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Briefing on COVID-19 impact of on NEET youth in rural areas

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1. Table of Contents

1.	WHAT IS THE AIM OF THIS BRIEFING?	2
2.	IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON NEET YOUTH IN RURAL AREAS	2
2.1.	KEY FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH NEET YOUTH IN RURAL AREAS	2
2.2.	POLICY AND PROGRAMMES FOR NEET YOUTH IN RURAL AREAS	3
2.3.	POLICY INTERVENTIONS DURING COVID 19 PANDEMIC	5
3.	CONCLUSIONS	6
4.	BIBLIOGRAPHY	7

1. What is the aim of this briefing?

The EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership aims to enrich the findings, identify gaps and draw relevant conclusions for European and national initiatives on adapting youth policy and youth work practice to new conditions and needs triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. This briefing examines the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on young people living in rural areas, who are Not in Employment, Education or Training (hereinafter, NEET youth in rural areas), one of the most vulnerable and socially excluded groups of young people. This group of young people was particularly affected by the pandemic. Labour market insecurities are widespread among young people in Europe, and they represent a key challenge to society. Compared to older age groups, young people more often experience exclusion from the labour market or episodes of not being in employment, education, or training (NEET) (Rokicka et al, 2018; O'Reilly et al, 2015; Eurofound, 2012, etc.). COVID-19 measures have further worsened labour market opportunities for NEET young people living in rural areas.

2. Impact of COVID-19 on NEET youth in rural areas

2.1. Key findings from research NEET youth in rural areas

The situation of NEET youth in rural areas

The term NEET refers to young people between the ages of 15 and 29 who are not in education, employment, or training (Mascherini et al., 2012;). According to the definition provided by the ILO (ILO, 2020), the person is referred as NEET if meeting these two conditions: 1) they are not employed (i.e., unemployed or inactive according to the International Labour Organisation definition) (ILO, 2020a); 2) they have not received any formal or non-formal education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey. A Eurofound analysis acknowledged the heterogeneity within the NEET group, and unlike the ILO it looks at young people between the ages of 15 and 34 (Eurofound, 2012).

The NEET concept made it possible to capture youth who became discouraged and gave up any job search as well as inactive persons who could or did not want to work, acknowledging the difficulties they faced, and the need for targeted measures. In 2010, the European Commission identified young people in the NEET situation as an important target group of activation measures, including areas covered by youth policy. At the same time, they developed indicators and the methodology for collecting data and calculating the number of young people in NEET situation (European Commission, 2010).

In a study by Sadler et al. conducted in the UK, rural versus urban areas' socio-economic problems were highlighted as a risk factor for NEET status (Sadler et al, 2015). This is also related to the high early school leavers rate as the majority resided in rural areas. Eurofound

(2020) emphasised the following NEET risk factors, among others: **health restrictions, migration background, low level of education, young people living in low-income households, adolescents whose parents were unemployed, adolescents whose parents had a low level of education, adolescents with divorced parents**. Young people living in remote areas had a 1.5 times higher NEET risk than young people living in medium-sized cities. Young people in NEET were at risk of social marginalisation. In addition to the specific issues of young people in NEET situations, young people living in rural areas and in NEET situation face additional challenges, **including the lack of infrastructure, high dropout rates from school, high rates of unemployment, and the depopulation process, caused by migration of youth to urban areas for other reasons** (Mujcinovic, et al. 2021; Simões et al. 2021).

NEET rates tended to remain low for the 15–19 age group because most of this population was still enrolled in education. However, NEET rates increased steadily for every age group, so that those aged 25–29 years were the most affected. Based on the Eurostat data, 16.6% of young people in EU-28 aged 25-29 were NEET in 2019. Several international studies indicated that the place of origin was one of the most critical factors that differentiated the trajectories of NEETs and that these were more frequent in rural areas. According to Eurostat (2019), NEET rates were higher in rural (18.3%) than in urban areas (15.1%), in 17 EU Member States. This difference was greater in Eastern (e.g., Bulgaria, Romania, and Lithuania) and Southern European countries (e.g. Greece). National reports 2009-2019 on Rural NEET across Europe¹ (and partly covering 2020) in 14 countries indicated the regional diversity of rural NEET situations. The reports highlighted in detail the situation of rural young people Neither in Employment, nor in Education or Training (NEET) aged between 15 and 34 years old, over the last decade (2009-2019).

