

# POLICY REPORT

## Youth employment support services and advancing green job opportunities

Report elaborated by Working Group 3 (WG3):

### Employment & employment services in rural areas



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COST Action CA18213  
Rural NEET Youth Network:  
Modeling the risks underlying rural  
NEETs social exclusion



WORKING GROUP 3  
Employment services &  
Employment in rural areas  
COST Action CA18213:  
RURAL NEET YOUTH

Policy Report:  
Youth employment support services and  
advancing green job opportunities

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Europe, young people living in rural areas face various challenges and barriers, such as limited access to appropriate education, slow employment processes, barriers to social inclusion, reduced participation opportunities, and a lack of engagement in civic life.

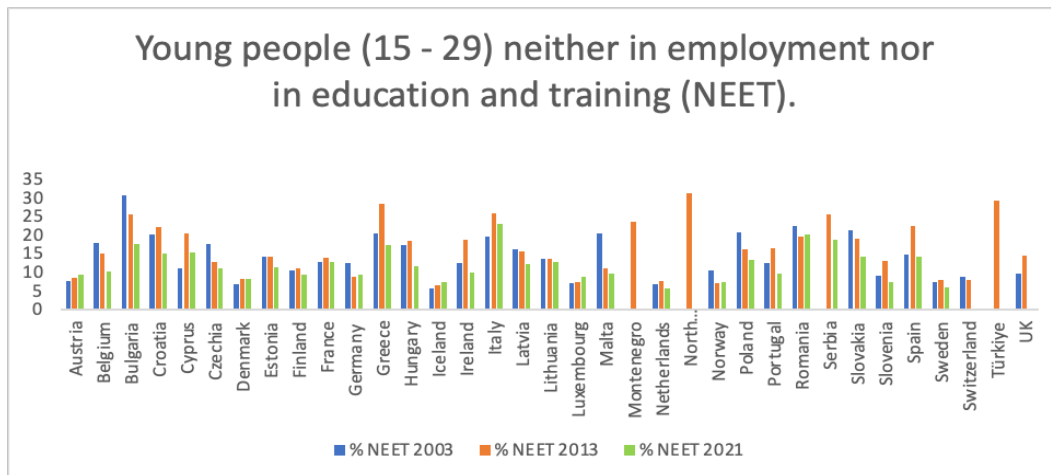
Eurostat reported that in 2020, the employment rate for young people aged 15–29 in rural areas was 29.7%, which is lower than that for the same age group in urban areas (37.2%). Additionally, Eurostat reported that in 2020, the educational attainment levels of young people in rural areas were generally lower than those in urban areas. Specifically, 31.3% of young people aged 15–29 in rural areas had completed only primary or lower secondary education, compared to 21.8% in urban areas. They also struggle to access essential services and infrastructures, and the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened these challenges. However, some young people have gained access to unavailable remote learning due to geographical or economic barriers.

NEET rates in 2021 are higher in rural areas (14.8%) than in cities (14.3%) and in the case of young people between 25 – 29 years old (18,5% in rural areas) that in 15 – 24 years old (11.3% in rural areas) according to Eurostat. Figure 1 shows the difference between 2003, 2013 and 2021 in the percentage of NEET. In 2021 it is minor in almost all countries compared with the previous year, except in Romania.

Rural minority and vulnerable groups, including youth with disabilities, young migrants and refugees, and rural young workers aged 15–17, may face additional difficulties accessing training, resources, and employment. Unfortunately, policies and strategies often need to consider the heterogeneity of youth, leaving them without adequate support.

Young people, mainly those aged 15–24, are more likely to experience unemployment than older age groups. This is supported by Eurostat data (2021) showing that the unemployment rate for this age group is generally higher than other age groups and can be exceptionally high in certain countries and regions. For example, in Italy, Greece, and Spain, the youth unemployment rate was reported to be between 50–55%, which is much higher than the overall unemployment rate. This can be attributed to various factors, including a lack of appropriate education and employment opportunities, limited training and resources, and a general lack of experience in the job market.

Figure 1: Young people (15 - 29) neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET) in EU countries between 2003 and 2021.



Source: Authors elaboration on the Eurostat dataset

The focus on youth employment support services and advancing green job opportunities in Europe reflects a growing recognition of the importance of creating a sustainable future for young people and the planet.

The European Union has implemented policies and support initiatives emphasising the importance of promoting the entrepreneurial skills and motivation of young people residing in rural areas. These actions advocate for education and training programs, lifelong learning opportunities, and work exchanges that foster social inclusion and protect the environment. The aim is to equip young people with the skills and resources needed to become successful entrepreneurs in their communities while ensuring sustainability in their rural environments.

One of the prominent examples is the Youth Guarantee program, launched in 2013, which provides a commitment to ensure that all young people under 25 receive a good-quality offer of employment, education, apprenticeship or training.

Moreover, supporting young people's capacities to engage in social entrepreneurship in rural areas is crucial for promoting economic growth and social innovation in those communities. Creating conditions for social entrepreneurship to thrive in rural areas can help address youth unemployment, depopulation, and social exclusion. Additiona-





lly, policies prioritising green job creation can help create an enabling environment for developing green social entrepreneurship in rural areas.

The objective of the policy brief is to examine different policy initiatives that can improve young people's access to green jobs, specifically those who are NEETs, and to identify the primary challenges and opportunities in developing green jobs for young individuals living in rural areas.

