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Activating aspirations: fostering creative and soft skills for rural NEETS in Central Portugal.

Abstract

This article focuses on young people not in employment or education in rural areas of Portugal. It highlights the specific vulnerability of this group, and its conceptual focus is underpinned by the debate between the capabilities approach and structural ramifications in the labour market. It presents a case study analysis based on an employability and social inclusion programme for young people in Central Portugal. The data analysis comprises documentary analysis, interviews with PES services and case workers, and 13 semi-structured interviews with young people. The discussion, which covers the views of programme participants' and stakeholders, deconstructs generalisations about the labour market and employment prospects for higher education graduates, taking the capabilities for education, work, voice and aspirations as analytical points. We argue that rural young people's employability may be enhanced by non-formal training that stimulates entrepreneurial and soft skills, and that service delivery should take mobility into account when planning interventions in rural areas.

Keywords:

Introduction

NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) functions as an umbrella-concept for the debate surrounding the conditions outlined in the acronym itself (International Labour Organisation 2015). This characterisation catches a significant number of individuals who meet this description. There are many versions of this debate. Different authors have shown that NEET status takes different forms. In other words, the characteristics that constitute being NEET may stem from either a temporary condition (such as occasional unemployment) or a permanent condition (such as lack of education or reduced work capacity) (Mascherini and Ledermaier 2016; Assmann and Broschinski 2021; Furlong 2006).

Individuals who are NEET may be considered in the general conceptual terms assumed here, but it is also necessary to examine nuances of NEET status that are specific to the

context. If we adopt a general overview of who the NEETs are in Europe, we may observe patterns and similarities across the EU. These patterns are regular in terms of both ages and types of locality in which they live (Eurostat 2022). However, NEET status is different forms in each country, and between rural and urban areas within them. The vulnerabilities arising from lack of education, employment, and training are clear, and data from research undertaken over the last decade support this scenario (Ferreira 2020). While the lack of education and training implies reduced employment opportunities and insecurity, formal educational qualifications do not necessarily rule out unemployment and lack of growth opportunities in certain geographical areas. Although Portugal lags behind other European countries in terms of numbers of those completing formal education, literacy rates and levels of educational attainment are improving all the time (Ferreira and Ribeiro 2021). However, the growth of qualifications does not translate into better employment opportunities for young graduates. In 2022, among employed Portuguese young adults aged 25 to 34 with higher education, 22.4% of were working in professions that were not in line with their levels of educational attainment, against 16.6% in 2011 (Sá et al. 2023). This overqualification results in an under-utilisation of acquired skills and is indicative of a potential mismatch between education and employment, a trend also noted in other European countries (Albert, Davia, and Legazpe 2021).

This realization does not diminish the fact that in addition to structural issues in the job market, access to and retention of employment also depend on various other factors (such as disposition, physical and mental health, and gender norms). Particularly in rural areas, factors such as mobility or lack of Internet access may be more challenging (Ferreira, Ellena, and Soler-Porta 2022; Mujčinović et al. 2021; Bernsen et al. 2022). This is true for the present study, which discusses employability for young Portuguese in rural areas, specifically focusing on those with higher education. Here we argue that formal education and high qualifications are not sufficient to address the reasons for the lack of opportunities for entry and continued employment. Navigating a job market that has not yet adapted to increasingly qualified resources requires maker and entrepreneurial skills that enable young people to forge their way in the world. Maker is here understood as the skill to be creative and to learn by doing autonomously, stressing teamwork, problem solving, knowledge sharing, networking, among others (Tabarés and Boni 2023). Based on a case study of a capacity building programme, this article is divided into the following sections:

- The Portuguese NEETs landscape
- The Capabilities Approach as a measure of meaningful educational intervention
- Methodology
- The NEETMAKER programme
- NEETs in the eyes of partners and mentors
- The impact of NEETMAKER on its participants
- Conclusions

