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## INTRODUCTION: STRATEGIES, POLICIES, PROGRAMS AND PROJECTS FOR YOUTH RURAL NEETS

ŠTEFAN BOJNEC  
CLAUDIA PETRESCU

Relatively few studies have investigated the strategies, policies, programmes, and projects concerning rural NEETs (namely, young people living in rural areas neither in employment nor in education or training). This special issue of *Quality of Life Journal* is dedicated to fulfilling this gap in the literature. It contributes case studies from six European Union (EU) member states: Italy, Spain, and Ireland (older EU member states); and, Slovenia, Estonia, and Romania (newer EU member states). The primary purpose of this special issue is to approach and discuss the various strategies, policies, programmes, and projects applicable to youth rural NEETs.

This special issue edition has sought to gather research papers (or critical, theoretical analysis on selected topics) covering NEETs strategies, policies, measures, programmes, and projects. These highlight the success factors and scope for transferability of good (or, how to avoid bad) practices. To that end, they examine pertinent labour market and NEET situations which can help to explain the context, reasons, and baseline for the various strategies and policy measures being implemented. They also cover assessment of NEET strategies by focusing on formal education, training and skills development, and active employment policies, in particular the role of Youth Guarantee in local/rural employment. Various other relevant factors are considered/examined, including: assessment of the NEET policy measures and results; objectives, target groups, geographical and sectoral scope in different economic activities, financial, legal and institutional frameworks; results and lessons learned, including adaptations due to crisis; domestic and international programmes, as well as numerous projects and instruments; difficulties and constraints; and, finally, assessment of the success factors and transferability of projects and strategies thereof.

The six original papers focus on strategies, policies, programmes, and projects regarding vulnerable and socially excluded rural youth. However, they are

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**Address of the corresponding authors:** Štefan Bojnec, Faculty of Management, University of Primorska, Izolska vrata 2, SI-6101 Koper – Capodistria, Slovenia; e-mail: stefan.bojnec@fm-kp.si, stefan.bojnec@siol.net; **Claudia Petrescu**, Research Institute for Quality of Life, Romania Academy, Calea 13 Septembrie, nr. 13, sector 5, 050711, București, România; e-mail: claudia.petrescu@iccv.ro.

especially focused upon intervention practices for youth rural NEETs, the various risk factors facing NEETs, and the various types of intervention being utilised to combat NEET status amongst varying populations and demographics across Europe.

A preliminary version of the selected articles included in this special issue have been presented as a national fiche, based upon work from COST Action CA18213 Rural NEET Youth Network: Modelling the risks underlying rural NEETs social exclusion, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology); [www.cost.eu](http://www.cost.eu).

The contribution from Italy is presented in the article *Soft Skills and Psychological Well-Being: A Study on Italian Rural and Urban NEETs*. This article aims to identify the soft skills that can be predictors of psychological well-being. It is based upon a large sample of young persons in Italy, aged between 18-34 years, and compares urban and rural scenarios which, in addition to gender and education attainment, which are crucial drivers in creating NEET status. The most critical and vulnerable group identified was females with low educational attainment residing in rural areas.

In the article *Policy and Practical Lessons Learned Regarding Youth and NEETs in Slovenia*, the country's strategies, institutions, policies, domestic and international programmes, projects, and other measures deployed to tackle the NEETs' predicament are highlighted. Special focus is paid to those residing in rural areas. The Youth Guarantee (and in particular, active employment policy measures) play a crucial role in bridging the gaps for those who are structurally and long-term unemployed, and especially for rural NEETs. Whilst the percentage of rural NEETs in Slovenia is modest, the hidden, unregistered NEETs are, of course, as important as those who are formally registered.

The Estonian case study is examined in the article *State Level Agreed-Upon Factors Contributing to More Effective Policymaking for Public Sector Services for Effective Local-Level Work with NEETs*. We see Estonia as a country implementing facing a broader policy challenge for better services for NEET youth. The approach used is based on analysis of documents and semi-structured interviews conducted with specialists. The shortcomings of the Estonian NEET support system lie in an insufficient understanding of aims and priorities that limit coordination and implementation of intervention measures and integrated services at the local level where the needs of youth can be heterogeneous.

The case study from Spain is described in the article *Youth Policy Adaptation in the Spanish Rural Context: A Case of Study of Youth Policy Programs*. Its focus is on youth policies, specificities, and policy constraints towards rural areas. It thereby brings attention to pilot experiences and partnerships between local stakeholders and policy implementation.

The article covering Ireland draws attention to NEET strategies in relation to formal and non-formal youth education and training. *NEET Strategies in Post-*

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*Recession Ireland: Reflections on the Importance of Connecting Formal and Non-Formal Educational Supports* extrapolates the links between the 2007–2008 global economic crisis and high unemployment rates for youths in Ireland, but also later improvements and their possible driving forces. It is observed that both the construction and agriculture sectors largely absorbed early school leavers into related apprenticeship programs. The later success story towards actual and potential NEETs has been driven by formal education, non-formal education and training, and considering feedback provided by those most impacted.

Finally, the Romanian experience in NEETs and rural NEETs is presented in the article *Implementation of the Youth Guarantee Programme in Romania*. The article aims to establish links between youth unemployment and NEETs, education, skills and experience, and employment. It has also highlighted the importance of apprenticeship, training, and life-long learning. Based on the investigation of the Romanian Youth Guarantee Programme implementation in the 2014–2020 period, the main challenges and barriers in the implementation are identified. There are some similarities with other investigated countries, for instance: a lack of coordination of measures between institutions at similar and different levels; problems related to hidden NEETs; and, a lack of partnership between local authorities and different local stakeholders.