

POLICY BRIEF

Enhancing community-based projects for rural youth NEETS: Policy recommendations

Policy brief elaborated by Working Group 1 (WG1):

Rural NEETs social networks and social inclusion



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Rural NEETs and community-based projects

This policy brief focuses on community-based projects across Europe aiming to give voice to and empower young people in rural areas. Our goals are threefold: 1) to identify projects that facilitate the participation and social inclusion of rural NEETs; 2) to examine the barriers and obstacles these projects face; 3) to present practical recommendations to support these projects and overcome existing challenges.

Rural areas:

administrative units located outside urban clusters, with low population density, according to the territorial typology adopted by Eurostat (Eurostat, 2023).

NEET: Not in employment, education, or training. Statistical indicator defined according to two criteria: young people who are not in employment, either because they are unemployed or economically inactive; and simultaneously not in education or training.

Being NEET in rural areas is a double challenge that puts these young people at greater risk of social exclusion, with more limited and less diversified opportunities than young people living in urban areas (Ferreira & Vieira, 2020; Simões et al., 2017), namely:

- fewer educational, training, social, and economic resources
- scarcer employment opportunities
- more limited access and diversity of access to public resources
- Digital inclusion: difficulties in terms of accessibility, connectivity, and literacy
- more likely to be at risk of or in poverty - generationally reproduced

These barriers further restrict their educational and career opportunities and expectations (Corbett, 2013; Carcillo et al., 2015; Rönnlund, 2020).



Methodological approach

This policy brief is based on the work developed by Working Group 1: 'Rural NEETs Social Networks and Social Inclusion', which is part of the COST: CA18213 - Rural NEET Youth Network: Modelling the risks underlying rural NEETs social exclusion (RNYN). In WG1 we have been analysing the role of social networks (family, friends, neighbours, and rural communities at large) and social inclusion processes (risk and protective factors at the rural community level) on the quality of life of rural NEETs'. This policy brief is based on the report 'Mapping Community-Based Projects Promoting Participation and Social Inclusion of Youth NEETs in Rural Areas Across Europe' (2023), which presents several examples of community-based that have been implemented in rural areas across Europe in recent years.

An online survey was used to map initiatives for rural NEETs across Europe. Data was collected between 8 June 2022 and 15 September 2022. The survey consisted of questions on 1) project characteristics; 2) project design and implementation; 3) project evaluation; 4) resources needed to develop the project; 5) articulation/networking; and (6) communication and dissemination.

In total, we have identified 43 projects from 14 countries: Portugal, Spain, Italy, Sweden, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Turkey, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, the United Kingdom, Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Croatia (Table 1).

Our descriptive analysis of the projects showed that:

- The projects targeted unemployed young adults and/or those in a NEET situation, aged 20–24 years or 25–29 years old, aiming to facilitate their labour market integration and/or resume their educational trajectories.
- Most of the projects involve the mobilisation of existing local resources and networks within the community, suggesting the importance of social networks for the quality of life and social inclusion of rural NEETs.
- The results suggest the importance of local-scale initiatives in addressing the social inclusion of specific vulnerable groups, allowing for a more personalised, tailor-made approach and community



- involvement, which is not always possible to reach through top-down programmes developed by national and European institutions.
- These community-based initiatives face several obstacles, barriers, and problems in their implementation and development, which limit young people's participation and social inclusion.

Table 1 - List of projects

	Film Workshop "Our Free Spaces!" European Capital of Culture Spatial Justice
	Support for young people in employment in the IT sector Social Map of Youth in the Municipality of Jajce
	Nuove Energie emergono dai Territori N.E.E.T. Progetto Policoro NEETs in entrepreneurship
	Improving children's mental and physical health Socio-emotional and Steam in Leisure time: Ugdykime vaikus
	Slow Wine – Sustainable Local Wine in the Tikvesh Youth Entrepreneurship Support Network
	Escola de Segunda Oportunidade de Gaia - E2OG "À Volta das Conversas" As Nossas Quintas Espaço J
	Joop JOVE Anigmatik INTERCONEXIÓN
	UTAS- Unga Till Arbete eller studier Motivera och Aktivera MOA SIKT 2.0
	Young Women Building Their Future First Chance NEET Needs, Problems and Future. Prospects of Young People in Turkey
	Springboard project Rural Youth Project

Barriers and obstacles faced by community-based projects

Despite the importance of targeting rural youth in the European Youth Strategy 2019–2027 (EU, 2018), most public policies continue to offer standardised and massified responses to young people – and especially to NEETs – in rural areas, based on an intervention that is not anchored in the local territory.

