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How to involve rural NEET youths in agriculture? Highlights of an untold story

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Abstract

This article discusses how to involve rural youths not in employment, education, or training (or NEETs) in agriculture. A Portuguese network-based project called *Terra Nostra*, carried out from 2013 to 2015 to engage and train NEETs in ecoagriculture activities, was examined to address this issue. The study focused on three aspects: a reanalysis of *Terra Nostra*'s final report, based on the bioecological model, targeting typical problems with NEETs' involvement and how the project aimed to overcome them; the lessons learned from the project according to the literature; and the state of the art regarding identical social interventions with NEETs in Portugal and the rest of Europe. A major conclusion stemming from the analysis is that similar projects will need to address the limitations of employment public services in reaching out to rural NEETs and the state's excessive protectionism of the sector.

Keywords: Agriculture and community; NEET; rural development; youth involvement

Youths not in education, employment, or training (or NEETs) are particularly exposed to the pitfalls of education or work policies. However, the needs of this group vary considerably across European countries and regions. These disparities often conflict with universal policies, a tension well illustrated by the implementation of the Youth Guarantee program. Youth Guarantee is a European Union initiative seeking to provide employment, education, or training to all young people. The program was initially set up by national structures, but significant implementation disparities were soon found. This led to different degrees of networking between stakeholders at local/regional levels, as well as problems in reaching out to NEETs in several countries (e.g. Portugal) (Tosun, 2017). Although reforms aiming to overcome these problems have been made, recent research shows that employment or educational public programs continue to fail in involving NEETs in further training or the transition to employment. One of the main reasons for this failure is that the proposed activities do not match NEETs' needs (Shore & Tosun, 2017).

Education and employment public programs also fail when their overall application relies on NEETs being represented as a fairly homogeneous group. Fortunately, a rising number of research reports have drawn attention to NEETs' heterogeneity (Sadler, Akister, & Burch, 2014). NEET subgroups are, nevertheless, described according to developmental criteria, based on different age ranges or situation regarding education/training or work systems. Other criteria, such as origin (whether these youths live in rural, suburban, or urban areas) has seldom been brought up as relevant. Moreover, a multilayered, comprehensive approach to the NEET situation, incorporating these youths' characteristics and visions, their relations with informal and formal systems, as well as their position considering cultural and economic definitions, is missing in the literature (Simões & Drumonde, 2016).

The present article reflects on how to involve rural NEETs in agriculture. This central question is addressed by examining a network-based project's efforts to promote rural

NEETs integration and training in ecoagriculture activities. Problems and threats faced by this project are also studied. The analysis relies on four main principles.

Firstly, the issue of NEETs' involvement in agriculture is analyzed in a rural context. The scope for examining this involvement is two-fold: not only do the most recent statistics issued by EUROSTAT (2017) show NEET incidence is greater in European rural areas, but also that the challenges faced by rural populations, and particularly by rural youths, increase their vulnerability (De Hoyos & Green, 2011; Sadler et al., 2014). To better capture how rurality may shape youth involvement in agriculture, this article draws upon a project carried out in the Azores, a peripheral and sparsely populated European archipelago in the heart of the Atlantic Ocean. In general, rural areas have restricted access to education and employment, lower quality of public service, and face accessibility limitations. In the case of remote islands, these problems are even more obvious, intensifying their inhabitants' vulnerabilities and involvement (Simões & Drumonde, 2016).

Secondly, the article examines the issue of youth involvement in agriculture as a complex one, with implications at different levels. To better address the topic's intricacy, the targeted project's final report, based on the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), is reviewed. The bioecological model suggests that human development arises from a dynamic interaction between individuals and their ecology, which is organized in four layers. The microsystem is a subjective layer of reality, conveying the individual's demographic and temperamental characteristics, as well as their activities and social roles, which altogether create a personal model of meaning attribution. The mesosystem encompasses the relationships established by the individual, which may be more or less significant or intense across the life cycle. The exosystem aggregates the organizations the individual contacts or is involved with. Finally, the macrosystem delimits the culture, better described as a global

pattern of ideologies, beliefs, values, or governance forms, which are prevalent in a certain intersection of space and time (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

Thirdly, the discussion of rural NEETs' involvement is based on a network-based project involving informal groups of youths and private organizations. The article, therefore, reflects on the implications of a specific intervention outside the conventional framework of regional, national, and European mainstream public policies, and on how similar initiatives can inform broadband policies aiming at rural NEETs' involvement.

This paves the way for a fourth and last guiding principle: to see how NEETs can be encouraged to get significantly involved in a rural sector that is being consistently abandoned in Europe, especially by youths (International Labour Organization, 2018).

The article has three sections. The first section discusses the NEET definition, proposing rural NEETs as a potential subgroup with their own specific vulnerabilities, as well as examining the challenges and opportunities of involving this subgroup in agriculture. The second section describes the *Terra Nostra* project (which can roughly be translated as "Our Land"): its main features and methodology, contextualizing it in the territory, the organizational landscape, and the national and European social intervention trends. The third section debates *Terra Nostra*'s effectiveness in involving rural NEETs in agriculture by comparing the lessons learned with the literature.

Rural NEET youths: An undefined subgroup

For a long time, NEETs were depicted as a homogeneous group. Within-group variability was first discussed in terms of developmental, age-related criteria. NEETs were initially defined as youths with an age range of between 16 and 18 years old (Furlong, 2006). Due to intense changes in the transition from adolescence to early adulthood, the NEET age range has successively been altered; nowadays it encompasses youths from 15 to 34 years old (EUROSTAT, 2017). Within-group variability has also been addressed regarding the

transition of these youths into the labor market. Being a NEET covers distinct profiles/situations ranging from being a long-term, discouraged youth, who is no longer actively searching for work to a youth who is voluntarily out of work or school/training systems so as to travel (Carcillo, Fernández, Konigs, & Minea, 2015).

