# THE POLICY AND SERVICE CREATION – NECESSARY SHIFTS FOR WORKING WITH NEETS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND PROFESSIONALS

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*T*he European Commission's Youth Guarantee initiative has brought renewed attention to the increasingly complex support needs of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEETs), particularly as they navigate key transitional phases in their lives. This study contributes to the understanding and evaluation of policies aimed at this demographic, as well as shifts in the broader policy landscape intended to enhance the effectiveness of interventions and ensure that support aligns more closely with young people's perceived needs. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with youth in NEET situations and professionals working with them in Estonia, the study underscores the necessity of adopting more community-based and participatory approaches to support interventions.

*Incorporating more inclusive, empowering, and confidence-building principles−such as the need for a minimal information flow requirement, situation-based communication, meaning-based change management, co-creation and reciprocal partnership, one-shop change management, a need-based rebalancing, and long-term legitimate expectation can play a crucial role in preventing the marginalization and social exclusion of target groups. These principles are essential for improving access to information, education, support services, and labour market opportunities. Realizing such an approach requires national-level strategic agreements that shift the focus of Member States from isolated actions to comprehensive implementation strategies, paving the way for the co-creation of an integrated, cross-sectoral support ecosystem. The article concludes with practical policy recommendations that are scalable at the European level.*

*Keywords: Youth Guarantee; NEETs perceived needs; policy creation; inclusive work principles; effectiveness of interventions.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Supporting young people in vulnerable situations has become an increasingly complex challenge. Over the last decade, the European Commission's Youth Guarantee initiative has been at the forefront of EU policy to address the needs of young people not engaged in education, employment, or training (NEETs). Established in 2013, the Youth Guarantee is a policy instrument aimed at ensuring that young people under 30 are offered a quality job, apprenticeship or a chance to continue their education within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education (European Commission 2021). Despite the introduction of extensive public support measures, young people continue to represent the most vulnerable demographic in the labour market, as they are often the first to be excluded during economic downturns (Petrescu *et al.* 2024; Tosun *et al.* 2024). The numbers of NEETs in the EU and the youth unemployment rate have risen in comparison to other vulnerable groups (Eurofound 2024). Consequently, public preparedness to support young people aged 15−29 needs to be continuous and increasingly proactive to prevent the adverse effects of potential crises on young people. European Commission guidelines (2020) emphasize the importance of enhanced knowledge about the circumstances of young people, effective outreach, and the mapping of opportunities through broad, flexible approaches. The universal approach has failed to deliver the anticipated results in the Youth Guarantee, as young people in NEET situations face diverse and highly specific challenges, underscoring the need for more tailored and nuanced support strategies (Eurofound 2024).

Structural solutions that address the root causes of various inequalities are most effective in supporting young people in NEET situations. Inequalities are often perpetuated through institutional practices across different sectors, project-based interventions, labelling and regional disparities in access to essential services, such as education, employment, housing, healthcare, and social support (Bálint *et al.* 2024; Øydgard *et al.* 2024). Given the heterogeneity of the target group, cross-sectoral and multi-level agreements are essential, presenting a significant challenge for national policymakers. Support systems across policy domains must foster simultaneous support for young people by different actors, both in the short term (Tamesberger and Bacher 2020) and in the long term (Csoba and Herrmann 2017). Effective support should facilitate rapid exit from the NEET situation while ensuring sustained impact to prevent re-entry into the NEET situation. Achieving this requires tailored, cross-sectoral interventions that are responsive to the diverse and evolving needs of young people (Mascherini 2019).

Since the inception of the Youth Guarantee initiative, both policy and academic literature have increasingly recognized the need for services aimed at young people to be more precisely tailored to their individual needs (European Commission 2020). A critical component of effective support involves

understanding the expectations and roles of young people in shaping the service, particularly in terms of the design and selection of support measures. One significant challenge in targeting the NEET population is the exclusion of young people in NEET situations from public employment service registers, leading to limited data on the actual size and needs of this group (Simões and Tosun 2024). Moreover, for policy interventions to be truly effective, it is essential to understand young people's well-being from their own perspectives and actively engage them in identifying locally appropriate solutions (Erdoğan and Paabort 2024; Agahi *et al.* 2024).

It is increasingly crucial to understand which policies and practices either hinder or facilitate young people's access to support, particularly from their own perspective. While the majority of studies to date have concentrated primarily on the viewpoint of policymakers, there is a pressing need for research that explores how young people in NEET situations perceive the services and support available to them. Additionally, research into co-creation with young people, including community-based service models, is essential (Paabort *et al.* 2023), as the positive impact of target group engagement in service creation has been proven (Voorberg *et al.* 2013; Osborne 2018).