The Portuguese NEET landscape

Official statistics count young people as NEETs if they meet the condition of being unemployed or inactive and have not received any formal or non-formal education or training in the previous four weeks (Eurostat 2022; International Labour Organisation 2015). Currently, NEET may include young people who are not in a vulnerable life situation or inactive at all, such as young people who are NEETs for a short time only or who are involved in other meaningful activities including caring responsibilities. Eurofound (Mascherini and Ledermaier 2016) emphasised several NEET risk factors such as health limitations, immigration and refugee background (Manhica et al. 2019), low educational attainment levels, low-income households, adolescents whose parents were unemployed, adolescents whose parents had low educational attainment levels, and adolescents with divorced parents. The NEET concept does not, however, include all young people in vulnerable situations, such as those in insecure or low-paid employment or short-term training programmes (Furlong 2006; Assmann and Broschinski 2021).

Several international studies indicate that **place of origin** was one of the most critical factors for different NEET trajectories, and that these were more frequent in rural areas. NEETs face additional challenges, including marginalization, lack of infrastructure, high dropout rates from school, high rates of unemployment, and the depopulation process, caused by migration of youth to urban areas for other reasons (Mujčinović et al. 2021; Simões et al. 2021). In 2022, according to Eurostat (Eurostat 2022), 11.7% of 15 to 29 year-olds in the EU were neither in employment nor in education and training. The percentage of 15- to 29-year-old NEETs in Portugal was around 9% for women and 8% for men, significantly lower than the EU average. However, the number of young NEETs

in Portugal was lower in cities (10.9%) and about the same level in towns and suburbs (12.2%), and rural areas (12.6%). This pattern of lower NEET rates in cities than in rural areas was repeated in 16 EU Member States and has been persistent through the last decade (Ferreira and Ribeiro 2021).

Rural areas have limitations in ensuring efficient support for young people (Simões 2018; Ferreira 2020). Institutional arrangements and practices in various fields (social affairs, health, education, and employment) that do not meet the needs of young people may be frustrating and make them give up on employment (Rikala 2020). Lack of access to the Internet may severely impact digital literacy and decrease remote job or distance learning opportunities (Ferreira, Ellena, and Soler-Porta 2022). Living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood increases the likelihood of becoming a NEET (Karyda 2020). Cajic-Seigneur and Hodgson (2016) stress that differences in the quality of provision of education in the district may increase inequalities experienced by young people in education or the labour market. Nevertheless, there is an ongoing discussion around the right to stay in rural areas, contradicting the mobility imperative and stressing how young people sometimes choose to stay for reasons of identity and wellbeing (Cook and Cuervo 2018; Foster and Jarman 2022).

During the pandemic several measures were made available for young NEETs living in rural areas, ranging from income support and help in finding a job to mental health initiatives. Several countries launched special emergency schemes: income support for young people, hiring subsidies to employers recruiting young people, new apprenticeship schemes, lower minimum social security contributions for young people (OECD 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic hit rural young NEETs hard, leading to additional challenges for those from disadvantaged backgrounds or marginalised communities. However, there were practically no policy measures targeted directly to young NEETs living in rural areas during the COVID pandemic. Their issues are mainly covered by youth activation schemes and employment policies, hiring subsidies, strengthening employment services for young people and expanding mental health services (Brazienė 2021). In Portugal, the main policy in the field of youth employment is the Youth Guarantee, present in other countries, which in Portugal comprises apprenticeships, internships, direct support to companies and entrepreneurship. However, the Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan has been criticised for not dealing with socio-spatial inequalities when applied, due to the existence of casual or ‘flexible’ labour and crisis-prone environments (Emmanouil et al.

2023). The other principal measures in the field of social inclusion for young people are contained in the Social Inclusion and Employment Operational Programme (POISE), in coordination with the Europe 2020 Strategy. These schemes generally fund short-term programmes, addressing local challenges and targeting a small number of beneficiaries. Programmes such as the one studied here have been implemented in Portugal on a project base, relying on local infrastructures such as FabLabs, but are highly dependent on European funding, which means they are not sustainable.

