

Youth Partnership

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Young people in rural areas: diverse, ignored and unfulfilled

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Introduction

European society is ageing, and the current demographic situation affects economic growth and solidarity between generations (European Parliament 2010). In the last 50 years, technical, economic and social changes have influenced both urban and rural areas. Whereas rural areas situated next to the urban centres have profited from rapid metropolitan development (job opportunities, infrastructure, access to essential services, etc.), other communities that are far from these centres suffer substantial and structural unemployment, lack of basic services or the permanent tendency of the younger population to leave the rural communities. (MIJARC 2003).

This study aims to identify the challenges that young people in rural areas face and potential policy responses, and to map governments' interventions to support the rural youth population to overcome the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. For this purpose, social inclusion, digitalisation and participation of rural youth were the main areas explored.

The study is organised into four main thematic sections based on the findings: the current situation of young people in rural areas, the European and national landscapes of policies and programmes for youth living in rural areas, the specific measures developed by policy makers to reduce the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people living in rural areas, highlighting, where they exist, the measures designed to support vulnerable youth in rural communities and a set of conclusions and recommendations addressing the main stakeholders involved with the youth triangle: policy makers, youth workers and youth researchers.

The findings are based on a combination of desk research and analysis of secondary resources focusing on social inclusion and participation with digitalisation as a cross-cutting element and on the outcomes of a survey circulated to the PEYR (Pool of European Youth Researchers) and EKCYP (European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy) networks of the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership.

The findings highlight the barriers that young people living in rural areas face and the need for substantial and structural investment to secure the future development of rural communities. In

this context, special attention is to be invested in supporting vulnerable youth living in rural areas to overcome the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The study looked at the challenges and needs that rural youth face, identifying both the existent research and policy gaps. Across Europe, there is a increasing interest to invest in opportunities for the rural youth population, especially through the lens of social inclusion. Yet, little is known about the needs, interests, and aspirations of rural youth, especially of those at risk of marginalization. Both the policy agenda and the research agenda are not sufficiently addressing the situation of the specified target and now, in times of pandemic, the request to pay special attention to the situation of youth living in the rural area emerges.

Methodology and framework of the study

This study aimed to identify the challenges young people in rural areas face, challenges that were addressed by policy measures, and also the measures (policy and programmes) developed by local and regional authorities to respond to those identified challenges while building on the strengths young people represent for rural communities.

The main research question leading the study was: “what are the current challenges that young people in rural areas are facing?” To explore the current situation, three sub-questions were used:

1. What are the relevant policies and programmes for rural youth at European and national levels?
2. Are there any instruments that state actors develop specifically for rural youth?
3. What were the main policy measures put in place during the pandemic to support rural youth?

In line with the defined research questions, the objectives of the study were the following:

1. To map out the main policy documents and measures at the European and national level that directly target rural youth.
2. To present identified practices based on the projects and initiatives shared by EKCYP correspondents and PEYR members.
3. To present the policy measures that state authorities have adopted or plan to adopt to support rural youth during the pandemic and post-pandemic.

For data collection, the following methods were used:

1. A desk review using secondary sources (relevant literature, legislation, national youth strategies and programmes, decisions and resolutions from the relevant authorities, etc.).
2. An online questionnaire with four open questions, which was circulated in May 2021 and distributed to the members of EKCYP and PEYR. Twenty-six answers were received from the members of the two pools, members from 22 countries.¹

The key data sources for this research were desk research mainly analysis of secondary resources focused on social inclusion and participation with digitalisation as a cross-cutting element.

Concepts and definitions

“Rurality” is not a uniform concept. In general, “rural” refers to locations away from urban areas. Many of these locations are situated in agricultural, farming or fishing areas. Over 53% of the world’s population live in rural localities and more than 70% of the poor population reside in rural areas. (Hazelman 2010)

In 2015, in Europe, almost a third of the population lived in rural areas. Eurostat data showed that in at least 15 of the EU Member States, the highest proportion of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion was recorded in rural areas. Rural areas were defined as local administrative communities outside urban clusters, mostly characterised by lower population density, specific socio-geographical and cultural image, vicinity to natural resources and therefore different economic prospects, but also with identified needs for further improvement of specific services aiming at youth as well as the general population. (Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on raising opportunities for young people in rural and remote areas 2019).

¹ List of countries: Albania, Azerbaijan, Belgium (Flanders), Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Serbia, Romania, Russian Federation, Sweden, Ukraine

In 1994, the OECD proposed a typology of rural areas based on the principle of scalar nesting and primarily used two criteria for classification: population density at a local level to identify rural municipalities, and the percentage of the population of rural municipalities at the regional level. For Europe, the categories in this typology were as follows (OECD 1994): at the local level, rural municipalities with a population density of less than 150 inhabitants/km² and urban municipalities with over 150 inhabitants/km². In 2011 the typology was updated and the current typology included: urban or predominantly urban regions; intermediate regions close to an urban centre; remote intermediate regions; rural or predominantly rural regions close to an urban centre; and remote rural or predominantly rural regions. It was only in 2018 that a broader classification was developed, and the current typology differentiates three types of rural regions. First, rural areas within a functional urban area (FUA), which are an integral part of the commuting area of the urban centre; second - rural regions close to a functional urban area, which are not part of the area's labour market, but flows of products and services still exist. The development of these rural regions depends on the development of the functional urban area. Third, rural regions that are far from a functional urban area, for which personal interactions outside these regions are limited and infrequent. (SHERPA 2020)

In Europe, Eurostat operates a three-level nomenclature of territorial units (NUTs): NUTs 1: regions with between 3 000 000 and 7 000 000 inhabitants; NUTs 2: regions with between 800 000 and 3 000 000 inhabitants; NUTs 3: regions with between 150 000 and 800 000 inhabitants. *National governments can ask for the NUTS system to be revised to reflect changes at a national level.* (Eurostat 2016, 2021).