Recent research has demonstrated that other factors, such as gender and migration background, along with public services delivery or national economic growth, may represent meaningful sources of variation in NEET rates and experiences (Bacher, Koblbauer, Leitgob, & Tamesberger, 2017; Simões, Meneses, Luís, & Drumonde, 2017; Shore & Tosun, 2017). The latest research developments have also stressed the importance of disparities between urban, suburban, and rural areas within countries as a source of variation between NEET subgroups (e.g. Bacher et al., 2017). These findings are further upheld by worrisome figures, showing that there are indeed considerable contrasts between urban, suburban, and rural areas, regarding NEET rates. As Figure 1 demonstrates, for the 28 European Union countries, NEET rates in 2016 were higher in rural regions (20.40%), compared to suburban (19.20%) and urban areas (16.50%). This trend was evident in 17 out of the 28 countries, with greater meaning in southern countries (e.g. Greece) and Eastern European countries (e.g. Bulgaria) (EUROSTAT, 2017).

The two main avenues for becoming a NEET, including rural areas, are school underachievement and lower socioeconomic status (Sadler et al., 2014). Recent research has detailed more nuanced differences between rural NEETs and rural youth at large. At an individual level, rural NEETs display lower professional skills, are more likely to face long-term unemployment (Carcillo et al., 2015), and show limited skills and lower access to new technologies, like the Internet, due to higher risks of early school-leaving (EUROSTAT, 2017). Family support dominates rural NEETs' informal support network, contrary to rural youths overall, who display more diverse and flexible social networks. This trend leads to

mixed outcomes: while it may nurture their self-efficacy beliefs (Simões et al., 2017), it also restricts rural NEETs' personal autonomy, overburdens families, especially in southern countries (e.g. Portugal; Carcillo et al., 2015), and limits educational expectations (Singh & Dika, 2003). In terms of employment and formal educational support, rural NEETs face challenges such as limited opportunities to develop a professional experience as skilled workers, lack of adequate training or reduced mobility and commutation (De Hoyos & Green, 2011).

Considering the latest trends regarding NEETs' regional distribution across European regions, three implications seem evident. First, age-related criteria and labor market transition analysis are not enough to describe the NEET situation and increase the chance of promoting policy-making and public interventions decontextualized from local/regional needs and youth expectations. Second, living in remote rural areas threatens youth development in general, and intensifies the risk of becoming a NEET youth. Third, it seems necessary to underpin, with greater detail, regional disparities regarding the NEET situation. Among other lines of inquiry, greater understanding of these youths' situation requires a critical analysis of the (potential) involvement of NEETs in typically rural economic sectors, such as agriculture.

(Insert Figure 1 approximately here)

Challenges and opportunities of involving NEET youths in agriculture

The involvement of rural NEET youths in agricultural activities offers a number of challenges and opportunities for rural development, which may be organized in layers, according to a bioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

At a microsystemic level, corresponding to the individual, how NEETs see agriculture is filtered by their own characteristics, as well as by prevalent negative stereotypes. Rural NEETs have been depicted as low-skilled persons, with a greater chance of having failed educational trajectories, greater dependence on their families, and a greater mismatch

between their needs and what public services provide (Sadler et al., 2014; Simões et al., 2017). These experiences convey a sense of failure and that these youths have no control over their present and future. Moreover, their background has given them no knowledge or experience of primary sector activities, despite the food sector's clear shortage of labor across Europe (International Labour Organization, 2018; Simões & Drumonde, 2016). Overall, agriculture is a physically demanding activity, which can be hazardous and uncertain, and may imply low-wages, precariousness, or illegal work (Diogo, 2007). Such demands lead youths to see agriculture in terms of negative stereotypes, combining inherent hardship with low wages, low skills, low technology, and negative behavioral features (Kuhmonen, Kuhmonen, & Luoto, 2016). More rarely, NEETs ascribe positive attributes to agriculture, such as health or good food, namely when agricultural activities are aligned with an ecoagriculture perspective (Simões & Drumonde, 2016).

At the level of meaningful relationships, also labeled exosystem (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), a number of factors pose important barriers to rural NEETs' involvement in the sector. As mentioned earlier, these youths do not generally have a familial background in the area, enabling them to continue running small farms and family businesses. Some of these youths' parents actually belong to the first generation that left the primary sector to work in services, something that is seen as an achievement the youths must perpetuate (Simões & Drumonde, 2016). Knowledge transfer in the area may also be blocked by migratory movements to urban areas, depriving the workforce of experienced adults who could act as mentors for these youths in agricultural activities (Zipin, Sellar, Brennan, & Gale, 2015).

At the mesosystemic level, concerning NEET interaction with organizations, many issues shape the potential of these youths' involvement in agriculture. To start with, formal educational systems stress labor market demands over community resources excessively. This tacit link between learning and work market tends to undervalue the traditionally more

dominant sectors in rural areas, whether agriculture, fishing, or others (White, 2012). Formal education's position in this respect crosses a wide range of issues and implicitly worsens NEETs' prospects of being involved in agriculture. Prevalent methodologies in formal education tend to not value learning by doing, inherent in manual activities. The connections between local traditions/knowledge and the curricula are often neglected, and there is a recurrent mismatch between training proposals and traditional sector needs or opportunities (McCune, Rosset, Salazar, Morales, & Moreno, 2017). In addition, employment services in rural areas are rarely tailored according to local or regional labor force demands. Service providers complain about the lack of autonomy to shape broadband policies, such as the Youth Guarantee, to local trends or a considerable workload. As a consequence, less NEET involvement in activation interventions is reported (Shore & Tosun, 2017; Simões & Drumonde, 2016). The lack of human resources or infrastructures in these areas, such as youth centers involving third sector organizations that may concentrate and provide an array of services, partly helps to explain this problem (Simões & Drumonde, 2016).

