

THE YOUTH OBSERVATORY

for

THE MINISTRY FOR YOUTH
E IL SERVIZIO CIVILE UNIVERSALE

INTERCEPTING NEEDS: PROXIMITY STRATEGIES

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DECEMBER 2021



UNIVERSITÀ
CATTOLICA
del Sacro Cuore

OSSERVATORIO
GIOVANI
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GENERAL FRAMEWORK AND PROJECT PHASES

In Italy, the NEET phenomenon has taken on worrying dimensions (at the end of 2020, 2.1 million young people aged between 15 and 29 years according to the ISTAT update of 9 July 2021), both at a macroeconomic and local level due to significant regional differences. In the South, almost one in three young people between the ages of 15 and 29 is a NEET. In order to understand how much the NEET phenomenon impacts our country, it is useful to start by comparing Italy to other EU Member States. The latest available Eurostat data concerns 2020. Of all European countries, Italy had the highest number of NEETs out of the total population between the ages of 20 and 34, about 12 percentage points higher than the European average.

Among the goals of the 2030 Agenda are full employment and decent conditions for all, including a drastic reduction in the number of young people not studying and not working. Reducing NEET rates is a major challenge for governments, and in Italy it is even more complex, partly due to certain specific features of the country (such as the view that extended economic dependence on the family of origin is normal and the phenomenon of undeclared work).

One of the main challenges, if not *the* main one, is outreach i.e. reaching young people who are not in education or employment. These young people, especially those belonging to the most disadvantaged groups, are “hard to reach” and not easy to engage in either social or employment projects.

Despite the fact that research in this field has been going on for twenty years, there is still very limited evidence on the most effective and long-lasting engagement strategies; a lack which is closely linked to the complexity of the NEET phenomenon itself, which groups together a range of young people who often have very different histories, skills and psycho-social conditions.

On a schematic level, we can identify at least three different groups of NEETs:

- 1. Young people looking (more or less intensively) for work:** These are people who have recently graduated from high school or university. They are the most dynamic and employable. A significant proportion of them have high human capital and high aspirations for a job, which are not always immediately reflected in the economy.
- 2. Young people who have slipped into the grey area between job insecurity and not working:** they have low skill levels but are keen to retrain.
- 3. Young people who have become disillusioned,** blocked by problematic family situations or discouraged by negative experiences that have sent them spiralling into depression over their economic but also emotional and relational condition. This last category is the most difficult to reach because it is also the least visible and the most difficult to engage except through proximity interventions that introduce tools which, even before employability, rekindle self-confidence and the desire to proactively take control of one's own life.

¹ For the sake of simplicity, in this report we will often refer to NEETs, but we mean “young people in the NEET condition”. In fact, it is important not to consider being NEET as a label applied to a young person (with the risk of it becoming a value judgement on the person), but as a condition in which, at some stage in their journey, they find themselves.

OBJECTIVES

The project, carried out by the Youth Observatory of the Toniolo Institute - commissioned by the Ministry for Youth Policies and in collaboration with the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI) - has the following objectives:

- 1. To improve knowledge of the NEET phenomenon** at local level and to provide indications on how to identify and intercept young people in this condition.
- 2. To lay the foundations for a co-planning process** involving municipalities to find an effective method for targeting and intercepting NEETs, with a focus on "proximity strategies".
- 3. To raise awareness on the issue** and to check which measures are most engaging, both from the point of view of the figures involved in planning for young people (and NEETs in particular) and that of the young people themselves (workers/students and NEETs).

LOCAL CASES

The survey (in agreement with ANCI) took place in four cities (local cases): Bari, Genoa, Giugliano (Na), Turin.

ACTIVITY CARRIED OUT

- PHASE 1: Building a picture of the information on NEETs** held by municipalities from available sources.
- PHASE 2: Interviews with privileged witnesses** (in particular experts, members of organisations and associations already present on the territory, with expertise and experience in projects with young people and NEETs).
- PHASE 3: Focus group** with young people, both NEET and non-NEET, in order to raise awareness on the issue, gather information on how peers with NEET status can be identified and intercepted, identify which channels would work best, which measures would engage most, etc.

PHASE 1

1. “SHARED” KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS TO BUILD ON

The experience of Youth Guarantee, together with many other initiatives in Italy and Europe, has shown that without specific “outreach” strategies, the young people most in need of reactivation programmes remain off the radar of public policies.

These are the most vulnerable and discouraged young people; those with weak family support, inadequate training, no or negative experiences of the world of work, low trust in institutions and public policies (nobody knows where they are except their family members and close social circle).

These young people cannot be expected to turn to a national portal or to public help desks. It is therefore necessary to identify and intercept them, often in combination with a proposal capable of capturing their attention, not only as a “push”, i.e. “I will help you get out of a negative condition” (which many do not clearly perceive as such), but primarily as a “pull”, i.e. an attractive offer to help them find a positive path to improve their condition.

2. SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS OF ITALY COMPARED TO THE REST OF EUROPE

Countries with more efficient *Centri per l'impiego* (Public Employment Services or PES) have more capacity to collect information on registered NEETs (directly or in cooperation with the education system) to offer them targeted programmes. Some of them also slip through the cracks, remain off the radar for various reasons (mainly related to family, psychological problems or addictions).

In Italy, the submerged proportion of NEETs is much larger and is also much more heterogeneous in terms of opportunities and ways to intercept them:

Moreover, in our country, there are two other specific characteristics to be considered:

- The support of the family of origin is often prolonged and can therefore reduce the sense of urgency among those in their twenties to get out of their situation (for many, it is considered quite normal to stay at home with their parents until the age of 30 and beyond, postponing commitments and responsibilities).
- Undeclared work makes it possible to “get by” somehow, reducing any sense of urgency to consolidate one’s career path and acquire skills for a formal and secure entry into the labour market.

