

# STATE LEVEL AGREED-UPON FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO MORE EFFECTIVE POLICYMAKING FOR PUBLIC SECTOR SERVICES FOR EFFECTIVE LOCAL-LEVEL WORK WITH NEETs<sup>1</sup>

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*Supporting young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) represents a new global policy challenge. There is a need to increase knowledge about policymaking connected to multidisciplinary approaches in order to provide better services for NEET youth. This study focuses on interpretations by specialists in the youth field in Estonia regarding the current public policy support system for NEETs and the associated factors affecting the achievement of policy goals. Based on document analysis and semi-structured interviews with specialists from all levels of the national NEET support system, this study demonstrates that the cross-sectoral and multi-level public policy system for NEETs lacks sufficient understanding of the central aims. The support strategy is, rather, created for use within a single structure and does not have a common meaning from a system-wide perspective. State-level coordinating parties need a common understanding at the beginning of policy creation concerning the system's long-term aims, information flow and performance, agreed-upon roles transcending sectors, and process management across structures. This change would enable better outreach and integrated services at the local level and be accurately based on the needs of youth with heterogeneous backgrounds whilst avoiding barriers at the individual case level.*

*Keywords: NEET; policy creation; policy coordination; information flow; multidisciplinary service; Youth Guarantee; Estonia.*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, 15–29-year-old young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEETs) have come under increasing scrutiny in both academic research (Simmons, Thompson and Russell 2014; Jongbloed and

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Giret 2021) and also youth policies (OECD 2015a; Mascherini 2019). The regional approach to policymaking has been found to be beneficial in supporting this target group (Simões 2018; Rikala 2020; Karyda 2020). However, there is little evidence regarding the efficiency of comprehensive support programmes (Hudson, Hunter and Peckham 2019). At the same time, policymaking is becoming more and more complicated given that youth move between sectors due to the heterogeneous background of the target group. In turn, this leads to a fragmenting of the responsibility of the services between national, regional, and local providers (Hooghe and Marks 2011). Therefore, there is an increasing need for a new approach to services and policymaking regarding this target group. This article aims to capture the current Estonian public policy support system for NEETs, and its need for development through the eyes of youth policy and youth work specialists. Using semi-structured expert interviews and document analysis, we describe how the Estonian national support system for NEET youth is structured, examine the guidelines for these support services, and critically consider how the system and its development needs are assessed.

The topic of NEETs came under political scrutiny in 2012, when it became clear that Europe had 14 million NEET youths in the 15–29-year-old age group: this figure made up 33% of the total number of European youth (Mascherini *et al.* 2012). The economic damage to Europe, primarily caused by tax losses and outflowing welfare benefits, was 162 billion euros, or 1.21% of European GDP (Mascherini *et al.* 2014). According to Eurostat (2020), the average ratio of NEET youth in European countries is 16.5%, however, this reaches 18.3% in rural areas. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of NEET youths was stabilising slowly (Kusa and Jasiak 2020).

The European Commission (2021) has set out new guidelines for the Member States on the need to achieve a high level of employment, skills, and job-related competitiveness, as well as establish strong social security systems (European Commission 2021). Based on the guidelines, the goal is set to reduce the rate of NEET youth from 12.6% (in 2019) to 9% (*ibid.*). The European Commission encourages the Member States to create a new, and stronger, Youth Guarantee (YG) by utilising financial support from the European Union (European Commission 2020). This is an updated programme of the earlier YG that was created in 2013 for supporting the under-25 age group with quality employment, further education, apprenticeships, or training opportunities over a 4-month period after graduating, or incurring loss of employment (Council of the European Union 2013; Escudero and López Mourelo 2017). Estonia approved the YG in 2014 (Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs 2018), and is currently preparing for the new period (European Commission 2020). Therefore, there is an increasing practical need for EU Member States to better understand the factors which need to be considered in order to create support systems for NEET youth and which can transcend sectors and levels effectively and efficiently.

## REASONS AND SOLUTIONS FOR NEET STATUS

The situation for NEETs (and its attendant consequences) represents both a significant individual and social challenge (Ryan and Lórinč 2013; Maguire 2018). However, being NEET is not always negative or problematic: young people can have a wide variety of reasons for withdrawing from education and the labour market (for a limited period, at least). To that end, for many young people, being NEET is largely a temporary state (Suttill 2017).

Several reasons can lead to NEET status, and these are individual and context-based. NEET youth have been shown to have more experience with prior unemployment, they have more unemployed friends, and they come from families with fewer economic opportunities (Vancea and Utzet 2018; Sadler, Akister and Burch 2015). NEET youth also have a higher likelihood of living with a single parent, or in a household where everyone is unemployed (Barham *et al.* 2009). It has been emphasised that the weak links between family, education, and employment policies impede the social guarantees for youth and their opportunities for independence (Garcia-Fuentes 2019). Additional obstacles include deficiencies of the parents of NEET youth, such as poor parental skills, lack of interest in children's education, and living conditions (OECD 2015b). Young people living in rural areas have been identified as being particularly vulnerable to such factors. It has been recommended that the restrictions on public employment services in rural areas be reviewed (Simões 2018) in order to ensure more efficient support, proper institutional arrangements, and effective practices in various fields (*i.e.*, social affairs, health, education, employment).

