

POLICY AND PRACTICAL LESSONS LEARNED REGARDING YOUTH AND NEETS IN SLOVENIA¹

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The article highlights the Slovenian strategies, institutions, policies, programmes, projects, and measures in tackling the NEETs, particularly the rural ones. The Youth Guarantee, and particularly active employment policy measures at a national level implemented via regional offices for employment work together to play a crucial role in bridging the gaps for the structurally and long-term unemployed in general, and especially for rural NEETs who are in transition from education and training to employment. National strategies and policies are supported by international programmes and projects. Amongst the success stories can be tentatively included the integration of the Roma population of at least one-cross-border area with geographical proximity to the neighbouring Styria region of Austria. Whilst the percentage of rural NEETs in Slovenia is modest, this does not mean an absence of the problems typical to this group i.e., less favourable personal, household, and/or other characteristics for the vulnerable, and economically and socially excluded rural NEETs. The hidden, unregistered NEETs (not participating in any programmes and policies) are at least as important as the registered ones. Both registered and unregistered NEETs are challenging issues in terms of their economic and social integration. To that end, it is necessary to provide general and specific opportunities for continued lifelong learning within the context of their personal, family, and social commitments: this will help to ensure their successful labour market and social integration, survival in the competitive labour market, quality of life by avoiding poverty risks, and sustainable rural development more broadly.

Keywords: youth; NEET; education; Active Employment Policy; rural NEET; NEET strategy; NEET policy measures; Slovenia.

INTRODUCTION

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Young people neither in employment nor in education and training (NEETs) are a specific, vulnerable group of youth defined variously according to their upper age, and/or being between 15 and 34 years old. They are unemployed, or inactive, and are not attending any education or training courses. The aim in this article is to analyse and summarise the main features of the NEETs strategy, policies, measures, programmes, and projects. It also highlights the success factors and scope for transferability of good (or, more specifically, to avoid bad) practices in the case of Slovenia (Petrescu, Erdogan and Flynn, 2020).

From 2015-2020, the Slovenian economy grew between 2.2% in 2015 and 4.8% in 2017 with a slight decline to 3.2% in 2019 (ZRSZ, 2021a). In 2020, there was a decline or negative rate of growth of around -5.5%. Part of this decline can be explained by the external short-term shock caused by the COVID-19 crisis, particularly due to the decline experienced in the hospitality and tourism related industries, with a recovery expected in 2021. It is well known from macroeconomics that employment and unemployment, with a certain time lag, follow developments of output or rates of economic growth (Mankiw, 2021). In 2018, the NEET rate for those aged between 15 and 29 years was around 5%. In 2020, during the COVID-19 crisis, the labour situation in general (as well as for the NEET groups) worsened in the short-term. Economic growth in Slovenia (as a small open economy) is significantly driven by exports, the reduction of which therefore reduces output and employment. The government also introduced measures to support sectors that were most impacted by the temporary closure of their operations. Combined, these factors have affected the recovery of the economy with a reduction of unemployment rates being observed.

This article contributes to the existing literature on NEETs by focusing on the main programmes, policies, interventions, projects and practices vis-à-vis the youth and NEET situation in Slovenia. There is, however, a lack of existing scientific literature on the topic which could be of scientific, policy and practical relevance and importance.

The article addresses the relationships between strategy and different institutions, policies, measures, and selected case studies addressing the needs of NEETs, vulnerable, and/or socially excluded rural youths in Slovenia. The factors examined will include education, rural and social entrepreneurship, and the important role of rural stakeholders in local employment development. The role of different domestic and international projects can also be important.

The method and approach follow selecting government strategies, programmes, and policies. The publicly available secondary information and data have been gathered, collected and used in this study. The procedure used focused on transition from education to employment and the NEET situation, particularly in rural settings. Different domestic and international projects, and case studies as criteria for selection, were also used in discussions and interviews with experts in the field.

TRANSITION FROM EDUCATION TO EMPLOYMENT AND THE NEET SITUATION

Previous studies have explained the links between education, labour market policies and the NEET situation (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2011; Simões, Meneses, Luís and Drumonde, 2017; Brunet, 2019). Both education and training policies, as well as active labour market policies (Sahnoun and Abdennadher, 2018; Juznik Rotar, 2021) can be important for a smoother transition from education and training into employment (Müller, 2005). These policies can be important in bridging the gaps in school-to-work transition and in mitigating the negative consequences for NEETs as confirmed by various EU countries (Bruno, Marelli and Signorelli, 2014; Vancea and Utzet, 2018, Caroleo, Rocca, Mazzocchi and Quintano, 2020; Simões, Marta, Marzana, Alfieri and Pozi, 2021).

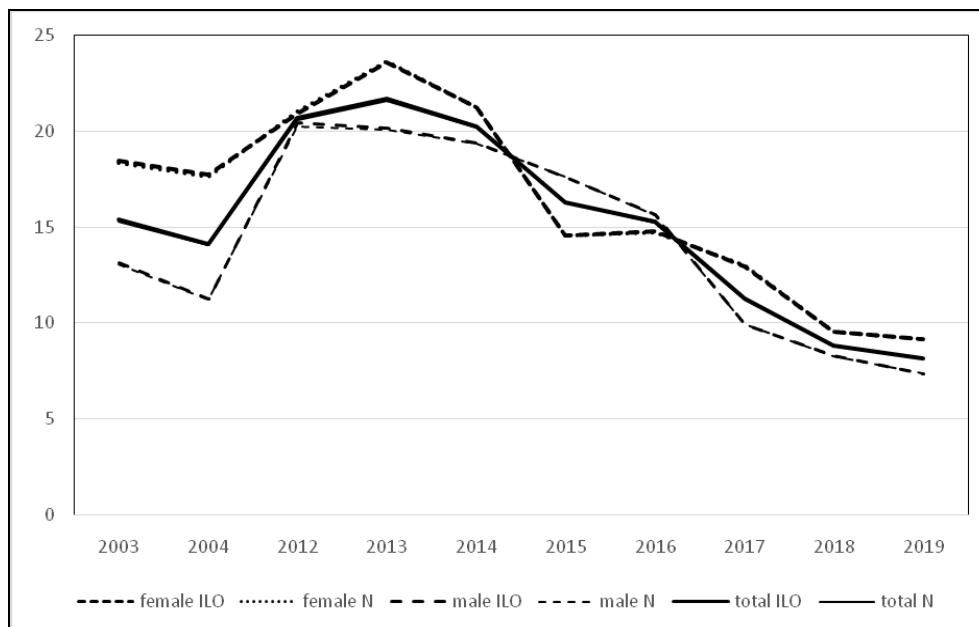
Whilst previous literature suggested the relevance of focusing on the school-to-work transition and policies, the focus of this section is on youth unemployment, the NEET situation in Slovenia, Roma youth and NEETs, and the early leavers from education and training. These main subgroups of young people are more likely to become NEETs and are vital to fully understand the Slovenian situation in terms of the specific challenges faced by youth in the transition from education and training to employment.

YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

This study focuses upon Slovenia, where the inverse U-shape curves representing youth unemployment rates over time can be seen in *Figure 1*. In 2004, when Slovenian joined the European Union (EU), the unemployment rates in Slovenia declined and increased after the EU accession up to the years 2012-2013: from that point onwards, they have started to decline. There is a very minor differential between the youth unemployment rates by modelled ILO estimates and national estimates. Whilst male youth unemployment rates have most frequently been lower than those of females, the differential between them during the most recent years was modest. In 2019, youth unemployment rates were around 9.1% for females, 7.4% for males and 8.1% in total. During the COVID-19 period in 2020, the youth unemployment rate increased. In March 2021, the youth unemployment rate in Slovenia was 13.7%, which was still low amongst the EU member states: latterly, this varied between 6% for Germany and 37.7% for Spain (Eurostat, 2021b).

Figure 1

Youth unemployment rate in Slovenia (% of labour force ages 15–24)



Note: female means unemployment rate of female youth (% of female labour force ages 15–24). Male means unemployment rate of male youth (% of male labour force ages 15–24). Total means total unemployment rate of youth (% of total labour force ages 15–24). ILO – modelled International Labour Organization (ILO) estimate. N – national estimate.

Source: Author's presentation based on data from World Bank (2021).

Government strategies and policy measures are applied in the context of transition from education to employment in order to reduce unemployment and improve NEET situations. According to Eurostat (2021b), youth unemployment rates in the EU-27 member states increased on average from slightly more than 15% in the first quarter of 2008 to more than 24% (or slightly less than 25%) in the first quarter of 2013. Subsequently, they declined close to 15% in the last three quarters of 2019 and the first quarter of 2020, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, during which they increased to more than 18% in the third quarter of 2020, followed by a slight decline, then close to 17%. Slovenian youth unemployment rates have, however, been below the average numbers for the EU-27 member states (Eurostat, 2021b).

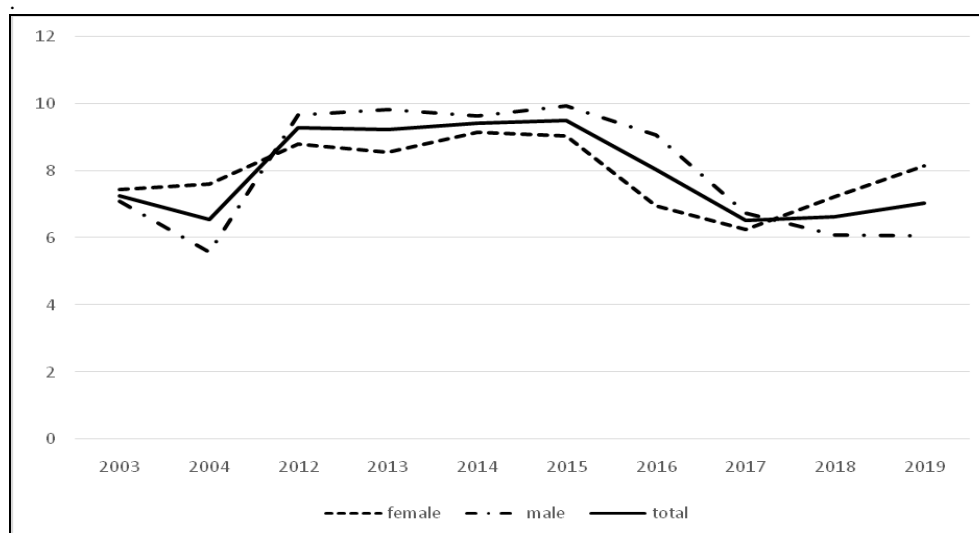
THE NEET SITUATION IN SLOVENIA

The definitions of the age groups classified as NEET can vary. Eurostat (2021a) provides data for NEET rates in accordance with different age groups between 15 and 34 years. In 2019, the NEET rate in the EU was 16.4% of the 20-34-year-old demographic. The proportion of youth classified as NEETs ranged from 7.3% in Sweden to 27.8 % in Italy. For Slovenia, it was 6.8% for men and 13.9% for women.

ILO (2021) defines the share of NEET as their proportion to the population of the corresponding age group: youth (ages 15 to 24); persons ages 15 to 29; or, both age groups. Following the ILO definition, the World Bank (2021) provides time-series data on the share of NEETs, which in Slovenia increased during the period following Slovenia's entry into the EU (*Figure 2*). Between the years 2002 and 2012, the NEET share particularly increased for males from less than 6% to close to 10%, the level at which it stabilised up to 2015, when it declined close to 6%. Interestingly, the NEET share for females was largely lower than that of males. This has changed since 2017, with the opposite pattern being observed between male and female NEET shares now predominating, with a decline for males and a slight increase for females above the Slovenian average.

Figure 2

Share of youth not in education, employment, or training (%)



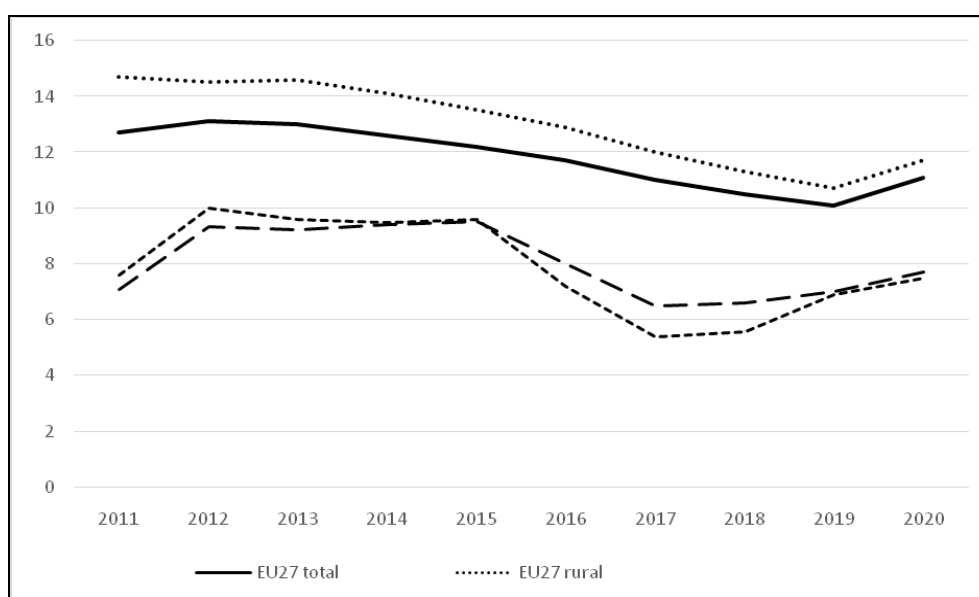
Note: female means % of female youth population. Male means % of male youth population. Total means % of total youth population.