This paper explores the challenges faced by young people in NEET situations and youth-supporting professionals in identifying the discrepancies between the perceptions of young people, professionals, and youth-supporting structures regarding the services required by young people in vulnerable circumstances. By addressing these contradictions, the study aims to provide insights that will enable policymakers to consider the principles necessary for effectively supporting this target group and to develop more efficient support systems. The research is grounded in semi-structured interviews with both young people and professionals in Estonia.

## THEORETICAL CONTEXT

This chapter offers an overview of the NEET context, along with the key policies and approaches implemented to support this group within the European Union, mainly in Estonia.

### Causes and context of becoming NEET

Youth NEETs have been a priority target group in the European Union for over a decade, driven by the goal of fostering high employment levels, enhanced skills and employability and strong social protection systems (European Commission 2025). By the end of 2023, the NEET rate stood at 11.2% across the EU and 9.6% in Estonia (Eurostat 2024). While the EU aims to reduce the NEET

rate among young people to 9% (European Commission 2020), Estonia has set a more ambitious target of 8.5% (Youth Sector Development Plan 2021–2035 2021).

Young people transition into NEET status due to a range of personal and structural factors, including gender, geographic location, family's economic status, peer unemployment, strained parental relationships, parental unemployment, abuse, neglect, lack of work experience, disrupted education, limited qualifications, and restricted educational opportunities (Paabort *et al.* 2023; Agahi *et al.* 2024; Tosun *et al.* 2024). An experimental study in Estonia identified immigrant background, lack of work experience, low education, and early motherhood as the most prevalent factors contributing to NEET status among youth (Sõstra 2023).

Regional policies aimed at supporting socio-economically disadvantaged youth have been shown to facilitate smoother transitions from childhood to adulthood and from school to work (Simões and Tosun 2024; O'Higgins and Brockie 2024). However, a lack of coordination among stakeholders poses a significant barrier to effective support. When a young person's needs are not seen holistically, the assistance provided may be inadequate (Görlich and Katznelson 2018). Given that institutional arrangements influence a young person's agency (Petrescu *et al.* 2024), fostering a culture of cooperation across sectors and partners is essential (Ellena *et al.* 2024; Erdoğan and Paabort 2024).

The theoretical framework of this paper centres on the concept of vulnerability, defined as the deterioration of the surrounding ecosystem affecting a target group due to adverse influences (Virokannas *et al.* 2018). Youth in NEET situations are regarded as a particularly vulnerable target group (Andersson *et al.* 2018), often experiencing repeated vulnerability (Rahmani *et a*l. 2024). As vulnerability is both relational and subjective (Kutsar *et al.* 2024), the effectiveness of support depends on individual experiences, current needs, and resources available within their immediate environment. Consequently, this paper posits that addressing the life circumstances that create vulnerability and exploring the role of support in mitigating or (re)producing such vulnerability (Virokannas *et al.* 2018) can enhance young people's resilience (Schweiger 2019). Additionally, from the policymaking perspective, vulnerability is understood as a social construct, with specific policy measures − such as the Youth Guarantee − designed to address the needs of vulnerable groups by providing targeted services.

## Policies for young people in NEET situations at the European and national levels

The Strengthened Youth Guarantee, launched in 2020, introduced diverse categories of youth in NEET situations (e.g., long-term unemployed) to help Member States tailor more effective policies (Mascherini 2019). However, such institutionalization of youth in NEET situations has been criticized for its failure to distinguish between specific vulnerable subgroups, which may result in broad,

ineffective policy interventions (O'Higgins and Brockie 2024). Critics argue that previous policies were often top-down, labour-market-centered, and lacked social innovation (Erdoğan *et al*. 2021; Petrescu *et al*. 2024). The Youth Guarantee has proven more successful in countries where public-private partnerships across sectors have been established and where non-formal education approaches have been implemented (Ferreira *et al.* 2024). Ultimately, solutions must prioritize improving the overall well-being of young people (Jonsson and Goicolea 2020; Poštrak *et al*. 2020).

