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# **Equal opportunities, fair work and social protection: Impacts of COVID-19 on young people in Portuguese rural territories**

Francisco Simões<sup>1</sup>; Renato Miguel Carmo<sup>2</sup>; Bernardo Fernandes<sup>3</sup>

## **Abstract:**

Several international organizations, as well as worldwide scholarship, have abundantly shown that young people under 34 are among the groups struggling the most with COVID-19 economic and social impacts. Seldom, however, does scholarship focus on the uneven effects of the pandemic on younger generations across different types of territories. Overall, young people in rural territories tend to face much greater adversities. These territories concentrate less population, show strong ageing trends and depict a lower settlement rate. Rural younger generations struggle to thrive, because rural areas depend heavily on declining economic activities such as farming, are plagued by precarious jobs, and display limited institutional support compared to (sub)urban areas. In Portugal, the country's population is unevenly distributed between affluent, high-density coastal areas and inlands and archipelagos with a considerable rural predominance. The COVID-19 crisis has the potential to further stretch the existing inequalities among young people due to spatial distribution. Therefore, in this chapter, we discuss the impact of the recent pandemic crisis on rural Portuguese young people. We will do so by characterizing headline indicators in the three domains of the European Pillar of Social Rights, namely equal opportunities (e.g., Early School Leavers from Education and Training), fair working conditions (e.g., Youth Unemployment), and social protection and inclusion (e.g., at risk of poverty and social exclusion). We expect to reach an initial comprehension of the challenges faced by rural Portuguese young people in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis in three domains: education, employment and social inclusion. We also discuss how more nuanced territorial conceptualizations (e.g., low-density areas) and policymaking can add alternative views about young people's living conditions due to subnational disparities.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; young people; rurality; education; employment.

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<sup>1</sup> Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (Iscte), Cis-Iscte, Lisbon, Portugal; francisco.simoes@iscte-iul.pt

<sup>2</sup> Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (Iscte), Cis-Iscte, Lisbon, Portugal; renato.carmo@iscte-iul.pt

<sup>3</sup> Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (Iscte), Cis-Iscte, Lisbon, Portugal; bernardo.fernandes@iscte-iul.pt

## 1. Introduction

In historical turning points such as the COVID-19 pandemic, negative representations of young people's futures become more salient. Such representations are further supported by evidence. A recent report (Eurofound 2021) shows that in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis European younger generations aged 18-29 were hardest hit by job loss, overrepresented in economic sectors most impacted by the sanitary restrictions, and more likely to have part-time or temporary contracts that terminated due to economic activity slow-down. This age group was also more likely to experience house insecurity or to report difficulties making ends meet compared to other age groups.

For the past decade, scholars are growingly interested in the intersection between spatialization and youth development. Although facing greater adversity and, thus, an increased risk of marginalization, less attention has been granted to younger generations' experiences in rural territories. Rural territories are mostly regions combining shrinking demography (low population density, aging and high rates of outmigration, especially among younger generations) with declining economies (including lack of relevant industry, the predominance of primary sector activities, incipient levels of innovation and entrepreneurship, limited job demand) and low levels of institutional support (e.g., limited access to services) (Bæck, 2016). However, little is known about how the recent COVID-19 pandemic impacted rural younger generations. Namely, it is uncertain if the pandemic side effects followed or further stretched these negative structural conditions, especially in countries such as Portugal with significantly vulnerable rural communities.

Bearing this in mind, in this chapter we seek to fulfil two aims. First, we describe younger generations' inequalities across Portuguese rural and urban territories before and during the COVID-19 period. Specifically, we examine the main indicators of the three different dimensions of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR): equal opportunities, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion, as key pillars of territorial cohesion (Medeiros 2016). Secondly, we reflect on the implications in terms of education, employment, and social inclusion for rural young people stemming from our analysis. In doing so, we also add a few conceptual and policy-making implications stemming from our discussion.

Our work seeks to make incremental, novel, and pertinent contributions to the scholarship on territorial socioeconomic inequalities towards of more balanced and cohesive territorial development (Medeiros & Rauhut 2020). Firstly, we seek to expand the knowledge about

younger generations' social inequalities in rural territories. Our contribution connects well with an increasing demand to unpack the disparities involving younger generations at subnational territorial levels (Cefalo and Scandurra 2021; Cefalo et al. 2020). We adopt a multidimensional standpoint of social inequalities (Costa and Carmo 2015) to address our goals in face of preliminary evidence showing that disparities at the subnational level are increasing in youth-related dimensions such as education (Bæck 2016), employment (Cefalo and Scandurra 2021), or social inclusion (Simões 2022). Therefore, new research efforts must add within-countries comparative layer to the dominant methodological (inter)nationalism (Scandurra et al. 2021) that focuses mostly on the contrasts between North-South or East/West blocks (Cefalo et al. 2020), on institutional arrangements in the form of transitional regimes (Pastore 2015) or in the differences between countries (Brzinsky-Fay 2014).

Secondly, our efforts bring novelty to territorial inequalities/cohesion literature, as the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on younger generations' social conditions in rural territories remains absent from scholarly discussions. Some marginal considerations about the uneven impacts of COVID-19 on youth-related dimensions across the urban-rural divide can be found elsewhere (e.g., Simões 2022). However, these reflections are far from providing a more systematic picture of how the pandemic impacted rural young people.

Finally, we seek to add pertinence to our work by focusing on the social impacts of COVID-19 on Portuguese young people in rural territories. We believe this contribution is relevant in the European context because Portugal is one of the countries where the asymmetries between (sub)urban territories and rural territories are sharper, due to a clear socioeconomic divide between coastal and inland/remote (e.g., archipelagos) areas (Mauritti et al., 2019). Moreover, Portugal is among the EU countries projected to experience a 21–27% population decline until 2050, with a higher loss (- 20%) in seven NUTS-3 regions located in inland, mostly rural border regions (Silva et al. 2021). This territorial divide is a major source of inequalities for younger generations (Simões 2018), making it more important to understand how a challenge such as a pandemic further stretches or even challenges these inequalities. We, therefore, follow the evidence showing that crises have an increasingly damaging potential for young people living in more vulnerable territories (Cefalo and Scandurra 2021). Still, such a harsh interruption of daily lives can have unintended, although limited positive effects on young people's and territories' prospects. For instance, some reports show that after COVID-19, rural territories are now described as safer, more natural, less restrictive environments, where new opportunities are shaping up – such as remote work – which can come to positively affect rural young people's lives (Silva et al. 2021).