Source: Author's presentation based on data from the World Bank (2021).

Within the EU-27 member states, the NEET rates are higher in rural than in urban areas. Before the COVID-19 crisis, the NEET rates tended to decline to less than 11% for the age group from 15 to 24 years, with a slight increase during the year 2020 (*Figure 3*). In Slovenia, NEET rates are lower and there is no significant difference between urban and rural areas. During the years 2017-2018, the NEET rates in rural areas were 5.4% and 5.6%, respectively, with a subsequent increase to 6.9% in 2019 and 7.5% in 2020.

Figure 3

Share of youth neither in employment nor in education and training in rural areas (NEET rates in % for age group from 15 to 24 years)



Source: Author's presentation based on data from Eurostat (2021a).

In addition to registered rates of unemployment and NEETs, there are also unregistered (i.e., hidden) NEETs. According to the OECD (2020), more than half of the NEETs in Slovenia are not registered with the Employment Service Offices (ESOs). This means that the hidden NEETs in Slovenia are even more numerous than registered ones, because of various reasons, such as not being entitled to income support, not being aware of the support they can receive, lack of trust in public authorities, or not looking for a job, or similar considerations.

ROMA YOUTH AND NEETs

As in some other countries in the Central and Eastern European region, Roma are one of the vulnerable population groups in Slovenia. The total Roma population in Slovenia numbers around 12 thousand, or 0.6% of the total population. Geographical distribution is concentrated in three geographical areas: Prekmurje, Dolenjska, and Bela krajina. There exists a special Roma Association of Slovenia, an organisation supporting Roma population in general with important focus towards youth.

High unemployment amongst the Roma population, sitting at almost 80%, has increased following the collapse of traditional industries. Consequently, they are largely dependent upon social assistance/welfare. NEETs problems are linked to lack of education, often due to unfinished primary schooling and lack of new knowledge, lack of skills, and therefore competitiveness for integration into the labour market with full-time employment. Some limitations, particularly during the COVID-19 period and the necessary online delivery of educational/school activities, are linked to poorer living and housing conditions and digitalisation problems.

Efforts have been made in order to raise public awareness regarding the existing problems and to promote good practices. For example, for more than 13 years, Radio-Television (RTV) Slovenia has conducted the Roma radio transmission *Naše Poti* (Our Paths) on Mondays, and the television (TV) transmission *Kaj Govoriš?* (What are you saying?) every second Saturday in the first programme slot of TV Slovenia. These are prepared by Roma to point out the hardships and problems of the Roma community, but also to highlight good practices within their communities.

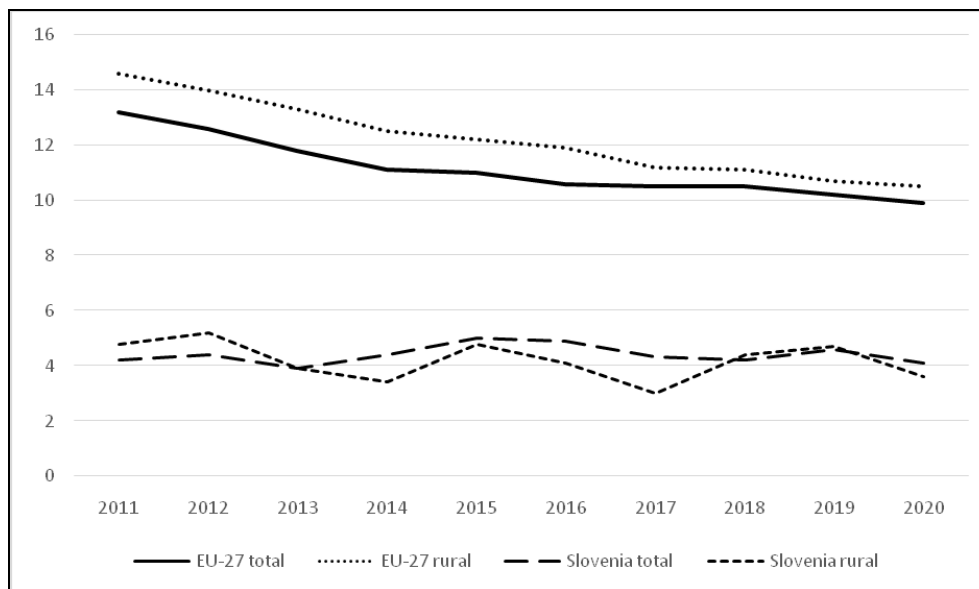
It is also important to mention that amongst the success stories can be included the local development and integration of the Roma population in at least one part of Slovenia. This is particularly valid for the village of Pušča (2021) near Murska Sobota, which has a geographical proximity to the neighbouring Styria region of Austria and its capital, Graz.

THE EARLY LEAVERS FROM EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The percentage of early leavers from education and training in Slovenia is lower than in the EU-27 member states (*Figure 4*). In 2020, it was around 4% for the former and around 10% for the latter, a disparity of 6%. Whilst during the last decade in the EU-27 members states it was higher in rural than in other areas, fewer significant differences were observed in Slovenia where in some years it was even slightly lower in rural than in other areas.

Figure 4

Early leavers from education and training in rural areas



Source: Author's presentation based on data from Eurostat (2021a).

NEET POLICY MEASURES AND INTERVENTIONS

This section aims to assess the institutional framework, particularly organisations involved such as Ministries, Offices for Youth and Employment, and different forms of organisation (such as social enterprises) operating in Slovenia. Additionally, it aims to assess the relevant policy objectives in terms of support to education and mobility, training and skills, local employment, social networks, communication and social media, and engagement of local stakeholders. The national youth policy addresses all types of youth and target groups, which can be various structures of youth and NEET participants, namely young people with or without higher education. Where possible, it aims to address rural NEET needs by policy measures and their results.

The role of government policies and type of intervention measures

Different authorities, in particular Ministries, are responsible for the implementation of the NYS (European Commission, 2020b). The Office for Youth is responsible for coordinating the implementation of the cross-sectorial national programme via action plans. The Government, on a yearly or two-yearly basis, adopts implementation plans. Since 2014, there have been Government decisions

adopted pertaining to the Implementation plan. The action plans define specific objectives, actions, terms of implementation, budget allocations and responsible institutions for their implementations. The implementation of the measures was most stable in vertical areas, for instance, in education and employment.

The types of intervention measures are presented and classified based on the topic of intervention: education, employment, school-to-work transition, and social enterprises. They are applied by the responsible Ministry to the target group, whilst some other Ministries can be also engaged indirectly in the NEET arena.