Macrosystemic factors may also influence NEETs' involvement in agriculture, especially at the policy-making level. Active labor market policy, fiscal incentives, or community ability to attract investment are all factors at a regional/national level that may give an impulse to NEETs' involvement (Bacher et al., 2017). However, in Europe, macro-regulations dictated by the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) play a more decisive role in stimulating or preventing youth involvement in the sector. Some authors (e.g. Skogstad, 1998) argue that agriculture endures under a state of exceptionalism, contrary to other activities. Agriculture's exceptionalism consists of government regulatory and expenditure intervention, to protect farmers' interests and life conditions, as well to ensure food stocks and safety (Greer, 2017; Skogstad, 1998). This stand has narrowed sectorial policy-making to players such as the European Commission, national governments, or farmers' corporate

representatives, while blocking a more decisive intervention from other stakeholders (e.g. environmental or social organizations). It also postpones agendas based on current societal concerns (e.g. sustainability) and programs that integrate social inclusion priorities.

International coregulation of the food sector, new-consumerism, cross-policy linkages, sustainability concerns, or the increasing income gap between small and large scale farming are some of the contemporary challenges that have pressed CAP towards a paradigm shift (Greer, 2017). However, at the best, agriculture is entering a phase of post-exceptionalism, where a historically persistent agricultural policy subsystem has opened up to new agents and incorporated some program change, but insists on farmers' interests and food safety as key ideas (Greer, 2017).

The conflict between rural and urban values may also affect the willingness to become a worker in the area. This clash is not new. Since the first industrial revolution, the rural world has been associated with an essential task, to produce food goods, based on one central economic activity, which is led by a social group of reference, peasants. Urban lifestyle has defined itself as opposite to rurality, based on diverse human activities, most of them intellectual ones or deriving from the use of technological innovations, in a scenario built and changed by human action (Ferrão, 2000). While, for centuries, rural and urban values remained opposite or, at least, complementary, the post-modern era raised the issue of how to balance both codes of values. Youths are often pressured to bring different sets of values together. Agriculture still resonates with the image of an ancient way of life, posing the challenge of how to turn what seems to belong to a bygone age into something new and appealing (Kuhmonen et al., 2016).

Rural communities that are able to involve rural NEETs in agriculture may create immediate opportunities for rural development such as enabling the emergence of service providers or changing employment patterns, by increasing the level of self-employment or of

labor force availability in the primary sector (White, 2012). These communities may also improve their long-term perspectives in terms of the strength to claim and enforce rights against the interests of non-local actors, enhance local capabilities to manage resources, and achieve better livelihoods, resulting in community empowerment (McCune et al., 2017).

The *Terra Nostra* project

The Azores: An overview of the region

In January 2013, the international economic crisis was hitting Europe hard. In Portugal, the crisis led to very high unemployment rates, especially among youths. The number of NEETs reached a peak in that year, corresponding to 14.10% of the population aged between 15 to 24 years old (Rowland, Ferreira, Vieira, & Pappámikail, 2014). In the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, the Azores, an archipelago of nine islands a two-hour flight from the capital city of Lisbon with a population of 247,372 inhabitants, was showing the significant effects of the crisis among youths. In late 2013, one out of four youths living in the Azores between 15 and 24 years old was NEET (Rowland et al., 2014). This rate was the highest among Portuguese regions. In 2017, although some improvements were evident, the Azores continued to display the highest NEET proportion in the country (19.30%), above the national rate (11.20%) and the NEET rate in urban areas, such as the Greater Lisbon Area (11.00%). This concerning picture is associated with the highest rate of early school leaving (27.30%, well above the national rate of 12.60%) and the highest youth unemployment rate among youths aged 15-24 (28.50%, above the national average of 23.90%). At the same time, the region displays the highest active population renewal rate in the country (119.20%) (Governo Regional dos Açores, 2018). These trends in employment and education have been accompanied by changes in the region's economic structure. In 2009, the primary sector (transformation of natural resources, including agriculture, fishing, or forestry) represented 13.00% of the

region's employment, while the secondary sector (manufacturing) covered 24.00%, and the tertiary sector (including attention, advice, access, experience, and caring labor services) 63.00%. In 2017, the primary sector represented 10.70% of the region's employment, the secondary sector covered 15.40%, and the tertiary sector increased its quota to 74.00% (Governo Regional dos Açores, 2018). These developments conflicted with post-2012 regional policies, which aimed at promoting youth involvement in the primary sector.

Caritas da Ilha Terceira: Activities and organizational landscape

Caritas da Ilha Terceira is a local non-governmental organization (NGO) run by the Catholic Church, part of the Caritas International network operating worldwide. In the Azores, Caritas da Ilha Terceira has run a center for disadvantaged youths since 2004. The center is integrated in a regional network involving 10 youth centers run by other private organizations and supported by the regional government. The network is unique in Portugal at a regional level. These centers work as one-stop shops spread among the archipelago's three most populated islands, providing occupational activities, psychotherapy, orientation, and vocational guidance services. Four of them also have non-formal and formal educational programs, including that run by Caritas da Ilha Terceira. All centers work closely with public social and employment services, schools, child and youth protection committees, youth associations, and private companies, but the degree of participation and cohesiveness varies in each municipality. In the municipality where *Terra Nostra* was conducted, public employment services were not involved in regular meetings. The communication with this public department was mostly unidirectional, meaning that youth centers would ask for or provide information about youths, but the reverse seldom occurred at that time. All the activities are run by youth workers trained in social sciences and education.

