



Protocol

Rapid Evidence Assessment Protocol for the Meta-Analysis of Initiatives, Interventions and Programmes That Target Rural NEETs

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Abstract: The acronym NEET refers to youths aged between 15 and 34 years old who are excluded from employment, education or training. However, historically, the NEET demographic has been depicted as a largely homogenous group. Against this backdrop and given the dependency of rural economies on agricultural practices for survival, such practices have been in decline for a number of years, seriously threatening rural communities' sustainability. While these rural NEETs can present as registered unemployed and also within the reporting statistics of various different state-funded initiatives, interventions and programmes, in the case of Rural NEETs, there is a dearth of reporting categories that highlight the specificity of this group resulting in their presence being largely overlooked within official dissemination. In order to advance this emergent field of research, presented here is a Rapid Evidence Assessment protocol that will aid future work of the authors and for others to adapt and/or adopt.

Keywords: rural NEETs; rapid evidence assessment; protocol



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1. Introduction

The acronym NEET refers to youths aged between 15 and 34 years old who are excluded from employment, education and Training (Eurostat 2020). However, historically, the NEET (Not in Employment, Education and Training) demographic has been depicted as a largely homogenous group, and critically so (Furlong 2006). While, in recent years, more attention has been paid to the subtleties of in-group variability for this demographic, it has taken some time for re-examinations of the definition of NEETs to acknowledge a need to redefine the age range and resulted in a change from 16–18 years to 15–34 years. In addition to this, a broadening of the inclusion criteria across the newly defined age range has emerged with sub-classifications that focus on temporal and contextual conditions (Mascherini 2019)

Although several authors (Furlong 2006; Mascherini 2019) have extensively addressed the need to pay attention to NEETs' different trajectories and profiles, geographic criteria, namely origin, have been kept outside this discussion (Erdogan et al. 2021; Almeida and Simões 2020). In this context, scholars' indifference towards rural NEETs is puzzling, especially when taking into account international figures. Eurostat data from 2019, indicates that 13.6% of youths in EU28 aged 15–34 were NEETs. NEETs' distribution seems balanced across EU rural areas (14.7%) suburbs (14.1%) and cities (12.8%). Still, disparities across countries tell a very different story, showing a clear North/South divide on this matter. In Romania (21.7%), Italy (24.8%), Greece (25.6%) or Bulgaria (28.6%), one out of four or

one out of five youths living in the countryside are NEETs. These figures contrast with very low rural NEET rates in countries such as The Netherlands (5.6%), Austria (6.6%) and Sweden (7.2%). Thus, the sustainability of rural communities is pretty much at stake in countries where overall institutional support for young people is shrinking, less recurrent or inefficient (Bello and Cuzzocrea 2018; Walther 2006), notably in rural areas (Simões and do Rio 2020). This challenge is even more relevant considering that rural NEETs, as well as other groups of disadvantaged youths, are the largest share of those remaining in the countryside (Farrugia 2016). These youths are more affected by involuntary immobility (Carling and Schewel 2018), meaning that they are reluctant to stay in rural areas, but do not have the resources to leave. So, in short, their futures depend on the available opportunities. Matching these youths' needs for decent jobs with local resources.

Rural NEETs and the Agricultural Sector: Matching Needs and Resources

Against this backdrop and given the dependency of rural economies on agricultural practices for survival has been in decline for a number of years, rural communities face a serious threat to their long-term sustainability. It is now evident that attracting young people into agricultural professions is proving difficult. As a consequence, policy measures that aim to enhance the likelihood of rural employment for young people have been introduced in countries with the aim of reducing at-risk-poverty rates and supporting the long-term viability of rural economies (Eurostat 2020). This action is informed, in part, by the prevailing role of higher added value non-agricultural activities in planning sustainable living in rural areas where labour demands are disparate and dependent on a vibrant and socially interconnected rural ecosystem. Understanding these activities and the impact that they have is important if a concerted multi-level response to the challenges of rural NEETs is to be possible.

In theory, policies seem appropriate to improve rural NEETs' involvement in the sector across European countries, which can lead to a kind of voluntary immobility, meaning a willingness from these young people to stay and strive in rural areas. However, in practical terms, policy packages continue to fail to match the agriculture sector's needs for human capital with the employment needs of rural NEETs. This mismatch can be ascribed to a series of interrelated factors, with most of them remaining unaddressed by decision-making (Simões 2018; Simões and do Rio 2020; Mujčinović et al. 2021). One of them is the excessive protectionism of the sector that prevents newcomers with limited background knowledge of the sector such as NEETs from finding a job in the sector (Greer 2017). Aside from this, the inability and lack of resources of the local employment services to motivate these youths towards activities in the agriculture sector is well-documented (Shore and Tosun 2019). These limitations of employment services overlap formal educational systems that overemphasise labour market demands, to the detriment of community opportunities in the agriculture sector, meaning that local resources are not under the radar of potential professional choices promoted by school and training centres (Simões 2018). Moreover, families often resist the idea of seeing their children involved in agriculture, experiencing that possibility as a kind of failure in providing them with opportunities for a bright and successful future (Simões 2018). At the individual level, all of these barriers lead to the formation of negative stereotypes about the sector among youths as a mainly male-dominated professional area involving low wages and dirty, undifferentiated work (Simões 2018; Simões and do Rio 2020). However, when having the opportunity to be involved in training and agriculture activities, NEETs acknowledge that these images are oversimplifications of the real complexity that agriculture activities encompass (Simões and do Rio 2020).