Education

The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (MESS, 2020) is responsible for education and plays an important role in a smoother transition to employment via education and training programmes. It also supports different domestic and international projects and exchanges with various domestic and international and rural stakeholders. Additionally, under this ministry is the Office for Youth, which is responsible for: planning, organisation and implementation of measures in the area of youth policy; activities in the area of social policy for children and youth; education and informal education; leisure activities; culture; public information and international co-operation; the monitoring of the implementation of the regulations and other acts relating to youth; warning of non-effective realisation of regulations and proposing measures for more effective realisation; the formulation and supervision of the implementation of the priority youth programmes; the monitoring of the role and position of youth in society; improving the conditions for organised youth activities and youth organisations; stimulating the mobility of youth; finding better ways of supplying youth with information and advice; support for international exchanges and the subsidising of trips for children and youth; encouraging various interest activities of youth; and, the creation of conditions for the inclusion of youth in social processes.

Various special needs education is adapted to children and adolescents. The procedures of assessment and recognition of education in the integration of immigrants in the education systems are the same as for all other holders of foreign certificates. Moreover, recognition of qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation allows access to education under the same conditions applicable to domestic citizens. The national examination centre carries out examinations of special talents, skills, and physical and mental abilities for persons under international protection without documents and who wish to enrol in programmes of higher vocational education and higher education programmes. The recognition of education for continuing education is yet another procedure regarding education attained abroad and which is to be considered for admissions at Slovenian educational institutions.

Employment

The Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (MLFSAEO, 2020) operates with Active Employment Policy (AEP) measures and regional ESOs with their implementation to assist difficult and long-term unemployed persons. These interventions are important for school-to-work transition and employment in general as well as for vulnerable groups. They provide the following: training; informal and formal education; employment incentives with financial support for employment of unemployed persons from vulnerable or socially excluded groups; job creation to support employment and social inclusion of the vulnerable/socially excluded (via public work); promotion of self-employment to realise entrepreneurial ideas and job creation in micro enterprises (up to 2020); and, substitution at work and job sharing opportunities in order to gain new knowledge and competences (not in use in 2020). Engaging in AEP measures is expected to increase the chances of a successful job search, but also enhances individuals' skills, and helps them to find (better) employment.

The long-term unemployed are also amongst the vulnerable groups in the labour market. They often occupy this status due to their lack of adequate qualifications, and are often first-time jobseekers. Most AEP programmes for the unemployed are implemented by the ESOs at regional/local levels. They keep a record of registered unemployed persons and follow employment trends in the labour market.

Social entrepreneurship

The Ministry of Economic Development and Technology (MEDT, 2020) offers support to entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship projects, and the setting up of social enterprises, contributes to resolving social, economic, environmental and other social problems in innovative ways. To that end, it is key in creating jobs and thereby increasing the social inclusion of vulnerable groups, including those in rural areas. This can often transpire in cooperation with the business sector and various other organisations.

One of the MEDT tasks related to the provisions of the Social Entrepreneurship Act is administration of a register which records social enterprises. On 15th March 2021, the registry reported 275 social enterprises in different statistical or NUTS-3 regions in Slovenia (Ministry of Public Administration, 2021).

Priority regional policy areas have included: disadvantaged border areas; the less developed Pomurska region; disadvantaged areas with a high unemployment rate; areas where the Hungarian and Italian national communities live; and, areas with members of the Roma community. Regional policy measures stimulate the development of social entrepreneurship, cooperatives, and economic democracy.

Farm and rural entrepreneurship

The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food (MAFF, 2020), along with Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) measures (particularly measure 112) assistance to young farm holders in Slovenia. Measures implemented through this rural development programme can contribute to generational renewal by transferring agricultural holdings from elderly to young farmers of less than 40 years of age. This priority task, which provides support for young farmers, is amongst the four main CAP priorities (alongside the promotion of environmentally friendly farming practices, the promotion of agricultural competitiveness, and the balanced development of rural areas).

In the programming period 2014–2020, the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)/LEADER approach has been taken as part of the joint instrument within which the EU funds were available to Local Action Groups (LAGs). A combination of various financial resources can enable LAGs to implement integrated and complex operations not strictly limited to rural areas. In Slovenia, there were 37 LAGs in the programming period 2014–2020 (Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, 2019), and these have been important for social inclusion and the fight against rural poverty.

The National Rural Network provides communication and other support for the implementation of the Rural Development Programme 2014–2020. It promotes participation under Measure 9 Producer, Measure 16 Cooperation, and Measure 19 Leader groups, and various connections between partners and stakeholders, such as within the European Network for Rural Development. It also promotes the transfer of knowledge, innovation, inclusion of partners, and provides information to target groups.

Other national policy measures for youth and NEETs

The Ministry of Culture (MC, 2020) can be important for youth and NEETs in the areas of arts, culture, cultural heritage, the media, the Slovenian language, freedom of religion, cultural diversity, and human rights. Its activities can be conducted at public cultural institutes, non-governmental organisations, but also by the self-employed.

The Ministry of Public Administration (2020) plays a role in the areas of civil society, volunteering, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs): this important for identifying and responding to the needs of the local environment, and contributes to social cohesion as well as providing widely accessible, high-quality services.

The Ministry of the Interior (2020) is important in the area of immigration to Slovenia. It encourages and facilitates the inclusion of immigrants in cultural, economic, and social life. It provides foreigners with information on education and

employment possibilities, health insurance, social assistance, free legal aid, as well as other important information about the country.

POLICY, MONITORING AND EVALUATION TYPES OF MEASURES FOR NEETs

Policy and types of measures for NEETs can be divided into two main groups in accordance with their objectives: firstly, those with a focus on the subjects of education from a formal, training and skill improvement standpoint; secondly, with a focus on employment, particularly with the assistance of the AEP. The synergies between both parts can be identified in the Youth Guarantee (MLFSAEP, 2016) and its role in local and rural education and employment. The measures can cover different geographical and sectoral scopes in different economic activities and are thus function as a flexible and useful policy device.

Youth Guarantee and its implementation

The Resolution of the National Youth Programme 2013–2022 was adopted by the National Assembly in October 2013 (European Commission, 2020a) with the defined scope, objectives and priorities of the National Youth Programme (NYP).

The Youth Guarantee programme focuses its implementation on the main challenges faced by youth in the transition from education to employment. In transitioning into the labour market, attention is given to young people with no education, first-time job seekers, young women with tertiary education, the long-term unemployed young people, and returnees who have not succeeded in obtaining employment (MLFSAEP, 2016; ZRSZ, 2021a).

It is important to ensure strong cooperation and networking between the various players and key stakeholders during the implementation, which includes: beneficiaries or providers, employers, associations, youth organisations, public funds, public agencies, public and other institutions, NGOs, and other organisations. According to the 2016–2020 Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan (MLFSAEP, 2016), young persons aged 15-29 shall receive an offer for employment (including traineeship), inclusion in formal education, on-the-job training or other training related to the needs of the employers, within four months of registering in the register of the unemployed. However, these offerings have also been the main challenges for the ESOs responsible for their implementation.