3. SUMMARY OF PHASE 1 RESULTS

From the Phase 1 reports of each municipality involved in the project, the main points are summarised here per local case.

TURIN

- From the activities carried out by the Municipality of Turin (with particular reference to the main project "Su la testa!") emerged a need for continual contact with reference people and support beyond the meeting, extending to the whole engagement process.
- **Awareness and cooperation of the NEETs themselves must be used** to counter the phenomenon.
- **Extemporaneous short-term projects**, which do not provide continuity and are not transformative in terms of giving impetus and direction to the path of young people, **are very weak**.
- **Communication is crucial**: we need ways that are more aligned with the language of young people and the tools they use, i.e. social media.
- **They must be made to feel that what is on offer is also particularly suitable for motivated young people without previous experience.**
- Also consider contacting and involving families.

GENOA

- **Future projects must be able to:**
 - **fit positively into an already existing "humus"** of activities and interventions;
 - **encourage coordination with the various bodies** operating in this context.
- Activities carried out in the region (in particular NeetGe) highlight the importance of using various channels to reach different categories of NEETs (Informagiovani for women, while traditional word of mouth worked better for men). More generally, those with higher levels of schooling show greater social skills, i.e. they are familiar with and know how to use specific agencies and channels for job seeking, while those with less schooling need to be approached by the services and supported in **using them**.
- **To reach the most vulnerable target group in particular, stability and permanence of tools is needed.**
- It is strategic to include schools in the alliance. Projects dealing with **detecting and reporting early school leaving and school drop-out situations are fundamental**.

BARI

- It is important **to link NEET identification and interception processes with integrated regeneration activities (pathways) that are based on social empowerment** (BIS and Porta Futuro projects, aimed at facilitating the integration of young people into the labour market).
- **Critical social and criminal conditions** emerge (more than in other Italian contexts), as well as the demand for opportunities **(projects that also favour entrepreneurial activities)**.
- Activities carried out suggest **promising projects in the digital field**, including in terms of communication.
- An effective territorial alliance for the interception and engagement of young people of NEET status **requires public-private partnership**.

In Bari, the range of bodies and institutions involved is very wide (local authorities, management bodies of day-care centres and of educational communities for minors, network of associations receiving municipal² and parish³, grants, schools, *Reti Civiche Urbane* (Urban Civic Networks), youth and cultural centres).

In order to **strengthen this network on the local level**, the following needs have been highlighted:

- Structure a system for effective **information exchange**.
- Know how to foster **collaboration** on common objectives and strengthen the **coordinating** role of the municipality.
- **Intercept** the most problematic cases.
- Carry out **monitoring** activities (through the Porta Futuro centre).
- **Share** available information on how school-to-work transitions work and how they can be improved.

² From <https://www.bariinnovazionesociale.it/opportunita-di-bari-innovazione-sociale/urbis-bari-incentivi-sociali/>

³ Examples include the Redentore Institute, the Parish of San Sabino and the Congregazione dei Padri Rogazionisti.

GIUGLIANO IN CAMPANIA (NA)

In the Giugliano in Campania survey, a smaller municipality and not a provincial capital compared to the others considered, the importance of creating local networks capable of collaborating and acting in an integrated way with respect to NEET initiatives emerges.

In particular, the **actors (local antennas) to be involved** are: high schools (where the phenomenon of early school leaving is widespread); sports associations; religious associations; general practitioners and paediatricians; priests; clerics of other religions; social services; community leaders; scout associations; youth associations; youth forums; association councils.

- The actions implemented by the network should be able to strengthen the school-to-work transition pathway.
- Giving continuity to the pathway beyond the proposed measures helps **bring out the skills acquired** and understand how to make them usable in the world of work.
- NEETs are engaged not only as recipients of interventions but as promoters of communication initiatives of the activities in which they have participated, and by supporting **effective action among peers**.

More specifically regarding their interception, the following is suggested:

- An information campaign via social media (Facebook, Instagram, etc.).
- The setting up of a help desk at Informagiovani in Giugliano in Campania with the involvement of the youth forum and association councils.
- At the same time, through websites and social media, information about the projects may be provided through expressions of interest from third parties (companies, schools, traders).
- By cross-referencing previously collected data, it will be possible to intercept and enrol NEETs on apprenticeships in local companies, particularly in the field of ecological and sustainable tourism and the promotion of arts and crafts.
- Train qualified personnel.
- Particular **attention** must be **paid to the specific characteristics presented by certain groups** that require a targeted approach and action: second generation immigrants and households with particularly vulnerable disabled people.

PHASE 2 AND PHASE 3

1. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY OF PHASES 2 AND 3

The specific objective of phase 2 was to raise awareness of the issue and to check which measures are most appealing both from the point of view of the actors involved in planning for young people (and NEETs in particular) and of the young people themselves (workers/students and NEETs).

Two instruments were used: in-depth interviews and focus groups.

- **Interviews with territorial experts:** eight privileged witnesses were interviewed for each municipality (32 experts in total) involved in projects targeting NEETs and/or young people in general. Specifically, the study involved local actors in associations working with young people, youth centres, cooperatives working with young people, Informagiovani/Spazi Giovani and other organisations identified by the municipality in order to collect information with the aim of transforming it into good practice.
- **Focus group:** Seven focus groups were set up, some with young people experiencing social and labour exclusion (NEET); others with young students or workers (18-26 years old).

The table below shows the results in an aggregated manner for geographical origin but divided for type of respondent and instrument used.

