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Chapter 1

Rural NEETs: Individual Features, Challenges, and Opportunities



Francisco Simões

Abstract In this chapter, I present and discuss the main individual features of rural young people Not in Employment, nor in Education and Training (NEET) living in rural areas. These characteristics fit in the so-called individual system of the bioecological model. I start out by depicting rural NEETs educational background and gender differences within this subset of NEETs, due to their importance in shaping these young people's pathways. Afterward, I elaborate on what is known to date about rural NEETs psychological profile, particularly regarding their cognitive skills, soft skills, and well-being. Finally, I will explore how these personal characteristics of rural NEETs may interact with emerging challenges and opportunities in rural communities located at other layers of the bioecological model. This chapter strongly relies on several contributions from the COST Action Rural NEET Youth Network, as well as on the most relevant international scholarship and policy reports focusing on rural communities' development, youth employment, and school-to-work transition, to achieve an interdisciplinary understanding of rural NEETs individual traits and features.

Keywords NEETs · Rurality · Educational background · Gender · Cognitive skills · Well-being

1.1 Introduction

Young people Not in Employment, nor in Education or Training (NEET) constitute a controversial social category. Since the seminal work by Furlong (2006), the NEET definition has been targeted for being mostly a statistical tool combining young people with very different educational, social, or economic backgrounds under the same label. Meanwhile, the concern with this group diversity has spread across research efforts dedicated to identifying distinct subgroups of NEETs or the multiple

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pathways that these young people trail in the transition from school to work. More recently, drawing on previous efforts brought forward by the Eurofound (2012), Mascherini (2019) has developed a NEETs typology departing from these young people's work status. Specifically, Mascherini proposes that one can distinguish between re-entrants, short-term and long-term unemployed NEETs, inactive NEETs due to multiple reasons such as family care, and physical or mental health issues, and voluntary NEETs who are in this condition based on personal options such as traveling or taking a sabbatical year.

Despite the justified concerns with its homogenization drive, it is important to acknowledge that the NEET notion has helped to demonstrate the tremendous social and economic losses associated with being in this condition. Indeed, states, communities, families, and, above all, young people are faced with an overwhelming social and economic burden of becoming and remaining in the NEET status (Eurofound, 2012). Consequently, for the past decade, European Union countries have coordinated their policy response to systematically address high shares of NEETs, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, under the Youth Guarantee framework (Tosun et al., 2019). Alongside, several empirical and policy reports established the ever-increasing risks associated with the NEET condition, as the shift from the role of student to the role of worker became longer (Pastore et al., 2021), more uncertain (Schoon, 2020) and detached from institutional support (Cuzzocrea, 2020).

A more nuanced understanding of these young people's experiences and developmental paths, one that duly informs policies and interventions and goes beyond their educational or work status, is still pretty much missing. One important add-on to a more refined research agenda in this field consists in examining the intersection between the NEET status with spatialities. Overall, younger generations living in urban, suburban, and rural areas navigate along disparate socioeconomic challenges and opportunities. There is mounting evidence, however, showing that territorial disparities at the subnational level are growing, with strong and more negative implications for school-to-work transition (Schoon, 2020), youth employment (Cefalo & Scandurra, 2021), and NEETs living in less affluent areas (Simões et al., 2022). Furthermore, the official statistics confirm the need to combine geolocation with the NEET status to improve the on-the-ground policy response. While there was a significant decrease in rural NEETs shares for the past decade across the European continent, rural NEET shares remained as one dimension of the structural divide between more and less affluent areas, but also a key element of the North/South or East/West asymmetries affecting the European Union (Simões, 2022). According to Fig. 1.1, in 2020, NEET rates were higher in rural areas (18.80%) compared with suburban (14.40%) and urban areas (16.00%). This trend was evident in 13 out of 27 EU countries. More importantly, however, this difference was remarkable in Southern (e.g., Greece) and Eastern European countries (e.g., Hungary and Romania)—by 10, 15, or even 20 percentual points (Eurostat, 2021).