## 2. YOUTH EMPLOYMENT SUPPORTS

Youth employment support services are vital in rural Europe, as young people in these areas face significant challenges in finding meaningful work. In Europe, several support programs address youth unemployment, particularly for NEETs (young people not in employment, education or training). These programs provide vocational training, coaching and mentoring, and financial support to help young people develop the necessary skills and knowledge to enter the workforce.

Table 1 shows the percentage of NEET for each nation. The compound annual growth rate was calculated for 2003 – 2021 and two sub-periods, 2003–2013; 2014– 2021. During the period analysed, several policies were introduced to combat this phenomenon, mainly directed at youth employment. A significant loss can be identified in the second period, thus definable as a positive effect of implemented policies.

One such initiative is the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI), which aims to support young people aged 15–29 in regions with high youth unemployment rates. The YEI provides funding for measures such as apprenticeships, traineeships, job placements, and entrepreneurship and self-employment support. This initiative is dedicated to EU regions with more than 25% unemployed young people.

One of the most important programs is the European Social Fund (ESF), which provides funding for vocational education and training initiatives across Europe. The ESF aims to improve young people's skills and employability, particularly in sectors with skills shortages, such as green industries. The ESF also promotes social inclusion and participation through volunteering and civic engagement activities.



Country	% NEET			Evolution of NEET rate		
	2003	2013	2021	2003-2013	2014 -2021	2003-2021
Austria	7,5	8,6	9,4	1%	0%	1%
Belgium	18	14,9	10,1	-2%	-3%	-3%
Bulgaria	30,6	25,7	17,6	-2%	-3%	-3%
Croatia	20,3	22,3	14,9	1%	-4%	-1%
Cyprus	11,1	20,4	15,4	6%	-2%	2%
Czechia	17,5	12,8	10,9	-3%	-1%	-2%
Denmark	6,8	8,2	8,3	2%	0%	1%
Estonia	14,2	14,3	11,2	0%	-2%	-1%
Finland	10,6	10,9	9,3	0%	-2%	-1%
France	12,8	13,8	12,8	1%	-1%	0%
Germany	12,6	8,7	9,2	-4%	1%	-1%
Greece	20,4	28,5	17,3	3%	-4%	-1%
Hungary	17,2	18,4	11,7	1%	-3%	-2%
Iceland	5,6	6,4	7,3	1%	1%	1%
Ireland	12,6	18,8	9,8	4%	-6%	-1%
Italy	19,5	26	23,1	3%	-1%	1%
Latvia	16,1	15,6	12,1	0%	-2%	-1%
Lithuania	13,6	13,7	12,7	0%	0%	0%
Luxembourg	6,9	7,2	8,8	0%	3%	1%
Malta	20,5	10,9	9,5	-6%	-2%	-4%
Montenegro	:	23,6	:			
Netherlands	6,7	7,5	5,5	1%	-3%	-1%
North Macedonia	:	31,3	:			
Norway	10,6	7	7,4	-4%	0%	-2%
Poland	20,8	16,2	13,4	-2%	-1%	-2%
Portugal	12,4	16,4	9,5	3%	-4%	-1%
Romania	22,4	19,6	20,3	-1%	0%	0%
Serbia	:	25,5	18,8		-3%	
Slovakia	21,4	19	14,2	-1%	-2%	-2%
Slovenia	9	12,9	7,3	4%	-6%	-1%
Spain	14,8	22,5	14,1	4%	-4%	0%
Sweden	7,2	7,9	6	1%	-3%	-1%
Switzerland	8,7	8	:	-1%		
Türkiye	:	29,3	:			
United Kingdom	9,6	14,6	:	4%		



In addition, the EU has developed policies and strategies to address the challenges young people living in rural areas face, such as limited access to education, training, and job opportunities. These initiatives include the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), which aims to promote sustainable rural development and improve living conditions in rural areas, and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (ERDF), which supports rural development and entrepreneurship.

Even the EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027) includes specific actions and measures to address young people’s challenges in rural areas, including employment. The Strategy aims to improve young people’s access to education and training, enhance their employability and support their transitions into the labour market, including in rural areas.

## 2.1 The Role of the Youth Guarantee Program

The Youth Guarantee initiative was launched by the European Commission in 2003 and has been one of the most important programmes for young people ever since. The programme has helped to broaden and diversify employment services in the Member States and support school-to-work transition. The program reduced NEET rates (aged 15–29) from 16.1% in 2013 to 12.6% in 2019 at the EU-27 level (EUROSTAT, edat\_ifse\_20). And more than 24 million young people received an offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeships or traineeships. Youth Guarantee Program had a significant impact on public employment services that have developed their range of youth employment services, have innovated to identify the best solutions for youth employment, have understood the need for integrated service provision and that these need to be tailored to the type of NEETs targeted, and have developed partnerships to deliver these services to NEETs. (Petrescu et al. 2023).

The Reinforced Youth Guarantee scheme from 2021 allows all people under 30 to access employment, education, apprenticeship or a traineeship within four months of leaving or becoming newly unemployed. EU countries have committed to reaching out to a broader target group of 15 to 29-year-olds’. Several EU countries are updating or developing new youth strategies to reflect the Reinforced Youth Guarantee.