	Stakeholder interviews	Student/worker focus group	NEET focus groups
Turin	8	1 (6 participants)	No availability
Genoa	8	1 (mini focus: 4 participants)	No availability
Bari	8	1 (mini focus: 4 participants)	1 (mini focus: 4 participants)
Giugliano (NA)	8	2 (6 participants and 1 mini focus: 4 participants)	1 (mini focus: 4 participants)

2. RESULTS OF PHASES 2 AND 3

2.1

RESULTS OF STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS (PHASE 2)

A wide range of issues were addressed and interesting points for reflection emerged. Five relevant thematic areas were identified: a) Current interventions; b) Strategies to intercept NEETs and their evaluation; c) Proposals for the integration and improvement of strategies; d) Institutions involved; e) Communication related to interception.

A) CURRENT INTERVENTIONS

Most of the stakeholders interviewed stated that they were aware of active projects and policies for their city, both in terms of young people in general and NEETs and the world of work. However, a **clear difference between the two northern cities and the southern cities** emerges. In the former, in fact, there are mainly two policies mentioned: the first for both is **Youth Guarantee**, with local projects second.

The **situation in the South is rather different**. With the exception of two interviewees, one from Giugliano and one from Bari, **Youth Guarantee is hardly mentioned**, and no other structured local policies are mentioned. Instead, the interviewees claim to be aware of **initiatives that are limited and local**, carried out by the associations to which they belong.

B) STRATEGIES TO INTERCEPT NEETS AND RESPECTIVE EVALUATIONS

In general, the interviews carried out point to a **strong difficulty in engaging young NEETs**. In any case, the interviewees from Genoa and Turin presented more structured methods of engagement than the interviewees from Giugliano and Bari. The interception strategies include:

- Reports and dispatches from associations and organisations, public help desks in social spaces, communication in the media and on social networks in particular, leaflets and materials distributed in social spaces, word of mouth between peers.

C) PROPOSALS FOR INTEGRATING AND IMPROVING STRATEGIES

A number of **proposals** emerged **for improving the ways in which NEETs are intercepted**. The need to strengthen engagement strategies was expressed and underlined as urgent and important in all four cities surveyed. For the northern cities, these actions are aimed at strengthening and developing the strategies already in place:

- **To network more between associations and bodies active on the NEET issue** at municipal and district level, to collaborate more and in a more systematic way. It would be useful to set up regular round table discussions on the NEET issue, involving all the bodies that have a role to play in dealing with the problem. The size of the round table is envisaged as extending to the district or at most the municipal level (a larger size is unrealistic).
- **Communicating through posters, billboards in public places:** in addition to communicating the existence of programmes related to the NEET problem, posters would give it real public visibility, fostering collective awareness, weakening the sense of stigma and loneliness and reducing barriers to recognising the problem and accessing pathways out of it.
- **Profiling and monitoring of potential NEETs from compulsory education onwards** and from higher education onwards for preventive purposes. Young people who have dropped out of school should be reported or at least registered in order to provide a list of them to structures that can in time bring them back onto a training and vocational orientation pathway. This is to prevent them from gradually losing contact with the institutions and from not knowing where to go when they want to find a job or simply support.
- **Building bridges between the end of higher education and the adult world**, offering young people points of reference and all-round support (not only in terms of training and work).

It is crucial to assess what is on offer to NEETs. It is well known that the job market is far from healthy at present: the demand for employment is much higher than the supply. Often people with high skills and educational qualifications find themselves having to accept jobs for which they are overqualified, further reducing the employability of NEETs who face more obstacles. Consequently, when it comes to intercepting young NEETs, some aspects have to be taken into account:

- **Offering strong guarantees during the outreach phase regarding the quality of the work/training experience** and the real possibility that it will be transformed into a contract/job with adequate performance, because without strong guarantees on the outcome, outreach is difficult. If the path followed by the NEET is not successful (i.e. the NEET is not able to find a job), the young person experiences disillusionment which inevitably lowers trust in services and makes re-engagement more difficult.

- **Greater focus on the phase in which young people are supported in training and finding work** during the transitions in their lives, by encouraging access to vocational training courses that allow them to “learn a trade” when there have been no other opportunities to do so (e.g. continuing their studies).
- **Co-construction, together with local associations**, of sports and recreational events that encourage the participation of many young people. These events, in addition to the above-mentioned activities and acting as a kind of catalyst, aim to raise awareness and promote interventions and labour policies and create real moments of outreach through registration on projects dedicated to young NEETs.

But you quantify, because they will come to sign up, so you will engage to talk, so you, for example, I mean, you the municipality, your objective is to intercept a demographic, the NEETs, in every neighbourhood where you organise a football tournament; you say to the contact person, “Look when you go to note down their data, ask this question too, ask what role a person has, so we see name, surname, profession, student, status”. Okay, and so you already have a name, you have something you can quantify, and relying on what? The dream you have given them, a super tournament for a prize that could be a five-day holiday for the whole team. (Giugliano, Interview 1)

- **Strengthening street education:** young NEETs do not often gather in cultural spaces (libraries, municipal halls, etc.) but instead use the streets a lot. In this respect, it could be useful for the various associations to set up stalls and gazebos in the main squares and actively talk to these young people. This can also be an opportunity to allow NEETs to register for the various programmes made available (e.g. Youth Guarantee).

The first strategy would be to create events in the town square, in the style of square demonstrations, let's say, square assemblies, with posters. (Giugliano, Interview 3)

You have to go directly to talk to them, you have to have one-to-one contact as much as possible [...] and try to talk to people, not only directly to young people but also to grandparents, parents, shopkeepers, and then go to bars where young people go, in short, meet all parties that can help catch the attention of a young person. (Genoa, Interview 5).

- **Massive increase in leafleting**, targeting a large number of areas: schools, gyms, swimming pools, sports centres, town squares and the street in general. This will extend the possibility of reaching different target groups of young people.

However, the strategies presented here must be acted upon simultaneously on several fronts. The term “NEET” encompasses different types of young people characterised by various socio-cultural and family backgrounds and wide-ranging work and non-work experiences, partly due to their edu-

cational qualifications and very different motivational levels. Consequently, according to the majority of the interviewees, it is crucial to diversify the ways of engaging these young people rather than set one target. Only this way can we increase the number of NEETs engaged, across the whole spectrum of that diverse category.

