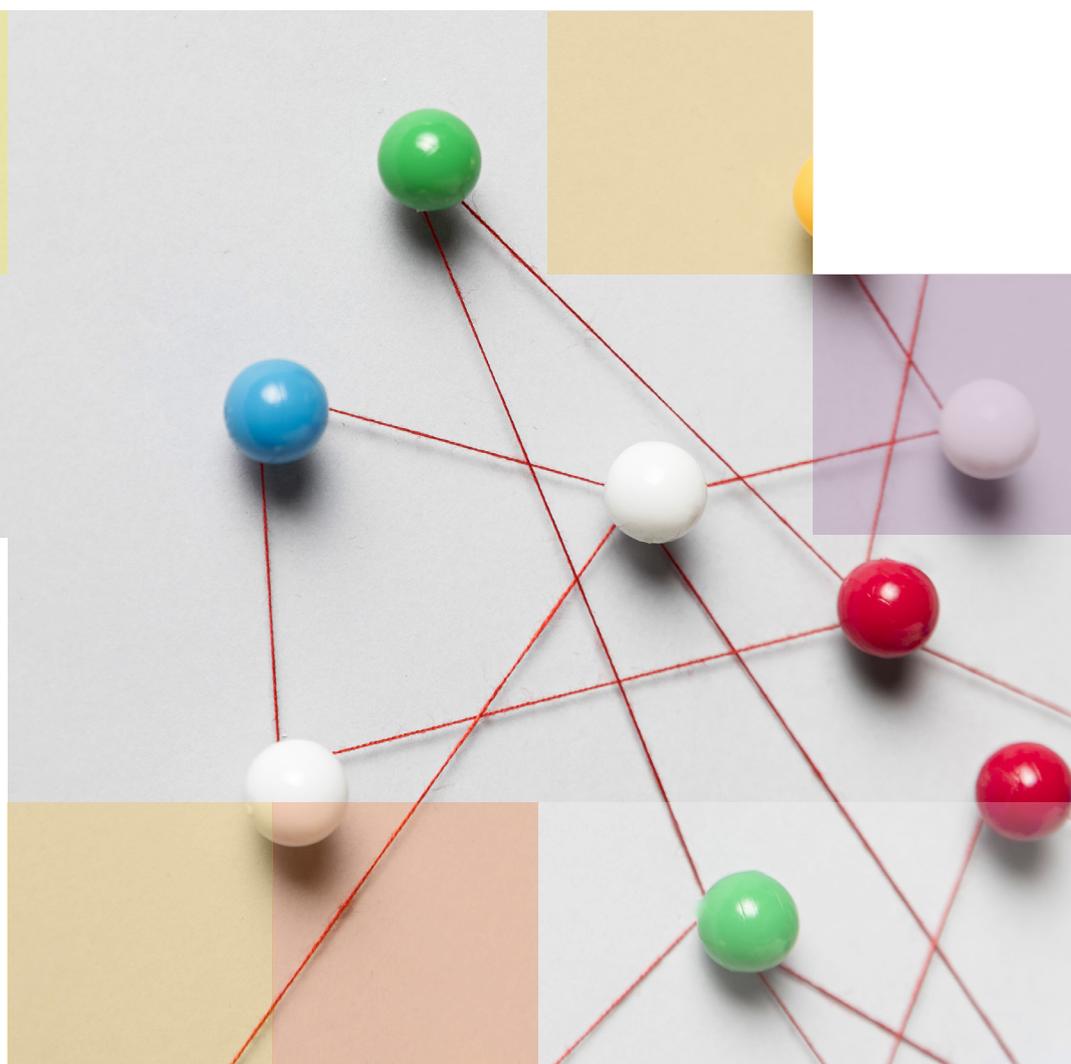


POLICY BRIEF

Rural NEETs and Sustainability: Pathways to Rural Transformation

Report elaborated by Working Group 4 (WG4):

Rural NEETs social networks and social inclusion



February 2023

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



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Rural NEETs and
Sustainability
COST Action CA18213:
RURAL NEET YOUTH

Policy Brief:
Rural NEETs and Sustainability:
Pathways to Rural Transformation

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Visual representation of the Policy Brief
Rural NEETs and Sustainability – Pathways to Rural Transformation

