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Using Evidence in Policies Addressing Rural NEETs: Common Patterns and Differences in Various EU Countries

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Abstract

Using the policy narrative framework, this article examines the pathways through which the development of policies (related to rural/small towns young NEETs in various EU countries) are based on evidence. To do this, we consider the Youth Guarantee (YG), an EU program (2014–2020) developed in several member countries with the aim of socioprofessional inclusion of NEETs (young people aged 15–24 that are not in employment, education, or training). It examines how evidence is used for national policy-making and is taken into account by stakeholders. This study involves documentary analysis of YG in three European countries: namely, Romania, Italy, and Portugal. In addition, it involves 27 interviews with policy-makers and NGO leaders. The results show a predominantly statistical use of data exclusively managed by public institutions. Therefore, we emphasize the importance of consulting evidence from academia and NGOs to improve this policy.

Keywords

program evaluation, rural context, poverty/disadvantage, policy, socioeconomic status/social class

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Introduction

Young People not in Education, not in Employment or Training (NEET), have been the focus of increasing attention from academics and policymakers. The alarming levels of youth unemployment in several European Union (EU) countries, as well as the increasing NEET rate, which reached a peak after the 2008 economic crisis, led to a concerted European response (Allegretto, 2013). As part of this response, the Youth Guarantee (YG) initiative was launched in 2013, aiming to ensure that everyone aged 15 to 24 would have an opportunity of education, employment, or training.

Past studies suggested that the implementation of the YG at the European Member States faced many challenges and downsides related to the lower levels of NEETs' involvement in the proposed projects/activities (Tosun, 2017), a mismatch between the measures implemented and the real needs of NEETs (Tosun & Shore, 2017), as well as to the diversity among NEETs (e.g., in terms of educational attainment, gender, immigrant background, geographic disparities) (Simões, 2018). Aspects related to geographical inequality (e.g., degree of urbanization) seem to be particularly relevant, given that the incidence of NEET status tends to be higher in rural areas (Mukherjee, 2012), and rural youth face several challenges that may constrain the effective implementation of YG measures, such as higher levels of poverty, family dependency, limited employment opportunities, higher mobility, and transportation constraints (Sadler et al., 2015; Simões et al., 2017). Furthermore, whilst the YG establishes a shared strategy for all Member States, each country has specific challenges and needs. As the design and implementation of efficient public policies depend on the evidence used (Head, 2010; Oliver et al., 2014), it is then crucial to examine how different countries have been using evidence in the YG.

This study aims were twofold. First, it aimed at examining how evidence has been used in YG policy-making, especially regarding rural NEETs. Second, it aimed at examining the factors which may constrain or enable the use of research in YG policy-making. Following a policy narrative framework (Fisher, 2003; Jones & McBeth, 2010), this study involved a documentary analysis of three national YG plans¹ and 27 in-depth interviews with policymakers, NGO leaders, and academia representatives. Three countries were involved in this study, Italy, Portugal, and Romania. Each had youth unemployment and NEET rates above the European average when the YG was launched, however, the implementation of the program seems to have led to different results in each country (Eurostat, 2020). Therefore, a cross-national study with these European countries will allow the identification of commonalities and differences in policy processes and generate evidence of

critical aspects and best practices amongst the Member States. Ultimately, with this study, we expect to better understand how and in what ways evidence is being used in the design and implementation of policy measures for addressing rural NEETs and what could be improved in policy making processes.

Literature Review

Evidence Use in Policy Development

The importance of using evidence within policy processes to increase the efficiency of public policy measures has been promoted not only by researchers, but also by policy makers through various strategic documents. Despite this, the move toward evidence-based policy (EBP) formation still requires improvement of the understanding of the role of evidence within policy process and analysis of the barriers in using evidence in policy development processes (Oliver et al., 2014; Rickinson et al., 2019). In some policy areas (e.g., NEETs, disability, social inclusion, migration, human trafficking), it is difficult to discuss EBP due to various challenges such as: lack of (or insufficient) data; limited understanding of evidence sources; and, poor capacities of decision makers and public institutions to analyze and use evidence effectively.