The remainder of this chapter unfolds as follows. First, we briefly define rural areas. Afterward, we discuss the main features of young generations in rural areas, in terms of shrinking demography, declining economies, and limited institutional support. Then, we describe COVID-19 impacts on Portuguese young people living in rural areas, based on the EPSR selected indicators. We conclude with a critical discussion of the multidimensional consequences of COVID-19 for Portuguese rural young people in the areas of education, employment, and social inclusion, as key components of public policies towards territorial cohesion.

## 2. EU and Portuguese rural areas: A snapshot

European rural areas correspond to low population density regions: < 300 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> and a minimum population of 5,000 (Eurostat 2018). In the EU, rural areas account for 341,000,000 inhabitants, representing 30.60% of the EU's population. Demographically, depopulation in these areas is associated with ageing and the enormous difficulty in attracting or retaining young people. Gender balance has become another demographic issue for these territories as well, with the share of men increasing in several countries (e.g., Germany) as women are more prone to leave rural territories (Leibert 2016). From an economic standpoint, rural territories tend to struggle with a considerable predominance of the primary sector, particularly farming, and accelerated deindustrialization (Zipin et al., 2015). Rural communities are ethnically homogeneous and show strong social networks and local identities (Ludden 2011) in the context of limited or low-quality institutional support (Shore and Tosun 2019).

In Portugal, rural territories are mostly located in the inland part of the country. On the other hand, a larger predominance of urban and densely populated areas is located on the coastland, particularly in the Metropolitan Areas of Lisbon and Porto and on the Algarve coast (in the south). A significant part of the rural territories has been losing population continuously since the 70s and 80s of the past century, to which must be added a strong ageing population trend. These areas are, therefore, marked by a high socio-demographic regression.

From a socio-economic point of view, Portuguese rural areas have severe vulnerabilities, which are reproduced, in part, due to the weakness of entrepreneurial activities and a lack of economic vitality (Ferrão et al. 2023). For this reason, employment offers tend to be reduced, which greatly limits the dynamization of local and regional labour markets. This framework is

partially compensated by employment in the public sector due to the construction and implementation of various facilities and social services that implied the hiring of some specialised and relatively qualified professionals. However, with the closure of some of these services determined by political options, due to the low demand, these territories have not only suffered a process of functional dismantlement but are increasingly unprotected and distant from public institutions that promote social inclusion. This dilapidation is particularly notorious in the education and healthcare sectors (with the closure of schools and health units since the early 2000s), but also in local administration (with the merge between parish councils) (Ferrão et al., 2023; Mauritti et al., 2022).

The socio-economic regression in rural areas has consequences at the level of spatial planning. Agricultural and forestry areas are no longer properly maintained, which contributes to the intensification of environmental risks (Mauritti et al. 2022). In fact, the lack of residents and of people of working age led to the degradation of rural areas and to greater difficulty in facing the consequences of climate change. The recurrent outbreak of forest fires, increasingly aggressive and unexpected, is a paradigmatic example of the difficulty in articulating spatial planning policies with those of environmental risk prevention in these territories.

### 3. Young people in rural areas

The social divide between young people living in rural areas from those living in (sub)urban areas is driven, to a great extent, by rural areas' own features, including how they position themselves regarding shrinking demography, declining economies, and institutional support limitations.

#### 3.1. Youth and shrinking demography

Rural areas ageing trends stem from a combination of multiple factors from a considerable drop in the birth rate to economic features such as the lack of industry (Zipin et al. 2015) or the centrality of the farming sector (Simões et al. 2021), resulting in a low capacity to attract young workers.

Younger generations deal with rural shrinking demography mostly through mobilities. Youth mobilities refer to a wide range of movements between places encompassing repeat, circular, and onward migration. Mobilities are, thus, distinct from migration classically defined as a one-shot, unidirectional long move from an origin to a destination country (King and

Williams 2018; Farrugia 2016). Youth mobilities definition is, thus, in line with the fluid nature of the migratory phenomenon in the contemporary world (King and Williams 2018), shaped by major trends such as globalization or work feminization (King 2018).

Mobilities of young people living in rural areas have been largely depicted from the outmigration (Farrugia 2016) and brain-draining (Theodori and Theodori 2015) perspectives. These lines of inquiry detail a leading trend of young people moving from rural territories to more affluent, urban areas within the country or abroad (Farrugia 2016) in a relatively permanent way. These movements are driven by young people's expectations to improve their education and skills (Theodori and Theodori 2015), have access to more qualified and rewarding jobs (Weiss et al. 2021), delve into a modern lifestyle matching their own values (Farrugia 2016) and increase upwards social mobility odds (Silva et al. 2021). This trend has been interpreted in different ways. Some authors fit youth outmigration from rural areas in the periphery-core movements of people from poorer regions and countries to large economic centers, due to the uneven distribution of opportunities and resources (King 2018). Others (e.g., Farrugia 2016) see in the dominant youth outmigration from rural areas the triumph of a metrocentric narrative whereby young people's happiness and success are situated and limited to urban places.

While outmigration represents, indeed, the major youth mobility trend shaping rural territories' demography, there are important nuances that need to be considered. On one hand, for the past decade, there has been a significant increase in the share of young people living in rural areas in some European countries such as Denmark, France, Italy, or Germany (Eurostat 2021), needing greater analysis. Moreover, there is a diversification of mobilities involving young people from rural areas, including short-term or returning movements. These tendencies have started to attract the attention of scholars, with some studies trying to untangle the factors behind, for instance, the return of younger generations to rural areas after tertiary education in countries such as Portugal (Simões et al. 2021) or Switzerland (Rérat 2014). One important contribution of this line of inquiry is to show that emotional geographies in the form of bonds to local communities and places is a significant predictor of rural young people circular (Nugin 2019) or returning intentions (Simões et al. 2021; Silva et al. 2021; Rérat 2014), even if this option is socially represented as a failure (Farrugia 2016). While leaving and staying can coexist (Nugin 2019) and returning can also be an option under certain circumstances (Silva et al. 2021; Simões et al. 2021) outmigration continues to be the dominant mobility trend among younger generations originating in rural areas. Consequently, the ones staying are those who are less-academic minded, especially men, without the financial resources to move out

(Farrugia 2016). This phenomenon further increases social gaps between young people living in rural areas and (sub)urban territories.

