

## The invisible youth in rural Romania and development perspectives

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According to UNICEF definition, 'invisible' children are those who are "disappearing from view within their families, communities and societies and to governments, donors, civil society, the media and even other children" (UNICEF, 2006, p. 35). Within this group of children, young people (adolescents), and, among these, NEET (not in education, employment and training) require special attention. NEETS are those young people in a particularly vulnerable situation. They are trapped in the intergenerational cycle of poverty: their parents don't know, don't care or have no means to help them to get the education or training needed in order to have a job and a decent income in the future, thus having little hope for a better life.

**This paper aims at documenting if youth work is making a difference in the life of the young people, especially young NEETs, and which are the best methods youth workers can integrate in their work based on a case study in Romania.** The paper includes two short context presentations: of the general data concerning young people and young NEETs in Romania, and of the current state of youth work development in Romania. We will present further the methodology of our research and the results of the main research tool used: the interviews, closing the paper with conclusions and opened questions.

### *Situation of young people and NEETs in Romania*

The analysis of the data provided by the National Statistics Institute of Romania (TEMPO and AMIGO databases) shows that the number of young people decreases with over 9% since 2013 until 2015. In the same time due to the fact that the decrease of the number of young people is more steepen in cities, the proportion of the rural youth has increased. In this context, despite the slow improvement of the activity and employment rates among the young people and of the constant economic growth in the last years, **official data shows an increase of over 3% of the number of young NEETs in Romania between 2014 and 2015.** Although the recent trends converge through the equalization of the rates of young NEETs in urban and rural areas, in 2015 over 55% of these young people were living in villages all across Romania but in two regions out of 8 (the capital – Bucharest-Ilfov region and the West region).

Several national strategic documents, including the National Strategy in the field of Youth Policies 2015-2020 (*Strategia națională în domeniul politicii de tineret 2015-2020*), the national strategies in the field of education and long life training (*Strategia educației și formării profesionale din România pentru perioada 2014-2020* and *Strategia privind reducerea părăsirii timpurii a școlii în România*), the National Strategy for social inclusion and poverty reduction for 2015-2020 (*Strategia națională pentru incluziune socială și combaterea sărăciei 2015-2020*), have young NEETs among their targets. But, in fact, **all these strategic documents are based on unique instruments when targeting the young NEETs – the European Youth Guarantee** – and they are all relying on the financial support of the Youth Employment Initiative of the European Commission combined with a comparatively low contribution of the social insurance budget. In order to make possible the education or training offer within the Youth Guarantee, European Investments and Structural Funds are planned to support the development of TVET and tertiary non-university education infrastructure. On the other hand, a strategy for the prevention of early school drop outs has been adopted. However, the preventive measures are not clearly operationalized at the moment and their implementation in schools is minimal and isolated.

### *Short presentation of youth work in Romania*

In this context, one should notice that **youth work in Romania is based mainly on the volunteering and external grants** (EU, Norway and EEA etc.). The state funds only 34 youth centers all over the country, and 1 to 4 youth specialists are employed in each of the 41 Romanian counties by the Ministry of Youth

and Sport local offices. There are no youth specialists employed by local authorities in Romania<sup>1</sup>. Mainly **youth leaders (trained as youth workers or without training) within NGOs offer services to young people** using a different set of educational approaches, including education for citizenship, active youth participation, community development and community organizing. However, **all these activities are set in non-formal and informal educational patterns and the social recognition of what these workers are providing is still under development**. As youth work is not systematically supported by state or local authorities and the international certification of one of the most experimented youth workers is not recognized at national level, there is little experience and expertise accumulated in the field, as most of these leaders prefer to choose other fields of work and abandon youth work activities for more stable careers (Mitulescu, 2008). Therefore, due to the lack funding and motivation limits for youth worker, youth work activities covering the group that needs it most: young people with few to no opportunities, including invisible young people and NEETs has a reduced social impact

Nevertheless, an NGO movement – the Coalition for the rights of young NEETs – composed from several NGOs working with this target group, was funded. The NGOs have implemented projects funded by the European Social Fund and by the EEA and Norway grants, having mainly two aims: training young NEETs (using formal and non-formal methods) in order to prepare them for a qualified job and studying the different situations and profiles of the NEETs. However, beside the common aim and a common representation in the dialogue with policy makers, the NGOs members of the coalition have very different approaches and experiences in working with young NEETs, from professional skills training delivery or social assistance to voluntary youth work including mainly leisure activities.

### *Methodology of the research*

The present paper is the result of a comparative research based on in-depth interviews with NEET young people, in two groups, one benefiting of youth work services and another not benefiting of these services. The **interviews were carried out face-to-face or by Skype with 10 young people between 16 and 23 in Giubega - Dolj County, Nicorești - Galați County and Hărman - Brașov County, in April and May 2016**. The interviews were conducted in line with academic and professional standards of research, including Council of Europe, EU and UN, following the principles of honesty, integrity, impartiality, confidentiality, avoidance of harm, transparency (communicating the purpose of the research to the interviewees), accuracy, completeness and reliability of the information rendering.

The interview guide included questions regarding young people's experience with education, training, work, social support (from social workers) and youth activities and their plans and wishes to continue school, to be trained and/or employed, their self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses related to their future plans. Designed in this way, the interviews allowed the **estimation of the interviewees vulnerabilities related to their education and skills, the labor market where they live, their socio-economica status, self-esteem and determination to improve their life and the evaluation of the youth activities that the interviewed youngsters attended**.

