition from education and training to employment. National strategies and policies are supported by international programmes and projects. Amongst the success stories can be tentatively included the integration of the Roma population of at least one-cross-border area with geographical proximity to the neighbouring Styria region of Austria. Whilst the percentage of rural NEETs in Slovenia is modest, this does not mean an absence of the problems typical to this group i.e., less favourable personal, household, and/or other characteristics for the vulnerable, and economically and socially excluded rural NEETs. The hidden, unregistered NEETs (not participating in any programmes and policies) are at least as important as the registered ones. Both registered and unregistered NEETs are challenging issues in terms of their economic and social integration. To that end, it is necessary to provide general and specific opportunities for continued lifelong learning within the context of their personal, family, and social commitments: this will help to ensure their successful labour market and social integration, survival in the competitive labour market, quality of life by avoiding poverty risks, and sustainable rural development more broadly.

Keywords: youth; NEET; education; Active Employment Policy; rural NEET; NEET strategy; NEET policy measures; Sloveni

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I INTRODUCTION

Young people neither in employment nor in education and training (NEETs) are a specific, vulnerable group of youth defined variously according to their upper age, and/or being between 15 and 34 years old. They are unemployed, or inactive, and are not attending any education or training courses. The aim in this article is to analyse and summarise the main features of the NEETs strategy, policies, measures, programmes, and projects. It also highlights the success factors and scope for transferability of good (or, more specifically, to avoid bad) practices in the case of Slovenia (Petrescu, Erdogan and Flynn 2020).

From 2015–2020, the Slovenian economy grew between 2.2% in 2015 and 4.8% in 2017 with a slight decline to 3.2% in 2019 (ZRSZ 2021a). In 2020, there was a decline or negative rate of growth of around -5.5%. Part of this decline can be explained by the external short-term shock caused by the COVID-19 crisis, particularly due to the decline experienced in the hospitality and tourism related industries, with a recovery expected in 2021. It is well known from macroeconomics that employment and unemployment, with a certain time lag, follow developments of output or rates of economic growth (Mankiw 2021). In 2018, the NEET rate for those aged between 15 and 29 years was around 5%. In 2020, during the COVID-19 crisis, the labour situation in general (as well as for the NEET groups) worsened in the short-term. Economic growth in Slovenia (as a small open economy) is significantly driven by exports, the reduction of which therefore reduces output and employment. The government also introduced measures to support sectors that were most impacted by the temporary closure of their operations. Combined, these factors have affected the recovery of the economy with a reduction of unemployment rates being observed.

This article contributes to the existing literature on NEETs by focusing on the main programmes, policies, interventions, projects and practices vis-à-vis the youth and NEET situation in Slovenia. There is, however, a lack of existing scientific literature on the topic which could be of scientific, policy and practical relevance and importance.

The article addresses the relationships between strategy and different institutions, policies, measures, and selected case studies addressing the needs of NEETs, vulnerable, and/or socially excluded rural youths in Slovenia. The factors examined will include education, rural and social entrepreneurship, and the important role of rural



stakeholders in local employment development. The role of different domestic and international projects can also be important.

The method and approach follow selecting government strategies, programmes, and policies. The publicly available secondary information and data have been gathered, collected and used in this study. The procedure used focused on transition from education to employment and the NEET situation, particularly in rural settings. Different domestic and international projects, and case studies as criteria for selection, were also used in discussions and interviews with experts in the field.

TRANSITION FROM EDUCATION TO EMPLOYMENT AND THE NEET SITUATION

Previous studies have explained the links between education, labour market policies and the NEET situation (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions 2011; Simões et al. 2017; Brunet 2019). Both education and training policies, as well as active labour market policies (Sahnoun and Abdennadher 2018; Juznik Rotar 2021) can be important for a smoother transition from education and training into employment (Müller 2005). These policies can be important in bridging the gaps in school-to-work transition and in mitigating the negative consequences for NEETs as confirmed by various EU countries (Bruno, Marelli and Signorelli, 2014; Vancea and Utzet, 2018, Caroleo et al. 2020; Simões et al. 2021).

Whilst previous literature suggested the relevance of focusing on the school-to-work transition and policies, the focus of this section is on youth unemployment, the NEET situation in Slovenia, Roma youth and NEETs, and the early leavers from education and training. These main subgroups of young people are more likely to become NEETs and are vital to fully understand the Slovenian situation in terms of the specific challenges faced by youth in the transition from education and training to employment.

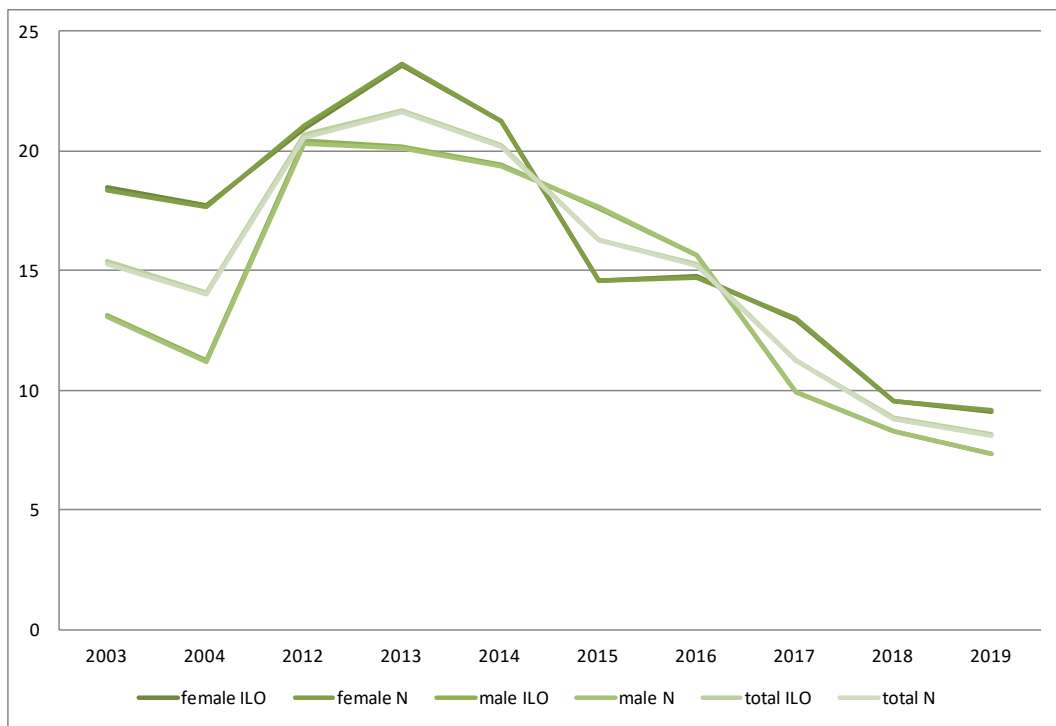
YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

This study focuses upon Slovenia, where the inverse U-shape curves representing youth unemployment rates over time can be seen in Figure 1. In 2004, when Slovenian joined the European Union (EU), the unemployment rates in Slovenia declined and increased after the EU accession up to the years 2012–2013: from that point onwards, they have started to decline. There is a very minor differential between the youth



unemployment rates by modelled ILO estimates and national estimates. Whilst male youth unemployment rates have most frequently been lower than those of females, the differential between them during the most recent years was modest. In 2019, youth unemployment rates were around 9.1% for females, 7.4% for males and 8.1% in total. During the COVID-19 period in 2020, the youth unemployment rate increased. In March 2021, the youth unemployment rate in Slovenia was 13.7%, which was still low amongst the EU member states: latterly, this varied between 6% for Germany and 37.7% for Spain (Eurostat 2021b).

Figure 1 - Youth unemployment rate in Slovenia (% of labour force ages 15–24)



Note: female means unemployment rate of female youth (% of female labour force ages 15–24). Male means unemployment rate of male youth (% of male labour force ages 15–24). Total means total unemployment rate of youth (% of total labour force ages 15–24). ILO – modelled International Labour Organization (ILO) estimate. N – national estimate.

Source: Author's presentation based on data from World Bank (2021).

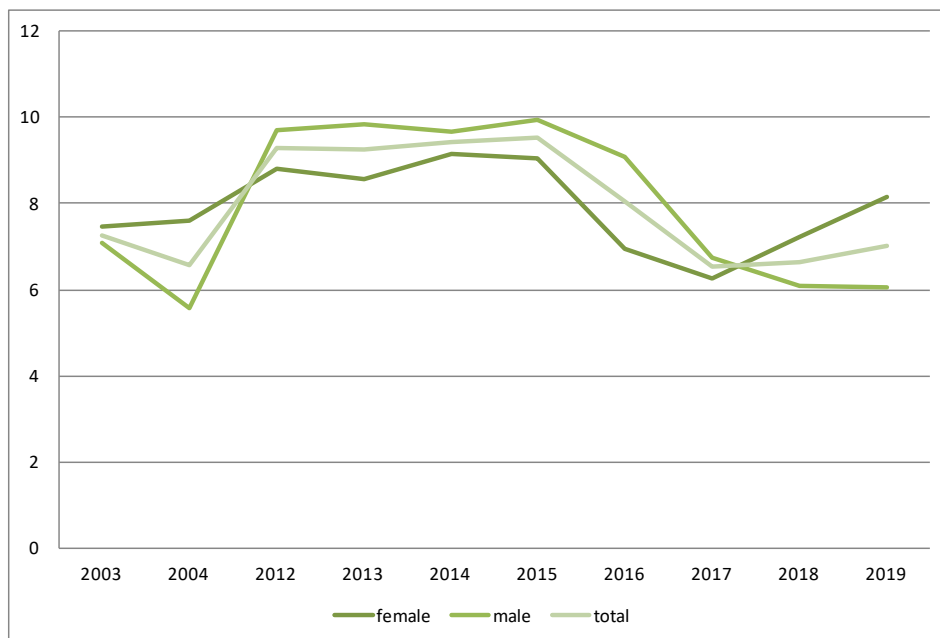


I THE NEET SITUATION IN SLOVENIA

The definitions of the age groups classified as NEET can vary. Eurostat (2021a) provides data for NEET rates in accordance with different age groups between 15 and 34 years. In 2019, the NEET rate in the EU was 16.4% of the 20–34-year-old demographic. The proportion of youth classified as NEETs ranged from 7.3% in Sweden to 27.8 % in Italy. For Slovenia, it was 6.8% for men and 13.9% for women.

ILO (2021) defines the share of NEET as their proportion to the population of the corresponding age group: youth (ages 15 to 24); persons ages 15 to 29; or, both age groups. Following the ILO definition, the World Bank (2021) provides time-series data on the share of NEETs, which in Slovenia increased during the period following Slovenia's entry into the EU (Figure 2). Between the years 2002 and 2012, the NEET share particularly increased for males from less than 6% to close to 10%, the level at which it stabilised up to 2015, when it declined close to 6%. Interestingly, the NEET share for females was largely lower than that of males. This has changed since 2017, with the opposite pattern being observed between male and female NEET shares now predominating, with a decline for males and a slight increase for females above the Slovenian average.

Figure 2 - Share of youth not in education, employment, or training (%)

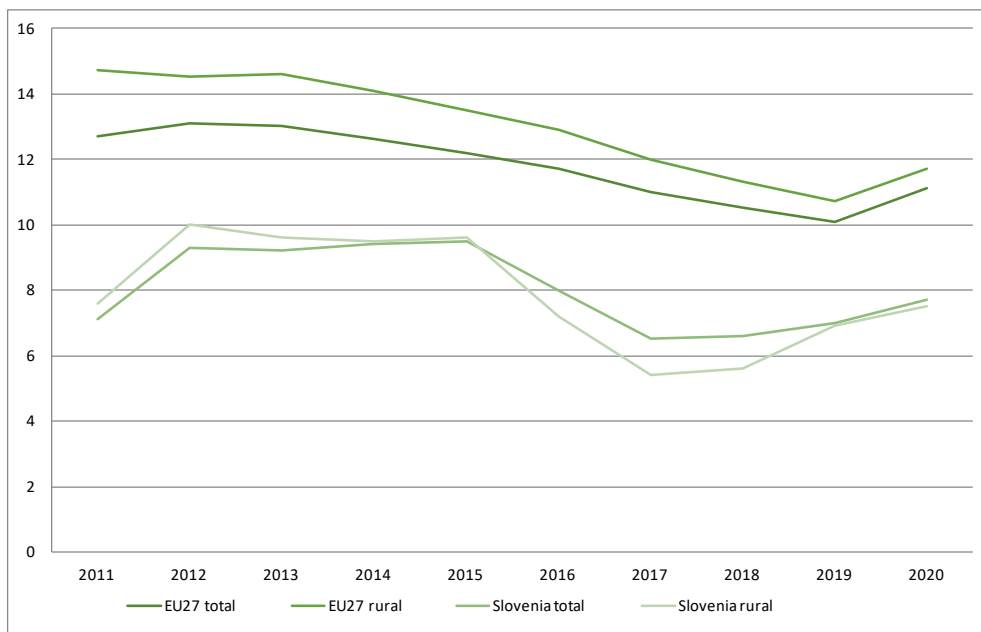


Note: female means % of female youth population. Male means % of male youth population. Total means % of total youth population. Source: Author's presentation based on data from the World Bank (2021).



Within the EU-27 member states, the NEET rates are higher in rural than in urban areas. Before the COVID-19 crisis, the NEET rates tended to decline to less than 11% for the age group from 15 to 24 years, with a slight increase during the year 2020 (Figure 3). In Slovenia, NEET rates are lower and there is no significant difference between urban and rural areas. During the years 2017–2018, the NEET rates in rural areas were 5.4% and 5.6%, respectively, with a subsequent increase to 6.9% in 2019 and 7.5% in 2020.

Figure 3 Share of youth neither in employment nor in education and training in rural areas (NEET rates in % for age group from 15 to 24 years)



Source: Author's presentation based on data from Eurostat (2021a).

In addition to registered rates of unemployment and NEETs, there are also unregistered (i.e., hidden) NEETs. According to the OECD (2020), more than half of the NEETs in Slovenia are not registered with the Employment Service Offices (ESOs). This means that the hidden NEETs in Slovenia are even more numerous than registered ones, because of various reasons, such as not being entitled to income support, not being aware of the support they can receive, lack of trust in public authorities, or not looking for a job, or similar considerations.



I ROMA YOUTH AND NEETS

As in some other countries in the Central and Eastern European region, Roma are one of the vulnerable population groups in Slovenia. The total Roma population in Slovenia numbers around 12 thousand, or 0.6% of the total population. Geographical distribution is concentrated in three geographical areas: Prekmurje, Dolenjska, and Bela krajina. There exists a special Roma Association of Slovenia, an organisation supporting Roma population in general with important focus towards youth.

High unemployment amongst the Roma population, sitting at almost 80%, has increased following the collapse of traditional industries. Consequently, they are largely dependent upon social assistance/welfare. NEETs problems are linked to lack of education, often due to unfinished primary schooling and lack of new knowledge, lack of skills, and therefore competitiveness for integration into the labour market with full-time employment. Some limitations, particularly during the COVID-19 period and the necessary online delivery of educational/school activities, are linked to poorer living and housing conditions and digitalisation problems.

Efforts have been made in order to raise public awareness regarding the existing problems and to promote good practices. For example, for more than 13 years, Radio-Television (RTV) Slovenia has conducted the Roma radio transmission Naše Poti (Our Paths) on Mondays, and the television (TV) transmission Kaj Govoriš? (What are you saying?) every second Saturday in the first programme slot of TV Slovenia. These are prepared by Roma to point out the hardships and problems of the Roma community, but also to highlight good practices within their communities.

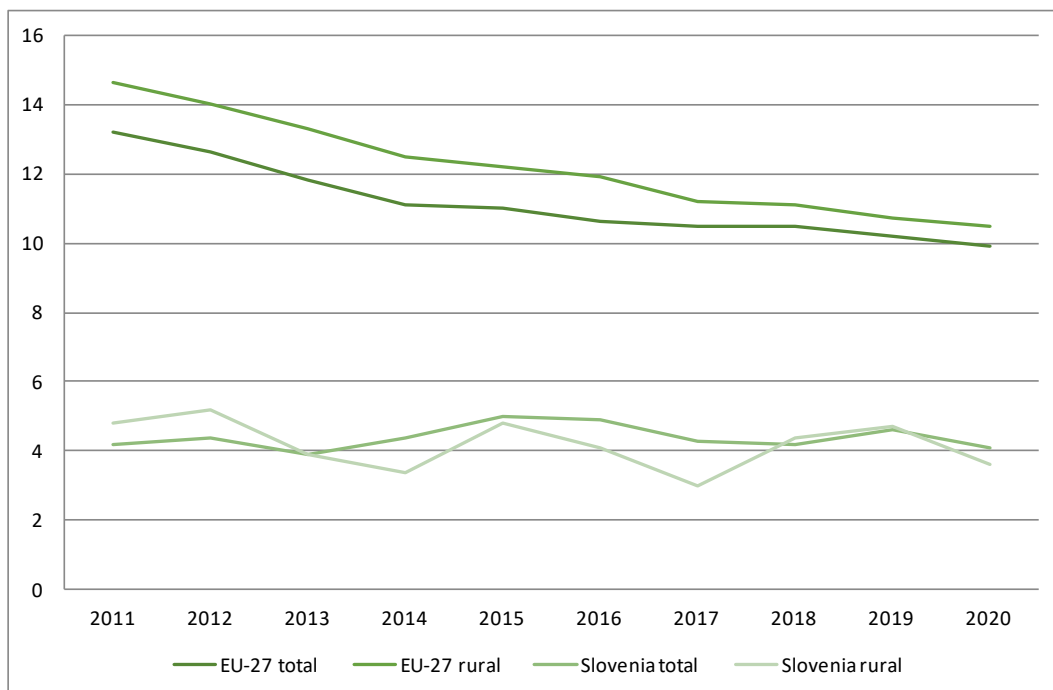
It is also important to mention that amongst the success stories can be included the local development and integration of the Roma population in at least one part of Slovenia. This is particularly valid for the village of Pušča (2021) near Murska Sobota, which has a geographical proximity to the neighbouring Styria region of Austria and its capital, Graz.



I THE EARLY LEAVERS FROM EDUCATION AND TRAINING

As in some other countries in the Central and Eastern European region, Roma are one of the vulnerable population groups in Slovenia. The total Roma population in Slovenia numbers around 12 thousand, or 0.6% of the total population. Geographical distribution is concentrated in three geographical areas: Prekmurje, Dolenjska, and Bela krajina. There exists a special Roma Association of Slovenia, an organisation supporting Roma population in general with important focus towards youth.

Figure 4 Early leavers from education and training in rural areas



Source: Author's presentation based on data from Eurostat (2021a).



I NEET POLICY MEASURES AND INTERVENTIONS

This section aims to assess the institutional framework, particularly organisations involved such as Ministries, Offices for Youth and Employment, and different forms of organisation (such as social enterprises) operating in Slovenia. Additionally, it aims to assess the relevant policy objectives in terms of support to education and mobility, training and skills, local employment, social networks, communication and social media, and engagement of local stakeholders. The national youth policy addresses all types of youth and target groups, which can be various structures of youth and NEET participants, namely young people with or without higher education. Where possible, it aims to address rural NEET needs by policy measures and their results.

I The role of government policies and type of intervention measures

Different authorities, in particular Ministries, are responsible for the implementation of the NYS (European Commission 2020b). The Office for Youth is responsible for coordinating the implementation of the cross-sectorial national programme via action plans. The Government, on a yearly or two-yearly basis, adopts implementation plans. Since 2014, there have been Government decisions adopted pertaining to the Implementation plan. The action plans define specific objectives, actions, terms of implementation, budget allocations and responsible institutions for their implementations. The implementation of the measures was most stable in vertical areas, for instance, in education and employment.

The types of intervention measures are presented and classified based on the topic of intervention: education, employment, school-to-work transition, and social enterprises. They are applied by the responsible Ministry to the target group, whilst some other Ministries can be also engaged indirectly in the NEET arena.

I Education

The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (MESS 2020) is responsible for education and plays an important role in a smoother transition to employment via education and training programmes. It also supports different domestic and international projects and exchanges with various domestic and international and rural stakeholders. Additionally, under this ministry is the Office for Youth, which is responsible for: planning, organisation and implementation of measures in the area of youth policy; activities in the area



of social policy for children and youth; education and informal education; leisure activities; culture; public information and international co-operation; the monitoring of the implementation of the regulations and other acts relating to youth; warning of non-effective realisation of regulations and proposing measures for more effective realisation; the formulation and supervision of the implementation of the priority youth programmes; the monitoring of the role and position of youth in society; improving the conditions for organised youth activities and youth organisations; stimulating the mobility of youth; finding better ways of supplying youth with information and advice; support for international exchanges and the subsidising of trips for children and youth; encouraging various interest activities of youth; and, the creation of conditions for the inclusion of youth in social processes.

Various special needs education is adapted to children and adolescents. The procedures of assessment and recognition of education in the integration of immigrants in the education systems are the same as for all other holders of foreign certificates. Moreover, recognition of qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation allows access to education under the same conditions applicable to domestic citizens. The national examination centre carries out examinations of special talents, skills, and physical and mental abilities for persons under international protection without documents and who wish to enrol in programmes of higher vocational education and higher education programmes. The recognition of education for continuing education is yet another procedure regarding education attained abroad and which is to be considered for admissions at Slovenian educational institutions.

I Employment

The Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (MLFSAEO 2020) operates with Active Employment Policy (AEP) measures and regional ESOs with their implementation to assist difficult and long-term unemployed persons. These interventions are important for school-to-work transition and employment in general as well as for vulnerable groups. They provide the following: training; informal and formal education; employment incentives with financial support for employment of unemployed persons from vulnerable or socially excluded groups; job creation to support employment and social inclusion of the vulnerable/socially excluded (via public work); promotion of self-employment to realise entrepreneurial ideas and job creation in micro enterprises (up to 2020); and, substitution at work and job sharing



opportunities in order to gain new knowledge and competences (not in use in 2020). Engaging in AEP measures is expected to increase the chances of a successful job search, but also enhances individuals' skills, and helps them to find (better) employment.

The long-term unemployed are also amongst the vulnerable groups in the labour market. They often occupy this status due to their lack of adequate qualifications, and are often first-time jobseekers. Most AEP programmes for the unemployed are implemented by the ESOs at regional/local levels. They keep a record of registered unemployed persons and follow employment trends in the labour market.

I Social entrepreneurship

The Ministry of Economic Development and Technology (MEDT 2020) offers support to entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship projects, and the setting up of social enterprises, contributes to resolving social, economic, environmental and other social problems in innovative ways. To that end, it is key in creating jobs and thereby increasing the social inclusion of vulnerable groups, including those in rural areas. This can often transpire in cooperation with the business sector and various other organisations.

One of the MEDT tasks related to the provisions of the Social Entrepreneurship Act is administration of a register which records social enterprises. On 15th March 2021, the registry reported 275 social enterprises in different statistical or NUTS-3 regions in Slovenia (Ministry of Public Administration 2021).

Priority regional policy areas have included: disadvantaged border areas; the less developed Pomurska region; disadvantaged areas with a high unemployment rate; areas where the Hungarian and Italian national communities live; and, areas with members of the Roma community. Regional policy measures stimulate the development of social entrepreneurship, cooperatives, and economic democracy.

I Farm and rural entrepreneurship

The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food (MAFF, 2020), along with Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) measures (particularly measure 112) assistance to young farm holders in Slovenia. Measures implemented through this rural development programme can contribute to generational renewal by transferring agricultural holdings from elderly to young farmers of less than 40 years of age. This priority task, which provides



support for young farmers, is amongst the four main CAP priorities (alongside the promotion of environmentally friendly farming practices, the promotion of agricultural competitiveness, and the balanced development of rural areas).

In the programming period 2014–2020, the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)/LEADER approach has been taken as part of the joint instrument within which the EU funds were available to Local Action Groups (LAGs). A combination of various financial resources can enable LAGs to implement integrated and complex operations not strictly limited to rural areas. In Slovenia, there were 37 LAGs in the programming period 2014–2020 (Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry 2019), and these have been important for social inclusion and the fight against rural poverty.

The National Rural Network provides communication and other support for the implementation of the Rural Development Programme 2014–2020. It promotes participation under Measure 9 Producer, Measure 16 Cooperation, and Measure 19 Leader groups, and various connections between partners and stakeholders, such as within the European Network for Rural Development. It also promotes the transfer of knowledge, innovation, inclusion of partners, and provides information to target groups.

I Other national policy measures for youth and NEETs

The Ministry of Culture (MC 2020) can be important for youth and NEETs in the areas of arts, culture, cultural heritage, the media, the Slovenian language, freedom of religion, cultural diversity, and human rights. Its activities can be conducted at public cultural institutes, non-governmental organisations, but also by the self-employed.

The Ministry of Public Administration (2020) plays a role in the areas of civil society, volunteering, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs): this important for identifying and responding to the needs of the local environment, and contributes to social cohesion as well as providing widely accessible, high-quality services.

The Ministry of the Interior (2020) is important in the area of immigration to Slovenia. It encourages and facilitates the inclusion of immigrants in cultural, economic, and social life. It provides foreigners with information on education and employment possibilities, health insurance, social assistance, free legal aid, as well as other important information about the country.



I POLICY, MONITORING AND EVALUATION TYPES OF MEASURES FOR NEETS

Policy and types of measures for NEETs can be divided into two main groups in accordance with their objectives: firstly, those with a focus on the subjects of education from a formal, training and skill improvement standpoint; secondly, with a focus on employment, particularly with the assistance of the AEP. The synergies between both parts can be identified in the Youth Guarantee (MLFSAEP 2016) and its role in local and rural education and employment. The measures can cover different geographical and sectoral scopes in different economic activities and are thus function as a flexible and useful policy device.

I Youth Guarantee and its implementation

The Resolution of the National Youth Programme 2013–2022 was adopted by the National Assembly in October 2013 (European Commission, 2020a) with the defined scope, objectives and priorities of the National Youth Programme (NYP).

The Youth Guarantee programme focuses its implementation on the main challenges faced by youth in the transition from education to employment. In transitioning into the labour market, attention is given to young people with no education, first-time job seekers, young women with tertiary education, the long-term unemployed young people, and returnees who have not succeeded in obtaining employment (MLFSAEP 2016; ZRSZ 2021a).

It is important to ensure strong cooperation and networking between the various players and key stakeholders during the implementation, which includes: beneficiaries or providers, employers, associations, youth organisations, public funds, public agencies, public and other institutions, NGOs, and other organisations. According to the 2016–2020 Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan (MLFSAEP 2016), young persons aged 15–29 shall receive an offer for employment (including traineeship), inclusion in formal education, on-the-job training or other training related to the needs of the employers, within four months of registering in the register of the unemployed. However, these offerings have also been the main challenges for the ESOs responsible for their implementation.



The Youth Guarantee programme in rural areas aims to provide support for the establishment and development of agricultural activities in order to improve the age structure of farm holders and speed-up structural adjustment and job creation. It also aims to contribute to faster restructuring and increasing of agri-food competitiveness. It is supported by the payment scheme for young farmers and a business start-up aid for young farmers. MAFF is both responsible for, and the provider of, these measures.

Involving youth in labour market measures and implementing the Youth Guarantee by the ESOs

The ESOs implement various measures in the labour market: the provision of services for the labour market – lifelong career guidance and mediation – and inclusion in AEP programmes (ZRSZ 2021a). From 2016–2020, the ESOs implemented the Youth Guarantee, which provides unemployed persons up to the age of 29 with an offer of inclusion in employment, training or further education for up to 4 months after the onset of unemployment. During this period, the ESOs implemented the project strengthening counselling work with youth: more than 6,300 young people underwent treatment. At the annual level, the average number of consultations conducted declined from 56,780 in 2016 to 43,400 in 2020. Most consultations in 2020 took place online (ZRSZ 2021a).

Lifelong career orientation

This includes activities aimed at identifying individual abilities, competencies, and interests important for decision-making in the field of employment, education, training and career guidance. Unemployed persons are provided with lifelong career guidance activities for youth: information regarding the labour market, tools for independent career management, basic career counselling, in-depth career and rehabilitation counselling, and learning skills for job searching and personal career management (ZRSZ 2021a).

In the period 2016–2018, unemployed youth took part in the workshops conducted by concessionaires: 7,915 unemployed young people aged 15 to 29 were included in the workshop 'Effective Appearance on the Labour Market' (share of youth, 43%), and 1,155 in 'Counselling' (share of youth, 23%) (ZRSZ 2021a).



The ESOs career advisors conducted the workshops 'Differently', 'Employment as an Advantage', and 'After Study into Employment'. In the period from 2016 to 2020, youths accounted for 31% of those included therein (ZRSZ 2021a).

The implementation of the Youth Guarantee is monitored annually by the Employment Committee. Macroeconomic indicators are monitored based on the Labour Force Survey, data covering exits from the Youth Guarantee scheme, and monitoring of the situation of young people after 6, 12, and 18 months following their exit from the scheme. During the years 2014–2020 of the Youth Guarantee implementation, the focus was on youth aged 15 to 24, and those aged 25 to 29 were also monitored. The central indicator is the share of NEETs aged 15 to 24. The percentage in Slovenia was below the EU average: the share in Slovenia decreased from 9.5% in 2015 to 6.6% in 2018, and in 2019 it increased by 0.4 percentage points (ZRSZ 2021a). Most of the decline in the share of NEETs was due to a decrease in registered NEETs, whilst the share of unregistered ones remains constant.

The share of youth covered by the Youth Guarantee is also monitored. This particular indicator in Slovenia is slightly above the EU average throughout the years under consideration. The share decreased slightly, which means that more young people remain inactive and thus indicates that Slovenia requires a system to account for unregistered NEETs.

The indicator in which Slovenia lags behind the EU average is that of length of stay in the preparatory phase, i.e., the duration from registration to exit from the Youth Guarantee scheme. In 2019, 58.7% of youth waited longer than 4 months for an offer, compared to the EU average of 48.7%. In Slovenia, youth receive the Youth Guarantee offer a little later than the EU average. Exits are more sustainable given that the situation is positive after 6, 12, and 18 months for the majority of young people included in the Youth Guarantee. In 2019, after six months, 61.4% of youth included in the Youth Guarantee were active. The EU average was 51.3% (ZRSZ 2021a). The situation in Slovenia is thus positive.



I Job placement and employment of youth

The ESOs provide mediation to unemployed persons and employers with the purpose of timely coverage of the employee's employment needs. Youth represent a significant proportion of these activities. In 2015, they accounted for 36.2% of all posted workers, whilst youth accounted for about a fifth of the unemployed. After that year, the share of youth amongst those posted decreased: in 2020, it was 21.6%. This reduction is partly due to the intensive implementation of the Youth Guarantee. On the other hand, youth represents a constant share in employment, falling from 33.1% to 30.7% between the years 2015 to 2020 (ZRSZ 2021a).