Bearing in mind both the academic discussions as well as the statistical trends, in this chapter I focus on describing the individual features of rural NEETs. My effort fits into the most concentric level of the bioecological model, the theoretical

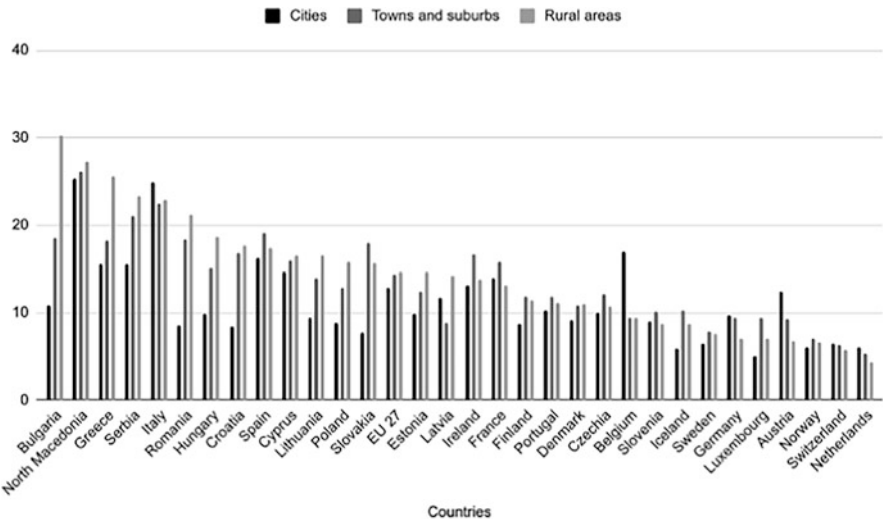


Fig. 1.1 NEET share by the degree of urbanization in European countries (%). Source: Eurostat—Labour Force Survey [EDAT_LFSE_29]; data extraction on 27.01.23; Notes: Countries excluded had no data for rural areas (e.g., Malta); the estimates for 2021 were still not definitive for most of the countries

framework inspiring the Rural NEET Youth Network mission to develop a more systematic understanding of this group of young people. According to the bioecological model, the individual level encompasses the organic-hereditary traits as well as psychological traits, including skills and behaviors (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Following this theoretical stance, I will depict rural NEETs core features in terms of educational background and gender differences, before elaborating on what is known to date about their psychological profile. Finally, I will discuss how these personal characteristics of rural NEETs may interact with emerging challenges and opportunities in rural communities. To fulfill my aim, I will strongly rely on several contributions from the Rural NEET Youth Network, as well as on the most relevant international scholarship and policy reports focusing on rural communities’ development, youth employment, and school-to-work transition, in order to achieve an interdisciplinary understanding of rural NEETs.

1.2 Who Are Rural NEETs?

1.2.1 Low Educational Status: A Key Risk for Becoming a Rural NEET

International research efforts have long established that students in remote, less affluent, and mostly rural areas struggle to excel in education. There are, indeed, a