The disadvantaged situation of NEET youth is further exacerbated by health problems (OECD 2015b; Hammarström and Ahlgren 2019; Stea *et al.* 2019) and gender (Russell 2016 a,b; Saczyńska-Sokół 2018). Therefore, NEET youth require a complex, multi-faceted approach since gender, place of residence, manner of intervention, possible financial support, disability, and other temporal factors can all significantly impact upon whether young people are in employment or education (Luthra *et al.* 2018). Beyond the young person's own life situation, NEET status may be an outcome of structural factors such as globalisation and neo-liberalism (Holte, Swart and Hiilamo 2019), economic recession (Scandurra, Cefalo and Kazepov 2021), normalisation of flexible labour market opportunities (Nielsen *et al.* 2017), liberalisation of the workforce (Katznelson 2017), and the structure of the educational system and labour market in specific locales (Avila and Rose 2019; Kelly *et al.* 2019).

Exiting from unwanted NEET status requires effective synergy between different policies. Several studies have shown that youth-centred support activities require political, institutional, and social agreements. These, in turn, affect the agency of youth to make important choices in an effective manner (Serrano Pascual and Martín Martín 2017; Saczyńska-Sokół 2018). It is important to integrate

various fields that allow links between policies to be established, which then support the long-term future prospects of youth without concentrating on merely surviving the present, difficult situation (Csoba and Herrmann 2017).

Disadvantaged youth benefit from various targeted interventions, including alternative educational programmes and mentorship (OECD 2015b). At the same time, it is evident that the most vulnerable youths still require additional programmes, which can help them acquire the skills they need for entering education or the labour market (Thompson 2011; OECD 2015b; Hämäläinen, Hämäläinen and Tuomala 2014). Research has also indicated that insufficient financing exists for the YG, which could create negative side effects for other social policies and the development of a country in general (Cabasés Piqué, Pardell Veà and Strecker 2016). Support for NEET youth may not be sustainable and fruitful if it is not delivered as part of a comprehensive system, but is rather provided on a project by project basis (Hutchinson, Beck and Hooley 2016).

Furthermore, when creating services for NEET youth, the flexibility of the services must be taken into consideration: a 'one service for all' model is inefficient. Therefore, a variety of solutions should be created which focus upon the different groups of young people within the system (Passey, Williams and Rogers 2008; Cabasés Piqué, Pardell Veà and Strecker 2016). Only tailor-made solutions for various sub-groups can potentially reintegrate NEETs into the labour market and/or education system efficiently and successfully (Mascherini 2019). It has been determined that a comprehensive and holistic approach is the most effective measure in supporting NEET youth given that it sets the stage for guiding NEET youth through consecutive processes (Kolouh-Söderlund 2015; Henderson *et al.* 2017). In order to ensure the holistic nature of the process, cooperation between various domains must be considered or the cooperation may otherwise collide with institutional barriers which will, in turn, prevent the necessary support from reaching and assisting young people (Kolouh-Söderlund 2013). To that end, coordination is required between many local level service providers, such as health care, social affairs bureaus, employment authorities, local governments, career counsellors, educational and training establishments, local employers, and social partners (OECD 2015b; Mascherini 2019; Kolouh-Söderlund 2015). In order to provide holistic services, vertical and horizontal coordinating capacities between different policy domains must be improved, and both the State and the local levels of government must have clearly defined roles in supporting NEET youth (OECD 2015b). It is important to harmonise the cooperation between different organisations because situations where service providers have a low level of competence (or concentrate only on reaching the goals of their own organisation) could create additional obstacles for young people (Beck 2015).

The success of a policy also depends on the indicators of success. Hence, the choice of indicators should support social inclusion of the target group (Petmesidou and Menéndez 2019). Intervention measures might be insufficient if the sub-groups

of the target group are not sufficiently understood, or the needs of the particular group of young people are not supported (Mascherini and Ledermaier 2016). Whilst the Member States continue to create new structures and services for NEETs, young people might not find or utilise them since they do not recognise measures as being targeted at them, or they might experience difficulties accessing services because of regional factors. Therefore, the assessing of a policy is considered a problematic area, where the performance and success indicators may not allow proper evaluation of all important aspects of supporting NEET youth (*ibid.*). However, institutions which support youth must provide national or local level services in a manner that suits the needs, developmental stage, and gender of youth in question (Henderson *et al.* 2017). Passey, Williams, and Rogers (2008) have highlighted that when providing services, the quality and availability of data on the youth is important given that this is what makes it possible to determine the circumstances that affect them, thereby enabling more tailored services.

Co-creation – a design process based on the needs of a target group and the cooperation of various actors to create specific public sector services – is starting to gain researchers' attention (Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers 2015; Windsor 2017). According to Osborne (2018), we must consider co-production as a basic principle of service provision because a service cannot exist without it being a joint product of the service provider and the recipient (as based on the exact needs of the clientele). At the same time, accepting novel roles to adapt innovative leadership methods with the self-organisation of communities (and within the possibilities of the national political context) is difficult for politicians: indeed, it poses a key challenge for those who seek to implement such innovative practices (Hansen, Steen and Jong 2012; Edelenbos, van Meerkerk and Koppenjan 2017).

Furthermore, the political term for the target group (NEET) may lead to stigmatisation of young people which, in turn, affects access to the services and therefore accepting (necessary) help (Maguire 2018; Holte 2018; Bonnard, Giret and Kossi 2020). This may create a situation where services actually have a stigmatising effect whereby the youth feel that they are being labelled, or that their lives are overly directed without them being able to contribute to their own goals. Sadly, this might also cause the youth to hide their real problems (Garcia-Fuentes 2019).