I Active employment policy (AEP) programmes

Most of the AEP measures are implemented by the ESOs. They aimed at: training and education; promoting employment; creating jobs; and, promoting self-employment. In the period 2015–2020, long-term unemployed persons (43.7%) were mainly included in AEP programmes with a significant share of unemployed youth up to the age of 29 (31.3% in the same period 2015–2020); the latter percentage was the highest in 2015 (more than 40%) and the lowest in 2017 (28.5%), and in 2019 (27.4%) (ZRSZ 2021a). Since 2011, the ESOs have monitored the unemployed inclusion at the level of its business plan goals.

Mismatches in the labour market and lack of work experience are particularly problematic during the transition from school to employment. Given this, youth are one of the target vulnerable groups of AEP. In the period 2015–2020, 45,836 persons aged 15 to 29 were included in AEP measures. Most youth were included in the training and education (28,627 persons, or 62.5%), followed by promoting self-employment (11,427 persons, or 24.9%) and job creation (5,106 persons, or 11.1%) and less often the incentive for employment (676 persons, or 1.5%) (ZRSZ 2021a). Amongst the youth included in AEP measures, slightly more were women (53.3%) and their share was the highest in job creation (65.6%), followed by promoting self-employment (57.7%), training and education (54.2%), and incentive for employment (45.3%) (ZRSZ 2021a).



In terms of education, persons with secondary education were more often included in AEP programmes: 14.3% with vocational schooling, and 36.0% with completed technical, vocational, or general secondary schooling. Moreover, 22.2% were with primary schools. As youth most often lack relevant work experience, 27.3% of those included in AEP measures were long-term unemployed and more than half in the job creation measure.

Youth had the largest number of inclusions in training and education programmes, most often in on-the-job training programmes (11,090 inclusions) and in training programmes (9,149 inclusions). Within the framework of incentives for employment, they were most often included in the incentives for permanent employment of youth (4,857 inclusions), and within the creation of new jobs in public works (4,707).

In the same 2015–2020 period, a large number of youth participated in various programmes: training in the workplace (6,993 inclusions); incentive for youth employment (6,602 inclusions); and, non-formal education and training programmes (5,094 inclusions). Furthermore, many young people were included in: public work (4,876 inclusions); work probation (3,694 inclusions); support and development programmes (3,303 inclusions); first challenge (2,987 inclusions); project learning for young adults programmes (2,403 inclusions); and, institutional training programmes (2,129 inclusions) (ZRSZ 2021a).

Amongst the results, of those included in training and education in the period 2015–2019 (during the duration of, or after completing the training), 67.1% of youth were employed (61.5% amongst those aged 15–24, and 71.5% amongst those aged 25–29). Amongst all those included, this share was 64.1% (ZRSZ 2021a).

Youth involved in subsidised employment (excluding public works) were significantly more successful than other groups involved: after the period 2015–2018, 84.4% of youth retained their jobs, whilst amongst all those included, this share was 73.3% (ZRSZ, 2021a).

After the completion of public works in the period 2015–2020, 50.2% of youth were employed, and amongst all those included in this programme, this share was 37.2% (ZRSZ, 2021a).

In the same period, 30,359 persons were employed with the help of a subsidy for self-employment, and 36.8% of the included persons were aged under 29 years (ZRSZ, 2021a).



I Monitoring and evaluating type of measures for NEETs

The MLFSAEO and the MESS provide monitoring and evaluation of policy results defined by the NYP 2013–2022. The success of the implementation plan of the NYP is measured using the (impact) indicators, which are designed for each measure to be implemented. The Office for Youth also monitors the implementation of the NYP.

Employment and social exclusion of youth have been monitored and evaluated by statistical data and published analysis by domestic and foreign organisations. These organisations work to keep data on (youth) employment up to date, particularly the analysis of different aspects of young people's lives, but also employment and social exclusion based on comparisons with other EU countries. The Statistical Office has collected data on different segments of employment and has also conducted research on the risk of social exclusion in relation to income and poverty.

The Youth Guarantee has been intended to assist youth getting back into education, training or employment and which would have, therefore, eased their entry into the labour market. Due to the lack of social and non-profit rental housing, an open question has been the provision of housing for young people in urban rather than rural areas.

After 2019, a working group to monitor the implementation of the Youth Guarantee measures met virtually on 15th April 2021. The ministries working group (MLFSAEO, MESS, MC, MEDT, and MAFF) presented an overview of the implementation of the Youth Guarantee measures in 2020: a total of 6,271 young people were employed through AEP measures. The members of the working group also set a timetable for the preparation of a report on the implementation of the Youth Guarantee measures during the period 2016–2020. In 2021, there are important incentives for employment in green jobs thus contributing to the greening of the economy, strengthening efforts to use energy and resources more efficiently, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Reducing the number of unemployed persons is also amongst the priority incentives.

The Office for Employment (ZRSZ 2021a) prepared the analysis on Youth in the Labour Market during the period 2016–2020. The analysis showed that 119,533 young people were employed at the end of 2020 and 18,336 unemployed young people were registered at the end of 2020. The unemployment trend has increased compared to previous years due to the COVID-19 epidemic. The unemployment rate of youth in the third quarter of 2020 was still below the EU-27 average: it amounted to 14.9% of unemployed youth



overall. The government has also adapted measures due to the COVID-19 situation with some additional measures implemented in general, but also particularly in activities which have been negatively impacted the most, such as tourism, hospitality, and linked services and other economic activities.

OTHER DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMMES, PROJECTS, AND INSTRUMENTS

Policy and types of measures for NEETs can be divided into two main groups in accordance with their objectives: firstly, those with a focus on the subjects of education from a formal, training and skill improvement standpoint; secondly, with a focus on employment, particularly with the assistance of the AEP. The synergies between both parts can be identified in the Youth Guarantee (MLFSAEP 2016) and its role in local and rural education and employment. The measures can cover different geographical and sectoral scopes in different economic activities and are thus function as a flexible and useful policy device.

I Associations and NGOs

The Slovenian Rural Youth Association (2020), which is a member of the European Committee for Young Farmers and 4H Clubs, is a voluntary association of Slovenian rural youth societies. Amongst other goals, it aims to unitise rural youth societies and co-ordinate their work: it takes part in educational processes to spread knowledge from agricultural colleges and other field institutions amongst its members. It organises seminars and courses in the fields of farming, environment protection, housekeeping, social policy, undertaking, and legislation for its membership. The association carries out implementation of projects, capacity building and training activities, and exchanges of successful case examples and practices with stakeholders.

YES, Group Slovenia (2020) has also carried out programmes related to NEETs. There are also several other charity organisations which have addressed the problems of NEETs.

I Local municipality level

Local communities implement youth policy at a local level by adopting a local programme for youth, establishing a working or consulting body for youth issues, financially supporting the programmes in the youth sector, and implementing other



measures in the youth sector. Their role in developing youth policies varies and depends on the size of each local community.

I Non-profit social enterprises

Of the 275 social enterprises in Slovenia, more than 60 social enterprises with a special non-profit-making purpose are currently operating (YES 2020). More than half are registered in the Pomurje and Podravje regions: however, there are more such enterprises than are officially registered and which likewise embody the concept of social entrepreneurship.

I INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS AND SUCCESSFUL CASE STUDIES

In Slovenia, there are some international projects which can be mentioned. eNEET Rural project (2021) or eNEET Rural Partners, Stakeholders and Young NEETs (2019, 2020), which encompasses the EEA and Norway Grants (Norwegian Financial Mechanisms 2014–2021), and the transnational focus (Consortia) project. The Fund for Youth Employment (FYE) was established in 2017 and funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, with a transnational focus to contribute to the reduction of youth unemployment and social and economic disparities in Europe. The crucial emphasis is on regional and cross-border cooperation for smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth: this involves working together on common challenges, learning from each other through dialogue and the exchange of good practices. The FYE target group is youth between 15 and 29, and is particularly targeted at the 25–29-year-old segment. Slovenia has cooperated either as a lead or beneficiary partner in the following five FYE projects.

Firstly, the 351–SOCIALNEET_From Civil Society Organisations to Social Entrepreneurship: Combating Youth Unemployment and Addressing the Needs of NEETs (2020). It is funded by the EEA and Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment (EEA and the Norwegian Financial Mechanism for Youth Employment), at a value of 1.7 million EUR, with 9 partners: Greece (as lead partner and as a beneficiary partner), Italy, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain (as beneficiary partners), and Belgium (as an expertise partner). Its duration is 36 months (from 12th April 2019 – 30th September 2021). The University of Primorska is the Slovenian project partner within a transnational expert cooperation network between seven countries and eight organisations. The project partners are preparing young people for jobs within social enterprises by offering training and capacity building services to civil society organisations and businesses.



Latterly, these belong to the social economy in the field of social entrepreneurship and civil society organisations. The participants, under the mentorship of experts, actively prepare content and business plans for their own social enterprise or inclusion in one of the organisations already operating. The priority contents of the project are: agriculture; information technology and open-source software/programming; tourism and culture; alternative or renewable energy sources; and, health care and social services. However, the project implementation is also open to ideas and initiatives from other areas of social innovation and entrepreneurship which deal with unemployed young people between the ages of 18-29, with an emphasis on the 25-29 year old segment. The project in Slovenia trained 28 NEETs: one participant has succeeded and opened a store, Ekola (2021) carrying mainly local, home-grown products that are available without packaging in keeping with the concept of zero-waste.

Secondly, eNEET Rural which facilitates entrepreneurship and improving the skills of NEETs living in rural areas (2020). Its value is 1.5 million EUR, and it has 7 partners: Bulgaria (as lead partner), Hungary, Italy, Romania, Slovenia, and Spain (as beneficiary partners), and Norway (as expertise partner), duration 36 months (1 October 2018 – 30 September 2021). This project focuses on innovation and technology in the agricultural sector in order to create a toolkit for rural NEETs. The Toolkit includes online and on-the-spot training offered by the project partners for two groups: those with a secondary school diploma receive entrepreneurship training, and those without a diploma receive training that prepares them for jobs via youth competition, staff exchange and mentoring services.

Thirdly, Individual Placement and Support for NEETs through Education Youth Technology Platform (EYTP, 2021). Its value is 1.2 million EUR, and it has 6 partners: Slovenia (as lead partner), Hungary, Romania, and Spain (as beneficiary partners), and two institutions from Norway (as expertise partners). Its duration is 36 months (1st September 2018 – 31st August 2021). Its focus is on improving the counselling competence in the partner countries by combining a two-step model: the Maturing Model of an individual coaching period (which is used for motivation) and preparation for more formal counselling work using the systematic Individual Placement and Support model from Norway. By way of an Education Youth Technology Platform, NEETs receive support towards vocational education or a permanent job.

Fourthly, the Social Innovators (2021) project. Its value is 1.1 million EUR, and it 4 partners: Slovenia (as lead partner), Bulgaria and Croatia (as beneficiary partners), and Norway



(as an expertise partner). Its duration is 46 months. The focus is on NGOs as a working and learning environment for young people in which they can gain work experience and become involved in different initiatives and programmes dealing with social challenges. They are supported to create their own jobs within the social sector depending on their educational background in relation to potential for further development.

Fifthly, the Direction Employment (2021) project. Its value is 1.9 million EUR, and it has 7 partners: these range from NGOs and universities, to various companies. In terms of countries, Bulgaria operates as both lead partner and as a beneficiary partner; Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, and Slovenia are beneficiary partners. Its duration is 42 months. The focus is on social and labour market inclusion of NEETs from marginalised minorities: it works by creating and testing an educational model with an experimental and innovative curriculum. This transpires within a mobile classroom model in order to train trainers at the regional level and apply assessment tools to demonstrate the impact of the methodology on the participants and their close environment (i.e., extended family, peer group, etc.) as well as on employers.

I DIGITALISATION, TRAINING, AND INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY

Moreover, there are some other international projects. Amongst them is the Rural Network Project (RUNE 2020) which aims to provide ultra-fast broadband optical infrastructure to all users in rural areas of Slovenia and Croatia. By building such a network in areas not currently covered by optical infrastructure, the RUNE project helps local governments to achieve the goals of the Digital Agenda for Europe 2020 by providing connectivity to an optical network with speeds of more than 1 Gb/s. Such a network construction concept also enables the liberalisation of the market for electronic communications services.

Vocational education and training activities within the framework of CEDEFOP (2021) – European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, are conducted and implemented by the Slovenian Agency, CPI (2021) Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training. The programme aims to improve innovation and flexibility of the participants, and thereby their vocational education and training skills qualifications in the transition from education and training to employment (CEDEFOP REFERNET 2021).

In terms of international mobility of youth, the Erasmus+: Youth in Action (MOVIT 2021) is important. The Institute for the Development of Youth Mobility (Zavod za razvoj mobilnosti mladih



– MOVIT) conducts the programme Erasmus+ Youth in Action. Erasmus+ is the programme of the EU in the areas of education, training, youth, and sport in the current period (namely, 2021-2027). The programme contributes to the personal and professional development of the participants towards a successful transition from education to the labour market via international experiences.

I DISCUSSION

In comparison with other EU member states, Slovenia has (on average) achieved promising NEET results in quantitative and qualitative terms. However, there is the question of the relatively high number of hidden NEETs, which seem to be of an even greater magnitude than those who are registered (OECD, 2020). Amongst the lessons learned for possible transferability at the EU level can be included measures related to AEP and successful case studies from domestic and international projects.

Amongst the relevant success factors, and those which have transferability are those with synergies between bottom-up local development and a broader policy which includes institutional and other support.

There have been continued efforts to empower young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, in order to increase their employment opportunities through various tailored projects. One of these, for example, is a project called With Youth Work against Youth Unemployment – Fair Employment (EPEKA 2021). This ongoing project between 1st February 2020 and 15th September 2021 (under the Association EPEKA), is a social enterprise which aims to strengthen the competences of young or NEET people aged 15 to 29 in order to increase their employability through innovative projects. A particular focus is on young vulnerable or marginalised social groups. These include: Roma; immigrants and refugees; people with a low level of formal education; young people facing social or economic hardship; and, long-term unemployed and temporarily unemployed persons. The project is funded by the MESS and the EU through the European Social Fund.

In recent years Slovenia has entered and developed various social enterprises with the aim of integration and inclusion of youth. An example of youth involvement is KreatorLab (2021), where the aim is to help young people to develop an entrepreneurial idea, enable them to work on machines (3D printers, CNC machines, etc.), and provide training, education, and skills development/empowerment.



There are also some examples of integration and cooperation of youth in rural areas in the development of local tourist services under the initiative TourismFromZero. There also exists a platform for the cooperation and promotion of local community which goes under the logo LocalsFromZero.

Social enterprises see their future in creativity and innovation, and the digital and green economy. Therefore, it is also important that socio-economic policies are focused towards creating new and quality jobs without exclusion. A special role can be played by government institutions, social partners, and civil society. Amongst the successful case studies on social entrepreneurship in Slovenia are examples such as the social co-operative Dobrina (2021), Haloze Wine Cooperative (2021), and Eco-Social Farm Korenika (2021).

With regards to economic and social inclusion, it is important to support and develop lifelong learning as a continuous ongoing process that requires personal responsibility combined with the support of society. Through regular schooling and the acquisition of a formal education, the requisite knowledge and skills are acquired to solve the challenges and needs involved in successfully integrating into the labour market. Continuous lifelong learning is important for the individual for personal and professional growth, but also for society at both the micro level (i.e., companies and other organisations) and at the macro level (by strengthening competencies and adapting to quality of life, and competitive and sustainable development. A specific target vulnerable group is rural NEETs, particularly in remote areas, where their hiddenness can be less socially visible from the viewpoint of urban areas and therefore (possibly) less disruptive to society. However, such cases require specific strategies, policies, programmes, and projects in order for NEETs to be successfully re-integrated into education, training or the labour market. To that end, they must be targeted at economic, social, and other qualitative aspects of human life so as to avoid (at the very least) the risk of poverty.

The difficulties and constraints for youth in Slovenia are suggested by the fact that approximately three quarters of young people would be willing to migrate abroad from Slovenia (Lavrič and Deželan 2021). Several of these would be willing to stay abroad permanently. If this migration offered better creative and life opportunities in general, 73.5% would be willing to move for a longer period or permanently to other parts of Slovenia and the same percentage to other European country, and 48.7% to other continents. These ongoing and possible youth brain-drains suggest that there are visible and hidden difficulties for youth at the domestic level vis-à-vis their preferable foreign



destinations. As in some other EU countries, this can be linked with problems related to precariousness and job insecurity (Alberti et al. 2018). There can also be problems encountered in designing and implementing the policy and measures bridging the gaps between the reality and youth expectations.

Amongst theoretical and practical implications, there are the NEETs who do not fall easily into any one category nor metric of assessment. Hidden unemployment and hidden NEETs are one of the crucial shortcomings of the capturing and targeting of the NEETs and their possible exclusion from education, training and employment. Evidently, this has policy and practical implications for society and local communities. These are also important issues for research, intervention, and policymaking in the future.

I CONCLUSION

The transition from education to employment is a complex task. Amongst youth, between 15- and 29-years-old, there exists a special group that is neither in education nor in employment or training (i.e., the NEET community). The article provides an overview of the NEET situation in Slovenia. It examines the policies and programmes addressing NEETs, and describes the situation of NEETs in Slovenia. It also highlights hidden unemployment and hidden NEETs, examples of good practices, and opportunities for the inclusion of NEETs, and their social re-integration into education, training, employment, and society.

Whilst the rates of youth unemployment and official rates of NEETs in Slovenia are below the EU-27 averages, the hidden NEETs are at least as important as the registered ones. This is a challenging issue reflecting a need to change or adjust the strategy, policy, and measures to make them more suitable for dealing with the issue of registered and hidden NEETs. Specific measures are crucial for educational, economic, and social inclusion in order to ease the transition from education and training to regular employment. Ad hoc student work and widespread precarious youth work are aspects of the less successful policy measures aimed at easing the transition from youth education to labour market participation. These will need to be addressed in the future. Furthermore, it is a matter of concern that a large majority of young people look to a future abroad.

Various government institutions with policies and measures, NGOs, rural and social entrepreneurship programmes, projects, and case studies are addressing the national youth strategy and needs of NEETs. There are also more successful innovative case



studies of youth, particularly young farmers, and social entrepreneurship. In addition to local social enterprises, the development of entrepreneurship and local employment can involve the participation of various rural stakeholders addressing the needs of NEETs: ESOs; local development agencies; municipalities; training and education providers; and, other stakeholders targeting the activities for rural youth. These issues are addressed through various rural and local employment development programmes targeting the needs of vulnerable or socially excluded rural youth and their possibly less competitive position in the labour market.

Amongst the success factors specific to Slovenia can be counted some social enterprises established by NEETs, or those employing NEETs. Amongst those of broader relevance can be counted life-long learning practices and the role of the AEP in bridging the transition from education and training to employment. One region at least (Prekmurje) and within it, one village (Pušča), can illustrate the advantage of synergies between economic development in the past, successful implementation of education policies, AEP, and social policies in the economic and social integration of a vulnerable group (Roma). These success factors could be applied and transferred to other contexts and similar target groups within the country as well as to other EU member states.

One of the important open questions relates to hidden unemployment, and particularly, hidden NEETs. This suggests that better evidence and traceability regarding NEETs over time could be important in more successfully assisting and helping NEETs in their economic and social re-integration into employment and society. Amongst the challenging issues to be addressed is not only ensuring that jobs are available to youths, but that such jobs are more sustainable in the medium to long term. That this is not the case can be one of the reasons for the emerging daily and permanent migration from rural areas, particularly to the capital (Ljubljana), and from the north-eastern parts of Slovenia to work in Austria. New challenges for the labour market have been induced by implications related to COVID-19. Whilst in the initial stage, both unemployment and the NEETs rate have increased, they have nonetheless stabilised, due to various policy measures which have mitigated the shocks caused by the pandemic crisis.



I LIST OF ACRONYMS

AEP – Active Employment Policy

CAP – Common Agricultural Policy

CLLD – Community-Led Local Development

EEA – European Economic Area

ESO – Employment Service Office

EU – European Union

EUR – Euro

FYE – Fund for Youth Employment

ILO – International Labour Organisation

LAG – Local Action Groups

LEADER – Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale (in French) or
Links between actions for the development of the rural economy (in English)

MAFF – Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food

MC – Ministry of Culture

MEDT – Ministry of Economic Development and Technology

MESS – Ministry of Education, Science and Sport

MLFSAEO – Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities

NUTS – Nomenclature des Unités territoriales statistiques (in French) or Nomenclature
of Territorial Units for Statistics (in English)

OECD – Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

NEET – Neither in Education nor in Employment or Training

NGO – Non-governmental organisation

NYP – National Youth Programme

TV – television



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YOUTH POLICY ADAPTATION IN THE SPANISH RURAL CONTEXT: A CASE OF STUDY OF YOUTH POLICY PROGRAMS³ |

This article aims to describe a series of policies concerning Spanish youth and their degree of adaptation to Spanish rural areas in terms of the key elements of social dynamics in Spain's rural areas. It considers some of the general youth policies being implemented, and identifies those which appear to be closer to these specific territories. After discussing these policies, it is clear that, on the one hand, there is a lack of flexibility and adaptation to the particular circumstances of rural areas. However, on the other hand, it is also possible to cautiously point out some policies which do indeed propose more appropriate actions for rural areas, as well as observe pilot experiences and partnerships between NGOs and the administration that not only have some outstanding elements, but also the potential to stretch into the future.

Keywords: rural; youth policies; rural development; social inclusion; depopulation.

The objective of this article is to describe a series of policies concerning Spanish youth and how they are adapted to Spanish rural areas. The types of policies implemented in these regions have begun to go beyond merely emphasising actions that basically seek to promote agricultural employment, to positively focusing upon certain aspects of the rural context. To do this, it is important to identify the key elements of social dynamics operating in rural spaces, since they will help contextualise the current situation of the countryside environment in Spain. We will also take into account policies on the diverse core fields, such as employment, education and training, social inclusion, and rural development. Furthermore, we will ask the fundamental question, namely: what is the degree of adaptation of these policies? We will also consider alternative experiences which can sometimes come into play in these regions. Finally, we will highlight the level

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of flexibility and adaptation to the circumstances of rural spaces, but also cautiously consider some pilot experiences or partnerships between NGOs and the administration whose configuration and range of action can potentially consolidate themselves in the territory.

I RURAL AREAS AND THE APPROACHES TO YOUTH

The spaces we inhabit are historically and socially constructed (Simmel 1986; Leal Maldonado 1997). Between them there exist different features, inequalities and (consequently) injustices (Soja 2014), which define the lives of various social groups. The experience of being young is also influenced by the particular space one finds oneself living in. In this study, rural areas are shown as a determining social framework wherein young people develop their biographies (Farrugia 2014 and 2018). In this sense, the degree of dynamism of the different territories leads to structural imbalances, marked by the ineffectiveness of policies, in some cases, or even by how counterproductive they have been when applied to the countryside (Nova Ruralitat 2019). For several decades, the build-up of imbalances and disadvantages have caused the demographic emptying of many rural spaces, thereby jeopardising their social sustainability in both the mid- and long-term (Camarero 2009). Young people tend to crowd over the most dynamic spaces in a spiral of territorial imbalance: hence, its epicentre is none other than the capital city of Spain, namely Madrid. Hence, “Madrid strengthens its position as the main recipient of talent for it not only brings together 38.7% of the interregional migratory movements of young nationals, but also absorbs entry flows of people with a high level of training: 64.8% of them being university graduates” (González-Leonardo, López-Gay and Recaño 2019, 2). The intensity of these flows towards major cities is the primary reason behind the educational, economic and social under-capitalisation of vast areas of the countryside and, therefore, the progressive decrease of its possibilities for/in the future.

This “brain drain” phenomenon is fundamental to correctly understanding the demography of the Spanish territories which tend to concentrate people in cities, according to a model of imbalance. Several other countries in Southern Europe replicate this pattern also. In a notably pronounced way, Greece and Spain display a type of settlement with remarkably large voids all over their respective territories (Map 1). This composition, going back some decades now, has lately gained media exposure as a phenomenon referred to as Empty Spain. Or, from a more vindicating perspective towards political decision-makers, as the Emptied Spain. Emphasis was placed, and continues to be, on the lack of effective policies and actions which can be used to help

rebalance the unequal situation, in terms of opportunities between the inhabitants of the city and those of the country. Prior to the coronavirus outbreak, there were several demonstrations followed by a great mobilisation in Madrid, in March, 2019. Protesters demanded greater infrastructure and services for the citizens of rural areas, whilst also calling attention to the lack of opportunities for younger people for whom it becomes harder and harder to continue working and living in their villages.

European Density Population: 1 person per km²



Source: Author's presentation based on data from Eurostat (2021a).

Explaining this social context is essential to understanding the situation of Spanish rural areas, and how depopulation is now considered a social problem, thanks to more recent media focus on this issue. Therefore, the social perception of inequality with respect to urban centres points an accusing finger at a whole series of policies which continue to favour/reinforce the exodus of young people from the countryside, and



thereby depopulating vast areas of Spain. As with other groups suffering some sort of inequality, rural youth have to deal with the elements attached to their life stage in addition to the inequalities affecting them by virtue of the place where they live.

The creation of ‘youth’ as a stage that needs to be attended via political action has been sustained since its delimitation as a collective group in the first half of the 20th century (Savage 2018). Beyond the attention paid to their socialisation and immersion in this or that national spirit, the drift in their situation during the past decades (Standing 2014) has placed them in the spotlight as a proof of the system’s inability to integrate all its citizens (Gosálvez 2021; Orza, Oliveres and Sánchez 2021). This inability has overlapped with a severe lack of opportunities, thereby reinforcing the low dynamism of rural areas. These structural conditions make up a most “favourable scenario for youth desertion” (González Fernández and Montero Logroño 2020). However, the exodus becomes even more serious in the case of young women: this is primarily due to the difficulties arising from territorially dispersed jobs which push them (especially the most qualified) to the cities (Camarero and Sampedro 2008).

Despite this, we must look at the bigger picture. The Spanish population is quickly aging as the increasing aging index shows: it was 125.75 in 2020 (INE 2021). If there is a place where youth policies can make a difference regarding social sustainability, it is the rural environment. Country towns in Spain display highly unbalanced population pyramids: specifically, the ageing population is much larger in rural areas, since the proportion of people aged 65 or more is 28.5%. It is even worse in tiny villages (40% in towns with less than 100 inhabitants). In the cities, this particular demographic proportion remains stable at 18.5% (Pérez-Díaz et al. 2020). However, besides the phenomenon of aging, rural spaces also suffer from another phenomenon: masculinisation. Women flee to the city more than men, and this therefore translates into a greater difficulty to form new families. In 2018, the masculinity ratio was 105 in towns of up to 5,000 inhabitants, whilst in towns with a population over 5,000 it was 94.4 (Trabada Crende 2020).

Young people in rural zones live in highly adaptive, resilient families. Indeed, this is one of their defining features of rural life in general (Camarero and del Pino, 2014). It is a key factor since it can cushion the impact on profiles of greater exclusion, given that “thanks to family subsistence strategies, they manage to absorb individual exclusion conditions” (Camarero and del Pino 2021, 18). This capacity becomes even more important inasmuch as the situation of exclusion in rural areas has continued to grow



since the 2008 crisis. Indeed, by percentage impact, it affects a higher degree of the population than it does in urban environments (Escribano Pizarro et al. 2019, 5).

Another key element in the dynamics of rural spaces is mobility. Mobility has added to the resilience of many territories (Oliva and Camarero 2019). The analysis offered by Camarero and Oliva (2016) demonstrates the intensity of this phenomenon amongst rural youth. According to them, “70% of young people between 18–20 years of age commute daily to urban centres for school and also, although to a lesser degree, for work” (Camarero and Oliva 2016, 104). Furthermore, for those between 18 and 30 years old, bi-residential patterns are observed. This is a dual condition proving the degree of rural – urban hybridisation of this age group, in the general sense (Camarero and Oliva 2016).

The features described here highlight the existence of different contexts connected to different ways of working, educating, and living. To that end, specific policies for the young are therefore required, at least a priori. Beyond this, the inequality in access to basic services in general, especially those which young people need the most, tends to perpetuate the gap between rural and urban spaces (Camarero and Querol 2020).

The adaptation of youth employment policies vis-à-vis the most disadvantaged profiles of young people has received much consideration, as well as criticism. Although the new European frameworks stand for a greater flexibility and adaptability to the heterogeneity of youth, the truth is their implementation still displays too much generality and rigidity (Rodríguez-Soler and Verd 2018). Additionally, the variable introduced here on the conditioning factors of the rural habitat does not usually appear in actions aimed at promoting youth employment. As we will see later, when it does, it remains limited to the primary sector (i.e., agriculture and stockbreeding). Despite being very important, it is nonetheless minor in Spanish rural areas.

I METHODOLOGY

Youth policies and actions for rural youth in Spain show some diversity, mainly depending on the regional governments concerned. The data analysis herein is a compilation of information from public websites related to employment and training departments where policies descriptions are also available. Some websites are conceived of more as a tool to apply for grants or jobs through public services: others include more or less detailed information about youth policy.



The criterion used to select information explores that which refers to the more general national administration of the Spanish State, which is highly federalised. Therefore, regional governments apply selected policies as per the scope of their own autonomy. In this instance, we have made a search to identify those policies displaying at least some territorial adaptation. To that end, policies for three regions were selected with the following criteria: Comunidad Valenciana, Catalonia, and the Basque Country. Furthermore, and deriving from theoretical readings, we identified two non-administration experiences in order to enrich the discussion part.

I NATIONAL AND REGIONAL POLICY

Youth unemployment for under-25s in Spain has a rate of 30.51% for the second quarter of 2019, with the young female rate (32,07%) higher than the young male rate (29.25%) (INE 2020). For the same year, NEETs rates in the same age range were 12.1% (15-24, Eurostat 2019).

However, we must take into account that first data from the COVID-19 period shows that youth unemployment for under-25s in Spain increased to a rate of 39.61% for the second quarter of 2020, with young female rates (41.23%) higher than young males (38.34%) (INE 2020). Supportive policies properly addressed to NEETs situation could enable marginal youths to receive enhanced training and employment environments (Inui 2009). Furthermore, the social construction of the NEETs concept as a form of stigma can mask real social problems faced by youth groups (García-Fuentes and Martínez 2020).

a. Types of intervention at the national level

Youth policies and actions for rural youth in Spain show some diversity, mainly depending on the regional governments concerned. The data analysis herein is a compilation of information from public websites related to employment and training departments where policies descriptions are also available. Some websites are conceived of more as a tool to apply for grants or jobs through public services: others include more or less detailed information about youth policy.



a. 1. Employment

Youth Guarantee Program [Spanish Government. Ministry of Labour and Social Economy. State Public Employment Service].

The *Youth Guarantee* is, as in other European nations, a European initiative which aims to facilitate young people's access to the job market. It is aimed at ensuring that all young people who are not employed nor integrated in the education or training systems, can receive a job, education or training offer, including apprenticeships or internships, after completing formal education or becoming unemployed. The European recommendation that established the program requires that each young person can receive an offer within a period of four months from the point of their enrolment in the program.

Shock Plan for Youth Employment (2019-2021) [Spanish Government. Ministry of Labour and Social Economy].

With the *Shock Plan for Youth Employment* the following takes place.