The Youth Guarantee programme in rural areas aims to provide support for the establishment and development of agricultural activities in order to improve the age structure of farm holders and speed-up structural adjustment and job creation. It also aims to contribute to faster restructuring and increasing of agri-food competitiveness. It is supported by the payment scheme for young farmers and a

business start-up aid for young farmers. MAFF is both responsible for, and the provider of, these measures.

Involving youth in labour market measures and implementing the Youth Guarantee by the ESOs

The ESOs implement various measures in the labour market: the provision of services for the labour market – lifelong career guidance and mediation – and inclusion in AEP programmes (ZRSZ, 2021a). From 2016-2020, the ESOs implemented the Youth Guarantee, which provides unemployed persons up to the age of 29 with an offer of inclusion in employment, training or further education for up to 4 months after the onset of unemployment. During this period, the ESOs implemented the project strengthening counselling work with youth: more than 6,300 young people underwent treatment. At the annual level, the average number of consultations conducted declined from 56,780 in 2016 to 43,400 in 2020. Most consultations in 2020 took place online (ZRSZ, 2021a).

Lifelong career orientation

This includes activities aimed at identifying individual abilities, competencies, and interests important for decision-making in the field of employment, education, training and career guidance. Unemployed persons are provided with lifelong career guidance activities for youth: information regarding the labour market, tools for independent career management, basic career counselling, in-depth career and rehabilitation counselling, and learning skills for job searching and personal career management (ZRSZ, 2021a).

In the period 2016-2018, unemployed youth took part in the workshops conducted by concessionaires: 7,915 unemployed young people aged 15 to 29 were included in the workshop ‘Effective Appearance on the Labour Market’ (share of youth, 43%), and 1,155 in ‘Counselling’ (share of youth, 23%) (ZRSZ, 2021a).

The ESOs career advisors conducted the workshops ‘Differently’, ‘Employment as an Advantage’, and ‘After Study into Employment’. In the period from 2016 to 2020, youths accounted for 31% of those included therein (ZRSZ, 2021a).

The implementation of the Youth Guarantee is monitored annually by the Employment Committee. Macroeconomic indicators are monitored based on the Labour Force Survey, data covering exits from the Youth Guarantee scheme, and monitoring of the situation of young people after 6, 12, and 18 months following their exit from the scheme. During the years 2014-2020 of the Youth Guarantee implementation, the focus was on youth aged 15 to 24, and those aged 25 to 29 were also monitored. The central indicator is the share of NEETs aged 15 to 24. The percentage in Slovenia was below the EU average: the share in Slovenia

decreased from 9.5% in 2015 to 6.6% in 2018, and in 2019 it increased by 0.4 percentage points (ZRSZ, 2021a). Most of the decline in the share of NEETs was due to a decrease in registered NEETs, whilst the share of unregistered ones remains constant.

The share of youth covered by the Youth Guarantee is also monitored. This particular indicator in Slovenia is slightly above the EU average throughout the years under consideration. The share decreased slightly, which means that more young people remain inactive and thus indicates that Slovenia requires a system to account for unregistered NEETs.

The indicator in which Slovenia lags behind the EU average is that of length of stay in the preparatory phase, i.e., the duration from registration to exit from the Youth Guarantee scheme. In 2019, 58.7% of youth waited longer than 4 months for an offer, compared to the EU average of 48.7%. In Slovenia, youth receive the Youth Guarantee offer a little later than the EU average. Exits are more sustainable given that the situation is positive after 6, 12, and 18 months for the majority of young people included in the Youth Guarantee. In 2019, after six months, 61.4% of youth included in the Youth Guarantee were active. The EU average was 51.3% (ZRSZ, 2021a). The situation in Slovenia is thus positive.

Job placement and employment of youth

The ESOs provide mediation to unemployed persons and employers with the purpose of timely coverage of the employee's employment needs. Youth represent a significant proportion of these activities. In 2015, they accounted for 36.2% of all posted workers, whilst youth accounted for about a fifth of the unemployed. After that year, the share of youth amongst those posted decreased: in 2020, it was 21.6%. This reduction is partly due to the intensive implementation of the Youth Guarantee. On the other hand, youth represents a constant share in employment, falling from 33.1% to 30.7% between the years 2015 to 2020 (ZRSZ, 2021a).

Active employment policy (AEP) programmes

Most of the AEP measures are implemented by the ESOs. They aimed at: training and education; promoting employment; creating jobs; and, promoting self-employment. In the period 2015-2020, long-term unemployed persons (43.7%) were mainly included in AEP programmes with a significant share of unemployed youth up to the age of 29 (31.3% in the same period 2015-2020); the latter percentage was the highest in 2015 (more than 40%) and the lowest in 2017 (28.5%), and in 2019 (27.4%) (ZRSZ, 2021a). Since 2011, the ESOs have monitored the unemployed inclusion at the level of its business plan goals.

Mismatches in the labour market and lack of work experience are particularly problematic during the transition from school to employment. Given this, youth are one of the target vulnerable groups of AEP. In the period 2015-2020, 45,836

persons aged 15 to 29 were included in AEP measures. Most youth were included in the training and education (28,627 persons, or 62.5%), followed by promoting self-employment (11,427 persons, or 24.9%) and job creation (5,106 persons, or 11.1%) and less often the incentive for employment (676 persons, or 1.5%) (ZRSZ, 2021a). Amongst the youth included in AEP measures, slightly more were women (53.3%) and their share was the highest in job creation (65.6%), followed by promoting self-employment (57.7%), training and education (54.2%), and incentive for employment (45.3%) (ZRSZ, 2021a).

In terms of education, persons with secondary education were more often included in AEP programmes: 14.3% with vocational schooling, and 36.0% with completed technical, vocational, or general secondary schooling. Moreover, 22.2% were with primary schools. As youth most often lack relevant work experience, 27.3% of those included in AEP measures were long-term unemployed and more than half in the job creation measure.

Youth had the largest number of inclusions in training and education programmes, most often in on-the-job training programmes (11,090 inclusions) and in training programmes (9,149 inclusions). Within the framework of incentives for employment, they were most often included in the incentives for permanent employment of youth (4,857 inclusions), and within the creation of new jobs in public works (4,707).

In the same 2015–2020 period, a large number of youth participated in various programmes: training in the workplace (6,993 inclusions); incentive for youth employment (6,602 inclusions); and, non-formal education and training programmes (5,094 inclusions). Furthermore, many young people were included in: public work (4,876 inclusions); work probation (3,694 inclusions); support and development programmes (3,303 inclusions); first challenge (2,987 inclusions); project learning for young adults programmes (2,403 inclusions); and, institutional training programmes (2,129 inclusions) (ZRSZ, 2021a).

Amongst the results, of those included in training and education in the period 2015-2019 (during the duration of, or after completing the training), 67.1% of youth were employed (61.5% amongst those aged 15-24, and 71.5% amongst those aged 25-29). Amongst all those included, this share was 64.1% (ZRSZ, 2021a).