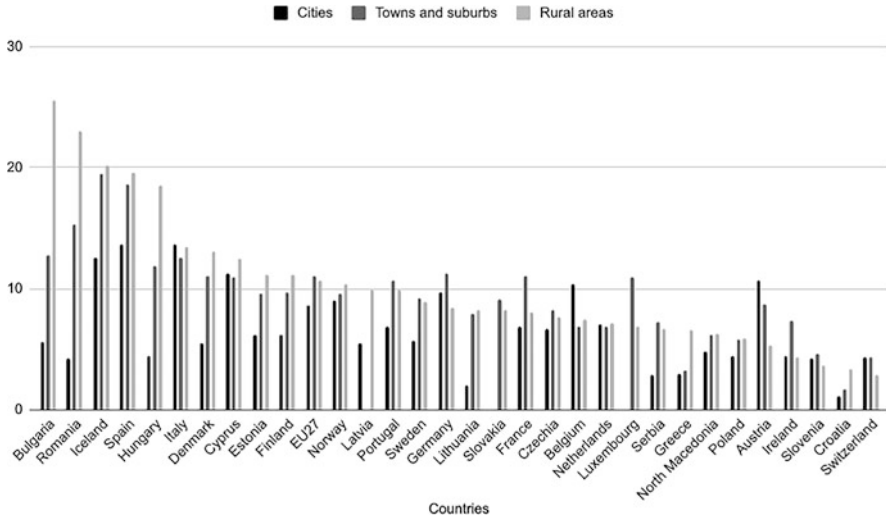


Fig. 1.2 Early School Leaving from Education and Training by the degree of urbanization across European Countries and the EU, in 2020 (%). Source: Eurostat—Labour Force Survey [EDAT_LFSE_30]; data extraction on 24.01.23; Notes: Countries excluded had no data for rural areas (e.g., Malta) or for all levels of urbanization (e.g., Latvia); the data available for 2021 was still not definitive for most of the countries

few reports (e.g., Bæck, 2016) showing that rural students' results are usually outperformed by the results of their counterparts attending schools located in suburban and urban areas.

For instance, in secondary education, rural students' poorer performance often translates into higher dropout rates (Bæck, 2016). The same applies to other indicators. Figure 1.2 summarizes the Early School Leaving from Education and Training rates by the degree of urbanization, in 2020, across several European countries. The graphic display shows how this pivotal indicator of the school-to-work transition is worse, overall, in the EU27 rural areas. This trend was evident in 21 out of the 30 countries included in the analysis. Several social and structural reasons have been put forward to explain these territorial disparities in educational outcomes.

At the social level, rural areas present larger socioeconomic inequalities, meaning that a more significant part of the population is in greater material, social and cultural privation (Bæck, 2016). Therefore, students originating in more vulnerable rural households have more limited access to symbolic, cultural, or technological artifacts, such as books or computers (Simões et al., 2022). Moreover, the educational expectations of socioeconomically disadvantaged rural parents regarding their children, as well as their involvement in school are lower, especially when compared to the smaller proportion of rural parents who have privileged access to resources (Bæck, 2016). Such inequalities are further stretched by a frequent mismatch between school values and rural communities' worldviews. Schools position the

future of young generations in affluent territories, such as cities, contrary to the prevalent traditional norms and values of rural communities (Simões et al., 2021).

The risk of rural students' educational underperformance affecting NEETs is further extended by structural factors, beginning with the on-the-ground infrastructure. Schools in low-density territories, such as rural areas, mountain regions, or border regions are often far from students' homes or at perennial risk of being shut down (Bæk, 2016). Rural students' learning and school attainment are also limited by greater resource shortages (Sullivan et al., 2013), although this caveat also treathens, for instance, schools in suburban areas (Silva & Abrantes, 2017). Moreover, the quality and retention of teachers in rural areas are lower with a strong potential to negatively affect school results (Reagan et al., 2019). Having a permanent contract means teachers face fewer mobility problems and can be more committed to their students in the long run. Lower teacher retention rates are further complicated by greater challenges inherent to the school-parent relationship, due to these communities' close social ties and bigger potential for clashes between parents' and schools' worldviews (Bæk, 2016).

There is, however, a consensus forming that rural students' educational results would benefit from a more granular analysis and stronger causal interpretation (e.g., Bæk, 2016). Missing a more systematic examination of rural education outcomes may lead to an unnecessary and deceiving fatalistic narrative about rural education. For instance, while urban/rural gaps in early school leaving from education and training rates are quite big in some Eastern and Southern countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, or Spain, these disparities are much smaller in several countries across the continent. Concurrently, territorial disparities in education by the degree of urbanization are becoming less straightforward. For instance, some urban and suburban areas, such as the suburban belts of major cities, do display growingly worrisome educational outcomes. As Silva and Abrantes (2017) point out, many high-density, suburban areas have become more diverse from a cultural point of view, but also more socially vulnerable. These communities often rely on public services and programs instead of extended families for accessing services such as education, but also to find social and instrumental support. Subsequently, educational programs struggle to respond to students' growing diverse backgrounds, with negative impacts on school outcomes. In sum, a true spatialized approach to the educational risks of becoming and remaining NEETs must consider the dynamic changes in local, subnational, and cross-national trends that come to affect school population composition and the subsequent allocation of resources.