Improvements in the competitiveness and added value of the Spanish productive structure is pursued with the aim of achieving levels of economic growth which allow for the generation of a substantial supply of employment, stable or flexible, based on the development of future and high-value sectors added (from sepe.es).

Avalem Joves [Valencian Region. Regional Ministry of Sustainable Economy, Productive Sectors, Trade and Labour]

This is an action included in *Labora* (Valencian Employment and Training Service). The comprehensive training and employment plan for young people 2016-2020 is a strategy of the Council of the Generalitat Valenciana, funded by the European Social Fund, in order to improve the employability of young people. To that end, it seeks to do the following: contribute to the implementation of a new production model which directly involves companies and people there; generate new employment and training opportunities for young people; and, promote the recruitment of young people in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) and the Third Sector, thereby facilitating the contribution of talent.



With these objectives, LABORA has launched a comprehensive campaign to reduce the youth unemployment rate through direct, more efficient, and innovative actions which encourage the hiring of youth under 30 years. Actions are focused on all profiles of young people: recent graduates and people without regulated training, or whose training do not meet the demands of the labour market. These activities, which are endorsed by the Ministry of Economy, are co-financed by the European Social Fund.

These actions are for young people between 16 and 29 years old. They offer a personalised guidance service adapted to demand in order to offer training itineraries, improve job searches, and to inform youth about employment opportunities from which they can benefit.

Avalem Joves, the Servicio de Empleo Público Valenciano offers subsidies for companies that hire qualified young people. These are grants that can be applied for by any private company, with a scope of operating in the wider community. The aim is to promote the employment of young people with indefinite contracts and internships. Specific actions include:

ECOJUP – 2020. Aid for the recruitment of qualified young people for internships
AVALEM JOVES – Youth Guarantee.

ECOGJU – 2020. Aid for the initial indefinite hiring of young people. YOUTH GUARANTEE
– Youth Guarantee.

Beyond this, *Avalem Joves Plus* is a subsidy plan for hiring young people, qualified and unqualified, by local public entities (local councils) in the Valencian Community. Specific actions include:

EMPUJU – 2020. Subsidy program for the recruitment of young people by local entities, within the framework of the National Youth Guarantee System.

EMCUJU – 2019. Subsidy program for the hiring of qualified young people by local entities, within the framework of the National Youth Guarantee System.

EMPUJU – 2019. Subsidy program for the hiring of young people by local entities, within the framework of the National Youth Guarantee System.



Public Employment Service of Catalonia [Catalonia Region]

Singular Project is one of best fitted for the NEETs category.

In the Singular Projects program, a single entity (or different grouped entities) can be presented under the following conditions:

- If only one entity applies, it will be the sole beneficiary;
- If a group of entities is presented, all the entities will have the status of beneficiaries, and will be subject to the rights and duties established by the relevant regulations.

The following entities may be beneficiaries, provided that they comply with the requirements established in the regulations of the program, namely:

- public or private entities with a work centre or operating establishment in Catalonia;
- local bodies and their dependent or linked entities. The different thematic areas that affect young people require coordination, in order to present a joint project;
- trade unions and employers' organisations.
- any other entity or company that carries out an activity necessary for the realisation of the project, and which is specialised in any of the services linked to the actions of the project.

Beneficiaries:

16 to 29 years old.

To be registered as an Unemployed Job Seeker or in an Employment Improvement,

- not having worked or having received training or educational actions the day before joining the project.



a. 2. Education

Shock Plan for Youth Employment (2019–2021) [Spanish Government. Ministry of Labour and Social Economy]

Strengthen the commitment to comprehensive training and the qualification of young people, thereby encouraging their individual, collective and professional promotion. This is supported by the educational system and the work environment as fundamental elements for their social integration.

Develop initiatives to return to school, to support training in strategic skills, and dual vocational training.

Avaletm Joves [Valencian Region. Regional Ministry of Sustainable Economy, Productive Sectors, Trade and Labour].

This program develops a mixed employment–training. The training program is characterised by its practical and innovative nature and is adapted to the demands of the labour market. Currently, it focuses on the creation of mixed programs, which combine training and paid work. The best examples are: *T'AVALEM* and *Employment Workshops*.

T'AVALEM and *Talleres de empleo* are programs in which students perform jobs that benefit their municipality, receive training and work experience, receive a salary, and obtain an official certification. Therefore, they are especially useful for unqualified people.

There have been grants from the mixed employment–training program *Escoles d'Ocupació ET FORMEM* for the 2019 financial year.

a. 3. Rural development

Shock Plan for Youth Employment (2019–2021) [Spanish Government. Ministry of Labour and Social Economy]:

– providing professional skills to those young people with little qualifications, taking care of young people in the rural environment, and empowered and reinforcing the role



of the Public Employment Services as a gateway to the labour market, and an active and participatory life within society.

In a different department, namely the Ministry of Agriculture, they produced a public draft on *MEASURES IN FAVOR OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND WOMEN in the field of Rural Modernisation and Diversification Strategy*. It was published in July, 2017. The document proposes 38 measures for improving the youth situation in rural areas of Spain.

LABORA (Valencian Employment and Training Service).

Avalem Territori Plan.

The *Avalem Territori Plan* is one of the most ambitious strategies promoted by *LABORA*, and with the collaboration of European Social Fund. Through this program, the Valencian Employment Service intends to redefine active policies to make territorial policies for employment of a transversal nature, and more adapted to real needs. Therefore, one of the functions of the territorial employment plan is to identify new job niches. Its intention is to design a new methodology of joint territorial strategies wherein the practical questions of how to work are addressed, in order to promote employment more generally. Furthermore, it aims to establish a new management model which adapts the exercise of active employment policies to the relevant territory in a way that links them and connects them with the real needs of people and companies, but also integrates territorial and sectoral agents in the process. Through a participatory diagnosis methodology with more than three hundred indicators, it has been possible to identify key variables such as productive specialisation, functional networks and dynamics, training deficiencies, and new occupation niches.

Avalem Territori aims to encompass the different agents linked to the Valencian territory (i.e., the autonomous administration, local entities, social agents, companies, institutional administration, and non-profit entities) from a participatory perspective. This will allow the creation of a collaborative network to carry out a joint territorial strategy.

Odisseu Project [Catalonia Region].

Encourage return to rural areas.



ODISSEU has the initial objective of encouraging a return to rural areas of origin. To that end, it aims to route young people trained via the contact and involvement of the main agents which affect its transition. These include: universities and training centres; local companies; institutions and administrations involved in rural development; employment and business creation, and youth policies.

a. 4. Social inclusion

Shock Plan for Youth Employment (2019–2021) [Spanish Government. Ministry of Labour and Social Economy].

Its main aim is to provide decent jobs, youth entrepreneurship, and the promotion of union participation of young people and business associations.

Following SEPES webpage, the objectives of this Employment Plan for young people are as follows.

1. Establish a labour framework of quality in employment and dignity at work.
2. Make young people protagonists in their job placement and qualification process.
3. Increase qualification and job placement, by providing young people with more professional skills.
4. Promote a new economic model based on productivity and added value.
5. Provide the Public Employment Services with the means and resources to provide adequate and individualised attention.
6. Develop specific training on equal opportunities between women and men to eliminate gender biases, combat horizontal segregation and the gender pay gap.
7. Combat the discouragement effect of young people who do not seek employment because they believe that they will not find it.



8. Special attention will be paid to especially vulnerable groups (migrants, long-term unemployed, school dropouts, people with disabilities, etc.).

9. The Plan encompasses fifty measures, divided into six axes, designed under a comprehensive and systemic perspective, which allow their combination and adjustment to each profile and existing needs in terms of insertion.

Avalem Joves [Valencian Region. Regional Ministry of Sustainable Economy, Productive Sectors, Trade and Labour].

Contribute to the implementation of a new production model.

Facilitate the return of young people who emigrated to other countries, to avoid precarious conditions upon returning, and those who are in search of new opportunities.

Stimulate the social commitment of young people with participation in social initiatives delivered by the Third Sector. This promotes the development of fundamental transversal skills in the labour market today.

Youth Return Program [Basque Country Region].

The Youth Return Program is an initiative of the Basque Government, developed and managed by Lanbide, which facilitates the return to the Basque Country of people under 35 years old.

Lanbide (Employment Basque Public Regional Service) supports the hiring of young people by offering support to companies help to incorporate professionals who have acquired valuable skills outside the Basque Country. It's aimed at young people (but also companies), with the goal of having them participate in the program. Young people who are willing to return can also apply for a travel grant.

Table no. 1 summarises identified policies and actions from administrations we have considered. At least three programs (Spanish, Valencian and Catalan) show more directly addressed actions vis-à-vis rural youth. Nonetheless, there is not a unique action or program for rural NEETs specifically.



Table no. 1 - Identified Policies and Actions

	Employment	Education and training	Social inclusion	Rural development	Rural NEETs approach
Spanish Government. Ministry of Labour and Social Economy	Youth Guarantee	Shock Plan for Youth Employment (2019-2021)	Shock Plan for Youth Employment (2019-2021)	Shock Plan for Youth Employment (2019-2021)	Taking care of young people in the rural environment
Valencian Government	Avalem Joves	Avalem Joves	Avalem Joves	Avalem Territori	Collaborative network to carry out a joint territorial strategy
Catalonian Government	Singular Project			Odisseu Project	Encourage return to rural areas
Basque Country Government			Youth Return Program	Youth Return Program	Youth return focused on urban and rural areas

Source: Own elaboration



I DISCUSSION

As previously noted, several actions have already been undertaken in the field of employment promotion through training. Moreover, companies have also been given some assistance to hire both skilled and unskilled young employees. These strategies, at least on the paper, lead to further specificity regarding the particular circumstances of each territory. However, the implementation period has not, as yet, even started, and the sudden onset of the coronavirus pandemic may well have slowed down, or even redirected, some of the initial approaches.

One of the approaches found in all the three Spanish territories selected in this study is to encourage the return of the youth. The exodus towards other European countries was one of the main phenomena observed during the 2008 financial crisis. Awareness about the decapitalisation of the country led to the development of several return aid plans. Inspired by this tactic, the regional government of Catalonia launched a return policy focused on rural areas. Recent focus on rural depopulation has fostered programs which develop rural actions, by highlighting how youth, and by extension their return, are vital for the dynamism of rural areas. Nonetheless, weakness in those actions linked to rural NEETs are very clear. However, there is no a specific program which takes into account that particular phenomenon.

Although these youth employment policies are “official” at some different levels of the Spanish administration related to employment policy and its implementation, it is worth highlighting pilot experiences, such as the one analysed by González and Montero (2020) for a LEADER project in Andalusia. Here, the authors identified the latent potential within proximity to the territory, but also confirmed the practical gap therein, with regards to the tools made available by LEADER programmes. Another significant experience is the Barrios por el Empleo project in Tenerife (Canary Islands), launched during the 2008 financial crisis. One of its hallmarks is its community approach, the emphasis being on the accompanying and fostering of co-responsibility amongst its participants (Zapata Hernández, Rumeu Amaral and Acosta González 2018). Its involvement in run-down neighbourhoods (and its success rate of 40% of its participants having found a job) single out this experience as one we should pay attention to, and learn from.



I CONCLUSIONS

Rural spaces in Spain have suddenly become the centre of attention of both the media and the political class, in marked contrast to only a few years ago. The phenomenon of depopulation has burst into the political and media agenda and, as a result, has also become a topic of public debate. One axis which has been conveniently exposed is the secular absence of public policies that would curb the imbalance between small country villages and cities. The gap in the access to infrastructures and essential services has resulted in mobilising that part of the Spanish society still living in rural areas.

In addition to the constant degradation of educational, transportation, medical and social services – exacerbated by Europe’s austerity policies and cutbacks – we must also include the elimination of financial services (i.e., banks), as more and more branch offices are being closed down for good and poor access (or even no access at all), to the Internet that also remains a problem. This scenario of imbalances makes the reversion of demographic trends in Spanish rural areas especially difficult. Only by focusing on having the young population settle down in the respective territories (combined with special emphasis on creating attractive spaces for qualified young women), would these trends begin to be reverted. The policies allegedly devised for the youth by the administration are not translated into a tangible form of action required to overcome the lack of dynamism found in rural areas.

Experimental initiatives launched by LEADER programmes confirm that “they can be a good platform to activate young population in rural areas” (González Fernández and Montero Logroño 2020). To that end, the adoption of a micro perspective in such policies is mandatory in order to achieve social inclusion in the diverse rural spaces (Escribano Pizarro, Serrano Lara and Martínez Guirao 2019).

Following Rodríguez-Soler and Verd, “both the SNGJ’s (Spanish acronym of the Youth Guarantee National System) general approach and the specific measures developed under its wing seem not to have made a strong move (or not to have made the right move) towards the re-orientation of prior policies. Nor has personalisation and adaptation of the measures for a heterogeneous group demanding policies with a much higher degree of specificity” been observed (Rodríguez-Soler and Verd 2018). Not only must heterogeneity be taken into account in this proposal, the individual profile policies must be effective: namely, they must also bear in mind the specific features of the different Spanish rural areas.



Needless to say, there exist other initiatives already pointing at territoriality as a key factor that must go with the definition of measures. Its effectiveness will have to be proven in the immediate future where further challenges (such as the ups and downs of the Covid-19 worldwide pandemic crisis, the effects of climate change, energy transition and so on) are certain to present new difficulties.

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NEET STRATEGIES IN POST-RECESSION IRELAND: REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTING FORMAL AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATIONAL SUPPORTS⁴

PAUL FLYNN

Relatively few studies have investigated the strategies, policies, programmes, and projects concerning rural NEETs (namely, young people living in rural areas neither in employment nor in education or training). This special issue of *Quality of Life Journal* is dedicated to fulfilling this gap in the literature. It contributes case studies from European Union (EU) member states. The primary purpose of this special issue is to approach and discuss the various strategies, policies, programmes, and projects applicable to youth rural NEETs.

In the aftermath of the 2007–2008 global economic crisis, Ireland had one of the highest unemployment rates in the OECD for those aged between 15–25 years. An over-dependence on the construction and agriculture sectors (used to absorb early school leavers into related apprenticeship programmes) was exposed. Consequently, a reassessment of the challenges this demographic faced informed the development of a suite of targeted responses. This paper reflects on three distinct, although interrelated, areas where strategies which impacted upon NEETs were actioned in Ireland between 2007 and 2019. These are: formal education; non-formal education and training; and, establishing the voice of those most impacted (i.e., NEETs and potential NEETs), as central to the success of emergent and future responses.

Keywords: NEETs; Youth; Education; Training.

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I INTRODUCTION

In 2007–2008, Ireland experienced an economic trauma that exposed both its urban and rural communities to global instability, as with many other countries during this period (Murphy and Scott 2014; Kiberd 2017; Kinsella 2012). Citizens from across all demographics were affected, and young people also felt the full force of this economic shock. Indeed, prior to 2007 Ireland tracked the OECD average rate of youth Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) at a rate of –2.41% for the age group 15–24 years. However post-2007, similar to other countries such as Spain and Italy, the number of Irish youth NEETs rose from a low in 2005 of 4.88%, to a high of 12.06% in 2009 for the same age group. This is 3.47% above the OECD average during the same period (OECD 2021). In many ways, this is unsurprising, given the buoyancy of Ireland’s construction industry up to 2007: construction accounted for over 13% of all employment in the country (Whelan 2011). At this point in time, while the construction industry had the highest rate in the OECD for percentage of employment in that sector, the Irish tourism industry accounted for 10.4% of all employment in the country during the same year (CSO 2012; MacFeeley and Delaney). Each of these major economic players in the Irish economy account for a significant number of Irish citizens who may be at risk of falling into the NEET categorisation. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the fallout from this economic shock was felt sharply by those aged 15–24 years: they may have traditionally entered into employment, education and/or training in these critical sectors.

However, since 2009, the impact of the Irish response (namely, to the challenge that this demographic experienced) can be viewed as a steady, sustainable decline in the number of youth NEETs, and how present-day Ireland, from 2018–2020, tracks quite closely to the OECD average of 6.74% NEET youth unemployment (for those aged between 15–24 years). While the acronym NEET includes a specific reference to education, it is also the case that education is the foundation of all initiatives targeting NEETs. The location and/or mode of that engagement is often that where it is considered necessary for education providers in this area to focus on either formal, or non-formal settings. It is perhaps the case that the presentation of these two educational settings, often as a dichotomy, is problematic. In the Irish context, post-2007/2008 with respect to NEETs, this dichotomy was broken down, and re-imagined as an educational continuum. To that end, it was/ is one where the needs of industry and associated opportunities for NEETs were/are aligned with formal and non-formal learning, and consequently a reimagining of the relevance of education to the sectors hit hardest by the 2007/2008 economic downturn.



This paper reflects on the Irish education and training response to this major economic shock. Firstly, a brief overview of the Irish education system is presented (including a characterisation of milestones most relevant to Irish NEETs). Secondly, a chronological exploration of significant policy informing activities, initiatives, and resultant programmes are mapped against a steady decline in NEET numbers between 2009 and 2019 (OECD 2021). Finally, this paper reflects on the role that the youth voice has in making explicit connections between formal and non-formal education initiatives, and how this can also factor in preparing for future economic events that may disproportionately impact young people aged between 15–24 years. Specifically, the recognition given to the voice of young people in preparing for the future is highlighted.

I THE IRISH EDUCATION SYSTEM – NEET MILESTONES

For most children in the Republic of Ireland, primary education begins at age four or five, and in predominantly mixed-gender school settings. Typically 60,000 primary school students begin an educational journey that for many will last at least 10 years. This sustained engagement is a direct consequence of the minimum age for leaving school being set at 15 years in 1972: this was done in response to transition rates to second level education in 1964 running at less than 33% (Coolahan 1981). This change resulted in a sharp increase in the primary school completion rates, and sustained engagement with education up to 15 years between 1972 and 1981. In the context of the Irish education system, the age category of 15 years is aligned with a state examination process called the Junior Certificate. Students typically sit between 8–10 written examinations supplemented by, in most cases, low stakes continuous assessments tasks completed in the previous two years (NCCA 2021). This examination process represents a significant milestone for NEETs and for those at risk of falling into the NEET category.

Historically, it is the case that most students who have opted to leave formal education post-Junior Certificate examination enter into a variety of apprenticeship pathways. Prior to 2007/2008, registration intake for apprenticeships peaked at 8,307 in 2006: this reflects the demand being expressed by the construction sector in particular. This sector experienced a decline in intake registrations to 244 in 2010 from that initial high in 2006 (DPER 2019). Following this, in 2013 the rate of youth unemployment peaked at 26.6% (CSO 2013). It is clear, therefore, that many of those young people who may have entered into training and subsequently employment, as a consequence of participation in initiatives such as the apprenticeship model, fell into NEET status, and thus relative precariousness. As will be explored later, the Junior Certificate examination point,



although now diminished in its relevance for the majority of the school going population, still remains the minimum qualification for entry into the apprentice system, but also a symbolic milestone event for a significant number of young people (SOLAS 2021).

For those students who remain in the education system up to the age of 18, and successfully complete second level study (culminating in the award of the Leaving Certificate), over 56% enrol at higher education institutions, and attain a third level qualification (CSO 2016). However, for a significant percentage of the population eligible to progress beyond the Leaving Certificate, this award represents a significant milestone also. This is particularly true for NEETs. Indeed, NEETs who have obtained a Leaving Certificate are more likely to re-engage with education later in their lives (CSO 2021). The high completion rate to this level is in part due to the introduction of multiple pathways to completing the secondary school post-Junior Cycle, including the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme (Smyth, Banks and Calvert 2011). The LCA programme was introduced in 1994 to offer students who would have traditionally been defined as early school leavers wishing to enter the labour market, an opportunity to develop necessary labour market skills (Banks et al. 2014). Despite the relevance of the programme and its relative success in preventing students from prematurely entering into NEET status, participation in this program generally results in exclusion from the progression pathways into higher education (Banks et al. 2014; Trant et al. 1999).

It is clear, therefore, that there are a number of key milestones which impact on young people's thinking regarding early school leaving. From an education perspective, legislation has had a significant impact on establishing key milestones for prospective NEETs to aim for in the Republic of Ireland. It is equally clear, however, that multiple pathways towards completion of secondary school is an important factor in establishing interim targets for prospective NEETs to work towards. Nevertheless, not all young people will opt for these pathways, and parallel opportunities and options for engagement are also essential in offering alternate staging points for the prevention of young people aged between 15-24 years falling into NEET status. In the Irish context, programmes that operate in the non-formal sector (such as Youthreach and the School Completion Programme) aim to support engagement with the education system and re-engagement with skills development for employment supplemented and supported by schemes such as the Back to Education Initiative 2014-2020.



I FORMAL SUPPORTS AND ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PATHWAYS

For most children in the Republic of Ireland, primary education begins at age four or five, and in predominantly mixed-gender school settings. Typically 60,000 primary school students begin an educational journey that for many will last at least 10 years. This sustained engagement is a direct consequence of the minimum age for leaving school being set at 15 years in 1972: this was done in response to transition rates to second level education in 1964 running at less than 33% (Coolahan 1981). This change resulted in a sharp increase in the primary school completion rates, and sustained engagement with education up to 15 years between 1972 and 1981. In the context of the Irish education system, the age category of 15 years is aligned with a state examination process called the Junior Certificate. Students typically sit between 8–10 written examinations supplemented by, in most cases, low stakes continuous assessments tasks completed in the previous two years (NCCA 2021). This examination process represents a significant milestone for NEETs and for those at risk of falling into the NEET category.

I Youthreach

Referring back to the formal/non-formal education dichotomy, a need for a hybrid space was identified in 1989, as the number of young people still opting to leave secondary school at the Junior cycle milestone remained significant. Youthreach is an education, training, and work programme for early school leavers aged 15–20 years of age. It offers support to young people to help them identify what they would like to do in adult life, and allows them to gain a certificate. It operates on a full time basis, and takes in new students all year round. As of 2020, there are over one hundred Youthreach centres in the Republic of Ireland hosting almost 6,000 students every year, and who are also eligible for a training, meal, travel and accommodation allowances (DES 2021). In 2009, the numbers of enrolment in Youthreach and associated training centres peaked, in line with similar trends evidenced in the OECD average for unemployment at this time. This indicates that early school leavers who may have entered into tractional apprenticeships (available to them pre-2007) were engaging with education, and re-evaluating their future pathways. Indeed, as Ireland diversified its skills needs in 2013, explored further below, the number of youth unemployed and those opting for Youthreach programmes declined, and tracked closer to the OECD average (OECD 2021). At the same time, an increase in uptake of new apprenticeship options increased (CSO 2021). It is clear that the presence and availability of Youthreach was an important factor in mitigating



the number of young people in Ireland who emerged from the economic downturn disengaged from education, employment, and/or training.

I The School Completion Programme

The success of Youthreach in providing a progression pathway to employment through sustained engagement with training has done much to prevent Irish youth from falling into NEET status. However, in 2002, the School Completion Programme (SCP) was developed to support students and young people at primary or secondary level education who have been identified as being at risk of leaving the formal education system at an earlier stage (Smyth et al. 2015). Specifically, at either just after (or prior to) the major milestones identified above. Typically, SCPs focus on schools that are part of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) network in Ireland. Students enrolled in DEIS schools are, generally, from disadvantaged communities, and experience socio-economic disadvantages that have a negative impact on their capacity to sustain engagement with education. Indeed, students enrolled in DEIS schools are nearly twice as likely not to progress to higher education than students enrolled in non-DEIS schools (European Commission 2017; HEA 2018; Smyth et al. 2019). The overarching aim of the SCP is to retain students to completion of the leaving certificate (or a suitable equivalent) that will allow them to transition into further education, training, or employment. The SCP is a good example of where formal and non-formal education initiatives can work together to provide a more holistic set of supports. The SCP is one of three strands of Tusla, the Irish Child and Family Agency, Education Support Service, including the Home School Community Liaison Scheme and the Educational Welfare Service (Tusla 2021). All three strands share the same national outcomes: improved attendance; improved participation, and improved retention. Considering the remit of Youthreach, the formation and implementation of the SCP provides for a continuum of targeted supports that can make a positive contribution towards preventing young people from disengaging with education, and subsequently, training and/or employment. In 2017, Ireland had exceeded its 2020 targets in reducing the number of early school leavers (European Commission 2017).



I REIMAGINING NON-FORMAL SUPPORTS POST-2007

While there will always be instances where the aforementioned formal education programmes and supports will not address the needs of all students in all circumstances, the formal education system has nonetheless established a continuum of supports for those at risk of leaving school prematurely. However, for some young people, early school leaving in pursuit of a vocation is an inevitability. Pre-2007, these pathways would have been quite clear for many young men in particular, with the construction industry and agriculture attracting a significant number of early school leavers (CSO 2021). However, in 2007 and the subsequent post-economic downturn, an Expert Group on Future Skills Needs was convened in order to assess the future needs of Ireland's economy, and to make recommendations that would help Ireland transition from an economy with a high dependence on one or two areas, such as construction or agriculture, to a more diversified and inclusive economy by 2020 (DES 2013). Following on from this, in 2013, and in response to the findings of a review of vocational training in Ireland by the OECD (2010), a review of the provision of apprenticeship opportunities, the pathway into the construction industry most frequently accessed by young people in the Republic of Ireland, was published. At that time, youth unemployment was 26.6% (CSO 2013), and it had become clear that the availability of traditional employment and vocational training opportunities had been eroded: this was particularly true for youth in rural areas.

The Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA), an independent expert group convened to examine and report on the near future economic development of rural Ireland up to 2025, engaged in a public consultation with a number of public forum meetings, stakeholder engagement meetings, and a wide-ranging online surveys. These were undertaken in order to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by all of those living in rural settings. This research activity culminated in a report published in 2014, *Energising Ireland's Rural Economy*. This was published by the Commission. Consequently, thirty-four recommendations were made to the Irish government, focusing on an integrated approach to the development of the rural economy. Key recommendations that may have a near future impact include: the establishment of Rural Economic Development Zones, and the development of Rural Town Stimulus programmes, which focus on rural settlements and their surrounding areas (CEDRA 2014).



Following on from the CEDRA report, an action plan called 'Realising Our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development 2017–2019', was developed. This report sought to build the inherent strengths present in rural communities, and utilise the contribution that such communities can, and do, make to Ireland's economic prosperity. There are five key pillars, with associated objectives and designated responsible bodies for implementation. They are:

- Supporting Sustainable Communities;
- Supporting Enterprise and Employment;
- Maximising our Rural Tourism and Recreation Potential;
- Fostering Culture and Creativity in Rural Communities;
- Improving Rural Infrastructure and Connectivity.

However, at the heart of all of these plans and initiatives rests education, training and employment. This calls for a deliberate re-focusing of efforts and a recognition that the connections between formal and non-formal education are vital components in the realisation of any aspects of the CEDRA report. To that end, the subsequent action plan resulted in a re-imagining of the manner in which young people are both included in national conversations that affect them, and how programmes of education (both formal and non-formal) are made available to them. One of the first initiatives to emerge at this time was the formation of the Apprenticeship Council.

I Generation Apprenticeship

In the wake of the 2007/2008 economic downturn (and as Ireland was emerging from this period), a review of skills shortages was carried out in 2013, and revealed that multiple areas were experiencing skills shortages, specifically: science (including biopharma and medtech); a broad spectrum of engineering skills associated with production and manufacture, and ICT, ranging from software developers to user support (DES 2013). Considering the pre-2007 focus on construction and agriculture (and the subsequent desire to shift to a more diversified economy) this shift towards a knowledge economy presented an opportunity to re-imagine the concept of apprenticeship provision in the Republic of Ireland. In 2014, the Minister for Education announced the formation of The



Apprenticeship Council. This was formed to specifically be enterprise informed, with representatives from business, trade unions, further and higher education bodies, as well as government taking part. In particular, the council was tasked with responding to the emergent needs of Ireland's changing economy (DES 2013; DES 2014). Since 2014, apprenticeships in Ireland have been overseen by the Apprenticeship Council. The further education and training authority, SOLAS, is the lead agency responsible for apprenticeship on behalf of Government. It works in close partnership with the Higher Education Authority, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, industry, and education and training providers across further and higher education. SOLAS' responsibility includes maintenance of a national register of employers approved to take on apprentices, and a national register of apprentices. For those wishing to pursue an apprenticeship pathway to employment, they are now directed to *Generation Apprenticeship*. Generation Apprenticeship presents a directory of apprenticeship pathways which reflect the full range of opportunities available to young people in industry in Ireland. These include: Agriculture; Arboriculture; BioPharma; Construction; Electrical; Engineering; Equine; Finance; Hairdressing; Healthcare; Hospitality & Food; ICT; Insurance; Logistics; Motor; Property Services; Recruitment, and Sales (DES 2021). Whilst the negative post-recession impacts of the economic downturn were felt by many for over a decade, it is also the case that the resultant reconceptualisation of apprenticeships in Ireland has also, along with programmes in the formal education sector, contributed to the steady decline in youth unemployment in Ireland overall.

I Back to Education and Training Initiatives

However, for those who may have fallen into precariousness between 2007 and 2008 (and before the aforementioned formal and non-formal support mechanisms were put in place), additional supports were required so that their disconnection from lifelong learning opportunities did not prevent them from trying again. To that end, a number of initiatives were developed to support returning to education at both the second level and via further education. The Back to Education Initiative, a part-time second chance at a second level programme, provides opportunities for second chance education to adult learners and early school leavers who want to upgrade their skills. The initiative builds on existing schemes such as Youthreach and the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS). The Back to Education Allowance is a financial incentive that is available to young people aged over 21 years, enabling them to return to complete their second level education full-time. Applicants can also make use of supports to continue on into higher education if they wish. Young people who are unemployed, parenting alone, or



who have a disability, and those who receive certain payments from the Department of Social Protection, are particularly encouraged to apply. The allowance is also available for those over 24 years of age to pursue postgraduate programmes, or to enrol in initial teacher education programmes in Ireland (DSP 2021). Such initiatives are an important component in the overall approach to supporting those who, for various reasons, find themselves in the NEET classification, and encouraging them to pursue employment, education and training opportunities.

It isn't always possible for NEETs to return to formal education settings. In response to this challenge, the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) was also introduced in 2012. VTOS is a special range of courses designed to meet the educational needs of unemployed people who are early school-leavers and are not in position to make a sustained return. The scheme aims to give them a choice of options from basic education and training, to advanced vocational preparation and training. It targets people over the age of 21 who have been getting unemployment payments or signing for welfare credits for at least six months. It is delivered through the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) at centres all over Ireland. In any given academic term during 2018, up to 5000 people were utilising the VTOS programme and its associated supports (CSO 2021).