Several studies were conducted in recent years evaluating the initiative both at the European and member states level. Many pointed out shortcomings in implementing the Youth Guarantee, some particularly relevant for rural youth. (European Commission, 2020; Toderita et al., 2019; Meirosu et al., 2020; Petrescu et al., 2021, Petrescu and Prietro-Flores., 2023, Braziene et al., 2023, Youth Employment Partnership 2021, Lost Millennials 2023, OECD 2014, ILO 2017a, Bördös-Petróczy 2019).

For example:

- lack or limited partnerships with local actors (local authorities, educational institutions, employers) and other actors involved in working with young people (youth workers, NGOs, youth centres),
- insufficient identification of NEETs youth and their needs for the implementation of integrated packages of services,
- skills training without an analysis of labour market needs,
- the inflexibility of service packages,
- weaknesses in reaching the most disadvantaged, weaknesses in reaching out to youth living in remote locations,
- reduced differentiation of measures according to categories of NEETs (NEETs is considered as a homogenous category).

### 2.1.1 Promising Practices from the Youth Guarantee Programme

In the Netherlands, the 'Action plan for youth unemployment in the Rivierenland region 2021-2025' is an example of a regional approach for supporting unemployed young people aged 16-27 in the framework of the RYG. The plan emphasises the importance of cooperation amongst all stakeholders concerned with youth (i.e. representatives of municipalities, employer and employee organisations, educational institutions and other stakeholders ); of building on what works well by connecting and strengthening existing successful initiatives, tackling the regional level for coherence purposes while still paying attention to municipal characteristics; and of implementing short-term actions that are also meant to contribute to the structural improvement and innovation of the regional youth approach.

The 'Youth Mediators' project (EC, 2017) is part of the Bulgarian National Programme 'Activation of Inactive Persons' funded by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. It



primarily aims at identifying young NEETs aged up to 29 years who are not registered with the Bulgarian PESs. This is done by training and employing young people as youth mediators to reach and inform NEETs about career services and opportunities for education, training and employment. It allows, on the one hand, to increase the employment rate of unemployed young people with tertiary education (i.e., the youth mediators) and, on the other, to offer NEETs with education, training and work opportunities that suit their needs. By way of example, the Youth Centre of Dobrich in the North-East of Bulgaria aims to activate NEETs in an area with a substantial Roma presence and integrate them into the community through their inclusion in the youth centre's activities.

### 2.1.2 Our recommendations:

- Prioritise the most vulnerable groups: Many evaluations in various countries found that job seekers with better opportunities in the labour market are more likely to be included in programmes. The initiative should focus on the more vulnerable groups within youth.
- Increase flexibility: On several occasions, the services and measures must be more flexible in responding to individual needs. Youth Guarantee should provide sufficient flexibility to tailor services and support to the individual.
- Address geographic disparities: Flexibility also should be increased from a territorial perspective; remote, rural and peripheral locations should be able to tailor the national program to local level context.
- Deepening local partnerships: Many national initiatives facing problems reach the most vulnerable youth. Involving local actors and youth organisations can support reaching out to the hardest-to-reach youth.
- Ensuring the placement quality: There is a risk that work placements are of a lower standard, especially in places with the worst labour market conditions. PES have to take action against companies exploiting traineeships as simply a source of cheap labour and support work placement to jobs with good labour market prospects.
- Implement regular evaluation: Evaluations should be conducted regularly on the national and EU levels, and these researchers should pay more attention to the urban-rural disparities.



## 2.2 Creating Conditions for quality traineeships

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that the transition to a green economy has the potential to activate 24 million new jobs by 2030. Green jobs should be understood as contributing to producing environmentally sustainable outputs or transforming the production process to be more environmentally sustainable while ensuring decent work conditions, security in the workplace and social protection (ILO, 2019).

The ILO also highlights that this transition is conditional to adequate investment and political commitment to enhance upskilling opportunities and job guidance (such as counselling and traineeships), especially for youth living in rural areas (ILO, 2019).

There is a need for comparable data and traineeship opportunities, with a clear focus on green skills for young people in rural or remote areas." A 2020 estimation from the European Commission reports that between 2014–2020 the number of young people engaging in traineeship opportunities increased from 16.6% in 2014 to 17.2% in 2020. However, this estimation excludes young people with below tertiary education qualifications. A 2023 study issued by the Commission highlights that 53% of the identified trainees had a university degree.

The 2014 EU Quality Framework for Traineeships (QFT) establishes 21 quality principles to support young people transitioning from education, unemployment or inactivity into the labour market, defining the contents and work conditions necessary to enhance their skills and allow them to gain valuable work experience. It is conceived to complement the Youth Guarantee and applies to active labour market policy and open market traineeships. The Impact Assessment accompanying the QFT demonstrates a clear link between a quality traineeship and a successful employment outcome. The main conditions included in the definition of quality traineeships are:

- Stipulation of a written traineeship agreement between the trainee, the organisations and the supporting service (if present). It should indicate educational objectives and working conditions (working hours, health insurance, holidays etc.) applicable to the trainee.



- Supervision is carried out by a mentor/tutor, who monitors the implementation of tasks, jointly assesses the transfer of skills and competencies with the trainee, and ensures that rights and obligations are upheld on both sides.
- Duration is limited based on the learning objectives to avoid exploitation of the traineeship contract.
- Knowledge, skills and competencies are assessed and certified at the end of the traineeship period.
- Transparency from the recruiters on their vacancy notices about their recruitment policies, tasks, and working conditions.
- Facilitations of cross-border traineeships by clarifying national legal frameworks and reducing administrative formalities for hosting trainees from other Member States.