Youth involved in subsidised employment (excluding public works) were significantly more successful than other groups involved: after the period 2015-2018, 84.4% of youth retained their jobs, whilst amongst all those included, this share was 73.3% (ZRSZ, 2021a).

After the completion of public works in the period 2015-2020, 50.2% of youth were employed, and amongst all those included in this programme, this share was 37.2% (ZRSZ, 2021a).

In the same period, 30,359 persons were employed with the help of a subsidy for self-employment, and 36.8% of the included persons were aged under 29 years (ZRSZ, 2021a).

Monitoring and evaluating type of measures for NEETs

The MLFSAEO and the MESS provide monitoring and evaluation of policy results defined by the NYP 2013–2022. The success of the implementation plan of the NYP is measured using the (impact) indicators, which are designed for each measure to be implemented. The Office for Youth also monitors the implementation of the NYP.

Employment and social exclusion of youth have been monitored and evaluated by statistical data and published analysis by domestic and foreign organisations. These organisations work to keep data on (youth) employment up to date, particularly the analysis of different aspects of young people's lives, but also employment and social exclusion based on comparisons with other EU countries. The Statistical Office has collected data on different segments of employment and has also conducted research on the risk of social exclusion in relation to income and poverty.

The Youth Guarantee has been intended to assist youth getting back into education, training or employment and which would have, therefore, eased their entry into the labour market. Due to the lack of social and non-profit rental housing, an open question has been the provision of housing for young people in urban rather than rural areas.

After 2019, a working group to monitor the implementation of the Youth Guarantee measures met virtually on 15th April 2021. The ministries working group (MLFSAEO, MESS, MC, MEDT, and MAFF) presented an overview of the implementation of the Youth Guarantee measures in 2020: a total of 6,271 young people were employed through AEP measures. The members of the working group also set a timetable for the preparation of a report on the implementation of the Youth Guarantee measures during the period 2016-2020. In 2021, there are important incentives for employment in green jobs thus contributing to the greening of the economy, strengthening efforts to use energy and resources more efficiently, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Reducing the number of unemployed persons is also amongst the priority incentives.

The Office for Employment (ZRSZ, 2021a) prepared the analysis on Youth in the Labour Market during the period 2016-2020. The analysis showed that 119,533 young people were employed at the end of 2020 and 18,336 unemployed young people were registered at the end of 2020. The unemployment trend has increased compared to previous years due to the COVID-19 epidemic. The unemployment rate of youth in the third quarter of 2020 was still below the EU-27 average: it amounted to 14.9% of unemployed youth overall. The government has also adapted measures due to the COVID-19 situation with some additional measures implemented in general, but also particularly in activities which have been negatively impacted the most, such as tourism, hospitality, and linked services and other economic activities.

OTHER DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMMES, PROJECTS, AND INSTRUMENTS

In addition to government-supported policies and measures, there are other programmes and projects addressing objectives, purposes, aims, and goals targeting NEET groups. These non-governmental or semi-governmental programmes and projects can be important in terms of implementation with internal and external partnerships and the funding of delivery of innovative instruments as well as achieving specific NEET objectives at both national and local municipality levels.

The ESOs conduct the PUM-O project: namely, project-based learning for young adults (ZRSZ, 2021b). The project targets NEETs without secondary education who are aged between 15 and 26 years old. The youth project participants are reimbursed for monthly costs for the previous month: this includes transport allowance or travel expenses plus an activity allowance for each hour of actual participation in the project for a programme lasting at least 100 hours. The project has been co-financed by the EU from the European Social Fund, within the Operational Programme for the Implementation of European Cohesion Policy for the period 2014 to 2020.

Associations and NGOs

The Slovenian Rural Youth Association (2020), which is a member of the European Committee for Young Farmers and 4H Clubs, is a voluntary association of Slovenian rural youth societies. Amongst other goals, it aims to unitise rural youth societies and co-ordinate their work: it takes part in educational processes to spread knowledge from agricultural colleges and other field institutions amongst its members. It organises seminars and courses in the fields of farming, environment protection, housekeeping, social policy, undertaking, and legislation for its membership. The association carries out implementation of projects, capacity building and training activities, and exchanges of successful case examples and practices with stakeholders.

YES, Group Slovenia (2020) has also carried out programmes related to NEETs. There are also several other charity organisations which have addressed the problems of NEETs.

Local municipality level

Local communities implement youth policy at a local level by adopting a local programme for youth, establishing a working or consulting body for youth issues, financially supporting the programmes in the youth sector, and implementing other measures in the youth sector. Their role in developing youth policies varies and depends on the size of each local community.

Non-profit social enterprises

Of the 275 social enterprises in Slovenia, more than 60 social enterprises with a special non-profit-making purpose are currently operating (YES, 2020). More than half are registered in the Pomurje and Podravje regions: however, there are more such enterprises than are officially registered and which likewise embody the concept of social entrepreneurship.

INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS AND SUCCESSFUL CASE STUDIES

In Slovenia, there are some international projects which can be mentioned. eNEET Rural project (2021) or eNEET Rural Partners, Stakeholders and Young NEETs (2019, 2020), which encompasses the EEA and Norway Grants (Norwegian Financial Mechanisms 2014-2021), and the transnational focus (Consortia) project. The Fund for Youth Employment (FYE) was established in 2017 and funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, with a transnational focus to contribute to the reduction of youth unemployment and social and economic disparities in Europe. The crucial emphasis is on regional and cross-border cooperation for smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth: this involves working together on common challenges, learning from each other through dialogue and the exchange of good practices. The FYE target group is youth between 15 and 29, and is particularly targeted at the 25-29-year-old segment. Slovenia has cooperated either as a lead or beneficiary partner in the following five FYE projects.

Firstly, the 351–SOCIALNEET_From Civil Society Organisations to Social Entrepreneurship: Combating Youth Unemployment and Addressing the Needs of NEETs (2020). It is funded by the EEA and Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment (EEA and the Norwegian Financial Mechanism for Youth Employment), at a value of 1.7 million EUR, with 9 partners: Greece (as lead partner and as a beneficiary partner), Italy, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain (as beneficiary partners), and Belgium (as an expertise partner). Its duration is 36 months (from 12th April 2019 – 30th September 2021). The University of Primorska is the Slovenian project partner within a transnational expert cooperation network between seven countries and eight organisations. The project partners are preparing young people for jobs within social enterprises by offering training and capacity building services to civil society organisations and businesses. Latterly, these belong to the social economy in the field of social entrepreneurship and civil society organisations. The participants, under the mentorship of experts, actively prepare content and business plans for their own social enterprise or inclusion in one of the organisations already operating. The priority contents of the project are: agriculture; information technology and open-source software/programming; tourism and culture; alternative or renewable energy sources; and, health care and social services. However, the project implementation is also open to ideas and

initiatives from other areas of social innovation and entrepreneurship which deal with unemployed young people between the ages of 18-29, with an emphasis on the 25-29 year old segment. The project in Slovenia trained 28 NEETs: one participant has succeeded and opened a store, Ekola (2021) carrying mainly local, home-grown products that are available without packaging in keeping with the concept of zero-waste.