I THE IMPORTANCE OF THE YOUTH VOICE IN SHAPING THEIR OWN FUTURE

Between 2007 and 2019, as this paper has explored, a large number of initiatives that link both formal and non-formal contexts have been implemented. A significant evolutionary aspect of how such programmes are now sustained and informed is the presence of the voice of young people in shaping their own future. Increasingly, at both a local and national level, young people between the ages 15–24 years are considered not merely as stakeholders, but as key informants of policy and initiative development. Indeed, this has been evident in the formation of national strategies and frameworks in the last decade. For example, Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (BOBF): National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014–2020, is a framework which seeks to improve the lives and life chances of children and young people aged under 25. The policy framework, prefaced by the National Children's Strategy, Our Children – Their Lives (2000–2010), identified six areas that have the potential to improve outcomes, and transform the effectiveness of existing policies, services and resources in achieving these national outcomes. They are:

- Active and healthy, physical and mental wellbeing;



- Achieving full potential in all areas of learning and development;
- Safe and protected from harm;
- Economic security and opportunity;
- Connected, respected, and contributing to their world.

This national policy framework also recommended the development of a National Youth Strategy as being central to the success of the aforementioned outcomes, particularly in relation to rural communities.

Following on from Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (2014–2020), the National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making, 2015–2020 was developed. This strategy is primarily aimed at children and young people under the age of 18, but also embraces the voice of young people in the transition to adulthood up to the age of 24. The strategy is guided and influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. The strategy focuses on the everyday lives of children and young people, and the places and spaces in which they are entitled to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives. This work prompted the development of the National Youth Strategy, as called for, and aimed to enable all young people to realise their maximum potential, by respecting their right and hearing their voices, whilst protecting and supporting them as they transition from childhood to adulthood. The published strategy builds a consultation process implemented in 2014/15, framed by the objectives in the BOBF policy document. This process highlighted that young people identified mental health, education, inclusion, employment, access to services, youth work/youth organisations, and supporting transitions as key areas requiring focused action (DES 2014).

Further to this, it was identified that consultation and intake development needed to serve the prosperity of all citizens, and to insulate them from the precariousness of NEET status. In 2017, the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017–2021 was launched. Travellers and Roma are amongst the most disadvantaged and marginalised people in Ireland. The 2011 census indicated that there are almost 30,000 travellers in Ireland, and their average age is 22.4 years. 18% of travellers live in rural areas, however many urban areas are located within rural development zones. 55% of travellers leave second level education by the age of 15, and a significant majority of the travelling community are without work. In addition, in 2018, the previously mentioned BOBF



document was found wanting in relation to inclusion and, consequently, the National Youth strategy was revised, and republished as the LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018–2020, in order to recognise that young Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Intersex (LGBTI+) people can flourish when they have consistently positive interactions with those around them, as well as supportive experiences in the services which they utilise regularly.

It is clear from the development of these policy frameworks and strategies that the voice of young people is recognised by the citizenship as a core informant in the shaping of opportunities for all young people to flourish, and to mitigate the risk of falling in to NEET status. However, it is also clear that a forum for that voice was absent. In response to this, The National Youth Council of Ireland Strategic Plan (2018–2020) was published. It presents youth work as having a number of purposes that include:

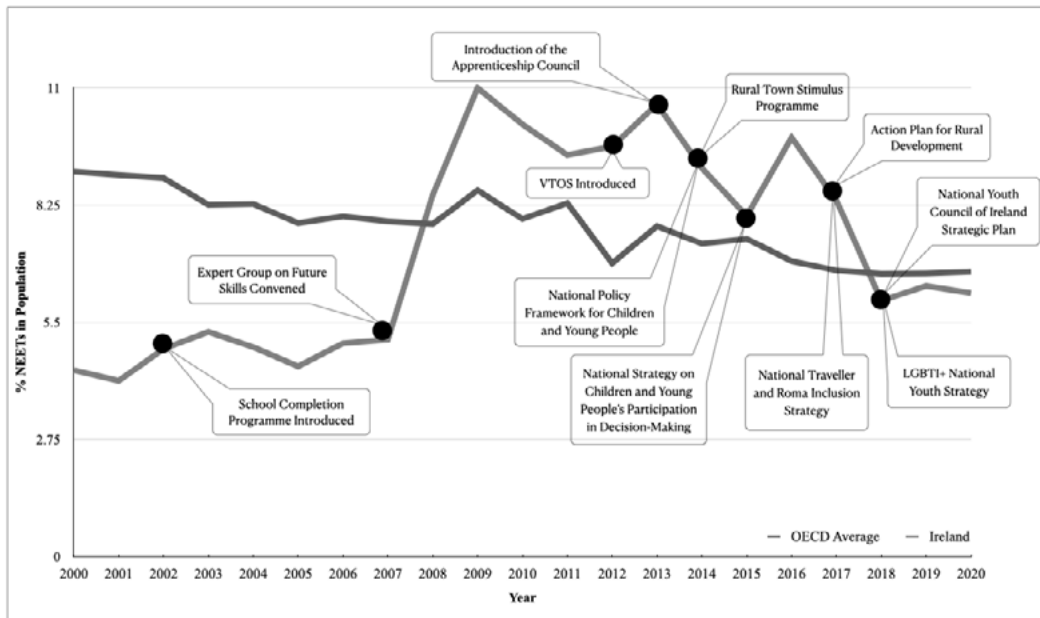
- Giving young people a voice in decisions that affect their lives.
- Giving young people the opportunity to talk and be listened to.

The National Youth Council of Ireland provides a forum for young people to participate in the conversations that shape their future and, in the future, for their voice to shape how those that follow them into adulthood have the best possible chance of not falling into NEET status, and the respective problems this would entail.

I CONCLUSION

This paper set out to present an insight into the impact of the 2007–2008 global economic downturn on the fortunes of those ages between 15–24 years, from that period onwards. It is clear from the OECD data presented in this paper that Irish youth were disproportionately affected by this, in turn resulting in a high unemployment rate, which took over a decade to address and return close to the OECD average (OECD 2021). Initially, an overview of the Irish education system and the key milestones which impact upon Irish NEETs provided a contextualisation of the challenges associated with sustained engagement with education between the ages of 15 and 18 years old. The complexity of these challenges are also evident within the formal and non-formal responses (see Figure 1) that were designed and implemented in order to ameliorate the precariousness faced by NEETs. Most notably, this includes the retention programmes linked to the formal education system and the overhaul of the apprenticeship model in Ireland in 2014.

Figure 1- The relationship between NEET trajectory and introduction of initiatives, programmes and supports in Ireland (NEET Trajectory Data Source: OECD)



However, it is this complexity and the inter-relatedness of each of the initiatives that has been highlighted in this paper which points to three key considerations for any NEET strategy. They are:

- It is vital that supports and a multiplicity of pathways exists across the continuum of education in order to encourage as many young people as possible to remain in education for as long as possible.
- In addition it is crucial that supports in the non-formal sector link to that of the formal education sector in order for the circle to be closed on the challenges that NEETs face. Such challenges do not exist in one sector or the other. Consequently, an integrated response is required.



- Finally, as has been the case in recent years in Ireland, the voice of youth citizens should shape the direction, and form of responses to challenges that impact upon them.

Taken together, these three key considerations formed Ireland's response to the 2007/2008 global economic downturn and its impact upon Irish youth. Whilst it is certain that some young people will be impacted more than others (and that the strategies, frameworks and programmes highlighted in this paper will inevitably let some people down), the response has nonetheless slowly but progressively provided a robust platform upon which not only to continue to build, but also be informed by those it is designed to support.

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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE YOUTH GUARANTEE PROGRAMME IN ROMANIA⁵

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In 2014, European countries began implementing the Youth Guarantee Programme (YGP), one of the European Commission's most important initiatives designed to combat the issue of youth unemployment. This led to a decrease in the number of young NEETs over the subsequent 6 years. Based on data concerning the extent and size of the NEETs phenomenon at the European level, the number of NEETs who benefit from various measures, and data regarding programmes for NEETs financed by ESF, this paper presents an overview of the YGP implementation in Romania during the 2014–2020 period. It does so by identifying the main challenges and barriers that prevented the achievement of the proposed results. In that regard, the main barriers in the implementation of YGP in Romania are related to the lack of coordination of measures between institutions; a lack of flexibility in registering young NEETs; low levels of partnership with local authorities, companies, and NGOs; delays in funding measures; and a lack of centralised monitoring data in order to provide a picture of progress and thus necessary improvement measures.

Keywords: NEETs; rural; youth; employment; education; Youth Guarantee

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I INTRODUCTION

In order to combat youth unemployment, in 2013, the European Union proposed a new policy initiative called the “Youth Guarantee Programme” (YGP). This was an EU flagship initiative which aimed to reduce youth unemployment and increase social inclusion for vulnerable young people. According to the YGP: “Member States should ensure that, within four months of leaving school or losing a job, young people under 25 can either find a good-quality job suited to their education, skills and experience or acquire the education, skills and experience required to find a job in the future through an apprenticeship, a traineeship or continued education” (European Commission 2014). The YGP aimed to address two main issues that affect the labour market inclusion of NEETs: the school to work transition, and the support for employment. This involved a major shift from passive labour market policies to active ones. For the European Commission (EC), the YGP’s implementation represented a structural reform in each member state that included reinforcement of the public employment services (PES) and educational system (European Commission 2014). Reform of the PES involves a better personalisation of the employment services offered so that they respond more effectively to the needs of the young person, and also offer more proactive tools to identify and activate the NEETs. As the tailored made measures could involve support for employment, training, or education in order to be easily included on the labour market, a specific reform is in the area of school to work transition. This involves improvement in vocational education (initial and continuous), apprenticeship, internship/traineeship, and professional training opportunities (in terms of curricula, specialisations, links with the labour market etc.)

The YGP was considered an investment from the EC due to the very high “long-term costs of unemployment to the economy, to society and to the individuals concerned, such as increased risk of future unemployment and poverty” (European Commission 2014, 3). At the same time, this was also an innovative active labour market policy due to the wide variety of measures proposed which included: (a) education programmes better adapted to the labour market requirements – e.g., initial vocational education, entrepreneurship courses; (b) remedial education school dropout measures – second chance education, or other routes to re-enter education and training; (c) apprenticeship, traineeship, or internship schemes; (d) entrepreneurship and self-employment guidance; (e) training programmes; (f) labour market intermediation services; (g) active labour market policies – direct employment creation, hiring subsidies, employment/labour mobility and start-up incentives (European Council 2013).



It also included measures for the PES development, namely: PES staff training; development of specialised youth services; data gathering systems; and study visits etc. Partnership and cooperation between relevant public and private actors were encouraged by the YGP, including companies; employment services; education and training institutions; career guidance services; trade unions; and other specialised youth services (i.e., non-governmental organisations, youth centres and associations). In order to be more effective, the YGP promoted the necessity of early intervention and activation.

Each member country developed a Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan with proposed measures for implementing the YGP at national level, funding sources for each measure, and roles of public or private institutions. In 2013, the YGP proposed as target group NEETs between 15 and 24 years old. However, some countries have increased the age range of young people to 15–29 years old. These are: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Poland, Portugal, and Spain.

Starting with 2014, Romania implements the YGP: that includes various measures to tackle NEETs' problems. This paper presents an overview of the YGP implementation in Romania during the 2014–2020 period and does so by identifying the main challenges and barriers that prevented the achievement of the proposed results.

The paper draws on extensive research of the Youth Guarantee Programme implementation process in Romania, using a mix of research methods including secondary data analysis, social document analysis, and public policy analysis. The analysis of the YGP's implementation in Romania involves a secondary data analysis of the Eurostat data on NEETs, of administrative data regarding the number of NEETs that benefit from various measures (from PES, Ministry of Education), and data about programmes for NEETs financed by the ESF. The document analysis is comprised of the following sources: the YGP report for Romania (2020); YGP monitoring reports at EU level (i.e., European Commission Staff Working Document The Youth Guarantee and Youth Employment Initiative three years on, 2016; European Commission, Data collection for monitoring of Youth Guarantee schemes: 2016, 2017, 2018; European Commission, The Youth Guarantee in Light of Changes In The World Of Work: Emerging Challenges Related to Young People's Transition into the Labour Market, 2018); YG monitoring reports for Romania (2015, 2016, 2017); evaluation reports on the implementation of (YEI) in Romania (2015, 2019); and various other reports on the YGP in Romania (Toderita et al. 2019). The document analysis aims to identify the challenges and main barriers in the implementation of the



YGP in Romania. The policy analysis comprises the EU policy document which defines the YGP (European Council, 2013) and the two YG Implementation Plans in Romania (for 2014–2015 and 2017–2020). The first section of the paper presents the NEETs' situation in Romania compared with the EU average; the second section examines the institutional and policy framework of the YGP's implementation; and, finally, the third section discusses the challenges and barriers in the YGP's implementation.

I LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth unemployment represents one of the main challenges of the European Union due to its economic and social impact (e.g., lack of social support, lack of social insurance, being more vulnerable to physical and mental problems, feeling of shame and low self-esteem, and increased likelihood of experiencing periods of unemployment at later ages etc.) (Brandt and Hank 2014; Gregg 2001; Vancea and Utzet 2017; Shore and Tosun 2019). Although the percentage of young NEETs has decreased from 15.4% in 2010 to 13.7% in 2020, this remains a problem for many EU countries such as Italy, Greece, Spain, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia (Eurostat 2021, edat_lfse_29). In the context of an economic crisis, it became more visible, and since 2010 EU decision makers have examined new solutions for more efficient engagement of youth in the labour market. Youth Not in Employment, Education and Training (NEETs) refers to people aged 15–29 who are hardest-to-place and most disadvantaged youth within society (Carcillo et al. 2015). This concept has mostly been used after 2010 and represents a tool which describes young people's vulnerabilities both in terms of labour market engagement as well as social exclusion (Eurofound 2016).

The NEETs concept defines a heterogeneous population characterised by a common feature (namely, not engaged in education or labour market), but with a lot of specific needs and characteristics. According to EUROFOUND (2016), there are seven categories of NEETs: 1) re-entrants: those who will soon leave the NEET category as they have already found a job or an education opportunity; 2) short-term unemployed: those who are unemployed for less than 12 months; 3) long-term unemployed: those who are unemployed for more than 12 months; 4) unavailable due to family responsibilities: those who are NEETs due to family responsibility (children, adults, other family responsibilities); 5) unavailable due to disability: those who are unavailable due to their own illness or disability; 6) discouraged workers: those who are NEETs because they do not look for a job as they do not think there is job for them; and 7) other NEETs: those who have not specified their reasons of being NEETs. Given all these categories of NEETs, public policy measures should address their specific needs and characteristics to be effective.



In the analyses which examine NEETs within the Romanian context, the urban–rural divide is presented as major source of inequality and marginalisation (Neagu et al. 2021; Țoc 2020). The Romanian rural areas accumulate specific socio–economic factors which expose a large part of the population (especially young NEETs) and specific areas to marginalisation and exclusion. To that end, there are many associated disadvantages related to access to public services, mobility (limited public transport, necessity of a personal car), and lack of information and employment opportunities (Teșliuc et al. 2016; Sadler et al. 2015). In rural areas, NEETs face multiple forms of discrimination in terms of access to education, to employment services, and labour market opportunities. Rural NEETs involvement in subsistence agriculture, or in household work, makes them more exposed to the risk of poverty and family dependency (Simões et al. 2017; Petrescu et al. 2020; Neagu 2020).

The YGP, the EU flagship initiative that aims to address the issue of NEETs, has achieved different results in different EU member states due to factors related to the PES capacity of implementation, but also to cooperation/partnership between actors involved in the programme’s implementation (Trein and Tosun 2021). The varieties of public–private coordination of the YGP represent one of the main factors which lead to different results in the implementation of the YGP in EU members states. In mixed market economies, the inclusion of private actors in the implementation of the YGP is less encouraged due to the public institutions’ central role in labour market implementation. In countries with a higher spending on active labour market policies, a restrictive public–private coordination in YGP implementation is adopted. Emerging market economies (i.e., those found in Central and Eastern Europe) develop new structures for public–private co–ordination of the YGP due to the high number of NEETs given that this implies increased pressure on the government to expand the public–private coordination in order to successfully implement the YGP.

I NEETS IN ROMANIA

Over the last decade, the share of the NEETs population in Romania has been slowly decreasing for all age groups, but this tendency has not been consistent enough to produce a significant improvement of the general situation (Table no. 1). Almost 15% of the young population aged 15–24, and 16.6% of the population aged 15–29, is neither in employment, nor in education and training. These values are above the European mean and as such place Romania between the countries with the highest proportions of NEETs (alongside Italy, Greece, Spain, Bulgaria, Slovakia and Croatia).



In the age group 15–19 years, which mostly corresponds to the upper secondary education, the share of NEETs population in Romania registered a value of 10.1% in 2020 (9.1% for boys and 11.3% for girls), the second-highest value in the EU after Italy (where this indicator reached 11.1%). There is an important fluctuation of the values pertaining to this indicator (12% in 2015, 9.4% in 2017, and 10.5% in 2019), which demonstrates the unpredictability of this phenomenon. For the age group 20–24 years the share of the NEETs population (19.4%) is almost double compared to the 15–19 age group (10.1%). In the category 25–29 years the gaps between Romania and EU become significantly lower: 20.2% in Romania vs. 18.6% in the EU.

Table no. 1 - Young people neither in employment nor in education and training (%)

Age		2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
15–24	EU-28	13	13.2	13	12.5	12	11.6	10.9	10.5	10.1	11.1*
	RO	17.5	16.8	17	17	18.1	17.4	15.2	14.5	14.7	14.8
15–29	EU-28	15.4	15.9	15.9	15.4	14.8	14.2	13.4	12.9	12.5	13.7*
	RO	19.5	19.3	19.6	19.9	20.9	20.2	17.8	17	16.8	16.6
15–19	EU-28	7.0	7.0	6.7	6.5	6.3	6.1	6.1	5.8	5.7	6.3*
	RO	10.4	10.3	10.1	10.4	12.0	11.1	9.4	9.2	10.5	10.1
20–24	EU-28	18.3	18.8	18.7	18.0	17.3	16.7	15.5	15.0	14.4	15.7*
	RO	23.2	22.1	22.9	23.1	24.1	23.6	21.0	19.9	18.9	19.4
25–29	EU-28	19.9	20.7	21.0	20.4	19.7	18.8	17.7	17.1	16.6	18.6*
	RO	23.4	24.0	24.1	24.6	25.3	24.7	22.2	21.5	20.8	20.2

Source: EUROSTAT [edat_lfse_20].

* For the year 2020 the data are referring to EU-27.

A particularity of the situation in Romania is expressed in the gender gap observed: 14.1% for male and 20% for female. A possible explanation of this notable discrepancy may lie in the gender differences in terms of early school leaving, or in terms of access to the labour market. It should also be noted that in the category 15–24 years, the large cities have a lower share of NEETs compared to the European mean (7.1% compared to 10.3%), whilst in the rural areas the ratio is inverted (11.7% in the EU and 19% in Romania).

Table no. 2

Young people (15–24 years) neither in employment nor in education and training by degree of urbanization (%)

Degree of urbanisation		2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Cities	EU-28	12.5	12.5	12.1	11.5	11.1	10.7	10.1	9.9	9.7	10.3*
	RO	10.8	10.7	10.5	10.9	10.7	8.6	6.9	7.0	8.2	7.1
Towns and suburbs	EU-28	12.2	13.1	13.1	12.7	12.3	11.8	11.3	10.6	10.4	11.5*
	RO	:	17.8	19.4	17.8	20.3	19.7	18.0	16.2	16.6	15.5
Rural areas	EU-28	14.6	14.3	14.3	13.8	13.2	12.7	11.8	11.2	10.6	11.7*
	RO	21.5	21.2	20.6	21.0	21.5	21.2	18.5	18.1	17.5	19.0

Source: EUROSTAT [edat_lfse_35].

* For the year 2020 the data are referring to EU-27.

I THE YOUTH GUARANTEE IMPLEMENTATION IN ROMANIA

The YGP began to be implemented in Romania in January 2014. It was based on an Implementation Plan for 2014–2015 which was subsequently updated for the 2017–2020 period. Between January 2016 and July 2017 (18 months) there was no plan for the implementation of the YGP in Romania which affected the achievement of the results due to delays in the implementation of the proposed measures (MFE 2019). The programme addressed young people between 15 and 24 years old who lost their job, or who did not find a job after graduation, and was intended as a useful instrument for tackling youth unemployment. According to the programme requests, the young people should be



registered through the PES structures and, within 4 months from registration (after leaving school or becoming unemployed), they should receive a good job offer tailored to their skills and qualifications, or a proposal for continued education, or an apprenticeship or internship offer. The coordination of the implementation of the Youth Guarantee Plan in Romania is made by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and delivered through the public employment service (called the National Agency for Employment) since most of the proposed measures are related to inclusion of young people in the labour market. Depending on the public institution responsible with the implementation process, the measures of the Youth Guarantee Programme can be grouped into three main categories:

- a. Measures under the coordination of the Ministry of Labour (namely, supporting the apprenticeships, stimulating youth mobility, supporting youth people's entrepreneurial initiatives, various training courses and career guidance);
- b. Measures implemented by the Ministry of Education (via the continuation of three national programs: Second Chance, Professional Scholarship, and Money for High School);
- c. Measures implemented by the Ministry of Economy (developing entrepreneurial initiatives amongst young people and stimulating the start-up initiatives of young people).

The measures proposed in the Romanian Youth Guarantee Plan 2014–2015 focused on two main directions: 1) early intervention and activation; and 2) support for labour market integration. Early intervention and activation measures aimed to reform the national PES in order to quickly identify and provide counselling for NEETs, to keep young people in education, and to stimulate those who dropped out of school early to return to education and training (i.e., the second chance for the primary and lower secondary level programme). In order to keep young people in education, scholarships were provided for those studying at vocational schools (i.e., the social inclusion programme– Professional Scholarship) and high schools (i.e. the social inclusion programme – High school money).

Support for labour market integration measures have been geared towards improving young people's access to employment and training, as well as to encouraging employers to become more involved in employment and vocational training. The included



measures were: subsidies for employers for hiring young graduates and young people at risk of social exclusion; subsidies for employers to provide apprenticeships to young people and internships for higher education graduates; vocational counselling; labour market mediation and job coaching for young people at risk of social exclusion; professional training; and mobility stimulation programmes (public grants for young people that were employed in a different municipality than that where he/she lives).

Measures designed to develop young people's entrepreneurial skills and facilitate their access to finance (in order to stimulate the establishment of micro-enterprises by young entrepreneurs) were also an important component of the YG.

In the implementation plans of the YGP, commencing from the measures proposed at European level, the Romanian authorities identified the already existing policies at the national level in the fields of employment, education, and entrepreneurship. Thus, most of the measures initially proposed in the national implementation plans of the YGP had been already implemented. The national implementation plan for 2017 also introduced reform measures aimed at creating youth advisory councils and community youth centres, however it remains unclear to what exactly has been achieved in this area.

A problematic aspect regarding the analysis of the data on the implementation of the measures provided in the National Implementation Plan of the YGP is the scarcity of public data. In 2015, the European Commission published the Indicator Framework for Monitoring the Youth Guarantee, which was revised in 2017 (European Commission 2017). The national monitoring data for the Youth Guarantee does not comply with the specifications of the European guide, which are limited due to the inability to track people who are no longer directly related to the employment service or education system. This leads to the loss of about two thirds of the data, and thereby hinders any significant interpretation of the results (MMPS 2019).

According to the YG monitor, the data for the period between 2014 and 2017 shows that the implementation of the Youth Guarantee has improved to some extent: the proportion of beneficiaries who accepted an offer within the 4 months target period increased from 35.4% in 2014, to 40.2% in 2017. Nonetheless, in Romania the data also indicates a decrease in the percentage of young NEETs included in the YGP within Romania, from 18.5% to 14.1%, a percentage well below the European average of over 40% throughout this period. The number of those entering the program in Romania decreased by over 80,000 people between 2014 and 2017: this was partly due to the lack of a coherent



plan by which to implement the YGP in Romania for the period January 2016–July 2017. According to European Commission monitoring data, the most unattractive measures in the period 2014–2017 were traineeships and apprenticeships (Table no. 3).

Table no. 3 - Youth Guarantee scheme implementation in Romania, main indicators

		2014	2015	2016	2017
EU average - YG participants as a proportion of the NEET population		40.7%	45.4%	42.5%	40.5%
YG participants as a proportion of the NEET population		18.5%	16.7%	14.2%	14.1%
Entrants	Total (15–24)	191,571	174,364	129,733	110,120
Stock	Total (15–24)	71,356	66,188	53,537	45,714
Exits	Total (15–24)	167,494	153,898	141,503	114,211
Timely exits by destination	Positive	54.9%	60.8%	80.8%	89.6%
	Negative	0.0%	0.0%	4.4%	0.6%
	Unknown	45.1%	39.2%	14.8%	9.8%
	Employment	89.7%	88.4%	89.1%	89.5%
	Education	10.3%	11.6%	10.7%	10.2%
	Apprenticeship	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.2%
	Traineeship	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%
Still in the YG preparatory phase after	4 months	29.4%	34.5%	65.7%	66.5%
	6 months	15.2%	23.3%	41.7%	50.0%
	12 months	0.0%	15.2%	25.1%	32.4%
Positive and timely exits from the YG preparatory phase		35.4%	47.8%	25.9%	40.2%

Source: European Commission, data collection for monitoring Youth Guarantee schemes 2015, 2016, 2017.



The main results of the YG implementation for the period between 2014 and 2018 include: 27 YG Centres for supporting NEETs; public policy reforms (apprenticeship law, law on traineeships/internship for higher education graduates, and improvements at the law on the unemployment insurance and employment stimulation law); apprenticeship and traineeship grants; a database on non-registered NEETs with around 100,000 entries (until 2017 were registered 67,702 NEETs in PES database); the assessment of skills and competences acquired both non-formally and informally; and 326 young people having developed a start-up (MMPS 2017; European Commission 2020).

To be closer to young NEETs, 27 pilot Youth Guarantee Centres were established throughout the country: this was achieved by the PES working together with partners from the business sector, trade unions, NGOs, and professional associations/foundations. 22 centres were established in the South region, and 5 in the North region. Within them, 6,475 young people were identified and registered (3,775 in the south and 2,700 in the north) and were provided with integrated packages of active measures (MMPS 2017). Given the large number of NEETs, these centres are insufficient and fail to reach young NEETs in rural communities, or vulnerable areas of the urban environment. Although rural NEETs rates are higher, the Romanian Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan nevertheless has a very low focus on rural NEETs. There is no specific measure dedicated to rural areas and rural NEETs, but they are addressed to all young people in Romania.

The passive attitude of the PES (which waited for the young NEETs to come to the public services during in the first phase of the implementation of the program) proved to be ineffective. Information activities regarding the YGP and the services offered were carried out, particularly in high schools, vocational schools, or universities but not for those who were no longer included in the education system. During the first 5 years of the YG implementation, vulnerable groups were under-represented and progress in reaching out these categories was limited (Meirosu et al. 2020). However, over the last two years, in order to be able to enrol as many young people as possible in the program and reach the most vulnerable amongst them, mobile teams have been set up; their role has been to explain to the young NEETs the advantages of enrolling in the program.

A recent report of the European Commission (2020) shows that despite some limited progress in implementing the Youth Guarantee, the core elements remain to be done. With regards to positive aspects in the last few years, the European Commission (2020) mentions the start of the INTESPO project as a model for youth activation, as well as improvements of the training programs and the legislative framework. In terms



of challenges, the insufficient adequacy of the public programs, the poor partnerships between public institutions and employers, and/or lack of an effective evaluation and monitoring mechanism can also be mentioned.

I Public Private Coordination

The partnership approach required by the YGP at the European level (and assumed through the implementation plans at a national level), was only partially achieved in Romania, especially in relation to the conditions surrounding the financing delay for these measures. Despite the lack of public actors with the capacity to successfully tackle the NEETs' problems, the private actors were not encouraged to become involved in the YG implementation. The pilot programs carried out included trade unions and employers' confederations, but to a small extent. The projects through which young NEETs were identified and counselled were carried out by public institutions, and these were coordinated by the PES. The non-governmental sector appreciates that the lack of partnerships with public and private organisations (and which provide services for young NEETs) or with local authorities has led to a very low level of implementation of YGP measures in Romania (Toderita et al. 2019). Sustained actions carried out in partnership with local public authorities would have been necessary, at least for the rural environment, where the share of young NEETs is the highest.

Calls for Human Capital Operational Programme (HCOP) funded projects (YEI and Social European Fund funding), for training providers, employers' organisations, trade unions, NGOs, companies (employers), and local public institutions were put out only at the end of 2020. The purpose of these projects is to increase the employment rate of young NEETs, but also include activities to identify young NEETs in the territory and register them in the PES database, information and communication campaigns, evaluation and certification of professional skills, training, mediation, and support in the labour market, supporting entrepreneurship amongst young people. During the summer of 2021, the 106 winning projects were announced. The results were: 55 for the South-West Oltenia, South-East and South-Muntenia regions; 49 for the Centre, North-East, North-West and West regions; and 3 for the Bucharest-Ilfov region. Their implementation commenced in September–October 2021 and is planned to terminate at the end of 2023 (MIPE 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

The belated implementation of Priority Axis 1 has delayed the implementation of the YG and prevented a rapid response to the urgent issue of NEETs within Romania. The dela-



yed and limited implementation of the Priority Axis 1 was mainly caused by the belated launch of project calls, changes of the intervention logic in 2016, by introducing national schemes, and because of the overestimation of public institutions absorption capacity.

I Labour Market Integration Measures

In Romania, the main reform pillars proposed for the YGP's implementation were: (1) the improvement of the unemployment insurance and employment stimulation law (Law 76/2002), (2) the amended apprenticeship law (Law 279/2005); and (3) a new traineeship and internship law (for higher education graduates) (MMJS 2013; MMPS 2017).

Public policy reform, deliberately undertaken to try and ensure a successful implementation of the YGP in Romania, focused particularly on the field of employment. This reform was started between 2014 and 2015 but continued into 2017 in order to improve the implementation process and increase the attractiveness of these measures for the business environment as well as young NEETs. Thus, Law no. 76/2002 (on the unemployment insurance system and employment stimulation) was amended to include the categories of beneficiaries of services provided the young NEETs and young people at risk of social marginalisation (i.e., young people in the protection system, young people without family support, with disabilities, victims of human trafficking, and those who have committed crimes). Moreover, the range of activation measures for placing these young people on the labour market has been diversified in order to become more attractive (e.g., mobility packages, employer subsidies, incentives for insertion for young people who are employed etc.) The training and counselling component has become mandatory for all those looking for a job.

The two other public policies (namely, Law no. 279/2005 on apprenticeship at work and Law 335/2013 on internships for higher education graduates) were amended in 2017 and 2018 respectively. This was done in order to increase the level of subsidies granted and thus become more attractive both to jobseekers who do not have a qualification, and also to employers who complain about the lack of qualified staff. In the case of higher education graduates, the amount of subsidy granted to employers who employ these young people increased from 750 lei/month (approximately 165 euros) to 1,350 lei/month in 2017 (approximately 300 euros), and again to 2,250 lei/month in 2018 (approximately 450 euros). For employers who employed young people in apprenticeships, the subsidy was increased from 300 lei/month to 1,125 lei/month in 2017, and 2,250 lei/month in 2018. Despite these changes, except for subsidies for employment



of these young people (they increased from 1,318 in 2017 to 8,190 in 2020), the attractiveness of traineeships and apprenticeships is not very high. However, after the increase in the level of subsidy granted for apprenticeship contracts, their number increased almost 150 times (from 384 apprenticeship contracts in 2017 to 5,684 in 2019). At the same time, the number of these contracts increased as a result of the support given to companies which employ apprentices through projects financed via European funds. The number of traineeship contracts for university graduates decreased between 2018 and 2020, from 100 to 26. Furthermore, the number of students employed during the holidays (at a maximum of 60 days / year) has decreased by more than half in 2019 compared to 2018. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the number of young NEETs integrated on the labour market in the period 2017–2019 rose from 26,043 to 31,485 (Table no. 4).