In the 2023 Working Document evaluating the Quality Framework for Traineeships (QFT), national policymakers in Romania and Slovakia underlined the Reinforced Youth Guarantee to be a determinant in ensuring that the QFT principles were implemented. Traineeships are a central element in the context of the YG, being the second most used measure after employment. In 2016, 2.1 million young people registered for the YG, and 32% chose to complete a traineeship or continued education. The employment rate for former trainees is 50.2% in Cyprus, 45% in Italy, and 50% in Latvia (European Commission, 2018).

In the 2019 Policy Guidance on Decent Work in the rural economy, the ILO identifies several challenges hindering inclusive and just access to training, upskilling and traineeship opportunities related to green jobs for youth in rural areas:

- Lack of access to quality education, training and traineeships opportunities, which adds to the increased illiteracy levels, and school dropout;
- Prevalence of informal economies, young people living in rural areas are 40% more likely to be informally employed (casual wage, no contract), and four times more likely to work as unpaid family workers as compared to young people in urban areas;
- Lack of infrastructure, such as training facilities and technological and digital tools, but also lacking access to efficient public transport due to the geographic remoteness;



- Lack of access to viable employment opportunities in the green economy, which can make it challenging to create quality traineeships that provide hands-on experience in green jobs, therefore preventing youth's opportunities to expand their skills and competencies;
- Lack of awareness and information resources concerning green job upskilling and traineeship opportunities.

### 2.2.1 Experience from EU Countries

In **Ireland**, Sola's training programmes offered to young people under the YG are subject to regular review at the national and local levels to ensure continual improvement in their relevance to the needs of trainees and local labour markets. It is also the responsibility of the Case Officer to ensure that training offers are appropriate to the needs of the individual young person and to refer him/her to the relevant course through the integrated software platform.

In **Italy**, the programmes under the YG are run at the regional level. In the Autonomous Province of Trento, specific YG traineeships are offered twice a year under the Servizio Civile Universale Provinciale. In this framework, young people are offered a 12-monthly contract in local social enterprises and organisations, with particular attention to ensuring the inclusion of the youth living in the region's most remote areas. The participants are offered continuous training on various topics, including green skills, a monthly reimbursement (600 euros) and public transport cards, individual mentoring and evaluation, the opportunity to get the skills and competencies acquired formally certified and job guidance.

In **Luxemburg**, the Fit 4 Green Jobs – training for young people who are NEET in the building sector programme offers nine different training courses related to the building sector for young NEETs or those at risk of social exclusion. The training comprises fundamental theoretical knowledge and practical exercises on the training site. For example, the training for Greentech jobs lasts eight weeks (336 hours), of which one-third would be a theoretical background and two-thirds practical work on actual installations. Experts from the field teach all practical aspects. During the training, the basic rules of a working environment are applied to influence the trainees' behaviour: punctuality, motivation, and hard work.





**Lithuania** approved the new action plan for implementing the Youth Guarantee initiative in 2021. The new plan aims to ensure that all persons aged 15–29 who are not in employment, education or training receive an offer to work, continue learning (including professional training in the form of an apprenticeship), practice or an internship'. The responsible authority for the Youth Guarantee implementation in Lithuania is the Ministry of Social Security and Labour. Since 2019, several projects, e.g. Discover Yourself, The New Start, and Let's Move, etc., have been implemented in Lithuania. The assistance was ensured by providing the necessary services and primary and secondary interventions.

### 2.2.2 Our recommendations:

- Support EU-wide, comparative data collection on traineeships and monitoring the QFT implementation to gain a more substantial understanding of the requirements, needs, use and impact of traineeships in the EU and their role in youth employment.
- Strengthen the mapping systems to improve the understanding of the NEETs' sub-groups and of the regional and local job market specificities to provide personalised, needs-based opportunities to young people and enrich the offer of employment support services.
- Foster cooperation among local public authorities and private organisations (both from the profit and non for profit sectors) to jointly identify the skills needed for green jobs in rural areas, design training opportunities, and facilitate access to the labour market;
- Promote harmonised legal frameworks for traineeships, detailing legal standards on working conditions and duration limits, also taking into consideration financial support measures to ensure equal access and opportunities, especially in rural areas;
- Support the awareness raising about skills and competencies for the green economy;
- Promote digital tools and digital upskilling opportunities to favour access to green skills and competencies in rural areas;



### 2.3 Gender perspective

Young women face several barriers in the labour market. The NEET rate for women was 14,6% in the EU27 in 2019 and was consequently higher than that of men at 10,8% (Eurostat, edat\_lfse\_29). The difference is even higher in rural areas of Europe (11,3% for men and 16,3% for women). Young women in rural areas face limited access to good quality childcare facilities, a lack of part-time and flexible-time jobs, low engagement of fathers in childcare, and gender role stereotypes. Active labour market measures should promote gender equality and address gender gaps. (Youth Employment Partnership 2021, Lost Millennials 2023, ILO 2017b)

In the Spanish “Youth Guarantee Plan Plus 2021 – 2027”, one of the measures identified is to ensure that steps will be taken to shed light on the role of young women in professions STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) with specific training courses and also in the area of Corporate Social Responsibility.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employment has had a disproportionate effect on young women in rural areas. Due to pre-existing gender inequalities and discrimination, young women in rural areas face additional barriers to accessing education and employment opportunities compared to young men. This is further compounded by the effects of the pandemic, which has led to increased job losses among young women in rural areas. Moreover, educated young women in rural areas face particular challenges in finding suitable employment opportunities. Despite higher levels of academic achievement, they often lack access to jobs that match their qualifications and skills, which can result in them migrating to urban areas or even abroad in search of work. This brain drain of young women from rural areas exacerbates the existing gender gap in rural areas and limits the potential for economic and social development in those regions.

