

# NEET Rural–Urban Ecosystems

Subjects: Urban Studies

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The European Union (EU) typically supports young people aged between 15–24 years who are not in employment, education, or training (NEETs) via policies that target the following interconnected areas at the individual member state level: employment; education; social work; and youth engagement. In the context of employment, each country must develop an aligned European employment strategy coordinated with the other member states, which should contribute to the management of common policies and the involvement of local governments, trade unions, and employers' organisations.

Keywords: rural–urban ecosystems ; social innovation diffusion ; education ; NEET

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## 1. Introduction

In the area of education systems, this cooperative approach between the member states is intended to contribute to the development of high-quality education recognised within and across the European community <sup>[1]</sup>. The circumstances underpinning these common themes of the EU social policy are the promotion of employment, improved living and working conditions, the equal treatment of employees, adequate social protection, and the development of human resources <sup>[1]</sup>. The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (2021) sets out guidelines for the member states relating to the need to achieve high levels of employability, skills, and strong social protection systems <sup>[2]</sup>. The Action Plan projected that, by December 2020, 16 million people would be unemployed, and youth unemployment would be at 17.8%, well above the overall population unemployment rate. Therefore, it was the goal of the Action Plan to reduce the rate of youth unemployment or NEETs from 12.6% to 9% over the lifetime of the plan. However, during the last decade, the recession exacerbated the economic disparities across Europe, with more pronounced increases in unemployment rates, especially among youths in the southern European countries, which were more severely impacted <sup>[3]</sup>. Indeed, it may be the case that differences in institutional environments may help explain cross-country youth disparities <sup>[4]</sup>. Considerable differences are evident in terms of the efficiency of the school-to-work transition system (e.g., the period between the end of compulsory schooling and full-time employment involving many actors from education systems to the institutions operating in the labour market); labour market regulations; and labour market flexibility, which may affect the length of unemployment spells and gaps in experience among youths <sup>[4][5][6]</sup>. Therefore, it is clear that there is a need to develop a coherent overview of this challenging environment.

Consequently, the European Commission encourages the member states, along with the provision of targeted financial support <sup>[2]</sup>, to implement the newly reformulated Youth Guarantee Programme with a particular focus on the development and provision of high-quality opportunities that have the capacity to support stable labour market integration. An action plan needed to be set up to implement the reformulated Youth Guarantee Programme adapted to national, regional, and local circumstances. For ensuring continuity across the European Union as far as is possible, the European Commission's Youth Guarantee guidance document identifies the need to strengthen partnerships between Youth Guarantee providers and the relevant stakeholders at all levels of government for the duration of the work programme (2021–2027) <sup>[2]</sup>. There is also a need to adapt these action plans to suit the complexities of the regional contexts of the affected people as the geographical location of a young person's residence can be an important contributing or limiting factor. For rural areas, it is recommended that a review of the restrictions on public employment services is carried out to ensure more efficient support, institutional arrangements, and practices in various fields (social affairs; health; education; and employment) that do not meet the needs of young people and encourages young people to simply abandon their pursuit of employment <sup>[7][8]</sup>.

The revised and reinforced Youth Guarantee recognises that while some NEETs may need a “less support” approach, other more vulnerable NEETs are likely to need “more intensive, longer-term, and comprehensive measures” to avoid disproportionately experiencing the negative impacts that are typical of the demographic <sup>[2]</sup>. At a European level, seven

different categories of diversity-related NEETs have been identified, which allow the member states to analyse and concentrate on more precise policy-making <sup>[9]</sup>

Even though the Youth Guarantee Programme acknowledges that certain sub-categories of youth are more likely to fall into the NEET status and, consequently, can be at a greater risk of social exclusion, scant attention has been paid to systemic exclusion in the context of rural areas in Europe. Since 2012, Eurofound has calculated that young people living in remote areas are at one-and-a-half times greater risk of falling into the NEET status than young people living in medium-sized cities <sup>[10]</sup>. Indeed, youth NEET rates vary significantly across European countries (and sometimes also within the countries), in which personal characteristics can correspond to different NEET traits <sup>[5]</sup>, compounded by rurality. Exploring this further, such categorisations are still largely based on the assessment of the individual context and not the systems that influence that context. Institutional and structural risk factors are rarely addressed within youth programmes despite local structures that support labour market entry, the field of innovation, and education systems being critical elements of urban and rural area ecosystems. Returning to the aforementioned disparity of risk versus geographic location, there are also significant variances between countries in which the percentage of NEETs in the population can vary greatly from 8% (Netherlands) to 38% (Turkey) <sup>[11]</sup>.