Table no. 4. - Main indicators of NEETs employment or support for employment, 2017–2020

	2017	2018	2019	2020
Young NEETs involved in active employment measures		74,313	76,236	72,206
Young NEETs on the labour market	26,043	27,373	31,485	30,299
Subsidizing the employment of young NEETs	1,318	2,165	7,557	8,190
Subsidies granted to employers who employ higher education graduates based on the Law no. 335/2013 on professional internships for higher education graduates		100	45	26
Subsidies granted to employers who employ pupils and students during holidays (maximum 60 days/ year) based on Law no. 72/2007 regarding the stimulation of the employment of pupils and students		1,925	814	183
Subsidies granted for apprenticeship programs at work based on Law no. 279/2005 on apprenticeship at work	384		5,684	3,317

Source: PES annual reports of the of implementation of the Employment Program 2018, 2019, 2020; MMPS, 2019 for 2017 data.

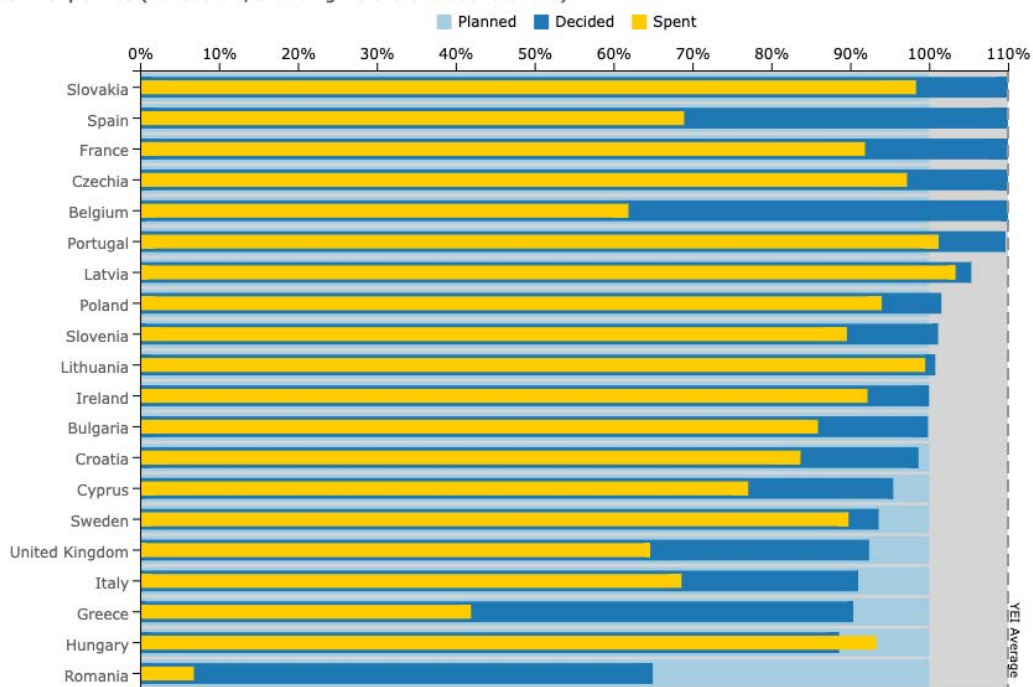


YG implementation measures in the area of youth labour market integration were supported by the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI). This was launched to provide support to young people living in regions where youth unemployment was higher than 25% in 2012 (for the Youth Guarantee Plan in Romania, 2014–2015), or 2016 (for the Youth Guarantee Plan in Romania 2017–2020). In Romania, the regions with youth unemployment rates higher than 25% were the Centre, South–East and South Muntenia regions (in 2012), and South–West Oltenia, South–East and South Muntenia (in 2016). Typically, the YEI funds the provision of apprenticeships, traineeships, job placements, and further education leading to a qualification.

Romania ranks last in Europe with the lowest percentage of resources allocated from the total budget of the YEI program (15%), as well as the lowest percentage spent (only 3%) (Figure 1). Romania is also at the end of the ranking in terms of the number of participants who completed the YEI program: only 2,047 (in 2019), at a great distance from Bulgaria, for example, which reports a comparatively much larger number of 37,805 participants. Only 1,014 of them successfully exited the program (i.e., were employed), and 6 months after the implementation process only 647 persons remained in employment⁶.

Fig. 1 - Implementation by country of YEI – total cost of selection and spending as % of planned.
Period covered: up to 30/06/2021

ESIF 2014-2020: Implementation by country for Youth Employment Initiative - total cost of selection and spending as % of planned (bullet chart, excluding multi-thematic allocations)



Period Covered: up to 31/12/2021

Refresh Date: 14/03/2022

⁶ <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/funds/yei>.



According to the evaluation report of the Youth Employment Initiative, the interventions within the Priority Axis 1 of the HCOP contributed to a very small extent to the sustainable integration of NEETs young people in the labour market. This is because the number of supported young people represents only a small part of the final target of the program. The proportion of beneficiaries who were employed was higher in the interventions financed by Axis 1 of the HCOP than in the projects financed by Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD). Thus, 31.72% of the young people who benefited from training courses, and 24.35% of the total beneficiaries, were employed at the end of the project. This is opposed to only 12.11% of the beneficiaries of the training programs, and 10% of the total beneficiaries of the pilot projects financed from SOP HRD (MEF 2019).

I Educational Measures

The main measures in the field of education included in the national implementation plan of the YGP were: The Second Chance Program; the High School Money Program (for high school students from vulnerable families); the Vocational Scholarship Program (for vocational students); and the development of vocational education (especially that of the dual system). These measures aim at better school participation, but also at an improvement of the transition from school to the labour market.

The “Second Chance” program is addressed to young people and adults who (for various reasons) did not complete primary or secondary education. Between 2013 and 2020, over 30,000 people enrolled in courses for the primary education cycle, and almost 70,000 enrolled in secondary education (Table no. 5). Between 2013 and 2020, the number of beneficiaries of the High School Money program decreased to one third, partly due to the tightening of the conditions for granting this scholarship. At the same time, the number of students benefiting from the Professional Scholarship program increased almost 5 times between 2013 and 2019. Amongst the causes of this increase are the introduction of vocational education in the dual system starting in 2016, as well as the conducting of a larger number of information and communication campaigns (Table no.5).



Table no.5 - YG scheme measures on education main indicators, 2013–2020

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of students enrolled in the "Second Chance" program - primary education level	3,665	3,434	3,552	4,489	4,440	4,777	4,932	4,532
Number of students enrolled in the "Second Chance" program - secondary education level	6,458	6,481	7,141	8,396	8,891	9,664	10,982	10,884
Number of students benefiting from the "High School Money" program	98,586	79,876	60,660	33,057	46,091	33,500	32,586	
Number of students benefiting from the "Professional Scholarship" program	22,393	49,287	67,520	83,247	90,125	90,396	100,693	

Source: Ministry of Education, SIIR.

After 2015, "Second Chance" type programs were funded through HCOP. Despite the participation incentives, which included both money and educational materials, as well as counselling and assistance services, the number of young people in the eligible categories who showed interest in these programs was, however, below expectations (MIPE 2021d). The available data shows some relevant aspects regarding the evolution of the number of beneficiaries. Thus, if the number of students enrolled at the secondary education level decreases over the years, the number of those enrolled in high school courses increases significantly. At the same time, there is a significant difference between counties, the number of participants ranging from less than 30 people in Vaslui to almost 1000 in Galati (MIPE 2021d). At the same time, it is notable that over 50% of the beneficiaries of the program are people over the age of 24, which demonstrates a high impact amongst the adult population.



Dual education was introduced in 2016 but was effectively implemented during the 2017–2018 school year (CEDEFOP 2019). Furthermore, in 2018 the notion of dual education was included in the legislation through additions to the National Education Law. This form of education involves stimulating the enrolment of children at the end of the eighth grade into vocational schools that offer specific programs developed in partnership with various economic agents. The students enrolled in this form of education receive a professional scholarship from the Romanian state, in the amount of 200 lei and additional scholarships granted by the partner companies in the organisation of dual education. The number of students who chose to enrol (in the ninth grade) in the vocational training programs offered through dual education was constantly growing: 2,568 students in the 2017–2018 school year; 4,244 students in the 2018–2019 school year; and 6,970 in 2019–2020 (Ministry of Education 2020, 95). At the same time, there was a significant increase in the number of economic agents involved in initial vocational training through dual education, from 227 companies in 2018 to 769 in 2020 (Ministry of Education 2020, 95).

Despite obvious progress, such as the introduction of this form of education and the constant evolution in terms of the number of students enrolled, the share of dual education remains low. Only 3% of eighth grade graduates end up choosing this training path, a percentage too low in order to discuss the real impact of dual education amongst young people in at-risk categories in relation to the phenomenon of NEETs.

I CONCLUSIONS

The main factors which contribute to maintaining the high levels of the unemployment rate and specifically the youth NEETs rate, are as follows: (1) the low level of education and training of young people at the time of transition into the labour market; (2) the mismatch between youth qualifications and skills required by the labour market; (3) the low impact of apprenticeship and internships schemes; (4) the high expectations of young people from a job (i.e., salary, work environment, other benefits); and (5) the limited number of job offers.

Beyond this, there exists rather poor coordination between the ministries and the subordinate agencies responsible for the implementation of the various measures provided in the National Implementation Plan of the YGP. The deficient coordination of the four ministries directly involved is also reflected in the lack of data regarding the implementation of the measures provided in the national plan.



At the same time, many of the information and communication measures have been implemented in high schools, vocational schools, and universities, where the most excluded NEETs are extremely difficult to reach. For them, the approach should have been changed to include more flexibility, and for the intervention to be carried out by local authorities and organisations providing social/educational services, or those active in the youth area. The introduction of mobile teams after 2017 has proven to be much more effective in bringing the YGP message to young people in vulnerable environments.

Amongst the reasons why the implementation of YGP in Romania did not go according to initial expectations, we can also include the following: poor adaptation of proposals for measures in the European program vis-à-vis national realities; delays in allocating European funds dedicated to measures for young NEETs; poorly developed partnership with employers, non-governmental organisations carrying out youth activities and local public authorities (MFE 2019; Toderita et al. 2019; MMPS 2017).

The Commission's 3-year assessment of the YG and YEI noted that key challenges in relation to implementation of the YG include improving the coverage of non-registered NEETs and increasing the take-up and impact of apprenticeships and traineeships (European Commission 2018). The lack of a Youth Guarantee covering 2016, but also the first part of 2017, also contributed to the lack of progress in this area (MFE 2019).

The absence of the implementation plan of the YGP between January 2016 and July 2017 led to delays in the implementation of the proposed measures, especially in relation to the employment component. The main cause of the lack of the implementation plan during this period was the rethinking of the approach to registration of young NEETs in the context of financing these measures, mainly from European funds. Delays in finalising the HCOP have made it impossible to finance projects for young NEETs. Furthermore, it is difficult to monitor the results of projects financed from European funds in the absence of accurate data. Their monitoring is the responsibility of the MIPE: moreover, the PES that coordinates the implementation of the YGP does not have access to this data until it is made public. In the context of starting the projects only in September–October 2021, it is most likely that the existing gap with other EU countries will not be reduced quickly.

Unlike other emergent economies from Eastern Europe, Romania did not develop a public–private coordination mechanism for the implementation of the YG and focused mainly on public actors' involvement in the process. Private actors began to be



encouraged to get involved in the YG implementation after the poor results obtained from public institution in this area. The implementation arrangements at the national level have, of course, affected the results obtained in various EU countries in relation to the YG implementation process. Thus, unlike Romania, most of the countries with higher NEETs rates developed public-private coordination mechanisms which, demonstrably, helped them to reach more NEETs.

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COST Action CA18213
Rural NEET Youth Network:
Modeling the risks underlying rural
NEETs social exclusion



PEOPLE BEYOND NEETS A Person- and Territory-Centred Approach to Combating Social Exclusion

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Abstract I

This contribution aims to provide an overview of the current situation of the labour market and of young NEETs in Italy. Particular attention is paid to the impact that the pandemic has had on the phenomenon. Through the presentation of the main policies and projects implemented to combat inactivity and youth unemployment, this report aims to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of these measures in order to offer suggestions and possible new paths to counteract the growing phenomenon of NEETs. Amongst the main difficulties encountered is that of the interception of NEETs, a heterogeneous and complex group, and which is seldom involved and engaged in the measures analysed. However, a glimmer of effectiveness seems to come from the world of NGOs (who are by nature committed to the fight against social exclusion), and wherein through ad hoc projects they have managed to reach and empower a large number of vulnerable young people. The authors hope, therefore, that political structures can take the involvement of these organisations, which are so familiar with the different territories and the socio-cultural difficulties they govern, into greater consideration.

Keywords: NEETs, Italy, Social exclusion, Cost, Youth Guarantee, NGOs.



1. INTRODUCTION

1.1.

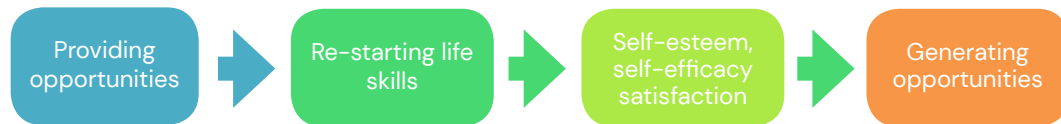
In a large portion of the economically developed world, the transition to adulthood has become more complex, and the relationship between young people and work has become more problematic. In Italy, all “active labour policies” have disappeared. Such policies used to be typical of a welfare system that offered protection against risks and a mechanism of empowerment for individuals, offering them measures suited to their path, their potential, and their objectives. Young Italians find it increasingly difficult to find a job at the completion of their studies (or at the time of their interruption). Furthermore, it is also important to allow young people to contribute to the labour market.

The NEET phenomenon is determined by economic and working factors. It is the result of the interaction of individual, familiar, and institutional factors. NEETs and young people in a marginal position of social exclusion generally demonstrate low self-esteem and self-efficacy, low personal and social trust, restricted networking, and poor social skills. These factors do not allow young people to develop a subjective and stable sense of self-confidence, which is essential to achieving goals and developing potential. Moreover, this translates into a lack of participation in different life contexts, from both a social and political perspective. Individual issues are intertwined with family ones: these are young people who come from families with low levels of education, who cannot provide the right support concerning the education system, and who guide their children towards poor and ineffective choices, or do not guide them at all. Empirical evidence seems to underline the need to develop complex projects for NEETs; projects that are capable of addressing both the individual’s plans as well as the social context. Ideally, they should aim at developing a connection between school and the labour market. Projects which can take NEETs into consideration, thereby placing them in the reference context in which they intend to operate, should be implemented. These would, in turn, favour the emergence of resources and tackle the limits of the community in which these young people find themselves. A recent study by Alfieri and colleagues (2020) highlighted the importance of promoting a process of reactivation of NEETs aimed at providing them with opportunities for growth and experimentation in “protected” contexts.

This process, presented here for exploratory purposes only, is illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1. A theoretical model of NEET reactivation



1.2. Social skills development

In the light of what has been said, interventions targeting marginalised young people must enable them to develop social skills, i.e., transversal, relational, and psychological skills. By transversal skills, we refer to the set of skills essential to produce professional behaviour capable of transforming technical “knowledge” into effective work and organisational performance. This includes: the ability to diagnose (context, problem); to evaluate and self-assess; and, to solve problems (face a problem, make decisions, manage time, etc.). Relational skills are a subset of transversal ones, however, they represent a specific and significant subset. Within relational skills, we find aspects related to transmitting information, communicating in an interpersonal situation, communicating through media, communicating in groups, and working with others (e.g., coordinating, negotiating, cooperating, etc.) Finally, psychological skills are made up of social representations, values, attitudes, and motivations expressed by people during their working activities: namely, they are a series of aspects related to personal and professional identity, and individual qualities and characteristics. Amongst psychological competences, we can include: job expectations and representations (both present and future); legitimacy (self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-evaluation, etc.); motivations; and, personal qualities (predispositions, “talents”, personal agreement or disagreement concerning the work being done).

In 1993, the World Health Organisation (WHO) defined these skills as “Life Skills”, i.e., basic cognitive, emotional, and relational skills which enable people to operate competently at both an individual and social level. Precisely because NEETs are characterised, as we have stated above, by low self-esteem and self-efficacy, low motivation towards employment opportunities and low confidence in others and the future, it is important to offer them paths of accompaniment and job placement that take into account the presence of these psycho-social variables as a fundamental element for the projects’ success. Whilst it is therefore clear that social skills are crucial for employability and maintaining a satisfactory quality of life in work contexts, it is also known that these



skills are not “innate”: indeed, they often need to be learned and/or need to be monitored and supported.

Finally, when we talk about skills, it is important also to focus attention on the role played by the education system, not only in terms of its capacity of develop said skills required by the labour market, but also in terms of its capacity to stimulate self-esteem and self-efficacy, but also to prevent early school leaving. Latterly, this is one of the most important factors predisposing towards the future status of NEETs. Across European countries, Italy displays one of the lowest shares of tertiary educated, but also a higher than the EU-average share, of early school leavers (Pastore et al., 2021).

2. LABOUR MARKET AND NEET SITUATION IN ITALY

2.1. Labour market

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic dramatically impacted the developments of the economy and society in Italy and the entire world. The global health emergency and consequent suspension of the activities of entire productive sectors have also represented (in Italy) a sudden and unprecedented shock on the production of goods and services. Consequently, the labour market has been adversely affected also. Specifically, in Q2 of 2020, there was a collapse in economic activity; this was followed by a recovery in Q3 which was, in some respects, more significant than expected. Owing to the spread and resurgence of infection, a further reduction was seen in Q4. The most affected categories are those that were already marked by conditions of disadvantage, namely: women; young people; and, foreigners who have been penalised since they more often occupy less protected working positions in sectors that were hit hardest by the crisis. Furthermore, the health emergency has stimulated a change in modes of working, which has been made remote wherever possible via agile work, telework, and various other ways. Digitisation and social distancing have produced new segmentation in the labour market, thereby distinguishing between those who can work from home and those closely tied to the workplace. Beyond this, there is a great deal of uncertainty about how the economy will recover and, above all, to what extent this pandemic has brought about permanent structural changes to the production system. If Gross Domestic Product is considered, there is a drastic drop of 8.9% in 2020 compared with the previous year. As far as employment is concerned, in December 2020, there was an overall drop of 425 000 employees compared with February 2020. Overall, the policy measures implemented to deal with the effects of the pandemic (e.g., Cig-Covid) have



mitigated the negative impact on employment, offloading its impact on hours worked, whose reduction has been much more pronounced, primarily due to the decrease in hours worked per capita.

2.2. NEET situation in Italy

In 2020, the data relating to the labour market's performance presented a relative worsening of the employment condition of younger people. Considering the employment rate, Q3 of 2020, as compared with the same period of the previous year, shows a lowering by 1.3% for workers in the 35–64 age bracket, and by 5.2% for workers in the 15–34 age bracket.

On the one hand, entering the labour market at the end of studies is complicated by the recessionary context, with fewer young people finding a job, even if looking for one, or fewer people deciding to engage in job research activities. On the other hand, the high percentage of young workers employed on fixed-term contracts has made this category highly exposed to the risk of job loss: 34.3% of workers under the age of 35 were employed on a fixed-term contract in 2020. The same marker drops to 9.7% for workers over 35 years old. Moreover, young people are more concentrated in the economic sectors which have been more negatively affected by the pandemic, such as sport, arts and entertainment, and in other non-essential activities and in informal jobs, where the absence of a formal contract makes them easier to dismiss. Finally, in the firing decisions, firms usually apply the LIFO (last-in-first-out) principle because they have less firm-specific human capital and a smaller number of children to support (Pastore et al., 2021). In this context, it is not surprising that the percentage of young people without a job and not engaged in study or training has undergone an increase throughout 2020, reaching 25.1% of those aged between 15 and 34 years old.

An increasingly emerging problem are the so-called mature NEETs (those over 30) of which our country has the relative and absolute highest number in Europe. The gap with the European average has been widening since the Financial Crisis of 2008–2013. This is a particularly problematic component, which in addition to previous fragilities now superimposes the impact of the pandemic at a crucial stage in the construction of their adult lives. In the absence of adequate policies, there is a high risk of chronic-isation of this condition, and therefore of becoming passive recipients of citizenship income (i.e., welfare payments).



Late NEETs have remained off the radar of the Youth Guarantee, yet in the meantime their incidence has grown. They require specific policies, certainly not aimed at reintegration into the education system, but they certainly also need retraining programs aimed directly at facilitating their insertion into the world of work in their local territory (if possible) and in keeping with their own life plans (Ellena et al., 2021).

3. ASSESSMENT OF NEET'S STRATEGIES

3.1. Active policies for integration into the labour market: Youth Guarantee Program (2013)

A precise attempt to contain the NEET phenomenon in Italy has been implemented via the Youth Guarantee Program. The Italian government program was based on the Youth Guarantee, a European measure that provides funding for member countries with youth unemployment rates exceeding 25%. This Fund provides investment opportunities in active orientation, education, training, and job placement policies. The young people registered at the portal were allowed to contact the local employment centres. It was first and foremost a measure designed for NEETs, but it clashed with the employment centres' limitations. Hence, the Youth Guarantee measure worked only partially.

Educational policies represent one of the main mechanism adopted in order to combat the phenomenon of early school leaving, combatting youth unemployment, and making it less likely that young people will come to occupy NEET status.

3.2. Educational Policies

The Guarantor Authority for Childhood and Adolescence (AGIA, in Italian: Autorità Garante dell'Infanzia e dell'Adolescenza), established in Italy by Law no. 112 of 12 July 2011, was created in order to protect and promote the rights of children and adolescents, proclaimed internationally by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Adolescence. The numerous competences attributed to the Authority can be traced back to various actions: listening and participation; promotion and awareness-raising; collaboration; elaboration of proposals; opinions; and, recommendations. In a note dated 17th September 2018, the Authority informed the Government of the following five priorities for the protection of children and adolescents at school: safe, healthy, and accessible school buildings; open and student-friendly schools in order to fight educational poverty and marginalisation; countering bullying and cyberbullying at school; inclusive schooling; and, countering early school leaving.



In January 2018, the Ministry of Education, University and Research issued a document titled: “A National Policy to Combat Educational Failure and Educational Poverty”. This was drawn up by the Director’s Office to combat early school leaving and educational poverty. In operational terms, the points developed by the document provide:

- Systemic measures and a unified direction: considering that the scholastic dispersion is a national phenomenon, the document calls for establishing a national control room capable of coordinating schools, local authorities, the third sector, and private social sector.
- Measures for the improvement of facilities, better school time management, and pedagogical and didactic innovation: these include structural measures (e.g., quality of school buildings), measures for the prevention of discomfort, and innovative teaching (e.g., tutoring, peer-education, mentoring, etc.)
- Measures to strengthen vocational education and training: this is the key point of the document since, in addition to the development of vocational training, it states the need to also strengthen pathways aimed at young people over the age of 18 who do not have a qualification, and who are in a non-working and non-training situation;
- Implementation of personalised pathways and soft skills development;
- Concrete indications to create priority education areas. To that end, training and transition to work or improvement of work between 18 and 35 years of age are suggested. It is specific according to territorial differences, with particular attention to those places that are marginal and where, lacking many resources, children struggle to have “a second chance”;
- Giving new strength to good guidelines and good practices in order to combat educational failure: the implementation of a good “school-work alternation” in secondary schools is implemented in order to facilitate the transition to work;
- Opening a public discussion on some unresolved issues of the Italian educational system.

3.3. School-to-work transition Policies

INAPP (in Italian: *Istituto Nazionale per l’Analisi delle Politiche Pubbliche*), the National Institute for Public Policy Analysis, offers webinars, such as the one on the 26th May 2020, “The



importance of (not) being NEET: profiles and risks of young people who do not study and do not work”.

INAPP is a public research institution which carries out analysis, monitoring, and evaluation of labour policies and labour services, education and training policies, social policies, and public policies that impact the labour market. The law establishes its strategic role in the new system of governance of Italy’s social and labour policies (Decreto Legislativo 14 settembre 2015, n. 150).

INAPP is amongst those international consortium partners which, alongside the project “Youth employment partnerSHIP – evaluation studies in Spain, Hungary, Italy and Poland”, won the call awarded by the International Fund EEA and Norway Grants 2014–2021. This fund finances analysis, evaluation, and research–intervention initiatives to reduce socio–economic disparities in Europe and the strengthening of cooperation between Norway, Liechtenstein and Iceland (whose governments finance the Fund) and other European countries. The aim of the project “Youth employment partnerSHIP – evaluation studies in Spain, Hungary, Italy and Poland” is the counterfactual evaluation of youth employment policies in Spain, Hungary, Italy, and Poland. The participating countries share high youth unemployment rates and a low capacity to carry out quality Counterfactual Impact Evaluation using available databases from administrative sources. Amongst the project’s initiatives, there can be considered: awareness–raising activities of Public Employment Services (PES;) and, youth recruitment policies – with particular attention paid to the gender dimension and the results of the policies undertaken. Comparable evaluation methods based on data from administrative sources are used for this purpose.

In order to facilitate the transition from school to work, Law 107, also known as “Good School” (Buona Scuola), inspired by the dual German model of school–work alternation, provides for apprenticeship programs from the third year of high school (art. 1, par. 33–44). It proposes the simplification of apprenticeship contracts, creating territorial workshops for employability, and facilitating collaboration between schools and companies in order to establish school–work alternation paths.

3.4. Labour Policies

The main policy in labour issues is the National Operational Program “Active Employment Policy Systems” (in Italian: Programma Operativo Nazionale – “Sistemi di politiche



attive per l'occupazione, PON SPAO). This program follows the directives of the European Council. The PON SPAO funding – which amounts to a total of € 2,176,505,801 (of which € 1,180,744,376 is from the European Social Fund (ESF) and € 995,761,425 is from national co-financing) – is mainly addressed to Axis I – “Employment”. To that end, the following priorities are considered:

- Access to employment for job seekers and inactive people, including the long-term unemployed and those on the labour market margins;
- Integration into the world of work of young people, in particular NEETs, including through the implementation of the Youth Guarantee;
- Equality between men and women in all areas, including access to employment and career progression, work-life balance and the promotion of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value;
- Modernisation of labour market institutions, such as public and private employment promotion services.

The aims of PON SPAO are pursued in close connection with the interventions foreseen by other central and regional administrations. It also provides support for the Youth Guarantee. The “Youth Employment Initiative” (YEI) was established by the European Council in 2013 with a budget of € 6 billion for the period 2014 – 2020. This was to be allocated to regions with youth unemployment rates above 25% in order to support the measures of the Youth Employment Package presented by the European Commission in 2012, and in particular the implementation of the Youth Guarantee (YG). Italy’s total budget for the implementation of the YG amounts to about € 1.4 billion for the two years 2014 – 2015, of which € 567 million was from the YEI, € 567 million from the ESF, and to which is added the share of national co-financing. Since the Youth Guarantee’s approval, the Italian Government has implemented an action plan to activate the national strategy. This ensures that the Youth Guarantee has an ad hoc PON: namely, the PON “Youth Employment Initiative (Iniziativa Occupazione Giovani)” (PON IOG). This particular funding targets all Italian regions as well as the autonomous province of Trento. Therefore, only the territory of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano is excluded from the IOG scope. The PON IOG has a total budget of € 1,513,363,329, of which € 1,135,022,496 is ESF – YEI and € 378,340,833 national co-financing.



The Thematic Objective of the PON IOG within the common strategic framework concerns the promotion of sustainable and quality employment and worker mobility. In particular, Axis 1 – “Employment of NEETs”, has as a priority the ‘sustainable integration into the labour market of young people (YEI), in particular those not in employment, not in education or training (NEETs), including young people at risk of social exclusion and young people from marginalised communities, including through the implementation of the Youth Guarantee’. This strategy pursues the following actions:

- Orientation: interview in order to identify the personalised insertion path based on individual, educational, and professional characteristics;
- Training: specific training courses oriented towards work or reintegration into training courses;
- Accompaniment: accompaniment to work and job placement actions favouring matching;
- Apprenticeship: employment contracts for the insertion of young people providing training contents;
- Internship: training period in a company that provides a monthly participation allowance;
- Civic service: the experience of civic and social participation in solidarity, cooperation, and assistance projects, which includes a salary;
- Self-entrepreneurship: services to support entrepreneurial attitudes, with training, assistance in drafting the entrepreneurial project, start-up support, and access to credit instruments;
- Professional mobility: encourages mobility in Italy and other EU countries, and provides a voucher to cover travel and accommodation costs for 6 months;
- Bonuses: an employment bonus to employers in case of hiring with certain contracts.



Phase Two of the Youth Guarantee project began in 2017, with a financial increase of € 1,271,988,158. At this point, the PON IOG had a total budget of € 2,785,351,487, of which € 2,141,794,090 was ESF – YEI, and € 643,557,397 was national co-financing. The implementation of this phase remains valid until the end of 2023.

This phase provides for additions to the activities implemented in Phase One, specifically:

- Reinforcement of the recognition of performance-based remuneration with regards to the parties implementing the various measures (e.g., exclusive use of Standard Cost Units and identification of implementation mechanisms providing for performance-based recognition);
- Introduction of a measure (linked to inclusion income) aimed at intercepting the target population groups furthest from the labour market;
- Further enhancement of the above measure – extracurricular traineeship provides a dedicated line to support geographical mobility;
- Enhancement of the National Civil Service Measure with its extension to the Universal Civil Service;
- Provision of Employment Incentives with full ANPAL (Agenzia Nazionale per le Politiche Attive del Lavoro; National Agency for Active Labour Policies) ownership, in order to enhance inter-institutional cooperation and interoperability of systems with INPS (Istituto Nazionale per la Previdenza Sociale; National Institute for Social Security).

3.5. Rural development policies

Regione Lombardia – PSR 2014–2020 (EAFRD): call for proposals – Operation 6.1.01 “Incentives for the setting up new farms by young farmers” granting a prize to young people for the first set up as the owner or legal representative of an agricultural enterprise. The call saw 220 proposals awarded, mostly located in what are called inland and disadvantaged areas. It is conceivable that amongst the winners there are also NEETs, but there is no data supporting this. However, such calls could give priority to NEETs in both inland and disadvantaged areas.