Lack of schooling or low levels of educational attainment are risk factors associated with NEET status. Recent research, however, highlights how university-educated young people are also vulnerable, as their access to the labour market depends on its needs, which are in turn dependent on national education and labour market policies (Scandurra, Cefalo, and Kazepov 2021; Albert, Davia, and Legazpe 2021). Higher education improves employability but may cause jobless youth to become inactive rather than active job seekers. Some inactive youth with university degrees may have families to take care of, others may not be able to find work related to their degree, while others may take a break after completing their studies, to travel or engage in constructive activities such as art, music or self-directed learning. These young people are voluntary or involuntary NEETs (Mascherini and Ledermaier 2016). On the other hand, a growing proportion of the labour force has university degrees, and in some cases, there is an oversupply of university graduates. The value of higher education is decreasing due to a structural (education-qualification) mismatch between the supply of young workers and the demand for them, reflecting a transient macroeconomic crisis. A growing supply of graduates of low-quality institutions may contribute to the risk of graduate unemployment due to a mismatch between their qualifications and the skills required by the labour market (Zudina 2022). This is particularly true for Portugal, where the massification of higher education and raising the age for compulsory schooling to 12 has produced a highly qualified young generation. But, while young people with more advanced education tend to be less vulnerable to unemployment, since 2015 the share of NEETs in Portugal has been identical for those with basic and upper secondary schooling and higher education. Moreover, there is less demand for certain areas of training such as the social sciences, journalism, information, management and administration, and law (Marques et al. 2021). Nevertheless, education is still a key factor in expanding young people's overall quality of life, from the point of view of the capabilities approach.

The capabilities approach as a measure of meaningful educational intervention

The Capabilities Approach has to some extent been adopted in discussion of the issues of vulnerable young people and the role of education and employment in their empowerment, and to understand the value of education and training measures aimed at enhancing their employability outside the labour market. The Capabilities Approach was first developed by the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen (Sen 2001) and further expanded by Martha Nussbaum (2011) and others (Robeyns 2005; Walker and Boni 2020). It consists of a theoretical framework focused on individuals' freedoms, opportunities, and the ability to achieve valuable functioning in various aspects of life. When applied to the field of youth employment, the Capabilities Approach is concerned with the wellbeing of young people and how they may find work which they find meaningful and of value to them. These possibilities are then shaped by conversion factors, and individual, social or environmental conditions, which may enable or prevent those possibilities from becoming actual opportunities or choices. Hence, different people may need more support than others in finding the right path in the labour market due to individual circumstances, such as having disability, or due to structural factors, such as living in remote areas with few work opportunities and social networks. In this sense, and as Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova (2021) have argued, the Capabilities Approach provides a bridge between structure and agency, two fundamental concepts in sociology.

Research applying the capabilities perspective to youth unemployment policies (Robertson 2018; Atzmüller et al. 2015; Bonvin and Orton 2009) has highlighted three types of relevant capabilities: capabilities for work (related to opportunities for finding quality and valued work); capabilities for education (opportunity to attend learning schemes that match one's priorities); and capabilities for voice (related to the opportunity and ability to express one's views, needs and values in relation to an employment situation and prospects, and taking one's own opinion into account). While work and voice capabilities are concerned with the more structural and political characteristics of employment services and of the labour market themselves, education capabilities are concerned with the empowerment of young people and enhancing (technical and social) competences and skills to meet one's aspirations regarding work.