### 3.2. Declining economies

Rural youth mobilities overlap with decision-making associated with the school to work transition. For the past decades, school to work transition has become longer, and more uncertain (Cefalo et al. 2020). Often, youth professional pathways involve experiences of precariousness, unemployment, and limited access to learning and skills development (Carmo and Matias 2019), blocking the fulfilment of independent life (Cefalo et al. 2020).

With some exceptions (e.g., Corbett 2007), the route towards an independent life is narrower and much more complex in rural areas due to local economic suboptimal conditions. These territories struggle with the dominance of the primary sector, especially family-owned farming businesses (Simões et al. 2021). This translates into economic ecosystems deprived of innovation, misaligned from major paradigm shifts (e.g., green transition), and showing incipient levels of entrepreneurship able to transform local resources in modern business models. This dominant economic context is coupled with an on-going dismantling of industrial capacity, with several collateral effects, including less obvious ones such as the loss of experienced workers who can mentor younger generations in developing skills in these activities (Zipin et al. 2015).

A declining rural economy on youth social conditions translates into a weaker youth labour market, offering only a few jobs, mostly temporary ones in a limited number of sectors (Cefalo and Scandurra, 2021; Dayram et al, 2020). Recent findings by Cefalo et al. (2020) further illustrate this, by showing a marked variation in youth labor market integration across countries, but also across regions, especially in Southern countries such as Spain or Italy. Regions displaying a lower GDP and lower demand for more qualified jobs are disproportionately rural regions showing lower rates of young people's labour market integration as well (Cefalo and Scandurra 2021). Interestingly, increasing the supply of tertiary-educated graduates is not enough to improve young people's labour market integration, demonstrating that job supply is also dependent on local economic conditions (Cefalo and Scandurra 2021). Moreover, youth labour markets in rural areas are often shaped by the sudden booming of specific industries or services such as mining (Dayram et al. 2020) or tourism (Diaz-Serrano and Nilsson 2020). However, these activities are characterized by employing low-skilled



laborers, rarely creating job opportunities for young locals, and have detrimental effects on the population's educational attainment (Dayram et al. 2020).

The above-mentioned youth outmigration is one of the immediate consequences associated with the deprived economic ecosystems of rural areas. Another outcome of rural territories' economic decline is the perpetuation of the inter-generational cycle of poverty and inequalities due to unemployment or precariousness (Dayram et al. 2020; Carmo and Matias 2019). Moreover, young people facing longer, or more recurrent spells of unemployment or underemployment will necessarily delay the accumulation of work experience, while having limited access to relevant training, meaning the one leading to differentiation and specialization (Dayram et al. 2020; Simões and Rio 2020). Finally, strong differences in youth job market integration can lead to what Cefalo et al. (2020) label as the geography of discontent. Indeed, large shares of unemployed or inactive young people fuel the resentment among whole generations living in rural territories in Europe constituting an important driver of populist and extremist movements (Moore 2019).

### 3.3. Institutional support

Institutional support plays a pivotal role in producing key outcomes for youth such as access to training opportunities (Simões and Rio 2020), the development of soft skills associated with employability (Schoon and Heckhausen 2019), or an overall smoother integration in the labour market (Cefalo et al. 2020). The research focusing on institutional arrangements aimed at young people has mostly focused on the comparisons between school to work regimes (e.g., Pastore 2015) or between countries (e.g., Brzinsky-Fay, 2014). Slowly, the focus has shifted to the subnational level, with analyses of regional disparities regarding specific outcomes such as youth unemployment (Cefalo et al. 2020). Two lines of inquiry have emerged from the literature in this respect.

Firstly, it is evident that regional asymmetries in institutional support jeopardizing young people's social conditions emerge from the lack of infrastructure in rural areas. By infrastructure, we mean both facilities and human resources in terms of qualified personnel to deliver services. This structural problem results in narrower access to and lower coverage of public services. Both problems are evident, for instance, in the educational sector. Indeed, rural areas struggle with lower quality school buildings, inefficient educational networks, greater distances between students' homes and schools (Bæck 2016), and lower capacity from regional

educational authorities to attract and retain high-quality teachers (Reagan 2019). The same problems of access and coverage apply to public employment services operating in rural areas. Indeed, these services struggle to outreach or activate vulnerable young people, such as those Not in Employment, nor in Education or Training (NEET). This is due to a combination of a lack of on-the-ground services and personnel with insufficient collaboration with the Third Sector organizations capable of amplifying the interventions' impacts (Smoter 2022).

Secondly, institutional support in rural areas is ineffective, failing to deliver services and programs that match local economic opportunities with young people's needs. This mismatch between territorial resources and young people's expectations is evident, again, in the educational sector. This problem is illustrated by the implementation of vocational education and training programs without targeting the regional most promising economic sectors (Simões and Rio 2020). The employment services operating in rural areas also struggle with the same problem, but due to different reasons. Job counsellors and caseworkers often lack the autonomy and/or the resources to adjust major policy instruments (e.g., Youth Guarantee) to regional/local conditions, resulting in clear inconsistencies between policy goals and on-the-ground outcomes (Shore and Tosun 2019).

Limited or ineffective institutional support leads to distrust in institutions among young people in rural territories. This is worrisome considering that institutional support in rural areas competes with informal support provided by families, friends, and communities overall, limiting young people to the resources made available through their most immediate social ties. This translates into restricted access to education, especially among women (Bæck 2016), and lower access to qualified and decent jobs (Simões and Rio 2020), further stretching the gap between younger generations in these territories and those living in the most affluent regions.