4. ASSESSMENT OF THE NEET POLICY MEASURES AND RESULTS

4.1. Education

4.1.2. "Exodus Foundation"

The Exodus Foundation project (financed by the Youth Department – Presidency of the Council of Ministers), lasted 12 months and featured 100 young people from the cities of Milan, Gallarate, Viterbo, and Reggio Calabria (i.e., the North, Centre and South of Italy). Young people were involved through various informal channels. Fondazione Exodus has several offices throughout the country: they are well-known and understood as places to turn to for help. The project was carried out with 30 schools and 10 public and private territorial services. Ten expressive workshops have been carried out comprising theatre, sport, art, music, and web radio. For one year, the educators met the boys two afternoons a week in all the cities involved. In addition to the "classic" activities, 50 cultural outings were organised: guided visits to museums, theatres, exhibitions, and various excursions. About half of the young people involved found work after the end of the project because they began to believe in their potential and benefited positively from the adults who accompanied them on their pathway.

4.1.3. "AutonoMia Giovani"

Amongst the young people at risk ending up amongst the NEET, the care-leavers, that is, the boys who grew up without family care and then have to leave formal care settings, are amongst the most exposed. It is for that reasons that SOS Children's Villages has developed the "Pag – AutonoMia Giovani Project" which in 2019 involved 84 boys and girls between 16 and 24 years of age who were supported with personalised accompaniment when leaving the community welcome found in the Village. The project supports the care-leavers in achieving autonomy through aptitude and orientation paths by carrying out a university training project or a job placement. Each of the students supported with university scholarships have pursued degrees, professional training courses, or traineeships, and job grants have also been carried out with the support of national territory entrepreneurs.

4.1.4. "Needs4NEETs"

La Fondazione Albero della Vita [The Tree of Life Foundation] in 2018 launched the "Needs4NEETs" project (Lombardy), which starts from a new, specific figure: the "Role



Model". These are people who have told their story, so that the NEETs could gradually identify their passions, define a goal for the future and decide how to proceed to achieve it. The project involved 150 boys. At the end of each activity, the boys regained confidence and became more aware of their skills. Needs4NEETs spaces have also become a place where you can talk freely and feel welcomed

4.1.5. "At school of radio"

The project "At school of radio" of the Ebbene Foundation foresees that, every week, the boys take courses to learn how to become skilled speakers. Those who assist in directing, those who learn to read aloud, knowing how to be inside a radio station, increase their feelings of empowerment. The Radio school welcomes everyone, young people who drop out of school, and many women who struggle to enter the job market. The acquisition of skills passes from identifying a training path which enhances young people's talent based on trust with the operators who build an ad hoc project. From the north to the south, the proximity centres that use the radio as a communication channel with young people take care of about 800 NEETs. In 2018, the project managed to engage 40% of the total intake.

4.2. School-to-work transition

4.2.1. "Comet" training school project

The Comet Training School (Lombardy) recovers dispersed children starting from a "doing" position as an angle through which they can "discover their talents", "learn" and thereby motivates young people to school. It seeks to create a tailor-made path for everyone. Created in 2004 from a group of families who had custody of some children in difficulty and who were unable to follow traditional school courses, the reputation of a "different school" quickly became established. The project put the boy back at the centre of the school, his journey through a real personalisation, following each one in the discovery of his own talents. To do this, it is necessary to know how to awaken the desire to learn. Since 2005, more than 50 children have been accompanied each year, either in dispersion and/or in an uncomfortable situation. 25% of the graduates then continued their academic studies. Comet has revealed that the phenomenon of dispersion is constantly evolving: the so-called "missing persons" have different characteristics annually, and a growing need for long-term accompaniment has emerged as the traits of disorientation and inability to advance a reflection of one's own stronger growth project have become clearer.



4.3. Employment (including self-employment)

4.3.1. "Teamwork"

ActionAid, with its "Teamwork project" (Lombardy), has built growth models aiming at professional integration with self-empowerment paths, sports activities, workshops, and intended meetings. Since 2015, groups of 20 children have joined for free in cycles which repeat every six months. To date, 90% of boys and girls who participated in the project have found jobs. The project has several stages: from personalised self-empowerment pathways (inculcating the ability to ignite the desire to do and learn); to sports activities such as Thai-boxing and rugby as well as work and training orientation meetings via the contribution of some foundations (e.g., Z Zurich Foundation and Adecco). Teamwork focuses on the suburbs of the cities and sees the project's target audience as boys and girls who come from a disadvantaged socio-economic context compared to that of the city centre. This includes young second-generation immigrants, boys with cognitive and relational disabilities, and also minors subjected to criminal proceedings.

4.3.2. "NEETwork"

The "NEETwork" (Lombardy) project was born within the Cariplo Foundations Services to the Person Area, developed in collaboration with the Adecco Foundation, Mestieri Lombardia and Istituto Toniolo. It arises from the need to focus on the lowest and most vulnerable group, of those who do not have the minimum coordinates to enter the job market independently. Hence, it operates on two levels: the formative and the motivational. The project's first challenge has been to intercept youths with these characteristics, giving them an opportunity and involving them in a motivational experience through a paid internship (500 euros per month for 6 months) at a Lombard non-profit organisation. 2,026 enrolments were acquired, with 225 internships activated. 76% of the boys and girls after the traineeship showed a higher level of determination (+ 6%).

4.3.3. "Masters becomes"

The "Masters becomes" civil service project has been put in place by Anap, the National Association of the Elderly and Retired, and Ancos the National Association of Social and Sports Communities, both established within the context of the "Confartigianato". The core idea is to bring together two categories which suffer from a strong social exclusion such as retirees, NEETs, and the under 29s who do not study and do not work in order to



help each other. It is based on an intergenerational pact which connects retired artisans and NEETs throughout the national territory through 40 boys' mediation interfaces in the civil service. The goal is to involve 1,440 young people over the course of a year. These meetings can be of various kinds, and occur in different locations – in the same workshops as professionals, or in spaces made available by local institutions. The results have been put to good use: the abundant experience of retired artisans serves as a trigger for the reactivation of young people who do not study and do not work.

4.3.4. "Train for the future"

Mission Bambini has been working on the NEET theme since 2011 and has given more than 400 young people the opportunity for job placement. The project "Train for the future!" aims to reach the beneficiaries of the Mission Bambini Foundation (Lombardy) who have moved onto their land, doing so via a campaign on social networks. The intervention structure includes two modules: reactivation (4 weekly meetings of 3 hours each); and, orientation to work (4 weekly meetings) with young people who intend to continue the course. The expected results are the future social/work inclusion of people with disabilities, spreading knowledge of the disability manager figure, and improving access to entrepreneurship for people with disabilities.

4.4. Entrepreneurship (including social entrepreneurship)

4.4.1. Voluntary activities

The National Civil Service projects for implementing the "Youth Guarantee" program are exclusively implemented in the following Regions: Abruzzo, Basilicata, Campania, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Lazio, Molise, Piedmont, Apulia, Sardinia, Sicily, and Umbria. The entities registered in the National Register of Civil Service have submitted the National Civil Service projects to implement the "Youth Guarantee" program exclusively to the Department for Youth Policies and Universal Civil Service. Bodies enrolled in the Regional Register of National Civil Service have submitted projects for the "Youth Guarantee" program exclusively at the listed Regions where the respective project implementation sites are located. The National Civil Service projects of the "Youth Guarantee" program are dedicated to young people outside the educational and learning processes and the labour market (NEET – Not in Education, Employment or Training, abbreviated NEET).



4.5. Social inclusion

4.5.1. "NEET. Nuove Esperienze Educative Territoriali"

This Social Agriculture project gives a new meaning to the acronym NEET. It is promoted by the social cooperative Kairos and NGO Salesiani per il Sociale–Federazione SCS/ CNOS, and also the Social Farms network. The project focuses on the Social Agriculture approach, on experimenting with either activities in the company or in contact with nature in order to empower and activate young people looking for inclusion opportunities. It is implemented in the rural area outside Rome (Lazio Region, centre of Italy).

The project aims to counteract the NEETs (aged 14–25 years old) socially disadvantaged condition through personalised pathways in the field of Social Agriculture, into avenues which encourage their orientation and social inclusion. Through the activities and opportunities typical of Social Agriculture, the project aims to:

- Stop the vicious cycle of social withdrawal by giving incitements and opportunities to promote responsibility and participation;
- Promote activities that help to develop and reinforce skills;
- Create contexts in which young people experiment a sense of belonging, social identity, and sociability.

The Coordination group also includes youth representatives (the direct target of the intervention) to be actively involved in every phase of the project: namely planning proposals, implementation, and monitoring (since May 2018).

4.5.2 "NEET- Equity"

The project is promoted by UNICEF-Italia and was selected in October 2019 by the National Department for Youth Policies and Universal Civil Service with the announcement of the "Prevention and contrast of young disadvantage" initiative. Using research and mapping of the NEETs phenomenon, UNICEF carries out interventions aimed at enhancing and strengthening their potential, otherwise unexpressed in the cities of Napoli, Taranto, Carbonia (Campania Region). The general objective is to improve the territory's capacity in building participatory active policies in favour of the young (aged 15–29 years old) NEETs' social inclusion.

The project includes 3 main activities:



- Social research on the phenomenon/existing policies and activities for NEETs. This has been carried out in the three cities in order to increase knowledge on their condition: the research results have been presented in a public event.
- Participatory Urban Laboratories as contexts for listening to and involving young people, providing training and design initiatives. These have been organised in concrete “planning communities” where collective action is put in place for the future of the young and the city.
- Forums addressed to community stakeholders are aimed at identifying local networks and active policies in favour of the NEETs’ social inclusion.

4.5.3 “Afmal”

Training and job placement of young people at risk and those leaving the juvenile criminal circuit through the implementation of courses and start-ups involving restaurants/pizzerias and bars.

4.6. Rural Development

4.6.1 “Semi di cambiamento. Percorsi di inclusione socio-lavorativa nelle pratiche di agricoltura sociale” (“Seeds of change. Socio-labour inclusion paths in social agriculture practices)

The project is promoted by CNCA (National Coordination of Home Communities) and financed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies. It involved 9 regions during the period 2014–2015: Sicilia, Calabria, Basilicata, Lazio, Marche, Toscana, Veneto, Lombardia, and Piemonte. It primarily targets vulnerable and socially disadvantaged minors and young adults. Practitioners, professionals, and all the organisations managed by CNCA, and those hosting these vulnerable people, are the intermediate targets.

The project aims to develop “a system of actions and opportunities” in the regions where the CNCA regional federations are present and operating, promoting and encouraging integration of socially disadvantaged young people and adults into jobs and wider society. This goal will be achieved through support for the development and diffusion of new forms of social economy, linked to interventions of social agriculture and inspired by the so-called green economy, capable of combining sustainable development, and environmental and social justice. The actions of the project aim at highlighting the effectiveness of the social agriculture inclusion practices, as well as the



sustainability of these experiences, by combining market-oriented management with the socio-labour inclusion of the disadvantaged groups.

4.6.2 “Campi aperti per il sociale. L'agricoltura sociale per la prevenzione e la riduzione del disagio minorile” (“Open fields for the social. Social Agriculture for the minors' disadvantage prevention and reduction”)

NGO Oasi, in cooperation with the Social Farms network, has since 2014 promoted a project for the development and experimentation of intervention models for children and young people in disadvantaged conditions, integrating educational tasks with productive and work factors.

The basic hypothesis is that social agriculture has great potential for the promotion and social protection of people at the early developmental stage. Potentials that are not yet sufficiently known and which, if fully applied within the intervention models, could generate many advantages in terms of appropriateness, socio-educational and welfare effectiveness, and economic sustainability.

Socially disadvantaged minors and young people are the final targets. Social workers, managers of social services, practitioners from NGOs operating in the socio-educational, and agricultural fields are the intermediate target.

The project involves the rural area outside Rome (Lazio Region) and aims at:

- Improving knowledge of the potential expressed by social agriculture in the socio-educational context, in the prevention of disadvantages, and the job placement of adolescents.
- Developing, experimenting, evaluating and disseminating an intervention model that uses this potential, not in a subsidy fashion, but in one of social inclusion.
- Increasing the social capital of cities by supporting and integrating networks of organisations that deal with the protection and health promotion of adolescents (i.e., schools, vocational training centres, educational youth centres, social services, social cooperation, etc.) with those of an economic-entrepreneurial nature, in the field of social agriculture (farms, social farms, etc.)



4.6.3 “ColtiViviamo- L’orto tutto verde” and “Jobs4NEET”

The agricultural company TUTTOVERDE Srl, which is a social enterprise of Progetto 92, aims at expanding its social and entrepreneurial activity in favour of the young NEETs by developing a new production sector that completes the supply chain already started, and which also adds to the primary activity the organic horticultural production for the direct sale of vegetables. Social Cooperative Progetto 92 commenced a collaboration with MUSE (Science Museum in Trento) in order to create a brand, “Beelieve”, so as to identify small design objects and thereby improve cohabitation between humanity and nature. This project is to be realised by vulnerable young people. Both projects have promoted the social and work inclusion of vulnerable and disadvantaged young people (NEET 15–29 years old), and have supported their job placement and empowerment.

5. DISCUSSION OF DIFFICULTIES AND CONSTRAINTS, ASSESSMENT OF THE SUCCESS FACTORS AND TRANSFERABILITY

There are no active labour policies that specifically target NEETs in Italy. The only policy that is implemented with this objective is the Youth Guarantee (YG), about which we have spoken extensively in the preceding paragraphs. In discussing the more problematic aspects of this policy, it is essential to consider it in its entirety, from macro-level programming to implementation at the local level. An important point is the use of evidence-based data in both its design and implementation.

Regarding the choice of including Italy amongst the countries involved in the measure, Eurostat data on unemployment, and the number of NEETs present in the country, were used. One of the issues that emerges clearly is the fact of not having used data that could highlight the different types of NEETs (Petrescu et al., under review). The measures are, in fact, started in general and the inclusion criterion was simply to be inactive and under 30 years of age. Consequently, there was an immediate difficulty in intercepting them and satisfying the specific needs of each.

On average, young people who participated in the program have less difficulty in finding work than those who really could have participated. It is, in fact, evident how incentives, training, and active policies have reached the young people who are most easily employable, i.e., precisely those who would need them least and for whom the improvement in the economic situation should insert them into the labour market almost automatically. This has inevitably generated inequality of access to opportuni-



ties, having a concomitant impact upon social inequality which, in turn, prevents or at least limits economic development (Terzo, 2018). The services offered by the YG have oriented themselves on a model that does not promote or choose. Rather, it selects everyone who asks for it, or the first one who arrives (Benini, Sorcioni 2016). Amongst the NEET profiles most at risk that have been scarcely intercepted we can identify the “disengaged”, or those who, due to discouragement and disillusionment, have stopped looking for work or training opportunities, and the “unavailable”, represented prevalently by women who remain in a state of inactivity in order to fulfil family care responsibilities. The low effective incidence of the YG on these NEET targets is demonstrated by the fact that during the period of implementation of the program, the inactivity rate of the youth population between 15 and 29 years of age remained more or less stable at high levels (Terzo, 2018).

A substantial portion of the “disengaged” and “unavailable” comes from critical socio-economic and family contexts and have a low level of education. The difficulty these young people have in entering the labour market leads to a vicious circle of passivity and disorientation with a high probability of ending up on the margins of the labour market and society. The longer these young people remain in a state of inactivity, the more difficult it will be to proceed with social and employment (re-)integration, due to the progressive obsolescence of their human capital (Eurofound 2017). Intervening on this target of the NEET population should have been the priority of the YG, but the way in which it was decided to structure the initiative did not make it possible to go beyond the inclusion of the most easily employable subjects. This was determined first of all by the fact that the Italian regions, in implementing the program, adopted an all-encompassing rather than a diversified, approach to active policy. Consequently, the differentiated needs of a remarkably heterogeneous aggregate in terms of characteristics, needs, and risk profiles have not been adequately considered. The choice, therefore, was to focus on standard measures such as apprenticeships and the employment bonus, which have been financed massively by all the regions and from which only a part of the potential pool of NEET has benefited: namely, those more easily employable and more attractive to businesses since they have medium-high educational qualifications and, in many cases, previous professional experience.

Finally, as Rosina (2015) argues, there was a communication deficit, first of all in the channels used to launch the initiative: too much advertising in newspapers and on TV, too little information on social networks and almost no informative events on the territories themselves. It is no coincidence that in the absence of adequate information ac-



tivities, the majority of those enrolled in the program learned about it through word of mouth from friends, relatives and acquaintances, therefore also leading to enrolments of people with profiles inconsistent with what was supposed to be the real target of the plan.

6. CONCLUSION

In order to intercept and involve the most fragile and disoriented NEET, it is necessary to promote proximity actions that adopt a model of intervention that is transversal to the multiplicity of problems to be faced. They represent a target on which it may not be sufficient to intervene with the traditional tools of active labour policy (Terzo, 2018). The multiformity of the needs expressed by these young people requires a global taking on of the person, initiating a process of selection of objectives aimed at defining a path of activation organised by priority and not by urgency.

As described in the preceding paragraph, the YG has turned out to be an extremely centralised and vertical measure, with little involvement of the reality of the territory. However, the experiences illustrated have nonetheless also shown how innovative responses have been activated to promote the socio-occupational integration of young NEETs, acting on their ability to exploit the resources available to them to undertake a virtuous path of empowerment. These experiences are best practices in terms of combating the social phenomenon of young people who do not study and do not work, thanks to the wealth of knowledge and skills made available by the NGOs, which, by its very nature, is Hence, it is therefore able to effectively understand the social dynamics which characterise the areas in which it operates, being able to articulate intervention plans aimed at incisively promoting the well-being of all segments of the population – especially the most disadvantaged and vulnerable. From this perspective, it is useful to reflect on the contribution that NGOs – in its various forms – can offer in the participatory planning of policies. More precisely, those that can lay the foundations for the development of a permanent youth guarantee system, in order to effectively combat the social phenomenon of young NEETs.



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YOUTH NOT IN EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, OR TRAINING: PRACTICAL REASONS AND SUPPORT IN ESTONIA

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ABSTRACT OR SUMMARY

The national support model for NEETs is implemented in Estonia via three structures – the Youth Guarantee, the STEP programme, and the Youth Guarantee support system. Estonia is one of the European countries implementing the Youth Guarantee action plan, divided into several sub-programmes. In Estonia, the Youth Guarantee implementation plan is the shared responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Research. This document provides an overview of the statistics concerning Estonian NEETs, relevant policies, influencing factors for becoming a part of this group, and the effect of COVID-19 on young people. NEET-status youth are one of the state priorities and different strategic documents (Estonia 2035 strategy, 2021; The Welfare Development Plan 2016–2023, 2016; Strategy for Education and Research 2021–2035, 2021) highlight the need to facilitate young people’s return to school or the labour market. This is to be achieved by creating suitable support measures and various youth work measures. The Estonian government has analysed the impact of the programs and have assessed that the future need to improve the intervention measures applies in the following ways: continuing co-financing by state; service coverage across the country, including rural –areas; inter-agency cooperation; social awareness regarding the NEETs; specialist qualifications; and, motivation.

Keywords: NEETs, policy, services, Youth Guarantee, Estonian practice



1. INTRODUCTION

The definition of NEET youth has been agreed as follows: young people in the 15–29 age group who are not in education, employment, or training (Macherini et al., 2012). According to Eurostat (2020), the rate of NEETs is higher than the European average (16.5%) in ten countries, with the highest rate being in Italy (28.9%) and Greece (26.8%), and the lowest in Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Sweden. In Estonia, the rate of NEETs is 13.2%.

At the end of 2020, Estonia had 24,300 NEETs (15–29-year-olds) according to Statistics Estonia (Statistics Estonia, 2022) – a 17% increase from the end of 2019. Women form the largest group amongst NEETs (14,100, or 58%). They mostly become a part of this group due to family responsibilities: however, at the same time, the most vulnerable group in relation to contributing to the increase of NEETs has been young men. According to Statistics Estonia, the largest group within NEETs in 2020 were inactive youths (15,300, or 63%): of those, 7,700 (50%) are caring for children and other family members at home, and 2,200 (14%) are inactive due to an illness or an injury.

The Youth Guarantee implementation plan of the European Union has been applied in Estonia since 2014. This document provides an overview of the statistics concerning Estonian NEETs, relevant policies, influencing factors for becoming a part of this group, and the effect of COVID-19 on young people. The document also describes the latest research on support programmes, their efficiency, as well as facilitating and hindering factors. Based on that, the most important challenges and recommendations for future periods are summarised.

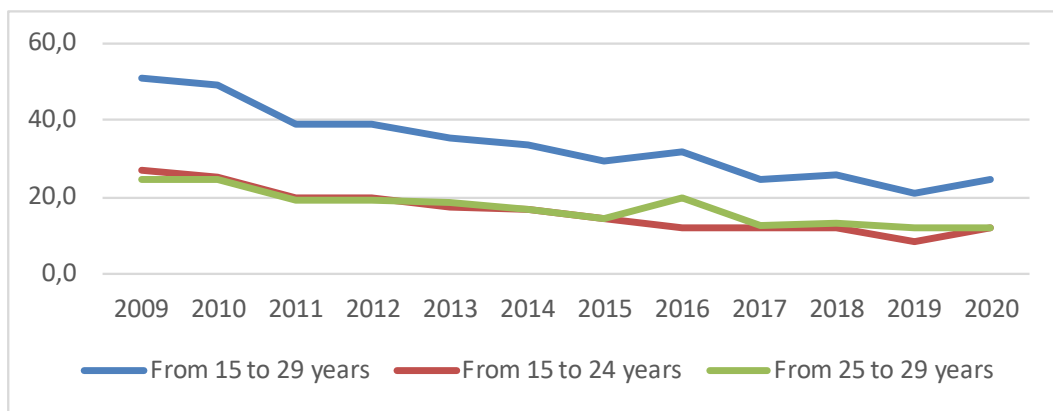
2. Labour market and NEET situation in the country

The pandemic which began in 2020 has greatly affected the involvement of the Estonian youth in education and employment. Although the consequences of the pandemic are less serious than those of the previous economic crisis, we still need to consider that both the economic recession and the pandemic have demonstrated clearly that the young are the most vulnerable target group on the labour market in Estonia and in many other countries – the unemployment amongst this age group grew faster than amongst



other target groups as the recession took hold, as well as during the pandemic (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2020). At the end of 2020, Estonia had 24,300 NEETs (15–29-year-olds) according to Statistics Estonia (Statistics Estonia, 2022) – a 17% increase from the end of 2019. Women form the largest group amongst NEETs (14,100, or 58%). They mostly become a part of this group as a consequence of family responsibilities. However, at the same time, the most vulnerable group in regard to contributing to the increase of NEETs has been young men. Compared to 2019, the number grew from 6,500 to 10,300. The ratio of young men in this target group has risen from the earlier 31% to 42%. Compared to 2019, the number of NEETs grew primarily in the 15–24 age group (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The number of NEETs from 2010 to 2020 (Statistics Estonia)



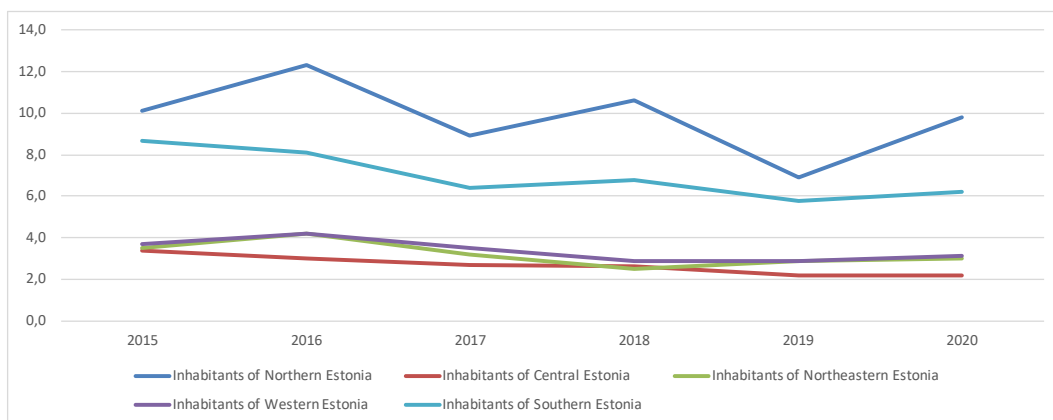
Melesk et al. (2021) indicate that the obstacles for returning to employment are mainly caused by competition for free positions because the number of applicants per position increases with a declining number of jobs. Additionally, the following factors are mentioned: little job experience amongst the young; lack of professional knowledge; low self-confidence; prejudices of the employers; and, little awareness of work life and working (ibid.). The measures for supporting Estonian youth have been found to be too general, and as such there is a need for greater cooperation as well as increasing the quality of existing support measures (Käger et al., 2021). The main obstacles for returning to education or employment for young people in the 15–26 age group (who participated in the 2015–2020 Youth Guarantee support measures) were: low level of education; family reasons (single parent, caring for a family member); and, living in a rural area (Kõiv & Paabort, 2021).



According to the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, the pandemic which started in 2020 mainly affected companies in the service sector (e.g., tourism, catering, trade, accommodation, construction) and where young people were hit the hardest with job losses, or a reduction in their workload during 2020–2021. Expectedly, the rate of unemployment grew the most amongst young people (16–24-year-olds) – in December 2019, it was 10%, and at the same time in 2020, the rate was 12% (Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, 2021). During this period, the rate of registered unemployment has almost doubled amongst the young. A similar trend in the rate of unemployment amongst the young has been detected since 2018, where unemployment is higher amongst young people than in the older age groups (ibid.). In 2020, the rate of unemployment increased faster amongst the Estonian youth than in the other European Union member states; as all April 2021, 17% of the Estonian young people in the 16–29 age group are unemployed (Statistics Estonia, 2022).

The conditions on the labour market and the situation of the young people are remarkably varied in different Estonian regions, in particular regarding the overall number of NEETs and the rate of youth unemployment. Based on rural and urban areas, the number of NEETs is the highest in urban settlements as at the end of 2020 (15,900, or 65% of the total): however, when taking into account the share of the target group in the age group, it is higher in rural settlements (14.6% and 10.6%, respectively). Based on regional data (Figure 2), the number of NEETs is the highest in North Estonia (9,800, or 40%), incl. the residents of Tallinn (6,900, or 28%). Based on the share of NEETs in this age group, the highest rates are in North-Eastern (18%) Estonia and Western Estonia (14%). The lowest rate is in Southern Estonia (12%). (Statistics Estonia, 2022).

Figure 2. The rate of NEETs in the age group according to regions, 2010–2020 (Statistics Estonia)

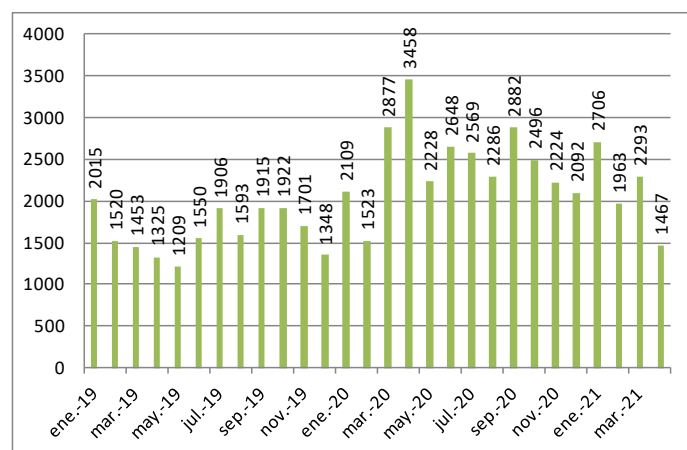




According to Statistics Estonia, the highest rate of youth unemployment in 2020 was in North-Eastern Estonia (28%), similar to the rate of NEETs. The lowest is found in Northern Estonia (10%). Prior to the pandemic, the differences between the regions decreased, but the pandemic caused youth unemployment to grow faster in North-Eastern Estonia than in other regions in 2020. By December 2020, registered unemployment grew amongst the 16–24 age group by more than 60% in Southern, North-Eastern, and Central Estonia compared to earlier periods. However, the growth rate was slower in Northern Estonia (42%). (Statistics Estonia, 2022).

Between 2019 and 2021, the average number of people in the 16–29 age group registering as unemployed per month was 1,621 in 2019. And 2020, the number registering as unemployed increased, making the average monthly number 2,449 (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The number of 16–19-year-old newly registered unemployed between 2019 and 2021 (April) (Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund)



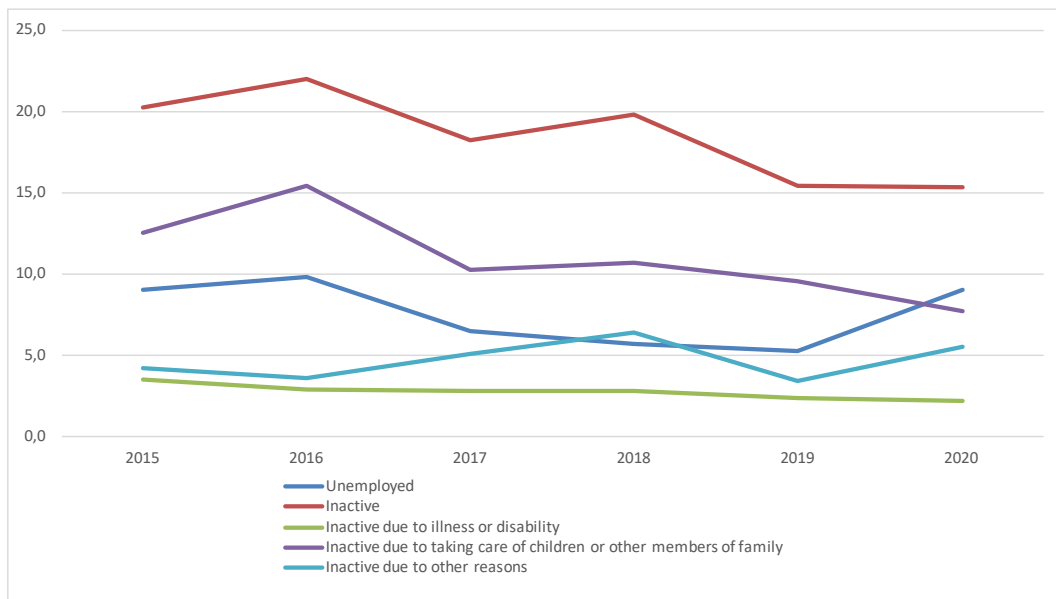
In 2021, the number registering as unemployed has decreased but is remains higher than in 2019 (2,107). In 2020, a monthly average of about 1,400–1,600 young people found employment through the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund. Youth unemployment reached its peak in March 2021 (12,744), with the highest percentage of youth unemployment, 22.7%, coming right after the onset of the current crisis (in April 2020). (Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, 2021)

If, in addition to NEETs and/or unemployed youth, we were to look at the sub-group of inactive youths, then in 2020, the largest group within NEETs were inactive youths according to Statistics Estonia (15,300, or 63%) (Figure 4). Of those, 7,700 (50%) are caring



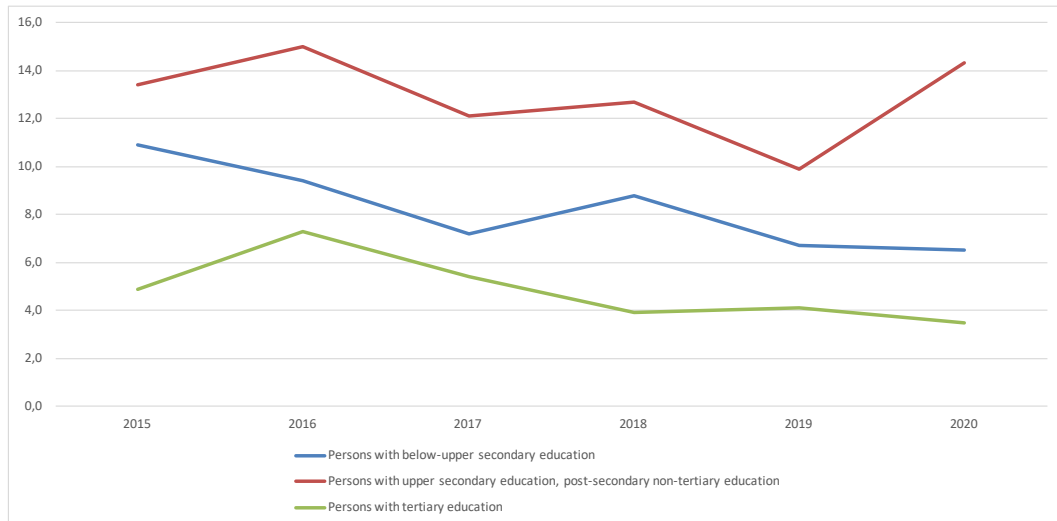
for children and other family members at home, and 2,200 (14%) are inactive due to an illness or an injury. Compared to 2019, the number of unemployed youths has increased the most: instead of 5,300, 9,000 young people are out of work. The number of inactive youths has decreased by 1,100 (14,300 instead of 15,400). (Statistics Estonia, 2022).