In this study, we focus on the national support system for NEETs in Estonia, monitoring both the macro and micro levels. The macro level includes the state level coordination; the micro level refers to the implementation level where the real support on the ground takes place. Based on Coleman's (1986) conceptualisation, three types of links between the levels were considered: macro-micro links (*i.e.*, the macrosocial influencing factors of an action); micro-micro links (*i.e.*, the immediate influencing factors of an action); and, micro-macro links (*i.e.*, the macrosocial consequences of an action). Based on Meadows (2009: 188–191), we define a system as a comprehensive set of interconnected elements with mutual

links and a common goal. According to Meadows (2009), social conditions, information flow, and physical conditions must be collaboratively monitored. In the context of the study, social conditions arise from the creation of a political environment generated by the state, which includes: a common way of thinking; vision; goals; operational framework; functions; and, implementation conditions. Physical conditions are considered to be the dynamics, operating principles, and associated results of the services created by the implementers. This includes the flow of information between two conditions which help to analyse performance in order to provide feedback as appropriate.

Relying on the theoretical framework described above, we begin by creating a descriptive national model for supporting NEETs by mapping the existing practices, the common features of the working principles, and their differences. Next, the institutional level is analysed in order to achieve insight into the expectations of cross-sectoral cooperation. Combining the results of the two analyses, we then provide the more accurate national support model and conclude with suggestions and policy recommendations for improving the current system according to the new knowledge.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

### **Document analysis**

Firstly, documents (guidelines for the YG, the YG Estonian Action Plan, state legislative acts, tender invitations, action manuals, strategies) for and about relevant services were collected and analysed using a cross-case approach. This made it possible to analyse several cases simultaneously. The comparative analysis enabled detection of the links between the recurring keywords, and elaboration of the final coding scheme. Secondly, content analysis was employed in order to obtain an overview of the texts and to describe the immediate content of documentation as communication in a systemic and quantitative manner. When choosing categories for the coding scheme, it was considered that (together with the information from the expert interviews) the categories could potentially be used for mapping the existing courses of action and for comparing the guidelines or conditions necessary for implementation.

### **Expert interviews**

Based on the document analyses, the ministries responsible for coordinating services for NEETs were identified. The sample for the expert interviews was recruited from the respective ministries and related institutions. A total of nine semi-structured expert interviews were conducted in February and March 2019. The experts represented the coordinating level (ministries, national-level agencies working with NEET issues), the promoting level (subdivisions of ministries), and

the implementing level (service providers). Eight experts represented the public sector, and one expert was from an NGO.

The main topics of the interview were sent to the interviewees prior to meeting. The length of the interviews varied from 45 minutes to an hour. The interviews were then coded based on the adapted approach of thinking, in terms of systems specified by Meadows (2009). The results were validated twice in the YG Estonian steering group (8 April 2019) and in the development programme for specialists working with youth (1 April 2019).

## FINDINGS

### National System for the Support of NEETs

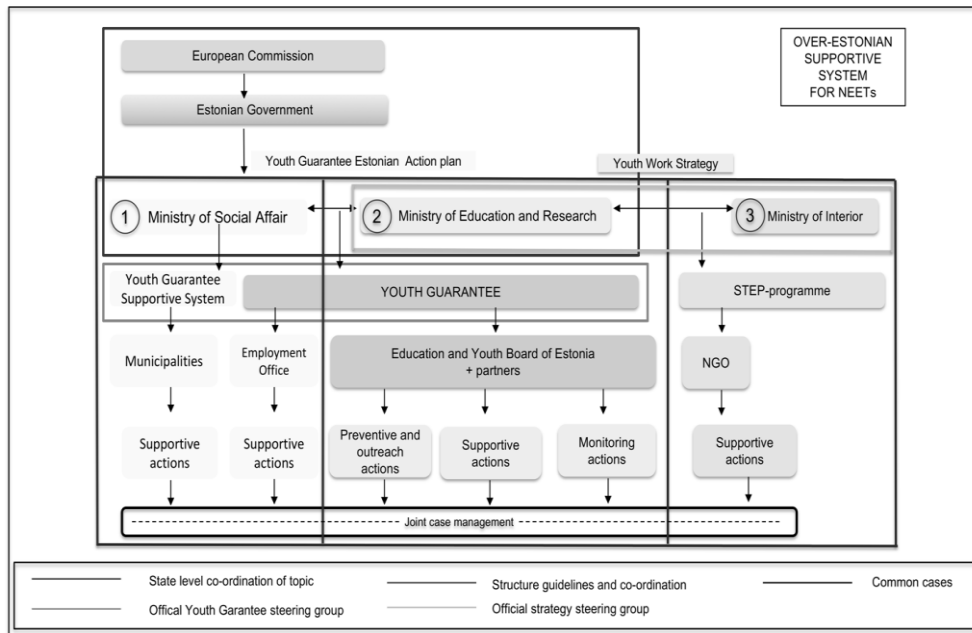
NEETs have been a national policy priority in Estonia since 2013 and they are supported through the three main national structures which transcend ministries – The Youth Guarantee (YG), the YG Support System, and the STEP programme (see *Figure 1*). Each structure has various aims (a total of 12, *Figure 1*). According to document analysis, the measures can be divided into two groups based on their function: universal (several objectives), and specific (one objective). The measures are specifically aimed at finding and supporting NEET youth, preventing young people from falling into that group, and helping NEETs to solve their problems, or monitoring the situation of this group of young people. Documents and expert interviews revealed that three measures are the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs, eight belong under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Research, and one is managed by the Ministry of Interior. All measures take place within the framework of the Cohesion Policy Fund: namely, they are financed by the European Social Fund, and the principles of networking are meant to be used to support youth, which includes planned actions whilst taking into account the synergy of education, youth work, and employment activities (Estonian Ministry of Finance 2018). However, the geographical scope of services is *not* national and their presence in urban or rural areas depends to a large extent on the voluntary willingness of service providers to provide the service.