Thus, rurality has not been properly defined through its own characteristics, features, and patterns, but has rather been *defined as the opposite of urban*. In terms of rural policies' development, a twofold long-standing conversation is developed: the first point lies in the historical roots of the European Union's integration, with the recognition of the cohesion policy's role to flank the agricultural policy and the structural changes of agriculture, while the second point is linked to the nature of policy interventions towards rural areas. Despite the declarations and objectives for a broader rural scope and for an emphasis aiming at the well-being of the population living in rural areas, the EU rural development policy remained mainly

agriculturally driven. (SHERPA 2020). Yet “*The role of agriculture as an economic activity is in sharp decline in terms of GDP and employment, with rural areas being abandoned in terms of people and services.*” (SHERPA 2020:2)

Youth in rural areas

Most countries in Europe face a noticeably ageing demographic. The youth population has constantly decreased across member states over the past decade. This is evident not only in cities but also in rural areas and is a consequence of low birth rates and migration of young people. There are differences among countries in youth population structure in comparison to the degree of urbanisation. However, small towns and suburbs have experienced a slight increase of young people in many countries (e.g. Poland, Lithuania, etc.). Moreover, not only has the number of young people decreased, but the proportion of young people in the overall population has registered a decline. Data extracted from Eurostat show that the number of young people aged 15-24 has declined in most countries. The youth population has decreased in all age groups (15-24 and 25-29), but the greatest shifts observed were for the age group 15-24 years old. According to the data provided by Eurostat², over recent years the number of young people has decreased for EU-28 (2013-2019) from 3 622.3 to 1 890.2 millions and for the age group 25-29 from 6 949.2 to 5 881.3 millions.

The number of young people in rural areas has decreased due to internal and external migration. There are some evident gender differences in migration trends. Generally, young women from rural areas have higher academic achievement, and consequently they leave rural areas to study tertiary education and do not return to their places of origin. During the last five to ten years, a significant amount of youth in European countries has migrated from rural areas to cities and towns but also to live and work abroad. This migration could be explained by the economic and infrastructure differences between rural and urban areas and through the lack of opportunities in their home regions.

² Eurostat Statistics: <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do#>

European institutions have expressed their commitment to rural development. In the current context, where youth should be the main actor in securing a sustainable community development process, young people living in the rural areas *“have become an increasingly rare added value.”* (Lodeserto 2020) In 2017 and 2018, when consulted during the 6th cycle of the Structured Dialogue, most young people involved in the process called for an increase in the range and quality of leisure, cultural, educational and healthcare opportunities where they live and asked for an increased quality of life. Some of them expressed their frustration related to the lack of participation in decision-making processes and felt disconnected from institutions and authorities. (Lodeserto 2020)

Young people in rural areas are in a less privileged situation than young people living in more urbanised environments, e.g. being disadvantaged in employment, housing or access to basic services. They face age-specific vulnerabilities and suffer directly the consequences of the underdevelopment of infrastructure and services in their communities. This is evident even in the Nordic countries, which have relatively high standards of living. The findings of the project [*Rural perspectives on spatial disparities of education and employment outcomes*](#), showed that living conditions influencing displacement among young people were poor physical health, poor mental health, lack of income opportunities, unemployment and limited social contact.

When it comes to their youth participation, non-state actors - mainly youth NGOs - face difficulties in outreach to young people in rural areas. Youth NGOs are mostly “a metropolitan phenomenon”. But there are also signs that even in small or remote communities, young people connect and form associations. A recent study from Belarus that looked at youth participation in rural areas showed that young people are interested and ready to participate but are not offered sufficient opportunities to participate. (Pantea 2021)

The implementation of the Enter! recommendation showed that local authorities started very recently to work with young people on social rights and that some avenues for co-operation opened up and made available several support measures (Brazienė and Garcia Lopez 2019). Part of the “repertoire of restrictions” for limiting young people’s right to assemble peacefully includes attacks and brutality, financial barriers, (para-)legal restrictions and fear of retribution,

criminalisation, stigmatisation and negative labelling. (Pantea 2021). Also, the shift to all-virtual participation during the pandemic has reinforced the digital divide and young people from rural areas are among the groups that have been the most marginalised. (Youth Progress Index 2021)

Working in broad coalitions would be highly effective and would require a coherent stakeholders' mapping exercise to be put in place. The narrative on rural youth needs to change from a needs-based to rights based approach by national public authorities. The European Youth Forum has contributed to this process by proposing a Checklist for youth rights. (Pantea 2021)

Young people living in rural communities need quality public services at the local level, in their living area, services that they can access easily. Many young people struggle to see the potential in rural areas and activism in these areas is quite weak. Marginalised within societal structures, youth lack confidence in their ability to make change and to be heard by local, regional and national authorities.