Aspirations are indeed a key aspect in long-term unemployment among young people, and occupy a central place in our study. (Hart 2016) examines how aspirations are shaped by social structures, including class, race, and gender. She argues that these structures influence the opportunities and limitations individuals perceive. Still, Hart underscores the importance of agency, suggesting that while social structures are influential, individuals still possess the capacity to aspire and work towards their goals. She promotes the idea of empowering individuals to overcome structural barriers, namely through education. On the other hand, (Appadurai 2009) argues that aspirations are a cultural capacity that varies among different communities, shaped by the cultural context and social norms. While Appadurai sustains that the capacity to aspire is limited due to lack of resources, for him aspirations provide a framework for hope and planning for the future, allowing to navigate uncertainty. For Appadurai, the capability to aspire “thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture, and refutation” (Appadurai 2009, 69). Hence, aspirations can also be regarded as a fertile functioning, since they can lead to wider choices, freedoms and capabilities, expanding agency (Wolff and De-Shalit 2013).

When studying long-term unemployment in Portugal, Andrade (2021) identified and examined the obstacles young unemployed people face in getting the job they have reason to value (work that allows them to apply their skills, to learn and to develop their identity and potential as human beings). To do so, this research analysed the Youth Guarantee framework as a set of opportunities for providing meaningful work, and the life narratives of young people. It concluded that active employment policies, such as the Youth Guarantee, when broadly applied, increase social exclusion, since individual differences are not considered, particularly socio-economic inequalities. Young people’s narratives revealed gender differences and preferences that were constrained by adverse socio-economic and family circumstances. Hence, young people are not entirely free when entering the labour market; rather, their expectations are shaped by conversion factors such as mobility (having public transport nearby, or a driving licence), housing (being able to rent a flat or to have a home office) and even gender cultural roles, for example, that attribute care duties to women that may curtail their capabilities for work.

Within the Capabilities Approach, education is regarded as a fertile functioning, one that enables several other capabilities, and has a two-fold value: the one intrinsic, valuable by itself for personal flourishing, the other instrumental, in the sense that it enables people to transform their personal situation and that of others by facilitating their participation in democratic societies, giving them better health literacy, and the ability to make better informed choices. In this sense, educational measures targeted at young NEETs (here taken as a particular group that requires specific support) have the potential to activate and integrate young people into the labour market (adapting their plans and skills to the opportunities existing in their prospective areas). Likewise, through the expansion of networks and confrontation with other world views, such interventions may allow young people to identify and develop their own work aspirations and empowering them to realize them. Some employment schemes try to foster such capabilities through entrepreneurship training. Therefore, in this article we analyse the significance of a programme of capacitation and employment stimulation of rural NEETs through the fostering of creativity and “maker” skills. We use the capabilities approach as a conceptual tool to understand how this intervention motivated young people and provided opportunities for their participation in the labour market.

Methodology

The data analysed in this article was collected as part of the research project entitled “Tr@ck-in: public employment services tracking effectiveness to support rural NEETS”, financed by EEA Grants, the aim of which is to deliver an evaluation model of the effectiveness of Public Employment Services (PES). The case study was developed within the Programmes Mapping and Validation work package, the aim of which was to map and validate good practices in improving rural NEETs’ employability.

Our unit of analysis was the practice itself, that is, a given measure or project (be it a training programme, internship or service delivery model). The case studies used mixed data collection methods, namely a national survey directed to public employment offices, document analysis, ethnographic observation on site, and interviews with case workers and young people. The NEETMAKER project was identified as a good practice during a screening meeting with the director of the regional employment office for the Central region. As a partner of the project, she was able to facilitate contact with the project leaders, who granted the team full access to internal data and were available for

interviews. We interviewed the director of a public employment centre, the main mentor of the programme and the representative of the local council, as well as 13 young NEETs who took part in the programme. Finally, we set up a focus group with 7 participants and the programme's main mentor. The study was granted ethical approval in 2021. Informed consent was obtained for all interviews. Data was collected between February and May 2023, and was subject to qualitative analysis using the MAXQDA software. The variety of data collected was used to triangulate different data sources, aiming to evaluate the impact and transferability of a given practice to other contexts. Young people are cited in this paper using pseudonyms, following ethical guidelines.