The EBP movement considers that rigorous analysis of policies and programs should be conducted in order to ensure that they have consistent and useful information which policy makers can utilize in policy process formation (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010; Head, 2015; Oliver et al., 2014). Considering that these analyses require time and financial resources, it is likely that other ways to obtain relevant evidence for underpinning policy positions and decisions will be taken into consideration (Head, 2015; Oliver et al., 2014). “Best available” evidence could be considered in the policy development process in cases where no scientific information or monitoring and evaluation results are accessible (Head, 2010, 2015; Oliver et al., 2014). The sources for best available evidence can include: expertise of certain individuals; studies of non-governmental organizations active in a specific policy area; academic studies; professional expertise of practitioners involved in consultative processes on policy; and, policy reports of international institutions (e.g., European Commission, agencies at the EU level, UN agencies, the World Bank.) (Head, 2010).

Policy narratives represent a new framework for analyzing and understanding evidence used in policy processes. According to this perspective, a policy process is a narrative-making one that includes three phases:

a problem definition phase (beginning), policy intervention (middle), and outcomes (end) (Fisher, 2003; Jones & McBeth, 2010). A narrative policy framework approach considers that a policy is a social construct with a bounded relativity (i.e., by ideologies, values, beliefs, etc.) (Shanahan et al., 2018).

The role of narratives in policy process formation has been recognized by researchers (Fisher, 2003; Jones & McBeth, 2010; Rickinson et al., 2019; Roe, 1994) since policy makers and stakeholders can successfully deploy narratives to influence the policy debate in the phases of policy problem definition, policy formulation, and adoption (Jones & McBeth, 2010). Considering that types of knowledge and expertise of stakeholders are varied, the narratives employed can be divergent in a policy process. The evidence that informs and enriches political debates could be used and analyzed differently according to the interest, perspective, problem framework, and/or capacity of understanding of the actors involved in the policy development process. Each of these factors combines and thus make the relation between evidence and policy one which is influenced and mediated by different contexts, interpretations, negotiations, and organizational practices (Fischer & Gottweis, 2012; Head, 2010).

Youth NEETs in Rural Areas

The NEET concept has proven to be a powerful tool for improving understanding of youth vulnerabilities in terms of labor market participation as well as social inclusion. This indicator has helped redefine policy goals in the area of youth policy (Mascherini et al., 2012). However, despite the speed with which it has gained traction in the policy arena, the NEET concept has sometimes been criticized due to the heterogeneity of the population it captures (Rosina, 2015). Whilst all NEETs share some common characteristics, they are also quite diverse, having many different characteristics and needs. This has important consequences for policy responses. Identifying sub-groups not only allows increasingly targeted and effective social policies to be implemented, but also helps identify who is most vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. In this regard, Eurofound (Mascherini & Ledermaier, 2016) identified seven main groups within the category of NEETs: re-entrants; short-term unemployed; long-term unemployed; unavailable due to illness or disability; unavailable due to family responsibilities; discouraged inactive; and, other inactive.

Importantly, geographic distribution seems to be a key aspect when considering NEETs. According to Eurostat (2020), NEET rates were higher in rural (18.30%) than in urban areas (15.10%), in 17 EU Member states. This

difference was greater in Eastern (e.g., Romania, Lithuania) and Southern European countries (e.g., Italy, Greece). Despite this evidence, there has been a lack of research focusing on rural NEETs, particularly in Southern Europe's rural areas, where the highest NEET rates are recorded.