D) INSTITUTIONS

The main institutions involved in most of the activities described by the interviewees are associations and the third sector. These were found to be fundamental interlocutors for the realisation and implementation of the main projects.

However, three major players are absent:

- Schools
- Job centres
- Local authority

The interviewees hope for greater supervision of youth and employment policies by these institutions in the future. Schools represent a precious opportunity to intercept a large number of young people and play a decisive role in the transition to the world of work. It could be an opportunity to raise awareness and promote existing policies and projects and, as a preventive measure, make boys and girls aware of these issues.

Policies should be a little more precise... Schools are essential... They should be reinforced in areas where children only continue beyond the third year of secondary school because they are obliged to do so. (Bari, Interview 2)

At the same time, the job centre could be a proactive entity in the area, participating in events organised by third sector associations and acting as an institution that approaches young people rather than a passive institution waiting for them to approach it. At the same time, municipalities should be more open to partnering with local associations and organisations. Partnership does not only lead to greater collaboration, but also to a streamlining and simplification of the bureaucratic machinery in favour of the organisations implementing the various policies and interventions. The municipality must be a facilitator, not a constraint.

E) COMMUNICATION RELATED TO INTERCEPTION

Regarding the communication channels to be used, once again the online world predominates. Re-

spondents suggested that an effective way to reach NEETs is to build effective social media campaigns (mainly Instagram and TikTok, plus Facebook to intercept older NEETs). At the same time, the idea has emerged of using certain influencers to convey the necessary information. Obviously, in this case as well, it is very important to vary these people as much as possible to expand the number of young people intercepted. As already emphasised above, communication between peers is again valued, but trusted figures are also important in this respect (friends, relatives).

Some stakeholders also suggest an increase in newspaper advertising. This medium does not seem to be very effective in intercepting NEETs, but it is a good tool for reaching relatives and parents.

2.2

NEET AND NON-NEET FOCUS GROUP RESULTS (PHASE 3)

The focus groups also generated very interesting information and, above all, gave direct access to the voice of young people as the most qualified experts on their own condition. The main issues that emerged were grouped into three themes: a) knowledge, awareness and perception of the NEET issue; b) main issues concerning youth policies; c) present activities and proposals for improving NEET interventions.

A) KNOWLEDGE, AWARENESS AND PERCEPTION OF THE NEET ISSUE

From the focus groups emerges the concept of a NEET as a young man or woman who is neither studying nor working. Young people mainly state that being in the NEET condition is not a personal characteristic or intrinsic to people's motivation, but rather a situation in which one finds oneself for various reasons. They are also aware that this situation is experienced with a certain amount of suffering by those who find themselves in it.

Because in many cases it is also a difficult experience for people in this condition. There may even be an element of shame. So before... Always manage meetings in such a way that the people who fall into this category... can talk about it. Also maybe explain their own motivations... (Non-NEET FG, Bari)

These mainly include the family context, the social context, individual problems that led to an interruption in education and the lack of support for young people from schools as institutions during the school-to-work transition.

This is difficult because, in my opinion, some of these people... It has to do with the small-town mentality here. The mother says to the son, "Stay here, don't worry, I'll take care of you". So not much importance is placed on trying to emancipate oneself or become independent. (Non-NEET FG 2, Giugliano)

With regard to the family issue, the economic aspect seems to play an important role whether the socio-economic status is low or high. In the first case, reduced opportunities may oblige the young person to interrupt their studies in order to devote themselves to their family, helping financially with occasional work. However, these young people, according to the participants, would not turn away from a job opportunity. The situation is different for those who come from wealthier families and who see work as compensation and recognition of their value: for example, these young men and women tend to refuse job offers where the wages are low. Many of the interviewees also stated that, once they found themselves in the NEET category, their sense of self-efficacy and their motivation began to diminish.

As a result, the young people became increasingly isolated and avoid interaction with the outside world, which they see as lacking in resources and a source of many, perhaps too many, disappointments (low wages, insecure contracts, few rights and even undeclared work).

But I know a lot of people, for example, who do not study and do not work, and who may have been at a standstill for several years. And so, in my opinion, here again the class distinction makes itself felt. Since if one needs money to live on, it is normal to jump in somewhere. Whereas if someone doesn't have the urgency... they tend to wrap themselves in cotton wool a bit more. Maybe looking for a more suitable job. (Non-NEET FG, Bari)

It is useless for me to go to work to be exploited. Why should I go to work for four euros an hour... if I'm not that desperate. So, first of all, an economic starting point, in my opinion, also makes a difference here. And then there is also a lot of... Really... Discouragement, mistrust maybe... Maybe this is the most suitable term... Towards the world of work in general. And also with regard to the ideas that you... in this case, do not have about your own future. (Non-NEET FG, Bari)

With regard to the social causes, the young people interviewed also attach great importance to the context in which they are born and grow up and to the resources and tools available to them.

[...] I lack the freedom to express myself as I would like to because I am surrounded by my own context and my own ghetto, which has obviously led me to become discouraged, because it becomes a vicious circle, doesn't it? We live on micro-motivations, so if something goes well for me then I can live off that motivation and things can snowball from there, but if I get dragged into a negative vortex, of negativity, as I said, we always head into a worse situation. So the truth is in the middle, but certainly in my opinion, the key word is freedom to re-endorse yourself and free your mind for a moment, to have full freedom to decide; full freedom is acquired when you have all the same tools as... When everyone has the same tools to be able to start their own path. (Non-NEET FG 2, Giugliano)

I think that the NEETs... Well, they seem to be in this condition because... That is, they are in this condition because of various factors... Partly because... I read a very interesting article on the fact that living in small towns... shapes you. The mentality of those who live in small towns is a little bit more oriented to the family, a little bit more reluctant to leave the comfort zone. In short, they're not... Compared to those who live in the city... in the main cities... It's a little bit to do with this. Basically, it's a little bit to do with where you're from. (Non-NEET FG 2, Giugliano)

In this regard, they also state that the conditions in the world of work at the moment are not at all promising and that if one starts from a fragile base, one will hardly be able to compete with those who arrive more prepared to face the challenges of the "adult" world.