When social inclusion measures are designed, special attention should be paid to working *with and for* young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) living in rural communities. Several international studies indicate that the place of origin is one of the most critical factors that differentiate the trajectories of NEETs and that these challenges are more frequent in rural areas. According to Eurostat (2019), NEET rates were higher in rural (18.3%) than in urban areas (15.1%) in 17 EU member states. This difference was greater in eastern (e.g. Bulgaria, Romania, and Lithuania) and southern European countries (e.g. Greece). This is also related to the high early school leavers rate as most of them reside in rural areas. Eurofound (2020) emphasised the following NEET risk factors: health restrictions, migration background, low level of education, young people living in low-income households, adolescents whose parents were unemployed, adolescents whose parents had a low level of education, adolescents with divorced parents. Young people living in remote areas have a 1.5 times higher NEET risk than young people living in medium-sized cities. Because of the pandemic, the share of young people not in employment, education or training rose in many countries in 2020 and has not yet returned to pre-crisis levels in most cases (ILO 2021). The effects of the Covid-19 crisis on rural NEET youth are not yet fully known. It can be presumed that in the coming years, with rural

youth being more vulnerable to economic and social changes one can expect higher levels of early school leaving and unemployment among rural youth.

Needs and challenges

Young people in rural areas face barriers related to access to appropriate education opportunities, to a sluggish employment process, barriers to social inclusion, reduced participation opportunities and lack engagement in civic life, while struggling to get access to basic services and infrastructures. (European Network for Rural Development 2018). Also the Covid-19 pandemic has generated more obstacles for rural youth access to the same opportunities that their urban peers have. In very few cases have the challenges become opportunities, as some young people living in rural areas have gained access to remote learning that was not available due to previous geographical or economic barriers. (European Youth Forum 2021)

Specific rural minorities and vulnerable groups such as minority youth, youth with disabilities, young migrants and refugees, girls and rural young workers aged 15–17 may face additional vulnerabilities, challenges and possibly marginalisation, owing to their specific difficulties in accessing training, resources and employment. (European Youth Forum 2021; Eurofound 2021; EIGE 2021, etc.). Policies and strategies do not often take into account the heterogeneity of youth, and so do not provide them with effective support. Those most affected by unemployment are the youngest. For example, the unemployment rate of 15–24-year-olds rose to 50–55% in Italy, Greece and Spain depending on the degree of urbanisation. The youngest cohort of young people is also facing lack of access to social protection. Social protection mechanisms often do not take into account the specific vulnerabilities young people in rural areas face.

The global Covid-19 pandemic has, in a relatively short period of time, affected all age groups through e.g. increased unemployment, online learning, numerous lockdowns, restrictions of free movement, and digital communication. Rural youth have disproportionately been affected by the pandemic situation (Mascherini and Sándor 2020). This is evident from data and reports from international organisations (International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations, European Youth Forum, etc.). They also highlight the lack or scarcity of studies in some countries.

Employment

Analysis of *youth labour market participation* trends 2015–2020 revealed that rural youth unemployment rates have declined considerably in comparison to the economic crisis period 2008–2013. From 2015 the employment rate rose again until the end of 2019. The employment rate, however, was clearly higher in cities, which suggests that many of those living in towns and rural areas remain outside the labour force. Even before the labour market crisis related to the Covid-19 pandemic, some southern European countries had already observed an increase in youth unemployment rates (for example, Spain, Greece, etc.).

Geography negatively affects overall employment and job opportunities in many countries and especially negatively impacts the employment of young people in rural areas. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on social exclusion of young people in rural areas. Because of Covid-19, the overall unemployment rate started to increase as of March 2020. Rural youth were hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic in respect to employment in 2020. Employment losses among young people were higher than those of prime age workers. Due to the closures related to the Covid-19 pandemic, rural youth were among the groups most likely to lose their jobs. The situation was often worse for women in rural areas, especially educated young women who could not easily find employment opportunities. Many had no alternative but to emigrate.

The most popular measures in favour of employment at a national scale in European countries were the introduction of cash grants, temporary employment schemes, the simplification of bureaucracy for hiring and the extension of temporary visas to support the agricultural workforce in some countries (ILO 2021). Although youth in rural areas were assessed to be included in some employment measures initiated by various governments, almost no specific measures were introduced for the specified target in response to the impact of Covid-19.

Specific measures related to increasing employment are rare, but there are some relevant examples. For example, in Spain, rural actors, including youth, held a Rural Hackathon³ to tackle the economic problems that Covid-19 pandemic may trigger. The online event hosted several stakeholders who shared their initiatives in order to address the economic consequences of Covid-19 in rural communities while also providing information on new sources of income for rural businesses.

Education and training

Education and training are issues of critical importance for rural youth. Education levels are lower and opportunities fewer in rural areas in Europe. Young people in urban areas are more likely to be educated than those living in small towns and rural areas. Lack of skills and training opportunities are major reasons for increasing unemployment.

