



How could policies improve societal inclusion of hard-to-reach NEET youths?

Key messages

- 1** The statistical category NEET does not grasp hard-to-reach precarious youths
- 2** Collaboration and coordination between organisations must be improved
- 3** Work with hard-to-reach NEET should be better recognised
- 4** The rules governing subsidies need to be adjusted to the reality of the field
- 5** Collaborations between professionals and peer supporters should be encouraged

Introduction

Since the 2008 financial crisis, the school-to-work transitions of lowly qualified youths have become more complicated with longer periods outside of structures of education, employment or training (Wolbers 2014). It is within this larger context that, today, the statistical category of “NEET” is used, to measure the number of young people who are neither in education, employment or training and to develop policies such as the Youth Guarantee, to help them find sustainable work or improve their qualifications. Compared to more privileged youths, youths that live in less favourable social and economic circumstances face more educational and professional exclusion, as well as greater health issues (View Brussels, 2020; Clouston & Link, 2021). Vulnerable youths also have less access to mainstream civic engagement (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013).

In urban contexts with important social inequalities, social policies do not always reach their target recipients, and this is partly due to the complexity of the institutional framework (Franssen et al. 2014). In 2020, in Brussels, 11.3% of the population between the age of 15 and 24 were considered to be NEET, while 9.7% between the age 18 and 24 were early school leavers. In the face of these numbers, the “Empower Youth” project aimed to understand why and how these young people do or do not make use of the available services to help them find work, improve their qualifications, or engage in civic actions that helps them improve their situation and increase their participation to a diverse democracy.

Methods, approaches and results

Methods

The research was rolled out in four methodological components.

The first strand had a youth-centred approach and was conducted in the neighbourhoods of Brussels with the lowest socio-economic index. These neighbourhoods have the highest proportion of 15 to 30 year-olds, of unemployment and early school leavers. Our approach is different from most NEET studies, which either mobilise quantitative data or reach NEETs only via organisations. We conducted interviews with approximately 100 young people, collecting their narrative about their situation, their school career, employment, training, social activities and, about their (non-)use of social services, etc. Speaking directly to the young people themselves made it possible to understand their reasons for non-take-up. Of interest here is that the young people who did not make any use of social services and institutional settings, or only difficulty so, said it was due to negative prior experiences with services and institutions in general. They cumulated bad school experiences with the police, at school, and felt the weight of social stigma and prejudice when turning to social services. In short, they pointed at implicitly built-in obstacles of institutions and services.

The second strand of the project consisted in collective participatory analysis workshops with hard-to-reach youngsters in the same neighbourhoods with NEET experiences of long duration (N = 34). The young participants gave feedback on the research project, as well as their analysis and attitudes towards different forms of societal and civic engagements. The third strand aimed to identify different forms of civic engagements that actually emerged in two neighbourhoods over four years, as well as their links to other forms of societal engagements, through in depth fieldwork that included interviews, participatory observations, and data from online social networks.

The fourth strand of the project consisted in interviewing staff from 50 organisations that work with precarious and hard-to-reach young people, or that received funding for a NEET-programme. Wanting to study implicit organisational obstacles and ways to solve them, we asked our respondents what difficulties they encountered working with young people, what solutions they thought of regarding the difficulties in working with the most excluded youth, and how funding affected their work.

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Results

Four key results from this research can be addressed through policy change.

1. **The category 'NEET' does not grasp the reality of the most disadvantaged youth.**

The first difficulties we encountered with the category of NEET occurred when trying to classify the young people we interviewed for our analyses. In particular the temporal and processual dimension is completely absent from the statistical category. As such, some respondents were indeed in a NEET situation at the time of the research. They shared several characteristics with each other: low socio-economic status, they had often been held back at school and reoriented to vocational tracks or had dropped out, and shared a sense of non-belonging to society, accompanied by experiences of discrimination. However, there were also respondents with these same characteristics, but who at the time of the fieldwork had a job or followed training. However, their situation was not covered by the term NEET, in the past they had known prolonged periods outside of work, training or school, and probabilities were real, given their unstable situation, that they would go through such periods again.

Similarly, some of the younger respondents who shared these characteristics were still in school (and even thought of graduating) but had lots of difficulties and showed signs of dropping out. As such, officially, they were not considered NEET, but they were clearly at great risk of becoming so. The reason they are still in school is often that they are afraid their families might lose their child support. Lastly, as criticised in the literature (Furlong 2006), the category of NEET is too homogenising. Regardless of socio-economic status, qualifications, resources and origin, anyone who is between 15 and 30 and who is neither in education, employment or training, is to be considered NEET. Thus a 24-year-old, from a middle-class family, freshly graduated from university will be considered NEET on a par with a 24-year old without a secondary school diploma, from a monoparental family, who lives in degraded housing conditions, and who has been looking for a stable job for several years. The needs of both are completely different, as are the probabilities of finding stable income. Furthermore, a small part of our respondents in a NEET situation were organised in parallel informal networks. Due to their experiences of discrimination and difficult relations with school (being held back, reoriented, expelled, dropping out etc.), the police or even welfare services, they had lost all trust in institutions and other (semi)

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public services. As such, these young people formed the hard core of hard-to-reach youth for whom different working methods were necessary to maintain the link with society.