#### 4. COVID-19 impacts on Portuguese young people living in rural areas

Reaching adulthood involves important changes in subjective dimensions. Young people become more open to new experiences, social relationships, and roles while developing wisdom-related knowledge or greater maturity (Arnett 2014). However, becoming an adult is also a process deeply shaped by the structural features that compose the socioeconomic environment with deep implications for educational choices and professional development opportunities (Masdonati et al. 2021).

From early on, COVID-19 had a systemic, negative impact on several structural forces that influence young people's lives. In terms of formal education, schools were closed, and classes were done remotely. Regarding the labor market, temporary and part-time jobs were not available anymore, due to strict lockdowns. This resulted in job loss and job insecurity among younger generations, as precarious contractual forms are more common among young workers (Eurofound 2021). Consequently, many young people struggled to meet basic needs due to income loss (Eurofound 2021).

It remains unclear how this systemic impact of the COVID-19 crisis followed or even stretched previously existent gaps between rural and urban young people in terms of education, employment, or social conditions. This is very relevant for public policy development, especially in asymmetrical countries such as Portugal where cohesion policy packages should also address younger generations' life conditions (Silva et al., 2021; Simões 2022). To better tackle this gap, we decided to depict some of the headline indicators in the three domains of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). The EPSR is seen as a compass that translates a process of renewed socio-economic convergence in the EU, towards territorial cohesion, based on a scoreboard of selected indicators. It constitutes, therefore, a beacon for analyzing how much fairness or equality is driving EU societies (EC 2021). Considering our purposes, we selected indicators of each of the EPSR domains containing specific information for younger groups (e.g., 15-24 years old) except for the risk of poverty and social exclusion. We then further broke down the indicators by EU and Portugal cities and rural areas. We choose to describe all the indicators since 2010, to capture the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis as well as the subsequent recovery period.

#### 4.1. Equal opportunities: education and transition to the labor market

The EPSR equal opportunities dimension includes indicators of skills development, life-long learning, and active support for employment. All these elements are indispensable to ensure increasing employment opportunities, facilitating transitions between different employment statuses, and improving the employability of individuals. In this domain, we depicted two indicators. The first one, Early School Leaving from Education and Training, refers to the share of the population aged 18 to 24 with at most the lower secondary education (ISCED-4) who were not involved in any education or training. This is a key indicator for examining young people's living conditions in the transition from school to work. Secondary education attainment is a requirement to progress to tertiary education, but it is also essential in ensuring

that countries increase their share of intermediate professionals in the workforce (Buchanan et al. 2017). The importance of reducing Early School Leaving from Education and Training is stressed by strategic EU documents, such as the communication from the EC (2020) on Achieving the Education Area. According to that key document, the share of people aged 20-24 years old with at least an upper secondary qualification should reach 90% in 2025 in the EU. While improving, Early School Leaving from Education and Training remains higher in rural regions of Southern and Eastern countries (Simões 2022).

Figure 1 shows that: (a) in 2010, Portuguese cities and rural areas had considerably higher shares of early leavers from education and training when compared to the EU27; (b) by 2021, these rates had decreased significantly in Portugal standing below EU rates for both cities and rural areas; and (c) the declining trend remained from 2019 to 2020 and from 2020 to 2021, during the COVID-19 crisis.

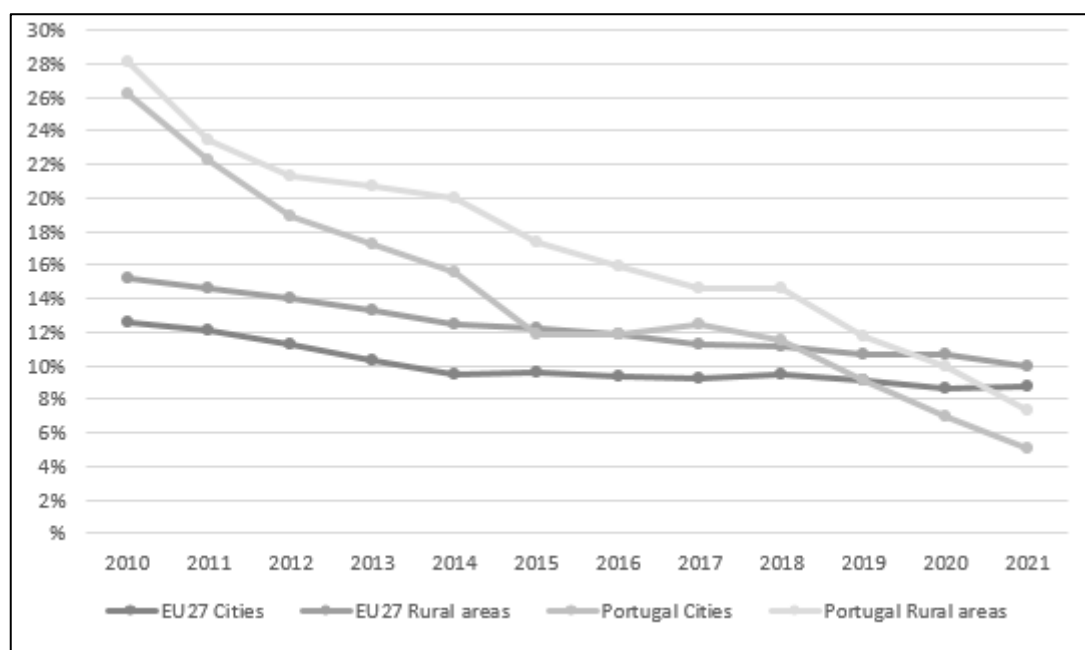


Figure 1. Early leavers from education and training (2010-2021) in EU 27 and Portugal (%), by degree of urbanization. Source:

Another relevant indicator included in the equal opportunities dimension of the EPSR scoreboard is the rate of young people Not in Employment nor in Education or Training (NEET). The acronym refers to the share of the population aged 15-29 who are not employed and not enrolled in education or training. This subset of young people constitutes, therefore, a very comprehensive descriptor of school to work transition processes. The breadth of this

category is, simultaneously, its major limitation. NEET youth constitute a very diverse group, covering different subgroups of unemployed youth (short-term and long-term) as well unavailable young people outside the labour market for different reasons (illness or physical/psychological incapacities, family care duties, feeling discouraged to find a job) (Mascherini 2019). The EU has set ambitious targets regarding the reduction of NEETs. According to the ESPR (EC 2021), it is expected that the share of young people in this condition has been reduced to at least 9% by 2030 in the EU. Again, rural areas of Southern and Eastern countries are more affected by higher shares of NEETs (Simões 2022).