<p>INPUTS (secondary data + primary data)</p>	<p>COST Action Rural Youth NEET Network (CA18213) deliverables:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manuals (Petrescu et al., 2021; Erdogan et al., 2021); • Policy briefs (Prieto-Flores & Gasparovic, 2022; Flynn et al., 2022) • Book (Bojinec & Petrescu, 2022; • Reports (Simoes et. al., 2020; Fernandes-Jesus & Ferreira, 2023; Flynn & Paabot, 2023; Petrescu & Prieto-Flores, 2023; Mujčinović & Bojinec, 2023) 	<p>Facts & findings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender imbalances (“masculinization” of the rural population, lower fertility rates); • Underemployment, out-migration and higher rates of poverty and marginalization as major challenges; • Early school leaving phenomenon is more prominent in rural areas; • Females face a higher risk of becoming NEET than their male peers; • Poor infrastructure in rural areas; 	<p>Current policy options</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Territorial development - Funding mechanisms; • Synergy & networking - Success of the policy interventions; • Creativity & Social Innovation - „New“ Agifood opportunities; • Rural-urban continuum - Digital divide/digital opportunities to transform rural areas;
<p>OUTPUTS</p> <p>policy recommendations</p>	<p>European policy level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to invest in rural infrastructure improving the quality of life (bridging the gap between urban and rural remoteness, and attractiveness while promoting well-being for all). • Continue to invest in digital infrastructure in rural areas while at the same time improving the digital skills among the youth and general population to induce digital transformation. • Continue to promote sustainable economic growth and youth employment through in-depth assessing the current measures/policies/action plans and aligning with youth needs and capabilities in rural areas. 	<p>National policy level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raising awareness of mixed approaches (bottom-up and top-down) in designing and implementing public policies; • Analyzing, identifying, and underlying causal mechanisms of specific youth/population needs within the specific regions and creating tailor-made policies/solutions (raising awareness about diverse and context-based aspirations, experiences, interests, and capabilities of the youth); • Applying networked rural development models that are locally rooted and emphasize local capacity-building; 	<p>Practice policy level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotions and diffusion of new, modern, and innovative activities (business models), such as the production of high-quality and region-specific products, product brand development, nature conservation and landscape management, agritourism, and the development of short-supply chains. • Promotions of a positive image of rural areas aimed to attract new technology/practice adopters (newcomers) along the value chain. • Early exposure to agricultural experiences in but also other complementary activities in rural areas.



Policy Brief: Rural NEETs and Sustainability: Pathways to Rural Transformation

Rural areas cover 44.6% of the total EU territory accounting for almost 30% of its population (EU, 2021), playing an important role in economic growth, social pluralism, and the well-being of the population while promoting environmental aesthetics. Still, the rural decline is an undisputed fact and it has become a global issue (Liu & Li, 2017) and the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated some challenges that impact rural opportunities. Living standards have both an economic and a social component. The bigger the economic and social differences between the urban (city/town) and the rural countryside, the higher out-migration from rural areas can be expected. Depopulation, particularly the outward migration of young adults, is the main expression of the shrinkage of rural communities and local economies (Amcoff & Westholm, 2007).

All over the world, countries are facing strong rural decline (Li et al., 2019) while the rural decline is first mentioned as „rural renewal“ in the US (Anding & Gustafson, 1968). Later on, the term evolved and nowadays numerous expressions have similar meanings such as rural decline, community destruction, “dying” rural communities, marginal community, and “hollowing out” of the countryside all of them to describe the downward spiral of decreasing employment, depopulation, economic depression and deteriorating quality of life in the countryside (Li et al., 2019). A general explanation for rural decline is the outcomes owing to the differences in living standards between rural and urban areas (Young, 2013).

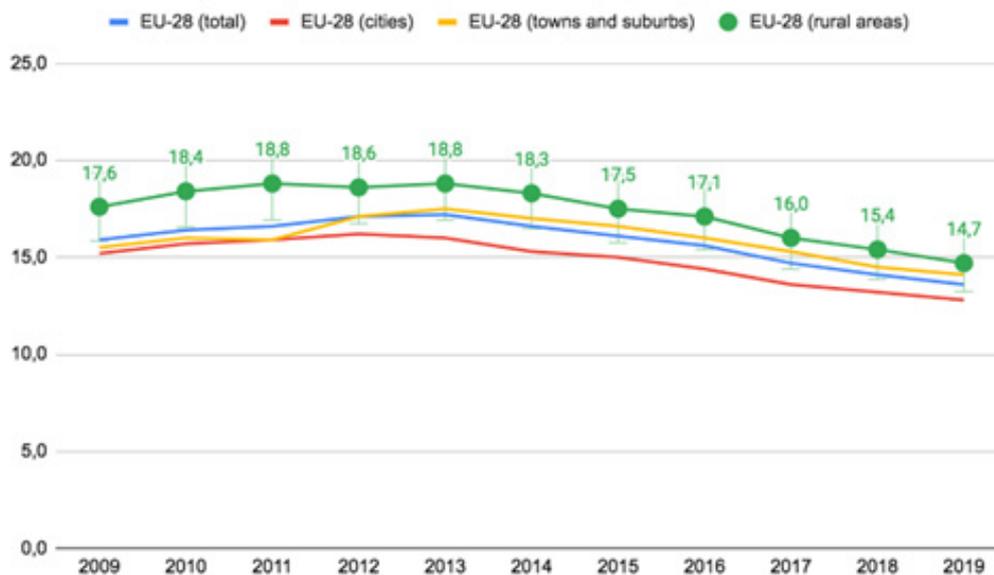
- Rural areas lag behind urban areas in broadband accessibility, which is one of the leading causes of the digital divide (service type, price, quality, and reliability) (Hollman et al., 2021);
- The long-established urbanization process that draws the population out of more remote rural areas into urban or more accessible rural areas is opposed to a more recent counter-urbanization flow from urban areas into accessible rural areas (made possible by new transport and information and communication (ICT) infrastructure);
- Aging not only unfavorably affects the demographic trend and thus reduces local labor supply in the future but also poses the risk to the future sustainability of social protection systems;
- Gender imbalances in some rural parts of Southern and Eastern European States, where high rural-to-urban migration of females has caused a “masculinization” of



the rural population, have led also to a secondary effect on further lowering fertility rates (Bertolini et al., 2008).

