

Future employment opportunities and changes in rural youth labour markets

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Editorial Note

EURYO's Policy Briefs: Looking into the future of jobs in rural areas

anticipating the future of jobs is becoming harder. The rise of Artificial Intelligence, its influence on jobs, skills, and demands, the talent competition, particularly in the technological fields, the increasing emphasis on reindustrialization across Europe, and the new opportunities stemming from the green economy will transform labour markets in the next decade.

These trends will further affect youth labour markets. Nowadays, young people face longer and more uncertain school-to-work transitions. Prolonged transitions are due, in part, to greater shares of young people moving from secondary education to university. In other cases, delays in labour market integration are explained by precarity or longer and recurrent unemployment spells, particularly among low-qualified young workers (Schoon, 2020; Simões, 2022).



Contemporary school-to-work transitions have important individual and social consequences.

At the individual level, repeated stopping and starting of professional and training plans complicates the accumulation of social and professional capital, the fulfilment of personal goals (Schels & Wöhrer, 2022; Steiner et al., 2022), or the formation of a coherent professional identity (Masdonati et al., 2022). At the social level, younger generations struggle to access Welfare State benefits (e.g., sick leave) due to growing precariousness or the rise of new work forms (e.g., gig economy) (European Commission, 2023).

The negative effects of prolonged and unpredictable school-to-work transitions are more pronounced in rural areas, including higher risks of long-term or scarring effects, such as chronic unemployment or precariousness. Several employment and education indicators used to monitor the different dimensions of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the EU's main policy framework for social inclusion and cohesion, confirm this view. For instance, the rates of early school leaving from education and training are consistently higher in rural areas, meaning the share of those aged 18–24 who have achieved secondary education is lower in these territories compared with urban and suburban areas. Rural areas also tend to perform worse regarding some youth labour market indicators. While youth unemployment rates tend to be lower in the countryside across the EU, the same trend does not hold when considering the share of young people Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET). Southern and Eastern countries display more complicated school-to-work transitions in rural areas, displaying bigger disparities compared with (sub)urban regions across multiple indicators (Simões, 2025).

The second piece of the European Rural Youth Observatory (EURYO) policy briefs series looks into the quality of jobs in rural areas. As mentioned in the note opening for the

first policy brief of this series focusing on mobilities, these publications intend to offer a canvas of alternative futures that is needed for young people living in rural areas. More than anyone, rural, younger generations need to weigh the tension between the possibilities associated with living in the countryside and the negative consequences of that option.

This policy brief combines key indicators with a reading of pivotal policy packages aiming at youth employment, such as the Reinforced Youth Guarantee, to reach a central conclusion: rural youth labour markets are missing out on the main EU political priorities. The lack of place-based approaches to rural labour market shortages or lower demand, depending on the sectors, will continue to obscure the future careers of rural young people. Moreover, this contradicts recent findings that intentions to stay and live in rural areas are increasing, as a recent report from the Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe shows.

As the Chair of the EURYO, I am certain that our Policy Briefs series represents an opportunity for dialogue with society at large, particularly with public and private institutions that help



rural young people move forward. I am also confident that these short reports will reflect rural young people's own views, something that is unusual and needs to be a priority more often among researchers. Only that position will add a transformative value to our work, contrary to a reactive position in the face of the massive societal changes rural areas are going through.

Francisco Simões

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Summary

Rural youth employment remains a critical and unresolved challenge across the European Union. Despite EU efforts, rural youth remain systematically disadvantaged, facing a higher risk of social exclusion and fewer high quality career paths than their urban counterparts. Young people living in rural areas have weaker labour market opportunities than their urban peers, including higher risks of becoming NEET, limited access to education and training, constrained mobility, and fewer quality jobs. These disadvantages contribute to territorial inequalities and accelerate rural depopulation, undermining social cohesion and long-term development. Artificial intelligence (AI), digitalization, and the green transition create new opportunities in rural areas, such as precision agriculture, renewable energy, and digital services. However, they also carry significant risks in “thin” rural labour markets, where job displacement is harder to absorb, and alternative employers are scarce.