NEETs face structural social exclusion, which is even more amplified in rural areas. In these regions, NEETs are also more exposed to the risk of poverty and family dependency (Sadler et al., 2015; Simões et al., 2017). Sadler et al. (2015) argued that poverty and low schooling are related factors and can be both considered determinant conditions. Furthermore, people living in rural areas face other disadvantages such as: more difficult access to services; limitations in public transport; limited recruitment opportunities; and, a lack of choice and information (Sadler et al., 2015). Additionally, because of lower family incomes, many rural NEETs enter the labor market early, but often as employees within hazardous or seasonal activities. These multiple forms of social exclusion often led to low levels of self-efficacy, high perceived social barriers, and lower occupational expectations (de Almeida & Simões, 2020). Repeated experiences of unemployment imply additional effort in dealing with obstacles and increase the likelihood of developing negative beliefs about professional advancement (Quintini et al., 2007). This is accentuated for NEETs in rural areas due to the limitation of opportunities caused by market structure and mobility concerns. NEET status also increases youth urban migration, worsening the weakness of the local economy, and contributing to an endless vicious cycle of exclusion and social marginalization (Simões et al., 2017). In acknowledgment of the multiple challenges faced by young NEETs, countries such as Italy, Portugal, and Romania have been developing several initiatives and interventions as part of the YG. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how geographical disparities and the needs of rural NEETS have been considered in the development and implementation of YG measures.

The Youth Guarantee Program in Italy, Portugal, and Romania

In 2013, 13% of the EU youth population aged between 15 and 24 were NEET and 14.3% of NEETs lived in rural areas (Eurostat, 2020 database, *edat_lfse_29*). The countries included in our analysis (Italy, Portugal, and Romania) reported levels of NEETs in general, and rural NEETs more specifically, higher than the EU average in 2013—22.2% of NEETs and 23.2% of rural NEETs in Italy, 14.1% of NEETs and 13.5% of rural NEETs in Portugal, 17% of NEETs and 20.6% of rural NEETs in Romania (see Table 1). Eurostat data showed that in all the countries included in our analysis the

Table 1. Young People NEET Aged Between 15 and 24 Years Old By Country (%).

	EU-28		Italy		Portugal		Romania	
	2013	2019	2013	2019	2013	2019	2013	2019
Percentage of NEETs	13.0	10.1	22.2	18.1	14.1	8.0	17.0	14.7
Percentage of rural NEETs	14.3	10.6	23.2	19.0	13.5	8.9	20.6	17.5
NEETs reached by the YG	N.A	38.9	N.A	12.7	N.A	55.4	N.A	11.6
Rural NEETs reached by the YG	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A

Source. EUROSTAT (2020), edat_lfse_29, European Commission (2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

percent of NEETs and rural NEETs between 15 and 24 years old decreased between 2013 and 2019. Despite this decrease, in Italy and Romania their respective percentages remain higher than the EU average. In Portugal, both the NEETs and rural NEETs percentages were below the EU average in 2019.

Against this background, the European Council (EC) recommended the implementation of an YG scheme (Escudero & Mourelo, 2015). The YG was the first European program targeting young people NEETs and involved a commitment by the Member States to ensure that young people receive, within 4 months of becoming unemployed or leaving education, an opportunity of employment, education, or training (Escudero & Mourelo, 2015). As recommended by the EC, Italy, Portugal, and Romania developed their first national implementation plans accordingly. Recent results from the YG country by country (the European Commission monitoring reports) for Italy (European Commission, 2020a), Portugal (European Commission, 2020b), and Romania (European Commission, 2020c) suggest that these countries have been able to reduce the percentage of youth NEET, but there are several notable differences between them. In particular, Portugal stands out in 2019 as the country having the higher percentage of NEETs reached through the YG program whereas Romania had the lowest. The percentage of NEETs reached by the YG program was higher in Portugal (55.4%) than the EU average (38.9%). In Italy and Romania the percentage of NEETs reached by the YG program was lower than the EU average—12.7%, and 11.6% respectively (see Table 1).

Based on the EU YG program each country developed its own YG plan (1 in Italy and Portugal and 2 in Romania—for 2014–2015, and an updated version for 2017–2020) with measures adapted at the national characteristics

Table 2. Youth Guarantee Programs' Measures and Initiatives by Country.