Also because let's say that... the current offer... in most cases, it's... difficult to get offered a contract... for your first experience of working... I think it's one in a million, and you have to be

very good... I mean one... It hardly ever happens something like that...[...] Or you have to go to the North, but not everyone succeeds. (Non-NEET FG 1, Giugliano)

In the NEET focus groups, in addition to what was mentioned above and common to the other focus groups, a focus on individual characteristics emerged. They stated that many times a young person finds him/herself in the NEET condition because he/she has had problems of a psychological nature, which have forced him/her to stop or have somehow lowered his/her motivation, from which he/she has not been able to recover. They also stress that it is not possible to lump all these young people together under one category:

And it goes back to the main cause, in my opinion, that can interfere with this... which is psychological causes. Stress, anxiety, depression, burnout... these are issues that are not dealt with in depth. They are very much underestimated and, to a large extent in my opinion, derive from the capitalist system in which we find ourselves immersed. From the excessive pressure and lack of calm in our environments. Also the cities, in my opinion... Things that accumulate and in the end make the young person in question feel completely powerless, and especially powerless compared to his/her peers... who might flaunt their successes on Instagram, on social media, and so this whole chain of social, economic and political motivation... political no, more cultural, drags many people down. (NEET FG, Bari)

Only in the municipality of Giugliano did young people distinguish between NEETs who correspond to the previously mentioned characteristics and a second category. The latter is made up of young people who, according to them, are “slackers” who are inactive during the day and often gather in the evening at outdoor meeting places. They do not attribute characteristics such as low self-esteem, low motivation or lack of self-efficacy to them, but rather a degree of conceit and arrogance.

There are a lot of people, groups of guys who spend a lot of time outside the bars and actually I wonder what they do at night, in the evening in the bars, and a lot of them also feel “cool” because they don't do anything, and... they think they are “fooling” the system. (Non-NEET FG 2, Giugliano)

According to the interviewees, these types of NEETs frequently engage in petty crime and illegal activities and very often disturb the peace. They are seen as “sly” people who are not interested in finding a serious and challenging job but in receiving benefits and living their lives on the edge of legality. Finally, the young people reported that although NEET rates are high, they are overestimated because most of them work illegally.

F1: Well, then there are also people who work, that is... They are criminals, I mean (laughs) in the sense that they do not declare.

F2: Definitely my neighbours (laughs)

M1: Oh, we are always talking about Giugliano in Campania, eh.

I: You say, F1, there is a, a percentage who are officially NEET but who do maybe work illegally...

M1: At least 30-40%.

F1: Yes, because it would be impossible... (Non-NEET FG 2, Giugliano)

These days it is convenient to work illegally, in my opinion, also at the level of... Because they mentioned the Reddito di cittadinanza [minimum income guaranteed by the state]... People who today take two salaries, because the state has given a figure, even one thousand euros for a family that is in fact already working. A husband and a wife working illegally, they have the salary of a doctor. We are talking up to three thousand euros... for example. These are enormous figures, but it has happened, and I see it today: there is a husband who earns one thousand euros, his wife five hundred and they receive one thousand five hundred... Some people do not have the opportunity and do not receive anything... even if in my opinion here it is a mistake on the part of the state to give the income to everybody, without knowing and seeing or really investigating the situation of the family. (Non-NEET FG 1, Giugliano)

Many young people who are registered as NEET do not adhere to the proposed policies or projects indicated because they are already participating in the underground economy which does not allow them to participate in further activities. This is reported by the interviewees as a crucial factor. Illegal work is described as a vicious circle into which young people fall, as the local job market does not offer any valid alternatives. This illegal way of working pays very low wages for very heavy working hours.

Reaching 30, 35 years old and not knowing what to do... must be a difficult solution, so then... this could open the doors to... paths that are pushing or surpassing the boundaries of the law. (Non-NEET FG 1, Giugliano)

In addition, many young men and women, mainly from the city of Turin, stated that working in the underground economy was an almost obligatory stage in entering the world of work. Not only do they confirm this to be their first working experience, but they also point out their lack of knowledge about the rules of the world of work, both in terms of contracts and wages and of workers' rights. In fact, they state that, if they had had more knowledge about these aspects, they would not have accepted that type of work but would have asked for more protection and, if the response was negative, would have quietly refused the job.

B) MAIN TOPICS OF YOUTH POLICY

On the topic of youth policies, several issues are highlighted. First of all, the issue of school. School was considered equally by young men and women, both NEET and non-NEET, as not very useful with regard to work in several respects.

- **Orientation:** The respondents did not have a satisfactory orientation experience. They did not feel supported by their schools. Indeed some of them stated that they were even refused permission to go to university halls or open-day events. Many of them claim to have left school without a clear idea of what to do next.
- **Knowledge of the world of work and career opportunities:** Another issue that is reported as problematic is knowledge of the world of work, i.e. a greater understanding of which sectors are most likely to be employable, which study pathways offer the greatest possibilities and whether, considering the context in which one lives, an academic path is recommended or actually considered unnecessary.
- **Job-seeking skills:** schools are strongly criticised for not having taught them how to look for work and the skills required (e.g. writing a CV and covering letter, how a contract works and the different kind of contracts).
- **Psychological support:** Finally, the school career, especially towards the end, was very complex and in some ways painful for them. Deciding “what to do when they grow up” not only requires them to confront practical aspects but various complex and fragile emotional aspects as well, which put the person in a state of vulnerability and confusion from which it is difficult to emerge in a positive, satisfactory way, or even to emerge at all. This must help young men and women find their own “vocation”.