As is shown in *Figure 1*, the main guidelines come from the European Commission, where the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Research are jointly responsible for the Estonian YG Implementation Plan, with the Ministry of Social Affairs being the accountable party to the European Commission. The Estonian YG Implementation Plan transcends ministries, fields, and sectors, and provides an overview of the implementation of the YG activities in Estonia, the role of the various organisations in its implementation, and evaluating the efficiency of its activities (Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs 2018). It was highlighted in the expert interviews that each member state should create its own YG implementation plan and use existing or new activities for its purposes. For

example, an expert of the Youth Guarantee Support System stated that the system was created due to a precept of the European Commission that the youth were not being reached, and that a separate online tool was needed for this.

Figure 1

### Estonian national-level support model for NEET youth



To that end, three Estonian ministries are responsible for NEET issues, and agreements regarding the NEET support system are reported through various official documents (action and development plans, steering groups etc.), where not all the parties are included. Likewise, support services for young people within different structures are provided at local level and the national coordination of services and reporting is rather vertical: moreover, it contains partly conflicting guidelines that can be an obstacle for comparing results, or joint case management at the local level.

The experts stated that the whole picture of the YG is not uniform: rather, it is a constructed system of ideas to which various parties have contributed over time. The responsible state-level experts could not explain the system: even so, they did not see it as a problem. A ministry is mostly obligated to organise the successful implementation of the actions listed in regulations, but only a part of those actions is seen as strictly YG actions, which is a potential cause for the confusion.



*“This [YG action plan] has developed over the course of various meetings which include reporting on the YG actions, and then we have selected it specifically. Everyone contributes to the implementation of the YG, preventive actions ... The measure aimed at NEETs is the only intervention.”*  
(Coordinating Expert H).

As the YG and YG Support System have similar names, the public might be unaware that they are not linked, which, according to the experts, has caused confusion. The YG is designed primarily by national-level decision-makers and since the communication about it has not always been clear, situations have occurred where many practical level experts do not understand the wider functioning of the Estonian NEET youth support system. This is problematic because communication-related risks can also reduce the outreach of services and undermine the support for young people.

### **The Guidelines of the National Scheme for Supporting NEET Youth**

Document analysis shows that differences in the structure’s guidelines result from different ministries. These entities are responsible for the measures, and moreover who determines its legal framework and the rules for using the funding. This is in addition to fulfilling goals congruent with the actions undertaken. Support services are delivered in different ways, and during different periods: in turn, this may lead to different conditions for providers. Various provision methods are used – procurements, own services, partnerships, and applications. Two different approaches have been adopted for determining the timeline, and an implementer guides this either as a continuous process, or periodically.

The document analysis and expert interviews confirm that the national support system for NEETs is directed at four different target groups (inactive youths, *i.e.*, those requiring help, NEET youths, unemployed youths, and young people in the 15–29 age group). Guidelines for cooperation are not always in accordance with each other. There are contradictions in target and age groups one can work with, length of support and the end goals of the support (*e.g.*, to enter school or the labour market).

Analysis also revealed different understandings of the parties in describing the results. Furthermore, the national reports use different methods for describing the efficiency of measures, and due to the different methods, the measures are not (therefore) always comparable. There are two general terms to describe the results for the decision-makers: the youth is *being supported* (like an e-mail has been sent or a phone call); or, the youth are provided with a *concrete service with successful results*.

*“Once a quarter, I provide the numbers of how many have received our services and how many have left the services ... I only submit numbers. This is all I have to present. Unless a goal has not been reached, I do not have to*

*provide any reasons. If no underlying reasons are required, then I do not really know what kind of information to submit.” (Promoting-Level Expert E).*

Experts stated that they understand that reports must include quantitative performance indicators in order to measure the goals of various domains. However, they found it equally important to report the qualitative outcomes of their work *in addition to* numbers outlining base-level utilisation of services. However, document analysis demonstrated that it is not considered necessary to collect additional data from service providers.

Looking at the general performance indicators in the reports, it became evident that many of the measures cannot be compared across reports since performance is not interpreted in the same way, or it is monitored using different methods. In the reports that describe indicators at the level of courses of action, three different approaches are used: the unique number of persons, the number of cases, and the general participation rate. Two very different methods are used for describing performance: sometimes participants are evaluated six months later, whereas sometimes later evaluation is not necessary. A coordinating-level expert was concerned that performance indicators and monitoring performance were not discussed and were necessary only to obtain funding. Another issue that could lead to arguments is deciding which level of indicators is considered as high or low. The fact that the criteria for performance indicators varied was also confirmed by the document analysis. A promoting-level expert explained that measures were monitored in every sector according to the internal rules of the organisation. In other cases, there were criteria which could be considered when assessing performance but were usually dismissed. Although the period of providing services is not decided internally, the promoting-level expert stated that a young individual should achieve results within six months, which is monitored across services. A coordinating-level expert added the dimensions of partnership and political will, the idea being that the better the relationship with partners, the more efficient the cooperation and the better the service. However, in their opinion, these dimensions were not currently evaluated.