Measures	Italy	Portugal	Romania
Vocational counseling and orientation	x	x	x
Work placement support	x	x	x
Professional training/learning	x	x	x
Apprenticeship	x	x	x
Internship	x	x	x
Civil service (e.g., service experience in a social organization).	x		
Support to self-entrepreneurship (e.g., funding for micro-enterprises).	x	x	x
Professional mobility within the national territory or in EU countries (e.g., youth mobility program).	x	x	x
Subsidies for companies (e.g., offered for employers for hiring young graduates).	x	x	x
Reintegration in the school system (e.g., second chance in Romania).	x	x	x

Source. MLPS-ANPAL (2013) (Italy), Council of Ministries (2013) (Portugal), Ministerul Muncii si Justitiei Sociale (MMJS, 2013), and Ministerul Muncii si Protectiei Sociale (MMPS, 2017) (Romania).

and needs. Despite some particularities of the NEET situation in Italy, Portugal, and Romania, national implementation plans describe similar measures, priority areas, and procedures. In Table 2, we identified several common measures existing in the national YG plans in Italy, Portugal, and Romania. Essentially, measures offered to young people under YG are organized around opportunities for employment, education, apprenticeship, and internships (Council of Ministries, 2013; Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali-Agenzia Nazionale Politiche Attive del Lavoro [MLPS-ANPAL], 2013). In terms of employment opportunities, the YG financially supports public entities and companies employing young people, as well as those offering support for young people via entrepreneurship in all the three countries. Opportunities for education include measures targeting the secondary level (e.g., professional training, reintegration in education and training courses, and learning training) as well as post-secondary and higher education levels (e.g., technological specialization courses, technical courses). Apprenticeship opportunities include several offers for short and also long-term courses in the three countries (e.g., professional courses, learning courses, youth life activities). Internships measures cover opportunities for

international mobility, internships at local institutions or private companies or organizations (e.g., professional internship programs). Italy also offers “civil service” within the YG that consists of a formative experience of civic growth and social participation, working concretely within projects of solidarity, cooperation, and assistance, thereby allowing the acquisition of useful transversal skills (MLPS-ANPAL, 2013). In turn, Romania offers a second chance educational program as part of the YG plan. In Portugal and Italy, opportunities for school reintegration are mentioned in the YG plans, but the second chance initiative is not explicitly stated in such terms. It is also important to note that vocational counseling and orientation are part of the YG in all the three countries (see Table 2).

National Public Employment Services (PES) have been responsible for the coordination of YG plans in each of the three countries. Whilst the national PES coordinates the YG implementation, they also have the support of other entities. In Romania, the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, (through the PES), coordinated the YG implementation, but the responsibilities have been shared amongst the Ministry of Education (for the measures dedicated to keeping young people in education), the Ministry of Economy (for measures aimed at developing entrepreneurial skills), and the Ministry of Youth and Sport. In Portugal, as in Italy, implementing this scheme has also involved several partnerships. Amongst others, this has involved: the Institute of Social Security; the Directorate-General for Education; the Directorate-General for Higher Education; the National Agency for Academic Valuation and Accreditation; and, the Youth National Institute. Considering the relevance of the YG at the European and national levels, and the fact there is still a lack of understanding on how (and indeed if) these measures are effectively addressing the needs of rural NEETs, in this study we chose to focus on the YG in Italy, Portugal, and Romania and on how evidence was used to develop the YG plan in each country.