The Covid-19 pandemic has shifted education and vocational training from traditional face-to-face to online learning on an unprecedented scale. The closure of education and learning facilities left a large proportion of rural youth outside education, owing to the difficult context they live in, and difficulties in accessing technologies for distance learning. In many rural areas the education, vocational education and training system may already have been disadvantaged by the underdevelopment or lack of certain services. All these interruptions may further result in a challenging school-to-work transition for rural youth and are likely to further increase inequality for rural youth.

The Covid-19 pandemic has shifted all types of education from traditional face-to-face learning to online by generally limiting access to education by vulnerable young people in rural areas. The use of remote learning and education, vocational education and training resources should be adopted to mitigate the loss of learning and training for young people in rural areas. The necessary tools and instruments should be introduced to ensure quality education and training in remote rural areas.

³ <https://www.ree.es/en/press-office/news/press-release/2020/04/29-projects-participate-hackaton-rural-covid-19>

The Covid-19 pandemic affected more rural young people from marginalised and vulnerable social backgrounds. Inequalities of age, gender, disabilities, minorities, etc. will need to be considered through all the measures initiated by governments and other partners both during the pandemic and in the recovery phase. Policy makers should make extra efforts to support rural youth, especially young migrants, young refugees, young people with disabilities and from other groups experiencing multiple disadvantages.

Participation

A study conducted by the European Parliament in 2021 showed that youth workers and youth organisations were not identified as key providers of services needed by young people. The most vulnerable young people, dramatically affected by the pandemic, were left outside the *participation* scene. Consequently, even if much needed, policy responses have not been adapted to young people's needs (European Youth Forum 2021; Lonean and Escamilla 2021). Research shows a twofold situation when it comes to vulnerable youth outreach during the pandemic: some youth organisations and youth workers lost contact with some of the most vulnerable youth – especially those with limited access to the internet or those who did not have devices, while other organisations managed to connect to young people who were facing barriers to offline participation. (Lonean and Escamilla, 2021). Studies refer to vulnerable youth in general while an important research gap persists on understanding the challenges and opportunities that digitalisation offers or hinders for rural youth participation. One of the key examples is identified by the Overseas Development Institute (2021), showing how young people in rural and remote areas used electronic platforms to stay connected despite the confinements and mentioning the importance of social media channels in developing intergenerational communication mechanisms.

Both state and non-state actors should invest in removing the limitations that restrict access by young people, including here the rural youth population, to devices, data, internet exposure, basic digital skills, and the use of platforms for any purpose. These limitations were there before the pandemic, but they became obvious in 2020 and 2021.

Social inclusion

Young people in rural areas are facing a number of challenges related to ***social inclusion***. In many countries, there is a lack of affordable housing, limited access to education and services, limited access to medical services, etc. Decreasing rural population leads to reduced services and consequently employment opportunities are limited even further. Gender, ethnicity, social class, disability, and other factors lead to multiple disadvantages.

There is some evidence from recent studies reflecting young people's situations in rural areas. The National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs in England launched a survey, "Your Post-Brexit Rural Future"⁴. The study results revealed that Covid-19 triggered changes in young farmers' routines, home life, education or employment as well as activities off-farm. The main challenges identified for young people in rural areas were affordable housing, lack of information and advice on mental health and wellbeing, access to housing, farming, training and skills.

Digital inclusion

Many concerns arose regarding persisting inequality among young people regarding access, awareness and skills-building opportunities through ***digital*** technologies. Evidence from a recent study (Neagu, Berigel and Lendzhova 2021) shows that digital inclusion of young people does not only mean access to ICT equipment, but also more access to training, guiding young people to use ICT to develop personally and contribute to community development, and the development of self-confidence. Education, or rather the low level of education of the rural population is the most common cause of low ICT skills. Even for those who use the internet regularly, reliance on the internet due to the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the size of existing digital gaps and inequalities, raising questions even on the availability of data related to access to internet and computers within households. The pandemic left most of the European governments blindsided when it comes to the digital needs of marginalised young people, including here young people living in rural areas. An increased strain has appeared even in households equipped

⁴ <https://www.rsnonline.org.uk/your-post-brexit-rural-future-a-survey-from-the-nfyfc>

with a computer or tablet, as families with one or more children had to navigate through overlapping timetables of children and parents studying or working remotely. (Șerban and Ștefan 2020)

Policy frameworks

Some of the challenges listed above have long been understood and regulated by policy. Yet, many of the challenges remain unaddressed by specific policies and programmes at European, national, regional and local levels. The following section describes the European policy framework, as well as the identified national and, where existent, local initiatives that target directly the rural youth population.

At the EU level, five key milestones were identified as having paved the way for the development of the EU's strategies in the field of rural development: Future of rural society (EEC 1988), the Cork Declaration (EU 1996), the New rural paradigm (OECD 2006), the Cork 2.0 Declaration (EU 2016), the Rural policy 3.0 (OECD 2018) (SHERPA 2020). Most European programmes that targeted rural youth were mainly for young farmers (up to the age of 40). The Young Farmers' Scheme aimed to facilitate the first phase of establishment of young farmers into the sector and the structural adjustment of their holdings after setup. The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development was also designed for start-up aid for young farmers.