Due to the pandemic, the share of young people not in employment, education or training has risen in many countries in 2020 (ILO 2021). At the end of 2020, the average NEET rate among 15-29 year-olds in OECD countries stood at 12%, and 2.9 million more young people were NEET compared to one year before (OECD, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic affected NEET young people living in rural areas by increasing digital gap, limiting access to informational services, etc. (Neagu et al., 2021). Considering that young people in rural areas tend to be more affected and vulnerable in the face of economic and social changes, digital exclusion, mental health issues, we can expect to witness higher levels of early school leaving and unemployment among this group.

2.2. Policy and programmes for NEET youth in rural areas

Over the last years, rural development policies, programmes and strategies have also sought to address young people's issues due to the NEETs rate from rural areas mainly tackling the

¹ <https://rnyobservatory.eu/web/National-Reports/14-NATIONAL-REPORTS-09-19.pdf>

higher migration of young people from rural areas with lower labour market opportunities, to urban areas or even to other countries. Those measures included entrepreneurship in rural areas (Denmark, France), financial support for youth who wanted to develop small farms (young farmers measure); loans with low interests for buying a house (e.g. Lithuania), etc.

Since 2008, labour market inclusion of young people has been a high priority for policymakers at both national and European levels, and numerous initiatives have been developed to address it. In 2012, the EU launched the Youth Guarantee Scheme (YGS) which aimed to offer good quality jobs or education opportunities (e.g. apprenticeships) for young people facing labour market problems. The Europe 2020 Strategy made explicit reference to promoting youth employment chances through better education policies, and integrated specific guidelines for economic and employment policies for vulnerable young people, in order to cater for those at risk of social exclusion.

In November 2020, a manual for the Classification of Intervention Best-Practices with Rural NEETs was published² by Cost Action CA18213: Rural NEET Youth Network: Modelling the risks underlying rural NEETs social exclusion. This manual provides key conceptual definitions about rural NEETs, adds a comprehensive review of policies that guide decision-making across Europe regarding NEETs and presents several national cases. This manual also establishes clear-cut criteria to develop a methodology of Assessment, Mapping and Classification of Interventions targeting rural NEETs. It describes types of interventions depending on the different vulnerable youth groups (low financial resources, mental and physical health problems, lack of access to health and social care services, low levels of qualification and educational attainment, no or weak social ties, low or no administrative capacity which affects their connection to relevant institutions, immigrant background).

eNEET Rural Project³ (funded by the Norway grants) covered Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Slovenia and Spain. The project focused on innovation and technology in the agricultural sector in order to create a Toolkit for young people, who are no longer in the education system, not working or being trained for work (NEETs). The Toolkit includes online and on-the-spot training, youth competition, staff exchange and mentoring services. The Nordregio report (2019) present a number of case studies from the Nordic countries aimed at supporting young NEET people in rural areas in their transition to adulthood (Anna Karlsdóttir (ed.) et al 2019). The **characteristic features of these cases are the application of a holistic approach**, focusing not only on young people's education or employment, but also other areas of life. One such innovative solution is **integrated youth health care services**, which include physical health, mental health and social care services (Hetrick et al., 2017). The key is that access to such services does not require any paperwork, bureaucracy or appointments, making them more accessible. Young people were offered employment and economic development services, rehabilitative services including municipal and social health

² <https://rnyobservatory.eu/web/manual-best-practices-rural-neets/>

³ <https://eneet-project.eu>

services, as well as other individual services, such as youth outreach work and youth workshop activities. This kind of approaches is particularly worth exploring in the current context, when mental health and well-being of young people is becoming a policy priority. The project *New Power*, implemented in several small municipalities in central Finland created a better exchange of information between public employment services and municipal authorities to help re-engage marginalised young people by enabling them either to enrol in education or to join the labour market.