Therefore, it is crucial to take a gender perspective into account when addressing the challenges faced by rural youth, particularly in terms of employment and education.



### 2.3.1 Promising Practices with a gender perspective

#### [WE GREEN Project](#)

##### *Rural Women's Empowerment through Green Social Entrepreneurship (2022–2024)*

Rural Women's Empowerment through Green Social Entrepreneurship (WE-GREEN) proposed to foster green social entrepreneurship among women in rural communities through education through practical local programs. In line with the European Pillar of Social Rights, 'everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training, and life-long learning to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage transitions successfully in the labour market.' The project aimed at bridging the "gap" in the educational system between the need for new green skills and entrepreneurial skills and the lack of adequate educational content for developing such skills through an innovative training course for teachers in delivering green social entrepreneurship education, utilising blended learning methodology.

#### [The Women's Academy for Rural Innovation in Spain](#)

The Women's Academy for Rural Innovation is an educational program that offers a remarkable opportunity for women living in rural areas. The program will take place in Spain and aims to provide participants with a unique learning experience where they can learn from expert speakers and mentors from across Europe. The program is designed to encourage dialogue and discussion on the most pressing issues facing women living in rural areas. Participants can explore potential solutions to address these issues and deliver tangible results in their regions. The program also seeks to empower women living in rural areas by offering them the chance to act as solid examples and role models for other women in similar settings. Through this experience, participants will be able to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to bring positive change to their communities and make a meaningful impact on those around them.

### 2.3.2 Our recommendations:

Policies and programs must be developed with the specific needs and experiences of young women in mind, such as providing equal access to education and training, promoting gender equality in the workplace, and addressing the structural barriers that limit women's opportunities in rural areas. By addressing these gender inequalities, we



can better support rural youth's social and economic inclusion, especially young women, and contribute to building more resilient and sustainable rural communities.

- Considering the structurally higher rates of NEETs to include gender quotas or gender women, it would also be appropriate for specific interventions, of which no evidence was found during the desk research.
- Design gender-sensitive programs: Ensure that the active labour market measures are designed gender-sensitive. This means designing programs and policies considering the different needs and challenges women and men face.
- Encourage female participation: Encourage more women to participate in the active labour market measures by providing targeted support and incentives. This could include providing flexible working hours, making childcare more accessible, providing transportation allowances, etc.
- Tailor approaches to reach young mothers: Many women avoid the labour market because of care responsibilities. The measures should include support for childcare access to ensure that young mothers (and fathers) can engage in job searches and training and return to work. Public Employment Service (PES) can offer services to young parents who want to find a job after some time to improve their labour market chances in the future.
- Address the most vulnerable: active labour market policy (ALMP) programme design should address multiple barriers, such as the specific needs of women and mothers from ethnic minority groups or single parents.

#### 2.4 Youth labour market integration through (social) Entrepreneurship

Youth entrepreneurship is unlikely to be a panacea for solving the youth unemployment problem, but it can be a part of the response. To maximise effectiveness and efficiency, policy should target resources on young people with the best chance of success, provide sufficient support to allow them to start businesses outside of low entry barriers but high competition sectors, and provide integrated packages of complementary support rather than one-shot instruments. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified young people's challenges when entering the EU job market, despite the overall decrease in youth unemployment over the last seven years. The European Commission prioritises the promotion of youth employment, as it is essential to allow young people to contribute to the European economy and unlock their skills. The [Social Economy Action Plan](#)



and [Youth Employment Support](#) are two EU policies that target youth social entrepreneurship and promote its development.

The European Commission released a strategic document called “The Social Economy Action Plan” in December 2021, highlighting the mutual benefits between young generations and the social economy, as young people bring innovative ideas and are particularly well suited to finding solutions to the green and digital transition. In contrast, social entrepreneurship can provide access to the job market. However, the plan also notes a need for more awareness and/or appeal to young generations towards social entrepreneurship and the positive impact of the social economy.

The proposed plan entails implementing specific measures for young individuals, including establishing a Youth Entrepreneurship Policy Academy and facilitating mutual learning amongst social economy entrepreneurs through the Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs (EYE) Programme. Despite their potential as valuable tools for young entrepreneurs, it should be noted that these opportunities do not cater specifically to rural youth, particularly those categorised as NEETs. Consequently, targeting and engaging this group through these initiatives may take time and effort.