2. Vulnerable youths engage in social and political activities that respond to their needs.

Though vulnerable youth have less access to classic forms of civic engagement, our data reveals that they tend to engage more easily in civic actions that answer their specific collective needs, which confirms research with disadvantaged young participants¹. We observed more specifically that moral civic engagements (e.g. charity, food packages), civic engagements of dialogue (e.g. addressing prejudice towards youth from disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Brussels) and peer support initiatives, are more accessible for disadvantaged youth in Brussels. In line with Speer et al. (2021), we also find that civic actions more inclusive of their diversities improves their socio-political development through accumulated sense of personal and collective empowerment, which increases their opportunities for more classical political engagement over time. This could improve their participation to a democracy, more inclusive of their diversity.

3. Social work with hard-to-reach youths often goes unrecognised and unpaid.

The previous results illustrate that there are important organisational and political obstacles that make it very difficult for organisations to reach the most disadvantaged youth.

Organisational obstacles occur when an organisation adopts the official definition of NEET (person between 18 and 30, living in Brussels, who is neither in education, employment or training) to select the people it works with. While organisations which have funded NEET-programmes and thus apply the “administrative” definition of NEET, they have little consideration for the variety of profiles and problems the most vulnerable and disadvantaged youths have. Consequently, they do not adapt their way of working to reach out to them, who in turn do not make use of the organisation’s services. The most salient example is the condition of registering with Actiris, the Brussels public employment office, to be eligible for the NEET-programme. Despite wishing to enrol in a training programme or make use of certain services funded to reach NEETs, many young men and women do not register with Actiris. However, the fact that they are not registered with Actiris has serious consequences because

1. (Checkoway et Aldana, 2013 ; Syvertsen et al., 2011 ; Wray-Lake et Abrams, 2020)

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the organisations' work with these young people is not counted as part of the NEET programme and therefore not funded. It places organisations in front of a dilemma: reaching out without being funded for it or "creaming"? Creaming consists of helping those who need the least help. **The political obstacles** result from the funding requirements. On the one hand, funding requirements involve burdensome accountability measures (statistics on the number of young people, on their background, types of outcome). Consequently, many respondents argue they spend time finding ways of justifying their work according to the project requirements in order to receive funding. On the other, funding requirements contain objectives which are determined top down and do not necessarily reflect the needs of youths and do not correspond to the goals and objectives to work with hard-to-reach youths. In this regard, our respondents have emphasised the need of "reach-out work" which consists of making the first step towards these young people to (re)establish minimal social relations, maintaining and feeding social contacts between organisation and hard-to-reach youths. Reach-out work is not about involving them in any specific project or programme. Rather, it is about giving young people their space, where they feel at ease, where social contacts can be fed, but without imposing

too strict rules. Due to its lack of a clear measurable output, however, this type of work is not officially recognised, and organisations who adopt this approach are not funded for it.

Amongst effective reach-out work, we have identified work carried out by "experience experts" or "peer supporters". The latter share a similar background as disadvantaged youth and had been through similar situations, but eventually managed to overcome the risks they faced and reengaged with society. Initiatives carried out by peer supporters have an important civic dimension, as most of the initiatives observed were on a voluntary basis. Peer supporters engage in "shadow" - nevertheless efficient - social work that addresses more adequately the specific and diverse needs of vulnerable youth, that formal social work struggles to address more accurately². Throughout the work of peer supporters, we better understood the diverse needs of the most distrustful youth, which comprised basic needs of rebuilding physical health, correlated with mental health, empowerment, self-confidence and a sense of utility to engage better with the collective and society. However, as mostly unrecognised by authorities and financing institutions, there is an important turnover among peer supporters. There are, however, some organisations that have managed to secure funding for some

2. (Schrooten et al., 2019)

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of the more qualitative forms of work with young people. However, in a context of scarce resources and economic crises, some actors are concerned about their sustainability.