The Estonian Youth Guarantee action plans were adopted in 2014 and 2021 (Estonian National… 2021). During the first period (2014–2021), support was primarily provided by the Ministry of Education and Research, the Ministry of Social Affairs, and the Ministry of the Interior. Evaluations indicated partial effectiveness (Käger *et al*. 2020), highlighting the need for a better understanding of youth circumstances, enhanced prevention, improved coordination, and reduced regional disparities (Kasearu and Trumm 2018; Käger *et al*. 2020). Limited cross-sectoral collaboration was noted, with calls for stronger co-creation and greater local authority involvement (Kõiv *et al*. 2021; Kvieskiene *et al*. 2021; Beilmann *et al*. 2023). In the second period (2022–2027), the range of stakeholders expanded, with a *focus* on the multidimensional nature of social challenges and design-based policy development (Estonian National… 2021). The updated plan targets 15–29-year-olds, particularly those at risk of exclusion, and prioritizes preventive measures, including youth monitoring, mobile youth work, entrepreneurship-based work experience, alignment of education with labour market needs, preventing early school leaving, counselling, wage subsidies, career services, and local government support (Estonian National… 2021; Paabort and Kõiv 2022). The Youth Guarantee Support System, an electronic tool and case management model, was introduced to improve identification of young people in need (Paabort and Kõiv 2022). Support for NEETs is now shared across sectors, with a national framework established to ensure smoother cross-sectoral cooperation and access to services (Pedanik *et al*. 2021).

## METHODS

To understand the challenges faced by NEET youth and the professionals who support them, as well as their differing perspectives on service development, we conducted semi-structured interviews with both professionals working with NEET youth and young people in NEET situations.

### Participants and Procedures

The samples of NEET youth and professionals working with NEET youth were drawn based on Estonian national documents on NEET youth (Paabort and

Beilmann 2021; Paabort and Kõiv 2022). These documents guided the identification of institutions providing services to NEET youth, through which we recruited participants for semi-structured interviews. Between 2021 and 2023, the first author of this article conducted 17 interviews: eight with young people aged 18−26 and nine with professionals or experts working with youth. The young participants were contacted through the professionals in education, social and youth work, and employment, and were all in NEET situations at the time of the interview. The professionals represented various levels: coordinating (ministries, local authorities, and their sub-agencies), the supporting (sub-agencies of ministries), and the implementing (service providers). Seven experts were from the public sector, and two were from NGOs.

### Data Collection and Analysis

We collaborated with young study participants at risk and in NEET situations in designing the interview schedule. Their involvement in the developing the professionals' interview schedule offered valuable insights into their perceptions of engagement with services.

The main interview themes were shared with all participants prior to the meeting. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour.

The interview data were analyzed thematically using a deductive approach to identify key themes. The analysis involved systematic and repeated reading of the transcripts, followed by coding and classifying codes under broader themes. The themes were derived from the model of cooperation and services for local authorities supporting young people at risk of or in NEET situations in Estonia, as well as from case management guidelines for the Youth Guarantee.

### Ethics

Given that the study targeted young people in vulnerable situations, we considered their circumstances and the potential impact of participation at every stage. We adhered to the ethical principle that participation should not only avoid harm but also provide a supportive and empowering experience for participants. The interviews were conducted by the article's first author, an experienced youth worker with over 25 years of practice, including with vulnerable youth. Participants were recruited through the institutions involved, and the professionals assisting with recruitment explained the study's purpose to them. Although participants were offered the option to have a support professional present, none chose to do so. All participants were informed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and the measures in place to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Personal data was not referenced by name in the notes; instead, young participants were identified by gender and age. To further

protect the confidentiality of the participants, the terms "young" and "specialist" are used in place of pseudonyms in this article.

## FINDINGS

### Reasons why young people become NEETs

First, we examine the reasons that led the young people to become NEET. The backgrounds and circumstances of the participants varied, but common among them was a sense of being expected to find purpose in their lives. However, their immediate need was a way out of their current situations. In discussing their experiences, young people expressed a desire to *"get out of trouble"* and *"get their life on track",* and to no longer live a life of uncertainty.

Most participants cited conflicts with peers and teachers as key factors contributing to their NEET status. These often stemmed from bullying by classmates, negative attitudes from teachers, and a general sense of being belittled. For several participants, the lack of supportive family members or unexpected family crises led to both physical and mental health challenges, making it difficult for them to manage other responsibilities. Due to dysfunctional family dynamics, several participants did not live permanently with their parents, instead staying with relatives or friends. Several young people had experience of living in various institutions, with one participant noting that even prison felt like a better environment than, as it was the first time she felt supported. The absence of a stable home environment and a lack of support contributed to their decision to drop out of education, diminished their motivation to seek solutions and fostered a need for early independence.

