

HERE TO STAY?

The transitions of rural youth before and after the Covid-19 pandemic



Youth Partnership

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HERE TO STAY? THE TRANSITIONS OF RURAL YOUTH BEFORE AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Authors

Francisco Simões
Antonella Rocca
Adina Șerban
Marti Taru

Co-ordinators

Tanya Basarab
Lana Pasic

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Executive summary

Goal

This report examines the experiences of rural youth aged 18 to 30 during their transition to adulthood in 14 European countries,¹ spanning the period 2019 to 2023 and incorporating pre- and post-Covid times. The research focused on the institutional set-up for supporting transitions based on the two-dimensional typology of youth welfare citizenship (Chevalier 2016, 2019), trends, policies, practices and the personal experiences of rural youth. The combination of these different layers of analysis enabled a comprehensive overview of the challenges and opportunities facing rural youth today.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach across six dimensions: education; support systems; youth participation; employment; mobility; and access to leisure, culture and sports. The trend analysis was conducted using Eurostat and Eurobarometer data (2019-2023) for rural areas after being disaggregated by degree of urbanisation. The policy analysis reviewed measures addressing the selected dimensions of youth transitions. The practices and projects involved desk research and case studies of rural youth-focused projects in Armenia, Estonia, Ireland, Romania and Spain. From 50 screened practices, nine were selected for an in-depth analysis based on qualitative methods, including a participatory workshop. A snowball sampling strategy ensured grassroots engagement. The youth perspective was addressed through a multilingual online survey (15 October 2024 to 31 January 2025), with 2 503 respondents meeting the inclusion criteria. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and regression models to explore associations between personal factors and key transition drivers with youth outcomes overall and country clusters.

Key findings and implications

The research reveals a nuanced and evolving picture of rural youth transitions in Europe before and after the pandemic. Certain indicators, such as rising tertiary education attainment and a decrease in NEET (not in education, employment or training) rates, signal some improvements in transition trends. However, these are contrasted by ongoing challenges, including youth population decline, increasing youth unemployment and limited civic engagement in rural areas. New governance

1. This study includes the member states of both the European Union and the Council of Europe.

approaches and civil society initiatives associated with megatrends, such as digital and green transitions, are emerging but require sustained support and monitoring.

One of the core issues identified is the significant policy gap concerning rural youth. Most countries do not explicitly recognise rural youth as a distinct policy subgroup. Instead, they are subsumed under broader rural or youth policies, which often lack specificity. Countries such as Estonia and Ireland demonstrate relatively integrated approaches, while in other contexts, such as Armenia and Romania, rural youth policies are less developed or explicitly articulated. National policy measures driven by key EU frameworks, such as the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism or the Reinforced Youth Guarantee, underscore the systemic oversight of rural youth needs.

Despite this, there is a vibrant ecosystem of practices and projects led by civil society and international networks aimed at addressing rural youth challenges. These initiatives are often fragmented and lack co-ordination and/or are project-based. Thus, they lack sustainability, limiting their strategic impact. Key issues tackled by these efforts include education, employment, mental health and access to recreational infrastructure. At this level, the study calls for stronger co-operation among stakeholders, the formation of interest groups focused on rural youth and greater integration into EU programmes such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe.

Education and informal community support emerge as pivotal transitional drivers. A surprisingly high proportion of participants are either enrolled in or aspire to pursue higher education, suggesting a shift in rural youth aspirations. Informal social support networks – friends, family and neighbours – play a critical role, especially in the absence of robust institutional support. However, formal youth participation remains low, with only a small fraction engaged in political or civic organisations, reflecting broader issues of representation and resource allocation.

Employment outcomes are mixed. While most participants are engaged in work or study, jobs are only moderately seen as decent and meaningful. Employment success is heavily reliant on access to transport (such as car ownership) and social capital (informal contacts and networks, for example) rather than institutional support provided by public employment services. These patterns highlight structural issues in rural labour markets and point to the need for policies prioritising decent and meaningful jobs, in line with evolving (inter)national goals for rural development and cohesion.

Contrary to common assumptions, rural youth involved in this study exhibit a strong intention to remain in or close to their communities. Most respondents currently live in their region of origin, with many never having moved for extended periods (more than six months). Factors such as close social ties, economic constraints and risk aversion influence these decisions. Importantly, mobility patterns appear to be changing, as commuting and circular migration are becoming more prevalent. The cost of living in urban areas and short-term mobility planning may help to explain these findings.

In terms of leisure and cultural engagement, rural youth display a preference for outdoor and nature-based activities, with lower satisfaction and usage rates for traditional cultural venues like theatres. These patterns are consistent across gender

and age, though satisfaction levels vary by country cluster. The limited availability of cultural infrastructure and resources further hampers youth engagement in these areas.

Perhaps the most significant overarching finding pertains to the central role of informal support in rural youth transitions. Rather than perpetuating disadvantage, as some literature suggests, the study finds that informal networks often bolster youth outcomes and satisfaction. Recognising this, the report recommends investing in the “soft infrastructure”, meaning the community-based support systems that leverage local social capital. Proposals include intergenerational programmes, public services co-ordination, participatory governance models and initiatives to keep young people connected to their communities even when they relocate to (sub)urban areas for education or work.

Conclusion

The report underscores the need for a more tailored, inclusive and strategic approach to rural youth policy, in support of European Youth Goal 6 “Moving Rural Youth Forward” and in line with the recent Recommendation CM/Rec(2025)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the social, economic and political participation of rural youth (Council of Europe 2025). Strengthening job quality and youth participation and purposely targeting informal support mechanisms in policy making are essential for sustainable rural development. Bridging the policy and practice divide, enhancing stakeholder co-ordination and fully integrating rural youth into national and international (European Union) frameworks will be key to ensuring a vibrant future for Europe’s rural regions.

Introduction

The specific challenges faced by rural youth are seldom covered by policy design and programme rollout. On the 7 May 2025, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe member states addressed this gap by adopting Recommendation CM/Rec(2025)3 on the social, economic and political participation of rural youth. This recommendation urges member states to pursue tailored policies to ensure that the needs of rural youth are met. These include access to essential services and rights, in particular decent housing, quality education, affordable and safe mobility options and public transportation, adequate data connectivity and internet access, social security and healthcare. Moreover, the EU's long-term vision for rural areas (LTVRA) (European Commission 2021b) foresees that vibrant, resilient and sustainable rural communities rely on supporting younger rural generations' livelihoods and aspirations. These examples show a momentum that youth organisations and the youth work sector must uphold for creating relevant policies and investments targeting rural youth.

This report builds on past research efforts from the European Union–Council of Europe Youth Partnership to bring rural youth to the forefront of the youth sector's public debates. Specifically, this report examines the situation of rural youth aged 18 to 30 across 14 countries of the Council of Europe in the pre- and post-Covid period (2019-2023) to inform policy making at European, national and regional levels. This research aims, therefore, to focus on the specific conditions and transition pathways of rural youth to adulthood in the aftermath of the recent health crisis, in a context of successive major global disruptions since the 2008 economic recession.

The report combines five major lines of analysis to deliver a set of conclusions and policy recommendations: 1. an analysis of the institutional set-up across countries for supporting rural youth transitions, looking for transnational similarities, based on a specific conceptual framework; 2. major transitional trends regarding the 2019-2023 period based on public data; 3. policies, by examining policy measures tailored for rural youth (if any); 4. practices and projects covering on-the-ground youth work experiences of (inter)national youth workers and youth organisations; and 5. rural youth's perspectives, through a multilingual online survey.

Overall, this report confirms some of the concerns raised by the Council of Europe's recommendation on rural youth. Moreover, it raises new and sometimes counter-intuitive findings that may help shape more robust and appropriate policies for this group. In addition, this research effort also raises new, pressing questions that would require further attention by the Youth Partnership and the research community soon.

Chapter 1

Research framework

Rurality in the context of polycrisis

Rurality is hard to define. Often, decision makers and researchers adopt administrative criteria to delimit it. Eurostat's (2018) degree of urbanisation criterion defines rural areas as low population density regions (under 300 inhabitants per square kilometre and with a minimum population of 5 000). Other institutions, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2011; 2016), propose a more nuanced approach, combining population density with distance to the closest urban centre. These guidelines make a distinction between remote intermediate rural areas, predominantly rural areas close to a city and predominantly rural remote areas (OECD 2011).

Demographic criteria help to set policies or guide research aims. They should, however, be used with caution, otherwise they perpetuate a senseless urban-rural divide (Ahlmeyer and Volgmann 2023). This type of contrast presents rural communities as hopeless places dominated by conservative values that resist change, innovation and risks (Kuhmonen and Kuhmonen 2015).

This study follows Eurostat's (2018) degree of urbanisation criterion, differentiating rural areas from towns, cities and suburbs. Adopting an internationally agreed upon standard clarifies the territorial scope of the research and enables comparability between countries. However, this study also accounts for values, social perspectives, economic resources and collective priorities of different rural territories. Moreover, the research approach recognises that rural areas face significant and well-known challenges and considers existing opportunities or promising local initiatives, even when they are exceptions. This more subtle perspective about rurality prevents a biased, self-perpetuating representation of rural areas as doomed spaces destined to be in a state of constant decay (Ahlmeyer and Volgmann 2023; Farrugia 2016).

A nuanced approach to rurality is needed in the current historical period. For the past two decades, societies have faced interconnected and successive global challenges that have had huge impacts on people and the planet, labelled collectively as a "polycrisis" (Henig and Knight 2023). The 2008 financial crisis led to rising unemployment and unmanageable interest rates that affected families, businesses and communities worldwide. The recent Covid-19 pandemic resulted in widespread mortality, illness and social and economic devastation that has not yet been fully addressed. The conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East have caused humanitarian crises, as millions of people have died or been displaced from their homes. The international

uncertainty has, in turn, disrupted the global food and energy markets, driving up prices and causing food insecurity and poverty. Meanwhile, climate change effects are fast-forwarding, with extreme weather events such as floods, droughts and fires having greater social, natural and economic impacts. Additionally, polarisation and extremist movements are spreading as political, social and economic divisions become more evident with multiple impacts (Dijkstra, Poelman and Rodríguez-Pose 2020), including in youth work. All these events increase inequalities and destroy livelihoods. Such negative consequences disproportionately affect the most vulnerable communities, which are often located in rural areas, with the most serious effects being felt by young people living there (Cefalo and Scandurra 2021; EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership 2021).

Rural youth

In this study, the label “rural youth” refers to those aged 18 to 30 who live permanently in rural communities, as well as students or young workers who commute regularly (daily, weekly, monthly) between rural and urban areas, while keeping their residence in rural communities. This definition reflects evolving notions of time and space associated with youth in post-transition societies. Transitions to adulthood have become longer and youth age limits have been stretched, while young people leave their family home later (Pitti 2022).

It is important to note, however, that younger generations living in rural areas include those aged under 18 as well. However, the focus of this study on the transition of rural youth to adulthood involved balancing three criteria: a) using a narrower age criterium that overlaps with legal and developmental requirements associated with the transition to adulthood; b) considering multiple forms of rural livelihood (from permanently living in a rural area to multiple forms of commutation in and out rural areas); and c) having access to a wide number of participants in a considerably short period.

Public discourses about rural youth are often bleak. Some underscore that their hopes and aspirations, whether to improve their qualifications, find a better job or become financially autonomous, can only be met in urban areas (Farrugia 2016). Others point out that the decline of critical mass in the countryside is irreversible, due to current ageing trends (Theodori and Theodori 2015). The most pessimistic consider that rural areas lack the economic, physical, social and cultural infrastructure to support younger generations (Bæck 2016; Cefalo and Scandurra 2024). These narratives depict outstanding challenges for rural youth, including before and after the Covid-19 pandemic (EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership 2021). They fail, however, to flag promising exceptions or trends, both in general and across specific transition dimensions such as education, youth participation or employment, to mention just a few. Departing from this definition of rural youth, this study aims to unveil those exceptions to better understand their current life conditions.

Research background

The backdrop of this study combines two main lines. First, the research process departs from a specific conceptual model to better interpret the results. Second, the study encompasses an analysis of the main trends affecting rural youth's livelihoods across the six dimensions covered by this report. These two lines of analysis are introduced below and further detailed in Chapter 3.

Conceptual model

To pursue the study goals, the research team adopted the two-dimensions typology of youth welfare citizenship (Chevalier 2016, 2019). Youth welfare citizenship defines the transition from youth to adulthood as a combination of social and economic dimensions that shape youth independence and autonomy.

The social dimension encompasses income support measures provided to young people by welfare systems while they enter adulthood. According to this dimension, countries can be grouped into “familialised” or individualised social types along the citizenship social dimension. The “familialised” citizenship countries understand youth as still being part of an extended childhood, where young people financially depend on their parents. Welfare benefits coverage is made available for young people below 25 years old, meaning until they are expected to move out of their parents’ house. Individualised citizenship countries uphold a view of young people as independent adults. According to this approach, parents are legally not expected or obliged to support their children after reaching civil majority age.

Three indicators are used to situate each country according to the social dimension of the youth welfare citizenship typology:

- ▶ age limits for family allowances and social assistance;
- ▶ the share of undergraduate students in receipt of student support;
- ▶ the share of young people (18-24) in receipt of unemployment benefit, disability benefit or any other social benefit.

The economic dimension of youth welfare citizenship refers to young people’s labour market inclusion and is shaped by economic and education policies. From Chevalier’s (2019) perspective, the economic dimension ranges between inclusive and selective approaches. The inclusive approach corresponds to universally accessible education, featuring high rates of school attainment/low rates of school dropout and low shares of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET). In this case, all young people develop a set of skills that are further supported by training-oriented active labour market policies (ALMPs). In the selective approach, educational systems promote students’ performance and achievement. These systems lead to greater educational inequalities, unequal distribution of skills, higher NEET rates and a greater demand for cheap, precarious workers. By prioritising young people’s performance, the selective approach can provide simultaneously lower youth unemployment and high rates of low-income workers (Chevalier 2019).

Four indicators are used to situate each country according to the two-dimensional typology of youth welfare citizenship:

- ▶ early school leavers from education and training aged 18-24;
- ▶ the share of NEET youth (aged 15-29);
- ▶ youth (aged 15-24) unemployment rate;
- ▶ the NEET rate (aged 15-29) of the low skilled (ISCED 0-2²).

According to Chevalier (2016, 2019) the social and economic dimensions of countries can be positioned into four clusters reflecting the overall support provided to their younger generations' transition to adulthood.

- ▶ **Denied citizenship** – In this cluster, young individuals receive limited support from the state, leading to a high reliance on family resources. Labour market policies are not inclusive, making it challenging for youth to achieve financial independence. This model often results in prolonged dependence on family and delayed transitions into adulthood. Countries in southern Europe (such as Portugal, Spain and Italy), as well as France and Belgium, are usually positioned in this cluster.
- ▶ **Second-class citizenship** – Here, the state provides some support to young people, but it is limited and often conditional. Labour market integration strategies may exist, but are not comprehensive, leading to precarious employment situations for young people. This cluster reflects a partial acknowledgement of youth needs, but without fully facilitating their independence. Ireland and the United Kingdom are usually included in this cluster.
- ▶ **Monitored citizenship** – In this model, the state offers substantial support to young individuals, but with strict conditions and monitoring. Labour market policies are more inclusive, yet young people are subject to close supervision and must adhere to specific pathways. This approach aims to guide young people towards independence while maintaining control over their choices. Germany and Austria are examples of countries placed in this cluster.
- ▶ **Enabling citizenship** – This cluster features robust state support that empowers young people to achieve financial independence. Labour market integration strategies are inclusive and comprehensive, facilitating smooth transitions into stable employment. Young people in this model experience greater autonomy and support in their journey to adulthood. Nordic countries such as Finland and Sweden are part of this cluster.

2. ISCED or International Standard Classification for Education is the reference international classification for organising education programmes and related qualifications by levels and fields. ISCED 2011 (levels of education) has been implemented in all EU data collections since 2014. ISCED-F 2013 (fields of education and training) has been implemented since 2016. It includes 8 levels: ISCED 0: Early childhood education ('less than primary' for educational attainment); ISCED 1: Primary education; ISCED 2: Lower secondary education; ISCED 3: Upper secondary education; ISCED 4: Post-secondary non-tertiary education; ISCED 5: Short-cycle tertiary education; ISCED 6: Bachelor's or equivalent level; ISCED 7: Master's or equivalent level; ISCED 8: Doctoral or equivalent level.

Box 1.1 below details the two main reasons for using a specific framework in this study.

Box 1.1 – Rationale for adopting the two-dimensional typology of youth welfare citizenship

Transitional issues: Chevalier's (2016, 2019) theory focuses on the expected outcomes for young people's transition: independence and autonomy. Therefore, the model acknowledges the transitional nature of youth, but also the hurdles of the process of becoming an adult. Young people take longer to establish their professional identities and leave their parents' homes (Pastore, Quintano and Rocca 2021). This trend reflects positive societal shifts (like higher rates of young people enrolled in university) but longer transitions also involve societal challenges (such as precariousness). In addition, youth transitions are more fragmented, involving multiple combinations of part-time jobs, precariousness, spells of unemployment or unreported work, which also prevents young people from achieving a fully independent life. In this context, the transition to adulthood is particularly challenging for vulnerable groups, including those from low-income households, ethnically diverse backgrounds (Mascherini 2019) and/or peripheral and rural areas (Simões et al. 2023).

Multiple angles of analysis – from the individual to systems of youth welfare: young people increasingly prepare for adulthood outside the institutionalised policies and official support systems. This gap results from the ongoing development of public policies, systems of support and benefits for addressing the "tripartition of the life course" – meaning the separation of childhood, adulthood and old age. Therefore, youth as a life stage is often ignored by welfare policies, illustrated by a generalised lack of policies designed for youth (Chevalier 2016). This applies to groups with fewer opportunities, such as rural youth (Simões 2022). The pathways to adulthood tend to be more demanding in rural areas due to a shortage of relevant on-the-ground public services (Shore and Tosun 2019), higher levels of distrust in institutions (Bæck 2016) and excessive reliance on informal social support for addressing pressing transitional issues such as finding a job (Bello and Cuzzocrea 2018). Departing from the two-dimensional citizenship typology (Chevalier 2016, 2019), this report assesses the influence of individual factors (like gender, age and educational attainment), country and different types or clusters of welfare systems in shaping the transition of rural youth to adulthood across various dimensions (such as employment). Reading the findings from this angle helps to understand how much the institutional framework matters in shaping the trajectories of rural youth into adulthood.

The use of the two-dimensional typology of youth welfare citizenship (Chevalier 2016; 2019) involved three important differences described in Box 1.2.

Box 1.2 – Adapting the two-dimensional typology of youth welfare citizenship

Baseline indicators – Overall, the research team relied on the same indicators used by Chevalier (2016, 2019) with two exceptions. For the economic dimension, the analysis also included the share of young people in formal education (the 15 to 29 age group). For the social citizenship dimension, the share of young people

(aged 18-24) in receipt of unemployment benefits, disability benefits or any other social benefit was removed from the analysis due to the lack of available, comparable data. This indicator was replaced by the best available proxy indicator: the share of unemployed young people aged 18 to 30 receiving assistance from public employment services.

Time points – The replication of Chevalier's (2016, 2019) typology was based on the data collected for one year: 2023. The original proposal clustered a few selected countries with averaged data for longer time periods (2004-2011, for example).

Limitations – The option for an overall model to frame and interpret the findings provides a comparative grid based on common indicators that cluster countries closer to each other regarding transition patterns. However, this approach has at least three important limitations that must be acknowledged. First, as some authors (Brzinsky-Fay 2014; Jorgensen, Jarvinen and Lundahl 2019) have rightly pointed out, policies and welfare support systems are becoming increasingly diverse, even in countries usually clustered together, such as the Nordic countries. Second, the welfare policies and support systems aimed at youth in the former communist countries or emergent welfare regimes are difficult to compare with western European countries in this respect (Broka and Toots 2022). The access and nature of educational systems, the scope and breadth of vocational and education training or the links between education and the labour market vary considerably between these countries. These differences are relevant even between countries grouped together, such as the Baltic states. Broka and Toots (2022) have rerun Chevalier's (2016, 2019) model for some of the emergent welfare states (like Bulgaria and Estonia), refining the initial indicators to provide a more nuanced and accurate positioning of these countries. Unfortunately, due to data availability and time constraints, it was not possible in the context of this research project to adopt this more elaborate strategy. Third, using an indicator to cluster the social dimension, focusing only on employment benefits instead of multiple social benefits, is a narrower approach to the social protection role of states. Unemployment benefits depend on national labour markets and school-to-work transition dynamics of each country. For instance, lower access to unemployment benefits can portray a weak social protection system (as in Bulgaria), as well as an early enrolment in the labour market based on strong vocational and education training systems (as in Germany).

Chapter 2

Methodological note

Goal

The goal of this report is to examine the situation of rural youth aged 18 to 30 across European countries in the pre- and post-Covid period (2019-2023) to inform policy making at European, national and regional levels.

Study dimensions

To achieve the central research goal, the report covered six key dimensions. The selected dimensions involve multiple and, at times, competing tasks of transitioning from youth to adulthood in rural areas: education; support systems; youth participation; employment; mobility; and culture, leisure and sports. These dimensions are, in turn, organised into two categories. Education, informal support and youth participation are considered individual key drivers of (un)successful transitions to adulthood among rural youth, due to their role in easing or complicating transitional pathways. Employment, mobility, and leisure, culture and sports are seen as transitional outcomes shaped by the individual key drivers (such as education), country of origin and youth welfare citizenship clusters.

Research sites

The survey was open and disseminated among rural youth across Europe. A total of 14 countries³ were included in this study: Armenia, Austria, Croatia, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Serbia and Spain. The only criterion for inclusion was that at least 20 participants from each country had completed 50% of a survey to grasp rural youth's perspectives about their lives and experiences. Five countries were also targeted for an in-depth policy and practices/projects analysis: Armenia, Estonia, Ireland, Romania and Spain. These five countries were selected to balance geographical diversity, with relevance and research feasibility.

Levels of analysis

The research project involved a mixed-methods approach spread across five analytical levels. The institutional set-up level and the trends analysis provided an overview of

3. The study includes member states of both the Council of Europe and the European Union.

the transitions of rural youth living in rural areas, based on secondary data (Chapter 3). The remaining three levels combined primary and secondary sourced data to reach a detailed understanding of facilitators of and barriers to rural youth transitions, highlighting grassroots experiences and rural youth's perspectives (Chapter 4).

- ▶ **Institutional set-up.** Based on the two-dimensional typology of youth welfare citizenship (Chevalier 2016, 2019), the research team conducted two rounds of analysis for grouping or clustering countries based on social and economic indicators. The first round of analysis included all European countries of the Council of Europe with available data in the selected indicators covered by the two-dimensional typology of youth welfare citizenship. The second one focused only on the 14 countries included in the study. This approach seemed reasonable to: a) fully retest Chevalier's (2016, 2019) model, considering the relative position of each country regarding other countries, a goal that could only be achieved by considering those that did meet the study's inclusion criteria (like Nordic countries); and b) regroup countries included in the study in a meaningful way, while considering the two-dimensional typology of youth welfare citizenship indicators and rationale. The adaptation of the two-dimensional typology of youth welfare citizenship involved a synthesis of the selected indicators used by this model based on a principal components analysis (PCA), followed by a cluster analysis (involving 30 countries with available data points) and an adaptation of this classification to the 14 countries included in this study. These procedures delivered a three-cluster solution presented in Chapter 3. All the statistical procedures for reaching a final clustering solution are detailed in the appendix.
- ▶ **Trends level.** The main trends affecting rural youth were assessed using public data. These data refer to publicly available indicators from Eurostat databases or key international surveys, such as the Eurobarometer. At least one leading indicator was selected by each dimension covered in this study (such as participation) to illustrate the trends affecting rural youth. Data extracted by degree of urbanisation came from different databases for 2019 and 2023, with a few exceptions. For instance, for some indicators, databases did not provide data points for 2023 for one or two countries. In that case, the research team collected 2022 data points. Also, for the youth participation and leisure, culture and sports dimensions, the most relevant data points from the Eurobarometer databases were only available for 2024. Furthermore, Armenia was not included in this analysis. Although the research team tried to collect public data for this country, the data points were not comparable to Eurostat's indicators or did not exist.
- ▶ **Policies level.** This level of analysis provided an overview of public policy measures (whether universal or targeted) addressing each of the six selected dimensions for this study. The research efforts tried to uncover policy responses to the Covid-19 pandemic and compare the pre- and post-pandemic context where possible. This layer of the report employed a conceptual framework informed by earlier and ongoing work of the Youth Partnership in the area of youth and public policy (EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership 2021; EU–Council of Europe Partnership 2023a). The policy research included a broad corpus of policy documents and institutional websites compiled

through purposive sampling. This initial selection was guided by relevance to the target group under investigation – rural youth – with national experts providing significant support in the identification process. The research team translated the documents from the original languages using Google Translate and DeepL. The research team member responsible for this task conducted a systematic content analysis across more than 100 policy documents and institutional websites spanning all five countries (Armenia, Estonia, Ireland, Romania and Spain). Through qualitative thematic analysis, these materials were examined for explicit references to rural youth and associated policy interventions. As anticipated in such document-based policy research, the initial sampling frame yielded a notably smaller subset of approximately 50 documents and websites containing substantive content addressing rural youth. This refined corpus was subsequently subjected to a more granular discourse analysis to evaluate the representation patterns of rural youth and intervention frameworks targeting them.