1.2.2 Gender and Educational Status: A Decisive Intersection for Rural NEETs

Educational attainment has distinct implications for rural young men and women. Specifically, the intersection between education performance and gender influences

the odds of becoming a rural NEET through processes such as spatial mobilities or education and professional expectations.

Prior reports have shown that women are overrepresented in rural youth out-migration fluxes (Farrugia, 2016; Leibert, 2016). Compared to rural young men, rural young women show greater educational aspirations and display higher professional expectations that drive them to move to more affluent suburban and urban areas, seeking a university degree as well as more qualified and well-paid jobs. Consequently, rural female NEETs are mostly the less educated women who opt to stay or who do not have enough financial resources to leave. These women are more likely to be dedicated to family care duties and, consequently, face a greater risk of remaining for larger periods in a NEET condition (Mascherini, 2019; Sadler et al., 2015). Moreover, the rural labour markets offer chiefly male-dominated jobs in agriculture or small industries (Leibert, 2016). Traditional gender stereotypes which are more prevalent in rural areas limit even further women's professional fulfillment outside the household (Farrugia, 2016). Rural women face, thus, a greater danger of being inactive NEETs, meaning that they are among those struggling the most to return to the job market (Mascherini, 2019).

The gloomy prospects for rural female NEETs do not mean that rural young men are outshining in the school-to-work transition. To begin with, young men are staying or establishing themselves in many European rural areas in disproportionately higher numbers (Leibert, 2016). This puts them competing for mostly low-qualified, temporary, and very precarious jobs in a narrow rural economy dominated by sectors such as agriculture (Almeida & Simões, 2020). They have, therefore, a higher chance of being in and out, but also for longer periods in the NEET category as short-term or long-term unemployed (Mascherini, 2019). Despite the mounting disadvantage resulting from these vulnerable professional trajectories, young men tend to adjust to this situation. Low-paid, precarious jobs are accepted as a fatality, and being aware of the local labor market conditions may even make them feel more competent (Almeida & Simões, 2020).

1.2.3 Rural NEETs Self-Perceptions: Cognitive Skills, Soft Skills, and Well-Being

In recent years, there is a body of literature that has started to examine the psychological features of NEETs such as their mental health (Simões et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the psychological profiling of rural NEETs is limited to only a few papers coming out from research projects conducted in Portugal (Simões et al., 2017; Almeida & Simões, 2020) and Italy (Ellena et al., 2021). As Schoon (2020) rightly states, the understanding of the school-to-work transition is, nevertheless, incomplete if the role of psychological factors is not added to the influence of social and structural factors shaping this vital dimension of becoming an adult.

One domain in which the psychological functioning of emergent adults is key for tailoring school-to-work transition is the modeling of vocational and professional choices. Two main mechanisms guide these choices. The first one, circumscription, corresponds to a definition of vocational preferences across childhood and adolescence, resulting in a delimitation of acceptable future professional alternatives. The second one, compromise, consists of personal investment in some areas seen as more realistic and accessible in the transition to adulthood. This individual adjustment results in dropping-out occupational preferences considered aspirational or idealistic, in a process fuelled by multiple individual (e.g., gender stereotypes) or contextual (e.g., economic hardship) factors (Gottfredson, 2002).