On what can be done first to go and resolve the actual problem: how schools should actually become a place where preparation for the world of work is guaranteed, but in a concrete way. A system that teaches you to be more active in life, because in any case our school systems tend to see us as passive individuals. (Non-NEET FG, Genoa)

In my opinion, we would also need to work on the psychological side. So, I don't know, either after high school or maybe in the penultimate year, to start preparing them with some course on emotions, on managing emotions, something at a psychological level. (Non-NEET FG, Genoa)

Another priority issue for young people is labour supply, which is a serious problem in many Italian contexts. The main point is that it is difficult to engage a young man or woman if the offer from the other side is not secure or attractive. On the one hand, investments are suggested to create jobs and increase supply. For example, aid for self-entrepreneurship, development of the territory for tourism purposes, redevelopment of agricultural areas; as well as incentives for companies already

present in the area but aimed at hiring people rather than simple underpaid internships that do not restore dignity and end up increasing demotivation. On the other hand, as has already emerged from the interviews with stakeholders, more information is required about the policies and projects that these young people can engage with.

The latter theme is linked to that of the creativity and participation of young people in this process, i.e. creating discussion groups, meetings between associations and events where the young person invited is not a spectator, but an active player in the co-construction of innovative ideas that are in some way heard and valued.

Finally, encourage meetings between young people and companies in order to increase knowledge of the world of work that does not only involve schools, so as to be able to reach those young people who are not on the radar of the education system.

C) PRESENT ACTIVITIES AND PROPOSALS FOR IMPROVING NEET

In general, the young people interviewed had little knowledge of the main measures to tackle the issue of work. Some of them say they have heard about Youth Guarantee and some other local projects. The Civilian Service is considered a useful and important measure especially in the municipalities of Genoa and Turin. For the rest, a worrying lack of information in terms of youth and labour policies emerges. An interesting fact is non-NEETs were not the only ones to confirm this (if they were, it might have been explained by the fact that, being in education or employment, they did not feel the need to approach these measures), but NEETs also reported as much.

While on the one hand, the Civilian Service is valued, on the other, the few who know about Youth Guarantee strongly criticise it as it does not offer continuity and job security, sometimes feeding into vicious circles to the detriment of young people and in favour of the companies and employers. This is described as an extremely discouraging factor.

The main proposals include:

- **Increasing training courses:** Almost all participants expressed the need for institutions (especially the municipalities) to equip themselves to provide vocational training for the acquisition of skills and immediate entry into the world of work.

But I think it would be important for the region to be able to organise free courses as well, because often the courses that exist are of little interest to young people, or often those that are of interest are paid for and therefore those who cannot afford them cannot start the course. (Non-NEET FG, Genoa)

- **Improving facilities such as employment centres and youth information centres:** these institutions are often too distant from young people and their real needs and should become more youth-friendly both in terms of their proposals and communication strategies. It is urgent that these organisations align themselves more closely with young people, as the previous paragraphs emphasise, shifting their role from passive reception to active promotion.

It would be necessary to improve the efficiency of the employment service in Giugliano, because I am now 23. I haven't been away since I was 18... and I have worked, let's say, in these years, but I have never been called by the employment service, and I know other people, even after 20 years, they have never been called... So let's say it is as if it was a... mythological structure where everyone goes to register, but then no one ever hears from them. (Non-NEET FG 1, Giugliano)

- **Simplify calls for applications and make them easier to find:** It would be difficult for a young person to approach the world of work on his or her own through such complicated calls for application. It would be more helpful to display posters around town that publicise both the job opportunities and the organisations to be contacted.

They are far too long and written in a language that we don't relate to in any way! (Non-NEET FG, Genoa)

- **Increasing the effectiveness of the training objective of internships:** they often become pretexts for "increasing the workforce" instead of real training programmes which also allow the company itself to enhance the value of the trained resource.
- **To create opportunities for psychological support** that not only help young people to motivate themselves and engage in the different projects but also to experience the project with awareness so that it is actually a path of personal growth and development.

As a social policy, we could also... organise free psychological support. I am a person who has always worked, has never had a day off. Holidays do not exist in my house. My parents have passed it on to me... For me the motto "work ennobles man" is true, because today, I worked a lot, I worked well and I came back home very happy. So, for me, it's true. So if a young person is in such a discouraged condition that they don't even want to look for a job, for me they need free psychologic support, because that costs a lot. So I would insert this in a social plan absolutely, because they cannot be a happy person. (Non-NEET FG 2, Giugliano) La gente non ha coscienza di cosa siano il benessere e il malessere psicologico... Non c'è cultura di questa cosa e quando si parla di NEET si pensa a delle persone pigre. Mentre non sono persone pigre ma che hanno disfunzioni personali nelle relazioni con l'esterno. (FG NEET, Bari)

People don't know what mental wellbeing and mental discomfort are... There is no culture of this and when people talk about NEETs they think of lazy people. They are not lazy people, but they have personal dysfunctions in their relations with the outside world. (NEET FG, Bari)

- **Creating facilities and proposing incentives that can enable the creation of local start-ups and thus increase the supply of jobs, making greater use of local opportunities.**

Let's say that we could start from the resources of a territory... The municipality of Giugliano has more than agriculture... Let's start from the resources. We have an archaeological site... a railway station, agriculture, we grow the Annurca apple, a typical product of Giugliano... We have resources, like many other places, but we do not know, that is, the municipal authority has never thought in recent years to... you know, to be proactive with people. That's what is missing. It has never thought to say, "Okay, I have a lot of land...[...]" we have to make young people understand that the local area has to be experienced and there is a future, there is a future in Giugliano. (Non-NEET FG 2, Giugliano)

