


# Introduction to the Special Issue: European Rural NEETs: A Snapshot

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This supplemental issue focuses on the challenges associated with European rural NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) youth socio-economic inclusion. For NEETs, the transition from childhood to adulthood is both complex and fascinating, fraught with risks of marginalization and precarity. Such challenges have been compounded by assumptions regarding homogeneity evident in publications by the EU and the OECD which place all NEETs within age ranges without recognition of the complexity of life in this demographic. In 2019, across the then EU28 member-states and non-EU states, the proportion of NEETs was recorded as higher in rural regions when compared with the same rate in towns and suburbs or cities (Eurostat, 2020). Notably, an uneven NEET distribution by the degree of urbanization was evident in many eastern or southern European countries, with gaps between cities and rural areas ranging from 10 to more than 20 percentile points. Clearly, there is a need to explore the greater proportions of rural NEETs that occur in European countries with sub-protective welfare regimes and fail short to support school-to-work transition among the most vulnerable youths (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019).

These young Europeans particularly, between the ages of 15 to 24 in rural settings, are especially vulnerable and depend on a wide range of supports and targeted interventions at regional, national, and international levels. The impact of recent economic crises and austerity policies of governments are having a sustained negative impact on the provision of such social services and, consequently, the availability of sustainable programs and opportunities that target young people and those already experiencing marginalization.

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Indeed, vulnerable rural youths are often confronted with less and lower quality educational alternatives, higher unemployment statistics, precarious living, and lower potential income. This can result in rural NEETs, in particular, being harder to outreach and engage with and where mainstream policies such as Youth Guarantee are fail to adjust to local and regional needs (Simões & do Rio, 2020). Despite this, it is evident that the seeds of marginal gains are being made. At a national level, across Europe, various public policies have been implemented to empower rural youth, develop educational opportunities and increase the employment inclusion policies for vulnerable young people residing in rural communities. Examples of this include policy packages, including broadband ones, for example, the EU Green Deal, or those specifically targeting youths, such as the EU Youth Strategy, have put vulnerable rural youths future in the spotlight. However, these initiatives and programs remain relatively disparate and under-disseminated not just at a European but also in the wider non-EU context as a consequence of research agendas that place all NEETs in the same homogenous grouping compounded by a dearth of contextualization.

NEETs, especially NEETs located in rural settings, are often invisible actors in society and this invisibility is also mirrored within the world of academic dissemination. In this supplemental issue Simoes et al. provide a much needed overview of the extant scholarship focused on rural NEETs, by conducting a bibliometric analysis of 325 entries in one of the largest academic databases, Web of Science. Through their analyses, they show that activity in the general field of NEETs is increasing revealing that the number of publications focusing on this topic has increased from five articles published in 2002 to 49 articles published in 2020. This rising academic interest coincides with an increase in the attention paid by policy makers, especially at a European Commission level. However, the number of articles that focus on the specifics of rural NEETs is only 14, written by 41 authors. Simoes et al. show that the study of NEETs is a highly concentrated task, in terms of outlets, countries of interest, and baseline documents. The global North is the main geographic locus of academic production, and the contribution of the South is significantly low, with the exception of China and Mexico. Simoes and his colleagues also focus on the evolution of themes, and they highlight that economic and psychological perspectives are still dominant themes and that NEETs are problematized as societal consequences of labor market failures.

This increased transnational attention regarding NEETs is evident in the evolution of European support programs such as the Youth Guarantee. This new policy space is supported by a collection of comparative datasets at the individual and macro levels. This supplemental issue includes a number of articles aiming to contribute to our understanding of the space by using these

comparative datasets. Rocca et al. focus on the effect of structural factors on individuals' situations by utilizing the dataset of from the 2016 EU Labour Force Survey which includes a specific module on school to work transition of European youth. The authors use the STWT measurements of different countries in addition to individual covariates such as gender, immigration background, level and type of received education, parents' level of education, degree of urbanization. The analyses carried out were based on data collected in seven different countries and they show that vocational education is a common factor in preventing school drop-out, whereas females are at greater risk of falling into NEET status, particularly in the Eastern and Mediterranean regions. The article also shows that young people have a variety of reasons for leaving education in each setting. Although there are many commonalities across locations, the findings of this study show first, the importance of institutions such as labor market structures in supporting young peoples and second, there is no a unique European characterization of what it means to be a NEET.