Figure 4. The number of NEETs (in thousands) based on background characteristics between 2015 and 2020 (Statistics Estonia)



Taking into consideration the attained level of education of the NEETs, the number of young people with upper secondary education has grown most in 2020 compared to 2019 (i.e., general upper secondary education, vocational secondary education, including secondary specialised education, or vocational education on the basis of basic education) (Figure 5).

Figure 5. The number of NEETs (in thousands) based on the level of education between 2015 and 2020 (Statistics Estonia)



3. Assessment of NEET strategies

At both the European and Estonian level, NEET youth are usually discussed separately as a priority. Communication of the European Commission (2021) provides the member states with new guidelines which include the need to achieve a high level of employment, skills and professional competitiveness, as well as create strong social security systems (Communication from the Commission..., 2021). The Communication states that 16 million people were unemployed in December 2020, with the unemployment rate amongst young people being 17.8%. It also sets a goal to reduce the rate of NEETs from 12,6% (in 2019) to 9% by improving their chances of finding a job (ibid.). The European Commission invites the member states to implement a new reinforced Youth Guarantee by focusing primarily upon quality offers and using the financial support from the European Union to support this (Eurostat, 2021). This is an updated programme based on an earlier version of the Youth Guarantee created in 2013, with the objective of supporting young people under 25 for four months after graduation, or becoming unemployed with quality offers for jobs, continued education, apprenticeships, or practical training.

In 2020, the European Commission started to work on the new, reinforced Youth Guarantee, to which every member state could submit their proposals. The European



Commission Youth Guarantee recommendation foresees the need for the following: to strengthen partnerships between the service providers and the relevant stakeholders of the Youth Guarantee at all levels of governance in the upcoming period (2021–2027); and, to promote the development of joint case management, multidisciplinary groups, and other integrated service models which strengthen partnerships (Council Recommendation ..., 2020). In the framework of the reinforced Youth Guarantee, we should acknowledge that some NEETs may require a lighter approach, whereas other more vulnerable NEETs might need more intense and versatile measures for a longer period in order to avoid the disproportionately negative influence on vulnerable youths (Seletuskiri Vabariigi..., 2020).

At the end of 2020, the Estonian government approved Estonian proposals for the reinforced Youth Guarantee (Vabariigi Valitsus, 2020). To that end, the work on the new Estonian implementation plan has begun. In Estonia, the Youth Guarantee implementation plan is the shared responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Research (Vabariigi..., 2014, Noortegarantii..., 2018). The Ministry of Social Affairs is the accountable party to the European Commission (ibid.). According to guidelines, it transcends ministries, fields, and sectors. The Youth Guarantee is implemented with funds from the Operational Programme for Cohesion Policy Funding 2014–2020 which was used for initiating support measures for returning NEETs to education and/or employment (Ühtekuuluvuspoliitika..., 2018). Networking principles are used for supporting young people with activities planned according to the synergy achieved between the education, youth work, and employment sectors (ibid.). The basis for the new reinforced Estonian Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan is the two main courses of action which were agreed upon at a national level. These are: the measures are aimed at prevention (including reducing the risk of exclusion of the youth); supporting a smooth transition from formal education/further training to the labour market (and vice versa); and, supporting young people not in education or employment individually in order to help them reintegrate into society (Noortegarantii tugevdamise..., 2021).

From the political point of view, in addition to the Youth Guarantee, supporting NEETs is prioritised more and more in Estonia, and the current NEET measures have generally met their goals (Käger et al., 2020; Euroopa Sotsiaalfondist ..., 2019). However, more awareness is necessary vis-à-vis the NEET youth and activities meant for them, as well as more consideration for communications targeted at young people, support for more flexible and cross-sectional cooperation, and guarantees for equal accessibility



of services, as well as more appreciation for the specialists working with the youth (Käger et al., 2020; Paabort & Beilmann, 2019).

The topic of NEETs is a priority for Estonia and is therefore included in several national strategic documents which, in turn, form the basis for creating the Estonian Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan. According to the Estonia 2035 strategy, Estonia needs to pay attention to the youth not in employment, education, or training to facilitate their return to school or the labour market by creating suitable support measures and various youth work measures (Eesti 2035, 2021). The Welfare Development Plan 2016–2023 emphasises the importance of youth employment and networking in order to bring the discouraged and inactive youth back to employment (Welfare ..., 2016). The Strategy for Education and Research 2021–2035 of Estonia describes the need for establishing suitable conditions for people with reduced competitiveness to be able to participate in education via flexible learning opportunities, access to quality education, and support in their studies (Haridusvaldkonna..., 2020).

Youth policy, which is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Research, is a part of the wider field of youth governance (Haridus- ja Teadusministeeriumi põhimäärus, 2021). Formally, a youth is a person between the ages 7 and 26 (Noorsootöö seadus, 2010). The scope of the youth policy mainly includes youth work as well as social, employment, health care, cultural, family, and crime prevention policies (Haridus- ja Teadusministeeriumi põhimäärus 2019). In order to implement the draft of the Youth Field Development Plan 2021–2035, a principle of viewing a young person as a whole has been adopted (Noortevaldkonna arengukava, 2013) and value is placed upon the formation and self-actualisation of young people. To that end, national support for activities which reduce the rate of youth leaving formal education, or their risk of becoming NEETs as well as associated costs thereof, are supported (Noortevaldkonna..., 2021).

4. Assessment of the NEET policy measures and results

The national support model for NEETs is implemented through three structures – the Youth Guarantee, the STEP programme, and the Youth Guarantee support system. Estonia approved the Youth Guarantee programme in 2014. Although an analysis of the Estonian YG programme by the European Commission (2018) recognises Estonia's good work on the partnership, it also highlights the need to improve the working methods of the Estonian coordinating group responsible for the implementation of the YG and points out the main challenges that need addressing: finding NEETs, registering



and directing them to services, and finding specialists to support the youth (European Commission 2018).

The Youth Guarantee is divided between preventive and supportive actions. It is further divided between policy areas and ministries. Preventive actions are mainly coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Research. Supportive actions are mainly coordinated by the Ministry of Social Affairs and The Ministry of Education and Research. Actions undertaken include the following: Noorte Tugila (Prop-Up, led by Association of Estonian Open Youth Centres); Hoog Sisse (led by Tallinn Education Department); and, My First Working Place (led by Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund). The STEP programme is led by The Development Centre OK, with the financial aid of the Ministry of the Interior of Estonia. The strategic partners of the STEP programme are the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund, and the Estonian Police and Border Guard Board.

The following information gives an overview concerning the analysis of the main programs focused on NEET-youth.

In 2014, the measure 'Improving the employability of young people and reducing the impact of poverty by improving the accessibility of youth work services' was initiated with the support of EU structural funds. It aimed to reduce the impact of poverty on education and career choices, prevent the occurrence of social exclusion and the associated employability problems of young people, and support the development of an active attitude to life amongst young people (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2019). The Ministry of Education and Research and the Ministry of the Interior implement four activities within the framework of the measure. This is in compliance with the actions and objectives of their respective area(s) of government. The activities of the measure within the area of government of the Ministry of Education and Research are:

Action 1: 'Reduction of the effect of unequal conditions, prevention of exclusion and supporting the employability of young people, including the provision of additional support to NEET young people', the objective of which is to include young people and improve their employability. This comprises young people exposed to an exclusion risk.

The activities of the measure within the area of government of the Ministry of the Interior are:



Action 2: 'Inclusion of young people who have committed an offence in the labour market', the objective of which is to increase the employment rate of young people who have committed an offence, and to support their decision to start working or studying, or to remain employed or continue studying.

Action 3: 'Providing developing opportunities for at-risk youth through the SPIN programme', the objective of which is to create additional opportunities for young people to spend free time, participate in sports, and develop life skills through a community prevention programme based on sports.

Action 4: 'Prevention of risk behaviour and identification and resolution of problems of families at risk by using agency work methods, and development of a secure living environment'. The goal here is to introduce the principles of agency work and facilitate the exchange of information with the aim of improving the shaping of a safe living environment at local level, identifying and resolving the problems of young people and families at risk, and enabling the county and local level managers and specialists to acquire better skills, working tools, and methods. In so doing, they can affect a decrease in the number of accidents and offences and, relatedly, prevent children's behavioural issues. (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2019)

The measure is financed via the European Social Fund (ESF) and state budget co-financing. The total cost of the activities planned under the youth measure is 20.2 million euros, which is financed from ESF to the amount of 17.2 million euros (85%), and where the national co-financing is 3.03 million euros (15%) (Table 1). (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2019)

The planned target level for 2018 was set at 130,000 young people (including 8,600 NEET young people) taking part in youth services. The total number of young people participating in youth work services was exceeded – by 2018, 132,913 young people were involved. However, for NEETs, the planned target was not reached – 7893 NEETs were involved.

The Ministry of Education and Research has analysed the activities, their effect/ effectiveness, and sustainability. Research has highlighted that the activities improve the employability of young people and help to decrease exclusion and inequality by offering development opportunities for young people, motivating them and improving their social



skills, as well as promoting agency work to support young people and their families. The objectives of the measure are encouraged by the satisfaction of the young people, which was confirmed by the positive feedback given within the interim evaluation by young people, or specialists working with them. The subject of the functioning principles of the labour market should be discussed more thoroughly within the framework of the activities (including reasons of working, legal worktime, workload and arrangement, reasons and the need to pay taxes). One particular issue identified was that some activities are not available across Estonia because they have been planned to be implemented only in selected counties, and young people with several problems need more support, including psychological, addiction, financial, and debt counselling, or even work with the whole family. (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2019)

The activities give young people relevant experience and thus increase their readiness to enter the labour market successfully, help reduce the effect of poverty or other unequal conditions, prevent exclusion risk or improve the social inclusion of young people at risk of exclusion, and thus activate NEET young people. The activities have improved the availability of youth work and extended the volume of activities designed for young people. A facilitating factor in achieving the final goals is that all the activities are functional, and issues arisen in the course of the implementation of the activities have been addressed by making necessary changes to better meet the needs of target groups or improve the efficiency of the implementation process. The interim evaluation showed that all the activities of the measure should be continued after the financing from the structural funds ends. Even so, there were activities with cooperation and financing models in place which help to ensure the sustainability of the activities. Several implementing organisations hold a vision that sustainability should be secured by local authorities who will take over the activities once the financing from the structural funds ends. However, not all local authorities have the capacity to take over these activities and require continued empowering and support. Many of those implementing the activities found that due to a complicated target group and subject, the activities should be financed, at least partly, from the state budget. (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2019)

Youth work services are based on the Youth Work Act which decrees that young people are aged 7–26, and that youth work is the creation of conditions to promote the diverse development of young persons which, in turn, enables them to be active outside their families, formal education acquired within the adult education system, and work on



the basis of their free will (Youth Work Act, 2010). According to the program rules, the NEET–youth services are for young people from the age 16 onwards.

The activities of the measure within the area of government of the Ministry of the Social affair are as follows:

Action 5: Labour market service “My first job” (M1J). Under the M1J service, a wage subsidy and training allowance are paid to an employer who hires a young person aged 16 to 29 who has no (or only short-term) work experience. The aim of the service is to support the employment of young people with little or no work experience and thereby reduce youth unemployment. Implementation of the M1J measure started in 2015. Since 2015, young people have started working with the M1J measure a total of 3468 times. The measure is widely accessible for young unemployed people registered in the Unemployment Insurance Fund. About 80% of all young people registered as unemployed are eligible for the M1J measure. Of all the people who are eligible, about 9% have started working with the M1J measure. (Melesk et al., 2021). The total direct costs of the M1J in 2015–2020 were 8.7 million euros. Of this, 98% (EUR 8.5 million) of salary support costs, and 3% (EUR 0.2 million) goes to training compensation costs. (Melesk et al., 2021)

Action 6: Youth Guarantee Support System (YGSS). The Youth Guarantee Support System was initiated in 2016 and piloted in 2018. The YGSS is a tool for the local government which, through data on studies and employment collated from different Estonian registries in the STAR information system, enables learning about NEET youth in their area and, if necessary, offering them targeted support proactively. This is primarily for continuing their education, and/or reaching the labour market. The costs of the program are known for the period 01.03.2017–31.05.2020. They are: 960 000 euros (816 000 euros ESF support and 144 000 euros state co-financing), to which is added the working time costs incurred by the local government in processing the list and communicating with young people. (Käger et al, 2020) The YGSS is available for all municipality governments over Estonia and is not regionally limited. The target group of the YGSS is youth aged 16–26 and who are neither working nor studying. To implement the YGSS, the following criteria for young people in need is added to the Social Welfare Act (RT I, 30.12.2015, 5). A person who is 16–26 years of age, and who complies with all the following conditions, may need assistance:

1. Who does not study;
2. Who does not work;



3. Who is not officially registered as unemployed in PES;
4. Who has not been established to have no work ability or a loss of capacity of work of over 80 per cent;
5. Who does not receive employment support service;
6. Who is not active in entrepreneurship;
7. Who does not receive benefits for raising a child who is younger than one and a half years;
8. Who is not imprisoned or in custody pending trial;
9. Who is not engaged in alternative service or military service.

Käger et al (2020) analysed the YGSS practice and its impact. Even though the program has had positive results thus far, the analysis has nonetheless highlighted that the implementation of the YGSS is not sustainable without support from the Ministry of Social Affairs. Hence, its effectiveness and relevance may also suffer. Continuous application of the YGSS is supported not only by state financing but also by increased awareness, increased promoting of the efforts of those working with young people, improved quality of the lists and user friendliness of the STAR, presence of strong cooperation networks, and a suitable form of work organisation in local governments. Hence, the successful application of the YGSS needs, at least in the near future, to continue with the support of state financing and coordination from the Ministry of Social Affairs.

5. Other domestic and international programmes, projects, and instruments

The Association of Estonian Adult Educators, Andras. The Week of Adult Learning has become a traditional all-Estonian event popularising adult education and introducing learning opportunities. During this event, the focus is on a person's learning and self-improvement throughout life, and this is presented as the main prerequisite for the development of personality and society in order to cope in a changing world.

The Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund. This started by offering services aimed at prevention of unemployment from May 1st, 2017. These services are targeted at



employees who need support in changing jobs or remaining employed due to a lack of skills (or their skills being outdated), as well as to employers to support them in finding and training a suitably skilled workforce and restructuring their companies.

Training support services include: a degree study allowance for an employed person or a person registered as unemployed for obtaining vocational, professional higher education or Bachelor's studies; labour market training with a training card for employed persons at risk of unemployment; support for obtaining qualifications for employed persons who have undergone labour market or other training with the support of the training benefit; a training grant for employers for improving the skills and knowledge of their employees upon their recruitment and helping them to adapt to changes in the employer's economic activities.

A business start-up subsidy is a form of financial aid with the objective of providing motivation and support in starting a business. The subsidy is granted for the commencement of economic activity through a new company being founded, or operating as a sole proprietor.

Work trial. The Unemployment Insurance Fund offers a chance to participate in a work trial within the framework of the employment mediation service. The work trial gives the employer an opportunity to check that the candidate is suitable for the position before signing an employment contract with them.

Job clubs are open to anyone who wants to learn about the labour market, application process, and the rights and obligations involved in being a member of the workforce.

Career services are provided for everyone, both face to face as well as over the Internet (i.e., via Skype, Microsoft Teams, telephone and e-mail). If a person is registered as unemployed or looking for employment, you have a consultant who will refer you to career services. A career specialist can also be invited to a school, a youth centre, or other establishments to discuss career related questions. (Eesti Töötukassa, 2021)

Plots for young families



Local governments provide plots of land to young families free of charge or for a minimal fee to set up a home in a rural area. More information is available from local governments.

South-Estonia specialist youth support. This measure provides support to a local government unit in the region to improve the living conditions of professionals living in its territory. The aim of the support is to boost the development of South-Eastern Estonia by improving the living conditions of specialists working in co-operation between the state and local government units. This thereby contributes to the retention and entry of specialists who are important for the economic development of the region.

Support for young entrepreneurs setting up in farming. Young micro and small enterprises starting their agricultural activity for the first time (or young entrepreneurs taking over an existing or grandparent farm) can apply for specific support for a young entrepreneur setting up in farming. A young entrepreneur is a person with up to 40 years of professional education and work experience. The purpose of the support is to make it easier for young farmers to set up, to facilitate generational change in agriculture and to increase the number of farmers with modern knowledge and experience.

6. Discussion of difficulties and constraints, assessment of the success factors and transferability

The Ministry of Education and Research supportive program analysis has pointed out that the issue of the functioning of the labour market could be addressed more thoroughly in the framework of the activities pursued. This would help to set young people's realistic expectations and reduce their desire to work in undeclared scenarios. For example, before starting work, young people need a better overview of taxes, the reasons for and necessity of paying them, and the organisation of pay, time and burden. The bottleneck encountered was that some activities are not available across Estonia (e.g., the STEP and SPIN programs), as they are planned to take place only in selected counties. Kõiv et al. (2021) analysed services for NEET-youth and highlighted that there is a lack of institutional co-operation, the focus of services is not clearly defined, and services do not take a holistic view of young people's skills development. The low level of salaries of specialists working with young people, the high risk of burnout and the general shortage of specialists have caused the most problems in the implementation of activities. For further development, it is necessary to create new cooperation models, raise ambitions, and ensure sustainable financing models. There is a need to enhance



cooperation between formal and non-formal education and to improve cooperation with health provisions. (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2020).

The YGSS case management model and IT solutions offered provide comprehensive support for young people, especially if the system is used consistently, and if young people are properly supported and everything important is written down systematically. The content and effectiveness of cooperation between YGSS actors in helping young people to enter education or the labour market varies from region to region and from case to case. Implementing YGSS is cost-effective from a national perspective. YGSS has the potential to be sustainable in terms of performance. However, given the problems related to the implementation of YGSS and the costs of local governments, there is a need for continued support of local governments in the use of YGSS and adaptation of YGSS or its support systems. Sustainability would be supported by more efficient organisation of work at the local level, increasing the availability of services, and raising the awareness of YGSS and NEET youth. For further development, it is necessary to: continue with the YGSS with the support of state financing and coordination from the Ministry of Social Affairs; increase the awareness of all parties about NEET youth, the importance of supporting them and the opportunities of doing so; support case managers in supporting young people and establishing and developing regional networks; ensure a uniform quality of the support service to NEET youth throughout Estonia and to reduce regional differences in access to services, support provided to young people, and accessing these services; value and support those working with young people in order to prevent young people from acquiring NEET status and to improve the effectiveness of supporting youth. (Käger et al., 2020)

Recommendations based on the results on evaluation of M1J are (Melesk et al., 2021):

1. Increase awareness of young people about the job search process and the rights and obligations that come with employment. Youth do not always know what to expect from the job search process and the challenges this includes. Experience of counselling within the job clubs or job search workshops for youth could also support the self-awareness of youth in the job search process, increase their awareness of the possible set-backs in the process, and build/maintain their self-confidence.
2. Increase awareness of young people of the services and opportunities offered by the Unemployment Insurance Fund for young people seeking a job. This information



should be included in school career studies programmes and information offered in youth centres in addition to the events organised for youth by the Unemployment Insurance Fund themselves.

7. Conclusion

In summary, it can be noted that on the European and Estonian level, NEETs have become a priority in their own right and are going to be included in several important national strategies (Eesti 2035; Haridusvaldkonna..., 2021; Noortevaldkonna..., 2021, etc.).

The national support model for NEETs is implemented in Estonia via three structures – the Youth Guarantee, the STEP programme, and the Youth Guarantee support system. Estonia approved the Youth Guarantee programme in 2014. Although an analysis of the Estonian YG programme by the European Commission (2018, 2020) recognises Estonia’s good work on the partnership, it also highlights the need to improve the working methods of the Estonian coordinating group responsible for the implementation of the YG. It also points out the main challenges that need to be addressed: finding NEETs (i.e., an effective tracking system); registering and directing them to services; and, finding specialists to support the youth (European Commission 2018).

All measures for NEETs coordinated by different ministries and implemented in partnership with different organisations and governmental institutions have been successful and opened for all regions in Estonia. However, for future progress to be assured, some common points must be taken in consideration:

1. Continued co-financing by state and other funds since leaving all responsibilities to local authorities in relation to financing may generate inequalities for youth services;
2. The availability of services must be guaranteed throughout the country;
3. Inter-agency cooperation must be developed and supported;
4. Awareness of NEET-youth must be raised in the wider society;
5. Attention must be paid to specialist qualifications and supporting their motivation.



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INTERVENTIONS AND GOOD PRACTICES OF YOUNG NEET IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA |

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ABSTRACT OR SUMMARY

In the Republic of Moldova, concern for young NEETs is relatively recent phenomenon. The NEET youth rate indicator was first introduced in the National Employment Strategy for 2017–2021. The educational and occupational exclusion of young people is related to cultural reproduction of poverty, deviant behaviour, health problems, social infantilism, etc. The actuality of the problem is determined by the isolation of the field of education and the sphere of employment. However, it should be noted that it can exceed the period of youth and can be transferred to middle age and even older ages.

Beyond exclusion, discrimination, depravity, and emigration, the NEET phenomenon amongst young people leads to significant economic costs. In EU countries where the NEET rate does not exceed the average for the region (14.8%), a loss of about 1.2% of GDP is estimated. [1] In the Republic of Moldova, where the share of young NEETs far exceeds the average of EU countries, and where the country's economy is in a deep crisis, the losses are more substantial. It is extremely important to understand why some young people end up in the NEET situation, what are the factors that place young people in the NEET category, what is their share amongst young people, and what is the socio-demographic and economic profile of such young people who are disadvantaged in terms of access to education, training and employment. However, the National Employment Strategy for 2017–2021 seems to be the first public policy document which directly addresses young people in the NEET category. However, at the country level, there are contradictions about the quantitative number of these young people. Although the National Bureau of Statistics provides us with some data, studies and international statistics show us a slightly different number. There is also uncertainty about the qualitative aspect of NEET young people: who are they? Why don't they work? What would they need in order to work? These are just some of the questions that cause uncertainty. Given that their profile is unknown, and the term is not new at all, the need to study this group of young people is imperative.

Keywords: NEETs, programs, policy, education, Moldovan experience.



1. INTRODUCTION

Young people's access to education and employment is a priority and a topical issue for the Republic of Moldova. This is especially true given the fact that there are still some difficulties related to the integration of young people in the education system and labour market, which in turn causes low capitalisation of the human potential of young people. The traditional indicators which characterise the labour force and its participation in the labour field (i.e., activity rate, inactivity, employment and unemployment) do not present complete information for assessing the degree of integration of young people in the labour market. Thus, for a better understanding of the situation of young people, especially their inactivity and vulnerability in the labour market, both international organisations and local institutional actors, researchers, increasingly use the concept of NEET youth.

Although there are several definitions, the most commonly used is the definition implemented by Eurostat, according to which young NEETs are young people aged 15–24 (it has also been extended to the age groups 15–29, 15–19, 20–24 and 25–29 years) who are not integrated in any form of employment, education, or training. The NEET Youth Rate is proposed as a specific target for young people for the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Target 8 "Promoting sustainable, inclusive and sustainable growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all" includes two objectives: (i) That until 2030, seek to ensure decent and productive jobs for all women and men, including young people and people with disabilities, as well as equal pay for work of equal value for women and men and the elimination of all forms of discrimination based on sex or other criteria; (ii) A substantial reduction by 2020 in the percentage of young people who are not employed, educated or trained (NEET).

In the Republic of Moldova, a complex study was conducted on young NEETs titled: "Inclusion of young people outside the education, training and vocational system (young NEETs)" [2, p.5]. It was built within the Youth Competence Observatory – a project carried out by the National Institute for Economic Research within the projects "Development of innovative business for sustainable local economic growth", funded by the Government of Turkey and implemented by the United Nations Development Program. Furthermore, the "Strengthening the capacity of national institutions in generating, using and disseminating data for formulating and implementing rights-based and evidence-based policies" was implemented by UNFPA, the UN Population Fund in



partnership with the National Youth Council of Moldova, with financial support from the Swiss Development Agency and Cooperation. The report presents the analysis of data resulting from a complex research approach that included documentary analysis, secondary analysis of quantitative data, interviews with representatives of relevant central and local institutions and individual interviews with young people outside the education, employment or training systems.

The aim is to assess the training factors and characteristics of the NEET youth category and risk groups, as well as to elucidate problems in young people's access to education, training and employment and to determine the necessary measures to facilitate the integration/reintegration of young people into education and the market. We have a large number of young people who are included in the NEET category, the so-called young people who neither study nor work, a large part of them living on the basis of remittances from family members working abroad. Thus, with a total inactivity rate of 59.6% in 2015, this phenomenon becomes more serious than unemployment. Of course, 63.5% of them are employed in the process of studies and professional training, and a large portion of whom will be employed at the end of their studies. However, there are still 36.5% who, for various reasons, do not end up in employment. [3, p. 8]

The objectives of the study are determined by identifying both the subjective and objective factors which increase the probability of becoming NEET, namely: delimitation of NEET subcategories and their characteristics; highlighting the problems faced by young NEETs in the process of integration in the fields of social life (education, occupation, etc.); determining the length of stay in the NEET position and the social risks/losses for the individual and for the community; highlighting the professional skills of young NEETs and the skills required in the internal labour market; knowledge of young NEETs from the perspective of their life experience, perceptions and aspirations; identifying the effective mechanism for social and occupational integration of young NEETs and those at risk of becoming NEETs; and, finally, determining the policy measures and public services required to prevent the NEET position amongst young people, but also a way out of this situation.

The report presents an analytical-informational basis on the magnitude of the NEET phenomenon and its determinants. It also proposes some public policy recommendations related to improving the situation of young people on the labour market, focusing on young NEETs.



2. Labour market and NEET situation in the country

The subjects of the study were young people aged 15–29, with an incidence of young NEETs aged 25–29. The localities where the interviews took place were selected on the basis of criteria of regional division, area of residence (urban / rural), and size of the locality. A total of 12 localities were selected (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of interviews with NEET youth, 2018.

	Number of interviews
Centre	24
Chişinău	9
Nisporeni, city	6
Micleuşeni, village	4
Horeşti, village	5
North	19
Soroca, city	6
Olişcani, village	5
Corbu, village	4
Fântâniţa, village	4
South	17
Comrat, city	6
Leova, city	3
Cania, village	4
Cioburciu, village	4
Total	60

Source: Includerea tinerilor aflați în afara sistemului de educație, formare și ocupație profesională (tineri NEET): Studiu sociologic. (Inclusion of young people outside the education, training and vocational system (NEET young people): Sociological study.) Chişinău: S. n., 2018 (Tipogr. „Foxtrot”). – 102 p.



The pandemic period that started in 2020 has affected very much the involvement of the Moldovan youth in education and employment. The labour market is influenced on multiple levels by the environment, the economic and social system within which it operates (as well as the political one), and the level and quality of employment. Collectively, these are essential characteristics for any society. Moreover, the labour force is the main engine of the development of any modern economy.

The analysis of statistical data [4], but also the results of different studies [5] shows us a series of systemic problems faced by the labour market in the Republic of Moldova. The most important of these are: lack of jobs; low pay; and, rural/urban disparities, etc. The concern for the occupational exclusion of young people is largely determined by the awareness of problems and risks, as well as long-term negative consequences, namely: cultural reproduction of poverty; deviant behaviour; health problems; and, social infantilism, etc. There are a number of arguments that unemployment amongst young people is more severe than amongst adults [6]. These include:

A country's success or failure to make full use of the economic potential generated by young talent can make a difference in long-term sustainable development;

Unemployment amongst young people directly affects the level of fluctuation of temporary staff in the labour market;

- The accumulation of experience is reflected both at the individual level and in the degree of development of the labour market at the national level;
- Unemployment amongst young people contributes to the intensification of poverty and the decrease of living standards – of a cognitive, medical, nutritional and psychological nature;
- As young people age and develop their own families, their failure to accumulate both economic and social capital can be projected/displaced onto children;
- Young people who fail to find a job, after graduating from a form of education, will not have the opportunity to earn an income, and will have to be financially assisted by their families. At the same time, society is losing the results of its investment in education.



At the same time, studies in the field also show that the occupational exclusion of young people is associated with two risk situations of major importance – incomplete transition from school to work, and informal employment. [7]

Given the specifics of the target group, no person interviewed at the time of the study was not employed, nor was involved in a study or training process. The vast majority of these young people stated that they once had had a paid job, with the exception of young graduates. Most of the young NEETs indicated that they worked in the informal sphere, which is largely explained by the low level of schooling and the lack of necessary qualifications, but also the lack of jobs in the formal sphere. These young people worked in construction, sales, agriculture, or as unskilled workers in various other fields (processing industry, etc.). The other occupations mentioned by the subjects occur with insignificant frequency, but they do have in common a low level of prior qualifications and a low financial reward.

Several young people indicated that during the last year they had had several jobs, mainly in the informal sphere. The number of jobs suggests that many job changes equates to a form of vulnerability in the labour market, with the need to accept any offers that would ensure a minimum income. Additionally, and related to young people who had had a job, but who worked with a work permit, most of them worked for a period of more than 6 months based on specialised diplomas in the banking sphere, the education system, but also in quality of skilled workers in the field of real estate construction. Young people who have a specialisation, regardless of the form of education completed, but did not work according to their studies, indicate as main causes the large number of specialists already in the labour market, a lack of available jobs, but also inaccessibility of jobs for young people, and corruption found amongst administrations of all levels.