Real incubators, with real micro-professions. There, you start to understand the aptitudes of young people, you start to put them all together, those who can go to work and who can already be the first operational team. There, I can show you how start-ups are born, but you also need training to find that, because you have to overcome many other obstacles. (Non-NEET FG 2, Giugliano)

- **Challenging prejudices about the world of work, involving and familiarising young people with "ethical" companies that embrace anti-exploitation policies. At the same time, taking action towards those companies that are not ethical and those structures that encourage undeclared work and illegal activities.**

A fair salary, in the sense that if I work for the company, and I work 24,18,12 hours a week, I don't first of all get a fixed-term contract, renewed as many times as is legally possible, and then the internship and then... No, because if I work for you, a company, and you know very well that I work for you, you give me a permanent contract, for example. In the end, the company takes advantage of the benefits offered by the law, but maybe if I were an entrepreneur... I would focus a bit more on... on the salary of my employee, without taking all the vouchers. Against vouchers, first of all. Secondly, if I know that I have a valid employee, it's clear. I mean we're not talking about an employee for six months, then if I like them, I keep them, if I don't like them, I don't. (Non-NEET FG 2, Giugliano)

I mean, starting from non-exploitation. [...] I would focus on anti-exploitation policies. (NEET FG, Bari)

- **Create networks of associations that promote legality and inform young people about the risks of undeclared work, but above all about the advantages and be-**

benefits of applying for contract work.

On the other hand, from the point of view of communication, the main points they emphasised are:

- Social campaigns using Facebook, Instagram and TikTok.
- Organisation of events enabling and encouraging youth gatherings, on the one hand, and promoting targeted projects, on the other. According to the interviewees, these could also be excellent opportunities to collect the names of young people who are not studying or working, if necessary, in a non-direct but anonymous way (by means of a form to be placed in an urn, perhaps to overcome psychological resistance to a direct registration request).
- Street activities and street education: try to go directly to young people in the places they congregate to promote initiatives or to set up information stands which, being already there, can encourage them to approach.
- Increasing the presence of leaflets and posters on the streets: it is thought that this method can reach a large number of NEETs, not least because of the wide range of personal characteristics and therefore of places frequented.
- Thinking about engaging directly with young people through direct contact, where possible, and also reaching out to their families, relatives and friends i.e. the figures that unmotivated NEETs trust, listen to and are influenced by.
- To create opportunities for “successful” young people to talk about their experience and be a positive inspiration for boys and girls.

The concept is to give positive examples; that is the key: show ultra-positive examples, start sending successful young people to schools, don't send structured companies, start letting a young person talk. (Non-NEET FG 2, Giugliano)

Well, I would prefer someone who could call me and... maybe inform me about this initiative, because then if I have to go and look for it, as XX said, it creates the problem of, who sees this? Do all young people see this? This doesn't always happen... (Non-NEET FG 1, Giugliano)

In conclusion, young people state that communication and engagement strategies must be absolutely diversified in order to reach as many NEETs as possible, thus enlarging the target group.

FINAL SUMMARY: MAIN INDICATIONS FROM THE STUDY

The first interesting fact to emerge from this study is the combination of, on the one hand, the aspects shared by all cities considered and both target audiences (stakeholders and young people) and, on the other, aspects that are more specific to the location of each city (North and South) and the various points of view compared.

Among the common aspects to emerge both in the North and in the South, from both stakeholders and young people, and also from the in-depth analysis of the knowledge possessed by the municipal administration and deriving from the examination of key past or current experiences, certain particularly relevant aspects can constitute a sort of reflective and practical guide for services and the third sector.

We comment on them briefly below:

- 1. The network.** In the context of proximity strategies, there is a strong (and shared) need to structure and strengthen a network between the municipality and associations, organisations and bodies operating in the area and interacting at various levels with young people. The network's function is to establish an alliance in the area to monitor the NEET phenomenon, share and update information ("mapping" both the places, with physical and social coordinates, and the activities conducted with NEETs), compare the effectiveness of the ways of attracting and engaging NEETs (which figures, methods and languages were most effective in the area at engaging them; and what were the greatest weaknesses and problems encountered?); develop the foundation for collaboration on joint projects..
- 2. Territorial support.** As its reference point, the network must have a local centre in the municipality (in cooperation with the local authority) that becomes both a visible (not only institutional but also taking a "street education" approach) and reliable point of reference on youth policies and programmes for NEETs and a coordination centre for the network (consolidating it, stimulating its activities, promoting training for network operators/educators/facilitators in contact with NEETs, monitoring the NEET phenomenon through the network, helping to strengthen the relationship with young people in the area, raising awareness among families and communities and conveying information on opportunities at local level). The figure of the "youth worker" is particularly suitable as an integral element of territorial protection activities (<https://agenziagiovani.it/erasmus/youth-worker/>). It is essential to create the fertile ground in which NEET-targeted projects can be successfully implemented. In this way, when a project is financed, it is more effective to present it to the local network, exploit existing connections in order to reach potential beneficiaries, give guidance on how to address them and present the project (it is not enough to report "cases") and be able to a

collaborative effort to reach out and engage NEETs in the project (a significant obstacle for many disengaged, unmotivated, highly vulnerable young people).