> *"I went to [name of the settlement] for a short break, then my mother sent me a text message saying I shouldn't go back home. So, I had to start living on my own" (Young person).*

Mental health issues were a recurring theme in the interviews. Some young people reported feeling constant anxiety, both in social interactions with friends and during various meetings. This pervasive anxiety became a barrier to addressing their problems, as it prevented them from finding solutions. Over time, the accumulation of challenges led to a sense of indifference towards their situation. They expressed that they lost their sense of self-worth, and each day felt like a struggle for survival.

### Young people seeking help and support, and interpretations of receiving it

When asked how they sought help to improve their situation, several participants noted that the constant labelling of young people as "unable to cope" often prevents those who need support or wish to change their lives from accessing it. They emphasized that not studying or working does not necessarily indicate an inability to manage but rather reflects a period of self-discovery. Participants stressed the importance of understanding a young person's background and emotional state, as a lack of such awareness could make support efforts counterproductive.

*"If I'm labelled but I'm learning, it will probably leave me cold. But if I'm labelled and truly in a tight spot... I wouldn't know what road to follow... it wouldn't raise my motivation. It's as if my courage to experiment has been taken away. If I start to step out of this tight spot now, you should immediately know what you want to do" (Young person).*

Professionals also identified labelling as a barrier to finding solutions, noting that young people are often seen as a "problem" within service frameworks, with society perceiving them as responsible for their own situation. The way young people are labelled and spoken to has a significant impact on their well-being. It was emphasized that services must be free from labels, and that young people should be taught how to manage their emotions and recognize that others may have different needs.

*"The child can't be at fault if an adult is involved. It's not logical and possible. The young person is not the problem; the problem arises when they don't use their potential to the fullest that they would otherwise possess" (Professional).*

When asked to empathize with young people, several professionals expressed the view that society does not treat young people well, yet expects them to behave appropriately. They noted that young people in the target group may feel that they do not fit in. As a result, professionals and society must lead by example − if young people are treated with respect and understanding, they are more likely to follow suit. Professionals highlighted the need for a more trauma-informed approach in supporting these young people.

*"As a society, we should look their way; we have taught them. Perception must change... We must look at what's hidden in the closet. Fear, aggressiveness, actions influenced by trauma: maybe I'll get another blow today? Someone stings you, and you already explode. We can only see the explosion, but they just want to survive. If we talk about these topics, which may be their backgrounds [young people in the target group], then I believe*

*that society will start changing it. We should reflect the positive sides of the youth" (Professional).*

Professionals emphasized that a safe, trusting relationship and coaching support are crucial for helping young people open up and explore their potential. This support can be built on the young person's own needs and strengths, which they need to recognized at first. Many young people had also sought ways to cope with their challenges independently, such as talking to friends, moving in with family members, seeking advice from relatives (e.g., grandparents, parents), finding hobbies, using support services (e.g. unemployment insurance), engaging in entertainment, taking casual or under-the-table jobs, using self-help tools, or ending a controlling relationship. Several participants noted that even a negative choice was made simply to survive.

*"I always made the best choices to survive... alcohol to escape reality... adrenaline... car thefts... I wanted to forget my life" (Young person).*

Several participants interpreted accepting help and support as a sign of not coping, while offering help or support from others was viewed as interference or overbearing care. Additionally, several young people distinguished between "helping"/"supporting" and counselling with the term "counselling" often used to describe the provision of formal information rather than emotional or practical support.

Professionals highlighted humanity and sincerity as two of the most important principles in supporting young people, as the target group is highly vulnerable yet often outspoken and willing to share their feelings. Many professionals noted that the impact of self-disclosure on facilitating change was surprising for many young people.

*"They say things while blushing, a kind of click goes off in their eyes, and it's surprising to them too. But that's where the change starts." (Professional)*

Several professionals expressed reluctance to talk about "helping" young people, as they felt it implied a sense of incapacity. They believed young people immediately sense when someone wants to "help" them, which can be off-putting because they often feel they do not need help. Instead, several professionals preferred to offer alternative solutions, allowing young people to see various paths and make their own decisions. It was emphasized that young people should not be left to decide entirely on their own but should be presented with progressively greater yet manageable challenges. As a result, several professionals preferred framing their approach as providing a safe environment and fostering empowerment, rather than offering help and support. This language felt more natural to them, as it allowed young people to retain the understanding that they were taking active steps themselves. Professionals also believed that young people should be allowed to experience a range of emotions, even if initially

uncomfortable, as this process fosters personal growth and courage. Over time, verbalizing and acknowledging these emotions could serve as a form of therapy.