Following on from this and considering that the diversity of the European NEET population is reflected in the diversity of policies attempting to ameliorate this issue, Petrescu et al. present an analysis of the different practices that are observed under the umbrella program of Youth Guarantee Program of the European Union. Employing a policy narrative framework with in-depth interviews, the authors focus on the experiences of NEETs in three different countries—Romania, Italy, and Portugal. They show that the official statistics, typically collected at a European level, form the basis of policies developed in these countries and also that authorities responsible for implementation prefer using the same statistics for measuring the impact of those policies. Although subnational and inter-regional differences are frequently cited in policy documents, local and regional authorities as well as other stakeholders such as academia and civil society organizations are not included as data providers. This article reveals that national authorities are primarily concerned with the provision of standardized data to justify their actions, and as a consequence they naturally prevent the development of an understanding the relationship between local differences and policies, at the design and evaluation phases.

This supplemental issue includes two articles that look at cross-national variation. Bojadjieva et al. compare the education systems of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia. All of these countries have similar cultural backgrounds but have different levels of Europeanization. They have similar percentages of 15 to 24 old youth however there are significant differences in terms of the percentage of NEETs and youth unemployment. The authors analyze the relationship between these

two variables, after controlling for other macro-level variables such as gross domestic product per capita and education. They show that, for these countries, worsening macro-economic conditions and market failures in school to work transitions lead to unemployment and, consequently, increased NEET ratios, regardless of differences across each countries' education system. In addition, Caroleo et al. focus on the experiences of three different countries having similar percentages of NEET population: Italy, Romania, and Bulgaria. The authors used data available from the Labor Force Survey and conducted a multivariate analyses that included age, gender, civil status, level of education of respondent and respondents' father, family structure, past work experience, and urbanization as the determinant of being a NEET. Comparative analyses showed that gender, as with Rocca et al. in this supplemental issue, is a common factor, whereas the impact of education is observed only in Italy. Having previous work experience is also another common factor in these three countries. Moreover, the number of children in the household, a proxy indicator of intra-family competition has a positive effect on the probability of being a NEET. The findings in this article comment on the impact that individual level factors varies across countries and that young people living in relatively poorer countries have different experiences.

Following on from this assessment of the individual factors that impact young peoples' likelihood of falling into NEET status, Koiv et al. present insights into a single country's experience of NEETs, Estonia. As one of many skills, Self-Directed Learning (SDL) may contribute to young peoples' readiness to enter the labor market and facilitate a successful school to work transition experience. The authors focus on a single program conducted in Estonia, the Prop-up Program, which has been designed based on the principles of a Double Diamond design. Mixed-method data collection composed of in-depth interviews, surveys and profile analyses showed that the young peoples' capability for SDL at the point of transition is relatively low and that specific institutions with specialized personnel is the key to the success of the program. In the case of Estonia Youth Centres are ideal candidates for the location of SDL programs and the authors conclude that the success of such initiatives is dependent on inter-institutional cooperation and the holistic support provided to young people who enter into these educational programs.

The aim of this supplemental issue was three-fold. Firstly we aim to establish rural NEETs as a specific and visible subgroup of NEETs; secondly, to enhance our understanding of European rural youth and the challenges associated with their socio-economic inclusion by encouraging submissions that address empowerment, education, and employment pathways specific to this demographic group; and thirdly, to deliver a scientific output which becomes pivotal for and stimulates new research agendas on this topic, in the years

ahead. While we believe that this supplemental issue has achieved these aims with the valuable contributions from the authors, we also believe this journey is just beginning and as a consequence of this important publication we hope to see a continued increase in the dissemination activities, as indicated by Simoes et al., as we strive to enhance our understanding of the challenges associated with the socio-economic inclusion of rural NEETS and respond accordingly.

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