- ▶ **Practices and projects level.** This level of analysis encompassed an in-depth analysis of promising/good practices aimed at rural youth. This inquiry identified the main features of good practice in youth work aimed at rural youth and how these practices addressed their needs, including those with fewer opportunities. Two main methods were used to collect relevant data. The research process began with a desk analysis. This method provides immediate, verifiable results, based on information already available from sources such as official documents, project reports or public policy documents, according to the research needs (Bynner and Chisholm 1998).
- ▶ Alongside, the research process involved a practices/case studies analysis. The case studies focused on practices and projects implemented by non-governmental organisations with and for rural youth in the countries chosen for an in-depth analysis. This involved primary data, generated through an analysis of organisations, programmes and projects, triangulated with information gathered during a one-day workshop in Brussels and a secondary analysis based on a desk review of multiple sources (project reports, project descriptions, policy and documents and public statements from NGOs).
- ▶ In total, 50 practices were included in a screening analysis across the five selected countries (Armenia, Estonia, Ireland, Romania and Spain). In the end, nine practices were included in an in-depth analysis combining data points from desk research and the one-day participatory workshop.
- ▶ The practices and projects analysis followed a vertical comparative approach, starting at the supra-national/European level and moving to the national and local levels. This approach relied on the fact that the European policy level sets a framework and funding opportunities for relevant national and local actors, including private ones, to address rural youth needs. One important feature of the analysis was its qualitative approach, allowing the researchers to capture nuances and specific features of the analysed cases at the European and national/local levels (Vollmer 2004).
- ▶ The five countries selected for an in-depth analysis allowed for a clear and more detailed contextualisation and explanation of their key ideas and underlying

work processes. This approach also enabled the capturing of experiences and lessons learned with and for rural youth, while targeting youth needs and interests through direct, grassroots intervention (Landman 2003).

- ▶ The sampling method used for practices was the snowball method, using a bottom-up approach, considering that the practices and projects reflected a co-creation design, meaning they were developed with and for young people in rural areas. This sampling approach ensures reaching organisations working on the ground, which are often beneficiaries of the European granting opportunities, instead of those involved in the policy processes.
- ▶ **Young people's perspectives level.** This level was addressed through an online survey to examine the perceptions of rural youth aged 18 to 30 regarding the six dimensions covered by this research project. All survey-based data collection was conducted using SurveyMonkey software. The original survey was developed in English and translated into 18 languages: Albanian, Armenian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Dutch, Estonian, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Lithuanian, Portuguese, Romanian, Serbian, Spanish and Turkish. The translation was done using Google Translate to provide a first version and a thorough revision by native speakers.⁴ The survey was made available from 15 October 2024 to 31 January 2025. The survey was disseminated through the Youth Partnership website, social media channels and national contact points. The research team also involved their networks (including the European Rural Youth Observatory, the European Union Rural Pact Coordination Group and national NGOs) to further disseminate it. The survey involved a total of 7 548 participants. Of these, 2 503 participants were included in the final survey analysis, comprising those who were: living in one of the member states of the EU or Council of Europe ; had completed at least 50% of the survey; gave their residence as being in a rural area based on information provided about their municipality and postal code. These two elements (living in a European country and having completed at least 50% of the survey) were checked against Eurostat's database of municipalities and postal code database by degree of urbanisation.⁵ Of those who were excluded, 3 029 had filled in at least 50% of the questionnaire, including those who opened the survey but did not provide their consent to participate, 1 561 lived in cities or suburban areas, 246 were based in countries that provided fewer than 20 respondents and nine came from countries that were not part of the Council of Europe. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics to portray the main results by each of the study's dimensions. These results were presented for the overall participants, as well as by individual factors, namely gender, age groups (18-24 and 25-30) and by clusters of countries. To move one step forward, the research team also tried to understand how individual factors and key drivers of rural transitions (education, support systems and participation) were associated with transitional outcomes (employment, mobility and satisfaction with culture, leisure

4. Translations were reviewed by correspondents from the European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKCYP) and members of the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR) and its Advisory Group, networks managed by the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership.

5. Postal codes by degree of urbanisation can be checked here: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/gisco/geodata/administrative-units/postal-codes>.

and sports) as well as with a measure of general satisfaction with rural areas. To achieve this goal, the report includes the results of a series of regression analyses for the overall participants as well as by clusters of countries. The details of these statistical analyses are presented in the appendix.

Methodological limitations

At the trends analysis level, it was not possible to find comparable indicators for Armenia, despite the efforts made by the research team. Also, for some indicators and countries (such as Malta), the latest available indicators for rural areas were provided for 2022.

At the policy level, the main limitations arose from the scope of the analysis and the nature of policy development, implementation and evaluation. In real life, interventions span multiple documents, especially when they extend over several years and involve multiple institutions. The situation becomes far more complex in larger countries with intricate public administration systems and extensive regional and municipal autonomy. The European layer adds further complexity in EU countries, creating multilevel relationships that extend beyond simple European Commission–national government interactions. From a methodological perspective, researchers would need to understand all connections, interdependencies and regulations across different administrative levels, as well as have intricate details of funding and reporting mechanisms. This information is scattered across numerous documents in various national languages. Consequently, obtaining an adequate and comprehensive picture of rural youth situations and their evolution presents significant challenges.

At the practices and projects level, nine cases were selected to ensure the geographical and thematic representation of the key transitional dimensions chosen for the analysis. This selection was limited by barriers such as failing to find organisations working with and for rural youth – either due to language barriers or to the inability of team members/leaders involved with other activities to participate in the workshop held in Brussels – and by the lack of a response from some of the organisations that were recommended by individuals (experts, researchers and other NGO representatives) to the calls from the research team. Therefore, the case studies' findings cannot be seen as a universal representation of the rural youth work field. Instead, they show the diversity and uniqueness of the practices and projects in this field, while underlining some commonalities and targeting a few challenges and areas of improvement.

At the rural youth perspectives level, a huge effort was made to make sure the participants represented the different youth voices. The survey was translated into multiple languages and made available online. Moreover, the study was presented to several stakeholders in a dedicated webinar and the dissemination efforts involved several channels, including on-the-ground organisations. While the final number of participants exceeded the expectations, the sample is biased towards more educated rural youth. The educational profile of the participants is not representative of rural youth realities, nor can the results of the survey be generalised.

Chapter 3

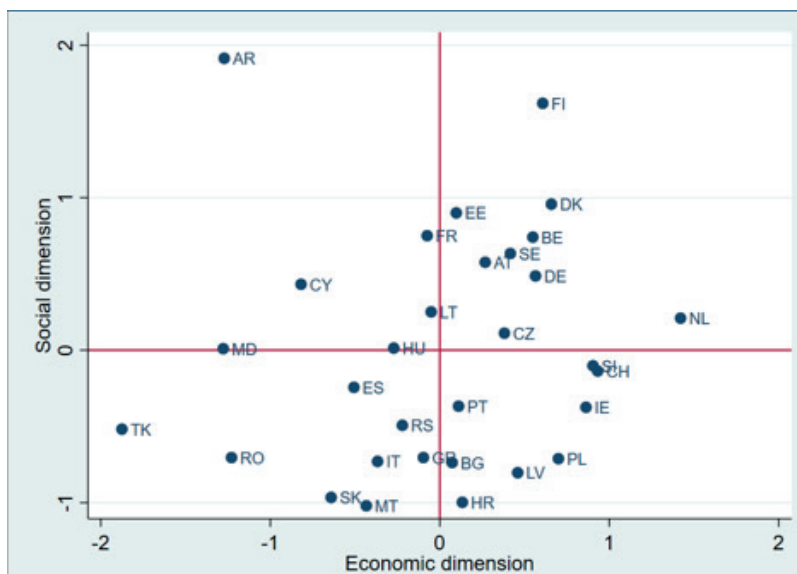
Setting the context for understanding rural youth in a time of polycrisis

State promotion of young people's transition, starting with the two-dimensional typology of youth welfare citizenship

Improving the odds of promising livelihoods among rural youth depends on how states roll out their policies. Do the policy packages for rural youth provide enough support for a full, prosperous life? Do they combine the right set of resources? Are they robust enough? And how do they compare with each other, in the context of polycrisis? Are these institutional changes in some countries positive or negative? As mentioned earlier, this report addressed these questions by adopting an institutional set-up analysis. This involved replicating Chevalier's (2016, 2019) two-dimensional typology, thus adding a layer to the contextualisation of the transition by rural youth to adulthood across Europe.

Figure 3.1 presents a replication of Chevalier's (2016 2019) two-dimensional typology of youth welfare citizenship. This figure shows some of the patterns found by this author and subsequent works (Broka and Toots 2022), but only to a certain extent.

Figure 3.1 – Replication of the two-dimensional typology of youth welfare citizenship



As shown in Figure 3.1, countries grouped under the “denied citizenship” label, typically showing patterns of low institutional support and worse economic prospects in the transition to the labour market, remain in that cluster (such as Italy or Spain), with other southern (like Malta) and south-eastern countries (like Romania) presenting the same pattern. In the other extreme, labelled as “enabling citizenship”, Nordic countries (like Finland) as well as some Baltic countries (Estonia) confirm their status as countries providing high support and promising economic conditions to facilitate the transition to the labour market. The intermediate layers of the typology present some different patterns. The quadrant corresponding to the “second-class citizenship” label does not reflect the liberal economic stand regarding the transition to adulthood, with countries such as Armenia, Cyprus, France or Lithuania falling into this category. At the same time, the “monitored citizenship” bracket, offering substantial support to young individuals but with strict conditions and monitoring, does not include countries that would typically fall into this group, such as Austria and Germany, while others that would usually be in the denied citizenship cluster, such as Belgium or Portugal, are moving in this direction.

The unusual findings, especially in the second-class and monitored citizenship areas, can be explained by the three reasons listed below.

- ▶ **Coverage of countries.** The analysis included non-EU countries such as Türkiye, Moldova or Armenia, which were never included in the two-dimensional typology of youth welfare citizenship. This shapes the distribution of countries across different groups, as clustering is affected by the relative position of each country. For instance, Germany shares the same cluster with Nordic countries because countries in the extremes, showing lower institutional support and worse economic conditions associated with the transition to adulthood, caused this country to move up to a more favourable quadrant.
- ▶ **Time points.** While Chevalier (2016) has used a long-time series and average results for each indicator (2004-2011), the research team used only one time point.
- ▶ **Changes in institutional support or economic conditions.** The indicators were clustered for 2023. Even accounting for the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the overall conditions leading to more positive transitions changed dramatically in some countries. The period covered by Chevalier (2016, 2019) overlaps with the 2008 economic recession marked by high youth unemployment and a sharp increase in NEET levels. These indicators improved significantly in some of the most hard-hit countries. For instance, in Portugal, the share of early school leavers significantly decreased from 17.3% to 8.1% and the NEET level came down from 14.6% to 8.9%. In Ireland, the economic conditions have improved with youth unemployment shares for those aged 15-24 dropping from 23.4% in 2014 to 10.7% in 2023. In contrast, in some countries such as Sweden, youth unemployment rates remained high in the last decade (22.9% in 2014; 22.1% in 2023). Other countries, such as Germany, were affected by increasing shares of early school leavers from education and training (9.5% in 2014; 12.8% in 2023). Thus, in a dynamic context, even after discounting the inclusion of non-EU countries in the analysis, some countries have moved along the intersection between institutional support and economic conditions, with some improving their relative position regarding others.

To better reflect how the countries included in the present study positioned themselves along the social and economic conditions associated with labour market transitions, the research team conducted an additional analysis. This combined PCA Principal with Cluster Analysis statistical techniques, but this time involving only the countries on which the study was focused (14 countries involved in the survey). Following this approach, we identified three clusters, presented in Box 3.1.

Box 3.1 – Clusters of countries reflecting the transition in the countries included in the study

Constrained citizenship. In this cluster, young individuals receive limited support from the state, leading to a high reliance on family resources. Labour market policies are not inclusive, making it challenging for youth to achieve financial independence. Young individuals in these countries are strongly limited in their independence and, thus, at greater risk of prolonged dependence on family and delayed transitions into adulthood. **Countries: Armenia and Romania.**

Uncertain citizenship. Here, the state provides a low level of support to young people. Labour market integration strategies may exist but are not comprehensive. The transition heavily depends on transient improvements in labour market conditions, heavily shaped by international economic conditions or booming sectors, leading to uncertain transition paths. Thus, young people's needs are not systematically acknowledged and transition results can be very distinct – prolonged dependence from family to full independence – due to the economic context. **Countries: Croatia, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Serbia and Spain.**

Progressive citizenship. In this model, the state offers support to young individuals, but this can range from somewhat low levels of support (as in Ireland) to more robust institutional support (as in Germany). Some countries attach that support to strict conditions and monitoring (like Austria), while others consider providing more universal support without so many conditions attached (like Estonia). Labour market policies are more homogeneous and comparatively more inclusive. The pathway to independence is more certain compared to the other two clusters, ranging from a more guided approach (as in Austria) to a more person-centred, universalistic approach (as in Estonia). **Countries: Austria, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland and Lithuania.**

Rural youth transitions: trends analysis

Rural youth face some common challenges compared to other youths living in (sub)urban areas. Attaining a good education, finding a meaningful and rewarding job, achieving financial independence, readjusting social relationships with peers, parents and intimate partners, or making purposeful use of free time are just a few of them (Arnett 2023). However, these challenges, as well as transitional pathways, can be exacerbated by living in more remote and sometimes under-resourced communities, particularly after large-scale disruptions such as the Covid-19 pandemic (EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership 2021). The combined impacts of rurality with an international crisis cut across multiple key domains of rural youth's lives.

To provide a sense of these impacts, this part of the report offers an overview of how key transition conditions for rural youth have evolved for the 2019-2023 period, by country and degree of urbanisation. This exploration a. covers all the dimensions of this study (such as education); b. relies on pivotal public indicators from all countries, except for Armenia because of a lack of comparable data; c. offers a shortlist of the main reasons behind the identified trends; and d. highlights positive exceptions to the main negative trends.

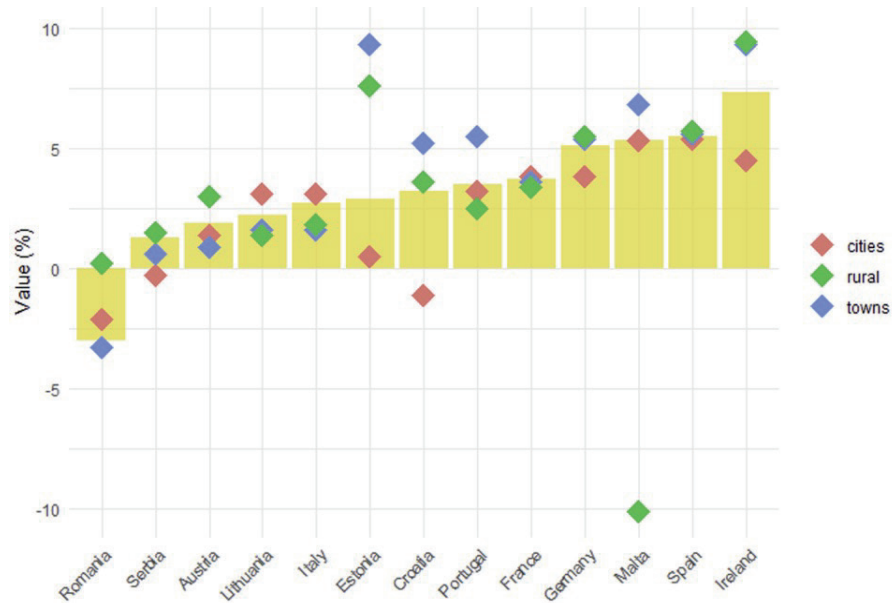
Education

Educational attainment is often presented in public discourse as the main way to achieve a prosperous and fulfilling life. Indeed, higher education levels lead to better economic and social outcomes for individuals (Mocca, Rojon and Hernández 2019; Terschuur 2023), as, for instance, there are more successful transitions from school to work (EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership 2023b; Mascherini 2019).

Academic results differ between rural regions and (sub)urban areas in various European countries, with the former usually performing worse (Choudry and Pastore 2023). Educational underperformance is evident at both secondary and tertiary education levels. One useful indicator to assess secondary educational performance across different types of territories is early school leaving from education and training – meaning the share of those aged 18 to 24 years old who dropped out of school without completing secondary education. Several data points are missing by the degree of urbanisation for the period 2019-2023 for the countries included in this snapshot analysis, thus not rendering very useful conclusions. However, overall, in 2019, the proportion of those aged 18 to 24 years in this situation was somewhat identical across rural areas (10.8%), towns and suburbs (11.1%) and cities (9%) in the European Union. In 2023, rates of early leaving from education and training had declined across all types of territories but remained higher in rural areas (9.9%) compared with cities (8.6%), but below the rates for towns and suburbs (10.6%). Importantly, the disparities by degree of urbanisation regarding early school leaving were bigger in southern and eastern European countries, reaching sometimes more than 20% (as in Romania).

The differences between (sub)urban and rural areas are more compelling when considering higher levels of educational attainment. For instance, the tertiary educational attainment among those aged 25-34, meaning the share of the population in this age group who completed a university degree, depicts bigger territorial differences. As shown by Figure 3.2, between 2019 and 2023, Romania was the only country showing a drop in this indicator (–3.0%). All other countries presented an increase in tertiary education attainment rates, with Ireland presenting the most significant absolute evolution in this indicator (+7%). In rural areas, Romania, both in 2019 (8.6%) and 2023 (8.8%), presented the lowest tertiary education attainment rates, compared with the highest shares in Malta (57.9%) in 2019 and in Ireland (56.2%) in 2023. Importantly, in all countries covered by this analysis, the share of those attaining a university degree improved in rural areas, except in Malta.

Figure 3.2 – Variation by country and degree of urbanisation in the share of tertiary education attainment (25-34 years old) (2019-2023; %)



Source: Eurostat: https://doi.org/10.2908/EDAT_LFS_9913 (data extracted on 26.02.25). Note: Data extracted for Malta is for 2019 and 2022.

Lower academic performance in rural areas reveals important structural inequalities faced by young people in these territories. Such disparities are driven by two main sets of reasons.

- **Social factors.** These include rural parents' lower participation in their children's school life, a mismatch between communities' traditional values and school's liberal worldviews (Bæck 2016) or greater shares of students coming from more vulnerable socio-economic households (with, for example, greater exposure to parental unemployment or precariousness) (Garcia et al. 2023).
- **Educational factors.** These refer to lower investments in infrastructure (school buildings, for instance), digital resources, equipment and networks, particularly in more deprived rural territories with larger shares of vulnerable students (Castillo et al. 2024), or reduced capacity to retain teachers and, thus, prevent turnover (Reagan et al. 2019).

Box 3.2 – Rural academic underperformance: exceptions and rising trends

Rural academic underperformance has some exceptions. A recent report shows that Portuguese rural municipalities achieved higher levels of secondary school attainment between 2009 and 2018, and that these differences were significantly greater by 2013, than high-density (mostly urban and suburban) municipalities (Garcia et al. 2023). Meanwhile, the educational gaps between rural and urban areas may shrink over the next years, but not for the best reasons. Educational attainment and overall school performance are expected to drop in high-density

areas, especially in the suburban belts of major cities. These areas are becoming more diverse, hosting a rising number of first-generation migrant families. Migrant children make up a disproportionate share of students with lower educational attainment (OECD 2023). These communities often depend on low-resourced public programmes for accessing education. As a result, (sub)urban schools struggle to respond to students' growing diverse backgrounds, leading to worse school outcomes in more affluent territories (Garcia et al. 2023).

Support systems

Support systems comprise the network of social relationships that provide resources to address practical (access to money and resources), social (community engagement) or emotional (developing personal positive ties) needs. Support sources are roughly divided into two main groups. Institutional support refers to the resources and assistance provided by organisations in the form of policies, programmes or facilities, to help individuals cope with relevant challenges (San and Guo 2023). In turn, informal support encompasses the provision of caring, love, interest, help or encouragement in interpersonal relationships, across groups such as families or friends (Sarason and Sarason 2009).

Institutional support is crucial to addressing transitional challenges such as early school leaving, youth unemployment, poverty or mental health issues. This type of support can involve multiple sectors (education, employment, welfare and health). In turn, informal support is often associated with more immediate social and emotional individual outcomes such as well-being. This is not to say that institutional support cannot shape the social and emotional needs of young people in the transition to adulthood, including in rural areas. Indeed, there is increasing evidence that support provided by, for instance, employment services is associated with increased levels of hope (Simões 2024) or life satisfaction (Mazzocchi et al. 2024) among vulnerable rural youth such as those not in education, employment or training. Still, it is important to note that some international surveys have captured a decline in perceived support from the community in rural areas, particularly in the most remote areas (European Commission 2021a).

Institutional and informal support often clash in rural areas. Institutions operating in the countryside struggle to reach, engage with and meet rural youth's requirements, particularly in the case of the most vulnerable (Smoter 2022). On the other hand, the overreliance of rural youth on support from family members and friends to, for instance, find a job increases the risk of perpetuating social disadvantage across generations. This risk stems from the fact that families tend to transmit to their children the same barriers they are faced with (such as precariousness, low-qualified jobs or poverty) (Bello and Cuzzocrea 2018).

Given the importance of labour market inclusion in the transition from youth to adulthood, the role of public employment services as key providers of institutional support becomes more pivotal. Figure 3.3 presents the variation in the share of unemployed young people receiving assistance from public employment services between 2019 and 2023. The services' role includes providing access to employment benefits and support for skills development, training and/or job finding. Germany in

2019 (51.2%) and 2023 (42.2%) was the country showing the highest shares of unemployed young people receiving support from public employment services among the countries included in this report. Croatia was at the opposite end of the scale in both 2019 (7.7%) and 2023 (8.0%). For this period, Germany was also the country presenting the biggest drop in the share of unemployed young people receiving support from public employment services, in contrast to Lithuania (+7.5%). In five countries included in the analysis, there was an increase in the share of unemployed young people receiving support from public employment services in rural areas. The biggest increase in these regions occurred in Estonia and Lithuania (12.5%), while the most significant decrease during this period occurred in Germany (–11.0%).

Figure 3.3 – Variation in the share of unemployed young people (18-30 years old) receiving assistance from public employment services by country and degree of urbanisation (2019-2023; %)



Source: ad hoc calculation based on Eurostat Labour Force Survey (data extracted on 26.02.25). Note: Ireland was excluded because of missing data points. For Malta, the share of unemployed young people was too low to calculate accurate estimates.

Support systems for rural youth are hampered by several important constraints.

- **Limited infrastructure.** Infrastructure covers both facilities and human resources in terms of qualified personnel to deliver services. Limited infrastructure leads to narrower access to and lower coverage of public services. These caveats affect, for instance, education and employment outcomes. The rollout of curricula and training programmes in rural areas is complicated by a worse physical infrastructure, namely a lower quality of school buildings, greater distances between students’ homes and schools (Bæck 2016) or the lower capacity to attract and retain high-quality teachers (Reagan et al. 2019). In turn, employment services struggle with a lack of on-the-ground services

and personnel and insufficient collaboration with third-sector organisations capable of amplifying the interventions' impacts (Smoter 2022).

- ▶ **Service co-ordination and outreach.** Service co-ordination and outreach involve a collaboration across multiple relevant sectors (education, health, employment, welfare) to target and meet individual needs (Trein, Thomann and Maggetti 2019). Such intersectoral collaboration efforts are seen as a solution for transitional challenges such as early school leaving or poverty, including in rural areas. Examples of co-ordination and outreach efforts include one-stop shops, integrated community centres, digital outreach or multiprofessional teams/programmes. Recent research programmes such as the Rural NEET Youth Network (<https://rnyobservatory.eu/>) have detailed a major concern about the limited co-ordination of service in rural areas. This limitation prevents person-centred approaches, meaning those able to tailor institutional support to everyone's needs (Flynn 2021; Paaborg and Beilmann 2021; Petrescu et al. 2022).
- ▶ **Distrust in institutions.** Limited or ineffective institutional support feeds distrust in institutions among rural youth. As a result, informal support provided by families, friends and communities often becomes critical to shaping rural youth educational choices, professional trajectories or social participation experiences. In this context, resources made available through institutional channels (such as training or job counselling) are deemed irrelevant or not used. Restricted access to education, especially among rural women (Bæck 2016), or lower access to qualified and decent jobs (Simões 2024) are some of the outcomes stemming from this situation.

Box 3.3 – Institutional support in rural areas: some innovative approaches

Despite institutional support in rural areas in fields such as employment or education being mostly limited and inefficient, there are promising pathways to be pursued. Some institutional support co-ordination efforts have been tested and seem promising to increase reach-out to and engagement with rural youth, including those on the fringes. For instance, Bulgaria has adopted a model of mobile public employment services (Ribeiro et al. 2024) and Slovenia has been rolling out mobile youth centres across the country (Mladi Zmaji 2025). At the same time, the digitalisation of services during the Covid-19 pandemic seemed more effective to engage with inactive young women who struggle to go to employment services offices because of family care duties (Simões 2024).

Youth participation

Youth participation refers to young people's engagement in an activity to achieve a collective goal, through social action, volunteering, collective action, voting or protesting (Pozzi, Pistoni and Alfieri 2017). Over the years, participation has become a buzzword. True participatory processes rely on youth-initiated and directed initiatives based on decision-making processes shared with adults. These forms of participation are very different from initiatives controlled by adults that prevent young people's voices from being heard (such as "manipulation decoration" or tokenism) (Aresi et al. 2023; Hart 1992).

Table 3.1. presents an overview of young people's participation trends by degree of urbanisation based on a survey from the Eurobarometer. These data show that non-formal examples of youth participation, such as engagement in voluntary activities or youth clubs, are preferred by young people, irrespective of where they live. This is particularly true compared to more institutionalised forms of participation, including involvement in political parties or niches of participation, such as being a member of a human rights organisation.

There are differences in participation across countries, with higher shares of young people living in cities or towns and suburbs involved in different forms of participation compared with those living in rural areas. These differences can be very considerable (for example, in Ireland 35% of young people living in cities are engaged in a youth club, compared with only 20% in rural areas) or very narrow (for instance, 12% of young people living in cities in Germany are involved in a political party, compared with 10% in towns and suburbs and rural areas). There are only a few exceptions to this trend, certainly reflecting local trends. For instance, rural youth in Germany and Portugal are more often involved in a youth club. The same trend is evident in Portugal and Italy for engagement in cultural organisations as well as in France and Romania in the case of involvement in political parties. The shares of Italian and Spanish young people involved in action to address climate change are also higher in rural areas. In addition, involvement in organisations advocating human rights is higher in rural areas of Italy.