The [Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs \(EYE\)](#) is a highly effective cross-border program supported by the European Union (EU) that facilitates the exchange of entrepreneurial and management experience among entrepreneurs from different countries. The program aims to provide opportunities for less experienced or aspiring entrepreneurs to work with and be mentored by established entrepreneurs leading successful enterprises in another EU member state. This program celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2019 and has received over 21,000 applications from entrepreneurs throughout the European Union, resulting in more than 7,000 successful matches between young entrepreneurs and host entrepreneurs. According to the European Commission (2019), 36% of all new entrepreneurs who completed the program subsequently created their businesses (Senčar, 2021).

While the Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs (EYE) program has successfully facilitated the cross-border exchange of entrepreneurial and management experience among young entrepreneurs in the European Union, its potential for rural areas, especially for NEETs, still needs to be explored. The EYE program can provide valuable support and resources for young aspiring entrepreneurs in rural areas, where access to entrepreneurial education, networking opportunities, and financing may be limited. By matching



them with experienced entrepreneurs in other EU member states, the EYE program can help bridge the gap in knowledge and skills and provide access to new markets and business opportunities. Additionally, the EYE program can be essential in promoting entrepreneurship in rural areas and addressing youth unemployment, including NEETs. By providing tailored support and mentoring for young entrepreneurs in rural areas, the program can help create new businesses, generate employment opportunities, and contribute to the economic development of rural communities. Therefore, policy-makers and stakeholders should consider ways to promote and expand the participation of young entrepreneurs from rural areas, including NEETs, in the EYE program. This may include targeted outreach, increased funding, and customised support services to meet young entrepreneurs' specific needs and challenges in rural areas.

In 2020, the European Commission released a communication entitled "Youth Employment Support" to tackle youth unemployment and provide young people with the necessary skills to succeed in the job market. The communication outlines several measures, including strengthening the Youth Guarantee program, revising vocational education and training policies, and promoting apprenticeships. Additionally, the plan acknowledges the significant role of social entrepreneurship and the social economy in generating equitable and respectable employment opportunities and promoting social integration and innovation. The communication underscores social entrepreneurship's positive impact on communities and social economy organisations' resilience to economic cycles. The plan is consistent with recent EU initiatives such as the EU Green Deal. Through the Next Generation EU and EU budget, the EU intends to invest €22 billion in youth employment support, which can benefit NEETs in rural areas.

In 2021, the European Commission released the [European Pillar of Social Rights \(EPSR\)](#) Action Plan, outlining concrete measures to implement the principles by 2030. The Action Plan focuses on three main objectives: achieving a 78% employment rate among the 20–64 age group, ensuring that at least 60% of all adults participate in training annually, and reducing the number of individuals at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million by 2030. The Action Plan emphasises young people, including NEETs, who are more vulnerable and at risk of exclusion from the labour market. It lays out several initiatives to actively support the integration of young people into the labour market and develop their skills. Additionally, the EPSR Action Plan recognises the valuable contribution of the social economy and social entrepreneurship sectors in building a fairer and more equitable society. It proposes various political and funding instruments



to develop the skills necessary for social entrepreneurship, social enterprises, and the social economy.

#### 2.4.1 Youth social entrepreneurship: challenges and promising practices

Corresponding to the last Global Entrepreneurship Monitor on social entrepreneurship (2016), it is found that among 18- to 34-year-olds, there is a greater representation of promising social entrepreneur/s than nascent commercial entrepreneurs in three of the world's regions – namely the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and Western Europe. Concerning operating initiatives, organisations, or activities, there are more social entrepreneurs than commercial entrepreneurs in every global region except for Latin America and the Caribbean. Moreover, GEM monitor also profiles in Eastern Europe and Western Europe; around half of the operational social entrepreneurs are highly Educated (Lamio, Sebillio, 2022)

Social enterprise management teams consist of 59% women. They employ, on average, 40% of disabled people and 56% of ethnic minorities. 37% of European Social Entrepreneurship Monitor (ESEM) Social Enterprises had high or very high involvement in the organisation's decision-making by their employees. In comparison, 69% of ESEM Social Enterprises involved beneficiaries in their production processes/services (Euclid, 2021).

Based on the ESEM, the main barriers young social entrepreneurs face come from "financial support", including the three most significant barriers which are experienced by the highest number of ESEM Social Enterprises: "lack of options to finance the organisation once started", "too complex public financing" and a "lack of patient capital". Internal factors that determine the success of social enterprises include clear missions, solid and inspiring leadership, valuable products, excellent operation systems, entrepreneurship and business acumen, a culture of learning and innovation, scale, income base and ability to manage finances, as well as effective relationship and alignment with the needs of stakeholders. The main barriers to social enterprise creation are legal and regulatory frameworks, financial resources, market access, business support and development services, and training and research (Lamio, Sebillio, 2022).



Moreover, young social entrepreneurs often need more formal preparation, support, and technical knowledge, which affects their capacity to prevent missteps and increase their chances of success. Additionally, they need more human capital, and networks, which can be significant obstacles in the marketplace. Young people's dependence on parents and caregivers may also constrain their ability to take charge of their plans and contribute to lower self-efficacy for change-making. Furthermore, their limited financial literacy and awareness may lead to unsustainable financial support and undermine their enterprise's growth and survival. These issues are significant challenges that need to be addressed to support the success of young social entrepreneurs, especially in rural areas where resources and opportunities may be limited (WRY, 2020).