Terra Nostra activities and methodology

In 2013, Caritas da Ilha Terceira was awarded a grant from EDP (the Portuguese Electricity Company) to develop a social-educational project aimed at improving rural NEET youths' involvement and training in agriculture, as well as to improve employment prospects. The project was the final collaboration between youths and youth workers who had worked together in 2013. The project was called *Terra Nostra* (Our Land) and ran from October 2013 to September 2015, involving a total of 34 youths aged 18 to 26 years old; 28 of the participants were male. The project had four phases. The first one, *experiencing*, promoted learning through practice, by supporting youths' free involvement in agricultural activities. From January to July 2013, a group of four youths worked on reusing some abandoned fields for food production. At this stage, those youths and youth workers were involved in two main activities: organizing resources (e.g. cleaning fields) and preparing, implementing, and monitoring a whole cycle of production.

A second phase, *project preparation*, took place between February and April 2013 and involved submitting a project to EDP. At this stage, a local ecoagriculture cooperative was involved as a partner in the process, and the work – described below - was essentially methodological and analytical.

A third stage, *training*, was implemented, after project approval, from October 2013 to September 2015 and involved the ecoagriculture cooperative partner already engaged in the project preparation stage. The aim was to provide participants with essential knowledge on ecoagriculture techniques. The project's activities were organized in two 12-month non-formal learning cycles in ecoagriculture, in three consecutive steps: (a) a 50 hour introduction to basic ecoagriculture techniques with trainers selected by the ecoagriculture cooperative; (b) about 200 hours of apprenticeship in the fields selected for the project, monitored by the same trainers; and (c) 100 to 150 hours of apprenticeship with locally certified farmers. At all stages, youth workers shared the work in the fields with the youths, from learning basic

techniques to harvesting crops, as a means of acquiring knowledge and instilling cooperative spirit between participants and the staff. In addition, individual mentoring was provided to each of the participants in an on-going basis.

A fourth stage, *approaching the community*, overlapped training to achieve several aims: to create a flexible system for moving into the labor market; to promote the project's social visibility; and to increase the youth network and project's outreach potential. At this point, besides all the project partners, local certified producers were involved as additional partners to ease the labor market involvement, along with private companies in the role of additional sponsors. Activities to fulfill these aims included public events, participation in food markets, storytelling through social media, or the close involvement of traditional media, such as national television channels or newspapers, with youths acting as spokespeople for the project. Transition to the labor market was negotiated with youths as a four-way solution. One option arising during the discussions between youths and youth workers was to create a social company, which could continue the project and create some job opportunities. An alternative was to facilitate participants' entrepreneurship, in case they wanted to create their own small businesses. A further possibility was to ease movement into local companies already collaborating with the project. Another option was to integrate these solutions. For instance, if one of the participants was hired by a local company, they could also start their own small business.

From a methodological standpoint, the project monitorization and data collection evolved as a foil, from looser to more structured approaches, as shown in Figure 2. The experimentation phase was dominated by great levels of informality. Informal talks between NEETs and youth workers were the most recurrent and dominant discussion method. These talks would mostly occur in the fields, while everyone was working. Soon, the youths started to fill in a field diary describing daily activities. The informal talks and the field diary led to

monthly 90-minute structured discussions. These became the pivotal methodological tool to review and assess data across all stages of the project, blending participative method features with focus group techniques. All youths and youth workers had the right to offer their opinion, with mutual respect demanded for others' opinions. A relator, responsible for taking the minutes of the meetings, was designated. A trained moderator from the youth worker team was in charge of conducting the meeting to make sure that some focus group assumptions were employed, namely that: (a) everyone participated; (b) a monthly review of the field activities was undertaken based on the field diary; (c) matters of progress and areas of improvement were identified; and (d) a summary of lessons learned from practice in the month prior to the meeting was agreed upon. Particular emphasis was given to the summary of lessons learned, so that potential contributions for the area were systematically identified from an early stage. Before the discussion ended, the relator would read the notes taken and the participants would give their feedback on the decisions and lessons learned from practice.

Project preparation was the most structured phase. Although it continued to involve talks with youths on integrating their visions in the final proposal, this stage was strongly focused on a social and organizational diagnosis. The social diagnostic consisted of a detailed characterization of the region and municipality in terms of youth education and employment rates. The organizational diagnostic involved a SWOT analysis in which professionals and the board of Caritas da Ilha Terceira assessed the institution's capability of setting up an agriculture project. Alongside this, a survey of training needs and interests was carried out. This involved 192 NEET youths between 18 and 29 years old who had been in contact with Caritas da Ilha Terceira youth center or its social work services for the 12 months prior to the project preparation.

Finally, during training and approaching the community stages, different methods were used to monitor the project. As with the first stage, there were informal talks between youths

and youth workers and a field diary was kept. Greater monitorization was introduced, through weekly informal discussion. These were shorter meetings, organized by the youths themselves, namely by a rotating leading team, exclusively focused on problem solving. These meetings were included due to the greater number of participants and work intensity, compared to the initial stage. Monthly structured discussions were again held, as described above. All these data collection tools contributed to a final report.