### **Forms of Cooperation**

The conditions for providing support are the basis for carrying out the measures, which are coordinated by ministries or implementing authorities. When establishing conditions for the measures, the ministries take divergent approaches. A promoting-level expert noted that providers with procurement agreements are only seen *as providers* and *not* as general contributors to the overall system. This is because the authority providing a service (thus being the spokesperson already) sets different expectations to the contracting authority regarding the general planning of this domain.

*“These expectations are related to the planning of further action and information for making smart decisions and choices now, reaching the level of local governments and the work that youth workers do.” (Implementing-Level Expert A).*

According to a representative of the promoting level in another sector, the authorities in their sector generally work independently, and a coordinating-level expert stated that cooperation agreements with local governments are used for the YG Support System, which is a voluntary option for the local governments.

### **The Role of Performance Information in Cooperation**

According to the experts, the role of reporting information in cooperation could be divided into the following subcategories: gathering information; forwarding it for the purposes of coordinating the goals of a system; and/or, for use in relation to action continuation plans. Document analysis revealed that the implementation of policy measures is related to several simultaneous systems: this is the reason for the differences in reporting and the forwarded information. A coordinating-level expert stated that they use disparate methods for collecting data: namely, information is gathered and forwarded on different levels (*i.e.*, the European and Estonian, ministerial, national, and sectoral levels). Another coordinating-level expert pointed out that explanations are provided to the government and various social partners (*e.g.*, political parties). Furthermore, various methods are used to gather information: mid-term appraisals; reports; quarterly meetings; steering groups; quality monitoring; analysing policy measures; research; and, various other documents. The analysis of the expert interviews highlights discrepancies where promoting-level experts have failed to understand for whom they are collecting and forwarding data, or what is going to happen to it and how feedback is provided. According to the implementing-level experts, feedback is largely quantitative. One implementing-level expert stated that they received feedback about reaching the indicators, which they consider disproportionate to the amount of work required for preparing a report or doing the actual work. The expert is willing to contribute more, for example, through a quarterly network meeting where everyone could provide an overview of their work. Currently, there is very little of such quarterly feedback. Another implementing-level expert prepared their own summaries, which they then sent to others. At first, there was an agreement about presenting a substantive report, but this has not been necessary in reality.

*“I want to analyse the successes of this period, what could be done better, what was a failure, and any obstacles mostly for my own benefit, to understand it better.” (Implementing-Level Expert B).*

Experts pointed out problems with finding public information on how successful the implementation of other measures has been. During meetings, mostly numeric information was shared. However, an understanding of the performance indicators, and the associated effects of particular actions, were considered to be much more useful. The document analysis yielded similar results.

### **The Development Needs of the NEET Support System: General Management and Sustainability Factors**

There is a need for cooperation between the actors involved in coordinating, promoting, and strategic planning of NEET support systems. However, the implementing level emphasises case-based cooperation more so than others. Coordinating-level experts stated in their interviews that they are primarily in the role of policymakers, which corresponded to the goals in the various national development documents, and functioned as a guideline for the local governments when planning regional activities. The important issue thereof was having implementers move in the *same direction* and under the *same framework* as the state. A YG coordinating expert indicated that the Estonian YG was one of the few in Europe which is built on a contractual partnership. Whilst one coordinating-level expert found that cooperation does not always have to be based on contracts in writing, an implementing-level expert thought that officially recognised cooperation is nonetheless important for the sustainability of the activities. Otherwise, this could lead to a situation where people leaving an organisation depart, in tandem, with the know-how whilst leaving a critical skills-gap in their absence.

*“If I were to leave all people aside and imagine that the world begins again tomorrow from a clean slate without any of us here, then I cannot imagine how this would work. Currently, the situation has evolved so that someone knows someone else or someone knows where another is an expert. I do not know of any agreements on the so-called best practices or some guidelines which would be valid after all these people leave and move elsewhere. In other words, everything is resting largely on the people. Every organisation has their own experiences and vision, but these are not written down or widely known.” (Implementing-Level Expert A).*

An expert thought that strategic planning was needed in order to know the direction to work towards when looking at the sector in general. This would involve them in cooperation between relevant ministries, thus keeping them better informed about the various developments in different sectors. To that end, clear and structured written documentation giving, at least, a common strategic purpose, overview, and methodology of common standards would serve to benefit everyone involved in implementing NEET policies.

## **The Role and Responsibility of Actors at the National and Local Level**

Both the national and local levels are involved in supporting NEETs, wherein everyone fulfils a different role. An exact understanding of the role of various parties is an important issue, including the question of a central NEET coordinator at the local and national levels. The experts consider the local governments as the main actors: however, several differences need to be addressed regarding the different levels. The coordinating and promoting levels believe that local governments should be the central coordinating authorities since the young people concerned live within their borders. An implementing-level expert indicated the need to know who is involved in solving this issue first because this would grant a better understanding of the role of the implementers at the local level. Before involving local governments to a greater degree, both parties see that several other problems need to be solved first given that the local governments are largely unaware of the unique problems facing NEETs. Furthermore, the local governments need empowering since not all of them have the necessary services, and furthermore, the existing services need to be given a more precise meaning within the context of the support system in order to avoid duplication, or a subsequent lack of function.