Rural youth encounter multiple barriers to expressing their views and having them seriously considered by decision makers and local leaders. Some of the most relevant roadblocks to the participation of rural youth are listed below.

- ▶ **Lack of representativeness** – Rural communities' decision-making platforms are frequently dominated by older generations that set local agendas and reproduce local values/traditions.
- ▶ **Disadvantages of close social ties** – The space for participation in rural areas is constrained by ethnically homogeneous social networks, strong informal relationships and a sense of loyalty to local values. Conformity to this status quo prevents young people's expression of their worldviews, especially when these clash with traditional, dominant values (Simões et al. 2023).
- ▶ **Limited resources** – Initiatives aimed at youth participation in rural areas struggle to secure access and combine resources at multiple levels, including policies and programmes, institutional support systems and informal social networks (Ferreira et al. 2024).

Table 3.1 – Young people's participation trends by degree of urbanisation (%)

		Youth participation																				
Youth clubs		Cultural organisations				Political organisations				Voluntary activities				Fight against climate change				Human rights organisations				
Cities	Towns	Total	Cities	Towns	Rural	Total	Cities	Towns	Rural	Total	Cities	Towns	Rural	Total	Cities	Towns	Rural	Total	Cities	Towns	Rural	Total
	25	25	20	13	13	15	10	8	8	8	18	15	17	17	13	12	9	11	14	15	7	12
Austria	25	15	12	17	19	13	14	15	8	7	10	22	16	18	19	18	7	9	11	4	8	9
Croatia	23	25	17	23	13	17	13	14	11	7	9	18	22	12	18	14	15	12	14	8	10	3
Estonia	18	16	17	17	21	15	16	17	6	6	7	22	11	13	15	8	6	8	7	5	6	6
France	16	16	24	19	15	11	10	12	9	8	7	14	15	17	15	14	10	9	11	13	8	9
Denmark	35	25	20	28	20	16	14	17	12	10	11	23	24	22	23	14	17	10	14	22	18	12
Ireland	12	15	13	14	16	16	17	16	7	6	7	14	19	14	17	11	11	12	12	13	17	13
Italy	19	25	19	21	13	18	14	15	7	8	7	19	24	19	21	11	12	8	11	14	14	9
Lithuania	30	24	19	25	15	19	9	15	13	9	7	23	25	23	24	21	20	13	19	23	16	19
Malta	13	18	19	16	11	14	16	14	8	10	7	20	16	17	18	8	6	8	7	11	8	9
Portugal	22	19	17	19	16	13	10	13	7	6	10	30	28	20	26	13	6	7	9	12	14	12
Romania	19	20	18	19	18	14	13	15	6	6	5	17	16	14	16	9	7	13	9	10	9	7

Source: Eurobarometer <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3181> (data extracted on 23.02.25).

Box 3.4 – Youth participation in rural areas: promising avenues

Despite the existing barriers to meaningful participation, younger generations, even in very remote rural areas, are interested in being socially active to help solve specific local problems (Simões et al. 2023). Moreover, megatrends such as the green or the digital transition can lead to greater levels of youth participation and intergenerational co-operation in different areas (such as developing new skills), although a potential for tensions between different generations also exists (European Commission 2021a). Policies pushing for sustainable farming will also imply greater collaboration between young people and the elderly to improve the management of local resources while reflecting a sense of local uniqueness and perpetuating local values (Mujčinović et al. 2024). Some concrete efforts are moving in that direction. For instance, in December 2023, Malta passed groundbreaking legislation allowing 16 and 17 year olds to run for mayor or deputy mayor, making it the first EU country to grant such rights. This reform empowers youth to not only vote but also hold executive municipal roles, including signing official documents. This has the potential to enable greater youth participation in rural areas (Foundation for European Progressive Studies 2025). In Portugal's border regions, municipalities are establishing youth councils to involve young people in local governance and regional development (Silva et al. 2021). These councils, supported by schools and youth associations, empower elected young people to advise on sustainability, civic issues and policy planning. The strategy addresses challenges like geographic isolation and weak outreach by formalising youth participation structures. Municipalities such as Almeida or Bragança have adopted this model, enabling young people to propose initiatives that enhance community resilience.

Employment

Rural employment prospects are shaped by declining local economies. Rural labour markets are dominated by the farming sector, composed of family-owned businesses or big farms based on intensive farming (Mujčinović et al. 2024), and the dismantling of industrial capacity with the consequent loss of skilled workers. This leaves rural youth without the opportunity to learn and be mentored by older professionals (Zipin et al. 2015).

Despite this negative economic outlook, some indicators show mixed trends for labour markets for the past few years. Figure 3.4 depicts the variation in the share of employment rates for people aged 15 to 39 between 2019 and 2023. Across the countries included in this overall analysis, Romania (–6.4%) and Portugal (–0.3%) were the only ones showing a decrease in the employment rates of those aged 15 to 39. All the other countries presented an increase in this indicator, with Malta depicting the most significant increase (+5.8%). In most of the countries included in this snapshot analysis, the share of those aged 15 to 39 who are unemployed has increased in rural areas. In seven of them, rural areas outperformed cities and towns and suburbs. Estonia (+6.6%) leads in terms of positive variation between 2019 and 2023. This result contrasts with Malta (–6.2%) for the same period.

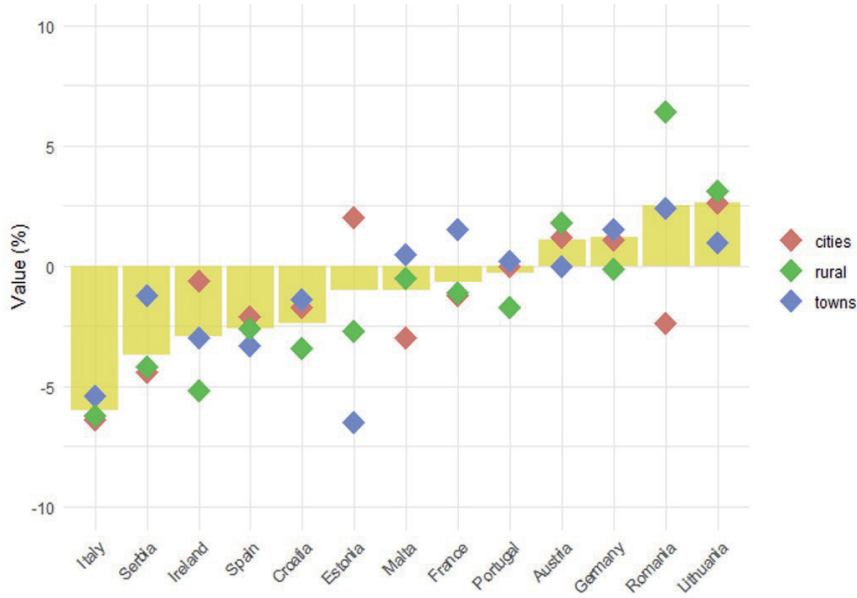
Figure 3.4 – Variation by country and degree of urbanisation in the share of employment rate (15-39 years old) (2019-2023; %)



Source: Eurostat: https://doi.org/10.2908/LFST_R_ERGAU (data extracted on 26.02.25).

Figure 3.5 focuses on the NEET rate variation by country and degree of urbanisation between 2019 and 2023. This indicator combines those outside formal work and education/training systems. Nine of the countries highlighted in this analysis showed a decrease in NEET rates. In 2019, Italy (22.1%) and Germany (7.6%) had, respectively, the highest and the lowest NEET rates. In 2023, Malta kept the lowest NEET rate (7.5%) compared with Romania, which showed the highest NEET share (19.3%). As Figure 3.5 shows, between 2019 and 2023, Italy had the biggest absolute decrease in NEET rates (–6.0%), while Lithuania (+2.6%) followed the opposite trend. Between 2019 and 2023, in 10 of the countries included in the analysis, NEET shares in rural areas declined. For the same period, Romania had the highest increase in rural NEET rates (+6.4%), as opposed to Italy (–6.2%).

Figure 3.5 – Variation by country and degree of urbanisation in the share of NEET youth (15-29 years old) (2019-2023; %)



Source: Eurostat: https://doi.org/10.2908/EDAT_LFSE_29 (data extracted on 26.02.25).

Increasing employment shares in several countries, as well as declining NEET rates, including in rural areas, deserve some careful consideration. Some policy instruments, such as the Reinforced Youth Guarantee, may have led to an overall improvement of rural labour markets (Petrescu et al. 2024). Some booming sectors, such as tourism (Díaz-Serrano and Nilsson 2020), may have also had a role in these improvements. At the same time, positive variations in, for instance, NEET shares are explained by historically high shares of young people outside labour and education since the 2008 economic crisis. However, higher employment rates and lower NEET shares do not speak about the quality of jobs. The International Labour Organization (2018) has adopted standards for assessing the quality of work experience in terms of decent jobs. Decent jobs refer to those granting access to full and just employment conditions, such as fair pay for productive work, equal opportunities, safety in the workplace or social protection (International Labour Organization 2018). Recent developments in job quality research have added the need for promoting decent but also meaningful jobs (Blustein et al. 2019; Masdonati et al. 2021). Meaningful jobs are those that enable the performance of productive tasks, leading to positive work attitudes and a sense of belonging to an occupational group (Masdonati et al. 2021).

In recent years, a decent and meaningful jobs perspective in policy making has been adopted at the European level. For instance, the European Council Recommendation of 30 October 2020, entitled Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee and replacing the Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee, stressed the need to expand youth labour market coverage, while emphasising the quality of job opportunities, aiming to facilitate young people's transition into the labour market and ensure access to decent jobs. More recently, the

European Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on individual learning accounts emphasises the need to enhance access to training and support career transitions, thereby contributing to employment security and the promotion of decent work for all workers, including those in the early stages of their careers.

There is limited evidence that quantitative improvements in rural labour markets are translating into quality jobs for at least four reasons.

- ▶ **The role of farming** – The share of people working in agriculture in Europe is declining in rural areas compared to other sectors (such as services or construction) (Joint Research Centre et al. 2025). However, farmers are more averse to risk, innovation and entrepreneurship when the primary sector is largely dominated by family-owned farming businesses. Thus, the chances to transform local resources into modern business models, particularly in southern and eastern European countries, are missed (Mujčinović et al. 2024).
- ▶ **Extractive economic activities** – The alternatives to farming in rural areas are usually tourism or mining. These are predominantly extractive economic activities that provide low-quality, precarious jobs and have detrimental effects on, for instance, educational attainment shares, as more young people drop out to perform these jobs (Diaz-Serrano and Nilsson 2020).
- ▶ **Lack of a policy focus on rural youth labour markets** – Recent analyses of the Reinforced Youth Guarantee (Petrescu et al. 2024), the overarching European Union policy framework for promoting youth employment and education or Pillar 6 of the Resilience and Recovery Mechanism aimed at the next generations (Simões 2022) show that, with a few exceptions (like Spain), countries do not tailor ALMPs for (disadvantaged) rural youth.
- ▶ **Improving qualifications is not enough** – Increasing the share of university graduates is insufficient to improve the labour market inclusion of rural youth. Job supply depends on local economic conditions (Cefalo and Scandurra 2021). The rural labour market supply shortages translate into the perpetuation of the intergenerational cycle of poverty and inequalities caused by longer or more recurrent spells of unemployment or by underemployment and delays in the accumulation of work experience, differentiation and specialisation across rural communities.

Box 3.5 – Decent jobs for rural youth: possible pathways

Some promising trends are still emerging in the labour market for rural youth. Socially responsible entrepreneurship in farming and ecotourism is creating new businesses that may contribute to retaining more young people in rural territories. Some production niches (such as wine production), the preference for local and responsible consumerism or the need for shorter economic chains are creating new and decent jobs in sustainable farming that resonate with the values of rural youth. Some rural areas closer to urban centres are establishing more efficient transportation means for young people to commute, whether to study or to work, which may lead to more significant access to decent and meaningful jobs (Castillo et al. 2024; Mujčinović et al. 2024).

Youth mobilities

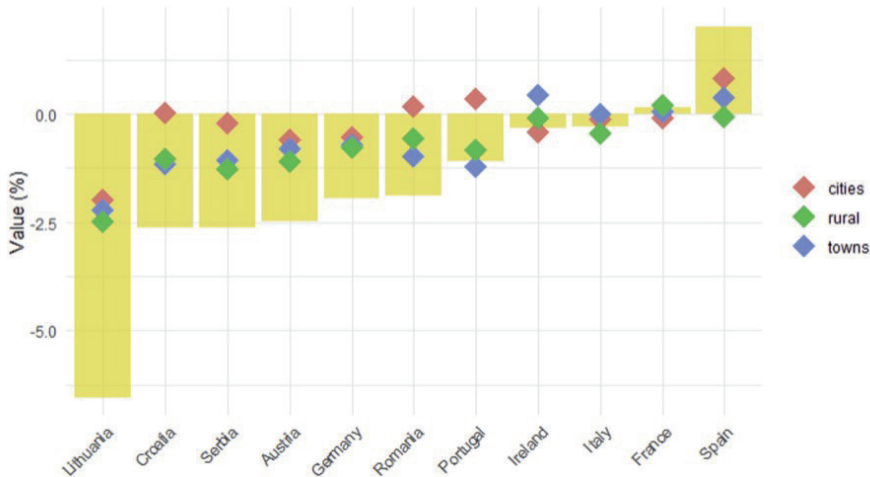
Youth mobilities refers to the different modes of movement between places used by young people. Youth mobilities are not, therefore, limited to migration, meaning single one-off moves from an origin to a destination country. Contemporary youth mobilities are fluid and more complex owing to major trends such as globalisation or increasing participation of women in the labour market (King and Williams 2018).

Youth outmigration and a subsequent decrease in the youth population aged 15 to 29 in the countryside is one of the most significant current demographic trends affecting rural areas. This indicator is depicted in Figure 3.6.

Most of the countries included in this report depicted a decrease in the share of young people in the whole population. In 2019 Portugal (16%) and Ireland (18.5%) had, respectively, the lowest and the highest share of young people aged 15 to 29 years old in the total population. In 2023, Lithuania (15.1%) and again Ireland (18.4%) presented the lowest and largest shares of young people in this age group. As seen in Figure 3.6, between 2019 and 2023, Lithuania presented the biggest drop in young people aged 15-29 (-2.1%), as opposed to Spain (+0.1%). In all countries included in this general analysis, the rural youth population decreased with the only exception being France, which showed a small increase in its share of rural youth aged 15 to 29 (+0.2%), with Austria and Portugal recording no absolute variation in this period.

It is, however, important to position rural youth mobilities according to all other demographic trends currently affecting rural communities across Europe. The decrease in the rural youth population is evolving in parallel with lower birth rates, accelerated ageing and an overall shrinking of the population (Eurostat 2024). This creates a very demanding demographic picture for rural communities, one where generational renewal, social capital and economic viability are compromised.

Figure 3.6 – Variation in the share of youth population (15-29 years old): total by country and by degree of urbanisation (2019-2023; %)



Source: Eurostat: https://doi.org/10.2908/URT_PJANGRP3 (data extracted on 26.02.25). Note: Estonia and Malta were excluded because of missing data points.

The mobility trends for rural youth have been discussed mainly from the perspectives of outmigration (Farrugia 2016) and brain drain (Theodori and Theodori 2015). These approaches coincide in showing that the most talented, academic-minded young people originating in rural areas are more likely to move to more affluent, urban areas within the country or abroad. In turn, those staying are more often men who are less motivated to improve their education or lack the financial means to move out. These mobility tendencies increase social gaps between younger generations living in rural areas and (sub)urban territories (Farrugia 2016).

Three interdependent reasons explain this leading youth outmigration flow from rural to (sub)urban areas.

- ▶ **Need to improve life prospects** – Rural youth outmigration is caused by young people's hopes for improving their education and skills (Theodori and Theodori 2015), for gaining access to better jobs and, thus, increasing their chances of upward social mobility (Silva et al. 2021).
- ▶ **Lack of opportunities** – Rural youth outmigration has been interpreted as the result of unequal territorial distribution of opportunities and resources or a triumph of a "metrocentric perspective" whereby young people's futures are situated in and limited to urban places (Farrugia 2016).
- ▶ **Limited access to exchange or short mobility programmes** – Young people from urban areas participate more in Erasmus+ mobility programmes because of access to better transport and to institutions and strong information networks (SALTO 2020). In contrast, rural youth face structural barriers such as poor infrastructure, limited outreach and fewer guidance resources that constrain their ability to be involved in exchanges and short-term mobilities (European Commission 2023).

Box 3.6 – Youth mobilities: there is more to it than outmigration

Recent reports show that there are important nuances to rural youth mobilities that need to be considered. Longer series of data reporting on the shares of youth population in cities, towns, suburbs and rural areas (starting in 2016) show an increase in the shares of young people living in predominantly rural areas in some European countries (such as Austria, Denmark, France or Ireland) (Eurostat 2024). This is a newer trend and requires further understanding. Likewise, the mobility of rural youth is increasingly more fluid, including circular movements (meaning the combination of successive outgoing and incoming mobilities) and returning movements. Circular or returning intentions of rural youth are strongly associated with high levels of attachment to places in the form of bonds to local communities and the surrounding spaces among young people from the countryside. This means that leaving and staying can coexist and returning can also be an option in some cases (Silva et al. 2021; Simões et al. 2021), even if outmigration continues to be the dominant mobility trend among rural youth.

Leisure, culture and sports

Leisure, culture and sports are the backbone of youth work and are key to young people's integral development. Cultural activities like art, music and drama provide

platforms for creativity, self-expression and exploring personal identity, empowering young people to develop confidence and unique perspectives. Participation in cultural events, team sports or group hobbies fosters social connections, communication skills and teamwork, which are essential for personal and professional growth (EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership 2023c). Engaging in sports and leisure activities also improves physical fitness, reduces stress and enhances mental health, helping young people build resilience and maintain a balanced lifestyle.

There is limited evidence about access to leisure, culture and sports for rural youth. Still, the latest Eurobarometer data show, for instance, that across the EU member countries included in this report, the participation of rural youth in cultural and sports activities in another EU country in the previous 12 months ranged from 7% in Portugal and 19% in Ireland. Only in Italy did rural youth participate more in international cultural and sports exchanges compared to young people living in towns and suburbs and cities.

There are a few well-known barriers to accessing leisure, cultural and sports activities in rural areas.

- ▶ **Limited infrastructure and facilities** – Rural areas often lack adequate sports centres, cultural venues and leisure facilities, making it difficult for young people to participate in structured activities (Saba and Roman 2022).
- ▶ **Transportation barriers** – Long distances to reach activity hubs, coupled with inadequate public transportation, hinder rural youth from accessing available leisure resources. This problem is exacerbated by the high cost or unavailability of private transportation options (Morrisey and Neuman 2021).
- ▶ **Financial constraints and programme costs** – Many rural families have limited financial resources, which can make the costs of participation, such as membership fees, equipment or travel expenses, prohibitive. Subsidised or free programmes are less common in rural settings than in urban areas (Saba and Roman 2022).
- ▶ **Gender divide** – Enrolment in leisure, cultural and sports activities is strongly driven by availability. Rural young men are more likely to dominate (or be admitted to) public spaces and community activities. This shapes the availability of such activities in rural communities. The masculinisation of public space is further strengthened by the fact that the activities girls take part in are less attached to place and can be viewed as supra-local activities (Bæck 2016).

Box 3.7 – Access to leisure, culture and sports: a few promising examples

Some municipalities are investing their efforts and resources into improving rural young generations' access to leisure, culture and sports. The examples/practices show how local stakeholders can use collective action, collaboration or creativity to improve access to leisure, culture or sports. For instance, the project Rural Noul Urban set up a cultural programme in the village of Liteni, in the commune of Moara, Romania. The programme featured concerts, artist residencies, exhibitions and creative workshops, all hosted at Ferma de Artă. The project aimed to engage various age groups, including young people, by integrating them into interdisciplinary artistic activities (European Commission 2025a).

In the Meža Valley, a predominantly rural and mountainous area in northern Slovenia, local action groups collaborated to create a free outdoor recreational infrastructure. This included modernising children's playgrounds and establishing 29 locations for outdoor activities across four nearby municipalities. The initiative promoted physical activity among various age groups, including children and young people, through workshops and events, contributing to healthier lifestyles and increased community engagement in outdoor leisure activities (EU CAP Network 2020). In Navia, a rural municipality in western Asturias, Spain, the historic Casino de Navia building was renovated to serve as a cultural and social hub. The project aimed to address the lack of local leisure and cultural facilities while preserving a listed cultural heritage site. The transformed casino now hosts a variety of cultural and social events, attracting people from surrounding areas and providing young residents with access to cultural activities.

Chapter 4

Rural youth: policies, programmes and perspectives

Policies

Public policy plays a crucial role in shaping young people's transitions to adulthood by determining the availability, accessibility and quality of institutional support in key areas such as education, employment, health and social welfare. This study acknowledges the relevance of policy options and frameworks when adopting Chevalier's (2016, 2019) model two-dimensional typology of youth welfare citizenship as a conceptual lens for structuring the results and their interpretation. The present research also recognises the importance of the policy infrastructure of each country for young people living in rural areas by including a policy analysis layer.

For young people living in rural areas, where access to services is often limited and economic opportunities are fewer, the presence or absence of targeted public interventions can significantly influence life trajectories. This is especially relevant in the context of widening inequalities and the broader challenges in a polycrisis era (Henig and Knight 2023). Rural youth often rely heavily on informal support networks, such as family and local community. While those resources can be relevant, the reliance on informal support for achieving certain transition goals (such as finding a job or gaining autonomy) can perpetuate intergenerational disadvantage in the absence of strong, inclusive public systems. Therefore, assessing national policy frameworks offers valuable insights into how rural youth are positioned within or excluded from broader welfare and development agendas.

Although the policy analysis presented in this section is not structured around a particular typology, it aligns with the broader conceptual lens adopted in this study, which identifies three empirically derived models of youth welfare citizenship: constrained, uncertain and progressive. These models reflect varying degrees of institutional support and labour market inclusivity across countries and offer a useful backdrop for understanding the implications of national and regional policy choices for rural youth.

A public policy measure in the context of this study can be defined as a purposeful action or set of actions initiated and executed by national governmental authorities. Such measures aim to address domestic societal challenges, achieve predefined

goals, prevent unwanted outcomes or regulate activities within the government's jurisdiction (Howlett, Ramesh and Perl 2009). State measures are influenced by multiple factors, such as economic environment or the relationships with other countries. In the case of EU member states, these measures also reflect the broader influence of relevant EU frameworks. Although EU countries must operate within the obligations of EU membership, such as compliance with single market rules or fundamental rights, they are still tailored to specific needs and governance structures of each country. Thus, overall, policy measures primarily reflect national priorities, legal traditions and socio-economic conditions.

Considering this study's dimensions, the research team paid attention mainly to public policy interventions in the domains of education, labour markets, transitions from education to employment, agriculture, fisheries and regional development, non-formal learning, youth work and leisure time. To achieve this, national-level policy documents – most often ministerial development plans – were reviewed. Where possible, adjacent policy areas, such as healthcare, welfare services, public transport and communications, were also considered.

Even though the five countries involved in the project (Estonia, Spain, Armenia, Romania and Ireland) organise their social policy domains differently, a consistent pattern emerges regarding rural youth.

First, in all countries, rural young people are most clearly addressed in policy documents related to regional development, rural life, agriculture and fisheries. In these areas, rural youth and young families are seen as target groups for promoting local development and countering depopulation. More specifically, these documents outline measures to support vocational education and training suited to rural labour markets and agricultural or fisheries employment, as well as support for entrepreneurship and business creation in these sectors. This focus represents the closest approximation to explicit national-level policy attention to young people living in rural areas.

In Spain, the Youth Strategy 2030 includes a dedicated chapter on rural youth aimed at making rural areas spaces for opportunity and promoting green transition. Romania's National Youth Strategy 2024-2027 contains a specific subchapter on rural youth, influenced by civil society advocacy, including the Rural Youth White Paper. Ireland addresses rural youth primarily through the Our Rural Future policy (2021-2025), which established annual Rural Youth Assembly consultations to give young people a voice in rural policy development.

By contrast, national-level frameworks in other core social policy areas – such as general education, employment and welfare – rarely, if ever, mention rural young people as a distinct category.

The influence of European Union funding and frameworks is clearly visible in the countries included in the policy analysis. Two key EU mechanisms stand out. First, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) underpins national rural development strategies in Spain, Romania and Ireland.

In Spain, CAP funding supports programmes like CULTIVA, which assists young farmers and ranchers in agricultural entrepreneurship for 2023-2027. Romania implements the CAP through its National Rural Development Programme 2021-2027, which

specifically identifies the lack of young farmers and rural entrepreneurs as a key challenge, promoting the emergence of young agricultural entrepreneurs. Ireland integrates CAP measures within its broader rural development framework, supporting young people in the agricultural and fisheries sectors through substantial European structural funds allocation.

Second, measures supported by the European Social Fund (ESF) and other instruments play an important role in Estonia, Ireland, Spain and Romania – particularly in funding projects for vulnerable groups such as NEET youth – where young people living in rural areas are often overrepresented.

In Estonia, while ESF support is less explicitly documented for rural youth, the country focuses on ensuring equal access to youth services across rural areas through its extensive network of open youth centres. Spain utilises ESF funding through programmes like the Youth Employment Shock Plan and third-sector initiatives such as Action Against Hunger’s Sustainable Rural Employment programme. Romania leverages ESF support through dual education opportunities, scholarships for rural university students and digital competence development for rural youth. Ireland incorporates ESF measures within its cross-departmental approach to rural development, though specific rural youth targeting is less prominent in employment strategies.