The circumscription and compromise mechanisms mobilize a comprehensive set of cognitive skills to clarify vocational and professional choices. Among them are metacognitive and planning skills such as self-efficacy, defined as personal beliefs that one can be successful by generating the desired outcomes for a determined task (Bandura, 1997), outcome expectations, referring to judgments limited to the most likely or realistic consequences of a certain behavior (Beal & Crockett, 2010), as well as perceived barriers, composed of current or future constraints to vocational development identified by individuals, as opposed to objective barriers such as educational level or income (Lent et al., 2000). Alongside metacognitive and planning skills, future-time cognitions also play an important role in shaping vocational decisions, with hope being one of them. Hope is a bi-dimensional psychological attribute encompassing the perceived capacity to achieve goals also known as pathways and a successful sense of goal-directed energy labeled as agency (Snyder, 2000). Overall, vulnerable emergent adults such as NEETs show lower educational qualifications, face more recurrent and longer unemployment spells, lack access to quality education, vocational guidance, and consistent professional experiences, denote a lower self-efficacy (Mortimer et al., 2016), perceive more barriers to find a job or to secure a contract (Messersmith & Schulenberg, 2008), and downgrade their professional expectations, as they anticipate to find less-qualified, lower paid jobs (Diemer et al., 2010).

A few studies have tried to untangle the factors associated with rural NEETs metacognitive and strategic planning skills (Simões et al., 2017; Almeida & Simões, 2020). These reports demonstrate how employment-related factors are key in shaping this group's psychological features. Greater stability in terms of having secured at least one job contract strengthens self-efficacy perceptions, contrary to longer unemployment spells (>24 months). Interestingly, though, greater self-efficacy among rural NEETs is also associated with lower independence levels, measured by living in the parental household. While this result is counterintuitive (more independence is usually associated with stronger self-efficacy beliefs), living in the parental household seems to be a proxy measure for mutual social support. Parental support, whether emotional, instrumental, or both, can help children feel more confident in their own abilities during the transition to adulthood. In parallel, these children in a NEET condition, such as females involved in caregiving tasks or males frequently engaged in unreported work, including small family businesses may more easily enact their own skills in the family context, thus demonstrating to themselves

their personal abilities. Family can, thus, constitute the most immediate if not the only social context in which rural NEETs can demonstrate their skills (Simões et al., 2017), an interpretation that is aligned with the reported high levels of mutual informal support in rural areas (Simões et al., 2022).

According to the existent reports, rural NEETs cognitive skills involved in vocational choices also entail lower professional and educational expectations. Specifically, rural NEETs who have completed lower-level secondary education are more skeptical about attaining higher levels of qualification and finding more complex and higher-paid jobs. Interestingly, however, those who attain secondary education see room for improving their qualifications, which may be informative for policymaking (Simões et al., 2017). These predominantly pessimistic expectations contrast with the generalized irrelevance of demographic—(e.g., gender) or employment-related (e.g., time of unemployment) factors in predicting rural NEETs perceived professional barriers (Simões et al., 2017). Subsequent research efforts confirm, however, that women perceive fewer barriers to entering the job market. More importantly, these perceptions are fine-tuned when demographic factors are combined with other metacognitive and planning skills. For instance, higher levels of self-efficacy among male rural NEETs are associated with stronger anticipation of barriers, while men depicting weaker self-efficacy also show weaker perceived barriers, compared with women in identical conditions (Almeida & Simões, 2020). This intersection between gender, self-efficacy, and perceived barriers levels reflects, to some extent, the stronger involvement in the rural job market of male NEETs. As they are repeatedly exposed to risks such as unemployment, precariousness, or low-paid jobs, these men also feel more competent to navigate this hardship (Almeida & Simões, 2020). Thus, adversity among male NEETs in rural areas tends to be incorporated into their cognitive apparatus, with these views about the labor market being further strengthened by strict vocational gender stereotypes that more often limit men to uncertain, low-qualified, and physically demanding jobs in these territories (Bæck, 2016).