Following our analyses, Figure 2 shows that: (a) the NEET rate peaked for all levels of analysis between 2012 and 2013, before a steady decline until 2019, with the exception of Portuguese rural areas, where in 2015 one can find a slight increase of the NEET share; (b) from 2019 to 2020, the NEET share increased for all levels of analysis, reflecting the first impact of the pandemic; and (c) the rates of NEET declined, again, from 2020 to 2021, to pre-pandemic levels, in all levels of analysis.

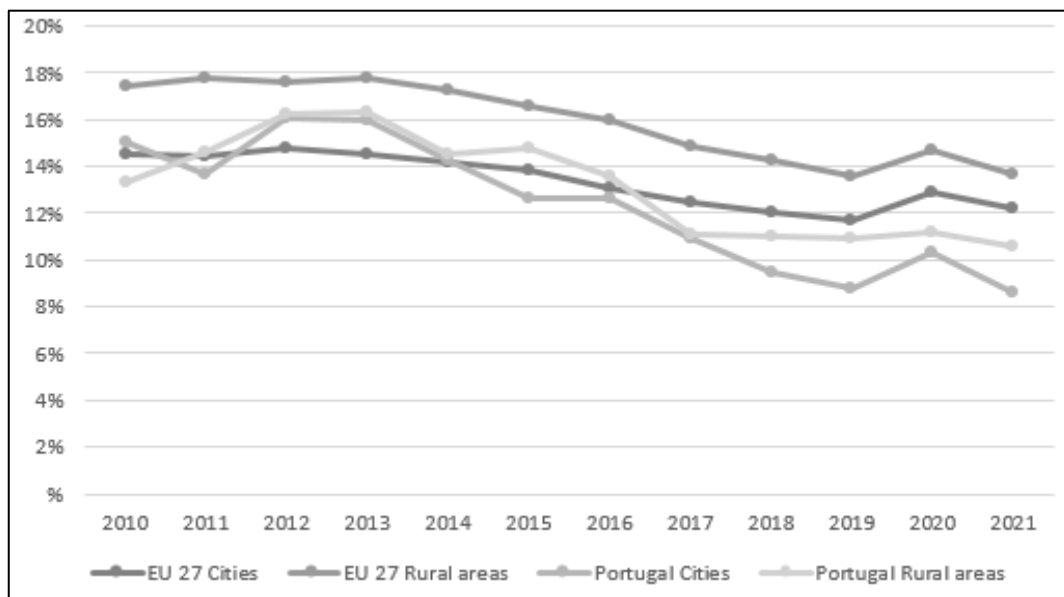


Figure 2. Young people neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET) (2010-2021) in EU 27 and Portugal (%), by age (15 to 29 years) and degree of urbanisation. Source:

#### 4.2. Fair working conditions: youth (un)employment

A second dimension of the EPSR is dedicated to fair working conditions. This dimension includes a series of indicators covering the balance between flexibility and security to facilitate

job creation, job take-up, adaptability of firms, and promotion of social dialogue (EC 2021). One relevant indicator of this EPSR dimension is youth unemployment. Youth unemployment is calculated by dividing the number of unemployed persons aged 15 to 24 by the total active population of the same age group. This indicator is meaningful for our approach because young people have twice the risk of being unemployed when compared to the adult workforce (ILO 2019, 2020). The EU's ambitions to reduce Youth Unemployment are embedded in the targets of the ESPR Action Plan (EC 2021). It is expected that at least 78% of people aged 20-64 are employed by 2030 within the EU.

According to Figure 3, we can see that: (a) youth unemployment rates peaked in 2012 and 2013 across the different levels of analysis; (b) from then to 2019, youth unemployment rates consistently declined except for Portuguese rural areas, with an increase from 2014 to 2015; (c) youth unemployment has been increasing both in Portuguese cities and in rural areas, after the COVID-19 breakthrough, contrary to EU cities and rural areas, where after an increase from 2019 to 2020, youth unemployment shares slightly declined; and (d) youth unemployment in Portuguese cities and rural areas have consistently been above the EU cities and rural areas figures, although differences were bigger immediately after the 2008 crisis (2012 to 2016).

