



## ADVANCING GREEN JOBS OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN RURAL AREAS THROUGH SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP



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The urgent need for a sustainable future has driven global efforts to address climate change and environmental degradation. In this endeavour, the potential of green jobs and sustainable business opportunities has garnered significant attention. While many initiatives have focused on urban areas, it is essential to recognise the untapped potential of the rural regions and their role in creating a greener and more inclusive economy.

Rural areas possess unique assets that can be harnessed to create green jobs and businesses, including abundant natural resources, such as land, forests, and water, offer opportunities for sustainable businesses like eco-tourism, organic farming, and forestry. Moreover, the strong community networks in rural areas provide valuable support and resources for young people interested in green entrepreneurship or community initiatives centred on sustainability. Government funding and programs dedicated to rural development and sustainability further equip young people with crucial mentorship, resources, and financial support [1].

Various stakeholders have taken steps to create a pathway for rural youth to thrive in the labour market. The European Union (EU), through its ambitious.

European Green Deal (EGD), aims to create 1 million green jobs within the EU by 2030. The EU has implemented several instruments, such as the European Social Fund, Erasmus+ Green Youth Jobs Initiative, and the Youth Employment Initiative to support vocational training, practical experience, and funding for green jobs and skill development.

Furthermore, the EU's Common Agricultural Policy provides rural development funding and supports sustainable agriculture and forestry practices. The European Investment Bank offers financing for sustainable projects in rural areas, ensuring the availability of resources through initiatives like the Natural Capital Financing Facility and the Circular Bioeconomy Fund[2].

Despite these positive strides, there remain obstacles that must be overcome to empower rural youth in the green economy. Inadequate infrastructure, including limited access to reliable electricity and internet connectivity, hampers access to education and training opportunities related to sustainability. Additionally, the scarcity of job opportunities in rural areas makes it challenging for young people to secure employment in the green sector or pursue entrepreneurial ventures focused on sustainability.



Understanding each rural area's specific obstacles and enablers is vital to developing targeted strategies that empower rural youth in the green economy. Recognising the potential of social entrepreneurship as a catalyst, this article explores how advancing green job opportunities for young people in rural areas can be achieved through social entrepreneurial initiatives. By leveraging social entrepreneurship, we can harness young rural entrepreneurs' enthusiasm, creativity, and drive to create a more sustainable and inclusive future.

By examining the [INDIGISE project's](#) findings, which sheds light on obstacles and enablers for rural youth in accessing green job opportunities, this article aims to offer insights into practical approaches and policies that can propel the growth of social entrepreneurship and green jobs in rural areas. By bridging the gap between rural youth, sustainable business opportunities, and the necessary support systems, we can pave the way for a prosperous and environmentally conscious future for all.

Youth entrepreneurship, mainly through social entrepreneurship, holds great potential for addressing the challenges of youth unemployment in rural areas and promoting sustainable development. While it may not be a comprehensive solution, it can be a valuable response.

Targeted policies and support systems are crucial to maximise the effectiveness of youth entrepreneurship initiatives. Resources should be directed towards young people with the highest chances of success, and

sufficient support should be provided for businesses operating in sectors with higher entry barriers but lower competition. Instead of relying on isolated instruments, integrated packages of complementary support should be offered to young entrepreneurs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the challenges faced by young people entering the European Union (EU) job market, despite the overall decrease in youth unemployment over the past years. Recognising the importance of youth employment, the European Commission has prioritised initiatives to promote youth social entrepreneurship and unlock the potential of young individuals. Two notable EU policies are the Social Economy Action Plan and the Youth Employment Support.

The [Social Economy Action Plan](#), released by the European Commission in December 2021, highlights the benefits that young generations and the social economy can bring to each other. Young people possess innovative ideas and are well-suited to finding solutions for the green and digital transitions, while social entrepreneurship can provide them with access to the job market. However, the plan also acknowledges the need to enhance awareness and appeal among young people towards social entrepreneurship and the positive impact of the social economy.

The proposed measures within the plan include establishing a Youth Entrepreneurship Policy Academy and facilitating mutual learning among social economy entrepreneurs through the Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs (EYE) Programme. While these opportunities are valuable tools for young entrepreneurs, it is essential to note that they may not specifically cater to rural youth, especially those categorised as NEETs (Not in Employment, Education, or Training), which may require dedicated efforts and time<sup>[3]</sup>.

The [EYE Program](#), a successful cross-border program supported by the EU, has facilitated the exchange of entrepreneurial and management experience among young entrepreneurs from different countries. Although its potential in rural areas, particularly for NEETs, needs further exploration, the EYE Program can bridge the knowledge and skills gap, offer access to new markets, and create business opportunities by matching young



aspiring entrepreneurs with established entrepreneurs in other EU member states.

Additionally, the Youth Employment Support communication released by the European Commission in 2020 addresses youth unemployment and aims to equip young people with the skills necessary for successful entry into the job market. It recognises the vital role of social entrepreneurship and the social economy in generating equitable employment opportunities and promoting social integration and innovation. The EU's investments in youth employment support, including through the Next Generation EU and EU budget, can also benefit NEETs in rural areas.