The empirical research on this topic is extremely limited. It is clear that there is a need to understand the institutional and structural factors that underpin the challenges associated with NEETs and the increased risk that youths living in rural areas experience <sup>[12]</sup>. In the case of the Youth Guarantee Programme and the aforementioned categories, coordination is based on working in the context of multilevel governance, which focuses on combining the work of formally separate organisations to achieve a specific public policy objective <sup>[13]</sup>. This approach calls on the member states to share good practices in order to attempt to decrease the cross-country differences that are evident in countries, such as the Netherlands and Turkey. It is for this reason that the European Commission collates and disseminates good practice through public knowledge centres. These centres present opportunities to establish a variety of channels (yet unexplored) that can help us develop a deeper understanding of vulnerable youth <sup>[14]</sup>. The reports and guidelines from the knowledge centres investigated in the present study (n = 51) present an opportunity to understand the links between the revised Youth Guarantee Programme and the best practices from a range of the member states and regions across Europe that focus on supporting young people in their transition from school to work. Making this transition is difficult, and rural regions, especially Europe, are commonly regarded as places with challenges relating to regional economic growth; high migration levels; a great need for mobility; and the scarcity of available resources, such as the diversity in career and social interaction opportunities. These challenges, relevant to 83% of the EU area in 2018, are compounded by demographic fluctuation and a higher risk of poverty <sup>[11]</sup>. To evaluate and interpret the reports reviewed in this paper, the authors take a holistic approach to the review process, embracing the perspective that interventions that aim to support the youth should not only make them fit for the (labour) market, but also build their capacities to be the future drivers of change and innovation, empowering them to respond to these extant challenges <sup>[12]</sup>.

## **2. The Role of Social Innovation in Supporting Sustainable Responses to NEET Challenges**

Understanding the lives of young people from their perspective, by embracing them as co-creators of responses to the challenges they experience, is a critical factor in effective policy-making <sup>[15]</sup>. This process is as complex as the target groups that such policies strive to serve. This paper will inform this action by exploring various best practices from Europe under the Youth Guarantee Programme, regarding their capacity to support sustainable social innovation.

Historically, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has determined that policies for the financial redistribution in rural development are not enough to address the specific challenges of different regions and help them develop. This action must be supplemented with policies that aim to develop rural regions and make them more competitive by mobilising local assets and potential <sup>[16]</sup>. In this context, social innovation can help communities respond to local problems; sustainable effect change; and react to environmental, economic, and social challenges <sup>[17]</sup>. Kröhnert and coauthors <sup>[18]</sup> conclude that in peripheral rural areas, only those villages in which an active civil society takes the local problems into its own hands are likely to be able to adapt and adjust, stressing that negative demographic change will not cease in regions that lack innovation and whose citizens lack a collective sense <sup>[18]</sup>. At this level, the commitment and creativity of citizens, as well as their ability to develop sustainable action structures, can support the successful and sustainable development of interventions <sup>[19]</sup>. Following on from this, and concerning rural development, such acts of collaborative action in the form of social innovations are at the core of rural development and essential prerequisites for its success. Indeed, social innovation is a participative process, bringing together different actors from different backgrounds <sup>[19]</sup>. These diverse social systems are considered more innovative than uniform social systems as, in such systems, there is a greater openness and willingness to adopt new ideas <sup>[20]</sup>. Applying this perspective to social innovation suggests that

actors with entirely different backgrounds, know-how, and interests have more potential to develop a successful social innovation than actors with similar interests and know-how. The diversity of capacity in rural areas is often very limited. Therefore, it is important that participation involves the fullest range of citizenship to ensure that sustainable social innovation is possible.

According to Peter and Pollermann <sup>[24]</sup>, participation seems to be related to the education level, whereby graduates, civil servants, and white-collar workers are more likely to take part in such processes than blue-collar workers and unemployed persons. As such, the social contexts most in need of social innovation may also have the greatest difficulties in motivating and mobilising the actors necessary for successful social innovation, which can also be addressed by the education system or youth work. It is clear, therefore, that education has a particular role to play in this process as those who engage with the education system, such as NEETs who re-engage, are likely to be the individuals who will have the decisive role in the occurrence or even the success of a social innovation act. Increasing this capacity, especially in rural areas, will be decisive for the future of any region as part of a systemic and/or systematic response to the challenges experienced by NEETs.

Critical aspects for the success of social innovation, especially the underlying participation process, are the opportunities or constraints beyond the responsibility of the actors involved in any participation process. Examples of such factors are the culture/means of funding; organisational structures; basic judicial conditions to which a rural development process is subjected; and the readiness of superordinate public administration groups to get involved with and support (development) processes with an uncertain outcome. Thus, one of the challenges is to alter disadvantageous determining factors to ensure potential success. One important factor to add to the likelihood of implementing social innovation is the possible barriers <sup>[22]</sup>. For example, in the case of the LEADER initiative, Dargan and Shucksmith <sup>[23]</sup> examined the use of the concept of social innovation in the context of LEADER interventions. They found that it can be challenging to promote local development in places with no history of collective action <sup>[23]</sup>. While the social innovation capacity of our communities seems to have the motivation to respond when supported, the distribution of reliable social innovative practices in rural areas is far behind their urban counterparts. This paper seeks to understand what social innovation interventions can work in such contexts through a close examination of disseminated knowledge and to encourage further discourse and action.

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