Methodology

This article draws from extensive research on the YG plans developed in Italy, Portugal, and Romania that included multiple research methods such as document analysis, public policy analysis, secondary data analysis of quantitative data, and in-depth interviews. The public policy analysis includes the EU YG program published in 2014 (Council of the European Union, 2013) and four national plans for its implementation ($N=4$, in Romania there are two YG plans). The document analysis comprises the YG implementation reports delivered in 2020 and 2018 ($N=6$), YG factsheets delivered in 2017 ($N=3$), and the evaluation of the EU YG program from 2016 (European Commission, 2016). The purpose of document analysis was to identify details related to the

existence of measures for rural NEETs; the type of data used for the elaboration of policies (e.g., number of NEETs, number of rural NEETs); the proposed measures in each country; the differences between regions within the country; the existence of the monitoring plan; the type of institutions involved in collecting data and in implementation of the program/policy; and, changes between 2014 and 2018 due to new evidence. The quantitative data used was from Eurostat and from the YG program reports. The authors carried out 27 in-depth interviews with policymakers and other stakeholders involved in the formulation and/or implementation of the YG in Italy ($N=10$), Portugal ($N=10$), and Romania ($N=7$). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic context, the interviews were conducted online, via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, between February and March 2021. In Italy the in-depth interviews were carried out with representatives of the employment services that deal directly with the reception of young NEETs and the activation of the YG policy (six interviews), the national agency that deals with the implementation of various social and labor policies on the field (1), NGOs that deal with YG projects' implementation (1), academia (1), and the ministry responsible for policy design of the YG plan (1). The in-depth interviews in Portugal were carried out with representatives from public entities and organizations who were involved in the design and implementation of the YG plan (4), NGOs developing and implementing projects under the YG plan (4), and employment services (2). In Romania, the in-depth interviews were carried out with representatives from public institutions who have responsibilities in implementing the YG plan and who were involved in the development of the YG (4), NGOs that implement projects for NEETs and that developed analysis of the YG plan in Romania (2), and NGOs' coalition for children and youth that was involved in the YG implementation plan's development (1). The interviews addressed questions related to existing measures to support rural NEETs in Italy/Portugal/Romania and how effective these policies actually were, how the YG had been adapted to the situation of rural NEETs, what evidence was used to design the YG, how this evidence was used, why does evidence use happen or not happen (drivers, barriers, influencing factors) and what could be done to improve the use of evidence in the future. The final analysis was guided by Rickinson et al.'s (2019) approach on the role of narratives in policy process formation.

Analysis

The results presented below consider both the in-depth interviews conducted, public policy analysis, and the document analysis. Within the four main macro-categories (listed below), which were also used during the construction of the interview grid, the results will be presented by country. Before moving to the presentation of the findings for these categories it is important

Table 3. Evidence Used in YG Plan in Italy, Portugal, and Romania.

	Italy	Portugal	Romania
Specific measures for rural NEETs	No	No	No
Sources of data used for YG elaboration in 2013			
Number of NEETs	National institute of statistics	National institute of statistics PES data	Eurostat
Number of rural NEETs	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Not mentioned
NEETs' situation	National institute of statistics	National institute of statistics PES data	National institute of statistics
The proposed measures reflect the situation from evidence collected	Partially	Partially	Partially
There are differences between regions	Yes	Yes	Yes
There is a monitoring plan	Yes	Yes	Yes
Institutions that collect data about YG implementation	PES	PES	PES
There are changes between 2014 and 2020 because some new evidence was considered	Yes	Yes	Yes

to highlight some overall descriptive aspects for each country. As can be seen in Table 3, Italy, Portugal, and Romania did not develop any specific measures for rural NEETs within the YG program. Moreover, whilst the three countries recognized geographic differences there was no mention of the percentage of rural NEETs in these countries. It is also interesting to note that all countries mentioned a monitoring plan and have been also introduced changes in their policies because of new evidence that has been collected.

What Types of Evidence are Used?