The persistent higher youth unemployment in rural areas, despite the rollout of the Reinforced Youth Guarantee (RYG), suggests that the issue is not a lack of political will, but a lack of territorial sensitivity. Current measures assume a density of employers and transport links that simply do not exist in ‘thin’ rural markets. Without an impact evaluation that accounts for geography, the RYG risks becoming an urban success that inadvertently subsidizes rural depopulation.

This policy brief combines EU-level statistical evidence with insights from participatory workshops conducted between April and May 2025 in a selection of European countries under the COST Innovators Grant (IG18213) “Future Youth Information for Rural Areas” (FYI-R).



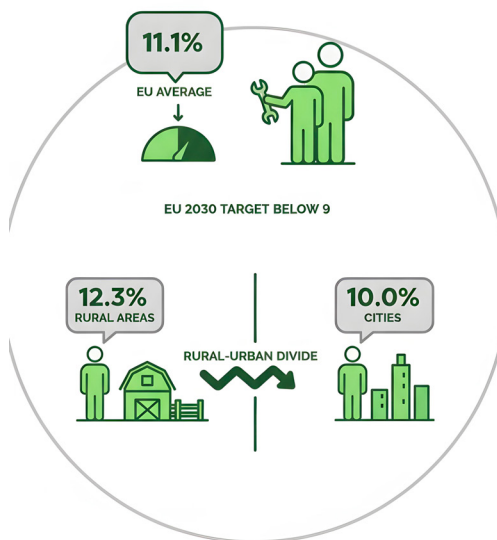
Why rural youth employment matters for EU cohesion

Youth labour market integration is a strategic issue for the European Union. Despite rising educational attainment, young people increasingly experience precarious employment, delayed transitions, and repeated spells of inactivity. Without a doubt, young people represent the most technologically advanced and educated generation compared to other cohorts. However, the unemployment generational gap is very high. In November 2025, at the EU level, the gap between the youth and the adult unemployment rates, expressed as ratio, was 2.9 (14.5% for people less than 25 years and 5% for those aged 25 and more).

In rural areas, the scarcity of services and infrastructure creates an additional disadvantage for young people in both education and employment. University attendance is often connected to the need to move to the city and live away with higher costs or long distances to cover. Employment opportunities in rural areas are lower than in comparable urban areas, often limited to agricultural and public positions (Bördös & Koltai, 2022). In rural areas, the challenge is not only the limited availability of jobs for young people, but also the quality of the work on offer. Many entry points into employment are shaped by temporary or informal arrangements,

weaker enforcement of labour standards, and gaps in social security contributions, which undermine income security and long-term protection (Simões and Marta, 2024). As a result, rural youth may be “employed” yet still face precarity, unsafe working conditions, and restricted prospects for progression.

YOUTH NEET RATES (EU, 2024)



Early labour market exclusion produces long-term scarring effects on earnings, social protection, and well-being, with high aggregate costs for societies and public budgets. These effects are often cumulative: extended periods of inactivity or precarious work reduce future employability and weaken contributions to social insurance systems. Without timely, targeted support, early disadvantage can translate into persistent higher poverty risks and deeper territorial inequalities over the life course.

NEET rates remain a key indicator of these challenges (Petrescu et al., 2024). In 2024, 11.1% of young people aged 15–

29 in the EU were NEETs, above the EU 2030 target of below 9%. Progress has been uneven across Member States, with particularly high rates in Romania, Italy, and Lithuania. Importantly, a persistent rural–urban divide persists: in 2024, NEET rates among 15–29-year-olds were 12.3% in rural areas compared to 10.0% in cities. This rural disadvantage is particularly high in Romania (26.8% in rural areas vs. 7.5% in urban areas), Bulgaria (23.9% vs. 6.3%), Lithuania (19.1% vs. 11.3%), and Greece (18.6% vs. 11.4%) (Eurostat, https://doi.org/10.2908/EDAT_LFSE_29).

These patterns directly challenge EU objectives on territorial cohesion, social inclusion and sustainable development, making rural youth employment a priority for both European and local policy agendas.