> *"What I mean is that enforcement is actually something natural in a process; the young person doesn't realize that I'm helping them. They still have autonomy. They're looking for a safe environment to start sorting their things out. Even though there's a lot of coaxing, they still feel that they did it... the responsibility was still left to the young person" (Professional).*

Professionals discussed the distinctions between the term's "child", "young person", and "client". The primary difference between a child and a young person is age, but in youth work, the focus is on seeing a young person as an individual. In contrast, within child protection, the same individual is often viewed more as a "client". Professionals also recommended avoiding the term "case", as young people do not identify with being treated as a "case".

### Young people's perceived needs for solutions and principles for supporting them

When discussing solutions, young people acknowledged the need for change and expressed feeling safe and comfortable in their current situation. As a result, there was little motivation to break their habits or seek professional help. Several young participants noted that the perspectives of their loved ones on their real situation − along with the desire not to be a negative role model − were significant factors in motivating them to seek a way out of their circumstances.

> *"A little sister of an acquaintance was bullied at school and then I started thinking about it. I wanted that my little sister... I wouldn't want her to have to say her brother is sitting in prison" (Young person).*

Participants identified several barriers preventing them from improving their situation, including the influence of friends, fear of the unknown, and the anxiety of repeating past negative experiences. Professionals also noted that while young people often do not want to remain in their current situation, they find comfort in the familiarity of what they have, even if it is limited. The barrier lies in the security that comes from the known, coupled with fear and uncertainty about a new situation. Despite this, young people expressed a desire to be in a different place. Young people had both short-term and long-term goals. Long-term aspirations included having a family, a stable home, a good salary, a healthy lifestyle, hobbies, and a car. Short-term goals focused on addressing immediate challenges, such as developing discipline, becoming independent, staying organized, and avoiding negative outcomes like detention or street life.

Participants identified several ways to support young people, including goal setting, promoting mental and physical health, addressing housing issues, providing referral support services, offering job search assistance, career guidance, and

general counselling. Temporary solutions like unemployment benefits and health insurance were also mentioned. Several participants noted that the beginning of the support often involved reflection, helping young people gain a better understanding of themselves and initiate the process of change. They felt that the support worker played a crucial role in initiating this process and guiding them forward.

> *"When I talk to others, I can also hear myself, I'm in the same environment, then I understand the type of situation I'm in, and I can help myself better"* *(Young person).*

Professionals working with young people emphasized the need for cooperation across education, youth work, social work, child protection, and employment to address complex issues and facilitate service referrals. While there is recognition of the need for collaboration, they noted that separate systems and the absence of a common goal often hinder effective practical cooperation.

One concern raised by professionals was that young people with complex issues often end up "running between services", while professionals are overwhelmed with excessive caseloads. One professional mentioned that she goes beyond her assigned duties to avoid feeling that she has failed in supporting the young person. However, the combination of too few professionals and insufficient time for each young person poses a risk of professional burnout, as the young person cannot be left without assistance.

> *"An ideal service must not create a situation where a young person comes in and is pushed through an intense programme; they must go through several doors. It has to be attractive, and it has to be real, how does it benefit me"* *(Professional).*

Professionals noted that within the same institution, young people are often rotated between different specialists, each focusing on their specific area of expertise. This results in the young person having to repeat their story multiple times, which can lead to their narrative becoming fragmented and misunderstood. Consequently, the last professionals involved may struggle to grasp the full scope of the issue. To address this, professionals highlighted the need for better data integration across institutions, while ensuring that the young person's privacy and data are respected and protected. A more effective approach would be a one-stop-shop model, where the first point of contact directs the young person to the specialist best suited to address their needs. However, the current inflexible support systems, often driven by short-term projects or sector-specific legislative frameworks with varying deadlines and indicators, hinder this approach. Professionals felt that the work is often driven by numbers and metrics rather than the goal of creating real, lasting change in a young person's life.

Specialists emphasized the importance of genuinely involving young people in the process of finding solutions. They stressed that young people must have a

role in deciding how to address their challenges, as it is only through their active involvement that the journey can truly be theirs. In addition to addressing the immediate consequences, several professionals highlighted the need for prevention. They argued that if the root causes leading to young people's situations are not tackled, there is a greater risk of simply creating more services for those already in critical circumstances, rather than preventing such issues in the first place.