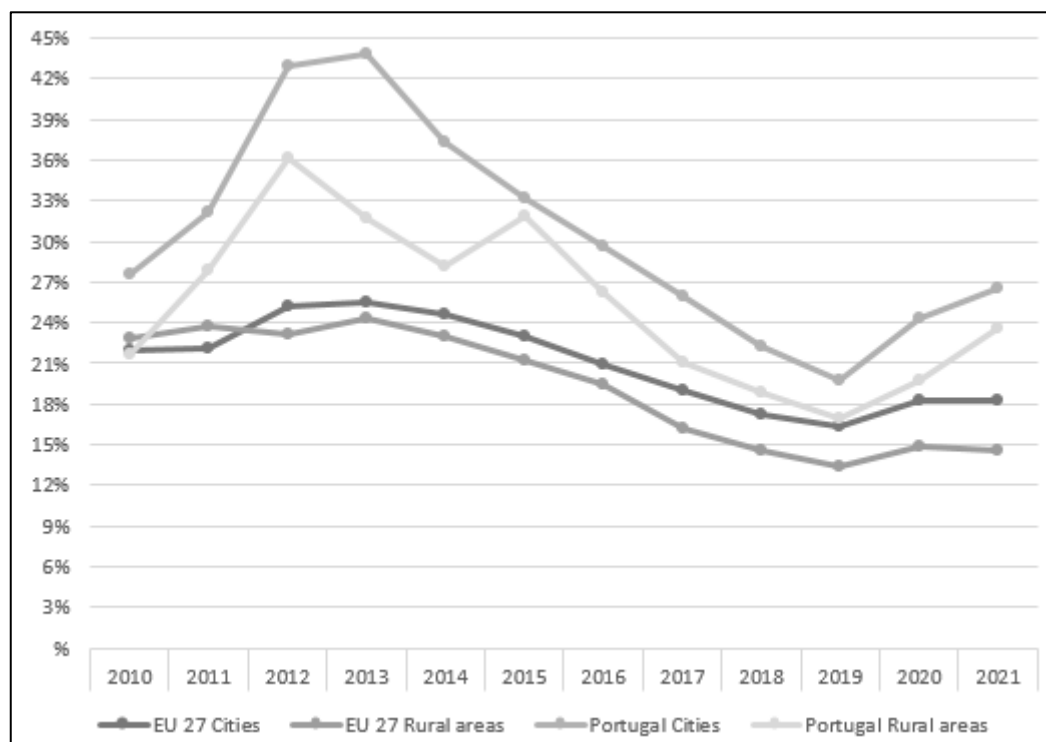


Figure 3. Youth Unemployment (age group 15-24) (2010-2021) in EU 27 and Portugal (%), by degree of urbanisation: Source:

Youth unemployment analysis must be balanced with a consideration of how employment rates have evolved across different Portuguese territories. Under the second dimension of the EPSR we have also considered the employment rates of those aged 15 to 39 years old by the selected levels of analysis. Youth employment refers to the percentage of employed persons in relation to the comparable total population. The consideration of this indicator is particularly meaningful for our work because young people have twice the risk of becoming unemployed when compared to adults as well as a higher risk of becoming a NEET in rural areas compared to cities, especially in Southern European countries (Simões 2022). According to Figure 4 we can see that: (a) employment rates dropped to a minimum in 2013 across all levels of analysis; (b) from then to 2018 employment rates grew steadily, except for Portuguese rural areas from 2015 to 2016; (c) after 2018 in Portuguese rural areas and 2019 in Portuguese cities, employment rates decreased considerably, meaning that the gap to the European average rates has increased, only with a slight recover in 2021 for Portuguese rural areas; and (d) except for 2010 and 2018, Portuguese rural areas have always shown lower employment rates than EU27 rural areas since 2010.

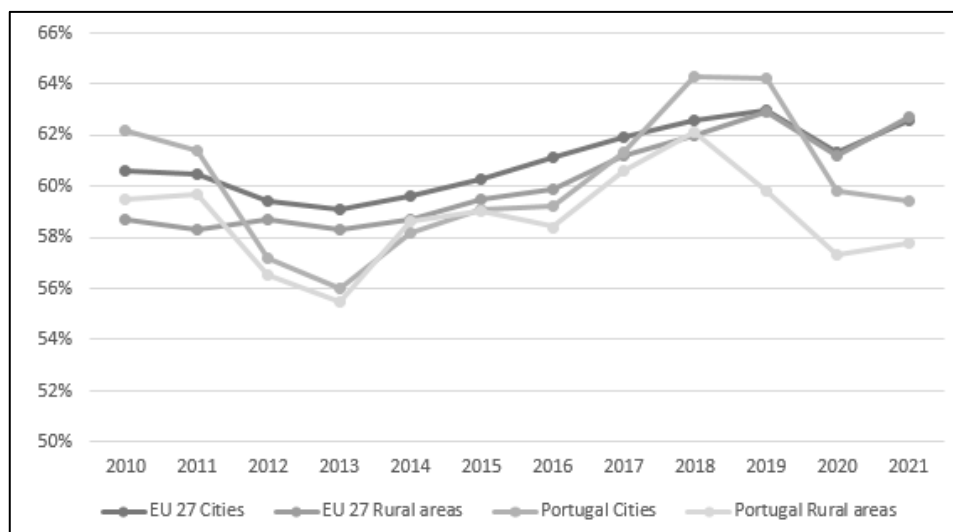


Figure 4. Employment rates (age group 15-39) (2010-2021) in EU 27 and Portugal (%), and degree of urbanisation. Source:

#### 4.3. Social protection: poverty, social exclusion and health needs

A third dimension of the EPSR covers social protection and inclusion. This dimension describes access to health, social protection benefits, and high-quality services, including childcare, healthcare, and long-term care, which are essential to ensure dignified living and

protection against life's risks (EC 2021). One key indicator at this level is the share of People at Risk of Poverty and Social Exclusion. This indicator combines three components, namely the at-risk-of-poverty indicator, persons living in households with very low work intensity indicator and the severe material and social deprivation rate. This is, thus, a pivotal statistical source to understand how life conditions evolve in EU countries. The target for 2030 set by EPSR is that the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion is reduced by at least 15 million, including at least 5 million children, compared to 2019 (EC 2021). Figure 4 depicts the evolution of the share of People at Risk of Poverty and Social Exclusion in EU and Portuguese cities and rural areas. The available data covers a shorter period (starting in 2015) and does not specifically focus on the youth population. Still, it is important to understand the existing trends by the selected levels of analysis, as this may add to our discussion. One can conclude that: (a) the risk of being in poverty or socially excluded has decreased for all levels, except for Portuguese rural areas, where it remains the same in 2021 compared 2015; (b) in both Portuguese cities and rural areas, such risk has increased during the COVID-19 crisis, from 2020 to 2021; and (c) the gap between Portuguese cities and rural areas in this indicator has become more evident over the years.