Youth-specific strategies exist in all countries except Armenia, which adopted a Youth Act only in 2025 and has yet to implement a comprehensive strategy or establish a dedicated youth policy institution. Most youth strategies focus broadly on youth participation and non-formal learning but typically do not define subgroups such as rural young people. An exception is Romania, where rural youth are explicitly addressed in the national youth strategy, supported by evidence and civil society advocacy (the Rural Youth White Paper).

In sum, targeted public policies for rural youth are relatively rare, with most attention confined to the agricultural and regional development sectors. Broader youth and social policy frameworks often treat young people as a homogeneous group, thereby overlooking the specific challenges faced by rural youth. As a result, rural young people tend not to be addressed in an integrated or holistic manner in broader youth or social policy design. Box 4.1 summarises the main conclusions of the policy analysis.

Box 4.1 – Policy analysis and transition clusters: what can we conclude?

We can draw several important conclusions about the relationship between policy frameworks and youth transition outcomes, particularly in rural contexts.

Broad alignment between policy environment and youth transition outcomes, but with notable exceptions

There is a general alignment between a country’s policy approach to rural youth and its placement in the transition typology, as outlined below.

Progressive citizenship countries (represented by Estonia and Ireland) are more likely to have more robust and structured policies that reflect strong institutional support, include rural youth in broader development plans, leverage EU funds strategically and promote inclusive education, labour market access and youth participation.

Uncertain citizenship countries (represented by Spain) tend to exhibit fragmented or inconsistent policy attention to rural youth. Policies exist, but they may not be co-ordinated or may be co-ordinated sub-optimally. Rural young people may be subsumed under general “vulnerable youth” categories or else the overlaps may be indistinguishable, implementation varies regionally and sub-national actors have notable roles to play.

Constrained citizenship countries (represented by Romania and Armenia), according to the study’s framework and available data, refer to contexts where youth policy structures appear less formalised or comprehensive and rural youth rely heavily on informal/familial support systems.

Importantly, in the policy domain, Romania shows characteristics of both constrained and uncertain clusters: although it lacks strong national co-ordination, it has recently made rural youth more visible in national strategy documents.

Policy frameworks tend to mirror welfare state typologies, with rural-specific distortions

Rural young people are often less explicit in mainstream youth policies. When addressed, it is typically through agriculture, depopulation or regional development lenses, not youth or social equity frameworks.

EU policies provide some structure for interventions targeting young people living in rural areas, but national commitment depends on country-specific features

Overall, the EU’s CAP and the ESF mechanisms have stimulated rural youth initiatives, especially around entrepreneurship and employment and encouraged national strategies and programmes. There is variation in the relative importance of the CAP and ESF mechanisms, depending on country specifics. While ESF mechanisms are utilised across all the European Union countries studied, CAP instruments are particularly prominent in Spain, Romania and, to a degree, Ireland. Armenia, not being an EU member, does not benefit from these mechanisms.

Practices and projects

Rural youth face specific barriers to improving their education, employment prospects or social and political participation opportunities because of their rural origin, as described in Chapter 3. Meanwhile, European institutions, national governments and local decision makers are starting to demonstrate greater interest in opening up dialogue and setting up working mechanisms and structures that lead to more and better conditions for rural youth. The ultimate example of this new interest in rural youth and rural communities is the EU LTVRA, published in June 2021 (European Commission 2021b). This strategic framework aims to create stronger, more connected, resilient and prosperous rural regions by 2040. It provides an outline for addressing demographic changes, connectivity issues and access to services, while promoting sustainability and economic diversification, particularly

through the green and digital transitions. The vision emphasises community-led development, smart villages and greater involvement of rural citizens in policy making. More recently, in May 2025, the Council of Europe added to these co-ordinated efforts when the Committee of Ministers issued Recommendation CM/Rec(2025)3 on the social, economic and political participation of rural youth, emphasising the need for governments to address rural youth needs. The recommendation specifically urges member states to ensure that rural youth have access to essential services and rights, in particular decent housing, quality education, affordable and safe mobility options and public transportation, adequate data connectivity and internet access, social security and healthcare services. Most of the practices and projects targeting rural youth still reveal, however, a top-down “for rural youth” approach, instead of adopting a co-creation vision with rural youth. Moreover, these programmes still extensively focus on supporting young farmers and rural development, as mentioned in the policy analysis.

It should be noted that rural youth are far from being a homogeneous group. For instance, not all rural youth show great interest in agriculture and farming. Additionally, questions should be asked about the inclusiveness of the young farmers’ schemes, as not all young people have the resources and means to start up a business. Available resources developed across different European projects show a growing interest in culture, innovation and social and sustainable development in rural areas. The cleavage of traditional vs modern forms of rural participation should also be discussed when working with and for rural youth. Digitalisation adds to the nuanced needs of delivering programmes targeting younger rural generations, as a cross-cutting theme of the policy agenda for rural areas as well (EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership 2021).

All these emerging issues, as well as the major trends affecting rural youth depicted in Chapter 3, affect practices and the rollout of projects. Taking that into account, this study examined case studies of practices and projects aimed at rural youth. The analysis included two major groups of practices. One focused on permanent initiatives with an international or European scope. These are often European networks and non-governmental entities invested in projects aimed at boosting the participation of rural youth across the continent, while documenting their needs, interests and aspirations. Considering their relevance, these initiatives were also included and examined in this research. A second and more extensive group of practices and projects is nationally based. These initiatives were selected and positioned according to the three-clusters solution stemming from the adoption of the two-dimensional typology of youth welfare (Chevalier 2016, 2019). Specifically, the selected cases cover Armenia and Romania (constrained citizenship), Spain (uncertain citizenship) and Estonia and Ireland (progressive citizenship). The practices from these respective countries were identified by combining the support of multiple networks (such as the EKCYP and PEYR) with the snowball methodology techniques, as explained in Chapter 2 and in more detail in the appendix.

European-level practices

European Council of Young Farmers

The European Council of Young Farmers (Conseil Européen des Jeunes Agriculteurs, CEJA) aims to tackle the low generational renewal in the farming sector in rural areas. Even if great interest and resources were invested in setting up support schemes for young farmers, CEJA projects and initiatives have highlighted that the conditions for promoting entrepreneurship in the farming sector are limited. Four main challenges are hindering young people's ability to set up in the farming sector, according to CEJA: 1. increasingly high prices of property and difficulties with accessing land for young people; 2. the limited access of young farmers to credit and investments, with credit applications often rejected or classified as high-risk credits (sometimes due to incomplete business plans or lack of knowledge and skills in agriculture); 3. lack of social and education opportunities, including limited financial support for training and technical education uptake; and 4. the decreasing dynamism of rural areas, with young farmers seeing themselves as rarely visible and rather isolated, including from policy-making circles (CEJA 2023). CEJA's projects and activities also provide evidence for the need for a more thoughtful, multifactor intervention to support rural youth. Better employment opportunities and investment in the development of social support measures and networks should be enacted in the policy agenda designed with and for rural youth.

Rural Youth Europe

Rural Youth Europe (RYE) is the umbrella youth organisation that works on promoting and activating young people in the countryside. RYE was established in 1957 as a European NGO for rural youth. It provides a wide range of international training and learning opportunities for its members, acting as an intermediary between national organisations, youth organisations and public institutions on a European level. RYE practices and projects cover a wide range of priorities, including youth participation, supporting rural youth organisations, sustainable regional youth work and creating opportunities for its members to meet and exchange practices. RYE is one of the main dialogue partners for the European institutions in policy and development processes put in place with and for rural youth. Additionally, RYE supports policy development through policy papers drafted around the emergent needs of rural youth on topics such as health and access to health services in rural areas (Rural Youth Europe 2025a) or sustainable food systems (Rural Youth Europe 2025b).

European Youth Card Association

The European Youth Card Association (EYCA) aims to support young people to be socially, culturally, educationally and economically mobile, to deliver quality European youth card services and contribute to better youth policy. EYCA is therefore committed to making European young people more mobile and active.

EYCA recently developed the Rural Youth Project aimed at exploring young people's desires, challenges and opportunities in rural areas. The project devised a set of key recommendations for youth-focused entities to increase their engagement with

rural youth. Essential to the project was the development of the “5 to do’s” to boost rural youth. To document these five guidelines, EYCA ran a study across 20 countries, setting up a series of events in rural communities, collecting a list of 100 ideas, organising a rural youth camp, working directly with the grassroots entities during the EYCA Conference in June 2024 and presenting the final recommendations to EU decision makers and European groups at a policy event in October 2024 (European Youth Card Association 2024a).

The “5 to do’s” comprise: 1. engaging communities in shaping local policies, by involving local young people in information sessions and creating relevant, transparent platforms for youth participation, such as youth councils; 2. bringing the community together and encouraging intergenerational mix by running storytelling workshops, skills-building projects and community initiatives for all generations, among other things; 3. promoting more public spaces and investing in developing the local infrastructure and creating spaces for collective initiatives; 4. improving accessibility and transportation that would lead to social inclusion through discounts on public transport and encouraging local authorities to improve mobility infrastructure; and 5. increasing rural cultural access and creative arts promotion, investing in creative arts and giving visibility to rural cultural centres, with youth discounts and support for new arts initiatives or building creative campaigns that celebrate the aspects that make rural areas so distinctive (European Youth Card Association 2024a).

Essential to the project is the collection of “100 proposals from rural youth across Europe”. These proposals vary widely and include access to technology and digital competences and to better educational opportunities, investment in entrepreneurship and access to cultural and sports activities. Young people’s requests are mainly related to securing a higher quality of education, including better teacher training, investment in inclusion and networking, employment opportunities for rural youth, creating and supporting the development of young organisations and local youth groups, equal opportunities for all young people, access to decision-making processes, more and more accessible services and activities in the rural areas, allocating budgets for youth-related activities, improved internet connections and increased access to digital education, developing volunteering opportunities for rural youth, creating and maintaining accessible meeting spaces, including youth clubs and youth centres, affordable housing, addressing the rural exodus by creating job opportunities and enhancing overall economic conditions, or creating support centres and activities for young people with fewer opportunities (European Youth Card Association 2024b).

Box 4.2 – International practices focusing on rural youth: main lessons

The selected European international initiatives of different European networks – rural youth networks or networks supporting rural youth – provide important insights into the rollout of practices and projects.

Space for more international co-operation and pushing forward rural youth’s needs

The efforts of CEJA, RYE and EYCA show a permanent interest in advancing lobbying and dialogue efforts to secure more and better policies for rural youth. These efforts remain, however, scattered across important but parallel initiatives. By gaining scale and momentum through dedicated collaboration, they can

translate into policies aligned with the current youth needs and interests. These cover cross-cutting themes such as digitalisation and social inclusion, quality education or encouraging youth entrepreneurship.

Evidence and participation leading change

All the international initiatives covered in this report have a well-defined evidence-based approach. Moreover, they offer rural youth the opportunity to express themselves in the research processes. Additionally, all the dimensions of the current study are targeted and interconnected in these knowledge-based efforts.

The needs in the spotlight

Across the different international initiatives and reports issued by the networks covered in this report, rural youth asked for better educational services, support for commuting to urban centres to access educational services, better access to health and mental health services, or higher quality jobs in different sectors besides farming.

National practices

The selected national practices cover a variety of services and projects provided to rural youth. Most of the projects and initiatives were implemented by the organisations with and for rural youth. Based on the clusters of countries resulting from the reinterpretation of the two-dimensional typology of youth welfare (Chevalier 2016, 2019), the practices and projects are clustered as follows in Table 4.1. These practices are detailed in the appendix.

Table 4.1 – National practices and projects by clusters of countries

Cluster	Organisation	Short description
Constrained citizenship	Curba de Cultură	Projects and initiatives aiming to support rural youth through volunteering, non-formal education and European mobility activities. Additionally, a pioneer in creating friendly youth spaces and youth infrastructure in rural communities.
	European Youth Village	European network that started from grassroots initiatives, with a leading role in promoting rural youth within national and European agendas.
	Adina Stiftelsen Foundation	Local organisation that provides educational and social support measures for rural youth, especially for youth with fewer opportunities.
Uncertain citizenship	KASA Swiss Humanitarian Foundation	Advancing inclusion through digital education and digital tools and community organising methodologies. Using gamification and digital education with and for rural youth.
	The Spanish Youth Council	Nationwide organisation promoting youth needs and interests in general and rural youth interests in particular.

Progressive citizenship	Asociación Mojo de Caña	Projects and initiatives designed with and for rural youth, particularly youth from the islands, initiatives advancing intergenerational dialogue, social inclusion and mobility through Erasmus+ granted projects.
	EPA! Network	Projects and initiatives aiming to support rural youth by preserving the cultural heritage and the local particularities of the region.
	The National Youth Assembly of Ireland	Projects, initiatives and national events that put the needs and interests of rural youth on the public agenda.
	Estonian 4H Youth Organisation	Nationwide organisation implementing initiatives that offer rural youth better participation opportunities, mobility activities and improved access to culture and leisure.

- **Constrained citizenship** – In countries like Romania or Armenia, non-governmental organisations play a key role in ensuring youth participation. Curba de Cultură and European Youth Village (Romania) are grassroots initiatives that started locally and were scaled up to a European level (European Youth Village) or set up essential youth infrastructure and services in rural communities (Curba de Cultură). The other cases – Adina Stiftelsen Foundation (Romania) and KASA Swiss Humanitarian Foundation (Armenia) – received international support, namely from the European Union through Erasmus+, to pilot local initiatives and help them to evolve into sustainable and locally tailored initiatives. All four practices included in this cluster targeted dimensions of this study, such as education, participation and employment. All respond to the need to deliver youth services and activities in communities where these services were unavailable to rural youth, while integrating community development approaches to the activities delivered. Additionally, in Armenia and Romania, NGOs presented projects that were implemented with the support of local partners to engage young people in second-chance educational activities or in developing new skills and competences required by the labour market, especially digital competences.
- **Uncertain citizenship** – The Spanish perspective covered the projects implemented by the National Youth Council, funded by the Spanish Government, and also local practices through the EPA! Network and Asociación Mojo de Caña, supported by the European Union, through Erasmus+. The main challenges that rural youth face in Spain are related to rural exodus and depopulation, gentrification in urban areas, the lack of affordable housing, lack of job opportunities, educational deficits, reduced access to healthcare services, limited access to digital infrastructure, deficits in transport infrastructure and transportation, distance to leisure and culture activities and generalised stigma – as if living in a small town is a sign of failure. This stereotype is reflected in the Spanish term “pueblerino”. To address the needs listed above, the organisations, both national and local, roll out projects and initiatives that often target dimensions of interest for this study, particularly education and employment. Indeed, the practices and projects included in the analysis run by Spanish organisations aimed at helping young people to continue their educational pathway or

find a job in other communities. Interestingly, EPAI's activities, run in rural communities, are also focused on preserving local cultural traits that indirectly connect with the support systems dimension explored in this study.

- **Progressive citizenship** – In Ireland and Estonia, the practices presented are delivered nationwide, with a local representation, either through clubs (4H Estonia, funded by the Government of Estonia) or joint efforts with local partners (the National Youth Assembly of Ireland, funded by the Government of Ireland). Similar to practices in other countries, in Estonia and Ireland, these organisations are also working towards empowering rural youth participation, ensuring digital access to educational opportunities and trying to find ways to support rural youth to commute for studies or work. Themes such as sustainable transition or linking volunteering to school curricula are also on their agenda.

Box 4.3 – National practices and projects: common trends, major priorities and promising opportunities

The data on practices and projects addressed the policy frameworks and how they provide opportunities for rural youth and fill existing gaps. The cross-cutting conclusions were strongly informed by a one-day participatory workshop in Brussels, gathering rural youth practices and projects. Overall, the discussions during the workshop led to one key conclusion: rural youth are mentioned in general policy frameworks, but the planned measures are rarely tailored to their needs, challenges and aspirations. Below are some of the common trends, major priorities and promising opportunities shaping the lives of young people in rural areas, voiced by the participants and further sustained by the analysis of practices.

Most important concerns and problems

All organisations highlighted that services are insufficiently covered or not covered at all. The concerns include: 1. the need for improvement in access to medical services and quality education, especially in the constrained citizenship cluster countries; 2. better mental health support across all clusters; 3. cross-cutting themes such as digitalisation and social inclusion through digitalisation, which should be on the working agenda of both governmental and non-governmental organisations.

Culture and youth work in rural areas require more sustained investment

Young people in rural areas need cultural spaces and cross-sectoral co-operation between different organisations and institutions. Additionally, efforts should be made to acknowledge the importance of youth work, while the need for recurrent and sustainable funding for activities with and for rural youth should be accessible to youth groups and youth organisations. The initiatives of the rural organisations are mostly project-based. Very few can run long-term structural programmes assigned to long-term strategies for intervention. Diverse and more structural support for rural youth structures (youth NGOs, informal groups, youth centres) is needed for their continued work. Capacity-building programmes are also required by the youth structures to increase their effectiveness.

Rural youth inclusion and participation

Policy and practice representatives are expected to work together to create inclusive participation frameworks for rural youth so that young people with

fewer opportunities have the chance to participate. Local action groups (LAGs) or the existing opportunities delivered through the Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale (LEADER) programme are among the solutions for increasing participation. Every LAG that is being established should have at least one permanent youth representative.

Information is still lacking

Access to information regarding different opportunities for personal and professional development should be promoted to rural youth, especially through a youth-friendly vision – meaning in terms of language and channels. Access to education, health or youth information services is problematic in most rural and isolated communities due to the distance to services and socio-economic obstacles.

Affordable housing and property

Residing in rural communities, at times, is not an option for young people, as the cost of living has increased. However, the housing crisis is also evident in villages. As described in the previous sections, access to land is not affordable to young people, while employment opportunities are also reduced.

More and better knowledge

Access to reliable data regarding livelihoods in rural areas, in general, and the situation of rural youth, in particular, should be considered. There is a lack of clear monitoring and of evaluation mechanisms of interventions and projects taking place in rural areas that are relevant for rural youth. The available data are mostly related to agricultural issues. The creation of clear monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and research (longitudinal) projects to gather data on rural youth is urgently needed. The use of a “rural youth check” by young people in rural areas, following the EU initiative aimed at ensuring that EU policies consider the impact on young people during the policy design phase, would be a milestone in redefining monitoring and evaluation strategies (European Commission 2024).

Good news on international mobility

The European grant programmes – especially Erasmus+ – offer opportunities for mobility, both through volunteering activities and through the opportunity to join youth exchanges and training courses.

More exchanges between villages: why not?

Peer learning activities and exchange opportunities between governmental and non-governmental organisations from different villages would be an excellent learning opportunity, especially when it comes to rural youth representation, creating spaces for dialogue and developing inclusive youth platforms.

Rural youth perspectives

The perspectives of rural youth were examined through a survey presented in Chapter 2. Table 4.2 provides a general description of the participants involved in this survey overall and by clusters. In the appendix, this general description of the participants is provided by country.

Table 4.2 – Main sociodemographic features by clusters of countries

	Constrained citizenship	Uncertain citizenship	Progressive citizenship	Total
Total	1 040 (41.6%)	678 (27.0%)	785 (31.4%)	2 503
Male	349 (33.6%)	253 (37.32%)	275 (35.03%)	877 (35.0%)
Female	688 (66.2%)	418 (61.7%)	504 (64.2%)	1 610 (64.3%)
Other	3 (0.3%)	7 (1.0%)	6 (0.7%)	16 (0.4%)
Age				
18-24	955 (91.8%)	369 (54.4%)	568 (72.6%)	1 892 (75.6%)
25-30	85 (8.2%)	309 (45.6%)	217 (27.6%)	611 (24.4%)
Educational level				
Primary school	19 (1.83%)	20 (3.0%)	26 (3.3%)	65 (2.60%)
Lower secondary school	31 (3.00%)	53 (7.8%)	73 (9.3%)	157 (6.27%)
Upper secondary school	731 (70.3%)	265 (39.1%)	384 (48.9%)	1 380 (55.13%)
University degree	259 (24.91%)	340 (50.15%)	302 (38.53%)	901 (36.0%)
Origin				
Native-born	1 004 (96.5%)	646 (95.3%)	757 (96.4%)	2 407 (96.2%)
Migrant	36 (3.5%)	32 (4.7%)	28 (3.6%)	96 (3.8%)
Household situation				
Living with both parents and/or siblings	553 (53.2%)	324 (47.5%)	348 (44.3%)	1 225 (48.9%)
Single-parent households	100 (9.6%)	96 (14.2%)	118 (15.0%)	314 (15.3%)
Living with partner or spouse	106 (10.2%)	79 (11.7%)	152 (19.4%)	337 (13.4%)
Other	281 (27.0%)	179 (26.4%)	167 (21.3%)	627 (25.0%)
Socio-economic status				
Not in material deprivation	815 (78.4%)	570 (84.1%)	652 (83.1%)	2 037 (81.4%)
Material deprivation	104 (10.0%)	50 (7.4%)	65 (8.3%)	219 (8.7%)
Severe material deprivation	121 (11.6%)	58 (8.6%)	68 (8.7%)	247 (9.9%)

Source: in-text.

A total of 2 503 participants were included in the study following the inclusion criteria mentioned in Chapter 2. About two thirds of the participants (64.3%) were female, with the distribution by gender being rather similar across the three clusters of countries resulting from the adoption of the two-dimensional typology of youth

welfare citizenship (Chevalier 2016, 2019). Most participants were aged between 18 and 24 (75.6%), but the distribution by age groups differed across clusters. While in the uncertain citizenship countries those aged under 24 numbered 54.4%, this age group in the constrained citizenship cluster was 91.8%.

Almost half of the individuals in the constrained citizenship cluster (48.9%) and a majority of them in the progressive citizenship clusters (70.3%) attended upper secondary school. About half of the participants (50.2%) in the uncertain citizenship cluster had a higher education degree (bachelor's or master's degree). Less than 10% concluded successfully lower secondary school across the uncertain and progressive citizenship clusters. In the constrained citizenship countries, the share of those only completing lower secondary school reached 12.5%.

The overwhelming majority of the participants were born in the country in which they lived. Many of the participants (48.9%) lived with both parents and/or siblings; a smaller fraction lived in mono-parental households (15.3%) or with a spouse/partner (13.4%). A quarter of the participants lived in other types of households (with grandparents, friends or peers, among others). This general distribution was largely similar across all clusters of countries, with a few variations, the most remarkable being that a greater share of participants lived with a spouse/partner compared with those living in mono-parental households in progressive citizenship countries, in contrast to the other clusters.

A few of the participants (8.7%) lived in material deprivation, meaning they were unable to afford three out of nine items considered by most people to be desirable or even necessary to live an adequate life (Eurostat 2025). Additionally, 9.9% were in severe material deprivation, as they were unable to afford four out of nine of these items. Most participants were not in material deprivation (81.4%). These shares were rather stable across the different clusters of countries, although the combined share of those in material or severe material deprivation was higher among participants from countries included in the constrained citizenship cluster (21.6% compared with 16% in uncertain citizenship and 18.6% in progressive citizenship countries).

The perspectives of rural youth on education

Educational attainment is a pathway for upward social mobility. Indeed, higher education leads to better economic and social outcomes for individuals (Mocca, Rojon and Hernández 2019; Terschuur 2023), including more successful transitions to the labour market (Mascherini 2019). As outlined in Chapter 3, with a few exceptions (Garcia et al. 2023), the negative effects of lower educational attainment are more pronounced in rural areas (Choudhry and Pastore 2023). Some of the factors behind this trend include greater exposure of rural students to material and social deprivation (Bæck 2016), their limited access to symbolic, cultural or technological artefacts (books or computers, for example) (Simões et al. 2023) or families' lower social capital (Bæck 2016).

Box 4.4 summarises the most relevant findings of the survey regarding the education dimension.

Box 4.4 – Education: highlights

Type of school enrolment

Most participants (60.8%) attended university, while 6.8% were enrolled in vocational education and training, 3.2% were doing an internship and 2.4% were attending secondary school. Importantly, 20.3% were not studying.

School enrolment across clusters

In the constrained citizenship cluster, 91.3% of the participants attended university. In turn, the biggest shares of participants who were not studying when the research was conducted occurred in the uncertain (34.8%) and progressive citizenship clusters (34.1%).

Educational bias

While there has been a generalised increase in educational attainment across the Council of Europe countries for the past decade, participation in this study is biased towards rural youth seeking to obtain a higher education degree. This must be considered in a context where indicators such as tertiary education attainment (meaning the share of people aged 30 to 34 with a tertiary education degree) is lower in rural areas, particularly in countries included in the constrained (like Romania) or uncertain citizenship (like Spain) countries (Eurostat 2024).

Education by gender

In the progressive and constrained citizenship countries, most participants attended university regardless of gender. In the case of the participants from countries included in the uncertain citizenship cluster, women more often attended university, while men were more often outside any educational track.

Education by age groups

The distribution by age showed a similar pattern for participants from countries included in the progressive and uncertain citizenship clusters. Those aged 18 to 24 were more often attending university, although the shares ranged from 29.3% in the progressive citizenship cluster to 46.3% for the uncertain citizenship cluster. In both cases, the majority of those aged 25 to 30 were not studying (76% for participants from countries included in the progressive citizenship cluster and 57.1% of those in the uncertain citizenship cluster). For those from the countries included in the constrained citizenship group, most were attending university, regardless of age groups (93.2% for those aged 18 to 24 and 69% for 25 to 30 year olds).

Education is a priority

Only 9.3% of the participants rejected the idea of going back to education soon.