A coordinating-level expert emphasised that we need to differentiate between the responsibilities of the state, the local government, and the young people themselves given that the possibility of supporting youth (based on the guidelines provided) might depend on this.

*“When a young person has already entered the system, then they are the state’s responsibility; when we talk about measures for preventing a young person needing the system, then we are discussing the level of local governments ... Here, we cannot say that we do not care; preventive action is important. If you have nowhere to refer them, then those four months are not an option.” (Coordinating Expert G)*

According to the expert, creating services at the local government level requires additional information from the state. The expert believes that there has to be national and/or financial agreements to develop that.

Those working in the implementing level mostly believed that if the European Commission, or the national level, do not have agreements with a certain level of detail or mapping between ministries, then designing effective services and dealing with cases exceeding a single domain at a local level is, to say the least, complicated. Other factors that were mentioned could be divided into those overarching the YG (*i.e.*, registries, data protection, multi-sectoral cases, regional differences, cases behind the data, labelling youth, sectoral rhetoric etc.) and moreover, the YG as a system itself (*i.e.*, guidelines on the four months, the

starting point for entering the service, agreement on the nature of the target group, the shared competency of the specialists etc.) The main factor that would help everything work more efficiently that was mentioned in the expert interviews was the need to harmonise the concept of performance at both the ministerial level and the case level. One coordinating-level expert indicated the problem of interpreting performance incorrectly, which might lead the decision-makers to draw wrong conclusions.

*“When bringing in the dimension of young people, we need to guarantee their happiness and well-being first, making them want to return to school and work and be active in the long run. This is a grey area which is accepted ... and is not accepted; an unregulated territory. A youth worker must seemingly know that this is important, but also is not.” (Implementing-Level Expert A).*

### **Coordination, Cooperation, and Co-Creation**

National experts highlighted the expectations that the ministries have for each other, specifically vis-à-vis understanding the role of the ministry better in *the overall system*, and how it would (therefore) help create smoother cooperation amongst its various components. A coordinating-level expert thought that the cooperation in this issue had been led too narrowly in the political context. The expert believed that not all parties had been included nor that the necessary time was not always allocated for the cooperation.

*“Maybe the contribution would spring from being in the loop in the end... you cannot think of absolutely everything... I don’t know; I have generally been quite positive lately about that at least – about what is happening between the ministries; and I feel that the civil society has grown into a better partner.” (Coordinating Expert I).*

According to an implementing-level expert, this approach would allow the creation of a common thematic policy framework for NEETs, where each ministry would have more clearly defined responsibilities and roles.

One coordinating-level expert said that to focus solely on a written development document would not bring results unless it was given clear, contextual meaning. At the same time, another coordinating-level expert thought that a joint agreement is necessary because complex cases require cross-sectoral cooperative planning and management, happening mostly at the level of programmes and not in the field in general. Therefore, inter-sectoral cases could go unnoticed. Another promoting-level expert stated that well-coordinated open cross-sectoral discussion is required. This would enable sharing various perspectives, understanding each other’s tasks, and learning from this.

*“I see that people often feel like there is no point. The workload, the lack of resources... I can see that we need it. The collective input and... It must happen. It must all happen through co-creation. People must see that this is necessary. We need an open discussion on those issues. The obstacles that one party might face and what others see in a particular case.”*  
(Implementing-Level Expert B).

Experts at various levels believed that changing the views on coordinating NEET issues is important. They thought that cooperation to guarantee sufficient resources was essential but also that reaching the shared goal should start with co-creation. In order to create a new structure, it is necessary to involve the target group from the beginning.

The experts indicated several factors regarding coordination which would help them to be more efficient and which required agreement between all parties. These would include: a common understanding between levels and service providers about the system; why we should support NEETs (and more importantly how); acknowledging problems openly; adopting a co-creation approach to create a new support system; mutual coordinated communication; one appointed coordinator; and, a willingness to reach a common goal. At the same time, one coordinating-level expert thought that a general coordinator is unnecessary: rather, everyone should meet and discuss the available resources in a structured and periodic fashion.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The national support for NEET-status youth in Estonia is provided across sectors, but the main aims of the system are not clear and the strategy and guidelines created by different parties in the structure lack a system-wide perspective. The existing system does not contain common information about the state of the performance of the whole system nor the development of the support system. Such fragmentation may lead to focusing only on short-term goals, whilst the overall development of the system remains inadequate. In order to support NEETs more efficiently across the territory of Estonia (including rural areas), the coordinating parties in the support structure require the following: a clearer common understanding about the system’s long-term aims; an official cooperation agreement at the state level that transcends sectors and levels at the beginning of service or policy creation; and, process management across structures. This development would make it possible to provide integrated services at the local level based on the needs of youth with heterogeneous backgrounds without stigmatising them. More precisely defined roles for all parties would also make it possible to reach more young people and avoid barriers between systems at the management level, as the guidelines can be coordinated from the point of view of the agreed-upon support system.

The expert interviews and document analysis in this study revealed five main factors whose coordination at the national level could smooth the operation of the NEET support system and guarantee that the system objectives are understood at the local level.