(Figure 2 approximately here)

Terra Nostra in the context of national and European social interventions

After a review of executive summary databases on competitive funding opportunities for social interventions aimed at promoting youth employment since 2013, *Terra Nostra* offered a sense of novelty. At national level, two major private funding schemes could accommodate interventions with similar aims to those proposed by this project. EDP, which funded the *Terra Nostra* project, makes a point of funding agricultural projects through a social responsibility program, while also funding other priorities (e.g. health promotion projects). Since 2013, the program has funded 180 projects: six were aimed at supporting youth initiatives in agriculture, but only *Terra Nostra* targeted NEETs. In the same vein, the EEA Grants, nationally managed by the Gulbenkian Foundation, funded a scheme to tackle youth unemployment. Two of the projects aimed at supporting NEETs, but only one focused on their integration in the agriculture sector. Interestingly, that project was also submitted by Caritas da Ilha Terceira in 2016 to set up a social company for food production proposed by *Terra Nostra* participants.

At a European level, the most important funding scheme for youth integration in the labor market is possibly the one offered by the European Social Fund, especially with its main aim of “Strengthening employment and mobility” and the specific measure: “Creating chances for youth.” The online database for this measure registers 61 active projects since

2013. While 7 specifically targeted NEETs, none had identical goals to *Terra Nostra*, and most of them ($n = 38$; 62.23%) aimed at offering broadband services such as vocational training and orientation, or counseling services.

Discussion

Lessons learned from the Terra Nostra project

The *Terra Nostra* contributions come from reanalyzing the project's final report, based on the bioecological model (Brofenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), comparing the project features with the literature, and contextualizing it according to the social intervention trends targeting NEETs in Portugal and Europe. Table 1 summarizes problems, contributions, and on-going threats unveiled by this analytical triangulation.

(Table 1 approximately here)

Using a bioecological grid, at a subjective/individual level (the microsystem), two main challenges seem to thwart rural NEETs' involvement in the primary sector. First, these youths share a number of vulnerabilities: they display lower professional skills, are more likely to face long-term unemployment (Carcillo et al., 2015), and show higher risks of early school-leaving (EUROSTAT, 2017). Altogether, these vulnerabilities configure a sense of failure and lack of control over personal destinies. *Terra Nostra* indicated some possible approaches to addressing these subjective barriers. A good starting point to build rural NEETs' involvement in agriculture is to rely on youths' self-determination. In the project, this involvement stems from the fact that a group of youths identified an opportunity in agriculture. However, effective self-determined involvement requires an organization of activities that nurtures free experimentation. In other words, at all stages, projects should be organized as laboratories in which youths may understand by themselves the demands, achievements, and barriers of agricultural activities, with minimal, but significant input from professionals. Together, self-determination and free experimentation are elements of an

activation formula that becomes a sense of empowerment seldom experienced by rural NEETs (Simões & Drumonde, 2016).

In addition, these youths are dominated by strong, negative stereotypes about agriculture. For them, it seems a sector with low wages, low skills, low technology, and negative behavioral features (Kuhmonen et al., 2016). To tackle rural NEETs' negative stereotypes about agriculture, one possible avenue proposed by *Terra Nostra* is informal mobilization. Youth spokespersons, meaning those who seemed to be more effective in transmitting key messages about the project, were intentionally and voluntarily involved in the process of spreading the news about the experience to their peers. A desired snowball effect of interest or curiosity was achieved, with many youths approaching participants and youth workers informally, showing the desire to learn about or to participate in *Terra Nostra*. At the same time, NEETs' negative stereotypes were addressed through the continuous use of traditional and social media. *Terra Nostra* achieved considerable regional and national visibility, and the youths and youth workers agreed on some communication principles to promote a positive representation of agriculture: (a) participants were presented as protagonists of their own change, based on first person reports and testimonials; (b) their experiences in the project were told based on storytelling techniques; and (c) stories stressed how the participants managed to overcome great adversity to found a new hope, based on learning and developing an agricultural activity.

At a mesosystemic level, the level of the participants' most significant relationships, rural NEETs rely more on family support compared to other rural youths. While family support conveys the necessary protection and improves NEETs' beliefs about their abilities, this situation also overburdens families and thwarts these youths' autonomy (Carcillo et al., 2015; Simões et al., 2017). Some contributions made by informal support may, nevertheless, improve youths' involvement in agriculture. The project's final report shows that extended

informal learning was taking place, as some youths discussed what they had learned during the different project phases with their families. For instance, some of them realized that most of the techniques that they used at different stages of food production (e.g. fertilization) had also been used by other family members, especially those belonging to their grandparents' generation. Moreover, some youths would bring suggestions from their family members and implement them during apprenticeship stages. Another unintended effect suggesting greater family support was land lending. Some families lent the youths portions of land to help improve their skills and practice beyond the opportunities provided by the project. In addition, an intentional feature of *Terra Nostra*, at a mesosystemic level, was to involve youths with local producers in the role of mentors, through apprenticeships. This might be a complex move, due to the scarcity of experienced adults able to act as mentors in rural areas (Zipin et al., 2015). The final report shows that, actually, this might have been one of *Terra Nostra*'s most successful strategies. Formal training rarely promotes informal involvement between mentors and learners. In addition, local producers do not usually match youth needs with their own production requirements. Given that the process of matching mentors and youths was flexible and could accommodate both parties' desires, mentoring in some cases led to hiring opportunities.