A series of policy and support documents (such as the European Rural Youth Parliament's European Rural Youth Declaration of 2019) have highlighted the need to support the entrepreneurial capacity and motivation of young people living in rural areas, through education and training, life-long learning and work exchanges, which encourage social inclusion and ensure the protection of the environment. At the same time, the need for sustainable farming was touched upon while infrastructure and digital connectivity through local digital strategies capable of closing the divide between urban and rural areas and preventing a further intergenerational gap in the use of digital tools, through fundraising, volunteering, and networking were required. A fundamental document on youth access to rights is the Council of the European Union Resolution 2008/C 141/01 on the participation of young people with fewer opportunities, a

document that emphasises that young people with fewer opportunities should be given special attention at an early stage, in order to be better integrated in society.

Other than initiatives for young farmers, The Youth Guarantee or the Youth Employment Initiative tangentially reached rural youth. Projects granted through the European Social Fund or Erasmus + and European Solidarity Corps aimed to better reach the rural youth population. Other mechanisms built on the regional policy such as the European Regional Development Fund or Interreg also addressed rural youth.

In 2020, at the EU level, [the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union](#) included Youth Goal 6 Moving Rural Youth Forward in its programme. The EU Council Conclusion recommends investing in the employment of young people in the farming and agricultural sector and to equip young people with the skills to build a rural economy. More than this, the policy makers were to seek mechanisms that would offer youth opportunities outside of their areas by improving connectivity and transport, but also by improving access to information and existing schemes such as Erasmus+ and other European programmes. Moreover, the recommendations to member states are related to developing cross-sector co-operation mechanisms to support young people in rural areas and to include in relevant strategies and policies actions and measures that reflect young people's perspectives and views in rural and remote areas.

The [Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on raising opportunities for young people in rural and remote areas](#) stressed the need for opportunities provided nearby and invited the EU member states to promote and facilitate active citizenship and meaningful participation by young people with diverse backgrounds in rural and remote areas in decision-making processes on matters that affect them. The participation to these processes should be done through appropriate tools, such as local youth councils and innovative/alternative means of participation; foster co-operation between relevant administration at all levels, where appropriate, while carrying out public consultations (analogue or digital) as a tool to engage with young people; encourage public administrations to facilitate the work of youth-led organisations; and support relevant actors who provide youth work activities at all levels, including outreach youth work. Also,

intergenerational co-operation and solidarity should be the lead values for the defined actions. The EU Youth Conference on the topic identified the need to improve employment opportunities and promote economic development for young people living in rural areas, enabling these areas to adapt to new economic climates. A series of recommendations and measures that could boost rural youth employment, including promoting vocational careers and life-long learning in rural areas through the opening of vocational/professional schools in rural areas and the development of education centres in rural areas were identified.

Also, financial measures to support the continuation of their studies are needed and both state and private actors are to support scholarship schemes. The findings from the National and European Youth Dialogue Activities indicated that the lack of transport in rural areas prevented young people from accessing other opportunities, such as education, leisure, cultural activities, public services and employment. Even before the pandemic, the need to improve connectivity and infrastructure in rural areas was identified, as was the need to ensure stable internet connection in rural areas, access to participatory structures, improved transport and mobility, and upskilling for digital tools.

For youth participation in rural areas, it was concluded that in rural communities, the voices of youth are not heard and that investing in local youth councils and rural youth representation networks on a long-term basis is urgent. The EU Community Led Local Development and LEADER (links between actions for the development of the rural economy) programmes could be utilised along with youth programmes.

Also, projects developed with and for rural youth should integrate non-formal learning instruments and methodologies. Moreover, conditions should be created for social entrepreneurship to take place. Supporting young people's capacities to engage in social entrepreneurship is to be ensured, including coaching, mentoring, provision of spaces to support creative skills, roundtables to enable idea sharing, networking events, visibility support, and many other activities can be included to achieve that goal. Youth work services should be delivered by qualified and mobile-flexible youth workers where young people are. They need to be financially sustainable, not on a per-project basis.

At the Council of Europe, the situation of rural youth has been outlined in different policy papers and targeted through different programmes. The Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly has dealt with the development of rural areas and youth policy in a number of official statements such as Recommendation 776 (1976) on the situation of rural and agricultural youth in Europe or Recommendation 1296 (1996) on a European Charter for Rural Areas; Recommendation 1320 (1997) on education, training, and advisory services in agriculture, fisheries and forestry; Recommendation 1321 (1997) on improving the situation of women in rural society; and Recommendation 1364 (1998) on European youth co-operation. The Committee of Ministers addressed the question in Recommendation No. R (97) 3 to the member states on youth participation and the future of civil society while the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe [Resolution 237](#) (1992) on the Charter on the participation of young people in municipal and regional life was one of the fundamental policy documents in the field. Some country reports refer to policies targeting rural youth. (Council of Europe 2001)