The NEETMAKER programme

NEETMAKER was a training and stimulus programme for employability and social inclusion for young people aged between 20 and 34 profiled as in a NEET situation. To this end, the NEETMAKER programme used Fablab Penela as a tool to train young people in the areas of digital fabrication, design, programming, electronics, the internet of things and digital audio and video. It took place in the Central (*Centro*) region of Portugal (Pombal, Coimbra, Penela and Ansião), which is classified as a rural area. This inland region of Portugal has a population of 2.23 million, mostly living in the main coastal cities. This region has the second lowest unemployment rate in the country (5.4%), and jobs are to be found mostly in the service sector. There is a differentiated profile between the coastal areas which attract more skilled workers in the fields of IT and industry, while less skilled jobs are found in villages inland. Penela, where the NEETMAKER headquarters are based, is a small municipality of 5440 inhabitants in 2021 (PORDATA, 2021). Of these, 10.4% are under 15 and 57.6% are of working age (between 15 and 64). Like many other municipalities, it has been faced with a declining and ageing population since 1981. In terms of work, 69.7% of its working population are employed in the service sector, followed by 27.6% in construction and industry. Being a rural area, it has poor public transport, and 73.2% of the population use a car to go to work or to their place of study.

The NEETMAKER programme was funded by Portugal Inovação Social (Portugal 2020) and the European Commission. It was committed to developing skills and competences for young NEETs and to capacity building in areas of the new economy, following the

Penela Municipality Strategic Plan. It was led by HIESE, an incubator for business innovation in strategic areas, located in Espinhal (Penela), and by the Penela Municipality, using the Smart Fablab, a fabrication laboratory located in Penela district. HIESE established partnerships with Social Security by making local contracts for social development and with the local Public Employment Office - IEFP (Institute for Employment and Occupational Training). The project involved 61 participants from 9 municipalities in the region (neighbouring Penela), recruiting them through local employment centres such as the one in Pinhal Interior Norte, through social media and job fairs. These participants had to be in a NEET situation in 2021, since one of the goals of the programme was to get jobs for 25 young people by the end of the project. According to the impact evaluation (Rodrigues 2022), this goal was surpassed, with 29 young people obtaining work by 2022, while others are developing their own business plans. The general aim of the project was to train and qualify young people for the labour market in IT, Digital Manufacturing and Design, and act as a facilitator between young people and companies to help them enter the labour market. Activities supported by the NEETMAKER programme comprised bootcamps (24 training days), workshops (32 training days), residencies and a creative ideas contest (36 training days), as well as maker fairs in the central region of Portugal. 7 mentors were involved in the delivery of these non-formal training activities. Throughout the training, young NEETs were first given social and creative skills, benefiting from new knowledge, development of soft skills, recognition of talents/interests, an increase in employability skills (namely how to look for a job), and establishing relationships and networking. In a second stage, with the residencies and creative ideas contest, the goal was mostly to help participants appropriate tools for the business model, increase resilience, promote personal fulfilment and competitiveness, foster the capacity for public participation and generate opportunities for collaborating with like-minded people (immersive networking). When applying the capabilities lens to the training structure of NEETMAKER, the first phase of the programme placed an emphasis in the capabilities of education and work through the capacitation of young people with new knowledge and skills through experiential learning. In the second phase, the capability for voice and aspirations were more privileged through enhancement of self-awareness, own project development and public participation skills that allow them to voice their needs.