The characteristics of rural areas

Even though the degree of rural disadvantage widely varies across EU countries, some common patterns can be identified. Focusing mainly on Mediterranean and Eastern countries, rural youth are more likely to experience unstable or seasonal work, low wages, and weak career progression, which fuels out-migration and, in some contexts, long-term inactivity (Simões and Erdogan, 2024). These demand constraints are amplified by a persistent “distance tax”: access to jobs, training, and services located in towns or regional centers entails higher costs in time, money, and feasibility for rural youth.

Depopulation dynamics further reinforce disadvantages, particularly in Southern Europe. In Spain and parts of Italy and Portugal, youth out-migration is both a symptom and a driver of shrinking local opportunity, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of population loss, service decline, and weaker labour demand. In Eastern and peripheral contexts (notably Romania, Hungary, and Lithuania), rural youth disadvantage is more tightly linked to poverty risk, inactivity, and migration pressure, increasing the need for integrated employment, education, and social policies (Şerban and Braziené, 2021).

Across all countries, skills and matching constraints play a central role. Rural young people often face a mismatch between their aspirations or qualifications and the narrow set of local jobs available, alongside limited access to diverse training pathways, apprenticeships, and employer networks (Eurofound, 2019). Digital and green transitions offer new opportunities, but unequal digital skills, connectivity gaps, and selective programme take-up risk excluding the most vulnerable.

Finally, institutional reach remains a critical bottleneck. Rural youth are more likely to be “off the radar” of Public Employment Services (PES), particularly where outreach is weak, and services are designed for urban conditions. Evidence from countries such as Portugal, Bulgaria, and Lithuania shows that effective interventions require proactive outreach, personalised guidance, and local presence, rather than digital-only delivery, due to the poor infrastructure of PES services in rural areas (Ribeiro et al., 2024).

Employment in rural areas: challenges and opportunities

Artificial intelligence and digital technologies introduce a dual dynamic for rural labour markets. On the one hand, AI can support productivity gains in small firms, farms, and local services, automate administrative tasks, and enable new forms of remote work. On the other hand, in rural contexts with few alternative employers, job displacement carries higher risks of inactivity or forced migration.

AI is more likely to transform job content than eliminate labour in physical sectors such as agriculture, maintenance, and renewables, creating demand for hybrid technical roles. Whether these transformations benefit rural youth depends on broadband access, training capacity, and whether productivity gains translate into local investment and improved job quality (Felten & Seamans, 2021).

Green transitions offer significant potential for rural revitalisation through renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and circular value chains. For many young people, green jobs are valued not only for growth, but for their contribution to community resilience, environmental health, and work–life balance (ILO, 2024; OECD, 2021; DIESIS, 2023). The transition to sustainable food systems and bio–economies can reposition agriculture as a high–tech, socially meaningful, and environmentally essential sector. However, realising this potential requires more than technical training. It demands investment in infrastructure, mobility, digital access, and land availability, alongside inclusive skills pipelines that allow rural youth to lead the transition rather than be sidelined by it.

Without coordinated action, green transitions risk reinforcing existing territorial divides and bypassing disadvantaged rural youth.



Listening to young rural people: insights from FYI–R workshops

to understand how these structural challenges could be effectively translated into real–life choices and constraints, it is essential to listen directly to rural young people. Between April and May 2025, under the FYI–R project, 4 participatory workshops were conducted in Hungary, Montenegro, Lithuania, and Croatia to explore how young people perceive future employment opportunities and labour market change in their local contexts. The other ten workshops were conducted addressing the intention to remain or move away (EURYO, 2025), education, and entrepreneurship.

These workshops were inspired by the Group Level Assessment (GLA) approach, a qualitative and participatory method widely used to assess needs, perspectives, and priorities (e.g., Vaughn et al., 2022; Vaughn, 2024; Vaughn & Lohmueller, 2014). Other participatory methodologies, including the citizenship circles (Rosa & Fernandes–Jesus, 2021), also informed the design and preparation of the workshops. All the workshops were oriented towards the future, following a foresight lens (e.g., Ko & Yang, 2024; Velasco et al., 2021). For more details on the methodology, see EURYO (2025).