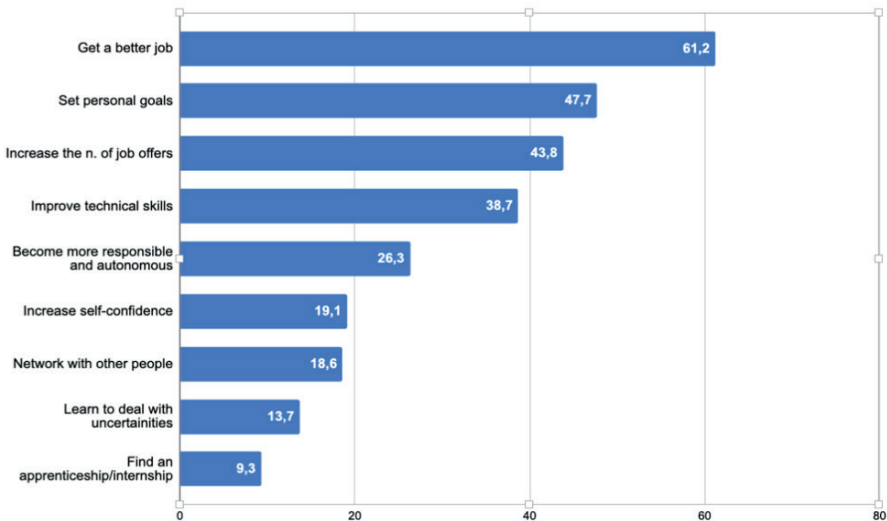
Education in the spotlight: reasons to stay or leave school in rural areas

Educational pathways in rural areas are commonly affected by the lack of resources (social, cultural and economic) to continue. Thus, it is important to detail the drivers for improving educational attainment as well as the main reasons leading to interrupting or even dropping out of school. The report distinguishes between an interruption in

school trajectories (one month or less) and school dropout (being absent for more than one month from school). While interruptions may be motivated by unwanted reasons (such as health issues), school dropout is usually connected with systemic barriers (economic reasons or lack of transportation). However, there is no universal definition of school dropout duration, with national authorities using different benchmarks. Still, the OECD (2010) shows that across countries, school dropout is associated with prolonged absenteeism (missing classes for more than 20% of the total school time). Thus, in many cases, being absent for three or more months is a strong indicator of school dropout in most countries covered by the study.

Figure 4.1 shows the main reasons for continuing to study, from the participants' perspective.

Figure 4.1 – Main reasons for continuing to study (%)



Notes: $n = 2503$; the sum of all possible answers is above 100% as the participants could choose up to three reasons to continue studying.

As Figure 4.1 shows, the main reasons for continuing to improve educational attainment were mostly instrumental, such as getting a job (61.2%), setting personal goals (47.7%), increasing the number of job offers (43.8%) and improving technical skills (38.7%). Personal improvement reasons, such as becoming more responsible and autonomous (26.3%) or increasing self-confidence (19.3%), ranked lower among the participants.

The top three reasons for continuing to study do not vary greatly. Across all countries, getting a job was the most important reason for improving educational attainment. Nevertheless, the relative importance of this reason ranges from 73.8% in the constrained citizenship group to 51.1% in the progressive citizenship cluster. Helping to set personal goals is the second most important reason for improving educational attainment in the constrained citizenship (55.9%) and in the uncertain citizenship clusters (45.4%), respectively, while in the progressive citizenship group, improving technical skills (40.9%) comes in that position. Increasing the number of job offers

(52.2%), improving technical skills (41.9%) and setting personal goals (39%) came third respectively in the constrained, uncertain and progressive citizenship clusters.

At least 19% of the participants acknowledged being absent from compulsory school for at least one month. Of these, 3.8% were away from school for three months, 1.6% were absent for four to six months and 1.7% left school for a whole school year.

Only 82 participants stated they had left for longer periods (more than three months). The reasons for leaving school are diffuse, ranging from health issues (22 cases) to a lack of motivation to study (nine cases) or working to help the family (seven cases). However, despite the many possible options provided, many of the participants (32 cases) reported other reasons for leaving school for long periods, without specifying them.

The perspectives of rural youth on support systems

As mentioned in Chapter 3, support systems include formal support, corresponding to resources and assistance provided by organisations in the form of policies, programmes or facilities to help individuals cope with relevant challenges (San and Guo 2023), and informal support, encompassing the provision of caring, love, interest, help or encouragement across family relationships or friendships (Sarason and Sarason 2009). Support sources can have complementary roles in easing the transition of rural youth to adulthood. However, previous research (Bæck 2016; Bello and Cuzzocrea 2018; Simões 2024) has demonstrated that institutional and informal support often clash, providing negative outcomes. Specifically, excessive reliance on dominant informal support in rural communities is associated with worse transitional results, particularly in terms of labour market inclusion.

Box 4.5 lists the main findings regarding this dimension of the study. Informal support was assessed using eight items in a six-point rating scale (from 1, strongly disagree, to 6, strongly agree). For a small subset of participants (183 in total), it was also possible to understand how they mobilise formal support resources when faced with a major challenge – finding a job.

Box 4.5 – Informal support among rural youth: highlights

Rural youth feel moderately supported by their closer ties

Overall and on average, rural youth felt somewhat supported by their informal networks in rural communities (4.2 points).

The level of informal support does not differ across clusters of countries

The average overall informal support rating for this measure ranged from 4 to 4.2 points for, respectively, those from countries in the constrained cluster and those from countries in the uncertain citizenship cluster.

Informal support ratings are stable across gender and age groups

Overall average ratings of informal support were also moderate across rural young men (4.2 points) and rural young women (4 points), as well as among younger (aged 18 to 24) (4 points) and older participants (aged 25-30) (4.2 points).

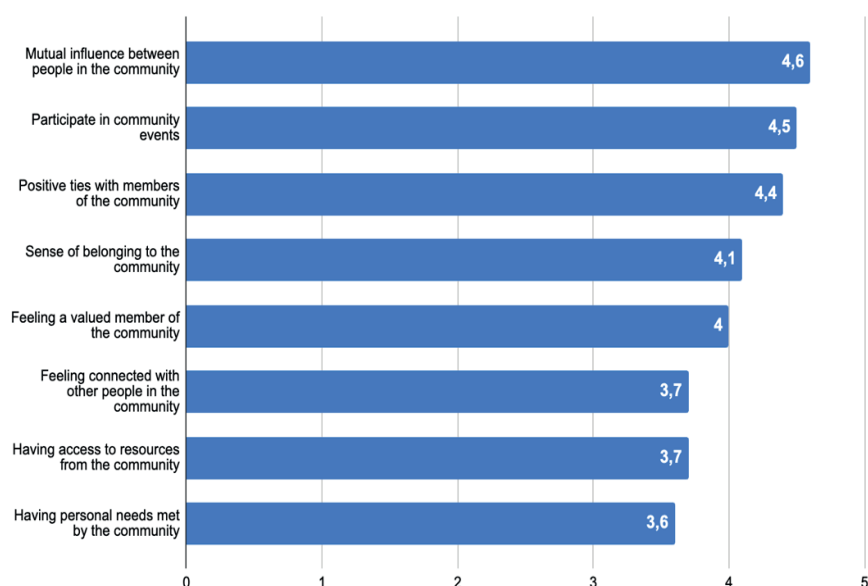
Rural youth turn to institutional support to find a job, but social media channels are on the rise

Considering the 183 participants looking for a job, 36.1% relied on informal support (friends and family) to find one, compared with 62.3% who relied on institutional support (provided by public employment services, schools or private recruitment agencies). The most often used source for finding a job was social media (65%). Importantly, the participants seldom relied on only one source. Frequently, their job search efforts involved combining more than one support source (64.5%). When relying only on one source, the most often used was social media (19.1%), followed by institutional support (12%), with informal support coming last (1.6%).

Informal support in the spotlight: from resources to belonging

A more nuanced analysis of the perspectives of rural youth on informal support is informative. Specifically, it allows an understanding of the roles their informal ties play. Figure 4.2 provides this more granular analysis of informal support.

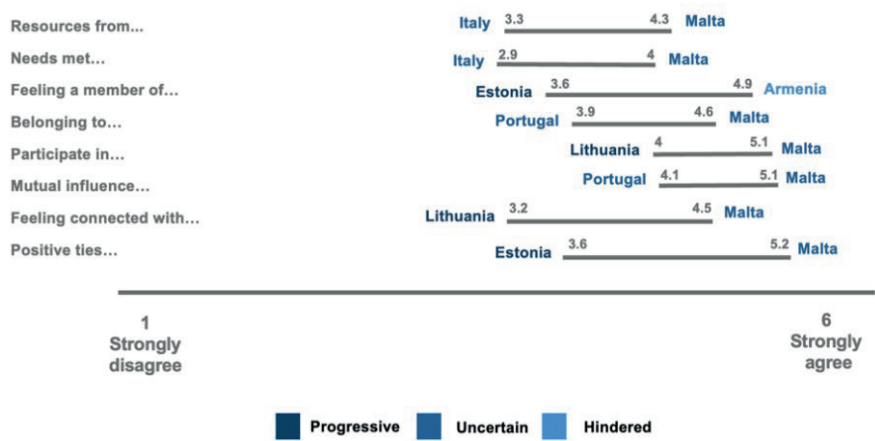
Figure 4.2 – Informal support roles



Notes: $n = 2331$; average scores. Scale: 1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree

The higher average ratings were related to social roles of informal support, namely the perception that community members mutually influence each other (4.6 points) and provide space for participation (4.5 points). Emotional support came next for promoting positive ties (4.4 points) and a sense of belonging (4.1 points). Rural youth perceived practical support as the weakest dimension of informal support. The instrumental role of informal support was translated into the provision of resources (3.7 points) and meeting individual needs (3.6 points). The variation of informal support roles by country and clusters is illustrated in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3 – Average results for different informal support roles played by the community (minimum and maximum values)



Notes: *n* = 2331

As shown in Figure 4.3, Malta had higher ratings for all forms of informal support except for feeling a member of the community, where Armenia leads. The lower averages varied across countries and clusters. Still, average rates of practical support were lower in one country from the uncertain citizenship cluster (Italy), while average ratings for issues covering social and emotional support were lower in Baltic states from the progressive citizenship cluster (Estonia and Lithuania) and in one country from the uncertain citizenship cluster (Portugal).

The perspectives of rural youth on participation

Participation is a driver of young people’s integral development as citizens. It facilitates social inclusion and promotes skills essential for a full and autonomous life (EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership 2024). As mentioned before, rural youth struggle to play an active role in their communities due to restricted access to formal decision-making platforms and limited resources from civil society for providing spaces and opportunities for participation (Ferreira et al. 2024). Still, emerging trends such as the settlement of newcomers in farming or digital nomads or the transformations from the green transition can represent outstanding opportunities for increased intergenerational co-operation and youth participation in rural areas (Simões et al. 2023).

Box 4.6 lists the most relevant findings of the survey regarding youth participation.

Box 4.6 – Youth participation among rural youth: highlights

Involvement in youth associations

Overall, 29% of the participants were involved in a youth association in the 12 months before the survey. This share ranged from 26% in the constrained citizenship cluster to 38% in the uncertain citizenship cluster.

Rural youth participate more as they get older

The share of those participating in associations was similar among young rural men and women (30%) and was higher among those aged 25 to 30 (35%) compared to those in the 18 to 24 age bracket (27%).

Formal participation is not so much on the radar of rural youth

In general, 14% of the participants participated in formal political activities, from involvement in political parties to local youth assembly or participatory budget initiatives.

Formal participation also grows with age and is a bit stronger among rural young men

As rural youth grow older, the share of participation increased from 11% (18 to 24 years old) to 22% (25 to 30 years old). Formal political activity was slightly higher among rural young men (16%) compared to rural young women (13%).

Formal participation differs across clusters of countries

Formal political participation ranges from 12% in the constrained citizenship countries to 26% in the uncertain citizenship countries. This form of participation is slightly higher among rural men across all clusters and increases with age, particularly among participants from uncertain citizenship countries (from 17% among those aged 18 to 24 to 31% among those aged 25 to 30).

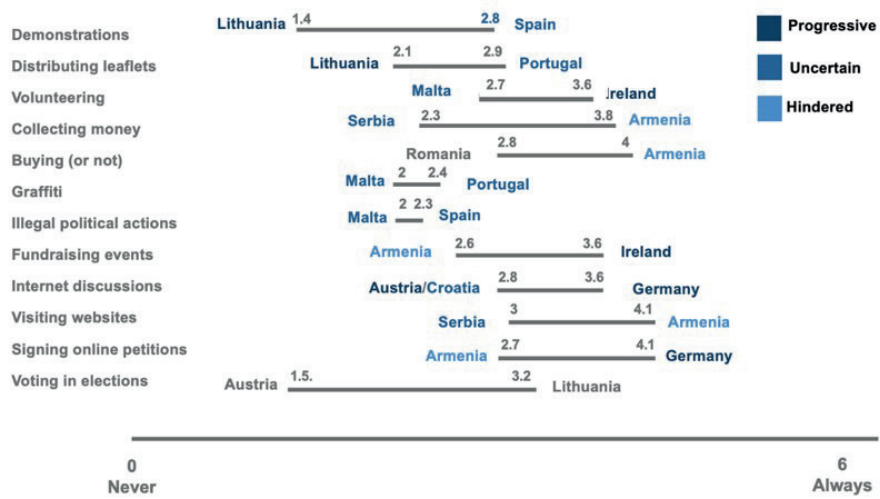
Youth participation in the spotlight: forms of participation

Youth participation can be institutionalised to various degrees and take different forms, from volunteering to involvement in illegal demonstrations. Thus, a more nuanced analysis of different forms of youth participation is key to better understanding how this can be transformed into a positive asset for rural communities. To do so, the survey included a civic and political participation scale, a 13-item questionnaire covering different forms of participation in the 12 months before the study (Menezes et al. 2012). Ratings ranged from 1 (never) to 6 (always).

Across different participation forms, the average results for the overall sample were low, ranging from 1.9 for participating in demonstrations focusing on social, environmental or political issues to 3.5 points for signing an online petition. In five of the participation forms covered by the questionnaire, the average result was below the average (3 points). These included the socially less accepted forms of participation, such as engaging in actions that might be illegal (2.1 points) or writing on walls or graffiti (2.2 points), but also institutionalised forms of participation, such as voting in elections, with similar ratings (2.2 points).

Figure 4.4 shows the range of minimum and maximum average results per country for each of the items on this topic. It is interesting to note that engagement in different forms of participation ranged considerably among countries and participants from different types of clusters. In some cases, these variations, being small (as for illegal political actions) or bigger (for distributing leaflets, for example), were always below the average point of the scale. In other cases, bigger fluctuations in average scores reach more substantial levels of participation, such as the signing of petitions (4.1 points in Germany).

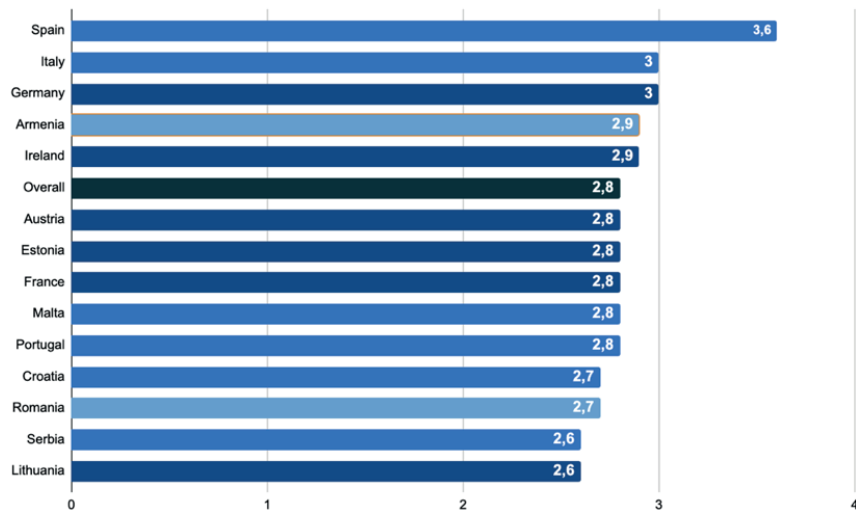
Figure 4.4 – Average results for forms of participation (minimum and maximum values; n = 2503)



Notes: n = 2503

The sum of the average points for different forms of participation provides an overall measure of participation for rural youth. Figure 4.5 shows those results by country and cluster.

Figure 4.5 – Average participation levels by country and cluster



Notes: n = 2503; scale from 1 to 6

As Figure 4.5 shows, Spain, Italy, Germany, Armenia and Ireland are above the average level of participation. The remaining countries were below that point (2.8 points). The distribution of rural youth’s participation levels was not affected by the transitional

clusters. For instance, countries in the uncertain citizenship cluster were both above (Spain) and below (Portugal) the average. Importantly, across all countries, the levels of participation did not vary considerably.

The perspectives of rural youth on employment

As described in Chapter 3, labour market integration in rural areas is complicated by declining rural economies affected by the dismantling of industrial capacity and the consequent loss of skilled workers (Zipin et al. 2015). Moreover, agriculture remains a pivotal economic force, but dominant family-based farms slow down innovation, risk-taking and entrepreneurship (Mujčinović et al. 2024). A few rural regions contradict this pattern. Some rely on an expanding services sector (Corbett 2007). Others welcome booming sectors, such as tourism (Díaz-Serrano and Nilsson 2020), which end up having negative long-term effects (such as a decline in education intake). Other rural areas have seen new farming business models focused on sustainability and local consumerism grow (Mujčinović et al. 2024). These rural economic trends generate weak rural labour markets, exposing younger rural generations to delays in accumulating work experience or becoming more specialised (Carmo and Matias 2019).

Box 4.7 systematises the pivotal findings stemming from the survey on the employment perspectives of rural youth.

Box 4.7 – Employment and rural youth: highlights

Different occupational statuses

The most common occupational status was being a student only (38.4%). About a quarter of the participants (25.3%) studied and worked. In turn, 16.9% worked full-time as a hired employee. Moreover, 7.3% of them were not working, but were searching for a job. The remaining participants were in different situations, such as working on their own or in their family businesses (3.9%), being enrolled in an apprenticeship/internship (3.6%), working part-time (only some days of the week) (1.7%) or volunteering (1.2%). Also, 1.2% of the respondents were inactive, meaning they were neither working nor searching for a job, because of health issues or family care duties or simply because they had given up looking for work. In addition, 0.5% were doing military service. The remaining participants reported being in another occupational situation.

Occupational statuses show some differences across clusters of countries

The distribution by clusters of countries showed some different patterns. The three predominant occupational conditions (covering about 75% of the participants) among the participants from progressive and uncertain citizenship groups were the same, although ranked differently. In the case of the progressive citizenship cluster, 28.5% studied and worked, 25.5% were hired workers and 19.9% were studying. In the case of the uncertain citizenship cluster, 33.2% were studying, 25.5% were hired workers and 19.6% studied and worked. The participants from the constrained citizenship cluster showed a different pattern of occupational statuses, with two occupational conditions accounting for about 75% of this group: 55.7% were studying and 26.5% were studying and working.

Gender does not affect occupational status

When considering the top three occupational statuses by gender, the results showed the same order: most often, both men and women were studying, followed by those studying and working and those working as a hired worker.

Are there work and education mismatches? Yes, there are a few

Most of those working reported that their work matched their educational level (60.8%). In turn, 32.7% acknowledged that their education was above their work duties. Only 6.5% considered that their education was below their work responsibilities. Interestingly, the pattern was the same across the clusters of countries, with close to two thirds of the participants considering their work matched their educational level and only one third (ranging from 32.2% in progressive and uncertain citizenship clusters to 34.1% in the constrained citizenship cluster) stating their education level is above the work duties. Only a fraction (less than 8% in the progressive citizenship cluster and an even lower share in the other clusters) reported that their work duties were below the attained educational level.

Factors supporting finding a job among rural youth – Having a driving licence and car

When asked about the three main factors that help to find a job, having a car (60%) stands out as the most important one, followed by having good contacts among family, friends and neighbours (55%) and having prior work experience (53%). Having a good education only comes fourth (42%). The remaining factors such as being involved in the community (16%), good access to public transportation (15%), being an entrepreneur (14%), being registered in public employment services (13%), using social media (12%) or having the opportunity to work in a family business (10%) are seen as much less relevant enablers of job finding.

Are the reasons for finding a job the same across clusters of countries?

Not really

The reasons for finding a job vary by clusters of countries. For the participants in the constrained citizenship cluster, the main reason for finding a job is having work experience (56%), followed closely by having a good education level (53%) and having good contacts among family, friends and neighbours (52%). For those living in countries included in the uncertain citizenship cluster, having good contacts among family, friends and neighbours (62%) came first, followed very closely by having a car (61%) and having prior work experience (45%). Finally, for respondents from countries included in the progressive citizenship group, having a car is the most selected factor for finding a job (77%), followed by having work experience (56%) and having good contacts among family, friends and neighbours (53%).

Does being registered with public employment services matter? Not really

The importance of being registered with public employment services ranks low across all clusters, ranging from 8% in the constrained citizenship cluster to 20% in the uncertain citizenship cluster.

Public transportation is not that relevant for finding a job

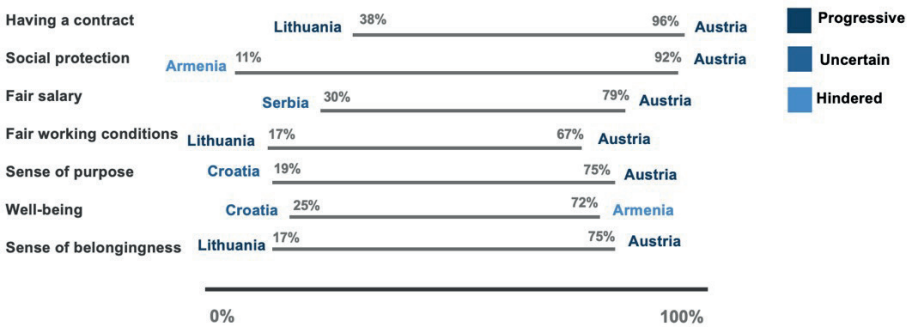
The same reasoning applies to access to public transportation, which was selected by a maximum of 18% of the participants grouped in the constrained citizenship cluster.

Employment: decent and meaningful jobs in the spotlight

Labour market success is increasingly assessed not only by the power to generate jobs and full employment but above all by the capacity to deliver jobs that are decent (those providing fair pay for productive work, equal opportunities, safety in the workplace or social protection) and meaningful (those that allow the performing of productive tasks, leading to positive work attitudes and a sense of belonging to an occupational group) (International Labour Organization 2018; Masdonati et al. 2021).

This research project examined the perspectives of rural youth on decent and meaningful jobs. Figure 4.6 summarises how the different elements of decent and meaningful jobs varied across the countries.

Figure 4.6 – Average results for decent and meaningful jobs dimensions (minimum and maximum share values)

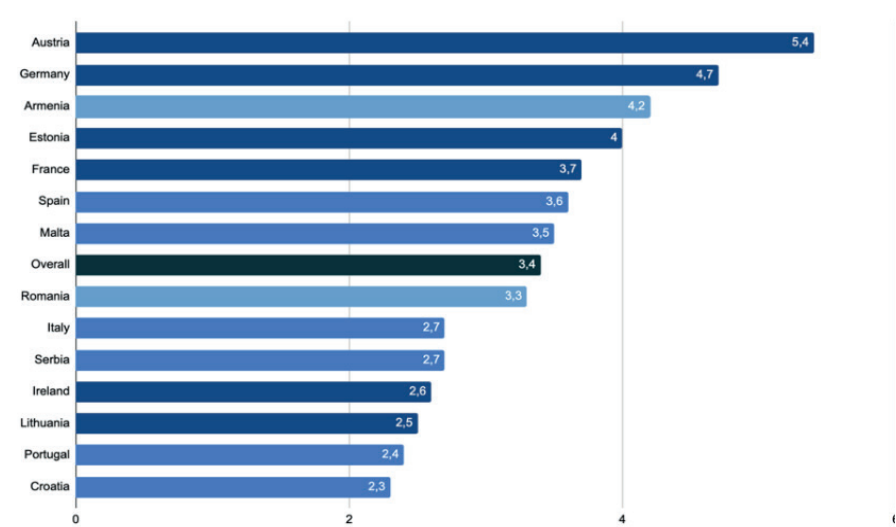


Note: $n = 1224$

As shown in Figure 4.6, there is significant variation regarding the different dimensions of decent and meaningful jobs. Austrian participants scored higher in all dimensions except for one. Indeed, participants from Armenia considered more often that their work contributed to their well-being (72%). In three of the dimensions, namely having a contract (38%), having access to fair working conditions (17%) and a sense of belonging (17%), rural youth in Lithuania showed the lowest share of positive answers. Croatia had the lowest share of rural youth acknowledging that their work contributed to their sense of purpose (19%) and well-being (25%). Armenian participants made up the lowest share of those acknowledging that their work provides social protection (11%).

When aggregating all the dimensions to measure the scale of decent and meaningful jobs as a whole, ranging from 0 (none of the dimensions covered) to 7 (all the dimensions covered), the results varied considerably, as shown in Figure 4.7.

Figure 4.7 – Average decent and meaningful jobs results by country and clusters of citizenship



Note: $n = 1224$; scale from 0 to 7

As shown in Figure 4.7, the average results for decent and meaningful jobs ranged from 2.3 points for Croatia to 5.4 points for Austria. The distribution of the results did not show a clear pattern by clusters of countries. For instance, three countries from the progressive citizenship cluster were ranked in the first four places (Austria, Germany and Estonia) and above the overall average. Two other countries from this cluster (Ireland and Lithuania) were below the overall average. Rural youth from countries included in the constrained citizenship cluster are above the overall average (in the case of Romania) and close to the average (Armenia). Importantly, the overall score showed that, on average, the work experience of rural youth only fitted three out of the seven criteria for decent and meaningful work.