> *"Before there was a traffic light; when it was red, we reacted quickly. Now, there is no traffic light; there is a forest fire. There is nothing we can do. We stand on the side of the road and scratch our heads. If the fire comes very close, we extinguish-react. Prevention has become lax" (Professional).*

Specialists view national agreements and dialogue as key solutions to addressing these issues. Professionals expressed a desire to understand the broader national context in order to align their goals and actions with the country's overall strategy, ensuring more coordinated and effective support for young people.

## Young people's expectations for specialists

Young people identified several key expectations for professionals, including a caring attitude, strong listening skills, the ability to maintain open dialogue, noticing concerns, and adopting a non-judgmental approach. Several participants mentioned that the positive attitude of professionals, their cheerfulness and the approval of their friends encouraged them to attend the initial interview. Following that first meeting, a second meeting took place when the young person felt the professional's genuine interest, the non-judgmental attitude, and the recognition of their right to make choices. Professionals affirmed that effective support occurs when it focuses on the young person and their individual needs, rather than the system's perspective on the problem. This requires starting by understanding the young person and addressing their basic needs. Key elements for success include valuing the young person as an individual with real potential, active listening, being present and attentive, creating a safe space, and demonstrating honesty and integrity. Reflecting the young person's experience and respecting their autonomy were also considered essential components of effective support.

> *"The important thing is not about writing ticks down... the important thing is to see his triggers. Once we solve the first basic need, the iceberg issues will slowly start to be solved. Already, the process of change is coming. They don't want to do anything when their stomach is empty... because their blood sugar is low" (Professional).*

Professionals emphasized that young people need to feel that their strengths are valued and that they have control over their own lives. For professionals, it is crucial that different sectors understand each other's roles and opportunities and trust one another when engaging with young people. This mutual trust forms the

foundation for helping young people to develop new skills, which in turn enables them to socialize, learn and work.

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to understand the challenges faced by the NEET youth and professionals who support them, as well as the differing perspectives of young people and professionals regarding the development of services to improve policies for supporting young people in NEET situations. The study corroborated several findings already established in the literature, while also offering new insights. Consequently, the discussion section highlights key recommendations, with some findings addressed more briefly.

The study highlighted clearly the contradictions between the perceived needs of young people and the objectives of existing services, underscoring the need for systematic agreements across sectors such as education, social work, youth work, health, and employment. Diverse and flexible methodologies must be applied throughout the support process, from prevention to transition out of services, to effectively support young people. Additionally, the study revealed that the primary concern for young people in NEET situations is not the lack of services or awareness of support opportunities, but rather the stigma (labeling) they face from service providers and society, the fragmented transitions between services, and the inflexible support practices that hinder their progress.

The study confirmed that the target group feels vulnerable, deprived of support, and has repeatedly experienced this vulnerability. Addressing this requires focus on factors that reduce vulnerability (Virokannas *et al.* 2018; Kutsar *et al.* 2024) and adopting more inclusive, youth-centred approaches (Pedanik *et al.* 2021; Erdoğan and Paabort 2024) that are better aligned with young people's realities, coping mechanisms, and actual needs (Schweiger 2019; Baker and Moukhlis 2020; Ellena *et al.* 2024). Effective support requires an equal partnership with young people, involving co-creation to better understand their unique situations. Thus, young people should be seen primarily as partners in cooperation (Agahi *et al.* 2024), not just as recipients of support and services. The study's main finding emphasises the necessity of cross-sectoral structural agreements, grounded in a needs-oriented rebalancing principle. Such an approach would align policy objectives with the target group's self-assessment of needs, as well as broader policymakers' expectations. When these assessments are based on shared evaluations, there is a greater likelihood of improving an individual's well-being through tangible changes to their circumstances (Helne and Hirvilammi 2022). This calls for coordinated action across sectors and legislative frameworks, facilitating smoother transitions to education, the labour market, or adulthood (Simões and Tosun 2024; O'Higgins and Brockie 2024).

The study identified seven main concerns experienced by young people, which formed the basis for developing seven policy-making principles. These principles, when considered in policy design, can better support the target youth according to their perceived needs and increase the likelihood of helping them transition out of vulnerable situations.

**Principle 1:** The study revealed that NEETs face diverse situations and respond to support in varied ways. To truly understand their needs, an equal partnership approach is essential. Involving young people, their networks, and relevant stakeholders in the design of services and individual solutions leads to more effective support (Holte 2018; Agahi *et al.* 2024). From a policy perspective, adopting **the principle of co-creation and reciprocal partnership** ensures that young people's perspectives on existing systems are considered, fostering more sustainable solutions. This principle equips professionals, local authorities, and policymakers with the necessary knowledge and tools to better engage and support youth.