Across countries, young people highlighted a set of recurring and concrete barriers:



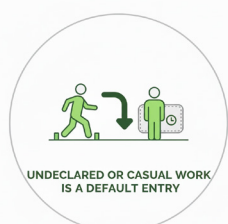
Limited job diversity and low wages

Rural labor markets remain heavily concentrated in traditional sectors such as agriculture and basic services. This lack of sectoral diversity forces youth into a narrow range of career paths, often characterized by entry-level wages that fail to keep pace with the rising cost of living. Consequently, many young people view migration as the only viable route to financial independence and professional variety.



Rigid schedules and poor work-life balance

Despite global shifts toward flexible working arrangements, rural employment (particularly in production and tourism) continues to rely on traditional, rigid scheduling. For young workers, this rigidity is often compounded by seasonal peaks that demand excessive hours, creating a significant barrier for those attempting to balance work with continuing education or family responsibilities.



Undeclared or casual work is a "default entry"

A troubling "normalization" of informal labor exists in rural areas, where undeclared or casual work is often presented to youth as a mandatory rite of passage. This "default entry" deprives young workers of social security benefits, legal protections, and a documented professional history, trapping them in a cycle of precariousness from the very start of their careers.



Long commuting times and high costs of moving

The "proximity gap" remains a major hurdle. Inadequate public transport infrastructure forces a reliance on private vehicles, leading to significant commuting times and fuel costs that eat into low rural wages. Conversely, the high financial barrier to relocating to urban hubs creates a "trapped" workforce that is underemployed relative to its potential.



Remote work opportunities, largely accessible only to higher-skilled workers

While digitalization offers the promise of "work from anywhere," the workshops revealed a digital divide. Remote work is largely restricted to high-skilled, white-collar roles. For the majority of rural youth without specialized degrees or high-speed connectivity, the "digital nomad" economy remains an inaccessible reality, further widening the inequality gap within rural communities.

Weak PES outreach and limited local training offer

PES often struggles with visibility in remote regions, resulting in a "services desert." This is mirrored by a local training offer that is frequently outdated or misaligned with current market needs. Without proactive outreach and localized vocational training, rural youth remain disconnected from the few growth opportunities available .



Partial awareness of technological change (e.g., robotics in agriculture) but low understanding of broader transitions

There is a clear "siloed" understanding of innovation; while youth recognize the role of robotics in large-scale agriculture, their literacy is low regarding broader transitions, such as the circular economy or green tech. This partial awareness prevents young people from positioning themselves for the high-value "jobs of the future" that these transitions will create.



Gig work is perceived as amplifying precariousness

Gig work can provide flexibility and rapid entry into income-generation for young people, but it is frequently perceived as amplifying precariousness when it replaces secure employment. The combination of unstable demand, income volatility, and limited social security contributions can leave young workers exposed to shocks and without long-term protection. Targeted policy action is needed to ensure decent work standards in platform-based employment, including transparency of pay and working time, effective dispute mechanisms, and access to social protection.



Access barriers to funding instruments

EU funding instruments such as rural development programmes under the CAP, the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), and micro-finance and guarantee schemes offer real opportunities for young people to start or expand agricultural and non-agricultural businesses in rural areas. Yet access is often constrained by complex eligibility rules, demanding co-financing requirements, a heavy administrative burden, and limited local advisory support for developing bankable projects. These barriers tend to disadvantage first-time applicants and young entrepreneurs with fewer assets, weaker networks, and lower capacity to navigate procurement, reporting, and compliance procedures.



Further, a striking insight comes from a Council of Europe / European Commission study (Youth Partnership, 2026) that, for many young people, having a car emerged as a crucial precondition for decent work, often more important than contacts with friends or prior experience. This illustrates how 'small' infrastructure constraints can dominate life chances in rural labour markets.




Discussion






Structural constraints shaping rural labour markets

The barriers identified by young people reflect well-documented structural features of rural labour markets. Rural economies are typically “thin”, characterised by fewer employers, limited sectoral diversity, and weaker job ladders. In this context, young people often face a choice between out-migration, low-quality local employment, or inactivity.