Secondly, eNEET Rural which facilitates entrepreneurship and improving the skills of NEETs living in rural areas (2020). Its value is 1.5 million EUR, and it has 7 partners: Bulgaria (as lead partner), Hungary, Italy, Romania, Slovenia, and Spain (as beneficiary partners), and Norway (as expertise partner), duration 36 months (1 October 2018 – 30 September 2021). This project focuses on innovation and technology in the agricultural sector in order to create a toolkit for rural NEETs. The Toolkit includes online and on-the-spot training offered by the project partners for two groups: those with a secondary school diploma receive entrepreneurship training, and those without a diploma receive training that prepares them for jobs via youth competition, staff exchange and mentoring services.

Thirdly, Individual Placement and Support for NEETs through Education Youth Technology Platform (EYTP, 2021). Its value is 1.2 million EUR, and it has 6 partners: Slovenia (as lead partner), Hungary, Romania, and Spain (as beneficiary partners), and two institutions from Norway (as expertise partners). Its duration is 36 months (1st September 2018 – 31st August 2021). Its focus is on improving the counselling competence in the partner countries by combining a two-step model: the Maturing Model of an individual coaching period (which is used for motivation) and preparation for more formal counselling work using the systematic Individual Placement and Support model from Norway. By way of an Education Youth Technology Platform, NEETs receive support towards vocational education or a permanent job.

Fourthly, the Social Innovators (2021) project. Its value is 1.1 million EUR, and it has 4 partners: Slovenia (as lead partner), Bulgaria and Croatia (as beneficiary partners), and Norway (as an expertise partner). Its duration is 46 months. The focus is on NGOs as a working and learning environment for young people in which they can gain work experience and become involved in different initiatives and programmes dealing with social challenges. They are supported to create their own jobs within the social sector depending on their educational background in relation to potential for further development.

Fifthly, the Direction Employment (2021) project. Its value is 1.9 million EUR, and it has 7 partners: these range from NGOs and universities, to various companies. In terms of countries, Bulgaria operates as both lead partner and as a beneficiary partner; Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, and Slovenia are beneficiary partners. Its duration is 42 months. The focus is on social and labour market inclusion of NEETs from marginalised minorities: it works by creating and testing

an educational model with an experimental and innovative curriculum. This transpires within a mobile classroom model in order to train trainers at the regional level and apply assessment tools to demonstrate the impact of the methodology on the participants and their close environment (i.e., extended family, peer group, etc.) as well as on employers.

DIGITALISATION, TRAINING, AND INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY

Moreover, there are some other international projects. Amongst them is the Rural Network Project (RUNE, 2020) which aims to provide ultra-fast broadband optical infrastructure to all users in rural areas of Slovenia and Croatia. By building such a network in areas not currently covered by optical infrastructure, the RENE project helps local governments to achieve the goals of the Digital Agenda for Europe 2020 by providing connectivity to an optical network with speeds of more than 1 Gb/s. Such a network construction concept also enables the liberalisation of the market for electronic communications services.

Vocational education and training activities within the framework of CEDEFOP (2021) – European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, are conducted and implemented by the Slovenian Agency, CPI (2021) Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training. The programme aims to improve innovation and flexibility of the participants, and thereby their vocational education and training skills qualifications in the transition from education and training to employment (CEDEFOP REFERNET, 2021).

In terms of international mobility of youth, the Erasmus+: Youth in Action (MOVIT, 2021) is important. The Institute for the Development of Youth Mobility (Zavod za razvoj mobilnosti mladih – MOVIT) conducts the programme Erasmus+ Youth in Action. Erasmus+ is the programme of the EU in the areas of education, training, youth, and sport in the current period (namely, 2021-2027). The programme contributes to the personal and professional development of the participants towards a successful transition from education to the labour market via international experiences.

DISCUSSION

In comparison with other EU member states, Slovenia has (on average) achieved promising NEET results in quantitative and qualitative terms. However, there is the question of the relatively high number of hidden NEETs, which seem to be of an even greater magnitude than those who are registered (OECD, 2020). Amongst the lessons learned for possible transferability at the EU level can be included measures related to AEP and successful case studies from domestic and international projects.

Amongst the relevant success factors, and those which have transferability are those with synergies between bottom-up local development and a broader policy which includes institutional and other support.

There have been continued efforts to empower young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, in order to increase their employment opportunities through various tailored projects. One of these, for example, is a project called With Youth Work against Youth Unemployment - Fair Employment (EPeka, 2021). This ongoing project between 1st February 2020 and 15th September 2021 (under the Association EPEKA), is a social enterprise which aims to strengthen the competences of young or NEET people aged 15 to 29 in order to increase their employability through innovative projects. A particular focus is on young vulnerable or marginalised social groups. These include: Roma; immigrants and refugees; people with a low level of formal education; young people facing social or economic hardship; and, long-term unemployed and temporarily unemployed persons. The project is funded by the MESS and the EU through the European Social Fund.

In recent years Slovenia has entered and developed various social enterprises with the aim of integration and inclusion of youth. An example of youth involvement is KreatorLab (2021), where the aim is to help young people to develop an entrepreneurial idea, enable them to work on machines (3D printers, CNC machines, etc.), and provide training, education, and skills development/empowerment.

There are also some examples of integration and cooperation of youth in rural areas in the development of local tourist services under the initiative TourismFromZero. There also exists a platform for the cooperation and promotion of local community which goes under the logo LocalsFromZero.

Social enterprises see their future in creativity and innovation, and the digital and green economy. Therefore, it is also important that socio-economic policies are focused towards creating new and quality jobs without exclusion. A special role can be played by government institutions, social partners, and civil society. Amongst the successful case studies on social entrepreneurship in Slovenia are examples such as the social co-operative Dobrina (2021), Haloze Wine Cooperative (2021), and Eco-Social Farm Korenika (2021).

With regards to economic and social inclusion, it is important to support and develop lifelong learning as a continuous ongoing process that requires personal responsibility combined with the support of society. Through regular schooling and the acquisition of a formal education, the requisite knowledge and skills are acquired to solve the challenges and needs involved in successfully integrating into the labour market. Continuous lifelong learning is important for the individual for personal and professional growth, but also for society at both the micro level (i.e., companies and other organisations) and at the macro level (by strengthening competencies and adapting to quality of life, and competitive and sustainable

development. A specific target vulnerable group is rural NEETs, particularly in remote areas, where their hiddenness can be less socially visible from the viewpoint of urban areas and therefore (possibly) less disruptive to society. However, such cases require specific strategies, policies, programmes, and projects in order for NEETs to be successfully re-integrated into education, training or the labour market. To that end, they must be targeted at economic, social, and other qualitative aspects of human life so as to avoid (at the very least) the risk of poverty.