**Principle 2:** Study participants expressed feeling replaceable, incapable of coping with life, and blamed for their situation. Research confirms that young people are reluctant to seek help from formal institutions because they do not want to be defined by their need for support (Reiter and Schlimbach 2015; Tosun *et al.* 2024). Therefore, when designing interventions for young people, it is crucial to reconceptualise how institutions define their target group and the services they offer. The image these institutions project significantly impacts access to services (Ellena *et al.* 2024). This calls for a **situation-based communication principle**, which focuses communication on understanding and addressing the specific situation and needs of young people in NEET situations. This principle may also prompt a re-evaluation of the NEET concept itself, as it often highlights what young people are perceived *not* to be, rather than recognizing their potential and needs.

**Principle 3:** Participants shared experiences of constant anxiety, low self-esteem, fear of change, and a lack of a stable social network. Research shows that low self-esteem (Holte 2018), anxiety (Stea *et al.* 2019), and a lack of close connections (Berlin *et al.* 2020) significantly impact young people's functioning. Approaches that build trust and focus on restoring self-esteem help young people regain the courage to re-enter society (Jonsson and Goicole 2020). Professionals also emphasized the importance of focusing on young people's strengths, as leveraging both existing and new skills immediately reduces the risk of relapse and dependency on professionals (Van Parys and Struvven 2013; Iacobuta and Ifrim 2020). This underscores the **principle of meaning-based support,** which aims to empower young people by enhancing their confidence, trust, and agency in a safe, caring, and non-formal environment. For trust-based communication and strengths-based counselling to be effective, it is essential to grant young people the autonomy to make appropriate choices. Thus, the focus should be on empowering the young

person and their immediate network, rather than simply offering advice (Flynn *et al.* 2024; Ferreira *et al.* 2024).

**Principle 4:** Our study revealed that young people often feel bounced between services and handled by too many different professionals. This fragmentation can be mentally exhausting and may erode trust in professionals, leading some to withdraw from support (Jonsson and Goicolea 2020). To address this, support for NEET youth should be based on the **one-stop management** principle. This approach designates a single point of contact, a 'process manager,' who is responsible for coordinating services and communicating with other professionals as needed. While this process manager may not be the primary service provider, the young person should have the choice in this decision. Implementing this approach requires a high level of trust and mutual understanding between sectors, a culture of collaboration, and effective transition practices (Mascherini 2019). This principle allows different sectors to identify the potential entry points and solutions (Erdogan and Paabort 2024; Ferreira *et al*. 2024) and increases the likelihood of young people accessing appropriate services by removing barriers.

**Principle 5:** Young people in NEET situations often require support from multiple agencies simultaneously, which can lead to re-victimization, as they are forced to repeatedly explain their needs. This study confirmed that such a process risks losing young people in the system. The primary goal should be to help young people understand that they alone have the power to create change and determine their needs, as well as who should be involved in finding solutions. This aligns with the **minimal information flow requirement** principle, which suggests that instead of prioritizing quick information gathering and sharing across partners, the focus should be on empowering the young person to decide what solutions they need and who should be involved. This approach helps maintain a trusting relationship with the young person and their close network, as feeling in control is crucial for young people to take responsibility and achieve positive outcomes (Nielsen *et al*. 2017).

**Principle 6:** The study highlighted a significant discrepancy between the perceptions of NEETs and professionals. While young people prefer to move out of a disadvantaged situation at their own pace, professionals are often guided by specific outcome expectations, such as securing employment within six months. This gap can create ethical dilemmas and contribute to burnout, as professionals may feel pressured to push young people into services that may not yet be suitable for them. Rapid referrals can entrap young people, particularly those with low self-esteem, who may accept lower-quality offers (Nielsen *et al*. 2017). Support is most effective when it centers on the young person's needs, rather than on service-oriented goals (Jonsson and Goicolea 2020). Furthermore, empowering young people meaningfully enhances their resilience in future challenges (Taru 2024). This suggests that support for NEETs should follow the **need-based rebalancing**

principle, where interventions are designed to align the needs and assessments of the target group with the broader policy expectations. Such an approach ensures that the goals and performance metrics of support are balanced with the real, felt needs of the young people.