NEETs in the eyes of partners and mentors

Considering the context of rural areas in relation to the NEET situation raises several specific issues. For the Director of the Pinhal Interior Norte employment centre, which includes several municipalities with NEETMAKER participants, one must first differentiate between the profiles of young people:

“It always depends, if we are talking about a graduate, if we are talking about an undifferentiated one. A young person who finishes the 12th grade and doesn't want to specialize in anything, he/she has a relatively easy job in this region. Of course, the expectation of salary, of career progression, are quite another matter (...) Right now, there is a lack of human resources everywhere.” [João Domingues, PES Director]

In his view, some graduates will have greater difficulty in finding a job matching their qualifications, as the inland labour market has fewer jobs requiring specific expertise. One aspect to bear in mind in rural areas is the difficulty of getting around. This rural region in the centre of Portugal has well developed industrial capacity, with businesses employing large numbers of people, but they cannot expand due to the lack of mobility between them. Most of these companies survive by providing transport for their employees. Mobility barriers also affect training provided by the employment centres, for they cannot ensure that groups in each of the locations are homogeneous. Hence, mobility is a critical conversion factors in turning the few job opportunities available into real capabilities, and something that young people can aspire to reach. Accordingly, employment centers provide training for the whole territory, with one training programme for every municipality. During the pandemic, online training was a good solution, despite the loss of the in-person relationship between trainee and trainer. A further problem is the lack of opportunities for progression in inland job market. As the PES Director said:

“A young person can even get a good job, but he/she will never have that competitiveness of being able, at any time, to do better and get an even better job elsewhere, neither benefit from the fear which employers have of losing their best to their next-door neighbour.” [João Domingues, PES Director]

For this reason, this PES director rates NEETMAKER as a very *“attractive programme”*, since *“it greatly encourages the creation of companies...”*, and supports young people in fulfilling their projects, even in a rural territory.

For the mentors of the project, Belmiro Luís of HIESE, and Pedro Ferreira of the Penela Municipality, the main concern of the NEETMAKER project was to foster critical mass

in the region. The project addressed this need by presenting each young NEET with a social innovation tool - FabLab. They also emphasized that all young people leaving university who have not done courses offering high employability on completion are all potential NEETs.

“In fact, we focused a lot on that point in our project design, because we thought that was where there was more raw material, and because, socially, it ends up becoming a social stigma. People have a university degree and can't get a job in the area. This was a way of encouraging them and realizing: “OK, you have had training there, but you can do other things, take your training and work in these areas, which is what the market needs”. That was our focus.” [Pedro Ferreira]

The view of the two project mentors is aligned with the view that aspirations are not static but rather fluid and can become activate by a positive environment. Hence, agency is not merely an individualistic trait but rather a product of social interactions and structural conditions. The ability to act, make choices, and pursue goals is shaped by the environment and the opportunities available. This understanding challenges simplistic notions of aspirations as being solely determined by personal ambition and highlights the importance of creating enabling environments where young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can develop the agency to pursue their full potential.

Although it was known that many higher education graduates are unable to find suitable employment, finding young people to take part in the programme was challenging, since the identification of NEETs is very unspecific, and mobility issues were also present, above all during the pandemic period. That is where the IEFP had a critical role in reaching NEETs registered in the Employment Centres. According to Belmiro Luís:

“We had people here more connected to design, computers, the arts and engineering; but we also had a lot of people from the media, let's call it that. I would say that we even had other young people who were with us and who did not have that aspiration, but it was a refreshing moment, of experimentation, of learning, in a non-formal educational setting, which allows them to learn in a much more attractive, light and inspiring way, than if it were via a professional centre (and then you need to have a certificate at the end). First, we wanted to start working with the Employment Centres right away, which is where we noticed that there were young NEETs.” [Belmiro Luís]

The impact of NEETMAKER on its participants

With the support of the project's main mentor, Belmiro Luís, we interviewed 13 people, 8 women and 5 men aged between 19 and 31, living in the Coimbra region and in the Autonomous Region of Madeira. Most of these young people have an academic degree, live with their parents, and are working as entrepreneurs, many of them remotely. Some of them have work experience, mainly informal, and some emigrated to work and study, although this was a transitory experience, as they prefer to live in Portugal. Most participants learned about the programme through the Internet or the training centres, but rarely through the Employment Centre.