- 3. Collaboration between institutions.** Collaboration between institutions is emphasised by all interlocutors. The potential actors/partners in the network are manifold and generally include local authorities, the third sector, associations, social and educational services and the various local organisations working with young people. Specific suggestions indicate the importance of the following being involved in the network: schools and training centres; youth associations and young people from the various organisations in the network; associations working with foreign communities; employment centres (or at least it is strongly recommended that the network maintain close contact with them). It must also be able to establish relationships with parents, teachers, social services, young people doing their civilian service and the police. The research also shows that employment centres and the Informagiovani service need a thorough overhaul to better align themselves with young people and have a real possibility of entering into dialogue with them.
- 4. The role of operators/tutors.** The operators involved in the NEET projects have a key role that goes beyond the technical. This means that they act as tutors in the relationship, paying particular attention to establishing trust with the young people involved through excellent skills in listening and emotional support. This means providing specific training for the operators on this particular aspect of developing the relationship and, specifically, on managing groups so that they can support the young people throughout a “training” experience in the broad sense rather than just in finding employment.
- 5. The role of the peer group as a tool for learning and growth.** The group is a very useful working tool in social contexts offering potential positive effects for the individual and the group itself. Central aspects of the group such as sharing, circularity, mirroring, emotional resonance, conflict, rituals and the common goal are all aspects that lead to or promote the “positive development” of each participant. The perceived similarity between the people involved in the group is the basis of its effectiveness: feeling some commonality with the other people involved, sharing common problems or experiences with them, “seeing” each other’s actions/situations etc. all promote the credibility and effectiveness of the educational and social activities proposed. The importance of the group and of the relationship with peers was strongly emphasised by the young people involved in this survey (as well as by the stakeholders), who see their peers as models through which they can reinterpret their own experiences and thereby, on the one hand, acquire knowledge and skills of various kinds and, on the other, change their own behaviour and attitudes. In light of this, it becomes necessary to prioritise the horizontal group dimension when sharing knowledge and experiences among the members of a group, starting from the consideration that equality can represent a push towards change. In this sense, the group becomes a real “learning community”, in which each person contributes cooperatively to the building of knowledge, creating a climate of reciprocal co-construction, thanks to tools and precise guidance (from the group leader) to lead each group member to a greater awareness of the environment in which they belong and of the

actors involved in the learning process.

- 6. Psychological attention.** In addition to these key aspects for the improvement of the general framework of the interventions designed for NEETs, a further element was mentioned by the various participants as a whole but especially highlighted by the young people. It is interesting to note that they, when asked about their own condition or that of their peers in greater difficulty, often took very clear and somewhat unpredictable positions. First of all, the awareness of the highly complex situation underlying the NEET condition: young people understand very clearly that more than a lack of job opportunities is at play, and various psychological and relational factors underly this exclusion from the world of training and employment. In this regard, they propose and ask for support that they call “psychological support”, thus fully recognising the importance of support during a phase of transition which, in conditions of discomfort (mental, family and social) can undermine outreach attempts which operate on a more (or exclusively) cognitive and concrete level. Hence the need to devise interventions that always include a psychological component and support (in the form of tutors or groups) as a fundamental part intertwined with the more concrete need for training and/or work.
- 7. Diversified strategies of engagement and intervention.** The insight that emerges from this research, confirming what is widely acknowledged based on the experience of working with NEETs, is the need and inevitability of diversified intervention strategies. This diversification should take into account at least two aspects: local difference (North and South first of all, but also the difference between urban and rural centres, which was not possible to capture in this specific project) and the difference between “types of NEET”, also mentioned in the introduction to this report. On this last point, the participants in this study speak of targeting, profiling and typologies; all expressions that clearly reflect the great complexity underlying the NEET condition. It is no longer possible, therefore, to speak of NEETs in a global sense and plan common interventions; it is time to translate this awareness into practice by diversifying the intervention measures according to the specific target group of NEETs to be addressed and paying attention to the specific context in question. This should also apply to large-scale projects (e.g. national or international), with a view to providing diversified actions within a single frame of reference. As frequently emphasised in various passages of the study, the NEET demographic is complex and highly differentiated, exhibiting local specificities. Local experience is therefore important, but so too is targeting communication within proximity processes to the specific young person in question, differentiating the offer to reflect the needs and desires expressed, so that the individual recognises it as offering value to them (rather than simply presenting it as a project for disadvantaged young people).
- 8. Gradual pathways.** In addition to what has been said above about the need to diversify interventions, we must also introduce a certain gradualness to the processes of engaging young NEETs. Many projects currently provide for engagement that begins immediately and calls for long-term commitment, which could discourage young people and undermine retention. Given the complexity of the process of engaging and retaining young NEETs, a possible corrective measure could be

to introduce “gradual” pathways involving series of steps towards the project that gradually increase in intensity. The first step could involve activities that arouse interest, e.g. socialisation and entertainment, and then move on to raising awareness of the topics of interest (work, training, social inclusion, etc.) and finally request a commitment.

- 9. Continuity and follow-up of projects.** It is important for all young people, in particular for the most demotivated and vulnerable, that we avoid suddenly showing up and asking them to take part in a programme. Instead, the invitation/suggestion is more effective when it comes from an operator/educator with whom there is an ongoing relationship (knowledge and trust) and/or a young person with whom he/she can identify, who uses methods and languages close to the young person in the NEET condition, perhaps even having come out of a similar condition in the past. This is why it is important that the beneficiaries of previous programmes remain in contact with the network and can be called upon to tell their stories and become an active part of local projects.

- 10. The systematisation of information and communication.** Other relevant indications concern the valorisation, integration and systematisation of information that the municipality can already access, such as details of NEET young people in families receiving Reddito di cittadinanza (minimum income guaranteed by the state), but also information from schools on school drop-outs or students at risk of leaving the education system with vulnerabilities that expose them to the NEET condition. Local proximity can also enable operators to make effective use of digital tools and social networks connected to the area and local communities. However, it is also crucial to combine this with information from national platforms (or web apps) that can provide general information but also interact with local areas (e.g. with local cards dedicated to young people that provide discounts on services, award points for social activities and allow them to build up a portfolio of recognised skills). Finally, there should be a special focus on convincing and attractive proposals for young people who are currently working illegally.