At the exosystemic level, rural NEETs' involvement in agriculture encompasses addressing their relationship with organizations, especially with formal education and employment services. Formal educational systems overemphasize labor market demands, to the detriment of community opportunities. In rural areas, this trend results in undervaluing traditionally dominant sectors in these regions. Other harmful side effects are the prevalence of traditional teacher-centered methodologies and rigid curricula that often neglect connections between local traditions and knowledge (McCune et al., 2017; White, 2012). To tackle these limitations of formal education systems, and based on youth workers' experience

of non-formal learning techniques, *Terra Nostra* proposed a program of non-formal education approaches with methodological and curricular implications. From a methodological perspective, training and apprenticeship took place on a highly unstructured basis. Learning sessions occurred mostly in the fields and not in a traditional classroom environment. Direct observation, demonstration, peer mentoring, small group problem solving, and learning diaries were all techniques used during the learning process, upholding a person-centered approach instead of a curricula or teacher-centered methodology. From a curricular standpoint, knowledge transmission was set as a bottom-up process. Although themes were predefined by trainers experienced in agriculture, the youths' questions and contributions were the starting point for exploring training topics. Altogether, this non-formal training approach created a collaborative learning environment completely different from the classrooms these youths used to know. They were encouraged to share learning with youth workers and trainers who did not present themselves as specialists. This atmosphere of equality in the learning process has often been recommended to engage NEETs in training opportunities (Eurofund, 2017).

At the employment service level, youth activation is a major issue, with many services being provided in a directive fashion (Shore & Tosun, 2017). In addition, in several European countries, including in Portugal, counseling and training often narrow rural NEETs' work alternatives to low-skilled intensive labor, without considering their expectations (Carcillo et al., 2015; Tosun, 2017). In this respect, an added value offered by the *Terra Nostra* project was its flexible approach to the transition from training/apprenticeship to employment. From an early stage of the project, discussions between youths and youth workers flagged that the training system followed a one-track solution: after a formal learning period, an apprenticeship was provided by vocational training schools, followed by certification, with no follow-up or mentoring regarding the transition to the labor market. Often, the selection of

a company or business to receive a student for an apprenticeship period was an administrative procedure. Students were seldom involved in a negotiation process that could accommodate their needs and interests. To address this issue, a flexible system of after-learning transition to the labor market was developed by youths and youth workers. This system conveyed three alternatives: (a) the creation of an ecoagriculture social business, which could integrate some of the youths; (b) entrepreneurship, meaning that each of the participants could initiate their own small business, with the support of the project's partners; and (c) integration in local food production businesses where apprenticeships took place. The flexibility of this system was also evident in the fact that youths agreed that these solutions could be combined according to each one's needs. For instance, someone hired by a local business could also develop his/her own production and sell it. The same approach could be followed by those who became involved in the social company created through collective action.

From a macrosystemic perspective, *Terra Nostra* addressed two main challenges. First, this network-based project contradicted overarching policy protectionism, which tends to block social stakeholders' agricultural interventions (Greer, 2017). Thus, Caritas da Ilha Terceira began focusing on identifying legal and regional policy resources that could further support the project's activity and future sustainability. By playing this more deliberate and leading role, the organization also acted as an agency, by informing youths about opportunities that could support their ideas in food production. This organizational position helped to channel regional and national funds to these youth activities, which otherwise might have been underused.

From a cultural standpoint, communication strategies associated with the development of an updated, socially valued form of agriculture seemed an effective formula to ease the conflict between traditional and modern values (Ferrão, 2000). The main outcome of this process was that a traditional activity started to communicate modern values and a new

image, as these youths started to see themselves as farmers. Instead of raw, low-skilled, and old-fashioned workers (Kuhmonen et al., 2016), they could view themselves as professionals involved in sustainable activities contributing to healthier, safer food production, making a valuable and most-wanted contribution to the community, while finding new employment opportunities.

On-going threats to rural NEETs' involvement in agriculture

The *Terra Nostra* project and other initiatives promoting rural NEETs' involvement in agriculture face on-going threats at all levels. At a microsystemic level, the rising numbers of NEETs in rural areas are, in themselves, a cause for concern (EUROSTAT, 2017). In addition, negative stereotypes from any source are resistant to change. Prevalent negative stereotypes held by NEETs about agriculture will, thus, take a long time to be changed, requiring on-going local initiatives and policies.

At a mesosystemic level, it is important to note that NEETs' families are often also vulnerable socio-economically, and the degree of their young adult descendants' dependence overburdens their situation (Simões et al., 2017). During the project, it was evident that involvement in agriculture was followed by family suspicion about the real chance agriculture would bring an income and professional prospects. Lack of follow-up opportunities may add resistance to future involvement in the area.

At an exosystemic level, although agriculture is not rural NEETs' first choice, a quick dissemination of a successful project may occur; in fairly small communities, this leads to risks of market saturation (Bacher et al., 2017). Therefore, it might be important that initial experiences in agriculture are followed-up by progressive production specialization (whether the production focuses on greens, flowers, or honey, depending on local features such as demand, climate, etc.). Another issue is how employment services were ignored during the project, especially at its early stages. This may be explained by lack of cooperation at a local

level, overreliance on Caritas da Ilha Terceira prior experience in targeting these youths or major policy guidelines (e.g. Youth Guarantee) which do not propose the participation of public services in outreach activities (Tosun, 2017).

At a macrosystemic level, two issues remained as important threats when the project finished in late 2015. First, major international sectorial policies, especially CAP, still operate in a framework of post-exceptionalism (Greer, 2017). The state's over protectionism of agriculture means reduced opportunities for other agents, including social intervenors, to promote agriculture as an alternative for rural NEETs. This is largely confirmed by the fact that national and European funding schemes ignore the potential of specific interventions in the area, while insisting on broadband ones (e.g. vocational training). At the same time, excessive regulation clashes with the declining number of people involved in agriculture in the region where the project took place (Governo Regional dos Açores, 2018) and in Europe (International Labour Organization, 2018).