In contrast, community-based projects aim to promote the participation and social inclusion of vulnerable rural young people based on a proximity approach. However, these initiatives face multiple obstacles and limitations that need to be identified to find solutions to overcome them.

Inspired by Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1989), which considers the dynamic interplays between individual and environmental factors at multiple levels, but not strictly following it, we organised the obstacles and limitations to the development and implementation of practice-based projects reported by the practitioners and stakeholders interviewed into different levels (Figure 1). These levels are individual, organisational, community, and macro (systemic/structural).

Figure 1 - Barriers and obstacles faced by community-based projects



Individual level

A common obstacle is the lack of awareness of the projects, meaning that target groups (youth and their families) do not have sufficient access to information about the projects and the project practitioners find it difficult to mobilise them to participate.



The lack of interest of the target group (young people and their families) in participating in projects is another obstacle mentioned in the survey. This lack of interest is also observed among other relevant stakeholders, who can be key to the success of the project, especially in attracting the interest of local bureaucrats.

Perhaps related to the young people's lack of interest in participating are two factors also mentioned in the study: lack of self-esteem and lack of institutional trust. Lack of self-esteem may be related to their previous experience of being NEET, as this experience can be perceived as an individual failure. Some highly hierarchical models of social intervention with NEETs exclude young people's participation in decision-making processes and may also contribute to their low self-esteem. Young people's previous negative experiences in social projects/interventions targeted at them may also explain their lack of trust in other participants, project coordinators, local authorities and bureaucrats and their low level of participation.

These factors lead to a critical obstacle: the lack of active involvement and participation, which is key to designing a successful intervention.

Organisational Level

Some obstacles are directly related to the organisational capacity of the intervening institution. Most of these institutions are small civil society organisations or local governments with limited resources.

A limited number of personnel carry out diversified roles such as managing the daily activities of the organisation, running the project and developing new projects to ensure the survival of the organisation. This situation has several consequences; firstly, the employees face the problem of precariousness and have to move to other locations to find suitable jobs; secondly, the organisation loses its institutional memory of the project; thirdly, it prevents the accumulation of know-how within the organisation.

The short-term orientation of organisations is linked to their limited financial capacities. They depend on the flow of funds from donors or the central government to projects. This makes project financial planning crucial, as any delay in the flow of funds will force organisations to have negative balancing accounts, making it difficult to run the project and cover its costs.



The lack of know-how in organisations also has medium-term consequences. They don't have the information to apply for EU-funded projects, the requirements and the format are more than complex for organisations, and they are disadvantaged at the application stage. If their financial structure is weak, they don't meet the expectations of international donors. In addition, the project timetable is highly squeezed, and only a small amount of the energy is devoted to field operations. Coordination and reporting dominate the agenda of the project coordinators, preventing the development and implementation of proper impact measurement and monitoring of activities.

Another obstacle is the failure of organisations to get consultancy and training from other professional institutions to facilitate their project development, application, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation processes.

Community Level

The third level of obstacles is observed at the community level. As the project targets rural areas, the lack of transportation is a major barrier to reaching the target community. Most project coordinators are based in urban centres. They cannot set up local offices in rural areas. Therefore, they must use public transport or their own vehicles, and both of which are limited in many areas.

The same obstacle is faced by rural youth and their communities of origin. The geographical mobility of young people living in rural areas is limited by the low frequency and variety of public transport services. This (i) mobility is a barrier to access to education, training, and employment, which are generally more available in urban areas.

The rurality of the projects creates another problem: the lack of necessary physical spaces, such as meeting rooms in these villages or neighbourhoods.

Structural (Macro) Level

At the macro level, different structural obstacles interact with each other. The first one is the unwillingness of local administration to support and participate in the projects. Government agencies often focus on large-scale, centrally organised projects and are suspicious of local and small-scale projects. The central government does not recognise the



promoters of these local projects, and, in some cases, they may be in conflict with the local governments.

This over-centralised approach by governments leads to an emphasis on the economic consequences of the NEET problem and tends to ignore other dimensions. As a result, social impact projects are generally ignored and do not receive sufficient support from policymakers.

