

YOUTH AND SUSTAINABILITY OF RURAL AREAS

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This special issue contains four articles, which were prepared within COST Action CA18213 Rural NEET Youth Network: modeling the risks underlying rural NEETs social exclusion. This special issue approaches and discusses about young people living in rural areas, particularly youth neither in employment nor in education or training (NEETs), and their role in contributing to sustainability from different perspectives, such as economic, social, and environmental.

The rural population in several European countries is aging due to both the low fertility rate and out-migration of young people from rural areas. The question of how to keep the young part of the population, and thus populated rural areas long term, are challenging and demanding issues for new approaches and measures, particularly addressing the transition from education to employment, to maintain the livelihood and sustainability of rural areas. Among rural youth is a specific group of NEETs who can be traced as registered unemployed, or not traced as hidden unemployed. This special issue “Youth and Sustainability of Rural Areas” focuses on the following four thematic issues: rural NEETs social networks and social inclusion, rural NEETs and formal and nonformal education, employment and employment services in rural areas, and rural NEETs and sustainability.

The first article by Valentina Milenkova, Albena Nakova-Manolova and Vladislava Lendzhova presents vocational education and training (VET) as an education pathway and school-to-work transition for Bulgarian rural youth. VET is considered a catalyst for young people from rural areas to enter the labour market. They highlight the importance of the quality of the practical training of graduates and their compliance with the requirements to successfully enter employment. Three crucial local actors are engaged in this process: vocational schools, businesses and local government bodies. To improve the speed and quality of VET, it is important to assess and collect opinions of local actors and stakeholders to improve the matching between demand and supply of skills needed in the labour

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market. Successful transition from education to employment for young people from rural areas is an essential condition to reduce the share of NEETs in rural areas, and to improve their quality of life.

The second article by Sonata Vyšniauskienė and Rūta Brazienė investigates challenges to rural NEETs transitioning from school to work in Lithuania during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article focuses on evaluating the quality of transitions from school to work. The article is based on the reviews of previous literature, and a mix of research methods and evidence on the transition of youth from education to employment, with the role of labour market policies, particularly active employment policies targeting rural youth. More specifically, the main focus of the article is on rural NEET youth transition from school to work in Lithuania, based on survey research of a sample of young people aged 18–35 years, unemployed and registered at the public employment service. On this basis, the article conducts an in-depth analysis of a subjective evaluation of the attitudes and experiences of the surveyed participants in the labour market and living in rural areas. Strikingly, the article finds a worsened situation in the labour market during the pandemic, and argues for specific policy measures targeting young NEETs living in rural areas.

The third article by Mateusz Smoter and Sylvia Danilowska addresses a specific research question related to the quality of employment and working conditions of young people with disabilities in Poland, as a case study. The focus of the analysis is on unemployed people with disabilities included in job activation programmes. The article analyses the participants' employment status, job stability, and job satisfaction six months after the completion of the job activation programme. The article argues that employment, and particularly job quality, are crucial for participant self-esteem, social relations and satisfaction, while less satisfaction is found with low earnings, as most of them are around the minimum wage level.

Finally, the fourth article by Omeed Agahi, Maria Isabel Pell-Dempere and Òscar Prieto-Flores presents the impact of multilevel governmental policies on employment and educational training opportunities in the Spanish region of Catalonia. The article illustrates the rural – urban divide, and gaps in education, employment and unemployment outcomes. The main focus is on the differences in Youth-based Active Labour Market policies between rural and urban areas in Catalonia. Differences and gaps between urban and rural opportunities are found to be a challenge for multilevel governance policies and practices.

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