Limitations

Terra Nostra's originality imposes some limitations. First, the current state of the art does not offer comparison terms to underline the lessons learned from this particular project.

Additionally, potentially similar interventions, especially at a European level, may exist beyond the European Social Fund framework. Nevertheless, this funding scheme is still the most comprehensive, and the review of its database of on-going projects since 2013 did not discover any similar interventions targeting rural NEETs.

Conclusion

Involving rural NEETs in agriculture is a challenging task. *Terra Nostra* proposes possible avenues on how to achieve that goal in different ways. More importantly, the analysis of this project restates cutting edge tensions that need to be solved. One tension assumes the form of youths' resistance to work in the primary sector, due to strong negative stereotypes about

agriculture. This attitude needs to be changed through informal training and proper communication strategies. Another tension arises from potential family resistance to rural NEETs' involvement in agriculture. Parents may see their sons and daughters' involvement in the sector as their failure to provide them with a brighter future. At an organizational level, *Terra Nostra* was an alternative to public employment services targeting and reaching out rural youths, suggesting that greater cooperation between private and public stakeholders in the area are urgently needed. Finally, at a deeper level, *Terra Nostra* questioned the excessive protectionism of the agriculture sector. Greater cooperation between youths, social agents, and producers (not to mention political decision-makers) would result in a win-win situation: not only would youths and social organizations find alternatives for youth employment based on local opportunities, but producers could also use an additional channel to tackle the increasing labor force shortage in the area.

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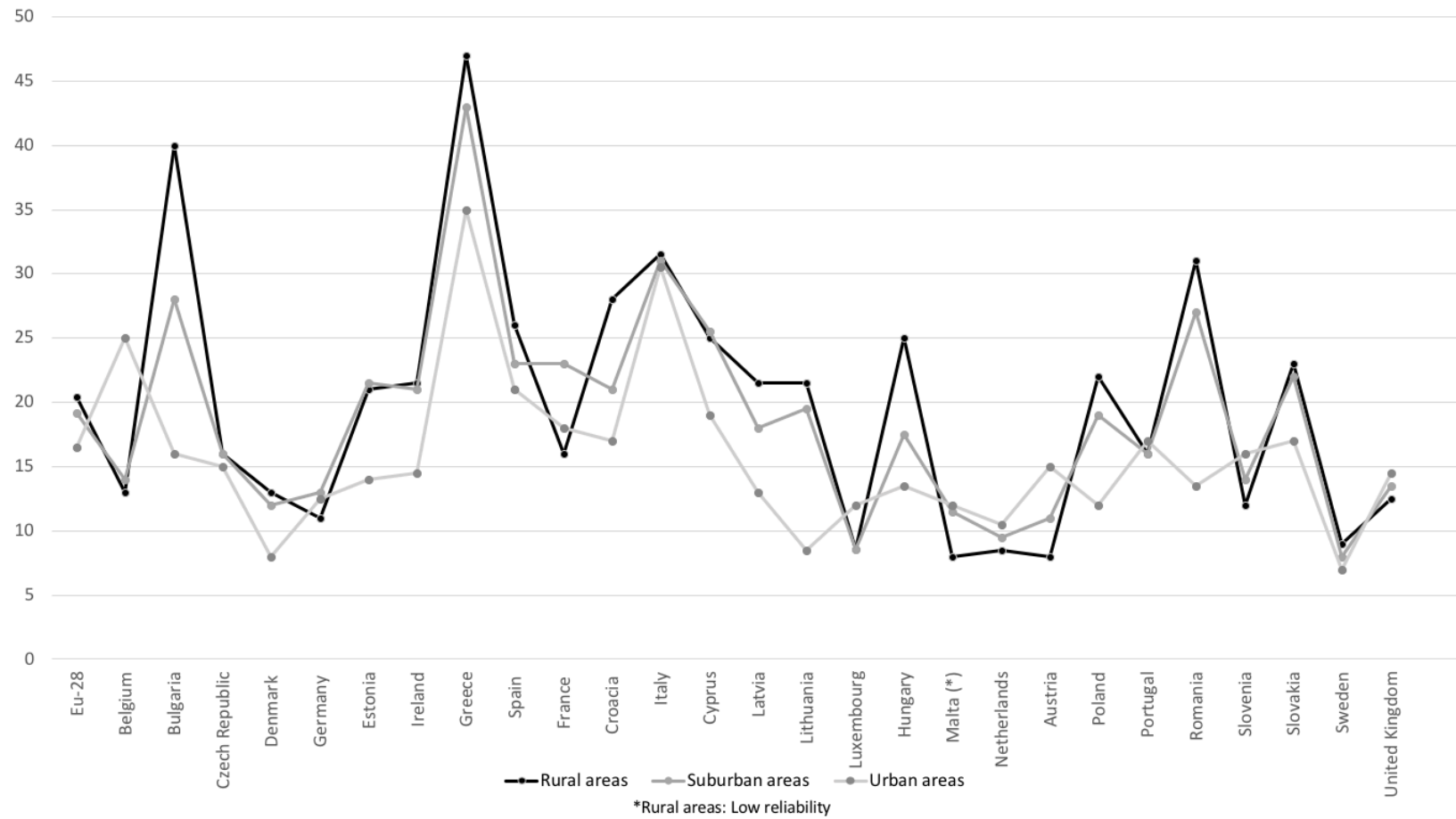