When asked about the transition from school to work, most young people appreciated it as a very difficult period, as they faced multiple obstacles, but also stressful inner feelings. The vast majority of young people noticed that after graduation they did not benefit from any career counselling and guidance services, nor guidance and placement on the labour market.

The lack of well-paid jobs is one of the biggest problems currently facing young people. The data collected in relation to aforementioned points underscore these conclusions. Thus, the vast majority of young people who had a job, either in the formal sphere or in



the informal sphere, were forced to give up these jobs precisely because of inadequate remuneration, or low wages. Moreover, the young people reported on the discrepancy between the work done and the remuneration offered. It is also noted that the policy of unfair pay is one of the main reasons for giving up employment, but also for the emigration of young people abroad.

3. Assessment of NEET strategies

The National Strategy for the Development of the Youth Sector 2014–2020 (hereinafter Strategy) is the third strategic document in the country in the field of youth. This strategy outlines the priority directions of development of the youth sector for the next seven years and defines a specific action plan. The document provides for the direct involvement of young people, workers and youth organisations as well as other actors of immediate contact in the political, economic, social, and cultural life of the country. [8] The strategy is part of the sectoral documents that are part of the National Development Strategy “Moldova 2020” and is guided by the principles, objectives and areas mentioned in the Council of Europe Resolution (dated 27th November 2009) on the renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010–2018). [9]

According to national statistics, in 2019 in the Republic of Moldova the number of young people is 743.2 thousand; or, 27.7% of the country’s population are young people aged 14–34. This figure is constantly declining due to the fact that young people emigrate due to the lack of opportunities at home, as they are looking for new perspectives and opportunities abroad. Factors which generate migration amongst young people are closely linked to identifying better educational opportunities, and paid jobs that would help reduce the risk of poverty.

Lack of attractive jobs for young people, low incomes, and increased risks of poverty are caused by limited economic opportunities, which prevent young people, especially vulnerable groups, from achieving their personal and professional aspirations. A considerable problem amongst young people is the inability to buy their own home due to lack of financial resources, or that the state program “First Home” cannot be accessed by many young people, especially those in the socially vulnerable category.

Disparities in welfare, education, health and economic opportunities are evident between urban and rural areas, where young people in cities have access to a much wider range of opportunities compared to young people in villages. At the same time,



the given disparities also refer to the quality of accessible services for young people. Thus, young people in rural areas are much more exposed to poverty and discrimination in access to goods and services. Moldova has a high rate of inactive young people who do not attend any education or training program, or have a job (NEETs). In 2015, its level was 30.8%. Young women represent the largest portion of this category, and they invoke family obligations as the major cause for which they are disconnected from the labour market. The latter constitute an untapped and failed human potential if they do not benefit from reintegration policies and measures. At the same time, young people are subject to the phenomenon of discrimination, where a high degree of discrimination against young people is found in the workplace. The phenomenon of discrimination is extremely high amongst socially vulnerable young people. An eloquent example is the situation of young people with disabilities who, due to the lack of infrastructure inaccessible to public transport, roads and buildings, are limited in access to education, work, health services. Moreover, access to accessible information (Braille, sign language, easy to read materials) is limited for them.

Against the background of the reduction of the employed population, there is also a constant reduction of the share of the young population in the total employed population. Inactivity and unemployment are characteristic of younger people, aged 15–24. Moreover, an unhealthy way of life involving alcohol and tobacco use is widespread amongst young people and has a detrimental impact on their health and harmonious development. Simultaneously, young people are constantly faced with stress and daily worries (compared to adults): hence, they are subject to risks which negatively influence their health. Finally, young people face problems such as pregnancy and childbirth, as well as sexually transmitted diseases.

Notwithstanding the importance of Objectives of General Development, no. 9 “Industry, innovation and infrastructure”, young people in Moldova are currently limited in their opportunities due to the lack of adequate infrastructure at the local level, as well as intercity connection being unsuitable for non-formal youth activities (i.e., because of the nature of public transport in villages). At the same time, Moldova is losing considerable potential in the development of infrastructure and communities because the guiding principles of “smart cities” are not used in their development, nor digitalisation, as a way to strengthen the youth sector. Finally, when we speak of partnerships for goals and strengthening the youth sector in Moldova, young people are lagging behind in terms of establishing and ensuring the functioning of the National Agency for Development of Youth Programs and Activities, and also the Governmental



Commission for Youth Policies and District Commissions of Youth Management which are regulated by national legislation. There is also a problem related to the insufficiency of local budgets for youth. Moreover, young people report that their voice is not always heard by decision-makers, which constitutes a real challenge to the participation of young people with limited opportunities in decision-making processes.

4. Assessment of the NEET policy measures and results

At the national level, there are several public policies targeting young people, including those in low-income groups. Within the National Development Strategy “Moldova 2020” [10], young people are seen as beneficiaries in terms of career-relevant studies (priority 1), taking into account youth unemployment and their level of training in the education system in order to integrate into the labour market. Thus, the state aims to connect the education system to the requirements of the labour market so as to increase labour productivity and, in turn, increase the employment rate in the economy. The Ministry of Education has proposed a sectoral document “Education 2020”, which provides for the development of the education system in terms of access, relevance, quality and use of ICT, and whose beneficiaries are young people as part of the formal education system. [11]

At the level of non-formal education, the Ministry of Education has proposed the Concept of validation of non-formal education, and the information will be useful in terms of non-formal education in the youth sector. [12] These policies are also necessary when analysing the phenomenon of youth unemployment.

The Ministry of Labour, Social Protection and Family has implemented the National Employment Strategy for the years 2007–2015 [13]. This policy aims to ensure the fullest, most sustainable and productive employment, as well as achieve a sustainable level of employment and acceptable level of remuneration for human resources work. The proposed goal is to be achieved by increasing the number of jobs, improving the quality of and increasing labour productivity, and strengthening social cohesion and inclusion. Employment policies will help combat the effects of structural unemployment, encourage the participation of workers, including young people, and increase the effectiveness of labour market integration and reintegration policies by implementing a set of stimulus measures.

Access to reproductive health services for young people and sex education are regulated by the Law on Reproductive Health, which mandates that sex education is



compulsory and that preparation for family life is carried out in educational institutions and other institutions where adolescents or young people are present. Latterly, this includes those with special needs, according to specially developed programs, which are part of the compulsory curriculum of educational institutions, taking into account age, sex and the peculiarities of psychosexual development. [14]

Another document on which the elaboration of this strategy was based in a transversal way (i.e., at all levels) was the Sectoral Decentralisation Strategy in the field of youth and sports, as well as the National Decentralisation Strategy and its Action Plan for 2012–2015. This National Strategy and Action Plan aims to ensure a local public administration that can function successfully both democratically and autonomously, and which has the necessary capacity and resources to provide public services according to the needs and requirements of beneficiaries, in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, equity. Evidently, this includes the perspective of the rights of groups with reduced possibilities, and financial discipline. The document is useful in terms of local youth services and the role of Youth Resource Centres. [15]

Table 2: Specific interventions according to the NEET youth category

	NEET 'unskilled' young people
Family background	Low level of education of parents Incomplete families Unemployed parents Parents engaged in the informal sphere Families with a low standard of living
Family status	Early marriage, especially amongst young women Unemployed partner
Material condition	Income – occasional earnings, daily Get involved in family farming Very poor material condition They do not have enough financial means for what is strictly necessary
Area of residence	Predominance in rural areas
Level of education	School dropout/incomplete high school education Gymnasium studies Learning problems Reduced availability to continue their studies



	NEET 'unskilled' young people
Skills/qualifications	Lack of qualifications/competencies Skills acquired formally and informally Limited practical skills
The period since they are unemployed/inactive	More than one year
Work experience	Lack of work experience in the formal sphere Employed in the informal sector (occasional activities, daily)
Work integration Do not look for a job Lack of interest in getting hired Hard to occupy	Do not look for a job Lack of interest in getting hired Hard to occupy
Mobility	Low internal and external mobility due to lack of financial means and limited practical skills
Share of total NEET youth	Approximately 40 percent of all NEET youth
Barriers to the labour market	Lack of employment/inadequate pay opportunities Lack of family support It does not address employment institutions, other institutions publicly Limited access to information Negative perceptions of them from the community
Impact	It does not accumulate economic, social and human capital Long-term unemployed/permanently unemployed Mostly informal employment Poor pay Reproducing poverty Deteriorating physical and mental health Deviant and addictive behaviours Social exclusion

Source: Includiunea tinerilor aflați în afara sistemului de educație, formare și ocupație profesională (tineri NEET): Studiu sociologic. (Inclusion of young people outside the education, training and vocational system (NEET young people): Sociological study.) Chișinău: S. n., 2018 (Tipogr. „Foxtrot”). – 102 p.



5. Other domestic and international programmes, projects, and instruments

The Grants Program for youth organisations is dedicated to supporting and developing the youth sector in the Republic of Moldova. It provides, on a competitive basis, logistical and financial support for the implementation of youth initiatives, programs and projects, thus strengthening cooperation with civil society. The competition is open to youth organisations from the Republic of Moldova which carry out youth projects and initiatives with an impact on youth policy at both the national and regional level, and is based on four priorities. These are: Priority I. Youth participation; Priority II. Youth services; Priority III. Economic opportunities for young people; and, Priority IV. Strengthening the youth sector. [16]

Young people in rural areas are given more attention with different levels of involvement in the implementation of the programs. Youth is clearly at the heart of the future of agriculture, food production and rural development. There are already some policies for rural youth in developing countries. Thus, young people in rural areas are included as some of the priority beneficiaries in the strategic programs of IFAD, FAO, the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID), the Danish Development Agency (DANIDA), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), etc.

Some programs intentionally target young graduates, whilst others target the poorest groups. As a rule, young women are included in such programs, or the equal inclusion of young women and men in rural areas is strived for. This commitment can take various forms beyond consultation processes: contractual arrangements with youth organisations based on their expertise; training young people to be local councillors and promoters of innovative agricultural practices (e.g., USAID, IFAD, FAO projects); and, supporting the links between students and farmers, etc.

Whilst the number of people employed in the agricultural sector has fallen in many countries, agriculture will continue to be an important source of employment in rural areas. Many organisations have emphasised the importance of successful young farmers' models through various media (e.g., radio / TV programs, Facebook, blogs) and through national competitions that promote successful young farmers. In this way, they present agriculture as a business rather than a subsistence activity. The approach of business schools for farmers, although not specifically aimed at young people, has also proven to be successful in developing agriculture as a business. Finally, low-cost technologies and innovative technologies that increase agricultural productivity, reduce



labour distortions, and facilitate market access can also help to attract young people.

Several programs target food systems and use value chain analysis, but not all focus on youth. Engaging young people in the early stages, and integrating a youth dimension into the value chain analysis, is therefore essential to identify opportunities and raise awareness amongst young people regarding these opportunities. The use of a territorial approach to employment can contribute to a better understanding of the links between agricultural productivity and on-farm and off-farm employment in the food sector as well as various other sectors.

Vocational training programs are being re-evaluated in order to address the mismatch between the types of skills acquired, and those required by the market. Some programs specifically focus upon targeted training in agriculture for young people as well as more general business and life skills.

The thrust of the transition is from generalised programs to policies designed with young people and for young people. Increasingly, young people are being invited to participate in national political dialogues and high-level conferences in order to identify solutions to the problems affecting them. This includes issues related to rural youth and employment in national and regional policies given that these are vital for the sustainability of interventions. There is a general recognition that the sustainability of interventions requires both the assumption and integration (at the national level) of youth and employment issues into rural and agricultural development policies and investment plans (at both the national and regional levels). [17]

6. Discussion of difficulties and constraints, assessment of the success factors and transferability

It is unanimously accepted that levels of education plays an important role in protecting individuals from unemployment, and that the higher the level of training, the lower the risk of being unemployed. However, recent statistics and realities from different countries show that these statements need to be validated both in terms of quantitative and qualitative studies. Therefore, in this study a special role went to the issues related to education – the level of education of NEET young people, the appreciation of the quality of studies, the problems encountered in the study process and relevant solutions in terms of this category of young people.



The study shows that a significant proportion of the young NEETs interviewed either dropped out of compulsory general education without obtaining a graduation certificate, or after completing compulsory education, did not subsequently enrol in any educational scheme. Taking into account the issue of early leaving of the education system, most young people in this category (with high school education) reported on the precarious financial situation of the families of origin, i.e., the inability of families to help them financially in further education.

Despite the fact that the current education system tends to provide equal opportunities for education for children from families with different material status, the family's financial resources and its ability to invest in children's education continue to largely determine their educational trajectory.

Young people who have dropped out of high school are in a difficult situation, given that they do not have a high school diploma, and therefore cannot access the next level of formal education. At the same time, these young people instead opt to accept precarious jobs in the informal sphere, and these are almost always poorly paid. Early leaving of the education system, according to the results of the qualitative study, presents a risk factor of becoming NEET, which correlates with the results of existing research in the field. [18] At the same time, the early abandonment of the educational system is also a complex and multidimensional social phenomenon that occurs as a result of the impact of a set of (often interconnected) factors: personal relationships; economic, social and educational context; and, family relationships. Amongst the determining factors of the early leaving of the educational system, there are: residing in the rural environment; the precarious material situation (self-appreciated) of the household; and, the low level of education of the parents. With increasing age, the probability of the young person not continuing his studies and limiting himself only to the low level of education increases, which in turn places him in a socially vulnerable position throughout his life.

Another category of NEET young people are those who have dropped out of specialised or higher secondary education, and who respectively do not have a professional qualification. Material constraints and the desire to earn money are amongst the main reasons for abandonment. Furthermore, there are some cases, when young people,



being students, started working and later cannot re-join the study process. At the same time, some of the young people are convinced that the chosen specialisation is not the one they want, or are no longer motivated to obtain a higher education diploma, considering that education no longer has a value and does not guarantee a successful insertion in the world of work.

The significant number of young people with a low level of education who are part of the NEET category reinforces the conclusions of previous research according to which a low level of education contributes to limiting young people's access to the labour market. This category of NEET young people has the highest risk of always being unemployed or poorly paid throughout their lives, to which is added the risk of taking on deviant or addictive behaviours and of facing health problems. The most important factor on the educational trajectory of young people is the financial situation of the families of origin. Young people from families with a materially unsatisfactory situation are more at risk of leaving the education system early than young people from families with a materially satisfactory status. Material deprivation in the family presses young people towards early employment in unskilled work, often in the informal sector, working during the day, which is a factor of vulnerability of the person throughout life and contributes to the reproduction of poverty.

In a similar fashion, not only having limited financial resources, but also the level of parents' education, have a direct impact on the chances of school success, which tells us about the phenomenon of intergenerational transmission of social inequalities. It should be noted that some of these young people, especially those who do not have any qualifications, are aware of the need to complete their studies, to obtain a job, specialties, as important factors in ensuring a proper insertion in the job market. At the same time, we mention here about the project "socio-professional integration for NEET youth" which proposes a complex approach and includes the identification and implementation of actions necessary for the socio-professional inclusion of vulnerable young people aged 15-18, from the Ungheni districts, Calarasi and Nisporeni. The project created a friendly service for adolescents that offers vocational guidance, training and professional integration, psychological counselling, personal development, internships, information on career opportunities, mediation, and assisted employment. [19]



7. Conclusion

The major challenge facing young people aged 15–29 when trying to find a place in the domestic labour market is the lack of opportunities. Hence, the presence of NEET young people in the 15–19 age group is the result of dropping out of school/leaving the education system early and lack of professional training. The high NEET rate for young people aged 20–24 reflects limited employment opportunities for low-skilled young people, including those who have dropped out of higher education and face obstacles to the transition to employment. The particularly high NEET rate for young people aged 25–29 is determined by the lack of employment opportunities that also affects young graduates trying to enter the labour market.

At the same time, the wide involvement of the population in labour migration, including young people, leads to the formation of a segment of the population that practices either circular or seasonal migration, or occasional migration and who are thus excluded from the domestic labour market, in turn leading to overestimation of the NEET youth segment in the young population as a whole.

The weak development of the labour market in recent decades has led to a state of uselessness of the employment potential of the population, as well as the decrease of the value of work in the structure of personal values, especially amongst young people. Employment and professional integration serve as a means of self-affirmation and social recognition, and in conditions of crisis these aspects lose their value, at which point work as a way of life of the individual becomes a means of survival.

The general life context of NEET young people is influenced by a multitude of issues, which have a considerable impact on their life trajectories. Delaying entry into the labour market causes young people to postpone their plans for the future, prolonging the transition to adulthood and the gaining of a personal status of social autonomy.



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WG2 NATIONAL REPORT – AUSTRIA I

Bahanur Nasya

0. INTRODUCTION

In Austria the right for education is based strongly in the constitution and supported with various tools (specialized schools, financial and other support for families with children and teenagers, financial support for young people in education etc.). The rights and tools are available for every citizen and mostly everyone living in the territory of Austria. The special challenges for rural NEET occur because of the demography and topography of the country on the one hand and due to decreasing importance of rural production and migration of opportunities to urban territories on the other hand.

NEET is a useful additional indicator for monitoring the social situation of young people. Therefore focusing on the NEET groups helps to develop and identify right policies. The NEET indicator of Austria has a limited informative value, as not all NEET young people are affected by social exclusion and on the other hand this indicator covers not all disintegrated persons, e.g. precarious employees. Additionally with other labour market indicators the NEET identification allows to identify future or further risks. A popular NEET measure in Austria, (the literature refers several times to Austria as a good example) and, among other things, is **the apprenticeship training**.

Young people who live in far away situated villages or settlements are 1,7 times more in risk of being a NEET than youngsters living in a town or city. An important measure to decrease the NEET rates is **prevention**. Those address youngsters who have to dropout of education or training, because of the own or families economic situation. Financial support allows the youngsters to achieve a degree. Support (accompanying and/or information service) in the transition from school to work is provided in Austria by the Public authorities, teachers or school staff). Also collaboration with employers is considered as an active prevention method. After being a NEET youngsters can apply for reintegration measures. Institutions and coaching, but as well creating new opportunities of employment can provide those⁷.

⁷ Unterstützung der arbeitsmarktpolitischen Zielgruppe „NEET“



NEET's in Austria

The economic transformations and crises (financial crisis 2008, COVID19 pandemic 2020, local crises and similar) affect young people and elderly employees the most. One of the immediate effects of crises is a substantial fall in labour demand. Youth unemployment is typically more sensitive to the business cycles than overall unemployment. One reason is that youth is mainly working in sensitive industries, they are often in part-time working relationships, they have less experience and often their skills are in miss-match with the job-requirements.

People who are not in any kind of a professional relationship, like work or education are called NEET. If they are between 15 and 25 years than they are called youth NEET. From the legal perspective though youngsters are until the age of 18 guided and lead by a legal guardian (parents and similar). After 18 they are eligible for all kinds of support for adults and benefit from the social network.

In Austria a variety of subgroups exist and some are vulnerable and extremely disadvantaged. Others are from a more privileged background and can choose to exit labour market and education system to hold out for opportunities.

Young NEET people have undermined ability to achieve self-sufficiency and are facing high risk of social exclusion. Austrian definition of NEET means that the referred young people are not integrated in the employment system, the educational system and the training system. All nine of Austria's federal states have different policies and financial resources and their activities vary accordingly. Statistically Vienna has the highest NEET numbers and therefore the topic is perceived often as an urban problem. Gender differences in terms of NEET come especially in effect, when the NEET person has a child under the age of 3 years⁸. The influence of location of residence is possibly due to the fact that childcare facilities are more prevalent in cities in Austria. Young parents are eligible for the first three years for maternity or paternity leave, which affects the policies in this regard. Illness and impairments are a lifelong challenge for NEETs. Nevertheless early school leaving is one of the mayor reasons for being a young NEET in Austria. The majority of NEET can contact the Public Employment Services and are eligible for labour market policy measures.

⁸ <https://www.intereconomics.eu/contents/year/2014/number/4/article/how-to-combat-neet-evidence-from-austria.html>



1. TYPES OF INTERVENTIONS AT NATIONAL LEVEL

Education (since 1962)

Austria has a differentiated education system. After year four and after year eight the pupils can choose between different schools, which lead to different types of education paths. In Austria the compulsory schooling is 9 years. The secondary school fulfils normally the 8th year that allows pupils to either to move to the upper secondary level, or attend a specialised 9th school year school, which prepares them for the vocational training. The secondary level provides a range of schools (academic, technical, economic and so on) and they provide the necessary title (Matura) to attend any kind of education in the third level (university, college, etc.). After completion of the 9th year, students can enter the dual training system. 80% of the time they get on the job training and 20% of the time vocational school courses. Any successful completed education and training phase, allows the student to enter the next level of education (advanced training courses, externists exams to achieve the allowance to continue education, or masters certificates for the field of expertise).

Training (since 2017)

In 2017 the “compulsory training”⁹ until the age of 18 was introduced in Austria by the Ministry of Education, Science and Research. The Ministry of Labor, as well as the Ministry of social Affairs, are together responsible for NEET and they act through special coaching projects for youth¹⁰. On national scope the ministries run the program “Education until 18”¹¹. The goal is to ensure that all young people in Austria attend a school or complete an apprenticeship until their 18th birthday.

Dropout

The main challenge in Austria in terms of youth NEET is coming from young people who drop out of school or all kinds of education. The main reasons for the “drop-out” are seen in success in learning, ability to learn and motivation¹². Spatial aspects (access to

9 <https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/schule/beratung/schulinfo/abp18.html>

10 <https://www.autark.co.at/angebote-zur-beruflichen-integration/neba-netzwerk-berufliche-assistenz/jugendcoaching-ausserschulisch-schwerpunkt-neets/>

11 <https://ausbildungbis18.at/en/>

12 <https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/schule/bef/schulabbruch.html>



options) are not listed. There is also not much differentiation for rural or urban youth NEET. In comparison to the other EU countries, Austria is pretty successful in preventing dropout problematic. In 2019 the national dropout number was 7,8% (ESL-Benchmark) with youngsters between 18–24 years. Specialized coaching programs are involving around 33.000 youngsters with around 45% girls.

Youth coaching (various years)

The youth coaching measure is a publicly funded measure, which was piloted in the two Austrian provinces Vienna (entirely urban area) and Styria in 2012. In 2013 it was extended to the whole of Austria. The measure is based on an initiative of the Ministry of Social Affairs in cooperation with the Ministry for Education. This program provides advising and support for youths from the 9th year of school onward and is designed to help them find an educational or vocational path, which suits their personal needs.

Federal and local responsibility (since 2013)

Austria is a federalist state. The responsibilities are shared between the Federal Government and the counties or provinces. The “traditional” youth policy is the extracurricular youth work and a collaboration of county and state. In 2012 a working committee was established, which ensures to imply the extracurricular youth work, with their expertise and support. The National Youth Council¹³, the Centre of Competence for Open Youth work¹⁴ and the National Network of Austrian Youth Information Centres¹⁵ are members of the group. This core group is further supported by workgroups on specific subjects (training, vocational training, employment, entrepreneurship). A national Youth Competence Centre was established in 2013, and coordinates key activities, offers knowledge and skills, and establishes contact with experts. Together with the members (BJV, bOJA and BÖJI) and in collaboration with the provincial youth departments, the centre acts as a National Agency for Youth.

13 <https://bjv.at/>

14 <https://www.boja.at/boja-bundesweites-netzwerk-offene-jugendarbeit>

15 <https://www.jugendinfo.at/>



1. 2. AREAS OF INTERVENTION

2.1 NATIONAL POLICIES

2.1.1. EDUCATIONAL POLICIES

Education (since 1962)

The right for education and training (since 2000)

The Federal Youth Promotion Act is in force since 2000 and promotes measures of extracurricular youth education and youth work, for the purpose of furthering the development of the mental, psychic, physical, social, political, religious and ethical competencies of children and young people. The “Child and Youth Employment Act” defines the rules and regulations of employing minors. From the age of 18 youngsters are eligible for the protection of the relevant chamber (agriculture, economy, workers etc.)

When young people have to decide on their future professional or training pathway at the end of their compulsory school period, this puts excessive demands particularly on disadvantaged young people. Youth coaching is a measure to keep these young people in the education and training system as long as possible or alternatively reintegrate them into the system. Disadvantaged young people are pupils from the individual year 9 of school education upward who suffer individual impairments or social disadvantages or who are at risk of not attaining any qualification at lower or upper secondary level. The key objective of youth coaching is to enhance their labour market opportunities through intensive counselling (“case management”) and, in general, to implement a measure to reduce the number of dropouts.

While the Ministry of Social Affairs (in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour) is responsible for the providers of Youth Coaching, the Ministry of Education steers the school-relating tasks. This includes informing the relevant stakeholders and preparing appropriate ordinances.



Schools identify affected young people and refer them to the providers of youth coaching.

The Federal Social Welfare Office (Sozialministeriumservice) is responsible for the implementation of the program by the different Youth Coaching providers. In every federal province several providers work closely together with schools. The main task of schools is to identify affected pupils and refer them to the providers. Coaches have two main responsibilities: Support for the young people according to their needs and networking with other professionals, like therapists, guidance services or training companies. Youth Coaching is based on the idea of case management.

The main aim is to combat early school leaving, social exclusion and youth unemployment.

The youth coaching scheme meets a longstanding demand for providing more support to teachers by external counsellors and consequently intensifying inter-professional collaboration.

2.1.2. SCHOOL-TO-WORK POLICIES

School to work (since 2012)

In the “future for youth action the Austrian Government guarantees unemployed young job-seekers employment or targeted training or a subsidised job within 6 months.

2.1.3. LABOUR POLICIES

Labour market (since 2010)

All kinds of employment is organised and supported by the Public Employment Service Austria, which has divisions in every county. Next to having financial support for people (no age limit) who lose their jobs, they have several programs to support education, training, apprenticeship and internships. Supported people get for a period of time (often 6 month) financial support, potentially also other supports (childcare, rent, transportation etc.) for the time in which they are looking for an employment. This period gets extended if a special program is employed (education, sabbatical period, training, and similar). The organisation collaborates with local companies, training organisations and municipalities. Therefore the support varies from location



to location. The organisation has an extensive database for job vacancies¹⁶ and open apprentice positions¹⁷. Other trainings and internships are often handled on demand and individually. Especially for young people the organisation started a program called “Arbeitszimmer¹⁸”. The aim is to support youngsters in all topics related to school, apprenticeship, studying, and similar.

2.1.4. SOCIAL WELFARE POLICIES

Social welfare (various years)

Every child financially is supported in Austria until the age of 18 and in case of further education until the age of 27. Minor’s support is paid to the parents. Additionally support for rents, homes, transport, childcare and other cares are provided upon necessity. “Mindestsicherung¹⁹” allow people in need a minimum income (financial security). There is no age limit and the person is eligible for such financial support, when other funding schemes are not applicable. For a period of time every person in need can also be eligible for primary care (Grundversorgung²⁰) in Austria.

2.1.5. RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

Agripreneur (various years, since 2015)

Farming is the most traditional field of activity in rural areas. Young farmers (Junglandwirte²¹) get financial support from the Chamber of Agriculture in each county auf Austria to build an existence. The age limit is 40 years. The chamber also supports with consultancy²². The financial support is depending on the reference-income on which the young farmer builds his or her farm concept.

16 <https://www.ams.at/arbeitsuchende/arbeitslos-was-tun/jobsuche-online-und-mobil#wien>

17 <https://www.ams.at/arbeitsuchende/arbeitslos-was-tun/lehrstellenboerse#wien>

18 <https://www.arbeitszimmer.cc/>

19 <https://www.oesterreich.gv.at/themen/soziales/armut/3/2/Seite.1693914.html>

20 <https://grundversorgungsinfo.net/zielgruppen/>

21 <https://grundversorgungsinfo.net/zielgruppen/>

22 <https://www.lko.at/beratung+2500++2676541>



Entrepreneurship or training youngsters (various years)

The Austrian Economic Chambers are supporting entrepreneurs (no age limit) when establishing a business²³. The business model is the main criteria and the context (rural or urban) is not the main criteria. The chamber also supports companies with counselling and funding for involving apprentices in their company, investing, and so on.

Young families (various years)

The Austrian counties develop affordable housing opportunities through subsidies, in most of the settlements and villages. Those are often collective housing models (apartments, terraced houses, and similar). For other kinds of housing (smaller villages or settlements, owned land and self-building, etc.) special kinds of loans by the banks and funding is available. The counties have special programs to support young families in “founding a home” (e.g. here in Styria²⁴). Supported are homes (bought or rented), furniture, renovation and building.

Individual support (various years)

On individual basis landowners (old farmers, organisations like religious entities, municipalities, families) provide their land or building for affordable prices to young people to either start a business (agriculture or others) or build a house. The opportunities in this field are very much depending on the overall context of the rural area (financial and demographic context).

Volunteering (various years)

There is no national program for youth volunteering. The Federal Chancellery promotes volunteer-specific projects of nationwide importance as well as model projects of volunteer organizations and supports educational, training and quality assurance measures. The Voluntary Social Year, the Voluntary Environmental Protection Year as well as Holocaust Memorial Service, Peace-related and Social Services abroad are a national level matter, but operated on to the federal state level.

²³ <https://www.wko.at/service/Austrian-Economic-Chambers.html>

²⁴ <https://www.wohnbau.steiermark.at/cms/beitrag/12117815/113383920>



2.1.6. PROJECTS

Projects (various years)

In Austria there are multiple actors to run projects, who might target rural youth NEETs. Those can be on the county level, initiated by the 9 counties, who can act partially independently (self-determination). Short-term programs for NEET are done by private companies and in collaboration (funding) with the Public Employment Service Austria (Arbeitsmarktservice²⁵) and or initiative of companies who are looking for staff, trainees and similar. Next to the public programs, also religious or sectorial (for instance VOEST-Alpine) funding can support NEETs reintegration into the job market.

2.2 LOCAL POLICIES

2.2.1 CASE STUDY CARINTHIA

Case study Carinthia (since 2015)

Next to the national programs also the counties develop programs specific to their contexts. Counties with abundance of rural areas are challenged with migration either to towns or out of the county, or commuting if the village or settlement allows (mobility infrastructure wise)²⁶. In the University of Klagenfurt, the education center provides a mentoring program for the first-generation students²⁷. The administration of the county is providing various support (childcare, mobility fares, social support, counselling etc.)²⁸ to the young people living within the territory of Carinthia.

²⁵ <https://www.ams.at/organisation/public-employment-service-austria#wien>

²⁶ Aigner-Walder Birgit, Klinglmair Robert, Leitner Sylvia und Sting Stephan (2015): "Ländliche Regionen unter Druck. Zentrale Ergebnisse empirischer Untersuchungen zu Wanderungs-, Bleibe- und Rückkehrmotiven bei Wanderungen in und aus Kärnten". Klagenfurt: Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt. Institut für Soziologie.

²⁷ <https://www.wohnbau.steiermark.at/cms/beitrag/12117815/113383920>

²⁸ <https://www.ktn.gv.at/Themen-AZ/Uebersicht?thema=5&subthema=28>



3. DATA SOURCE

<https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/schule/beratung/schulinfo/abp18.html>

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YOUTH POLICY

APPLICATION OF THE INTERVENTION:
BEST-PRACTICES WITH RURAL NEETS