The perspectives of rural youth on youth mobilities

Rural youth mobilities are becoming more diverse, and include dominant movements such as outmigration, daily or weekly commuting between urban and rural areas for work or studying, or returning movements, when young people originating from rural areas decide to return after being away for a long period (Silva et al. 2021). The combination of these mobility trends with generally lower birth rates, longer life expectancy or a lower number of immigrants settling in rural areas across European countries has led to a decline in the youth population (under 30 years old) in the countryside, with a few exceptions (such as Ireland) (Eurostat 2024).

Box 4.8 systematises the main results of the survey, describing how rural youth perceive and experience mobilities.

Box 4.8 – Mobilities: highlights

Rural youth are not that mobile

About two thirds (65.7%) of the participants acknowledged that they were still living in the same rural area where they were born. The share of those remaining in rural areas of origin ranged from 53.1% in Estonia to 85.2% in Armenia. Remaining was more common among rural youth living in countries included in the uncertain citizenship cluster (71.2%) compared to those living in countries in the progressive (68.8%) and constrained (59.3%) citizenship clusters.

Remaining is a little more common among rural young men and older participants

Rural young men (68%) and older participants (aged 25 to 30) (68.1%) were slightly more likely to remain in their rural area of origin compared to rural young women (64.6%) and younger participants (aged 18-24) (65%).

Remaining is also the standard across lifespans

About half of the participants (48.9%) had never left their rural area of origin for more than six months, ranging from 41.3% in Italy to 62.3% in Armenia. That was more often the case among participants from countries included in the progressive citizenship cluster (55.5%), young men (53.4%) and younger (54.7%) participants.

Family and friends are the main reason to stay

Overall, the three most important reasons for remaining in rural areas were staying closer to family and friends (31.6%), not having enough financial resources (25.8%) and preferring the countryside lifestyle (19.1%). These reasons and their order of importance are the same irrespective of the identified citizenship clusters, except that preferring the rural lifestyle and not having enough financial resources came second and third for rural youth from countries included in the progressive citizenship cluster.

Moving out to study

Overall, educational reasons (attending university, attending secondary school or finding an apprenticeship) were the overwhelming motive to move out of rural areas (69.7%), followed by employment reasons, namely finding a job (10%), and social reasons (such as living in a bigger place, meeting new people) (9.7%). The remaining 10.6% indicated other motives for moving out. These motives to move out were stable across clusters of countries, although a bigger share of rural youth from countries included in the constrained citizenship cluster (81.2%) selected educational reasons for outmigration, compared to the uncertain (70.2%) and the progressive (52.3%) citizenship clusters. The same distribution was evident across rural young women and men, although a bigger share of women (73%) left to improve their qualifications, compared to men (64.1%).

Future mobility intentions in the spotlight

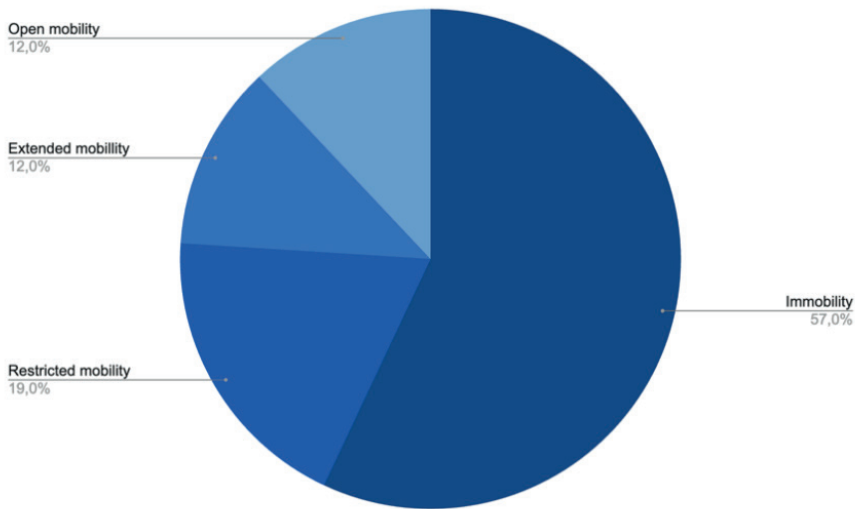
Youth mobilities involve intention – the reasoning behind the motives, resources and the consequences of moving from one place to another – and enactment, corresponding to the effective transition between places. Knowing more about

rural youth’s mobility intentions helps to anticipate mobility movements and tailor policies and resources to better fit the local and regional needs of youth social capital (Silva et al. 2021).

Rural youth in this survey were asked to assess their mobilities intentions in the short term (the next 12 months). The relatively narrow approach to mobility perspectives is more realistic, considering young people are going through a transitional period where decisions are fluid and keep changing. Moreover, rural youth mobilities are affected by multiple factors, including financial (greater costs of moving from rural to urban or suburban areas), social (stronger ties to local communities), infrastructural (lack of transportation) or geographical (distance to urban centres that limits commuting) (Simões et al. 2021).

In this study, the participants positioned themselves regarding immobility (staying where they are living now for their daily living), restricted mobility (commuting or moving permanently to a nearby rural area), extended mobility (moving permanently to an urban area or abroad) or open mobility (intention to move but unsure where) in the next 12 months. Figure 4.8 summarises the overall results.

Figure 4.8 – Mobility intentions in the next 12 months (%)



Note: *n* = 2378

As Figure 4.8 shows, most participants did not intend to move out of the rural areas in which they live (57%). About one fifth (19%) envisioned themselves in a restricted mobility situation, between commuting or moving to a rural area nearby. In turn, 12% of the respondents fit the extended mobility category, that is, considering moving out permanently from their rural area to live in a city or abroad. The same share of participants fit in an open mobility situation, as they think about leaving, but do not know where.

The shares for the different mobility intentions were similar across citizenship clusters. The share of participants who frame their mobility intentions in terms of staying in

rural areas for their daily life, commuting or moving to nearby rural areas ranged from 73% for respondents from countries in the uncertain citizenship cluster to 78% for participants from countries in the progressive citizenship cluster. This trend is also stable across rural young men and rural young women, with 78% and 75% respectively choosing an option aligned with the immobility and restricted mobility categories. The same applies to age groups, with an exception: older participants (65%) were more likely than younger participants (55%) to report immobility intentions.

The perspectives of rural youth on leisure, culture and sports

Leisure, culture and sports activities are key for youth work programmes. They are also essential for promoting positive individual outcomes such as physical fitness, stress reduction, mental health and a balanced lifestyle. Offering good-quality leisure, culture and sports activities in rural areas is often complicated by multiple barriers such as limited infrastructure and facilities, lack of transportation (Morrissey and Neuman 2021), financial constraints (Saba and Roman 2022) or lack of diversified activities appropriate for different groups (such as young women) (Bæck 2016).

The survey addressed how much rural youth were satisfied (on a scale from 1, meaning completely dissatisfied, to 6, completely satisfied) and used (also on a scale from 1, meaning never, to 6, every day) different leisure, culture and sports facilities. The listed facilities were bars and pubs, cinemas, theatres, libraries, youth centres, community centres, sports facilities, natural parks and beaches. Box 4.9 summarises the main findings.

Box 4.9 – Leisure, culture and sports: highlights

Theatres or natural parks? Satisfaction depends on the type of recreation opportunities

Rural youth participating in the survey showed moderate satisfaction with the available leisure, culture and sports facilities, with an average rating of 3.2. Their ratings ranged from 2.5 points for theatres to 4 points for natural parks. The overall average satisfaction rating was higher among the participants from progressive citizenship countries (3.9 points) compared to participants from countries in the uncertain (3.7 points) and in the constrained (2.4 points) citizenship clusters. Their average ratings were also higher for each of the facilities/spaces included in the assessment.

Satisfaction is not a matter of gender or age

The satisfaction levels were constant across gender and age groups. Across these groups, natural parks, sports facilities and pubs receive higher average satisfaction rates. However, the ratings across these subsets of rural youth were all in the moderate range (from 3 to 4 points).

Satisfied, but not ready to make use of leisure, culture and sports facilities

The average use ratings for leisure, culture and sports are lower. The overall average use rating is low (2.2 points). The participants' ratings ranged from 1.6 points for theatres to 2.9 for natural parks. The average use rating was very similar for participants from countries in the uncertain (2.4 points), progressive (2.2 points) and constrained (2.1 points) citizenship clusters.

Use is also not affected by gender and age

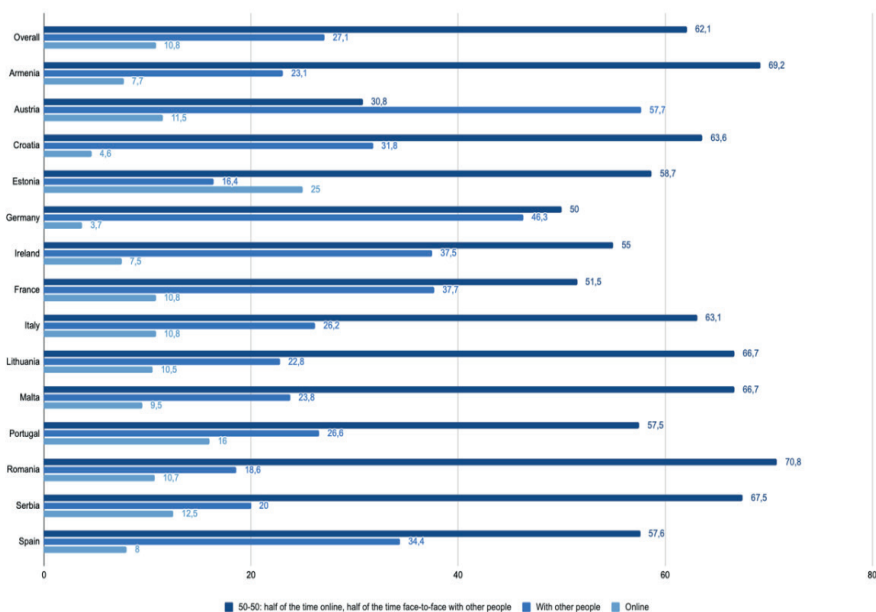
The average ratings by gender and age subgroups follow the same pattern of the average satisfaction ratings. Thus, natural parks, sports facilities and pubs are the facilities with higher average use rates. However, the use ratings are a bit lower, going from 2.5 and 3.1 points across these subsets of rural youth.

Leisure, culture and sports: use of free time in the spotlight

The use of free time is changing among young people. Young people in Europe increasingly spend their free time online, primarily on social media and streaming platforms. Yet, face-to-face interactions remain important, especially for maintaining close friendships and participating in group activities. The overall picture is that digital engagement often complements rather than replaces in-person socialising (Eurostat 2023).

This study assessed how the overall use of free time is made in rural areas. Figure 4.9 summarises the findings. Across all countries, the participants confirmed recent trends presented by Eurostat (2023). Most of them shared their free time equally between digital and face-to-face interactions, ranging from 70.8% in Romania and 50% in Germany. The exception is Austria, where most of the participants spent their free time with other people in face-to-face interactions. For all the other countries, spending free time with other people came as a second option, with the lowest ratings found for Estonia (16.4%). Spending most of the free time online was the least common situation for all countries, except for Estonia, where 25% of rural youth admit that it is the most common option.

Figure 4.9 – Use of free time (%)



Note: $n = 2257$

Factors related to transition outcomes and satisfaction with living in rural areas

Describing the survey's results is useful for understanding the perspectives and experiences of rural youth while they prepare for adulthood. However, moving a step forward in the analysis to explore what factors are more strongly and more consistently associated with transitional outcomes (employment, mobility and satisfaction with culture, leisure and sports) as well as with satisfaction of living in a rural area adds an important layer to the analysis. Following this approach, the research team was guided by some key questions. What factors or types of factors are more often linked with transitional outcomes and satisfaction with living in a rural area? Are individual traits or conditions such as gender, age or economic status relevant? Are transition drivers, corresponding to some of the study dimensions, such as education, more important than individual traits? Which factors are more consistently (meaning more often) associated with these indicators of transition and satisfaction? And how do the results differ across different citizenship clusters? The main conclusions of this exploration are summarised in Table 4.3.

At the employment level, the analysis focused on the factors associated with decent and meaningful jobs. This transitional outcome is the one associated with more factors for the overall participants. Here, individual factors mattered. Older participants, aged 25 to 30 and those not in economic deprivation were more likely to report higher rates of decent and meaningful jobs. The same applied to some transitional drivers. Those holding a university degree and who showed stronger perceptions of informal support provided by their community were also more likely to rate their jobs as decent and meaningful more strongly. There were, however, variations by clusters of countries. Among participants from countries in the constrained citizenship group, the factors associated with stronger ratings of decent and meaningful are almost the same. The only exception was that informal support was not significantly associated with this employment indicator. In turn, older participants, with a university degree and showing stronger perceptions of informal support, were more likely to present higher rates of decent and meaningful work in the uncertain citizenship cluster. Finally, only older participants with stronger perceptions of informal support were more likely to present higher rates of decent and meaningful work in the progressive citizenship cluster.

Regarding mobility, older participants showing higher levels of informal support but also reporting lower levels of youth participation were also more likely to intend to stay in rural areas. Higher levels of informal support were associated with stronger intentions to stay in rural areas across all citizenship clusters as well. Older participants were more likely to show stronger intentions to stay in countries from the constrained and the progressive citizenship clusters. Lower youth participation was associated with stronger intentions to stay only in the progressive citizenship cluster.

The results also demonstrate that older participants, as well as those giving higher ratings for informal support, were more likely to use culture, leisure and sports facilities. This main trend is slightly different across the citizenship clusters. Older participants, as well as those rating informal support higher, were also more likely to use these facilities in

the constrained citizenship cluster. In the other two clusters, only those reporting higher rates for informal support were more likely to use culture, leisure and sports facilities.

Finally, the participants more likely to show higher satisfaction with living in a rural area were those who were not in material deprivation and who reported higher rates of informal support and youth participation. Importantly, those with a lower educational level (primary school or lower secondary school) were more likely to be unsatisfied with their life in a rural area compared with those holding a university degree. This trend was consistent across citizenship clusters, with one exception. For participants from countries included in the uncertain citizenship cluster, only higher rates of informal support are associated with greater satisfaction with living in a rural area. Importantly, youth participation is only significantly associated with higher rates of satisfaction with living in a rural area for all participants. The same effect is not observed for any of the clusters.

Table 4.3 – Main associations between key factors and transitional outcomes among rural youth overall and by citizenship clusters

Transitional outcomes	Overall	Constrained citizenship	Uncertain citizenship	Progressive citizenship
Higher ratings for decent and meaningful jobs	Older participants (aged 25-30) Participants who are not in economic deprivation Those with a university degree Participants rating informal support higher	Older participants (aged 25-30) Participants who are not in economic deprivation Those with a university degree	Older participants (aged 25-30) Those with a university degree Participants rating informal support higher	Participants rating informal support higher
Greater likelihood of staying in rural areas	Older participants (aged 25-30) Participants rating informal support higher Participants rating youth participation lower	Older participants (aged 25-30) Participants rating informal support higher	Older participants (aged 25-30) Participants rating informal support higher	Older participants (aged 25-30) Participants rating informal support higher Participants rating youth participation lower
Greater use of culture, leisure and sports facilities	Older participants (aged 25-30) Participants rating informal support higher	Older participants (aged 25-30) Participants rating informal support higher	Participants rating informal support higher	Participants rating informal support higher
Stronger satisfaction with living in a rural area	Participants who are not in economic deprivation Participants rating informal support higher Participants rating youth participation higher	Participants who are not in economic deprivation	Participants who are not in economic deprivation Participants rating informal support higher	Participants rating informal support higher

Chapter 5

Discussion and recommendations

This report assessed how rural youth aged 18 to 30 across European countries were transitioning into adulthood in the pre- and post-Covid period (2019-2023). Five of them (Armenia, Estonia, Ireland, Romania and Spain) were covered across the five levels of analysis: institutional set-up; major trends; policies; practices and projects; and young people's perspectives. The research team followed a mixed-methods approach, aiming to assess the multiple key dimensions that shape the processes and outcomes of the transition from youth to adulthood in rural areas. Overall, these key dimensions cover the European Youth Goal 6 "Moving Rural Youth Forward" and its goals. These goals include ensuring that:

- ▶ there is an appropriate infrastructure in rural areas for the equitable provision of public services, data connectivity and housing opportunities for young people;
- ▶ there are sustainable, high-quality jobs, accessible to young people in rural areas;
- ▶ there is a decentralisation of different activities by, for and with young people in order to support their inclusion and to benefit local communities;
- ▶ active participation in decision-making processes is possible;
- ▶ there is equal access to high-quality education for young people in rural areas;
- ▶ there is a positive image of rural areas;
- ▶ rural traditions are protected.

Moreover, the findings also address the recent recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to member states on the social, economic and political participation of rural youth. Specifically, the findings support the needs highlighted in the recommendation for the member states to: 1. remove barriers and ensure rural youth have equitable access to rights, services and opportunities in social, economic and political life; 2. strengthen youth structures, promoting democratic participation and improving access to education, healthcare, mobility and digital infrastructure; 3. tailor policies, financial incentives and inclusive governance for empowering rural youth and revitalising rural communities. Based on the report's main findings, the following eight pivotal findings inform these two frameworks.

- 1. Transitional trends in rural areas are mixed, showing room for progress.** In the 2019-2023 period, several transitional indicators have continued to improve across rural Europe in most European countries. For instance, rural tertiary education attainment among those aged 30 to 34 has increased, while NEET rates have

decreased. These positive signs contrast with a continued and consistent decline of the youth population aged 15 to 29, an increase in youth unemployment, particularly in southern European countries or lower participation rates in the countryside. Ensuring a more consistent improvement of rural transitional trends requires national governments as well as regional and local authorities to adopt and mainstream some promising ideas or weak signals coming from the on-the-ground experiences. These include: a. new governance approaches for service delivery, namely those that promote effective public services co-ordination (Ribeiro et al. 2024); b. drafting programmes to bridge megatrends such as digitalisation with rural communities' needs, which has the potential to promote new forms of rural intergenerational relationships or rural entrepreneurship (Mujčinović et al. 2024); or c. using more thoughtful outreach strategies to target young people with fewer opportunities, showing an appropriate mix between the use of digital outreach and face-to-face support (such as street work or mentoring) (Simões & Marta 2024).

- 2. Policy measures do not target rural youth as a priority group.** Across the different countries included in the policy analysis, rural youth are not targeted as a specific youth subgroup. Usually, the issues facing rural youth are addressed through universal policies for cross-cutting challenges for rural areas, associated with farming, regional development or entrepreneurship. The lack of targeted policies for rural youth is further deepened by a general alignment of policy packages with transitional typologies reflected by the citizenship clusters. While countries such as Estonia or Ireland (progressive citizenship) integrate rural youth needs in relevant, broader policy packages, such as those aiming at rural development, this strategy is more nuanced in Spain (uncertain citizenship) and more often absent in Armenia and Romania (constrained citizenship). These findings echo and extend the findings from recent reports showing: a. a lack of territorialised youth policies, namely of policy measures aiming at the most pressing needs of rural youth, including in major EU instruments such as Pillar 6 (policies for the next generation) of the Resilience and Recovery Facility Framework (Simões 2022); and b. the uneven translation of key instruments such as the Reinforced Youth Guarantee into national policy measures aiming at the most vulnerable subgroups of rural youth (such as those categorised as NEET). In this respect, while some countries, such as Spain, have adopted measures to support NEET young people in rural, disadvantaged and remote areas, other countries included in this report (Italy and Lithuania) do not prioritise rural youth (Petrescu et al. 2024). This continued absence of rural youth as a priority of policy design at the EU and national levels is flagged by the recent Recommendation CM/Rec(2025)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the social, economic and political participation of rural youth. The same gap must be questioned when major efforts, such as the EU LTVRA (European Commission 2021b), are expected to gain importance and momentum. Pathways to address these shortcomings demand that national governments make efforts that include: a. ensuring a better vertical co-ordination of policies targeting rural youth, meaning a more efficient streamlining of international and EU-level initiatives into national, regional and local programmes and agendas, in areas such as vocational education and training, ALMPs or rural development; b. combining top-down policy initiatives with bottom-up strategies involving stakeholders working on the

ground (such as youth organisations) to ensure enough resources are flowing to rural communities and that the priorities are adequate and meaningful to promote rural youth's multiple transition needs; c. balancing the rollout of key universal policies, such as ALMPs or regional development packages, with some targeted programmes prioritising rural youth, as Spain did in the context of the Resilience and Recovery Facility Framework; d. strengthening the priority given to rural youth as a target group in pivotal EU programmes, such as Erasmus+ (for example, by adding new calls or specific outcomes in existing calls for funding covering this subset of young people, awarding additional points in the most appropriate evaluation criteria for projects that include and adequately address rural youth needs, or improving/prioritising networking, exchange and mobility schemes linking different rural and rural and urban areas, with a focus on remote rural areas); and e. adding a rural youth layer to broader and relevant national universal policy packages in areas such as employment, education and mobility or through initiatives targeting transversal issues affecting rural youth (for example, Spain created a Ministry of Demographic Change, which implements intersectoral policies relevant for the future of rural youth).

- 3. Practices and projects demonstrate that there is a lively youth sector, but the organisations' efforts lack co-ordination and sustainability.** Despite policy design limitations, this research project identified vibrant and relevant practices and projects targeting rural youth across different countries. These initiatives are promoted by international umbrella organisations and national (local) civil society organisations. Overall, these practices show a clear concern for producing knowledge, particularly at the international level, while identifying the key needs of rural youth. Importantly, the different projects and practices identify transitional issues and pivotal concerns of rural youth, such as the need for better education and employment. They also reflect pressing needs in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, such as limited access to mental health support or culture, leisure and sports facilities. However, one important finding stemming from this research project is that just as there is a need to build up a policy agenda for rural youth, there is a need to co-ordinate the efforts and knowledge of national and international youth organisations working in rural settings. This will help develop capacity building in the youth sector, while also improving these organisations' capacity to influence major (inter)national efforts and agendas such as the EU long-term vision. Some measures may help to achieve that, such as: a. establishing permanent interest groups or think tanks focusing on the needs of rural youth that can bring "a rural youth vision" into critical European-level initiatives, such as the Erasmus+ programme, the EU LTVRA or the strategy to promote generational renewal in rural areas (European Commission 2025b); b. creating stable, predictable and long-term funding schemes and channels at the national level to continuously support youth organisations operating in rural areas, including incentives for regional co-operation and more efficient sharing and use of resources (such as joint initiatives and the shared use of infrastructure in different parts of the same region); c. establishing new transdisciplinary research agendas at the national level and within the Horizon Europe framework to allow for a more continued and purposeful collaboration between research institutions, youth organisations

and local stakeholders, while increasing the quality, co-ordination and sharing of best practices and projects aimed at this subset of young people.

4. Transitional drivers: more education, moderate informal support, low youth participation. This report selected education, support systems and youth participation as drivers of transitional pathways towards adulthood among rural youth. The participants' perspectives about these dimensions provided some surprising findings. Most of the participants are enrolled in some sort of education or training. The majority graduated from university. Of those who were not studying, the overwhelming majority wanted to continue studying. Importantly, the participants clearly acknowledged that education has an instrumental role in improving life prospects (such as finding a job). The willingness to continue improving qualifications and to value the role of education among rural youth is not in line with existing evidence (Bæck 2016). However, the participants are biased towards higher educational levels and must have experienced how much education is a powerful tool for social mobility in rural areas. Besides, the surveyed participants feel moderately supported by their community. However, average levels of support are higher in social aspects, such as mutual influence or providing space for participation, contrary to more practical areas, such as resource provision or meeting individual needs. Thus, the results confirm the importance of rural social ties to family, friends and neighbours reported elsewhere (in Bello and Cuzzocrea (2018) and Simões et al. (2022), for example). In this report, the findings mostly stress the social relevance of these support sources for creating a sense of community and providing participation opportunities. That importance is further highlighted and discussed below (point number 8 of the discussion). Moreover, youth participation rates are overall low. Less than a third of the participants are involved in an association and only a small fraction are engaged in formal forms of participation (such as a political party), with differences across citizenship clusters. Participants coming from countries in the constrained citizenship group participate the least, compared to those from countries in the uncertain citizenship cluster, whether participation forms are more or less formal. These results are, furthermore, in line with recent reports from the Youth Partnership (EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership 2023d). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that among those with lower education and, more often, more vulnerable subsets of rural youth, the participation levels are even lower. Ensuring that key transitional drivers positively affect rural youth transitions requires the following from national governments.

- ▶ Creating school clusters involving formal collaboration between rural schools to mitigate size-based challenges, while offering an alternative to traditional school provision approaches often driven by relocation of students in larger, faraway schools.
- ▶ Adopting novel, tailored approaches to formal education in rural spaces, by better integrating distance learning in higher education and life-long learning perspectives, while adapting curricula to reflect local opportunities and labour markets, particularly for vocational education and training (Agahi, Pell-Dempere and Prieto-Flores 2023).

- ▶ Improving Vocational Education and Training deployment, by easing or adjusting constraints associated with EU funding in rural areas (for example, a more flexible approach to school and class sizes, as well as to curricula deployment, such as moving any barriers to implementing “multi-courses”, with common theoretical subjects, but aiming to develop technical skills in different professional areas).
- ▶ Better co-ordinating local economic opportunities with education and training deployment, by prioritising rural regions, particularly those in remote (mountain, coastal, outermost) areas, in Erasmus+ Centres for Vocational Excellence calls for proposals or by developing specific initiatives informed by the European Alliance for Apprenticeships.
- ▶ Investing in the capacity building of rural youth organisations to enable them to provide sustainable co-creation spaces and projects, in the context of existing national and EU frameworks, through more continued funding and training (Ferreira et al. 2024).
- ▶ Increasing the representativeness of rural youth in local decision-making forums run and facilitated by municipalities, including of those “on the move”, meaning those that are away completing their studies or working (Silva et al. 2021), so that their ties with rural communities and contributions to local social capital are transformed into an asset to counteract brain drain and encourage them to return to their origins.