The European Commission's commitment to youth employment is further emphasised in the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan, which outlines concrete measures to implement its principles by 2030. The plan focuses on supporting the integration of young people, including NEETs, into the labour market and developing their skills. It recognises the social economy and social entrepreneurship sectors' valuable contribution to building a fairer and more equitable society. The EPSR Action Plan proposes various political and funding instruments to foster the necessary skills for social entrepreneurship, social enterprises, and the social economy.

By leveraging social entrepreneurship, targeted policies, and EU initiatives, it is possible to unlock the potential of rural youth in the green economy and create sustainable employment opportunities. The next section of this article will delve deeper into the significance of social entrepreneurship in advancing green job opportunities for young people in rural areas, exploring its benefits, challenges, and potential solutions.

According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), social entrepreneurship is more prevalent among young people in the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and Western Europe compared to commercial entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurs also outnumber commercial entrepreneurs in most regions globally, except for Latin America and the Caribbean. Additionally, social enterprises tend to have diverse management teams, with 59% women, and employ a significant number of disabled individuals (40%) and ethnic minorities (56%) [4].



The main barriers faced by young social entrepreneurs include financial support, such as a lack of options for financing their organizations, complex public financing, and a lack of patient capital. Success factors for social enterprises include having a clear mission, strong leadership, valuable products, efficient operation systems, entrepreneurial skills, a culture of learning and innovation, a sustainable income base, and effective relationships with stakeholders. On the other hand, barriers to social enterprise creation include legal and regulatory frameworks, access to financial resources, market access, business support and development services, and training and research.

Young social entrepreneurs often require more formal preparation, support, technical knowledge, human capital, and networks, which can be challenging to acquire. Dependence on parents and limited financial literacy and awareness further hinder their success. These challenges are particularly significant in rural areas with limited resources and opportunities.

To address these issues, the European Commission has released the European Skills Agenda, which focuses on providing individuals and businesses with the necessary skills for competitiveness in the changing EU labour market. The agenda recognizes the potential of the social economy and social entrepreneurship in the fair green and digital transition and calls for increased awareness, appeal, and the development of social entrepreneurship skills and education programs.

In rural areas, green social entrepreneurs can play a vital role in creating sustainable agriculture and food systems, acting as community innovators, changing the economy's structure through sustainability and change-makers who create and change economic norms to maintain sustainable societal development [5].



One excellent example of this is TerriuS, a social enterprise based in the Alentejo region of Portugal, founded by young people with agricultural backgrounds who wanted to address the lack of youth employment opportunities in the countryside. The initiative seeks to combat rural desertification and preserve local culture and national products. TerriuS purchases from small local producers and transforms their products into high-value items while providing support and training for small and young farmers. They also organise community workshops and guided tours for schools and groups and promote regional products. In addition, they have reintegrated chestnut and acorn flours in the region and helped recover the PDO and PGI certifications, preserving and creating around 30 jobs. TerriuS works with local small producers and industries, contributing to the area's regional development and attracting young people to the rural context. Their products are sold in various urban and peri urban areas and online. The initiative creates an opportunity for young professionals to live in new rurality, seeking to change the relationship between the economy, ecology, and society through a multilevel approach to climate change that is both a challenge and an opportunity for the rural regions.



In conclusion, fostering youth entrepreneurship, particularly in rural areas, requires a comprehensive approach that addresses various challenges and provides tailored support and resources.

Partnerships between educational institutions, public authorities, and the private sector can be crucial in promoting entrepreneurship education and training. Training programs, both formal and non-formal, can equip rural youth with the necessary entrepreneurial skills and knowledge.

Simplifying administrative procedures and reducing regulatory burdens is essential to encourage young entrepreneurs to start businesses in rural areas. Public authorities can support youth entrepreneurship by streamlining bureaucratic processes, assisting with registration and compliance requirements, and providing guidance on taxation and licensing.

Access to financing and funding is a significant challenge for young entrepreneurs, particularly in rural areas. Establishing financing schemes tailored to rural youth's needs, such as microloans, seed funding, crowdfunding, or peer-to-peer lending, can help overcome this barrier. Promoting financial literacy to ensure sustainable financial support for rural youth ventures is also essential.

Partnerships and networking opportunities are vital for rural youth with limited access to role models and business networks. Cross-sectoral collaboration between the public, private, and third sectors can create new opportunities for social entrepreneurship and address complex social and environmental challenges. Public authorities can facilitate such collaborations by creating platforms for dialogue and joint initiatives.

Raising awareness of social entrepreneurship among rural youth is crucial to showcase it as a viable career option and highlight its potential social and environmental impact. Awareness campaigns, workshops, events, media coverage, and social media can be utilised to promote social entrepreneurship and inspire rural youth.

In the framework of the COST Action Rural NEET Youth Network: Modelling the risks underlying rural NEETs social exclusion, DIESIS Network is actively working on this topic to create an observatory of youth entrepreneurship. This initiative aims to gather valuable insights, monitor trends, and guide policymakers and stakeholders involved in supporting youth entrepreneurship, especially in rural areas.

By implementing these recommendations and actively supporting rural youth in their entrepreneurial endeavours, we can create a more inclusive and sustainable future. Promoting youth entrepreneurship in rural areas drives economic growth and empowers young individuals to contribute to the green and digital transition, address social challenges, and foster innovation within their communities.



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