4. The funding policies and the competition between organisations.

Two consequences of the funding policy are of importance here. First, as mentioned above, organisations have to choose between unpaid and unrecognised work with young people who do not fit the administrative framework, or not work with them at all to focus on those who do fit the framework. This way of working is often a matter of survival for organisations in a context of project management. However, this has an impact on the relations and cooperation between organisations. Second, then, from the perspective of organisations that work with hard-to-reach young people, those who limit their work to get their numbers are considered to “scrounge for NEETs”. Organisations that do manage to work with these young people, invest time and energy in building a relation of trust and want to avoid at all costs that the contact with other organisations might strengthen the negative experiences of their public. Hence, to prevent new negative experiences, when solicited by organisations in search of ‘NEETs’, they refuse to collaborate. As such, potential

collaborations, vital for the division of labour, are often nipped in the bud. Far from the competition between organisations created by the funding structures, different kinds of collaborations between professionals of formal social work and peer supporters have been observed. Based on the complementarity of knowledge that each actor detail (professional and experience knowledge), collaborations between peer supporters and professionals help the latter to adjust their offer more accurately to the hard-to-reach public, in a flexible bottom-up approach.

Conclusions

The four issues discussed above have a common thread. They are the result of a policy that is not conceptually adjusted to the realities on the ground. The lack of accuracy of the statistical category NEET has its implications at a policy level. This, in turn, has implications in terms of financing policies, which affects the organisations on the ground and the way the policy is experienced by the target public. We think that the following adjustments will improve the efficacy of our youth policies in the Brussels Capital Region.

Policy recommendations

1. Define more accurately the target public of NEET programmes

In particular, include socioeconomic indicators of vulnerability such as: degree of qualifications, family income, ethnic origin, and postal code of residence. The target public needs to be defined more precisely to fit the descriptions of the most disadvantaged social categories. It should also, keep in mind that social disadvantage is not simply expressed in not being in education, employment or training, but equally implies living conditions, difficult family situations (absent parents, health issues, etc.), which all contribute to the difficulties of taking up services and benefits.

2. Definitions that include the characteristics of the most disadvantaged and hard-to-reach youth should also imply that the use of key performance indicators and other forms of accountability be adjusted to the realities on the ground

Working towards the inclusion of the most marginalised people, implies working in steps, each of which has different methods and scopes. As mentioned above, with hard-to-reach youths low conditionality of schemes

is of major importance to build a relation of trust and maintain contact. This is the *conditio sine qua non* of further social work towards improved qualifications, training and eventually employment.

3. Funding authorities need to stimulate cooperation between organisations, and not competition and distrust, which is detrimental for the target public

The central goal must be to secure positive experiences of their young public, and avoid negative ones that can undo all of the trust-building work. Several things can be done. First of all, in general, the required administration and accountability can be adapted according to the size and nature of the funded organisation. Separate calls could be created to level the playing field between organisations.

Secondly, project calls should include funds to hire scouting officers to make the organisation known on to youths and other actors so as to avoid distrust and improve collaborations. Lastly, specifically for funds reached out by Actiris, two conditions should preferably be dropped to improve the participation of NEET. The first is to drop the condition that young people can only be enrolled in one NEET programme at the time. In fact, this

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condition exacerbates competition between organisations and leads to treat NEETs like numbers. Most importantly, when speaking of youth with complex trajectories, it might be more interesting to stimulate their curiosity rather than pushing them to make a choice. The second, and perhaps most important condition to drop is being registered with Actiris. This condition often creates a mental blockage because young people and their families are afraid of losing their child support. This in turn has the negative consequence that they wait until they turn 26 to make the step towards training programs. A smoother transition to work could be achieved by dropping this condition.

4. We recommend more direct funding for collaborations with “peer supporters”

Peer supporters share common ground with the target public, yet are themselves in the process of resilience and societal inclusion, which gives hope, encourages proximal and empowering bottom-up initiatives, which answers the needs of the most distrustful and discouraged youth. Peer supporters have a bridging function between professionals and hard-to-reach youth, thanks to their capacity to build trust and connection more rapidly

than professional social workers do. It is important to create a frame of collaboration between professionals and peer supporters that maintains the specificity of their local and generational knowledge stemming from experience, that avoids competition, or assimilating them into the top down logics of formal social work organisations. A status recognition of peer supporters would facilitate more substantive collaborations with professionals, and improve the value of their expertise. Encouraging networks of support and intervision between peer supporters would also inspire constructive hindsight on their very specific practices, which in turn can improve their outreach practices with a public that face diverse societal disruptions.

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About

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The project

The “Empower Youth” project funded by Innoviris sought to understand why despite the wide array of social services, institutions, initiatives and NGOs that focus on improving the conditions of the most disadvantaged youth and neighbourhoods, many young people do not make use of them in Brussels. The project consisted of a sociological study of the trajectories of these young people and their interaction with their environment and organisations. An interdisciplinary and social-psychological approach studied youth societal and civic engagement in poor neighbourhoods, and their collaboration with organisations and institutions.

Prospective
research



Through the Prospective Research programme, the Brussels-Capital Region is hoping to fund research projects from a dual perspective: to provide a solid regional prospective vision; to build solutions to the specific challenges it will face in the years to come. The solutions proposed by the funded projects must take into account Brussels' urban complexity as well as the Region's environmental, social and economic transition objectives. The programme targets researchers in human science as much as researchers in exact or applied science.

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