In terms of participation of young people living in rural areas, the following documents are important and could guide authorities in developing and securing participation mechanisms: the recommendation CM/Rec(2006)14 to member states on citizenship and participation of young people in public life; the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life (2015, first adopted in 2009) - the Charter recognised that all local and regional sectoral policies should have a youth dimension and identifies consultation and co-operation with young people and their representatives as an essential principle in youth policy implementation. The EU–Council of Europe youth partnership’s study on barriers to social inclusion *Finding a Place in Modern Europe* (2015) marked five possible areas of inclusion or exclusion: education, labour market, living, health and participation, defined also as “safety nets” since they provide basic resources and prerequisites for the fulfilment of everyday needs. For young people living in rural areas, when these safety nets become unavailable or unstable, the risk of social exclusion is extremely high. Recommendation CM/Rec(2015)3 on the access of young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods to social rights presents a breakthrough, as it focuses on efforts by member states to implement policies that prevent and eradicate poverty, discrimination, violence and exclusion faced by such young people. (Potočník 2021)

The Final Declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention: Signposts for the Future (2020) stated that young people from particularly marginalised groups facing multiple discrimination are particularly stricken as social inequalities increase and social justice is further away. The Declaration stressed the need for national youth policies to create incentives for local (youth) policy making through co-financing mechanisms and setting standards, while in rural areas, special attention should be given to support the development of quality youth work and the creation of a community of practice.

National policy responses

In most European countries, rural youth is not treated as a separate category. Policies for rural youth can be identified at local, regional and national levels. A survey circulated in May 2021 mapped the challenges, needs, policies and programmes for rural youth in different European countries. This section presents a synthesis of the outcomes collected. The analysis was based on the following criteria:

1. the levels of governance in terms of policy development
2. the specific measures that the local, regional and national authorities put in place for rural youth.

Responsibilities for the rural youth population are split between national, regional and local authorities. In general, ***national*** youth policy encompasses objectives and priorities to support young people with fewer opportunities and rural youth is clustered as a vulnerable category (Romanian Youth Strategy 2015-2020). In Germany, the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth deals with the implementation of the Youth Strategy of the German Government. In some fields of action, the government's joint youth strategy also deals with the conditions of rural areas and outlines the need for action and measures to improve the situation of young people in rural areas. In Serbia, by supporting projects of local youth offices and civil society organisations, the Ministry of Youth and Sports strives to improve the living conditions of young people from rural areas, to create conditions for acquiring new knowledge, skills, to inform them and encourage their employment and self-employment.

In Finland, the policies are formed at the *local* rather than at the national level and most of the measures and programmes for rural youth are available at this level. In Sweden, the operative responsibility for youth policy development is mostly a municipal and a regional attribute. Sweden has a strategy for rural development that addresses living conditions in Sweden's rural areas, with a sub-goal "Equal conditions for people to work and live-in rural areas". The regions and municipalities are responsible for the operational approach to making policies for their respective areas. There is also a relevant network for government agencies, regions and NGOs, the Swedish Rural Network. In 2020/2021, the Youth Agency of Georgia has implemented the Municipal Youth Policy Development Program that aims to facilitate the development, implementation and monitoring of municipal youth policies through strengthening of local policy actors. The programme develops rights- and knowledge-based municipal youth policy strategies tailored to the needs of local youth. Through these municipal policy documents, more effective and tailored programmes for rural youth will be implemented. The National Network of Local Action Groups in the Czech Republic is the most effective platform, especially an informal grouping of Local Action Groups (LAGs) called "Rural Youth". Each Local Action Group is made up of representatives of municipalities, local entrepreneurs (including farmers), NGOs and active citizens. These LAGs are NGOs, most often civic associations, and public benefit (beneficiary) associations. It is therefore a certain form of institutionalised public-private partnership. Each LAG elaborates a local development strategy and is responsible for its implementation. The implementation of the local development strategies is financed through the European Social Fund, namely the Rural Development Programme and Integrated Regional Operational Programme. Priority is given to improving the infrastructure and quality of formal and non-formal education.

Findings from the EKCYP and PEYR survey indicate that most European countries do not clearly define the various groups among the young population living in rural areas, including their specificities, needs and challenges. In most European countries, rural areas are not mentioned as a separate category, but are covered under other policies. In Ukraine, the Law on the Basic Principles of Youth Policy of 27 April 2021 does not single out youth in rural areas, while the Law on promotion of social formation and development of youth in Ukraine states that young people living in rural areas and working in agricultural production, processing and service

industries of the agro-industrial complex, operating in rural areas, the social sphere of the village and local governments in the countryside, also enjoy benefits under the Law on the priority of social development of the village and agro-industrial complex in the economy. In addition, the Law on the priority of social development of the village and agro-industrial complex in the economy states, among others, that there is a mandatory quota for the admission of rural youth in all higher education institutions (universities, institutes), colleges, technical schools, etc.

The same situation is apparent in North Macedonia. No specific reference is made in the National Youth Strategy 2016/2025 nor in the Law on youth and youth participation. Youth policies are generally regulated with the National Youth Strategy and the Law on youth and youth participation. Rural youth is mentioned in the National Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development, but the measures focus on the economic aspect, particularly access to state aid for farming.

In Cyprus, the specific measures for rural youth are included in the Rural Development Programme, which includes financial support for young farmers under 40 years old, and in the Youth Entrepreneurship Programme. Some countries set up measures to support young people's access to education living in rural areas as well as their access to employment, affordable housing or to education and training. In Cyprus, measures for housing are part of the Housing Policy Programme, which offers grants to young people living in rural areas to obtain their first home.