Most interviewees believe the NEETMAKER programme matches the interests and aspirations of most young NEETs. Their expectations were greatly exceeded, mainly through the support provided by the mentor of the programme, who was instrumental in helping most of the participants develop their soft skills. Interviewees also found the network of contacts they developed to be of great value. Hence, we can here recall Hart's (2016) conception of the capability for education and its critical role of education in forming and nurturing aspirations, as it can either expand or constrain students' visions of their futures. As this young woman puts it:

“NEETMAKER did a lot in terms of encouraging me, of “you can do it” and “you can fight and do everything you can to follow your dream”. [Joana, 25, Pombal]

This highlighting of personal aspirations and of self-discovery at an individualized pace was very present in the focus group. On the other hand, the operationalisation of these aspirations relies not only of the capability for education but also on the capability for voice, since young people need to be motivated to expose their wishes to public debate and to revise them and validate them in a group of peers. The appreciation for the collective while not diminishing the individual approach is highlighted by two participants:

“One positive point that I must mention is that this programme is much more human than other IEFEP training programmes, it is remarkably different, even from university. It's a programme where you're there with your individuality, what you want for your career, you see other perspectives, other young people in your age

group, and it's very good for motivating you, for opening horizons, for realising that there are other people.” (João, 28, Coimbra)

And you can see and feel how they personalize it for each one of us, which is very good. Because you're really, really following the whole process, even during all that (the pandemic), but you can really see that there's a genuine concern for every detail. (Fernanda, 28, Pombal)

Regarding the capability for work, the emphasis on soft skills were one of the programme's stepping stones, since there is a conviction that “the market has changed, and people need to know how to sell themselves” (Belmiro Luís). Soft skills here include communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, time management, and leadership, transferable to all fields. While these are general skills that do not match a particular profession or career, they are vital for reaching real opportunities of valuable work. For some participants, this was even the most significant content of the training:

That first week with more technological skills wasn't of so much interest to me, in other words, it's a profile that is very focused on certain areas of training and that may not be so applicable to others. So, in that first week, I think it would be better to have a bit more in the way of soft skills, how to apply, how to build a CV, interview training, practical things that are applicable to any area (...), Networking with Sofia was also important during entrepreneurship training, for example, she helped me a lot with this, she did an interview with me, made herself available to have a meeting with me in which she reviewed my CV, my motivation letter, gave me super practical advice on how to use LinkedIn, European programmes (...)” (Adelaide, 31, Madeira)

Adelaide's testimony provides insight on how the presence of a supportive environment, including positive role models and mentors, can stimulate agency and contribute to more ambitious aspirations. These role models often exist within an individual's "aspirations window" (Ray 2006, quoted by Mkwanzani 2019), a concept that describes how people draw inspiration from the lives and achievements of those around them. A successful role model can change the expectations of what an individual can achieve, thus influencing their aspirations.

In overall terms, the major gain from NEETMAKER was making participants aware of possibilities previously seen as being unattainable, allowing them to operationalise their

aspirations. At the same time, the intervention was instrumental in giving them confidence and drive by fostering a maker mindset:

"I can share something. I think that everyone derives a different value from the experience (...) I'm a soft skills layman, for example. And that part benefited me a lot, it gave me a bit more confidence, it motivated me to make things happen in my life. I am the master of my destiny, nobody is going to do for me what I need, right? And that awakening was the greatest experience I took away from those days, although I also enjoyed the more technical training courses because you look at 3D printing or even video editing, for example, and you think you need years and years of experience... But no, with just a mobile phone camera or anything, you can start any project and by learning little by little you can achieve bigger things."
(Rui, 28, Pombal).