In Italy, the YG plan used European and national statistics. Firstly, data from Eurostat has been used to define the percentage and number of NEETs

present in the country in order to evaluate the possibility for Italy to take part in the YG program. The National Statistics Institute (ISTAT) provided the data concerning NEETs distributions namely that which is required to distribute funds amongst the administrative regions. Urban and rural differences were not taken into account. Furthermore, it was at the regional level where monitoring data was collected, thus allowing some changes in the implementation of the policy. From the interviews it emerged that NEETs differences were not considered when it came to implementation of the policy. Consequently, there was an immediate difficulty in intercepting and satisfying the specific needs of each participant. At the local level, reports that recount and document the projects implemented were produced, mainly by NGOs. In the interviews it emerged how fundamental the collection of data at the local level is (employment services and employment center). In this regard, there are regional differences in terms of data collection and, consequently, in terms of administration and implementation.

In Portugal, the YG plan used several European and national statistics supporting the relevance of the YG scheme. Statistics sources were from the Portuguese's National Statistical Office (INE) and the Institute of Employment and Vocational Training. Statistics describing the European situation were also presented, although the source was not always explicit. In the YG plan there were no references to the level of rural NEETs in Portugal, but there were some references to differences according to country regions (Islands vs. the mainland). The data from interviews confirmed the lack of measures for rural NEETs and the inexistence of specific projects based on territorial differences. However, interviewees acknowledged an increasing recognition of the geographic disparities due to their own experience in implementing the YG. Furthermore, the interviewees addressed other forms of evidence used in the implementation of measures and programs. Several pre-existing measures were adapted and integrated under the YG program in Portugal. For example, the *INOV contacto* program has existed since 1997 aiming to provide young people with the chance to sharpen their skills and experiences abroad by participating in an apprenticeship. This program was integrated in the YG plan in 2014. Data from interviews shows that the experience accumulated, the information collected from the participants and partners involved in the program have been key sources of evidence over time.

Evidence used in YG plans development in Romania are mainly statistical one, from Eurostat or the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), and refers only to a few number of indicators. This preference for using validated statistical data was due to a poor capacity of analyzing and understanding different types of data. The policy development process of the YG plans was based mainly on statistical evidence from Eurostat and NIS and other research

developed by EU institutions or the World Bank, on guidelines provided by the EU and on some data from NGOs reports. In the first YG Implementation Plan for 2014 to 2015, it can be observed a scarcity of evidence used. Only a small portion of statistical data from Eurostat and NIS was included and was related to youth unemployment and the employment rate, early school drop-out rate, NEETs rate. The data on Roma youth was from a report developed by an NGO. In the next YG implementation plan for the 2017 to 2020 period, the evidence used was slightly improved and also included data regarding the transition process from school to work and youth entrepreneurship. Data from in-depth interviews from Romania shows that there was no consultation on YG plans with the practitioners from outside government regarding evidence on NEETs' situation and that the evidence used was that which sustained the measures proposed by the EU (Council of the European Union, 2013). The dominant narrative in evidence used in policy development was that of public institutions and considered that the measures were established by the EU and the data should therefore, to sustain them. The NGOs narrative was not considered since the problem was of no interest at that time.

How is Evidence Used?

As previously mentioned, European and national statistics have been used to define Italy's characteristics to verify the fulfillment of the criteria for taking advantage of the policy. At the national level, ISTAT data was used for the distribution of funds amongst the different administrative regions. Furthermore, the Italian YG plan provided a strategy to monitor and evaluate the interventions' implementation. This program aimed at documenting both the number and characteristics of the recipients reached, as well as the progress of spending and the effects of the measures on the employment situation of the beneficiaries, in order to identify any corrective actions.

In Portugal, statistics were used to justify the relevance of specific measures and the implementation of the YG plan in the country. The YG has also been generating evidence, according to the interviewers. As part of the sixth priority area of the Portuguese YG plan, a coordination and monitoring committee was created. Participants in the interviews described the monitoring as highly rigorous given that "we have to prepare semestral reports, and then a detailed final report, with financial information, participants, etc." (Representative national public institution).