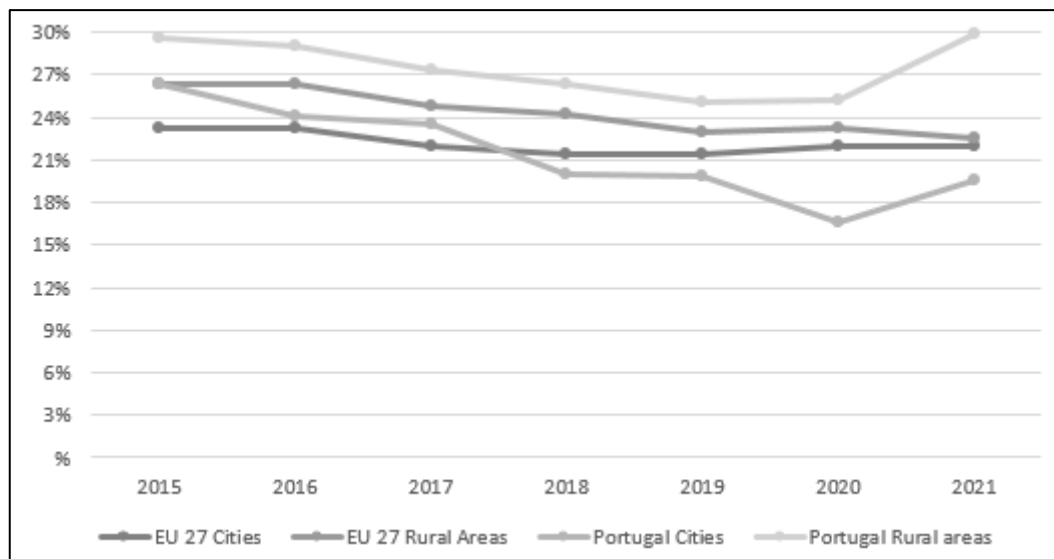


Figure 5. Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion (2015-2021) in EU 27 and Portugal (%), by degree of urbanization. Source:

In the context of the third ESPR pillar, we have examined a second indicator, the self-reported unmet needs for medical care in the age group 16 to 29. This indicator refers to a



person's own assessment of whether he or she needed a medical examination or treatment. Here, an assessment of unmet medical needs translates into being too expensive, involving long-distance travel, or being put on a waiting list. According to the EPSR action plan, everyone has the right to access affordable, preventive, curative, and good-quality healthcare (EC 2021). Although daily life returned to normal, COVID-19 continues to impact healthcare (e.g., operations and treatments were canceled or delayed, and staff has been redeployed) (Eurostat, 2022). Traditionally, rural areas stand out for their lower social inclusion (Mauritti et al. 2022) so this line of inquiry must also be accounted for our purposes. Figure 6 shows that for this indicator: (a) EU27 rates have been slowly improving from 2013 and 2014 until 2020, while the Portuguese figure in cities and rural areas are much more inconsistent; (b) between 2011 and 2014 unmet needs raised significantly in Portugal, especially in rural areas reaching the peak in 2014; (c) from 2020 to 2021 perceived levels of unmet medical care needs have increased in all levels of analysis with special prominence for Portuguese rural areas.

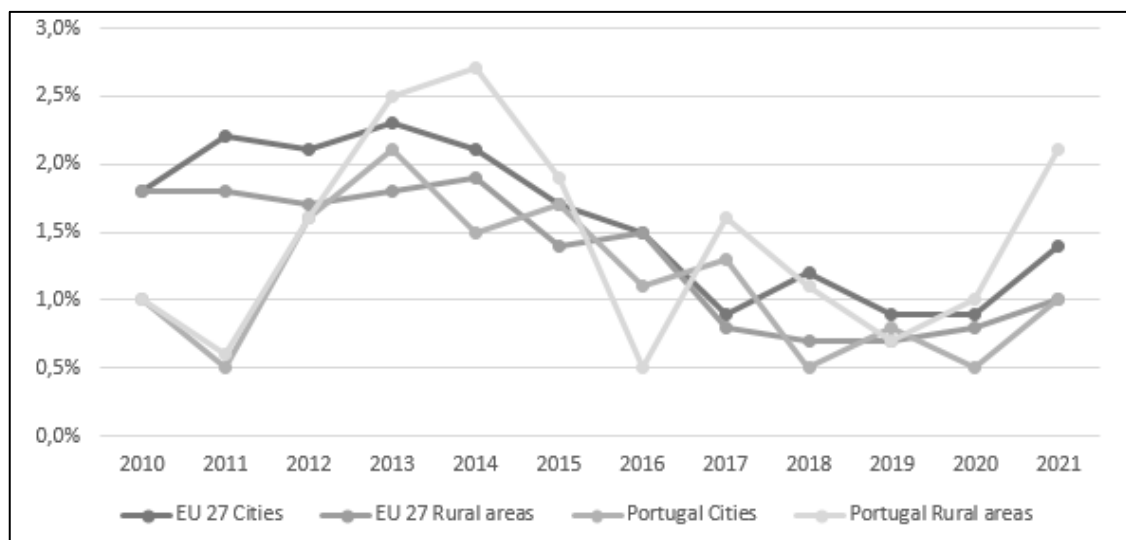


Figure 6. Self-reported unmet need for medical care (age group 16-29) (2010-2020) in EU 27 and Portugal (%), by degree of urbanisation. Source:

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter we seek to address three interconnected claims. Firstly, there is an overall demand among scholars to expand the knowledge about younger generations' social inequalities in rural territories. Secondly, there is a specific need to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on younger generations' life conditions in rural territories. Thirdly,

this understanding is especially required in those countries showing more striking asymmetries between rural and urban areas such as Portugal. To deliver these contributions, the analysis aimed at covering COVID-19 implications for Portuguese rural young people's education, employment, and social inclusion, based on general indicators of the EPSR.

The first finding is that education attainment seems less impacted by the effects of the pandemic. This conclusion might, however, be deceiving. There is, indeed, a decrease in the share of Early School Leavers from Education and Training in Portuguese rural regions in line with the trends for Portuguese cities and EU cities and rural areas. This trajectory continued even during the pandemic years. These results are in line with other findings showing that secondary education attainment in Portuguese rural areas has consistently improved for the past decade (Garcia et al. in press). Importantly, these trends contradict the dominant pessimistic narrative spread about rural education outcomes. The existing research overemphasizes that rural schools often lead to worse educational outcomes due to a combination of infrastructural limitations with curricula disconnected from local values and priorities (Bæk 2016). The impressive and continued improvement of secondary school attainment in rural Portugal does tell another story. However, considering the massive school shutdowns during the pandemic period all over Portugal, it is still uncertain how school attainment during these years will translate into actual learning and skills development in the long term (Vieira and Ribeiro 2022), including for students in Portuguese rural areas.