The difficulties and constraints for youth in Slovenia are suggested by the fact that approximately three quarters of young people would be willing to migrate abroad from Slovenia (Lavrič and Deželan, 2021). Several of these would be willing to stay abroad permanently. If this migration offered better creative and life opportunities in general, 73.5% would be willing to move for a longer period or permanently to other parts of Slovenia and the same percentage to other European country, and 48.7% to other continents. These ongoing and possible youth brain-drains suggest that there are visible and hidden difficulties for youth at the domestic level vis-à-vis their preferable foreign destinations. As in some other EU countries, this can be linked with problems related to precariousness and job insecurity (Alberti, Bessa, Hardy, Trappmann and Umney, 2018). There can also be problems encountered in designing and implementing the policy and measures bridging the gaps between the reality and youth expectations.

Amongst theoretical and practical implications, there are the NEETs who do not fall easily into any one category nor metric of assessment. Hidden unemployment and hidden NEETs are one of the crucial shortcomings of the capturing and targeting of the NEETs and their possible exclusion from education, training and employment. Evidently, this has policy and practical implications for society and local communities. These are also important issues for research, intervention, and policymaking in the future.

CONCLUSION

The transition from education to employment is a complex task. Amongst youth, between 15- and 29-years-old, there exists a special group that is neither in education nor in employment or training (i.e., the NEET community). The article provides an overview of the NEET situation in Slovenia. It examines the policies and programmes addressing NEETs, and describes the situation of NEETs in Slovenia. It also highlights hidden unemployment and hidden NEETs, examples of good practices, and opportunities for the inclusion of NEETs, and their social re-integration into education, training, employment, and society.

Whilst the rates of youth unemployment and official rates of NEETs in Slovenia are below the EU-27 averages, the hidden NEETs are at least as important as the registered ones. This is a challenging issue reflecting a need to change or

adjust the strategy, policy, and measures to make them more suitable for dealing with the issue of registered and hidden NEETs. Specific measures are crucial for educational, economic, and social inclusion in order to ease the transition from education and training to regular employment. Ad hoc student work and widespread precarious youth work are aspects of the less successful policy measures aimed at easing the transition from youth education to labour market participation. These will need to be addressed in the future. Furthermore, it is a matter of concern that a large majority of young people look to a future abroad.

Various government institutions with policies and measures, NGOs, rural and social entrepreneurship programmes, projects, and case studies are addressing the national youth strategy and needs of NEETs. There are also more successful innovative case studies of youth, particularly young farmers, and social entrepreneurship. In addition to local social enterprises, the development of entrepreneurship and local employment can involve the participation of various rural stakeholders addressing the needs of NEETs: ESOs; local development agencies; municipalities; training and education providers; and, other stakeholders targeting the activities for rural youth. These issues are addressed through various rural and local employment development programmes targeting the needs of vulnerable or socially excluded rural youth and their possibly less competitive position in the labour market.

Amongst the success factors specific to Slovenia can be counted some social enterprises established by NEETs, or those employing NEETs. Amongst those of broader relevance can be counted life-long learning practices and the role of the AEP in bridging the transition from education and training to employment. One region at least (Prekmurje) and within it, one village (Pušča), can illustrate the advantage of synergies between economic development in the past, successful implementation of education policies, AEP, and social policies in the economic and social integration of a vulnerable group (Roma). These success factors could be applied and transferred to other contexts and similar target groups within the country as well as to other EU member states.

One of the important open questions relates to hidden unemployment, and particularly, hidden NEETs. This suggests that better evidence and traceability regarding NEETs over time could be important in more successfully assisting and helping NEETs in their economic and social re-integration into employment and society. Amongst the challenging issues to be addressed is not only ensuring that jobs are available to youths, but that such jobs are more sustainable in the medium to long term. That this is not the case can be one of the reasons for the emerging daily and permanent migration from rural areas, particularly to the capital (Ljubljana), and from the north-eastern parts of Slovenia to work in Austria. New challenges for the labour market have been induced by implications related to COVID-19. Whilst in the initial stage, both unemployment and the NEETs rate

have increased, they have nonetheless stabilised, due to various policy measures which have mitigated the shocks caused by the pandemic crisis.

List of acronyms

- AEP – Active Employment Policy
- CAP – Common Agricultural Policy
- CLLD – Community-Led Local Development
- EEA – European Economic Area
- ESO – Employment Service Office
- EU – European Union
- EUR – Euro
- FYE – Fund for Youth Employment
- ILO – International Labour Organisation
- LAG – Local Action Groups
- LEADER – Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale (in French) or Links between actions for the development of the rural economy (in English)
- MAFF – Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food
- MC – Ministry of Culture
- MEDT – Ministry of Economic Development and Technology
- MESS – Ministry of Education, Science and Sport
- MLFSAEO – Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities
- NUTS – Nomenclature des Unités territoriales statistiques (in French) or Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (in English)
- OECD – Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
- NEET – Neither in Education nor in Employment or Training
- NGO – Non-governmental organisation
- NYP – National Youth Programme
- TV – television

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Articolul scoate în evidență strategiile slovene, instituțiile, politicile, programele, proiectele și măsurile privind tinerii NEET, în special pe cei din mediul rural. Programul Youth Guarantee și în special măsurile active de ocupare la nivel național implementate prin birourile naționale, joacă un rol crucial în acoperirea celor care sunt în șomaj structural și pe termen lung, în general, și pentru tinerii NEET care sunt în tranziție între educație, ucenicie și muncă. Strategiile naționale și politicile sunt susținute de programe și proiecte internaționale din cadrul fondurilor UE și granturilor EEA – Granturi Norvegiene (Mecanismul Financiar Norvegian). Printre poveștile de succes poate fi inclusă în mod special cea a integrării populației Roma din cel puțin o zonă transfrontalieră cu proximitate geografică cu regiunea Styria, Austria (cu capitala la Graz). În timp ce procentul tinerilor NEET din rural în Slovenia este modest, asta nu înseamnă absența problemelor de acest gen, care pot fi legate de diferitele caracteristici personale, gospodărești sau de alte feluri, pentru cei vulnerabili și excluși economic și social, NEET din mediul rural. Cei din categoria NEET care nu 'se văd', cei neregistrați, care nu participă în niciun program sau necuprinși în politici sunt cel puțin la fel de importanți ca cei care sunt înregistrați. Ambele categorii sunt provocări pentru integrarea lor socială și economică, cu scopul de a li se crea oportunități specifice și generale pentru a continua procesul de învățare în vederea unui angajament personal, de familie și social față de integrarea socială și pe piața muncii, pentru supraviețuirea în competitivă piață a muncii, legat de calitatea vieții – (evitarea riscului sărăciei) –, și pentru o dezvoltare rurală sustenabilă.

Cuvinte-cheie: *tineri; NEET; educație; Politici Active de Angajare; NEET din rural; strategia NEET; măsuri pentru politici; NEET Slovenia.*