- A look at the labor market and rural unemployment reveals the opposite gender divide in particular for youth rural unemployment where in the majority of EU countries young women were more often unemployed than men.
- Participation in training and qualification shows that young females are more motivated to take added training. On average of the EU-27 countries, the participation rate was 59.6% for rural young women, exceeding that of men (49.2%) by ten percentage points.
- In the sector of tertiary education (ISCED 5-8) on the other hand young females have a higher share of tertiary education than males living in rural areas in all EU countries;
- Rural young women on average stay longer in the education systems and reach higher education more often than their male peers living in rural areas;
- Early school leaving phenomenon is more prominent in rural areas (Eurostat 2022);
- Total share of rural NEETs decreased since 2011, females face a higher risk of becoming NEET than their male peers.

NEETs (15-34) in EU-28 (2009-2019) by degree of urbanization





Current approaches to tackle problems of rural youth and declining rural areas

Rural areas are complex units, consisting of many elements and with a lot of interactions where the robustness of rural communities depends on the sustainability of many facets such as economy, population, social networks, spatial factors, agriculture, culture, land use, ecology, and government policy (Epps, 1995). This indicates the complexity of rural areas and intensifies the assertion that there is no single “model” for sustainable rural development (Bryant et al., 1996). Some of the identified concepts, theories, and business models are used to raise awareness about the necessity to change the perception of rural areas as “agricultural dominant”, “isolated”, and “traditional” in terms of doing business and policy interventions toward the understanding that rural areas were and will be important if not crucial in reaching sustainable development and wellbeing for all.

Funding mechanisms for territorial development

Different possibilities of financing with EU funds are available for rural areas and rural development. The successful absorption of EU funds can depend on different factors such as the ability to co-financing and refunds, human resources required in project preparation, and actual implementation of projects.

Sinergy & networking are important for the success of the policy interventions

Success cannot be generated exclusively from the local or imposed by the regional and/or national and international (EU) level policies. Instead, synergy and meeting of bottom-up and top-down approaches are key to achieving a such desirable outcome (Neo Endogenous Development (Ray, 2001;2)). Development is best stimulated with:

- focusing on the specific needs of a specific rural territory and its communities, where the focus shifts from the classical analysis of needs within individual sectors of the economy.
- valorizing and using local resources, natural and human, to retain as many potential benefits as possible in the local area.
- focusing on the needs, capacities, and perspectives of the local population.



“New” Agrifood Opportunities in Creativity & Social Innovation

The multi-functionality of the sector is explained through the service sector in rural areas that have been expanding rapidly and, as agriculture and industry shrink further, a rise of on- and off-farm non-farming employment activities and rural households incomes, i.e., farm tourism or the integration of care services into farms become more prominent (Scoones, 2009).

Can rural-urban gaps continue?

A new technology called Industry 4.0 fuel transformation and builds a new integrated Cyber-Physical-Social Environment which brings together people, markets, and working space into one new cyberspace making location less important. In addition to digital divide/lack of digital opportunities to transform rural areas, three main factors can slow down the transformation of agrifood systems and rural economies:

- poor investment and less development overall, not only digital infrastructure in rural areas;
- undeveloped and weak social capital in rural areas;
- lack of consistency of public policies and complex institutional settings.

Recommendations are provided at three levels:

European policies

- Continue to invest in rural infrastructure and green transition improving the quality of life (bridging the gap between urban and rural remoteness, and attractiveness while promoting well-being for all).
- Continue to invest in digital, ICT infrastructure in rural areas while at the same time improving the digital skills among the youth and general population to induce digital transformation.
- Continue to promote sustainable economic growth and youth employment through in-depth assessing the current measures/policies/action plans and aligning with youth needs and capabilities in rural areas.



National level policies

- Raising awareness of mixed approaches (bottom-up and top-down) in designing and implementing public policies;
- Analyzing, identifying, and underlying causal mechanisms of specific youth/population needs within the specific regions and creating tailor-made policies/solutions (raising awareness about diverse and context-based aspirations, experiences, interests, and capabilities of the youth);
- Applying networked rural development models that are locally rooted and emphasize local capacity-building;

Practice level policies

- Promotions and diffusion of new, modern, green, and innovative activities (business models), such as the production of high-quality and region-specific products, product brand development, nature conservation and landscape management, agri-tourism, and the development of short-supply chains.
- Promotions of a positive image of rural areas aimed to attract new technology/practice adopters (newcomers) along the value chain.
- Early exposure to agricultural experiences but also other complementary activities in rural areas.



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