2.3. Policy interventions during COVID 19 pandemic

During the COVID 19 pandemic a number of countries have introduced new plans, strategies and commitments have been made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Responses have differed significantly from country-to-country both in scale and areas of focus, but several directions of measures can be identified. The measures available for NEET young people living in rural areas range from income support, services to find job, prevention of social exclusion to mental health initiatives. A number of countries have introduced special emergency schemes: income support for young people, hiring subsidies to employers recruiting young people, new apprenticeship schemes, decreased minimum contribution requirements for young people to get access to social protection benefits (OECD, 2021).

Several EU countries are updating or developing new youth strategies to reflect the reinforced **Youth Guarantee**. For example, in Spain, the 2021-27 strategy for the reinforced Youth Guarantee (released in June 2021) was developed and negotiated with regions, trade unions, business organisations and youth stakeholders. In Luxembourg, the revised national implementation plan for the reinforced Youth Guarantee will include mapping of target groups and policies to increase outreach to vulnerable groups. In Latvia, the project to increase outreach to young NEETs (KNOW AND DO!) which was originally planned to end in 2020, has been extended through to 2022. In Italy, the national Youth Guarantee Plan remains the flagship youth employment strategy. Since this Plan already includes many of the new parts of the reinforced Youth Guarantee, there are no plans to make major adjustments, although special attention will be given to profiling and career guidance and scaling up programmes to enhance digital skills for young NEETs. Estonia is currently developing an implementation plan for the reinforced Youth Guarantee, focusing on supporting vulnerable groups and promoting a smooth school-to-work transition.

In 2021 European Commission launched **ALMA programme (Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve)** with the aim to help young people not in any kind of employment, education or training (NEETs) to find their way to the job market by combining support for: education, vocational training or employment in their home country and with a work placement in another EU country. It targets young people who: have difficulties finding a job, are in long-term unemployment, have insufficient school performance or vocational skills, have a

migration background, or live with disabilities. The objective of this programme is to improve skills, knowledge and experience and give them an opportunity to create new connections across Europe. This new initiative, under the European Pillar of Social Rights aims to tackle inequalities and create equal opportunities by offering active support to employment, especially for disadvantaged young people.

In the context of the pandemic there are developments in youth sector strategies across the Europe. For example, the new strategy for 2021-35 of Estonia, currently in development, will possibly prioritise strengthening mutual information exchange, increased community support for potential early school leavers and NEETs, and increasing inclusion of all young people in the labour market.

3. Conclusions

Research before the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that the regional factor negatively impacts the educational and employment opportunities of young people in rural areas, with NEET young people in rural areas particularly affected. Over the last years many policy interventions have addressed and supported this group of young people. Local, regional, and national projects aimed to bring this group of young people into education and employment. Examples of intervention areas include measures to prevent early school leavers, school-to-work transition interventions, measures to foster employability, support for self-employment among young people through training or seed/start-up funding, and training courses.

COVID pandemic hit NEET young people living in rural areas particularly hard. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or marginalised communities faced additional challenges than other youth groups. However, the policy measures and interventions targeted directly to the NEET young people living in rural areas are almost not present during COVID pandemic. NEET young people living in rural areas issues are mainly covered by schemes supporting youth activation and employment policies, hiring subsidies, strengthening employment services for young people and expanding mental health services.

As the NEET young people face a higher risk of social exclusion and tend to be more fragile in relation to economic and social changes, it can be presumed that levels of early-school leaving and unemployment among young people living in rural areas will increase. Guaranteeing appropriate and sustainable measures, integrated approach to services, funding and financial support will be crucial support for this group to navigate the impact of COVID 19 on their life now and for better future trajectories.

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