Educational and skills gaps compound these challenges. Early school leaving remains higher in rural areas, while tertiary attainment and participation in lifelong learning are substantially lower than in cities. Digital divides persist beyond connectivity, with lower digital skills and fewer training opportunities linked to technological change at work.

Access to services further differentiates rural contexts. PES often have a weaker local presence and outreach, which reduces early risk identification and personalised guidance. Gender inequalities intersect with territorial disadvantage, as childcare shortages, transport constraints and traditional norms restrict women’s labour market participation, while young men face repeated cycles of low-skilled and unstable work. These intersecting constraints shape not only who can access work, but also which jobs are available locally and how quickly young people can move into better opportunities.

Sector / value chain (rural-relevant)	Roles likely to grow (examples)	Core skill bundles (what to train for)
 <p>(precision farming, short supply chains, food processing) [1]</p>	<p>Agri-tech field technician; precision agriculture operator; farm data/monitoring assistant; food processing quality assistant; cooperative logistics coordinator</p>	<p>VET in agri/food; basic digital & data literacy (sensors, apps, dashboards); machinery operation & maintenance; quality/safety standards (HACCP); problem-solving and teamwork</p>
 <p>(solar/wind/biomass, heat pumps, retrofits) [2]</p>	<p>Solar PV installer; wind/solar maintenance technician; energy retrofit coordinator; heat pump technician; community energy project assistant</p>	<p>Electrical/mechanical VET; health & safety; diagnostics/maintenance; regulatory basics; project coordination; customer communication</p>
 <p>(repair, reuse, waste-to-value, bio-based materials) [3]</p>	<p>Repair & refurbishment technician; recycling/waste operations supervisor; circular supply chain assistant; bio-based production operator</p>	<p>Technical VET; process operations; compliance and safety; logistics; continuous improvement; basic digital tools</p>

Sector / value chain (rural-relevant)	Roles likely to grow (examples)	Core skill bundles (what to train for)
 <p>CARE, HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES</p>	(ageing, long-term care, community services) [3]	Care worker; home support coordinator; community health assistant; social care navigator (linking services)
 <p>SUSTAINABLE TOURISM & LOCAL SERVICES</p>	(nature/culture tourism, hospitality, creative local economies) [3]	Eco-tourism guide; hospitality supervisor; destination experience designer; local procurement coordinator
 <p>DIGITAL PUBLIC & BUSINESS SERVICES</p>	(e-government access, SME digitisation, local hubs) [3;4]	Digital service facilitator (helping residents/SMEs use e-services); SME digitisation assistant; remote customer support (where connectivity allows)
 <p>LOGISTICS & MOBILITY SERVICES</p>	(last-mile, shared mobility, essential service access) [3;4]	Last-mile logistics coordinator; fleet/route planner; shared mobility operator; maintenance support for local transport
 <p>LAND, NATURE & RESILIENCE</p>	(forestry, biodiversity, climate adaptation, fire risk management) [3]	Forestry/land management technician; biodiversity monitoring assistant; nature-based solutions field worker; rural risk prevention assistant

Source: [1] (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2022); [2] (IRENA, 2023); [3] (European Commission, 2021a); [4] (European Commission, 2021b)



Policy implications and recommendations

Taken together, the evidence points to a clear conclusion: rural youth employment policies must move beyond uniform solutions and address labour demand, skills, mobility and service delivery in an integrated, place-based way.

1. Make the youth employment policy place-based by design



WHY: Rural labour markets differ in job density, sector mix, and access to services; “one-size-fits-all” Youth Guarantee delivery leaves rural youth behind.

HOW: Embed a rural dimension in Youth Guarantee implementation using local diagnostics (employer ecosystem, transport, service access) to tailor outreach and measures.

2. Support local development by improving infrastructure



WHY: Even when jobs exist, poor transport and limited childcare/care services restrict participation, especially for young women.

HOW: Fund rural mobility solutions (vouchers, shared mobility, demand-responsive transport) and expand childcare/care services as core employment-enabling measures.

3. Strengthen PES outreach and last-mile delivery in rural areas



WHY: Rural youth are more likely to be missed by standard PES channels and digital-only approaches, leading to increased inactivity and disengagement.