Some respondents spoke of project fatigue. As a result of the implementation of the Youth Guarantee Programme in several Member States, the number of projects targeting NEETs has increased, and the success rate is still questionable. Too many failed projects lead to “project fatigue” among all stakeholders, especially government agencies.

The country’s democratic culture can play an essential role as an obstacle. In some countries, civic involvement is already institutionalised and has become an integral part of policy development and intervention. In some other cases, the nationalist/isolationist governments are suspicious of the activities of civil society organisations. In these cases, the absence of a long-standing democratic and participatory culture may discourage active citizen participation in policies and interventions. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic and social isolation are major obstacles. Many interventions had to stop or shift their activities to the online environment. This shift had a direct negative impact on the effectiveness of the interventions. Moreover, as the target groups of interventions were already vulnerable to external shocks, the pandemic multiplied these vulnerabilities.



Final considerations and challenges for policy

Youth-centred approaches

Most projects involve young people only through consultation. It is important to involve them as key actors in the design, implementation, and evaluation of projects. Young people should have a role in defining the responses that meet their needs and expectations.

Strategies

- Focus on the needs of young people and develop responses that consider the multi-faceted challenges that young people face.
- Consider other dimensions of social inclusion beyond employment and education (e.g., quality of work, belonging and identity, cultural challenges, family environment).
- Support and fund youth-led initiatives and projects.
- Facilitate projects that give centrality to peer-to-peer interventions.
- Meet young people in their own contexts (e.g., festivals, caravans for young rural NEETs, competitions, performances, bootcamps, engaging awareness-raising campaigns).
- Diversify ways of communicating with young people and avoid adult-centred approaches.
- Consider technology as a tool (pathway to bring young people project): bi-directional communication (not a uni-directional tool).
- Promote young people's participation in planning and defining what is important for their communities (e.g., participatory budget, youth parliaments).

Connect and build bridges within the community

It is also important to raise awareness among rural youth of existing community-based projects and how they can benefit from them. Workshops and information days as well as social media posts would give young people in rural areas the opportunity to learn about ongoing and future projects in their community.

It is necessary to facilitate projects to act locally through a prior and rigorous diagnosis of the problems, needs, opportunities, and specific



potentialities of each territorial context, allowing the mobilisation of local resources and networks.

Establishing and promoting partnerships thus becomes a fundamental axis in the implementation of community-based projects, allowing institutions to strengthen their capacity for action by mobilising a variety of partners and thus respond more effectively to the problems and challenges faced by young people.

At the same time, these local partnerships enable young people to meet and interact with a variety of partners, allowing them to (re)connect with local communities and organisations and enrich their network of contacts, which can be particularly important for the transition process from education to the labour market.

Strategies

- Establish community-based advisory groups for each project.
- Map and identify which “institutions” (e.g., local organisations, churches, mosques) are important in the community and work with them in designing projects.
- Promote collaborative work with institutions to build synergies and sharing resources between different organisations.
- Work at the prevention level: i.e. involve schools as key partners in the project.

Empower and support community-based organisations

Policymakers should seek to strengthen the organisational capacity of intervening institutions, either small civil society organisations or local governments.

In many cases, priorities should include the engagement of (additional) skilled staff (trained to apply for projects), an increase in financial capacity and bringing know-how to organisations through educational seminars and training to acquire the necessary skills to apply for EU-funded projects.

The provision of basic resources and infrastructure to optimise project outcomes in rural areas needs to be prioritised in the policy agenda.



Strategies

- Facilitate and help build institutional capacity to apply for the EU-funded projects.
- Provide consultancy at all stages of the project (from development to the evaluation process) and set up contact points for technical support within the municipality.
- Develop national and local platforms for young people that bring together the information that exists for them and that is scattered.
- Develop youth workers' relational skills, self-awareness and self-care.
- Invest in funding for human resources and physical spaces (e.g., local-based community youth centres).
- Establish local offices and equipped meeting spaces that can be shared by different organisations and communities.
- Facilitate mobility and transport by developing shared transport programmes, strengthening public transport services and encouraging people to use sustainable transport such as bicycles or electric vehicles.
- Promote digital inclusion of young people in rural contexts, i.e. digital literacy (ICT skills), accessibility (access to electronic devices) and connectivity (good internet connection both fixed and mobile broadband).



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