Firstly, the support system's long-term goals, the functioning of actions in the different structures, and the role of sectors like social or youth work need to be agreed upon at the national level in order to avoid various actors interpreting them differently. According to the approach proposed by Meadows (2009), which involves thinking in systems, the basis for the behavioural characteristics of successfully functioning systems and structures is coordinating the objectives of the parties within systems, which later makes it possible to assess performance based on the same principles. It must be considered that various interpretations of a system could lead to unwanted or undesirable objectives (Meadows 2009). Luhmann (1995) states that one system can be a part of another: however, monitoring the harmony of such systems is important, whilst according to Meadows (2009), said harmony can be consciously guided through a strategic flow of information.

Secondly, there is a need for a coordinated understanding and communication concerning which level is responsible for which tasks when implementing a whole system and structure, including systemic handling of the joint cases. According to Meadows (2009), information flow and guidelines in a system affect the manageability, stability, observability, and reactions to external influences. As stated by Tatar *et al.* (2017), NEETs need a personal approach and this assumes a systematic and more integrated cooperation between service providers. It must be considered that NEETs as a heterogeneous target group, often with complex problems, require more flexible services in cooperation with other sectors and institutions. Therefore, according to Hämäläinen, Hämäläinen, and Tuomala (2014), keeping the national guidelines from limiting cooperation and communicating those clearly to different parties must be a conscious effort when collectively solving cross-sectoral cases. As stated by Hämäläinen *et al.* (2014), existing and future precepts must be considered when creating support measures for NEET youth so that the documents are harmonised and do not cancel each other out. Unless this has been done, cooperation could be hindered by institutional barriers which, sadly, prevent young people being reached or supporting them as a shared effort (Kolouh-Söderlund 2013). Avoiding cross-sectoral cooperation may lead specialists to carry out only certain tasks instead of supporting NEETs from a holistic (systematic) view (Beck 2015). This leads to the understanding that implementing-level experts must automatically follow the cross-sectoral guidelines and conditions, some legislative acts (such as data protection), and the requirements for the competency of specialists due to the cross-sectoral approach when measures for NEETs have a cross-sectoral operational framework and when services must be provided at the local level. A holistic approach facilitates reaching



the target group and creating the necessary conditions for guiding youth through a sequence of processes which help lead the youth smoothly to the support services they need (Kolouh-Söderlund 2016). Common case management helps to achieve a clearer vision of and with whom the state needs to work. Determining the more precise nature of the target group (and increasing data quality) would make it possible to reach more young people in need of assistance as well as deciding the list of essential services that should be provided regionally in the future.

Thirdly, the greatest discrepancy was found in the different guidelines about describing performance and in the beliefs of the experts on whether providing support means that a person has found help, or simply been passed through the services (phone call *versus* leaving NEET status). If the data collected is not comparable, that may lead to incorrect conclusions about the system or even the undermining of future development processes. The analysis of the expert interviews highlights the problem of drawing incorrect conclusions about the measures and structures at the level of the decision-makers because the performance indicators have been measured differently across parties. Coleman (1986) points out that the effect of the macro level could be changed through the micro level, and the knowledge created at the micro level influences effects at the macro level. Combined, this creates the need for the harmonisation of performance indicators. The experts believed that if the information provided through the reports was interpreted unambiguously amongst the parties (so they can draw conclusions about the impact of the measures at the national level), then the rules would feel less unfair. Maintaining an exchange of information is also important for professionals working in different national NEET youth support systems so that they feel comfortable operating within the same system.

Fourthly, it is important to avoid (negatively) labelling NEET youths in the communication and public information flow. Receiving NEET services should not stigmatise anyone. Furthermore, NEET status is not always negative from the perspective of youth, or problematic for the state. Cabasés Piqué *et al.* (2016) have indicated that the “NEET-youth” categorisation fails to do justice to what is, in reality, a heterogeneous and dynamic target group. Hutchinson, Beck, and Hooley (2016) and Garcia-Fuentes (2019) also highlight that whilst new structures for NEETs are being created in EU Member States, young people may not find/access them because they do not recognise themselves in the policies targeted at them. Sergi, Cefalo, and Kazepov (2018) share the opinion that institutionalising NEET-youth as an analytical category may prove problematic since it may not clearly identify specific vulnerable subcategories, thereby leading to ineffective one-size-fits-all policy interventions. Therefore, if policy and communication is based solely on the term NEET-youth, then the available evidence suggests the need for a broader categorisation of NEET-status, as policy interventions may not meet the needs of many young people (Maguire 2018; Bonnard, Giret and Kossi 2020). When creating services for the youth and communicating about them, it must be

considered that young people are NEETs for different reasons, and mostly temporarily (Suttill 2017). According to Garcia-Fuentes (2019), stigmatisation could worsen their situation and the youth may start to hide their actual problems.

According to Ajzen (1991), social and cultural systems lead people to behave in a certain ways and therefore to construct their attitudes accordingly. Suttill (2017) reminds us that it is necessary to avoid labelling the NEET youth when describing the results of services, because this puts the service providers in a complicated position where they cannot frame the attitude that the young people will adopt towards state assistance. Such an approach may create uncertainty amongst service providers about what the system is working towards.