The only aspects that require improvement were the duration of the programme and the areas covered, which should include topics other than IT, Digital Fabrication and Design. Also, most of the participants pointed out that they needed further support, even after finding a job, after the programmes ended. This was envisaged through the designation of a mentor, but never put into practice. Hence, while participants had opportunity to voice their concerns and perspectives upon the programme and employment perspectives, these had no visible consequences. The need for follow up after intervention exemplifies how rural young people require further resources to navigate a job market where opportunities are scarce, such as the inland areas, and they may have to carve their own trade. Hence, as much as education is a fertile functioning, it requires that structural conversion factors such as continued support and mobility that allows real access to job opportunities are addressed to fulfil its promises.

Conclusions

Our analysis of the impact of the NEETMAKER programme on prospects for employability was shaped by the capabilities approach, paying attention to the capabilities for education, work, voice and aspirations. Interviewee feedback stressed aspects such as "a change of mindset", "new contacts", "opportunity to create your own business" and "increased motivation", which point to a perceived positive impact. In a qualitative sense, emphasis was given to the identification with the "maker" mentality and the sense of belonging to a community of "makers", projecting the essence of the NEETMAKER

project into the community through the creation of new business ideas/ways of working. This seems to be of value for rural young people who may not have the range and quality of labour market options in their area and may need the skills to create those options themselves.

Considering how valuable the education capability is for activating young people, it is fair to say that even for those NEET who have high levels of educational attainment, the translation of formally acquired knowledge into operational competences is facilitated through targeted soft skills training that enables each one to forge their own path in the world of work. However, it should also be noted that those who come from socio-economically deprived backgrounds often demonstrate risk aversion that is incompatible with entrepreneurial endeavours. But even for those, a complementary training in business could be of value for overcoming adaptive preferences. From a pedagogical perspective, the key aspects to retain from this example are the value of experiential learning, the need for a tailored approach to each participant's learning path and the importance of charismatic mentors who lead by example and empathy.

Analysing the capability for work, while higher education programmes in general do not cater for emotional needs or provide education that is rooted in local labour markets and in student profiles, we argue that complementary non-formal training after graduation may enhance young people's employability, both by stimulating their awareness of labour markets and their local networks. It is significant that, despite being mostly university graduates, many NEETS lacked good communication skills, this being associated with lack of entrepreneurial spirit. Hence, training in soft skills that enhances such gaps and provides a bridge between the academy and the job market is critical in supporting young people in finding their paths.

Taking capability for voice and its connection to aspirations, it is not to be expected that young people will remain in their place of origin for work, should their wishes find a match elsewhere. But equally, young people should not be forced to move away from the rural area and their families just because they do not have the means to survive in their place of origin, particularly since moving to the city also brings specific challenges that must be equated, such as housing. This places them in a situation of social exclusion and dependency that further delayed their development as full citizens. Hence the discussion

of the right to stay in rural areas should be accompanied by a discussion of the conversion factors that allow people to fulfil such aspiration. Lack of mobility options and few public transports remain an obstacle for rural young people looking for jobs or to take part in specific training. Hence, to fight the mobility and location conversions factors, PES workers and local associations in rural areas must be ready to reach out to young people in their local villages, making service delivery more flexible throughout the territory. While in certain cases remote training and counselling may be an option, people in rural areas suffer from the isolation caused by depopulation. Social services also play a role in countering this trend, by providing the motivation and the space for people to meet and exchange ideas, something much appreciated and valued by programme beneficiaries.

To sum up, from a policy perspective, programmes such as the NEETMAKER respond to the growing problem of skills mismatch among graduates, avoiding the waste of talent while upskilling and capacitating young people to thrive in a shifting labour market. While the programme does not link directly to job offers, there is evidence that the young NEETs who went through the NEETMAKER training were fully integrated and motivated to enter the job market or to create their own job. In terms of human development, the NEETMAKER programme achieved one of the most significant goals of education and training, particularly for young people who are discouraged: it revitalised their sense of agency and activated their aspirations by developing valuable and meaningful capabilities,

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