Considering the scarcity of evidence used in Romanian YG plans, the measures proposed are mainly those from the EC recommendation from 2013. In the absence of detailed evidence on NEETs situation and of consultations with practitioners, academia, and experts, it was almost impossible to

propose new measures adapted to the national context. Additionally, the lack of disaggregated data on residence area, did not allow a differentiation of proposed measures for rural areas where the NEETs rate is almost double that of urban areas. Interview data revealed that the narrative of policy makers was that these YG plans were in line with the EC recommendations and that the evidence used was sufficient. Starting with 2017 the NGOs began to criticize these measures, especially since they could not benefit from ESF funding to implement measures provided in the YG plan. The data from the evaluation of the YG plan for 2014 to 2015 was used to substantiate the measures from the updated YG plan for 2017 to 2020.

Why Does Evidence Use Happen or Not Happen (Drivers, Barriers, Influencing Factors)?

According to the interviewees, the main problem in Italy is represented by some administrative regions' and local services inefficiency to collect and manage further data. A further point that limits the proper implementation of the YG plan is the scarce communication between the regional and national levels. Not taking into account the NEETs differences, the interception issue remains the main concern. Additionally, there is little school involvement in this process. The school represents a place where young people can be informed about this measure in a timely manner as well as gather information about the fears and difficulties that they are facing.

In Portugal, the biggest difficulty in using evidence seems to be related to a lack of effective communication and cooperation between national, regional, and local institutions and even between ministries, which seems to hinder the acquisition of knowledge on how to develop preventive and transversal measures.

In Romania the main barriers in using evidence in YG plans were represented by the insufficiency of data on NEETs situation, the lack of cooperation of the four ministries involved in providing data, and the reduced capacity of data analysis at the level of public institutions.

So What Could Be Done to Improve the Use of Evidence in the Future?

In Italy, local employment services and employment agencies are key interlocutors since they are in charge of the final phase of the YG plan, that is, the contact with the persons concerned and the implementation of activities. Interviews with these agencies revealed particular difficulties on several fronts. The proactive method of recruitment does not help considering the

personal characteristics of NEETs. Simultaneously, people who do not really need it are taking advantage of the measure: for example, internships for early-graduates. The most problematic NEETs and those at risk of social exclusion who are difficult to reach and more likely to slip through the cracks of social services and educational institutions, are mostly excluded from this measure. Furthermore, these entities find it easier and more flexible to activate measures that permit a better and more rapid response. Therefore, interviewees suggest consideration of data from the academy and the reports of local associations be utilised in order to better address the NEETs diversity issue. Consequently, a greater sharing of NGOs' best practices would highlight crucial points of effectiveness and in turn extend them to other contexts and organizations.

Overall, the YG plan was evaluated positively by the Portuguese interviewees. The plan was considered to fit several young people's needs in terms of employment, education, and training. However, the YG plan was considered ineffective in terms of reaching young people living in rural areas or long-term NEETs not registered in the national employment services. Therefore, the most common challenge identified by the participants was the lack of ability to mobilize young people detached from the systems of education or employment. Participants reclaimed the need to establish close connections with local organizations and institutions and proposed interventions that consider territorial differences and the existing diversity amongst NEETs. Furthermore, another aspect identified was related to a lack of integration of some measures and integration of the YG with the formal educational system. In the official documents, the need for preventing early school leaving or school failure was very explicit.

In Romania the YG plan was considered a failure mainly due to implementation issues (e.g., difficulties in identifying the NEETs, non-proactive measures to reach the NEETs, non-involvement of youth NGOs etc.). These issues are mainly due to the lack of knowledge of the situation of NEETs, of their needs, and of their specificities in rural areas or in marginalized areas. The data from interviews revealed the need for better evidence in the design phase of the YG plan.