### *Results of the research*

While most of the young people interviewed are NEETs as per the official definition, some of the young people (two out of 10 interviewees) benefiting from projects targeting NEETs in the past are in fact **officially enrolled in schools, but not attending**. Although they are not 'invisible' according to the definition presented in the introduction to this paper, being 'known by'/'visible for' the school, the situation of these young people is precarious and risky. In most of the cases they cannot benefit of the projects targeting NEETs funded by the Youth Employment Initiative and the European Social Fund in the budget period 2013-2020, because they are not eligible. They cannot be the beneficiaries of those projects implemented in schools either (funded by the European Social Fund or other international donors) simply because they don't attend school. **In their case detached and outreach opened youth**

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<sup>1</sup> If exceptions exist, they are very rare and isolated.

**work is needed in order to activate them, to bring them back to school and/or to enroll them in skill development programme/training in order to prepare them for the labor market.**

All of the interviewees live in relative monetary poverty and some of them live in extreme poverty. With two exceptions, out of 10 subjects, it is either the young NEETS or their parents (if they are minors) that **benefit of the social aid scheme** delivered by local authorities and some of them **receive form unemployment benefits** from the county unemployment offices. In this respect they are not completely 'invisible' for the local and state authorities. However, instruments provided by the law are not helpful in empowering the young people to become EETs from NEETs. Social aid and unemployment benefits, although very small, are covering basic needs in the rural areas, where young people usually live in precarious housing conditions, sharing the living spaces with two other generations of their family and every family is farming a small plot of land for self-consumption. As such, **without any additional intervention, social aid and unemployment benefits seems to discourage the development of young people.** On the other hand, the county unemployment offices offer counseling and placement of workers, but several shortcomings prevent young NEETs from rural areas in accessing these services:

- **The illiteracy rate** among young NEETs in rural areas is very high, being thus 'unemployable' for any qualified job. Activities for literacy skills development organized by NGOs are rather targeting children than young people and the methods used are not adapted to adult education (as needed by the older young people). Therefore, young NEETs with poor literacy skills are not covered by the project. And there are few funding opportunities for NGOs to develop such projects.
- **The access to jobs** for young NEETs from rural areas is problematic: the vast majority of available jobs are in the cities and **salaries offered to young unqualified people are barely covering the costs of commuting.** Moreover, the schedules of available means of transportation are rarely work friendly.
- Most of the NEETs (and all the interviewed ones) that participated in a training, having thus certified vocational skills, **don't have work experience and some of them have very little practical experience** they developed during the training, due to its poor design.
- Most of the young NEETs (and all the interviewed ones) **don't have employability skills (team work, communication etc.).** And the research shows these skills are really included in the training design of projects funded by the European Social Fund (the biggest donor in the field of training delivery).

We interviewed young people not benefiting from any youth or training activity and young people benefiting from two different projects funded by the European Social Fund. Concerning their vulnerabilities and skills the interviews show that:

- **Recovery and/or remedial classes** for the young NEETs that dropped school or for youngsters who are not attending school **are rarely available** (they are not available for any of the interviewees), so **there is not a systematic preventive approach** to the problem of young NEETs.
- **Young people participating in trainings have more vocational skills** than the young people not participating in training. However, the level of the skills is dependent on the training design and the way practical training was delivered. There is a large range of concrete ways in which the same training is delivered by different providers working with NEETs.
- **The level of the employability skills among the young people is low in general.** However **young people participating in youth activities, trainings or other kind of youth activities (counseling, leisure etc.) have obvious better communication skills** than the other young people interviewed.
- Most of the young NEETs from rural area (9 out of 10 interviewees) have **limited access to jobs**, as they have to engage for a relatively long and costly commuting.

Mainly as a result of their limited skills and access, young NEETs from rural areas – participating or not in youth activities – are **pessimistic** concerning their employment opportunities and chances. However, **young people with participation experience in youth activities are more aware of their strengths and weakness, they are ready and opened to learn new things and to change their lifestyle** if needed for a job and they are. Although all the interviewees have realistic expectations concerning their employability and don't dream too big, most of the young NEETs that didn't participated to youth activities have plans to continue working in the substance agriculture they grew up with, while most of the others would like and try to get a job in services or industry.

### *Conclusions and opened questions*

In a nutshell, the research conducted shows that youth work is effective in offering better opportunities to young NEETs to become ETTs. Participants in youth activities have in general better vocational and employability skills than the other NEETs, yet this effect is limited by the design of the trainings. Still youth activities are more important in shaping attitudes, self-awareness and self-esteem, that are instrumental in finding a job.

These results are affected by shortcomings in activities design and available funding for these activities. The lack of professional youth work, donors' specific conditions/demands that are not always adapted to the local context, discontinuities of youth work due to lack of funding and/or skilled/professional staff are diminishing the changes of a real impact of youth work in young people's lives.

There are few initiatives that are professionally combining youth activities for personal development, with employability skills and vocational skills development in order to contribute to all elements that are creating employability among NEETs. These initiatives should be analyzed and systematically promoted and replicated.

On the hand, there are few initiatives focusing on a preventive approach to the problem of young NEETs and very few on developing literacy skills among young people. One has to acknowledge that young people who are not able to read, write and count are not employable and they are trapped in a cycle of poverty and social exclusion. How will the state or the NGOs break this cycle remains an opened question, while there is no substantial funding available and there is not a clear, practical and targeted action plan to implement the national strategies in the field.

### ***Short presentation of authors***

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