In turn, the transition from school to work processes described by NEET shares pinpoints pre-existing concerns. Although NEET shares in Portuguese urban and rural areas are below the average EU rates, the share of NEETs in Portuguese rural areas has increased during the first year of the COVID-19 crisis and is declining slower compared to the share of NEETs in Portuguese urban areas. The slower decrease of NEET shares in Portuguese rural areas stems mainly from the composition of the rural young people population in terms of educational attainment and prospects. After completing secondary education, the most academic-minded rural young people, especially women, move to cities looking for improving their educational and professional status (Theodori and Theodori 2015; Weiss et al. 2021). On the contrary, those staying are mostly less-academic-minded men, accumulating several experiences of school failure and without the financial resources to move out (Farrugia 2016). The limited offer of personalized counselling services by public employment services or the lack of curricula matching young people's interests (e.g., adequate vocational education and training programs) justify, in part, these unsuccessful educational pathways that complicate labour market integration in these regions (Simões and Rio 2020). Subsequently, the knowledge and skills of

those remaining in rural areas are often mismatched with the local economic opportunities (Simões 2018). Therefore, the odds of these youths being trapped in precariousness, longer unemployment spells and, therefore, in a NEET situation driven by lower or inadequate education are much higher. These risks already existed before the COVID-19 crisis and will continue to press local institutions and decision-makers in forthcoming years.

The COVID-19 crisis impact on Portuguese rural young people's employment prospects is much more severe. Youth unemployment in Portuguese rural territories has kept rising from 2019 to 2020 and from 2020 to 2021 while stabilizing in Portuguese cities. In parallel, employment among those aged 15 to 39 in Portuguese rural areas is the lowest across all the selected levels of analysis and it has not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. Overall, there was a quick reaction from governments in implementing a wide range of generous measures to stabilize employment and income in the EU countries. This included reimbursing firms for payroll costs to preserve employment, the reinforcement of unemployment insurance systems, or the provision of income relief for vulnerable families, with different combinations of these measures being adopted across countries (Eurofound 2021; ILO 2022). Still, it must be considered that the generous financial support provided by States in EU countries was unequal across States and within countries. For instance, Portugal was among those countries spending less on measures to mitigate the negative effects of COVID-19. Moreover, these policies often failed to reach out to the most disadvantaged youth, including those living in more remote areas (ILO 2022). This is a serious caveat of public policies, considering the continuous decline of rural economies, often dependent on family-owned businesses in the farming sector (Simões et al. 2021), or the ongoing dismantling of industrial capacity in these territories (Zipin et al. 2015), which contributes to territorial exclusion rather than territorial cohesion trends (Medeiros, 2016). As a result, the labor market structure offers a limited number of job opportunities to young people (Cefalo and Scandurra, 2021; Dayram et al, 2020), especially in Southern countries such as Portugal. Furthermore, the sudden booming of industries in sectors such as tourism has been observed in the Portuguese context, but seldom provides rural communities and their young generations sustainable job prospects (Diaz-Serrano and Nilsson 2020; Ferrão et al., 2023).

Finally, the COVID-19 crisis coincided with a deterioration of social inclusion perspectives among Portuguese young people, especially among rural young people, according to the EPSR social protection and inclusion indicators that we have selected. The risks of being in poverty or socially excluded have slowly decreased across all levels of analysis until 2019, with slight increases from 2019 to 2020. However, from 2020 to 2021, while the figures

remained stable for the EU levels included in the analysis, in the Portuguese cities and rural areas, the share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion increased very significantly. More importantly, the gap between Portuguese rural areas and cities has been growing. While these results must be interpreted with caution because they are not age-specific they still highlight an alarming trend. Moreover, and while reports are very inconsistent for the past decade, it is important to mention that self-reported unmet medical care among young people has been increasing in Portuguese rural areas since 2019 and has clearly exceeded the rates for EU levels and Portuguese cities. The mounting risks of social exclusion for younger rural generations in Portugal cannot be disassociated from the overall functional dismantling of public services across Portuguese rural areas. Young people's social inclusion is threatened by the lack of infrastructure and lower coverage of their educational, employment, social, and health needs. As we have mentioned before, this dilapidation of public services capacity has been politically justified by low demand from populations and is evident in the education and healthcare sectors, but also in local administration (Ferrão et al., 2023; Mauritti et al., 2022). The side-effects of this political orientation come in the form of worst levels of quality-of-life, regions' incapacity to attract and retain younger generations, especially the most educated and innovative ones, and worrisome levels of mistrust in institutions (Simões 2022).

### 5.1. Implications for research and policy

Our analysis indicates that Portuguese rural young people are struggling more than their counterparts in Portuguese cities, EU rural areas and EU cities, especially in terms of employment and social inclusion. However, we believe our efforts constitute a mere overview of the impact of COVID-19 for young people living in vulnerable regions. Rural areas are very diverse across Portugal and EU countries, ranging from mountain areas to islands and outermost archipelagos or inlands in border regions. This variety of territorial realities shapes young people's choices in terms of education, employment, or mobility in very different ways. Therefore, using more refined spatial concepts such as the contrast between low-density and high-density will certainly add layers and detail to the discussion of how COVID-19 has impacted young people in more remote and vulnerable territories, and thus affected territorial cohesion trends at the national level.

We believe our work further adds to the claim that the subnational/regional level of analysis must be streamered into the design and implementation of youth-oriented policies (e.g., Cefalo et al. 2020). One would expect that a subnational lens would be adopted by decision-

makers when defining guidelines to mitigate the COVID-19 collateral effects for young people. That is not, unfortunately, the case. Some reports (e.g., ILO 2022) clearly show that young people, as well as the most vulnerable young people groups, such as those living in peripheric areas, were often neglected by States when delivering mitigation measures. More importantly, the major EU policy instruments aimed at tackling the COVID-19 crisis effects, such as the Recovery and Resilience Framework, and more specifically the national Resilience and Recovery Plans from European Southern countries consistently overlook the need to nuance expected reforms and investments active labour market policies to the needs of different territories (Simões 2022).

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