Conclusions

This article explored the pathways and narratives through which evidence was used to develop policies related to rural NEETs in various EU countries. Three different countries were involved in this analysis: Italy, Portugal, and Romania. Data analysis underlined several commonalities amongst them but also a few differences. Comparing the three countries taken into consideration, we can

say that overall the urban and rural issue has not been taken into consideration in any of them. The problem of intercepting the most vulnerable NEETs seems to be common, as well as the lack of consideration of the issue of differences. The Portuguese narrative, however, seems to be very positive compared to the Italian and Romanian ones where the focus on inefficiencies prevails. The success of the YG in Portugal is in large part due to its ability to integrate existing policies into the program from the outset, thereby facilitating implementation at the local level. In Italy, on the other hand, the best practices can be attributed mainly to NGO's projects, which have managed to integrate the young NEETs in greatest difficulty.

This research tried to observe whether these difficulties in implementing YG plans are due to insufficient and inconsistent data or poor analysis thereof. The public administration reforms mention the importance of evidence in the policy development process for more effectiveness, efficiency, accountability, reliability, and coherence.

Nevertheless, this article has highlighted the scarcity of evidence used in the development of national YG plans in the three countries and a preference for statistical data from EUROSTAT or national institutes of statistics. This preference in using validated statistical data was due to an insufficient capacity to analyze and understand different data types and a lack of rigorous empirical data at the national level.

To address these critical issues it is important to have sufficient and qualitative evidence collected through various informants and different methods, but also the capacity to analyze it. Furthermore, the analysis showed that the expertise and studies of NGOs and professional expertise of practitioners were not considered relevant for the YG development process at the national level. There were only formal consultative processes with NGOs, regional authorities, and practitioners, but their data analysis and observations only counted to a small extent. Additionally, it emerges that communication between different agencies dealing with YG, in all three countries considered, is not very fluid nor efficient.

The interests of the stakeholders involved represent an essential variable in the policy problem definition. At the beginning of the YG period 2014 to 2020, we observed that the most crucial narrative was that of the European Commission. As such, the countries adopted the measures proposed by the EU YG Program without many changes. However, the needs of this group vary considerably across European countries and regions, and these disparities often conflict with universal policies.

This paper shows that the three countries made some efforts to adapt and include pre-existing relevant measures into the YG plan. Nevertheless, these efforts are still too few and not very successful: specifically, in order to have

effective and efficient policies it is necessary to exert more effort and invest more resources in this direction. YG plans should consider the geographical area of residence of NEETs: data shows that NEETs residing in rural areas are about twice the number of their comparative urban peers. At the very least, the lack of disaggregated data on residence areas did not permit differentiation of proposed measures for the different types of NEETs.

The present work has some limitations. Firstly, it would have been interesting to interview the political, institutional, and technical figures who have followed the development of the program since its inception in order to have their voices heard on the use of empirical evidence in the application and development of the YG. Secondly, it would have been interesting to collect the voice of operators working in PES in order to understand this issue from their point of view, given their proximity to NEETs and thus their direct knowledge of the problem, what empirical evidence could be prioritized for a better development of YG.

Despite its limitations, this work offers indications for future research, suggestions for developing youth strategies, policies and programs, and some practical implications. Firstly, it highlights the importance of organizing country-specific evaluation research on the impact of the YG, involving collaboration between academics, policymakers, NGO's and PES, in order to be able to assess the program's outcomes in terms of employability and employability opportunities in a more targeted and consistent manner over time. Secondly, we recommend not only the use of evidence for the implementation of the YG but also that the sources of evidence utilized should be diversified in the case of NEETs' policies. To be more effective, the NEETs policies should consider the local needs and characteristics of this category of youth, the territorial dimension (residence areas, continent vs. island, and region) should be present to a greater extent, and more measures should be explicitly addressed toward youth from rural areas, poor regions, and islands.

In conclusion, the data demonstrates the need to reorganize the flow of information from local services to national institutions dealing with the YG to disperse important information, make it a shared heritage, and better design targeted interventions in order to prevent and manage the NEET phenomenon.

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Note

1. YG plan refers to the national plans developed under the YG program. YG program refers to the European YG scheme.

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