In Germany, affordable housing and adequate infrastructure are identified as a condition for the return of young people to their home regions – and thus as a counter strategy to rural depopulation. Other measures are available through the Federal Rural Development Programme. The aim of the programme is to maintain and further develop rural areas as attractive habitats. In Belarus, young people from rural areas have additional benefits when receiving loans for the construction and reconstruction of housing (Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus dated March 1, 2004 No. 123). Extra support and exemptions are provided for the admission of rural youth to educational establishments.

In Georgia, several programmes are implemented by both government agencies and non-governmental organizations. In 2020, the Youth Agency of Georgia created a youth fund through which projects submitted by regional youth organisations and initiative groups from the regions are funded through a grant competition. Most of the funded projects aim to address the needs and problems of rural youth, to promote youth work services and to support youth initiatives; to develop key competencies of young people through non-formal education; to provide capacity-building activities for youth organisations; to improve the involvement of rural youth in local community, economic or cultural life. The Rural Young Entrepreneurs Support Programme “Young Entrepreneur” is designed for young people with entrepreneurial spirit. The programme was initiated by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia and is implemented by the Rural Development Agency, funded by donor organisation, the Danish International Development Agency.

The Rural Development Programme for Greece was formally adopted by the European Commission on 11 December 2015 and last modified on 5 March 2021. Within this framework, 25 600 young Greek farmers will receive start-up aid. Youth participation and volunteering in rural areas were also fields of action that were tackled by some European countries.

In the Russian Federation, the “Open Spaces” youth project is taking place in districts of the Novosibirsk Region with the support of the regional Ministry of Education. The project is aimed at creating and developing platforms for organising and holding youth events - master classes, concerts, seminars and lectures in rural areas.

In Serbia, the national volunteering programme “Youth rule” improves the position of young people in rural areas and boosts youth participation and the activities are largely implemented in suburban areas and underdeveloped areas. Through the youth volunteer projects, informal youth groups and youth associations implement actions aimed at addressing local needs, and above all, renewing spaces for young people in local communities, organising activities to preserve the environment, to promote humanity and solidarity, understanding and tolerance, security, intergenerational co-operation and youth entrepreneurship. Every year, more than 1 500 young

people across the country, in more than 60 municipalities are involved in this programme, and the Ministry of Youth and Sports invests more than €180 000 each year in its implementation.

In Poland, the support to rural youth is carried out mainly through the initiatives of NGOs – namely the Rural Youth Association (*Związek Młodzieży Wiejskiej*), Rural Areas Support Foundation (*Fundacja Wspomagania Wsi*) and the Polish-American Freedom Foundation (*Polsko-Amerykańska Fundacja Wolności*). The programmes available for rural youth are the following: the Equal Chances Programme, allowing libraries, community centres, cultural centres, and informal groups from areas with less than 20 000 inhabitants to implement their own projects and initiatives, and the Act Locally Programme, supporting and stimulating local rural communities.

Measures specific to the Covid-19 pandemic

Through the survey circulated in May 2021, we were also interested to find out whether the member states put in place specific measures to support youth in rural areas to overcome the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The following sections show some examples of specific measures and highlights the needs that are still uncovered.

Eurofound's Covid-19 EU PolicyWatch (2021a) collects information on the responses of government and social partners to the crisis, as well as gathering examples of company practices aimed at mitigating the social and economic impacts. Covid-19 EU PolicyWatch currently contains 1 301 measures introduced by governments and social partners to cushion the social and economic effects on businesses, workers, and citizens (e.g. income support, direct subsidies, active labour market measures, working conditions protection, etc.), but no specific measures targeted at young people living in rural areas are indicated.

In Serbia, in order to reduce the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people, the Ministry of Youth and Sports aimed to inform young people, including vulnerable youth, about the virus and protection measures. In co-operation with youth associations, in the period from mid-March to June 2020, the series “Youth work online - demonstrate and connect” was

implemented and training on using digital tools was organised for youth workers and educators from the sector. With the support of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, numerous digital activities took place: youth exchanges in virtual space, regional meetings of youth workers and professionals from various fields, and digital youth clubs were launched. Also, in 2020, the Ministry of Youth and Sports prepared a new project focused on youth in rural areas. The project “Perspectives of Youth in Rural Areas in Serbia” is set to begin at the end of 2021, will last three years and will focus on improving the economic and socio-cultural perspectives of young people in rural areas in Serbia.

In Malta, even though there were no specific policies or programmes developed for youth in rural areas during the Covid-19 pandemic, the National Youth Agency came up with the *IdeAzzjonisti* programme, with one of its aims being to target rural youth. This programme initially targeted the island of Gozo since it is the most rural location in the Maltese islands, however the programme was extended to include the general rural youth in Malta. *IdeAzzjonisti* is a programme for young people who would like to participate in a community-based active citizenship programme, offering young people the opportunity to undergo training, carry out research and to present to their communities ideas that could contribute to a better quality of life.