The European Commission has released a strategic document, the [European Skills Agenda](#) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness, and Resilience, which aims to provide individuals and businesses with the right skills to be competitive in the changing EU labour market. The agenda addresses the challenges posed by the green and digital transition and the COVID crisis and emphasises the need to support vulnerable groups, including young people, in accessing high-quality employment opportunities. The agenda recognises the potential of the social economy and social entrepreneurship to offer solutions for the fair green and digital transition and to contribute to the EU economy's innovation. More attention should be given to raising awareness, increasing the appeal of social economy and social entrepreneurship, and focusing on developing social entrepreneurship skills and education programs.

#### 2.4.2 Promising practices

##### **COOP4IN**

*Cooperative Business for social inclusion in rural areas (2021-2023)*

The main objective of COOP4IN is to establish a cooperative business model that centres around people with disabilities (PWDs) and to develop policy recommendations that encourage the creation and support of social enterprises and cooperatives in rural areas. This will promote sustainable local development, improve the quality of services available to PWDs, and generate employment opportunities. By doing so, COOP4IN aims to enhance the quality of life for PWDs and create positive impacts for remote





and rural areas that are experiencing population migration and economic depletion. To achieve these goals, it is crucial to design a specific business model that empowers local stakeholders and highlights the potential of social entrepreneurship in local areas. The involvement of disadvantaged groups, particularly PWDs, is central to this effort and will result in a mutual benefit that promotes active participation and addresses real needs.

### **Digital Story Doing for Local Tourism**

*Storydoers (2021-2023)*

The main goal of this project is to enhance the competitiveness of rural businesses operating in the tourism industry by providing support for their digital story while also developing the skills and capacities of young entrepreneurs. By focusing on Storydoing, the project aims to teach participants the skills and digital competencies required to design and promote sustainable local tourism experiences. The project will enable youth to acquire Storydoing skills and social and digital competencies through free educational resources, which are crucial in today's economy. This will help young entrepreneurs to create successful enterprises while contributing to the growth and sustainability of the rural tourism industry.

### **CASYE**

*Cultural and Social Youth Entrepreneurship (2020-2022)*

CASYE project aims to support youth entrepreneurship in the creative sector by developing and piloting a social economy model, emphasising empowering young people with fewer opportunities (social obstacles, geographical obstacles and/or economic obstacles) with a focus on youth living in rural/depopulated/ marginalised areas. The project developed innovative Continuous Professional Development (CPD) accredited tools to support marginalised young people in becoming entrepreneurs in the social and cultural sectors through the capacity building and certification of youth workers and other professionals by giving them new approaches to support and strengthen their work, improve their skills, and increase the quality of their interventions.



### 2.4.3 Our recommendations:

- Foster entrepreneurship education and training can be achieved through partnerships between educational institutions, public authorities, and the private sector. To address this, partnerships between educational institutions, public authorities, and the private sector could establish training programs tailored to rural youth's needs and opportunities. Non-formal education, such as workshops and mentorship programs, could also be provided to complement formal education and training. These programs could focus on developing entrepreneurial skills such as business planning, financial management, marketing, and social impact assessment. Mentors could guide business strategy, marketing, financial management, and social impact assessment.
- Simplify administrative procedures and reduce regulatory burdens: In rural areas, administrative and regulatory barriers can discourage young entrepreneurs from starting businesses. To support youth entrepreneurship, public authorities could simplify administrative procedures and reduce regulatory burdens for new businesses, especially those with a social or environmental mission. This could include assisting with registration, licensing, taxation, compliance requirements, and streamlining the bureaucratic processes.
- Access to financing and funding is a crucial challenge for young entrepreneurs, especially in rural areas where financial institutions may be less accessible or unwilling to lend. But also promote financial literacy. Financing schemes tailored to the needs of rural youth could be established, such as microloans, seed funding, crowdfunding, or peer-to-peer lending. Partnership and networking can be precious for rural youth with limited access to role models and business networks and could facilitate access to markets, suppliers, partners, and customers. Cross-sectoral collaboration between the public, private, and third sectors can create new opportunities for social entrepreneurship and help to address complex social and environmental challenges in rural areas. Public authorities could facilitate such collaborations by creating platforms for dialogue, partnerships, and joint initiatives.
- Raising awareness of social entrepreneurship since many young people in rural areas may need to be made aware of social entrepreneurship as a viable career option or more understanding of its potential social and environmental impact. To raise awareness of social entrepreneurship, public authorities, educational institutions, and civil society organisations could organise awareness campaigns, workshops, and events that showcase successful social entrepreneurs and their achievements. Media coverage and social media could also be used to promote social entrepreneurship as a positive and viable career path.



### 3. ADVANCING GREEN JOBS OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The International Labour Organization estimates that creating 24 million new jobs globally by 2030 in the green economy presents a significant opportunity for youth employment, particularly in rural areas. This shows the potential for green jobs as a viable pathway for rural youth to enter the labour market. However, rural youth need help accessing green job opportunities despite their interest and potential. These challenges include limited access to finance, skills training, and technology.

The European Green Deal (EGD), established by European Union in 2019, aims to create 1 million green jobs in the EU by 2030, including jobs in renewable energy, energy-efficient buildings, and sustainable mobility. To achieve its objectives, the EGD includes a plan to make its economy sustainable, including initiatives to promote green job creation.