Fifthly, there is a need for a shared understanding of sectoral contribution. In order to support NEETs, cooperation between many service providers is required, namely in and amongst health care, social affairs, employment agencies, educational institutions, and social partners (OECD 2015b; Mascherini 2019). The measures for describing the contribution of each partner are mostly quantitative, concentrating on numeric performance indicators. Due to the lack of sectoral principles for evaluation, the results of the sectors implementing the measures and policies cannot be measured in terms of their effect on the young and the efficiency of achieving the objectives of the system. This, according to Petmesidou and Menendez (2019), prevents us from grasping all the important aspects regarding the efficiency of supporting the NEETs effectively via policy implementation. Focusing only on the quantitative measures contradicts the statements of the experts, according to which various domains add great value to the main performance indicators. This, in turn, makes it possible to better emphasise sectoral policies so they are recognised at the political level. Due to the lack of evaluation principles, the learning experiences of today's good practices may not be put to good use, and (hence) the system may fail to focus on the fulfilment of long-term goals.

According to Serrano Pascual and Martín Martín (2017) and Saczyńska-Sokół (2018), creating links between policies that do not only concentrate on temporary survival but rather supporting youth according to a long-term perspective is important. In other ways, this will lead to bureaucratic functioning of the system where young people are redirected to another service simply to register that the young person has moved to the next level, and that the funding objectives and indicators have been formally met. Avila and Rose (2019) highlight that the work of professionals is guided instead by funding rules and structures more so than youth needs. Increased risk is seen in terms of increased performance requirements, which focus on the implementation of indicators and which thus may lead young people to become trapped in the system (Görlich and Katznelson 2018). Furthermore, support may not be sustainable or sufficient if it is not part of a holistic system and is carried out on a project-by-project basis (Hutchinson *et al.* 2016).

In conclusion, it could be stated that a cross-sectoral approach must continue to support NEET youth (Serrano Pascual and Martín Martín 2017; Saczyńska-Sokół 2018). This should be based on a conceptually heterogeneous target group, and the various sectors and levels must be included in the process of designing public sector services from the outset. Doing so will enable youth to receive a more integrated and smooth support services (Kolouh-Söderlund 2015; Henderson *et al.* 2017).

Whilst considering the possible limits to cooperation due to sectoral systems, guidelines, and legislation (Hämäläinen, Hamalainen, and Tuomala 2014), it is important that differences in service dynamics and in-service policy creation must be rendered possible between actors at the local level. For this purpose, the belief that coordinating the ministries and various levels so as to achieve a common goal should begin with co-creation (Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers 2015; Windsor 2017, Osborne 2018). If achieved, this would help create a single policy framework for NEETs, whereby every ministry would have a better-defined area of responsibility and role, one which describes common goals, target groups, activities, and performance indicators that affect the possibility of supporting youth at the local level. According to Maguire (2015), and Csoba and Herrmann (2017), data which can be compared makes it possible to better describe the potential of various sectors and thereby create needs-based interventions. This change could mean that legislation and geographical scope must be overhauled from the perspective of the entire state support system, so that understanding of the system would not be as fragmented and the joint provision of services would be possible at the local level. Such a common approach, based on Suttill (2017), also avoids the stigmatisation of NEET youth.

Although this study has helped to perceive of the issue of NEETs and the YG in Estonia from a broader perspective, several topics mandate further research. The state's expectation of referring services to the local level presumes a more exact understanding of the mutual expectations of the target group, the local level stakeholders, and specialists from various sectors. The results of this research can be used for the further development of steering groups, ministerial strategies, and programmes in order to reinforce the YG of the European Commission in Estonia and elsewhere.

Finally, two main limitations of the research should be acknowledged. First, the sample of expert interviews was rather small. Considering the limited circle of actors active in the Estonian youth field, the sample utilised represents the main actors rather well. However, the composition of the sample cannot form the basis for drawing conclusions and generalisations about other similar programmes. Secondly, the first author of this article has a close connection to the YG. Interviewees were all aware of the author's role in the YG: in order to alleviate the risk of a biased interpretation, the experts were given the opportunity to validate the results.

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**S**prrijinirea tinerilor care nu se află nici în sistemul educațional nici în cel ocupațional sau de pregătire (NEET) reprezintă o provocare globală de tip nou.

Există o nevoie de a spori cunoașterea asupra design-ului politicilor, în conexiune cu abordarea multidisciplinară, spre a pune la dispoziție servicii mai bune celor NEET. Acest articol se concentrează pe interpretările specialiștilor în domeniul tineretului din Estonia cu privire la sistemul actual de politici publice pentru NEET și la factorii asociați care influențează îndeplinirea scopurilor acestor politici. Pe baza analizelor de documente și a interviurilor semi-structurate cu specialiști de la toate nivelurile din sistemul de suport NEET, acest studiu demonstrează că politicile publice cross-sectoriale și de multinivel din Estonia duc lipsă de înțelegerea pe deplin a problemelor centrale. Strategia de suport este creată, mai degrabă, pentru a fi folosită într-o singură structură și nu are un înțeles comun cu perspectivă largă, de sistem global. Părțile care coordonează aceste strategii de la nivel de autoritate de stat necesită o înțelegere globală de la începutul creării politicilor cu privire la scopurile pe termen lung ale sistemului, cu privire la fluxul de informații și la performanțe, să se pună de comun acord asupra rolurilor transsectoriale și asupra proceselor manageriale transstructurale. Această schimbare va permite o mai bună putere de pătrundere a acestor servicii integrate la nivel local și o centrare mai precisă pe nevoile tinerilor cu backgrounduri diferite, în timp ce barierele diferitelor cazuri individuale vor fi evitate.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** NEET; design de politici; coordonare de politici; flux de informații; servicii multidisciplinare; Youth Guarantee; Estonia.

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