The understanding of future-oriented cognitions in rural NEETs professional development is less detailed in the literature. To my knowledge, only one report focuses on understanding the factors influencing rural NEETs hope levels (Simões, [submitted](#)). This study adopts a bioecological lens to assess how hope levels evolved among rural NEETs for 12 months during the COVID-19 pandemic. One main finding stemming from this investigation is that only one factor at the individual system level—gender—is directly associated with hope levels. Specifically, female rural NEETs present a significantly worse evolution on both hope dimensions (pathways and agency) compared to men, after accounting for factors at the macrosystem (e.g., collectivism perceptions), the exosystem (e.g., public employment support) or the microsystem (e.g., informal social support) of the bioecological model. The same report delivers important insights regarding how the combination of work status (inactive vs. unemployed) with formal support provided by public employment services relates to agency levels. Indeed, while inactive NEETs' agency estimates increase due to an increment in public employment services' support, unemployed NEETs' estimates decrease over time to a point that they are below

inactive NEETs' agency rates at higher levels of public employment support. It is reasonable to assume that a larger digital coverage of these services during the COVID-19 pandemic improved outreaching inactive rural NEETs and nurturing their goal-seeking energy, particularly among female or disabled NEETs who are less likely to attend face-to-face meetings. In turn, during this period unemployed NEETs were struggling with the recent job loss, lockdowns, and the economic activity downturn. In other words, the perceived increasing support provided by public employment services was insufficient to promote goal-seeking energy among unemployed NEETs considering the complex economic environment (Eurofound, 2021).

Finally, at least one report has delved into the factors associated with the psychological well-being and soft skills of rural NEETs (Ellena et al., 2021). The first finding offered by this research piece was showing lower psychological well-being levels among women with lower qualifications, irrespectively of living in rural or urban areas. Female rural NEETs reported, however, worst psychological well-being compared to their urban counterparts. The accumulation of risks previously mentioned such as the high share of family caregivers that usually compose this group in rural areas (Sadler et al., 2015), the limited participation in the job market (Simões & Rio, 2020), but also the greater levels of social comparison in less affluent areas, leading to increased perceptions of failure (Ellena et al., 2021) jointly explain these outcomes. Similar results were found regarding soft skills self-assessment, with only one exception. Rural female NEETs with tertiary education living in rural areas presented a more positive vision of their skills, compared to female urban NEETs with an identical educational level. Although employment opportunities are scarcer in the countryside, these rural women may reason that their educational background is more unusual and therefore, more promising for securing a new job. They may also interpret that inactivity or unemployment are more transitory in rural areas than in cities, where job vacancies are more easily available, but intense professional competition can also raise more uncertainty when one assesses personal qualifications (Ellena et al., 2021).

1.3 Challenges Shaping the Individual Characteristics of Rural NEETs

What we know about rural NEETs individual characteristics is quite limited. Moreover, the available knowledge is expected to change in the years to come. New demographic, social, and economic trends are forming in rural spaces, proposing new challenges for younger generations, especially for the most vulnerable ones.

Rural NEETs are and will continue to be threatened by their invisibility. This specific group of NEETs is hard to be targeted by services and to be enrolled in on-the-ground active labor market policies (European Commission, 2018). This has implications for service deliverance in the employment and education domains.

In the employment domain, invisibility translates into limited capacity from public employment services to outreach to rural NEETs. According to Smoter (2022), outreach can be improved if public training and employment services are more effective in coordinating their actions with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) specialized in social and youth work. There is also the expectation that the growing digitalization of these services, particularly of public employment services, will expand the capacity of reaching out to NEETs in remote areas (European Commission, 2018). However, it is questionable that the digitization of services *per se* will effectively increase rural NEETs engagement with public officers. True digital transformation entails a full modification of organizational norms, values, and processes. Pilling up digital solutions on existing ill-analog processes will not result in better public digital encounters (Lindgren et al., 2019), nor it will immediately provide person-centered approaches tailored to young people facing very uncertain transitions from school to work. Therefore, the end goal of public employment services' digital transformation here is to find the right mix between analog support (e.g., street work, mentoring) and digital support, tailored to the characteristics of rural NEETs (Simões & Marta, 2024, in press). In any case, the serious challenges in targeting and engaging with rural NEETs constitute an important reminder that our knowledge of this group remains superficial.