**Principle 7:** A significant concern identified in the study is the project-based and temporary nature of many services provided to young people in NEET situations. While these services can offer immediate relief, they often fail to build sustainable support systems, making it difficult for young people to rely on consistent, long-term help (Pique *et al.* 2016). This creates a disconnect between the temporary nature of services and the real, ongoing needs of young people, who rightly expect support as long as they require it (Hutchinson *et al.* 2016). To address this, the principle of **long-term legitimate expectation** should guide the design of services for NEET youth. This principle acknowledges that young people under initiatives like the National Youth Guarantee have a legitimate expectation to receive long-term, effective support that aligns with their perceived needs, regardless of the temporary funding cycles that may govern such services. It is crucial that when project-based funding ends, young people continue to receive the necessary support, either through alternative services or by transitioning to longer-term support systems.

The successful implementation of these principles necessitates the establishment of national structural arrangement**s that facilitate cross-sector collaboration in supporting young people**. This requires coordinated efforts across various sectors, ensuring that regional policies designed to support youth effectively ease their transitions (Rocca *et al.* 2024; O'Higgins and Brockie 2024).

## LIMITS

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, the sample size of both expert and youth interviews was relatively small. Although the sample effectively represents the key actors in the Estonian youth support sector, it does not allow for generalizations to other similar programs. Second, the first author of this article has a close affiliation with the Youth Guarantee, and interviewees were aware of this connection. To mitigate the potential for biased interpretation, experts were given the opportunity to validate the findings.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study identified several bottlenecks in the development of policies for NEETs, while also highlighting opportunities to make these policies more effective and aligned with the real needs of young people. By focusing on the factors that contribute to vulnerability and the role of support in mitigating or recreating

vulnerability, it becomes possible to enhance young people's coping mechanisms (Virokannas *et al.* 2018; Schweiger 2019; Helne and Hirvilammi 2022; Kutsar *et al.* 2024; Ellena *et al.* 2024). This call for a more cross-sectoral, needs-based strategy, which integrates several key principles: minimal information flow requirement, situation-based communication, meaning-based change management, co-creation and reciprocal partnership, one-shop management, need-based rebalancing, and long-term legitimate expectation. These principles aim to prevent the marginalization and social isolation of young people while improving their access to information, support and education and employment services. Successful implementation of these principles requires national strategic agreements that shift the focus of Member States from mere delivery to actionable approaches and ecosystem co-creation opportunities.

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*I*niţiativa „Garanţia pentru tineret" a Comisiei Europene a readus în prim-plan nevoile tot mai complexe de sprijin ale tinerilor care nu sunt încadraţi în educaţie, muncă sau formare (NEET), în special în perioadele de tranziţie majoră din vieţile lor. Acest studiu contribuie la înţelegerea şi evaluarea politicilor destinate acestui segment demografic, precum şi la identificarea schimbărilor din peisajul mai larg al politicilor, menite să sporească eficienţa intervenţiilor şi să asigure o mai bună aliniere a sprijinului la nevoile percepute de tineri. Bazându-se pe interviuri semi-structurate cu tineri aflaţi în situaţii de tip NEET şi cu profesionişti care lucrează cu aceştia în Estonia, studiul subliniază necesitatea adoptării unor abordări mai comunitare şi participative în cadrul intervenţiilor de sprijin.

Integrarea unor principii mai incluzive, care să împuternicească şi să consolideze încrederea − cum ar fi nevoia unui flux minim de informaţii, comunicarea bazată pe situaţie, managementul schimbării orientat spre sens, co-crearea şi parteneriatul reciproc, managementul schimbării într-un singur punct de contact, reechilibrarea bazată pe nevoi şi aşteptările legitime orizontale − poate juca un rol crucial în prevenirea marginalizării şi excluziunii sociale a grupurilor-ţintă. Aceste principii sunt esenţiale pentru îmbunătăţirea accesului la informaţie, educaţie, servicii de sprijin şi oportunităţi pe piaţa muncii. Realizarea unei astfel de abordări necesită acorduri strategice la nivel naţional, care să schimbe perspectiva statelor membre de la acţiuni izolate la strategii de implementare cuprinzătoare, deschizând astfel calea pentru co-crearea unui ecosistem integrat şi intersectorial de sprijin. Articolul se încheie cu recomandări practice de politici care pot fi extinse la nivel european.

***Cuvinte-cheie:*** *garanţia pentru tineret; nevoile percepute ale NEETs; crearea de politici; principii incluzive de muncă; eficienţa intervenţiilor.*