Figure 1. Share of young people (aged 20–34) neither in employment nor in education and training, by degree of urbanization, 2016 (%) Source: Eurostat (edatlfse29)

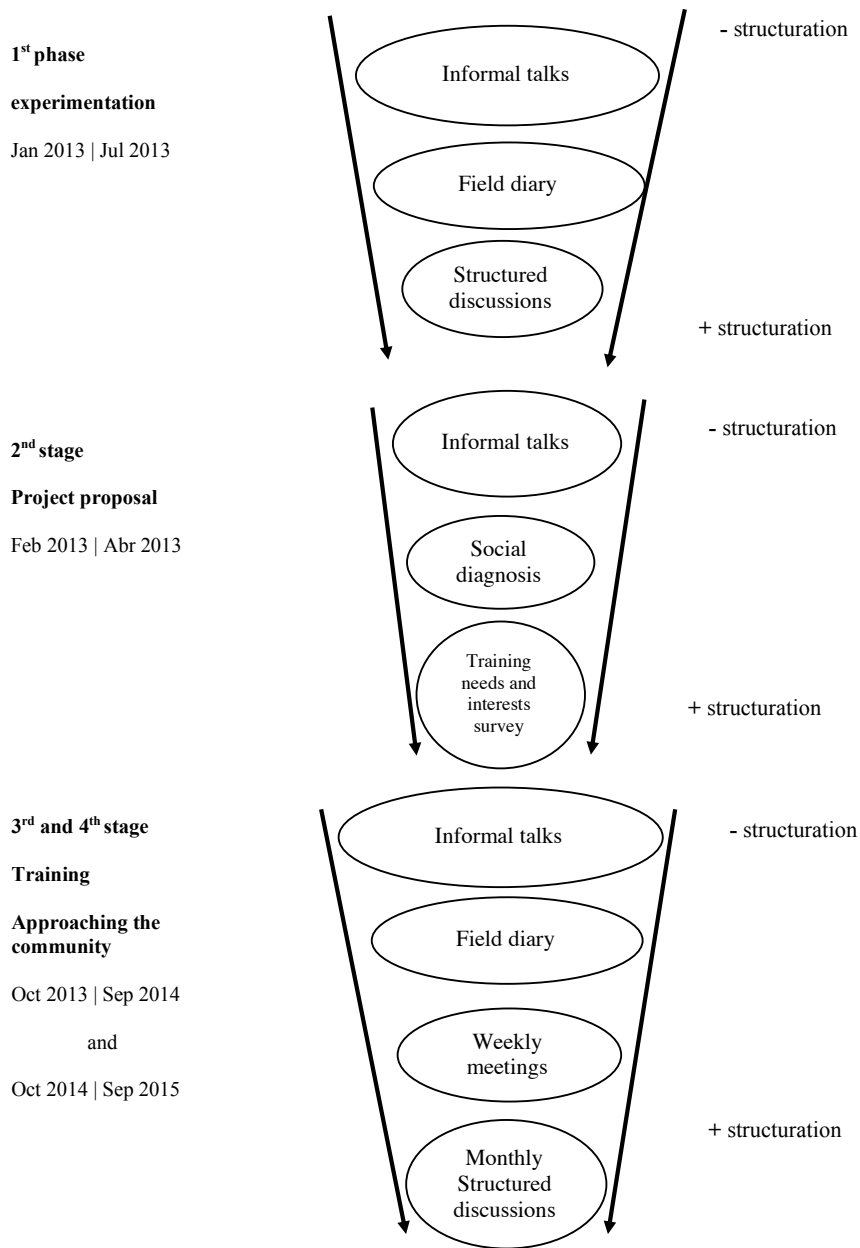


Figure 2. Graphic representation of the methodological structure and timeline of *Terra Nostra* project.

Table 1. Involving NEETs in agriculture: Problems, contributions from the *Terra Nostra* project, and on-going threats by different levels of analysis according to the bioecological model.

Level of analysis	Problems	Contributions from the <i>Terra Nostra</i> project	On-going threats
Microsystem (The individual level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NEETs' general sense of failure and lack of control - Youths' negative stereotypes regarding agriculture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Youth's self-determination - Free experimentation of agricultural activities - Informal mobilization of other youths (identifying youths spokespersons) - Use of traditional and social media to propel a positive image of agriculture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rising numbers of NEETs in rural areas - Stereotypes are resistant to change and take time to do so
Mesosystem (The significant relationships level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of familial background on agriculture activities - Negative family perceptions of agricultural activities - Lack of experienced adults who can act as mentors in the agricultural area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extended informal learning (involving families) - Land lending - Involve youths with local producers in the role of mentors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NEETs' families' socio-economic vulnerability and the degree of their young adult descendants' dependence overburdens their situation
Exosystem (The level of relationships with organization)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Under valorization of traditional areas including agriculture by formal learning systems - Lack of employment services adjustment to local/regional needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Non-formal education approaches to agricultural learning - Flexible approach to the transition from training/apprenticeship to employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Quick dissemination of practices and market saturation - Local producers focus on work force needs over the social responsibility of their involvement - Weak cooperation with employment services
Macrosystem (The level of prevalent culture)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need for policy-making at a regional level leading to greater involvement in the primary sector - Clash between youths' identification with modern values and traditional values associated with agriculture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identification of legal and regional policy resources - Ease the conflict between traditional and modern values (through communication techniques and the adoption of an ecoagricultural paradigm) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - CAP post-exceptionalism - On-going decrease of people involved in agriculture in Europe