Rural NEETs invisibility involves limited outreach, but also barriers to participation. This second layer of rural NEETs invisibility is particularly relevant in the education sector and can be defined as a generalized disregard for students' expectations, needs, and dreams when defining curricula or training programs, particularly for the most disadvantaged ones and who are, thus, at greater risk of becoming NEETs. As I have pointed out earlier, low education attainment represents a key risk shaping school-to-work transition in rural areas. While educational figures (e.g., early school leaving from education and training) are improving across European countries and regions, that improvement is slower in remote and predominantly rural areas (Simões, 2022). More importantly, it is uncertain, to say the least, that the education sector will succeed in better equipping young people in rural areas with the skills required by local job markets. Besides the limited on-the-ground physical infrastructure and the lower rates of teacher retention (Reagan et al., 2019), the curricula being offered in rural areas are limited, especially in the vocational education and training sector (Bettencourt et al., 2023). This results in failure from local educational authorities to address the existing demand for intermediate professionals (Bettencourt et al., 2023) as well as to match local economic opportunities with young people's employment needs (Simões & Rio, 2020).

Another foreseen challenge with impacts for rural NEET profiling is related to the side effects of a declining rural economy. The rural economy is overwhelmed by the dismantling of industrial capacity, and the consequent loss of trained and/or skilled human capital. This scenario leaves behind entire generations without the opportunity to learn and to be mentored by older professionals (Zipin et al., 2015). Moreover, agriculture remains a pivotal economic sector in the countryside, but not without problems. The sector is mostly an aging one, struggling to attract, and retain those outside the sector, including NEETs (Simões, 2018). There are exceptions to

this negative scenario, with some regions showing a vigorous services sector able to offer a considerable number of jobs, including for young women (Corbett, 2007). Others are managing to modernize agricultural activities through eco-agriculture and thereby increase their value (Simões & Rio, 2020). However, the path to a job in rural areas remains narrower and that must be accounted for when interpreting rural NEETs rates.

1.4 Opportunities Shaping the Future of Rural NEETs

There are also opportunities on the horizon for the most vulnerable rural young people. Altogether, these opportunities may contribute to a more diversified and qualified labor market, attracting local and non-local young people. One of these opportunities is associated with the changing nature of youth mobilities in rural territories. Out migration to urban areas will, certainly, continue to prevail, anchored on narratives of human potential that resume personal success in achieving high educational and professional standards (Farrugia, 2016; Simões et al., 2021). However, these onward movements of rural younger generations will more often overlap with circular or returning mobilities. This shift is mostly driven by other factors at the individual level, such as a sense of belongingness to a community or feeling attached to local culture and traditions, or greater appreciation for rural areas' quality of life, in terms of being in contact with nature or showing a preference for a more sustainable lifestyle (Silva et al., 2021; Simões et al., 2021). The figures do show that something is already changing in the demographic composition of rural younger generations (Simões et al., 2022). For the past decade, the share of European young people living in rural areas has marginally declined from 27.40% in 2011 to 26.34% in 2020. However, in some countries, such as Denmark (+18.74 pp), France (+129.48 pp), Italy (+73.80 pp), or Germany (29.20 pp), the share of rural young people has been swiftly increasing. However, in countries such as Estonia (−52.08 pp) and Poland (−35.22 pp), or in Southern countries, such as Greece (−50.37 pp) or Spain (−52.30 pp) we can observe the opposite trend (Eurostat, 2022).

The developments, driving forces, and implications of the new rural demographic trends changing the structure of the rural youth population require more attention from researchers and policymakers. However, they may already be reflecting with the transformative processes associated with the twin (digital and green) transition. The digital transition can respond to some of the listed challenges faced by rural young people. Upcoming digital solutions may, for instance, help to expand the coverage of welfare, education, and employment services, especially by improving reaching out strategies aimed at those that are harder to target by public services. This may represent a true means for engaging young people in relevant programs and interventions if these strategies are combined with the right kind of analog support, as I have already stressed (European Commission, 2018). The pace of dematerializing services can also be increased, raising the number of young people working remotely from the countryside in demanding, sophisticated, and well-paid

jobs (International Labor Organization, 2022). Still, accomplishing these opportunities must account for the need to improve young people's digital literacy, internet connectivity, and access to the most up-to-date equipment in rural areas (European Commission, 2018).