HOW: Incentivise proactive outreach (mobile caseworkers, school/community hubs, youth organisation partnerships) and guarantee personalised guidance beyond online portals.

4. Build rural skills pipelines for AI and green transitions



WHY: AI and the green transition can create rural opportunities, but skills gaps and weak training access risk excluding young people from new roles.

HOW: Scale blended training (online + local practical components) linked to employers/projects and prioritise hybrid profiles (agri-tech, renewables maintenance, digital administration, digitally supported care).

5. Ensure AI adoption upgrades rural jobs rather than displacing them



WHY: In “thin” rural labour markets with few employers, displacement can trigger long-term inactivity and out-migration.

HOW: Link AI-related support to training and job redesign commitments (especially for SMEs) and provide transition assistance targeted at high-risk rural areas.

6. Address rural gender inequality through targeted programme design



WHY: Young women face compounded barriers from care responsibilities, limited mobility, and occupational segregation.

HOW: Combine flexible work pathways with digital skills programmes and use career guidance, role models, and employer commitments to challenge segregation; increase child-care services

7. Close the evidence-to-policy gap with rural-sensitive monitoring



WHY: Policy often measures employment levels but misses job quality, access barriers, and uneven impacts of AI/green transitions.

HOW: Invest in comparative evaluation of rural interventions and monitor outcomes with rural-sensitive indicators (job quality, mobility constraints, service access, retention).

8. Expand youth access to EU rural and green funding opportunities



WHY: Young people often lack clear, practical information on EU funding for sustainable rural entrepreneurship and innovation.

HOW: Create a “Rural Youth EU Funds Awareness & Support” offer (youth-friendly communication + application clinics) and mobilise LEADER LAGs to disseminate best practices and referrals.

9. Use socially responsible procurement to create rural youth jobs



WHY: Public spending can shape local labour markets, but employment opportunities often bypass rural youth or remain low-quality.

HOW: Add social criteria that reward rural youth hiring and retention (contracts, social security, training) and enforce commitments through contract performance clauses and reporting.

10. Subsidise quality hiring and paid work-based learning for rural youth



WHY: Employers often perceive rural youth recruitment as risky, while young people lack work experience and affordable pathways into stable jobs.

HOW: Provide time-bound wage subsidies tied to decent work conditions and retention and expand paid internships/apprenticeships with mobility support and clear progression into employment.

Concluding insight for policymakers

In rural contexts, employment policy fails when it ignores transport, services and delivery capacity. AI and green transitions can become engines of rural opportunities only if institutions and skills keep pace. Participatory approaches are not an add-on: listening to young people reveals bottlenecks that standard policy lenses often miss. In many cases policymakers are aware of the problems affecting rural areas and young people living there, but in a condition of scarce resources finding solutions is easier with young people participation, to fix priorities and practical solutions. Addressing rural youth employment is not only an economic imperative, but a cornerstone of Europe's territorial cohesion towards 2040.

By foregrounding rural young people's own perceptions of barriers, opportunities and future job prospects, the brief highlights the need for place-based, implementation-focused and youth-centred policies that address employment, skills, mobility and services together.

Key messages

- Rural youth experience entrenched **structural barriers** in education quality, access to training, job availability, and mobility, reflected in consistently higher rates of NEET status and early school leaving compared with urban areas.
- **AI and digitalisation** can boost productivity and open new opportunities, but in rural labour markets with a limited number of employers and occupations, displacement risks and job polarisation are more acute unless reskilling pathways are in place.
- The **green transition** can become a major source of rural youth employment, but only where it is supported by local skills pipelines, enabling infrastructure (energy, transport, broadband), and inclusive delivery mechanisms that reach disadvantaged groups.
- Young people's **employment choices** are shaped by everyday feasibility, not only aspiration: reliable transport, accessible services, predictable hours, and work-life balance often matter as much as innovation-driven opportunities.
- **Policy effectiveness** depends on **place-based and gender-responsive implementation**, combining targeted measures with local delivery capacity, coordination across services, and sustained follow-up, rather than relying on programme design alone.

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