In Georgia, the European Union and The United Nations Development Programme UNDP launched a “weekend virtual school” for high-school students from Georgia’s regions, combining knowledge about European integration and sustainable development with extracurricular offerings including music and art. The weekend school covers a wide range of topics, including the economic and social benefits of European integration and sustainable development, historic ties between Georgia and the EU, self-governance traditions in Georgia, gender equality and non-discrimination, innovative ways of doing business and digital solutions in communication and information management.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The desk review and the outcomes of the survey showed evident gaps in policy and research when it comes to rural youth situations. **Most youth policies ignore the rural, and most rural**

policies ignore the youth. Even where they have been developed, the measures are very generic and no recognition of the specific challenges of addressing youth were a priority.

Most of the studies looked at rural youth and agriculture and very few studied their needs, interests and aspirations. Even in those looking at the situation of young farmers, research should also focus on the “newcomers”, those setting up new business and most likely, bringing some innovation to rural communities, and the “continuers”, those who would continue the farming activities of their families (IFAD 2019). Another recurrent theme in studies of rural youth is young people’s perception that those in authority pay them no attention. At times, the feeling is determined by the fact that young people have the willingness to participate but have no opportunities for involvement, while in other communities, authorities set up participation opportunities for young people, but the structures are either not known in the community or far from the youth needs and interests. (European Parliament 2010)

Research, policies, and practice need to look at young people in rural areas as diverse groups with their own interests, needs and challenges. Most policies take an outdated assumption that young people in rural areas only want to become farmers or farming entrepreneurs. Insufficient examples of participation and youth work are gathered and disseminated to encourage other communities. *Youth research* is needed to understand the lives, aspirations and needs of young people living in rural areas. Research should co-operate with youth workers and community organisers to better document access to rights and social inclusion of the rural youth population. Inclusion should be approached through different lenses, including gender, vulnerability, multiple discrimination or the digital divide.

In terms of *policy development*, measures should start from developing open dialogue with young people in rural areas to understand the reasons for and counter **the exodus of young people and the ageing population**. Actors should develop a clear picture of who the various groups of young people in their communities are, discuss with them the challenges and co-create solutions. For example, understanding how many people live in rural areas and for how many of them the rural communities are only the communities of domicile, is important for successful programmes. There are also a significant number of young people who need to commute to

continue their studies or to access the labour market in other communities. The EU-Council of Europe youth partnership's study on barriers to social inclusion, *Finding a Place in Modern Europe* (2015), marked five possible areas of inclusion or exclusion: education, labour market, living, health, and participation, defined also as “safety nets” since they provide basic resources and prerequisites for the fulfilment of everyday needs. For young people living in rural areas, when these safety nets become unavailable or unstable, the risk of social exclusion is extremely high. With unstable safety nets and feeling excluded from community life, a great part of the youth population chooses to migrate either to bigger urban settlements or to live and work abroad because of a lack of perspectives. Some might face discrimination in the new host country or struggle with integration in the new social structures.

In most rural communities, access to **youth work** services is still limited or only beginning (in terms of youth work services development). Diverse outreach methods are used in rural areas where youth work infrastructure is often missing. In these contexts, outreach youth work, detached youth work or mobile youth work approaches could serve to get closer to youth, especially to marginalised or vulnerable youth living in rural areas. The aims of rural development can conflict with those of youth work, especially where “getting on” (through education) is a means of “getting out” (of the restricted options available in local labour markets in rural areas). Perhaps this dilemma can only be resolved when providing both “**support to leave**” and possibilities for later return alongside “**support to stay**”.

For young people living in rural areas to reach their full personal and professional potential, they need the opportunity to be active in their communities, including accessing the labour market locally. Opportunities to find a job in their villages are quite often limited. With rather reduced support from their local networks, young rural entrepreneurs encounter obstacles in developing their **own initiatives/businesses**. The lack of awareness regarding the importance of entrepreneurship to sustainable local development and the lack of access to information are not encouraging rural youth in starting their own entrepreneurial journey.

The **digital gap** has become very visible during the pandemic, with many young people struggling to access either equipment, connectivity, or both.

Policies for rural youth should be tailored around:

1. Better guidance from schools, teachers, careers services, training and further education institutions and local employment services.
2. A greater emphasis in schools on developing active citizenship skills and nurturing an awareness and understanding of, and an interest in, local politics.
3. Building an explicit youth element into community development, with staff employed to work specifically with young people, especially the least privileged.
4. Promoting a local culture that accepts children and young people as social actors and as citizens to be included and valued. (European Parliament 2010)

The share of young people in rural areas is declining in Europe due to an ageing society, declining birth rate and migration of young people to more urbanised areas, e.g. larger cities and towns. This is mainly due to structural factors, the lack of necessary infrastructure, employment and education possibilities for young people.

Young people in rural areas, compared to their urban counterparts, are more often in vulnerable situations, facing difficulties to access the labour market, dropping out of school, etc. Disadvantaged young people (with mental disabilities, less educated, with a migrant background, etc.) are at greater risk. Local public authorities have a responsibility to generate local change, because they are closest to where young people live. (Pantea 2021).

The Covid-19 crisis has severely affected labour markets by affecting young people in rural areas more than other age groups. Country data shows an increase in youth inactivity in 2020. The share of young people in rural areas not in employment, education, or training has risen in many countries and has not yet returned to pre-crisis levels in most cases. The increasing unemployment rate provides only a partial insight into the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on young people in rural areas, confirming the need for broader monitoring of labour market outcomes for rural youth, especially including quality of employment.

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