Alongside, the green transition will allow for an upgrade of farming activities, through innovation and greater use of digital tools. Moreover, farming is being increasingly combined with services to increase its economic value (e.g., ecotourism). At the same time, sustainability needs are increasingly emphasizing the importance of closer supply chains and local consumerism (Unay-Gaillard & Simões, 2021). Taken together, these changes can lead to a more diversified vocational education and training sector reflecting local opportunities and upholding more rewarding and decent jobs, as the green transition principles rely on all sustainability pillars (natural, social, and economic). Nevertheless, threats associated with intensive farming still expanding in many European countries must not be overseen, especially those that bring in young migrants, often through human trafficking networks, without any concern whatsoever for the welfare of these people or their social integration in local communities.

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter focused on describing the individual characteristics of rural NEETs. My effort focused, therefore, on detailing the features of the rural NEET individual system, the most concentric level of the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). I embarked on an exploration covering empirical and policy reports, always considering how factors operating at more external layers of the bioecological model (e.g., social support, official services) may shape individual characteristics of this vulnerable group.

The picture composed in the previous sections shows that rural NEETs constitute mostly an under-educated group, more often observed in Southern and Eastern European countries, who opt to stay in or lack the means to leave their communities in search for better opportunities. However, the experience of becoming and/or remaining in the NEET condition is quite different for women and men. Women are more often inactive NEETs dedicated to family care duties, seem to develop a more negative view of professional choices, and present worse well-being levels, especially when compared to urban female NEETs. Men are more often unemployed NEETs, combining over and again precariousness and unemployment spells in low-paid and low-skilled jobs, ending up accepting their professional circumstances as being normal.

1.5.1 New Research Developments

The body of research dedicated to rural NEETs psychological profiling is still limited in thematic and geographic scope. A whole research agenda on this area is needed, covering the following topics.

- **Comparing the individual and psychological features of rural and non-rural NEETs.** With only one exception (Ellena et al., 2021), the reports on rural NEETs do not follow a comparative effort to understand the specific features of NEETs living in different types of territories. This closer looker is required to better inform territorialized policies and interventions.
- **Diversifying the scope of psychological attributes included in new research efforts.** The analysis of psychological features of rural NEETs has focused mostly on their metacognitive skills. Knowing more about these psychological features is key to inform interventions aiming at improving school-to-work transition in rural areas. However, it is vital that psychological profiling of rural NEETs also covers mental health, well-being, or quality of life outcomes, considering this group's invisibility as well as the more limited access to social, economic, or cultural resources in the countryside.
- **Considering the intersection between gender and psychological features.** Although evidence is still scarce, it seems certain that female and male rural NEETs have very distinct educational and employment experiences. They also seem to interpret these experiences in disparate ways. Forthcoming research projects must systematically examine how women and men reason about these experiences, as both groups face specific risks that need to be addressed.

1.5.2 Policy Recommendations

Recommendations for policy development must be cautiously drafted considering the limited existing evidence about the individual profile of rural NEETs. Still, two lines of action seem relevant.

- **Improving outreach is urgent. Many rural NEETs remain invisible.** The combination of appropriate human-mediated or analogue support with digital tools may constitute a step forward. Investing in more mobile services, especially in more remote areas seems another step needed. Also improving the participation of young people in tailoring education and employment services is duly required. The absence of rural NEETs voices in the definition of programs and services constitutes a layer of their invisibility that seriously needs to be tackled.
- **On-the-ground programs must be gender sensitive.** The existing reports show that gender-blind interventions for rural NEETs will certainly constitute a waste of time and resources. Women will for sure benefit from measures such as more public-funded kindergartens vacancies or digital support from public

employment agencies, in case they want to find a job. Men, instead, are more likely to need support to improve their skills and qualifications to have access to more stable jobs. In any case, interventions must seek to fulfil person-centered approaches, always considering the striking individual differences between rural female and male NEETs.

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