It is not by coincidence that the EU has designed several instruments to promote green jobs. For instance, the European Social Fund supports vocational education and training programs across Europe, focusing on sectors with skill shortages, such as green industries. Similarly, the Erasmus+ Green Youth Jobs initiative is tailored to provide young people practical experience in green jobs and environmental sustainability. The Youth Employment Initiative funds EU member states with high youth unemployment rates, especially in the green jobs sector. The European Investment Bank provides financing for sustainable development and climate action projects that can create new green job opportunities. Finally, the European Alliance for Apprenticeships aims to develop high-quality apprenticeships, many concentrating on green industries and equipping young people with valuable skills and experience. These programs illustrate the EU's commitment to promoting a sustainable economy while offering young people the chance to thrive in the workforce.

The EU's Common Agricultural Policy also includes funding for rural development and support for sustainable agriculture and forestry practices. The European Investment Bank also provides financing for sustainable projects, including those in rural areas, through its various funding mechanisms, such as the Natural Capital Financing Facility and the Circular Bioeconomy Fund.



These data points highlight the importance of empowering rural youth to lead in the green economy in the EU and the potential for the green economy to create employment opportunities and contribute to sustainable rural development. Therefore, developing supportive policies and programs to promote green entrepreneurship and provide young people with the necessary skills, resources, and support to start and grow green businesses in rural areas is crucial.

As the world faces the challenges of climate change and environmental degradation, there is a growing need for green jobs and sustainable business opportunities. While many efforts to promote these opportunities have focused on urban areas, it is essential to recognise the potential of rural areas. Rural areas have unique assets that can be leveraged to create green jobs and businesses, such as abundant natural resources and supportive community networks. However, some obstacles must be overcome, such as limited infrastructure and access to funding. In this context, advancing green job opportunities for young people in rural areas is a crucial step towards building a more sustainable future.

For instance, the INDIGISE project identified the obstacles and enablers for advancing green job opportunities for young people. The review found that inadequate infrastructure, such as a lack of reliable electricity and internet access, was a significant obstacle for rural youth in accessing education and training opportunities related to sustainability. Additionally, limited job opportunities in rural areas made it difficult for young people to find employment in the green economy or pursue entrepreneurial ventures focused on sustainability. Furthermore, rural areas may need more access to funding and resources to start and grow sustainable businesses or community initiatives focused on sustainability.

On the other hand, the review identified several enablers that could help rural youth access green jobs. These include access to abundant natural resources such as land, forests, and water, which can be used for sustainable business opportunities such as eco-tourism, organic farming, and forestry. Strong community networks in rural areas can provide support and resources for young people interested in green entrepreneurship or community initiatives focused on sustainability. Lastly, government funding and programs to support rural development and sustainability can provide opportunities for young people in rural areas to access funding, mentorship, and other resources to advance green jobs and opportunities.



It's important to note that these obstacles and enablers can vary depending on the specific rural area and its unique characteristics. However, understanding these factors can help stakeholders develop targeted strategies to empower rural youth in the green economy.

### 3.1 Promising practices

#### **BC4ESE**

*Building Capacities for Innovation in eco-social Entrepreneurship Education (2022–2025)*

The main focus of the BC4ESE project is meeting the needs of organisations from the western Balkan region working with young people. The BC4ESE project aims to build capacities for promoting eco-social entrepreneurship (ESE) and developing non-formal education tools and methodologies. This will engage young people to ESE through developing their soft, entrepreneurial and digital skills, thus enabling behavioural changes for individual preferences, cultural values and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles.

#### **Terrius**

*an example of a green social entrepreneur*

In rural areas, green social entrepreneurs can play a vital role in creating sustainable agriculture and food systems. According to Zahedi and Otterpohl (2016), they can act as community innovators, changing the economy's structure through sustainability and change-makers who create and change economic norms to maintain sustainable societal development.

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 recovered two old products that nobody was producing (chestnut and acorn flours) 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 periurban 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.

### 3.2 Our recommendations

- Increase access to education and training: Rural youth should have access to education and training programs focused on sustainable practices, renewable energy, and green business opportunities. This can be achieved through partnerships with local schools, community centres, and universities.
- Provide access to funding and resources: Rural youth need access to grants, loans, and infrastructure to lead in the green economy. Partnerships with organisations, governments, and private sector investment can increase access to these resources.
- Encourage community involvement: Foster community involvement and engagement by involving rural youth in community initiatives focused on sustainability, such as community gardens, conservation projects, and sustainable tourism.
- Support entrepreneurship: Encourage rural youth to pursue entrepreneurship and provide resources and mentorship to help them launch green businesses. This can include setting up incubators or accelerators for sustainable businesses and providing access to networks and funding opportunities.
- Address barriers to participation: Address barriers to participation, such as lack of access to technology or transportation, that may prevent rural youth from participating in the green economy. This can be achieved through partnerships with transportation providers and investment in technology infrastructure.



- Promote collaboration: Encourage rural youth to collaborate, organisations, and communities to share ideas, knowledge, and resources. This can be achieved through networking events, conferences, and mentorship programs.
- Support social impact assessment: Social impact assessment is essential for measuring, evaluating, and communicating green businesses' social and environmental impact. Public authorities, educational institutions, and civil society organisations could provide training and technical assistance for social impact assessment and access to tools and frameworks for measuring social impact. Public and private investors could also incentivise social impact assessment by requiring it as part of their due diligence and investment criteria.



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