5. Rural youth have occupations, but when working, jobs are not that decent or meaningful. Most of the participants were occupied working, studying or doing both. About 9% of the participants were unemployed or inactive. Close to two thirds reported that their work matched their qualifications. Interestingly, the most important factors for finding a job included having a car, having good contacts among family and friends and having prior work experience, with education only coming fourth. These reasons are ranked differently across citizenship clusters but remain in the top three/four positions. Importantly, the relevance of institutional support for finding a job, in terms of being registered with public employment services, is downplayed – ratings range from 8% in the constrained citizenship cluster to 20% in the uncertain citizenship cluster. One positive finding is that most participants have an occupation. Moreover, overeducation rates are below the figures of recent studies, where these may reach 50%, particularly in southern European countries (Baran 2024). These findings also contradict the negative prospects for rural youth labour markets after the pandemic, presented in the trends analysis, reflecting only the reality of European Union countries. The fact that the participants present higher educational levels certainly plays a role here. Importantly, these findings confirm the pivotal role of informal support for labour market inclusion, probably reflecting the higher quality of informal networks’ contacts and the resources of these participants. This shows a distinct trend from what Bello and Cuzzocrea (2018) identify as familism, meaning the risk of informal ties perpetuating social capital gaps across generations of low-educated, low-qualified workers in the transition to the labour market. A pivotal finding of this study is that jobs are seen as only moderately decent and meaningful, even among a more educated set of rural youth, although with important

variations across countries. This result is particularly relevant, as (inter)national policy agendas on work issues have set the quality of jobs as a standard indicator of positive labour markets. More importantly, stronger, more connected, resilient and prosperous rural regions by 2040, as envisioned by the EU LTVRA, will need to rely heavily on radical changes in rural youth labour markets, which cannot be limited to improving the level of qualifications. Only decent and meaningful jobs, providing individuals with fair wages, dignity and purpose, will ensure rural sustainable economic growth and strengthen communities through increased productivity and social cohesion (Masdonati et al. 2021). Overall, these results suggest that national policy efforts to improve rural youth transition must do the following.

- ▶ Invest in significantly improving daily mobility, by reducing car dependence, increasing the availability and affordability of public transportation, while reducing the environmental impacts of car-based commutation. This can be achieved through public transport provided by local on-demand mobility services, organised and co-funded by rural inhabitants or incentives for private initiatives such as ride sharing to complement public transportation options.
- ▶ Invest in new public employment service delivery methods (for example, mobile public employment services like the ones in Bulgaria) to increase the capacity of institutional support and to support school-to-work transitions in rural areas appropriately.
- ▶ Adopt a grassroots approach, involving LAGs and other local platforms in the context of the LTVRA and/or the CAP framework, to create dedicated employment policies for setting an agenda for decent and meaningful rural jobs in critical rural sectors, such as farming, fisheries or regional industries.
- ▶ Define or refine specific incentives (such as tax cuts or funding programmes) and policy instruments to advance jobs associated with the twin transition, particularly in the circular economy, but also in the orange (cultural) economy, often associated with rural youth entrepreneurship or with youth work. Altogether, these sectors have the potential to generate more decent and meaningful jobs, particularly for professionals with intermediate qualifications who tend to stay more often in rural areas.
- ▶ Create dedicated policy agendas to increase the capacity for rural youth, including those from vulnerable groups like women and young people with disabilities, to work remotely, including investments in digital infrastructure, teaching digital skills to young workers and providing key support services, such as childcare or work–life balance measures.

6. Thinking of moving outside rural areas? Actually, rural youth want to stay. Several reports (Farrugia 2016; Theodori and Theodori 2015) and public indicators (Eurostat 2024) show a dominant and continued youth outmigration flow from rural to urban areas. This trend is inconsistent with the participants' views, at least in the short term. Most of them live in the rural area where they are originally from and half of them have never left to live somewhere else for a longer period (at least six months). This trend is rather consistent across gender and age groups and clusters of countries. Keeping close social ties with family and friends is the main reason to stay. However, a quarter of the participants

acknowledge that the lack of financial resources is the main justification for remaining in a rural area. Among those leaving, more than two thirds did it to study. More striking is that 76% of the participants envisage themselves staying, commuting or moving to a nearby rural area in the next 12 months. These results are even more unexpected because most participants are aged 18 to 24 and highly educated. These subsets of rural youth tend to show stronger mobility intentions. These findings can stem from three interconnected reasons. First, rural youth mobility is increasingly more fluid, with commuting, returning and circular mobility becoming more frequent (Silva et al. 2021:). Given that many young people chose “having a car” as the most important factor for finding a job, this study certainly captured an important share of participants who commute daily, thus justifying this result. Second, the research may have identified a novel, but increasingly relevant, issue in the current economic conditions, the high living costs in urban areas in the post-pandemic period that end up reducing mobility intentions, particularly in rural areas closer to cities that benefit from better rural-urban links (OECD 2025). This point certainly deserves more attention, as housing costs are also rising in rural areas. Third, the time frame applied to the question on mobility intentions (12 months) is short. Thus, it remains uncertain if a longer time projection would lead to different results. Transitional periods are marked by quick changes, meaning that longer time projections for studying the mobility intentions of rural youth tend to be less precise. Therefore, policy recommendations made in point 2 apply here, particularly the expanded efforts to improve short and medium-term mobility opportunities for rural youth, namely those under the Erasmus+ programme and national exchange/mobility frameworks.

- 7. Free time is a matter of making the most of nature.** The assessment of the use of and satisfaction with culture, leisure and sports facilities shows a clear preference for outdoor recreational options/spaces such as natural parks. Overall, rural youth are moderately satisfied with the available recreational infrastructure and report low use of different facilities, particularly those related to culture, such as theatres. These results are consistent, regardless of age and gender. Those from countries in the progressive citizenship cluster tend to show greater satisfaction with their recreational opportunities and infrastructure. These differences by clusters do not apply to the usage rates of these facilities. Unfortunately, the reasons explaining these findings (for example, what is available is of low quality or not interesting enough) have not been explored in depth. Moreover, there is the increasing importance of online forms of recreation, in line with findings from previous reports (Eurostat 2023). To tackle this, policy makers must:
a. make strategic investments in local infrastructures, particularly by renovating abandoned buildings like old schools to install multi-activity centres (libraries, cinemas or exhibition rooms) run by youth associations as local dynamos (Saba and Roman 2022);
b. subsidise access to culture and leisure time in urban areas, through discount cards and transportation passes;
c. prioritise or incentivise decentralised cultural initiatives in national cultural funding schemes.
- 8. Above and beyond all the factors relevant for transitions among rural youth is the role of informal support.** Regardless of individual factors, including

economic conditions, other transitional drivers (like educational level) and citizenship clusters, informal support stands out as the factor most consistently associated with the different transitional outcomes and the overall satisfaction with living in a rural area. Informal support, meaning the support provided by communities, through family, friends and neighbours, is often matched with worse transitional outcomes or perpetuation of negative life conditions across generations. What the findings suggest is that instead of this dismissive approach to the role of informal support, it is crucial to make the most of the “soft infrastructure” of rural areas (Kavanagh et al. 2022). In other words, it is important to encompass the role of close social ties, local social capital and community leadership in designing better programmes and policies to address rural youth’s needs in the transition to adulthood. This can be translated into measures such as the following.

- ▶ Allocating funding and resources at the EU and national levels for promoting intergenerational co-operation initiatives and spaces, ensuring a greater participation of young people in local governance. An equivalent to the Erasmus+ for intergenerational co-operation seems required in the near future, given how much youth organisations emphasised the need for collaboration among different generations in rural settings for moving forward.
- ▶ Opening up youth centres to more co-operation initiatives between young people and adults (such as for rural youth champions programmes), including those that help fund youth work local initiatives.
- ▶ Drawing on sustainability challenges (such as promoting sustainable farming among newcomers to the sector) and digitalisation needs (skills development among the elderly, for example) to create win-win co-operation between generations.

Conclusions

This report offers an in-depth examination of the transition to adulthood for rural youth across 14 European countries (including European Union and Council of Europe member states) between 2019 and 2023. The findings illustrate a complex landscape: one marked by significant achievements and persistent challenges. Despite improvements in educational attainment and NEET rates, the evidence supporting this report shows that rural youth remain underrepresented in policy frameworks, underserved by institutions and in need of decent and meaningful employment and participation opportunities.

One of the most striking findings is the consistent lack of targeted policies addressing rural youth as a distinct group. Instead, young people in rural areas are often subsumed within broader regional development or youth policies, limiting the responsiveness and effectiveness of state intervention. Furthermore, while innovative practices and grassroots initiatives are emerging across the continent, these efforts are often fragmented and unsustainably funded, undermining their long-term impact.

The lived experiences of rural youth underscore that they value education and informal support networks. These findings suggest a need to explore the power of community-based relationships, or “soft infrastructure”, as a foundation for more participatory and responsive policy frameworks. Importantly, most rural youth express a desire to remain in or return to their home regions. This unexpected result, possibly driven by increasingly unbearable living costs in cities, as well as by the fact that the study covered an important share of rural commuters, highlights the untapped potential for sustainable rural revitalisation. This is the case as long as decent, meaningful jobs, quality services in terms of education, employment support and participation opportunities are made available.

To move forward, the report calls for multilevel and cross-sectoral action. Key recommendations include the creation of vertically co-ordinated policy structures that bridge EU, national and local levels; the expansion and targeting of programmes like Erasmus+ to specifically benefit rural youth; investment in rural-friendly VET and mobility schemes; the enhancement of the digital and transport infrastructure to reduce isolation and expand opportunities; and continued and more targeted support for youth organisations on the ground.

Above all, the report reaffirms the need to position rural youth not only as recipients of policy but as agents of change. Their attachment to place, combined with growing educational aspirations and digital competences, can be pivotal to realising important national and European policy frameworks, including the EU’s LTVRA for vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural areas. Addressing their needs directly – and enabling them to shape the future of their communities – is not only a matter of justice, but a strategic imperative for Europe’s cohesion and prosperity.

Appendix

Methodological principles

Key principles

The research team agreed on six conceptual principles for conducting the study.

Transdisciplinary vision – The study is a collaborative effort bringing together the knowledge of researchers experienced in applied youth research with an international background in public administration, youth work and rural communities and other relevant areas and the expertise and knowledge of relevant stakeholders that run programmes with and for rural youth.

Transnational perspective – The study offers a transnational perspective of rural youth across Europe. The countries included in this study have distinct social, economic and geographical conditions that must be considered to fully understand the quality and impact of on-the-ground youth work initiatives in rural areas.

Ecological approach – The team adopted an ecological, multilevel perspective – in terms of policies, services and young people – on being young and living in rural areas. Thus, the study relies on multiple angles and layers of analysis to deliver a more complete picture of young generations in rural areas.

Participation – The research process fostered a collaborative and inclusive understanding of stakeholders as persons or groups whose interests/activities strongly affect and are affected by rural young people's livelihoods. Stakeholders are those who control relevant information and resources in this domain and whose support is required to make any change regarding the current conditions of rural youth. Therefore, the study relies on participatory and co-creation methods throughout the different research stages, helping to create a truly collaborative effort.

Questioning normative narratives – This research is driven by a nuanced perspective on rurality that goes beyond the post-industrial urban-rural dichotomy while at the same time contesting the dominant narratives that condemn rural communities to decline and decay. Therefore, the study highlights the barriers faced by young people living in rural communities and the existing opportunities, counterintuitive results, and examples of good practice that may spark change for younger generations in these territories. In doing so, the study considers how funding for services and programmes reaches rural youth and affects the level of participation and, thus, how it makes a difference.

Comparability – The study makes sure its transnational research approach is based on data comparability, for both publicly available data and data generated by the project.

Methodological assumptions

The research team also adopted some core methodological principles.

Multimethod approach – Considering the multiple levels of the proposed approach, the research team combined different data-collection methods, including policy analysis, qualitative analysis (focus groups, world-café sessions and/or interviews with key stakeholders) and a survey.

Knowledge integration – Although the research process relied on three parallel studies, the findings are integrated in terms of overall analysis and recommendations. Knowledge integration corresponds to the combination of “codified knowledge”, meaning data gathered and organised by the research team, with “tacit knowledge” from the different stakeholders, to enable a nuanced, multilayered understanding of the current situation of rural youth.

Data and databases – The study combined existing public data with data generated by the research team. The existing data refer, mainly, to publicly available structural indicators used to describe policies targeting younger generations living in rural areas as well as the underlying general living conditions (for example, data from Eurostat). Data generated by the research team pertain to the data points stemming from an in-depth analysis of relevant youth work programme case studies and a survey that was devised and disseminated during the research process.

Language – Data collection was done in different national languages – for example, for the survey, using the language translation resources of the web survey tool used in the study and provided by the Youth Partnership (SurveyMonkey) – and in English, when using qualitative data collection (such as interviews).

Engagement and study dissemination – The study implementation engaged with multiple stakeholders, focusing particularly on youth workers and young people living in rural communities. The study also targeted a large network of relevant stakeholders (ministries of youth and regional authorities, among others), local leaders (such as boards of youth associations and NGOs) and online multipliers (like social media influencers) to facilitate the study's dissemination. Facilitation has several meanings, including access to general data that is not publicly available; survey distribution; or identification of good youth work practices with the support of the Youth Partnership and the two institutions.

Participants

This was a multilevel and multi-informant research project, particularly at the level of services and young people. At the services level, the participants were youth organisations selected based on screening the relevance of their programmes in rural communities, with many of them specifically dedicated to rural youth.

The target group was young people living in rural areas, those aged 18 to 30 who live permanently in rural communities or students or young workers who commute regularly (daily, weekly or monthly) between rural and urban areas, while keeping their residence in rural communities. The proposed age range focused on dimensions related to the transition to adulthood (like employment) covering different developmental tasks such as identity formation, labour market integration or autonomy.

Data collection and analysis – Institutional level

The following 30 countries were identified and included in the initial cluster analysis: Armenia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Türkiye and United Kingdom. Data points for Armenia and Moldova were not immediately available and were obtained using alternative data sources (European Training Foundation 2016), for Moldova, and various Armenian organisations for Armenia.

Before running the cluster analysis, the indicators were synthesised within each dimension (the social and the economic dimension of citizenship) following the methodology used for the composite indicators' construction (Chevalier 2016). According to this methodology, data were first standardised using the min-max method. This converts data into a standardised format where 1 corresponds to the maximum value and 0 to the minimum. They were then corrected so that all indicators are in the same direction (in the sense that the higher values of each indicator correspond to better outcomes). After that, a principal component analysis (PCA) was followed within each of the dimensions identified (social citizenship and economic citizenship). For each group of indicators composing the two dimensions, PCA was run in two steps. In the first step, the PCA was conducted to identify the number of components to select. The criterium followed consisted in maintaining the first components explaining at least 60% of the total variability and selecting all the components whose eigenvalues were higher than 1. Then, we ran again the PCA, fixing the number of components to maintain in the analysis and applying the varimax axes rotation. The axes rotation allows a better distribution of the variability between the components selected. Finally, the synthesis of the components into a single indicator was realised calculating a weighted average of the components, where the weights corresponded to their contribution to the total explained variability of the components selected.

For the cluster analysis, we applied first a hierarchical cluster using the single linkage method and the Euclidean distance. The scope was to identify the countries' composition in terms of homogeneity. After that, we applied a non-hierarchical cluster.

Both k-means and k-median methods were applied. They calculate the cluster centroid (centres) using the arithmetic mean and median respectively. This is usually to be preferred in the case of presence of outliers. We tested and identified the best solution in terms of method and number of groups according to different criteria.

Our final choice was led mainly by the elbow role and Silhouette index.

The best solution was identified as follows.

K-means cluster with five groups:

Group 1: Armenia, Cyprus

Group 2: Moldova, Romania, Türkiye

Group 3: the Czech Republic, Ireland, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, Switzerland

Group 4: Austria, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Lithuania, Sweden

Group 5: Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Spain

However, when we limited the analysis to the 14 countries selected, we chose the following composition of groups.

Group 1: Armenia, Romania

Group 2: Austria, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania

Group 3: Croatia, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Serbia, Spain

Policies

Armenia

Armenia currently does not have an overarching youth policy development plan/strategy. The last such document ended in 2017. Until 2019, youth participation, youth voice, youth non-formal learning and youth recreational activities were the responsibility of the Ministry of Sports and Youth. Until 2018, the Youth Events Centre, a sub-unit of the ministry, was responsible for these activities before being closed down. In 2019, the ministries of sports and youth and of education, science and culture were merged into a single Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports. Since then, youth participation, leisure time and recreation issues have been handled in this ministry by the Youth Policy Department. Rural youth measures cannot be specifically identified at the national level youth policy processes.

On 5 March 2025, the Law on Youth Policy was adopted by the Armenian Parliament, the drafting of which started in 2021. However, this act does not specify any group but serves as a legal framework for strategic planning on youth. Its focus is on ensuring the sufficient availability of environments that support the development of talent and human capital and provide opportunities for participation in economic, political and social life.

The State Programme for Education Development until 2030 outlines a comprehensive approach to improving the quality and accessibility of education in Armenia, with a strong emphasis on modernising the educational system and integrating digital tools. It highlights that pedagogy is not of interest to young people and there is a need to promote it as a profession among young people to prevent teacher shortages.

In terms of rural areas, the document mainly focuses on pre-school education and the need to establish kindergartens in rural areas. While the document does not specifically target rural youth, it contains elements that could significantly benefit young people in local communities. The programme prioritises the expansion of distance-learning opportunities and the development of online courses accessible to learners across various educational levels, particularly in rural and border communities. It also highlights the importance of non-formal education and lifelong learning for both youth and adults, including campaigns to promote non-formal education among young people.

The Employment Strategy 2025-2031, adopted in December 2024, addresses youth employment challenges by targeting non-studying and unemployed youth aged 18 to 29 and aims to enhance their skills, expand job opportunities and increase productivity. To reduce the share of inactive youth from 35% in 2022 to 19.6% by 2031, the strategy emphasises continuous skill development, vocational training and active labour market programmes. Special attention is given to communities and regional cities, where employment in high-productivity, non-agricultural sectors will be increased to boost local economies. The strategy also fosters entrepreneurship, integrates social benefit recipients into the workforce and improves employment services to bridge labour market gaps. By prioritising human capital development and regional economic growth, it strives to ensure that young people across Armenia, including those in rural areas, are better equipped for sustainable employment.

The Agriculture Strategy of Armenia for 2020-2030 outlines a vision for sustainable, innovative and high value-added agriculture that harmonises with the environment and enhances the well-being of rural populations. The strategy acknowledges the challenges faced by rural areas, including low education levels, limited employment opportunities and weak collective action. A major concern is the ageing and declining rural population, exacerbated by youth migration to urban areas, Russia and other countries over the past few decades. To address this, the strategy emphasises youth engagement in all aspects of agricultural development, from policy making to production, processing and marketing. It aims to ensure sustained participation of skilled human resources in shaping the sector's future. Additionally, the strategy highlights the need to introduce programmes supporting youth-led business initiatives in agriculture, creating new opportunities for young people to remain in rural areas and contribute to economic growth.

Summary

Rural youth have not been addressed as a distinct category in national-level policy documents. Moreover, the distinct Youth Policy Department ceased to exist in 2019 and the period 2019-2025 had no youth-specific national-level institution. This might have impacted youth voice in other policies, but it is a hypothesis yet to be tested. With the adoption of the Youth Act in March 2025, legal grounds were created to develop and implement more youth-specific measures in the country's political and public administration system. It is likely to increase the cross-ministerial as well as the cross-tier integration of public policy organisations regarding policies that address young people in general. Its concrete effects are yet to be seen and the adoption of the act is promising, yet it does not address rural youth as a distinct category. Addressing the situation of rural young people remains predominantly within sectoral policies and ministries even though the governance approach may be shifting towards an increased exchange of information and collaboration.

Estonia

Estonia adopted the Youth Work Act in 1999. The term “youth policy” was first used in the national document “Youth Work Concept”, which was adopted in 2001. The youth policy framework in Estonia has youth work at its centre, which is understood as a blend of youth participation and non-formal learning in specially designed

environments that help young people to discover and develop their interests, creativity and talents. The Youth Sector Development Plan 2021-2035 devotes space to the provision of youth work service in rural areas and mentions the number of open youth centres, that is, youth work establishments offering open youth work (281 in 2019), the majority of which are situated in rural areas. In addition, youth councils, youth organisations, hobby schools and hobby activities are available to young people, including rural youth. With increasing urbanisation, there is an increased need to improve the availability and choice of services in rural areas in order to ensure young people have equal access to youth services wherever they live, including rural areas.

The Education Sector Development Plan 2021-2035 does not mention rural youth or rural areas. It only mentions that special policy measures have been developed for regions in need of special or additional support measures. The measures are tailored to the cultural and developmental specifics of a specific region. However, rural-urban distinction is not made. The development plan also mentions the agricultural and fisheries development plan in the context of providing education and professional training for specialists in agriculture and fisheries. Adhering to the overall cross-sectoral nature of public administration, the development plan is integrated with a number of other sectoral development plans, such as those for transportation, healthcare, employment and entrepreneurship.

Employment, social security and social welfare provision, children and families are merged into one development plan – the Welfare Development Plan 2023-2030. This mentions young people in the context of employment measures, specifically NEET youth, and in terms of the support for young people leaving foster care homes or facilities upon turning 18 and becoming adults. In the development plan, rural areas are not mentioned and regional development is mentioned only once. In sum, this development plan does not outline public policy interventions that address rural youth.

The Agriculture and Fisheries Development Plan until 2030 establishes the development of rural and coastal regions as one of its priorities and explicitly includes the development of youth-oriented activities as a distinct goal and a distinct measure, under the title “Bring youth back to rural areas”. It is the responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture and Regional Development. The development plan defines youth as people aged 21 to 40. But judging by the issues identified and solutions proposed, it seems to address more those in the 30 to 40 age bracket and less so those aged 21 to 29. Youth is mentioned in connection with several themes and topics:

- ▶ supporting the development of local communities, cultural infrastructure and turning them into attractive residential areas;
- ▶ providing opportunities for education, training and retraining in the food production industry, agriculture and fisheries, while increasing the attractiveness of these fields of activity for young people;
- ▶ supporting employment and entrepreneurship opportunities in these areas by providing easier access to financial instruments and by providing business counselling and collaboration platforms.

Summary

The Youth Sector Development Plan 2021-2035 and Agriculture and Fisheries Development Plan until 2030 are central to understanding how the situation of rural youth is conceptualised in the national public policy frameworks and what measures are foreseen to address rural youth. The first of these plans outlines measures supporting the discovery of and support for the development of one's talents and skills; the other outlines measures that seek to support quality of life in rural areas, thus increasing attractiveness also for the young. In particular, the latter conceptualises rural youth as a part of rural life, as a next generation of the rural population. Policy measures have been developed from the perspective of ensuring that young people stay in or move to rural areas and include interventions mainly for young adults who could start and live independently and enjoy an acceptable quality of life in rural areas.

Ireland

Youth policy in Ireland comes under the responsibility of the Irish Government and youth policy governance takes place at the national level. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth is the main government department responsible for youth policy in Ireland. Youth policy in Ireland in many cases takes a cross-departmental or a whole-of-government approach, co-ordinated by the Youth Affairs Unit within the above-mentioned department. Ireland has established children and youth policy institutions and respective policy plans since the 1990s and expanded their coverage significantly in 2010s. However, these mainly focus on the 0 to 24 age group, and more specifically on those under 18. Within this policy area, rural areas are mentioned but the attention predominantly is on activities and challenges associated with under 18s (youth work, child poverty, early school dropouts). Less attention is paid to those in the 18 to 24 age bracket, with any attention mainly focused on areas where there are overlapping interests, for instance employment, substance misuse services, medical services, public transport and youth justice.

"Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures" was a national policy framework for children and young people for the period 2014-2020, under the responsibility of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures was the first overarching national children's policy framework that covered children and young people (from 0 to 24 years). It adopted a whole-of-government approach and is underpinned by a number of constituent strategies in the areas of early years, youth and participation. However, the report on the national policy framework for children and young people for 2014-2020, published in 2022, did not mention rural issues at all. The National Youth Strategy 2015-2020 had its basis in the Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures framework and was a cross-sectoral, whole-of-society approach to supporting young people in their everyday lives. It mentioned rural youth in connection with heightened poverty rates in rural areas.

The National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making does not mention rural youth and youth areas separately. Youth participation has been implemented in the form of child and youth councils in each of the 31 local authority areas across Ireland. These give children and young people a voice in the

development of local and national services and policies. The National Youth Assembly of Ireland convenes on specific policy areas, such as climate, rural development and other issues of national importance. The assembly is made up of delegates from youth councils, youth organisations and relevant non-governmental organisations.

Rural young people in the 18 to 30 age bracket receive public policy attention in the broader framework of rural development policies, which more concretely addresses agricultural and fisheries development in the coastal areas of Ireland. Policy goals and measures are stated in the national programme *Our Rural Future – Rural Development Policy 2021-2025* from the Government of Ireland. In the area of youth participation, the document foresees the establishment of, and annual consultations with, the Rural Youth Assembly to allow young people living in rural Ireland to make an ongoing contribution to identifying and influencing policy issues that impact on them and their future. The government is committed to a continuous dialogue with people in rural Ireland throughout the life of this policy. In this context, structures have been built into the policy to support ongoing dialogue with rural stakeholders (for example through the Rural Ideas Forums and Rural Youth Assembly) to enable new actions to be added through an annual work programme to respond to emerging needs and issues. These assemblies have convened annually since 2021.

The measures addressing rural young people are rooted in the national reform plan entitled *Ireland 2020*. The plan mentioned rural areas in several contexts. It also mentioned the Action Plan for Rural Development as an important vehicle for rural development for the period 2017-2019. The objective of the wide range of initiatives contained in the action plan was to assist sustainable rural communities, job creation, rural connectivity, culture and tourism. The whole-of-government approach of the action plan provided increased investment rights across government for assisting rural business, rural communities and rural connectivity.

Development of rural areas is the responsibility of the Department of Rural and Community Development. Developing and implementing interventions that address rural youth is also the responsibility of this department. However, these policies are developed in collaboration with other governmental departments in the cross-sectoral manner mentioned earlier. Ireland has been allocated substantial sums from European structural funds to improve its rural areas. Young people in rural areas are also supported by these measures.

National policy plans in the areas of education, teacher education, employment and youth engagement, job seeking and the transition from education to the labour market do not mention rural youth specifically.

Summary

In Ireland, there is a solid child and youth policy framework addressing the mainly younger age groups (up to 18) and to some extent 19 to 24 year olds. Rural areas are mentioned mainly in the context of child poverty and provision of youth work services. Rural young people aged 25 and over are addressed mainly in the framework of rural development policies. At the national level, the only explicit policy measure outlined in the Rural Development Plan is the annual meetings of the Rural Youth Assembly.

Rural youth are not mentioned in other policy sector plans, such as strategies for education, employment and the transition from school to work.

Romania

In Romania, the responsibility for youth policy is divided between the central authorities and the local authorities. Within the limits of the Youth Law, the local authorities are free to develop initiatives and there is seldom co-ordination at the national level. Cultural Student Centres, County Offices for Culture, the universities and schools also have a large degree of autonomy in establishing their activities and calendars for working with young people. The decentralisation of activities ensures the accessibility of youth activities and youth work for many young people in cities, towns and villages. However, the whole territory is not covered equally and young people in some cities benefit from a larger number of activities and services compared to other young people.

The dedicated institution for youth policy was, until December 2021, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, established in 1990. In January 2022, the Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities was founded, which was merged with the Ministry of Labour to form the Ministry of Labour, Family, Youth and Social Solidarity in December 2024. Some youth policy measures are also under the responsibility of other ministries, such as the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Culture.

The National Youth Strategy 2024-2027 is a governmental not a ministerial strategy. The strategy contains a dedicated sub-chapter on/for rural youth. Inclusion of this section in the strategy probably resulted from the White Paper on Rural Youth, which itself is a sign of strong youth voices and taking these voices into account in national-level policy processes. This section of the strategy sees poor educational opportunities as a major challenge for rural youth, household poverty being a significant reason for this, and it also mentions poor job opportunities and the dominance of the secondary labour market.

To alleviate the situation, the strategy foresees financial support measures and expertise for young people to start up their own business; however, challenges related to accessing financial schemes are mentioned. The youth strategy also mentions the lack of youth infrastructure and poor leisure-time opportunities in rural areas.

The Ministry of Labour, Family, Youth and Social Solidarity is responsible for the Social Inclusion Strategy. The strategy addresses rural youth poverty, both as a problem/challenge in itself and as a reason for early school dropouts. There are several ways in which the problem of poverty and vulnerable youth is addressed: by providing dual education with vocational education and training (VET) opportunities; providing additional scholarships for university students from rural areas; investing in the development of digital competences of rural youth; and creating job opportunities for rural youth in their resident communities.

The National Strategy on Education and Training 2016-2020 acknowledges the importance of creating specific measures to support rural youth. This includes the expansion of the network of information centres, non-university counselling and professional guidance, in both urban and rural areas, in order to provide initial and

continuous training with an emphasis on vulnerable groups; and improving access to vocational training programmes for young people from hard-to-reach categories, with an emphasis on those from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds and the Roma population.

The National Strategy on Combating Early School Dropout in Romania views rural youth as one of the risk categories. The strategy includes much-needed support for quality education, supporting mobility programmes for teachers – to come and teach in rural areas – and for students/pupils, creating educational opportunities in the community, involving other stakeholders in the community, local NGOs, parents and teachers. In 2023, the Ministry of Education announced the acquisition of school buses for rural areas. Pupils and students from rural areas are entitled to financial support for commuting and transportation.

The Ministry of Investments and European Projects has in place the National Programme for Rural Development and one of the declared aims of the programme is to encourage rural youth and families in rural areas to settle down in these areas. The National Rural Development Programme 2021-2027 is a programme to implement the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). It is implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. For the period 2023-2027, the programme has identified that there is a lack of young farmers and young rural entrepreneurs. Their education and employment opportunities need to be increased and enhanced. The emergence of young agricultural entrepreneurs, as well as young farmers and young farm managers, is seen as an opportunity to be seized. Before this programme, a similar programme was implemented for the period 2014-2020. Implementation of the European CAP measures is divided between the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Ministry of Investments and European Projects, reflecting the general cross-sectoral nature of public policy in Romania. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development has launched a programme for supporting rural youth in finding, starting and/or accessing business development opportunities. This again occurs mainly within the broader framework of employment in rural areas.

Summary

Social policy attention on rural youth occurs within several sectoral strategies: education, social inclusion and rural development. The national youth strategy addresses mainly youth participation and youth voice, while other sectoral strategies address the situation of youth in general, without a focus on specific policies and/or subsets of youth, such as rural youth.

Characteristic to Romania is the high degree of independence of local authorities when it comes to supporting young people. Many of them are likely to offer support measures targeting rural youth.

This overview shows that public policy support for rural youth is made explicit in some national-level policy plans: education, rural development and social inclusion. However, it is likely that the support is more extensive even though it is not made explicit in national policy documents.

Spain

Spain has established the Ministry of Youth and Childhood and the Youth Institute (INJUVE), which focus on policies in the youth field. The Spanish government, with support from INJUVE, developed the Youth Strategy 2030, which was adopted in 2022. The strategy contains a chapter focusing on rural youth, “Youth and the rural world”. The goal of this strategic priority is to turn rural areas into spaces of opportunity for youth and to promote the green transition. This involves enhancing the status of rural environments so that young rural populations can settle and avoid emigration, ensuring they have equal opportunities and rights compared to their urban counterparts. The picture is complemented by a plan outlining 130 measures for tackling the demographic challenge, which was approved in 2021 by the Minister for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge and which includes aspects of the European Youth Strategy 2019-2027, such as connectivity. The measures are the result of general concerns in Spain about the depopulation of rural areas and the need to stop and revert the process (Querolemma, Nicolauxavier and Sanches 2021).

The national strategy is complemented by the youth plans of the autonomous communities, which take into account the specificities of their areas. Most of the autonomous communities in Spain have the capacity to develop their own youth institutes, which can be co-ordinated with the Spanish Youth Council (CJE). Some autonomous communities have developed youth return programmes to prevent brain drain, offering job contracts and, in some cases, housing assistance or subsidies for return travel costs.

At the national level, INJUVE is responsible for ensuring equal opportunities for young people, fostering participation in Spain’s political, social, economic and cultural development and co-ordinating various public administrations and ministries in areas affecting youth. In addition, the autonomous communities have extensive competences in the youth field and almost every community has established a youth agency. At the local level, youth information services offer advice on education, employment, housing, culture, health, etc., and youth spaces designed for young people’s socialisation where cultural, leisure and study activities take place and where there may be spaces for citizen participation.

Employment and education policies are shared competences between the national government and the autonomous communities. However, in each autonomous community, the European Youth Guarantee and associated funding schemes (primarily the European Social Fund) have been the main drivers of employment support interventions across Spain (Agahi et al. 2023). Between 2019 and 2021, the Youth Employment Shock Plan was implemented, increasing guidance for young people in employment and job training and providing training programmes alternating with employment, return programmes for young emigrants, dual training and training in digital skills or entrepreneurship, among other measures.

In Spain, a range of educational and labour market interventions for rural youth have been developed. Both central government and the autonomous community governments focus their efforts on advancing digital skills and providing programmes that include training courses tailored to the needs of a specific local labour market. For example, the TándEM Programme addresses young people aged 16 to 29 and combines training with employment. There are other programmes to promote

entrepreneurship, hiring through subsidies or programmes such as First Experience in Public Administration. The State Public Employment Service has put an investment programme in place to promote agricultural employment in depressed rural areas. This is done by subsidising contracts for temporary agricultural workers and financing investments that can provide lasting employment in those regions. Although this intervention does not target youth exclusively, youth is considered a priority group.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has developed several programmes supporting agricultural entrepreneurship among the young. For instance, the programme Cultiva supports young farmers and ranchers in agricultural entrepreneurship and helps them to start a farming career. The programmes are integrated into the European Common Agricultural Policy programme for the period 2023-2027. The Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge has also put in place several programmes that seek to support young people in non-urban areas and settlements. For instance, the programme Rural Campus which started in 2021 offers paid internships to university students in municipalities with fewer than 5 000 inhabitants or at risk of depopulation.

Third-sector entities together with the Ministry of Labour and Social Economy have taken action to reduce the depopulation of and to revitalise rural areas. For instance, Action Against Hunger, a third-sector organisation, with support from the Ministry of Labour and Social Economy through ESF funding, has developed the Sustainable Rural Employment and Entrepreneurship Communities programme. A national annual fair for the repopulation of rural Spain aims to revitalise depopulated Spain by acting as a catalyst for initiatives. Although these initiatives primarily aim to fulfil the CAP's generational renewal and social innovation objectives and do not target explicitly rural youth, they also have a significant impact on rural youth.

Spain's National Housing Plan 2022-2025 contains an Aid Programme for Young People under 35, which includes rental assistance (for those aged 18 to 35) and aid for the purchase of a first home in non-urban municipalities with fewer than 10 000 inhabitants. The Official Credit Institute offers guarantees for young people to buy their first home. Some autonomous communities have also created their own financial guarantee schemes supporting young people to buy their first home. The Ministry of Transport and Sustainable Mobility has created a social rental housing construction programme that considers young people a priority group.

Summary

Public policy interventions in Spain addressing rural youth have been driven by a broadly perceived need to stop and revert the depopulation of rural areas. Therefore, Spain has developed and implements various social policy interventions to support rural youth. National-level interventions are complemented by policy plans developed by autonomous regions that have competences in key policy areas, such as education and employment. European Union policy initiatives like the Common Agricultural Policy and the Youth Guarantee play a significant role in developing and implementing policies targeting rural youth. Third-sector initiatives like Action Against Hunger's Sustainable Rural Employment programme, supported by ESF, also promote rural revitalisation and support rural youth.

Practices and projects: national cases

The Spanish Youth Council

The Spanish Youth Council (CJE) is a platform of more than 60 youth organisations, created by law in 1983 and made up of the youth councils of the autonomous communities and national youth organisations. The main initiatives implemented by the CJE that are relevant to supporting rural youth are as follows.

- ▶ A CJE resolution against gambling (2019), which includes the imposing of restrictions on the operating hours of gambling halls close to schools and the restriction of gambling advertising in school environments.
- ▶ The campaign “Soy de pueblo” (2019) was promoted by the Youth Council of Extremadura and is a campaign to celebrate and promote pride in living in rural areas.
- ▶ The Youth Emancipation Observatory is a CJE strategy for monitoring issues such as youth emancipation, disposable income and the labour market. As a result of these reports, some villages located in Castilla y León implemented affordable housing programmes for young people at risk of migration.
- ▶ Participation of the CJE in the “youth embassies” during the seventh European Dialogue Cycle – Promotion of Youth Associations: Creating embassies as a direct channel of communication between young people and regional authorities. In the Comunidad Valenciana, the youth embassy promoted the creation of a youth advisory council that is now involved in policies on access to housing and vocational training. This model was replicated in Aragon as well, where youth embassies helped unlock funds for affordable social housing for young people.

The National Youth Assembly of Ireland

This is a consultative forum for young people aged between 12 and 24. It is one of several youth participation structures in Ireland to ensure the voices of children and young people are heard by decision makers. The assembly plays a significant role in including the voice of young people in implementing public policy and prioritising action for the government’s main function: to provide a systematic means of capturing the voices of young people in Ireland and feeding this directly into government policy.

The National Rural Youth Assembly was commissioned by the Department of Rural and Community Development and acts in partnership with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Four rural assemblies have taken to date, each assembly ending with a set of recommendations. At the end of 2021’s event, young people highlighted the need for policy makers to find the means for rural youth to stay in the rural areas, to create schemes for sustainable and reliable transport, to invest in facilities – youth services, healthcare and roads – and to support intergenerational groups and education on minority groups (LGBTI+, ethnic minorities, etc). The assembly in 2022 restated the need for accessible transportation, asked for the appointment of a community liaison officer to facilitate conversation

between young people and the government, to lower the tractor licence age to 15 years and to lower the voting age, and to ensure a just transition to sustainable living. In 2023, discussions were focused on the civic engagement of young people in rural Ireland and the political participation of rural youth, volunteering and community being the cross-cutting themes. The final resolution contained proposals on lowering the voting age to 16, appointing youth officers in every rural administration and supporting youth participation. Additionally, linking volunteering opportunities to school curricula and encouraging young people to volunteer, including by providing transportation for volunteering activities, were also requested by the 60 participants. In line with European priorities, creating safe spaces for participation and funding mental health services for rural youth were mentioned as essential needs to be covered.

Asociación Mojo de Cana

Since 2019, Mojo de Cana has been active in urban areas on the Canary Islands of Tenerife and Gran Canaria as well as in rural communities in La Palma and La Graciosa. It works to support the social inclusion of infants and young people, their families and legal guardians, and elderly people, and to improve youth participation through non-formal education and involvement in sustainable projects. The work involves the production of socio-cultural events and intercultural learning and unlearning through international projects and mobility. Young people from the Canary Islands are facing major challenges when it comes to youth unemployment (around 24%), temporary working contracts – especially in tourism and services – and high living costs indirectly related to tourism. Additionally, mental health crises, lack of accessible services, limited opportunities to continue education (there are only two universities on the islands) and a reduction in the number of safe youth spaces, including youth projects, are hindering the participation of Canarian youth in community development.

Through the international youth projects that are hosted and organised by the association, over 180 European Social Corps volunteers have been welcomed and more than 250 young people from the islands have joined projects abroad as volunteers. Over 2 000 young people have been part of these international activities and have had the opportunity to go through learning processes that have had a great impact on their skills and competence development. Intergenerational dialogue has also been one of the working areas of the organisation's project "Tertulia Vertical", involving initiatives where young people have met with elderly people as a way of helping them cope with loneliness.

EPA! Network, Spain

EPA! is an association running small initiatives involving young people who seek to make a positive impact in rural areas through different approaches and collective lines of action. The vision of the network is to invest in young people in rural areas so that they can help revive these rural territories. The members are encouraged to collaborate with other groups and institutions and to have a positive impact on rural areas' development. The EPA! Network aims to support young people in rural areas. Through the programme Cultiva – funded by Spain's Ministry of Agriculture

– young farmers can benefit from training programmes (running for between 5 and 14 days). The sessions include learning about modern farming techniques, business models and new technologies. Campus Rural, an initiative managed by the Spanish Ministry for Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge with the support of the Ministry of Science, provides university students from rural areas (under 5 000 residents) with internship opportunities. The programme aims to support depopulated areas by fostering economic and social connections, offering students work experience and potential job opportunities. Students benefit from a stipend and social security, while rural communities benefit from the presence of future professionals. Prototypes of production workshops, citizens' labs and cultural events and festivals are also activities that members of the network implement in their communities. More than 15 youth-led initiatives have joined the network with joint efforts in areas such as youth participation, cultural diversity, cross-sectoral co-operation, diversity, cultural mediation, cultural rights and youth entrepreneurship.

4H Estonia

Established in 1991, Estonian 4H's mission is to be an association that supports young people's need for communication, belonging and self-realisation, which relies on working together and valuing rural life. 4H is active in nine counties in Estonia, with over 820 members. Every year, the organisation runs around 170 activities, offering:

- ▶ youth participation opportunities, providing young people with a chance to get involved in the planning and implementation of activities (meetings, events, hikes, camps, charities, information days, membership recruitment);
- ▶ social support and networks; these include club leaders, youth workers, volunteer helpers, parents;
- ▶ a nationwide youth network created by major projects and supported by events (hackathon, summer camp, academy, thank-you event);
- ▶ events for understanding the importance of intercultural dialogue and intercultural skills' competencies' development.

4H joins different European network activities and runs international projects with and for its members. In addition to the direct impact on young people's personal and professional development, 4H's activities have a great impact on the local community by creating stronger social bonds and a greater sense of community cohesion, broadening the horizons of young people and increasing their cultural awareness. The environmental education projects also help young people to respect nature and a sustainable way of life. The organisation works closely with different public and private stakeholders on the projects.

Komitas Action Swisse-Armenie Humanitarian Foundation

Komitas Action Swisse-Armenie (KASA) projects and initiatives are implemented with and for young people and promote non-formal education, active citizenship and social entrepreneurship. All projects and initiatives aim to tackle the challenges and needs that young people face in Armenia. For this purpose, KASA works closely with a wide range of relevant actors in the field of youth who are committed to

the sustainable development of Armenia. Launched as a humanitarian initiative to support Armenians in need, today the organisation has developed into a dynamic structure which looks for long-term and sustainable solutions. KASA has been working on civic education for the past 15 years using various means, including youth clubs, social innovation youth projects, youth platforms and youth spaces. Through the social educational centres in Yerevan and Gyumri, young people benefit from quality youth services that support their personal and professional development and improve their motivation for community engagement. To support young people in rural and remote areas and to reduce the educational divide between the urban communities and other regions, KASA took the strategy of decentralising its work and implements its projects in communities by involving local youth.

Innovarium and Mobile Youth Work are two models of the civic education programme that KASA is implementing and that offer rural youth participation and engagement opportunities. Innovarium is based on a gamified method for innovative community project development and civic education. Teams of young people go through training activities, implement tasks and win learning badges and then have the opportunity to work with other young people and receive mentoring support to implement community initiatives and educational activities. More than 300 young people have worked on solving problems identified in their rural communities, by starting with the game and then transferring their experience with that to their community. Long-lasting youth initiatives and youth organisations have been created through Innovarium.

The second initiative is the Mobile Youth Work programme in rural communities in Shirak region, where young people have the opportunity to join safe spaces and to meet their peers, in communities where participation opportunities are reduced. The meetings are co-ordinated by trained local organisers and youth workers and youth groups meet on a weekly or bi-weekly basis.

Adina Stiftelsen Foundation

The Adina Stiftelsen Foundation based in Dolj County, Romania, is a welfare, apolitical and non-governmental organisation, legally registered as a freestanding foundation in 2004 and accredited as a social services provider. The organisation creates and implements programmes, projects and activities, working with a holistic development approach. It accompanies children from the early development stages (kindergarten), providing educational support via non-formal integrated educational programmes based on skill and talent development. It also provides financial incentives to pupils and students and supports young people from rural communities to develop essential skills and competences that would help them gain access to labour market. All seven educational programmes of the foundation are based on evidence (of needs, challenges and interests) collected through research activities implemented in the 29 villages in south-western Romania where the organisation implements activities. It records the satisfaction rate of the beneficiaries on a regular basis. Vocational education training is also one of the core activities that the organisation runs for vulnerable youth, on a partnership basis with public and private entities (private sponsors). Empowering young women through vocational training is another innovative programme from the foundation. Leisure-time

activities, sports and cultural workshops are also offered to young people who come on a regular basis to the Adina Home Program. This is a program operating across Romania that offers after-school workshops (twice a week) for children from vulnerable/rural communities, with creative, digital, sports, cultural-identity and personal-development activities. Understanding the importance of offering rural youth different learning and training opportunities, the foundation is part of international mobility programmes like Erasmus+.

European Youth Village

The European Youth Village in rural Romania is a joint initiative between two non-governmental entities – ADA, the Association for Active Development, and the Go Free Association – who aim to stimulate citizens' participation in sustainable community development, including by increasing young people's social, cultural and civic participation. The European Youth Village is a strategic initiative that aims to contribute to the development of the Romanian and European youth ecosystem. The initiative is based on the needs and interests of rural youth and is fully tailored to the realities and challenges that rural youth are facing in their communities. The strategic programme has the following components.

- ▶ The European Youth Village title, awarded for a year, commits communities to boosting youth involvement in all local processes, fostering a participative culture.
- ▶ The White Charter on Rural Youth is a strategic document that sets out the vision and priorities for the rural communities and aims to contribute to the development of young people and the entire rural youth ecosystem.
- ▶ The Rural Youth Summit is a strategic event, held in a village, which brings together young people from rural areas, decision makers and representatives of youth organisations from all over the country.
- ▶ The Rural Youth Awards is an event that aims to give visibility to young people from rural areas and to recognise their participation in their community.
- ▶ The National Rural Youth Day is a national umbrella event to celebrate the rural youth sector.
- ▶ The Informal Network of Young People from Rural Areas (RITM) is an informal network that aims to raise the level of representativeness of young people from rural areas in the decision-making process, at local, regional, national and European levels.
- ▶ The NGO Rural Platform is a network of organisations and informal groups of young people that aims to support the rural youth sector and the rural youth work.
- ▶ From Rural to Plural policy recommendation at EU level is a comprehensive policy paper that emerged from the European Rural Youth Summit.
- ▶ The Rural Youth Manifest is a declaration rural youth in Romania, articulated during the fourth edition of the Rural Youth Summit. It serves as an urgent call to action for public authorities to listen to the needs and desires of rural youth and to include them in decision-making processes that directly impact their lives.

- ▶ Starting with 2025: the European Youth Villages Alumni Network will serve as a platform for past members to connect, share experiences and collaborate on initiatives. Moreover, the Alumni Network will have an active role in selecting the future European Youth Villages.
- ▶ The EU promoters network focuses on promoting the core values of the European Union in villages.
- ▶ The Rural News[room] is an initiative focused on journalism and media within the rural context. The Rural News[room] is a platform for young people to report on issues, events and stories relevant to rural communities.

Curba de Cultură

Curba de Cultură is a non-governmental organisation established in rural areas of Prahova County in Romania. The projects and initiatives of Curba de Cultură are highly integrated, non-formal education methodologies that aim to empower rural youth participation. Additionally, the association's focus is to improve education levels and community engagement for the young people living in a rural environment in Romania. Curba de Cultură organises safe and secure spaces for young people's leisure time in order to facilitate personal development with an accent on non-cognitive skills, using the youth centre infrastructure, and is something of a trendsetter in Romania in terms of opening rural youth centres. Additionally, Curba de Cultură is active in hosting international and national volunteers. Both groups of volunteers are involved in individual learning mobility activities. International volunteers work closely with local young volunteers on cultural and educational activities.

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About the authors

Francisco Simões is an Assistant Researcher at the Center for Social Research and Intervention at the University Institute of Lisbon (Cis-Iscte). He is the Chair of the European Rural Youth Observatory (EURYO). His research focuses on school-to-work transitions, particularly in rural areas. He has co-authored several international peer-reviewed publications and co-ordinated multiple international research projects in this thematic area. He has extensively collaborated with international entities on project evaluation and knowledge transfer for public policy, including the Council of Europe, the European Commission, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. He was a member of the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR) between 2023 and 2025.

Antonella Rocca is an Associate Professor in Economic Statistics at the University of Naples "Parthenope" in Italy. She is also the research co-ordinator of the European Rural Youth Observatory (EURYO). Her research focuses on labour market vulnerability, inequality, and school-to-work transition. She is the author of several peer-reviewed publications and collaborates with international entities on projects.

Adina Șerban is a seasoned practitioner, researcher and trainer with global exposure and education, who applies the principles of European and international organisations within corporate social responsibility programmes dedicated to disadvantaged communities. She is highly experienced in youth research and the youth policy development process, from the European to the local level, specifically working with and for young people from rural areas. She holds a PhD in comparative youth policies Romania/Turkey (2013) and has been an active correspondent for the European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (ECKYP), national correspondent for Youth Wiki (2015-present), 2020-2021 - Chief of Staff of the State Secretary in the Field of Youth - Ministry of Youth and Sports, Salto Trainer and senior trainer of the Romanian National Agency, leading training, research and policy development projects. Since 2010, she is the President of the Center for Sustainable Community Development, Giubega Romania, an organisation that implements projects with and for rural youth in rural and isolated areas, piloting and delivering youth work services and activities, including mobile youth work, detached youth work and structured dialogue mechanisms in rural communities.

Marti Taru, PhD, is a senior youth researcher with an extensive record of providing evidence-based advice on the development of youth policy and youth work in Europe. He has been involved in the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR) since its inception and previously participated in the European Youth Researchers Network. He has also contributed through the European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (ECKYP) network of national correspondents. His work spans young people's

transitions to the labour market, youth social inclusion, the history of youth work, youth worker training, cross-sectoral youth policy and the mainstreaming of youth issues in public policy. In addition to publications, he supports youth-sector events in roles such as rapporteur, facilitator and presenter.

This study examines the experiences of rural youth aged 18 to 30 in 14 European countries, spanning the period 2019 to 2023 and incorporating pre- and post-Covid times. The findings are based on data collected through a multilingual online survey, complemented by desk research and case studies of rural youth-focused projects in Armenia, Estonia, Ireland, Romania and Spain.

The authors analyse the situations of young people in rural areas across six dimensions: education; support systems; youth participation; employment; mobilities; and access to leisure, culture and sports. The analysis explores the institutional set-up for supporting young people's transitions into adulthood, looking into youth welfare citizenship, trends, policies, practices and the personal experiences of rural youth. The combination of these different layers of analysis enabled a comprehensive overview of the challenges and opportunities facing rural youth today.

While there is a significant policy gap concerning rural youth, as most countries do not explicitly recognise rural youth as a distinct policy subgroup, there is a vibrant ecosystem of practices and projects led by civil society and international networks aimed at addressing rural youth challenges, as well as reliance on informal support networks.

The study concludes by highlighting the need for a more tailored, inclusive and strategic approach to rural youth policy, in support of European Youth Goal 6 "Moving Rural Youth Forward" and in line with the recent recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member States of the Council of Europe on the social, economic and political participation of rural youth.

Bridging the policy and practice divide, enhancing stakeholder co-ordination and fully integrating rural youth into national and European frameworks are key to ensuring sustainable rural development.

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youth-partnership@partnership-eu.coe.int

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