Rural labour markets are structurally and distance specific and there are significant challenges associated with supporting such action (Unay-Gailhard and Bojnec 2021). They provide narrower and limited job offers for potential career development, often for relatively lower-skilled jobs in less proximity spatial locations (Rauhut and Littke 2016; Sano et al. 2020). Supporting cooperation among the various actors within the rural labour setting, or

rural ecosystem is challenging. The macro-level stakeholders include: the labour market; the education system; and local employment development initiatives, which face significant challenges in relation to removing labour market mismatches at rural and regional levels as employment and/or unemployment as a factor of social exclusion among youth can be more severe in rural areas (Bojnec 2021). This can be particularly challenging when weak family support is linked with weak formal support systems in the society creating mismatches between the education system and labour market integration (Matysiak 2022). At the micro-level, for rural youth, who fall into the NEET category and where the absence of opportunity in the rural context is persistent, they can often go unnoticed or hidden from view. While these rural NEETs can present as registered unemployed and also within the reporting statistics of various different state-funded initiatives, interventions and programmes, in the case of Rural NEETs, there is a dearth of reporting categories that highlight the specificity of this group resulting in their presence being largely overlooked within official dissemination (Pennonni and Bal-Domańska 2022).

In light of the above, the aim of developing this rapid review protocol is to help the research team, and others, to identify initiatives, interventions, and programmes that seek to address the specific challenges experienced by rural NEETs by asking the following review question: How do initiatives, interventions or programmes, which aim to re-establish participation in education, employment and training for young people aged between 15 and 34 years who experience marginalisation as a consequence of rural dwelling? The overall aim of this review process is to identify, synthesise and consider evidence of the impact of initiatives, interventions, or programmes that specifically target the re-engagement in education, employment and training of rural young people aged between 15 and 34 years. To achieve this the following specific actions will be taken:

- A rapid evidence assessment, a form of systematic review, using the protocol developed in this paper, will be carried out with a view to reviewing, synthesising and evaluating through a quality appraisal process evidence on the effects of initiatives, interventions, or programmes on rural NEETs.
- Estimation of the impact of initiatives, interventions or programmes on rural NEETs' relationship with education, employment and training.
- Identification of key characteristics of initiatives, interventions or programmes that mitigate rural isolation and marginalisation. Of particular interest are features of initiatives, interventions or programmes that impact NEETs' holistic wellbeing as a consequence of re-engagement with education, employment and training.
- Additional, emergent, impacts of reviewed initiatives, interventions or programmes targeted at rural NEET re-engagement with education, employment and training will also be investigated resulting in the identification of emergent gaps and needs for future research areas will also emerge.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Protocol and Registration

This rapid evidence assessment is informed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (Tricco et al. 2017) and UK Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) (King et al. 2022) publications that outline best practices for the development of Rapid Evidence Assessment. This protocol was submitted to the International Prospective Register for Systematic Reviews—PROSPERO and subsequently approved (Reg. No. CRD42021236794). Currently, there is no standardised reporting process for rapid reviews that are carried out. Consequently, this protocol adapted the PRISMA-P flow process as a framework to report on the findings of the review.

2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The research team is interested in identifying, synthesising and considering evidence of the impact of initiatives, interventions or programmes that specifically target the re-engagement of rural NEETs in three areas: education, employment and training. The

research team is primarily interested in the impact of initiatives, interventions, or programmes on rural NEETs' relationship (in sum or in part) with education, employment and training. Studies that are qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods will be included. Studies that do not include empirical data will not be included in this review. Following on from this, in order for publications and reports to be considered eligible for inclusion in this review the following inclusion and exclusion criteria, following on from the formation of the aforementioned research question using the PICO elements are useful: population, intervention, comparison, and outcomes. Therefore, the PICO model is applied:

Population: The review will focus on young people aged between 15 and 34 years who live in rural areas and who are not in education, employment and training at the time of the studies being carried out. Where studies include participants that fall outside of the above age range if the mean age range of the study falls between 15–34 years the study will be included. Where studies do not focus exclusively on rural NEETs, where the datasets presented by the study are not presented separately and where the authors cannot provide additional information the study will be excluded.

Intervention: Interventions will be considered if they adhere to the target population parameters. Studies that focus on formal, non-formal, informal, place-based learning, community engagement, outreach activities, media programmes, sports initiatives, enter-prise interventions, career pathway programmes and general educational initiatives, interventions and programmes. In addition, studies that incorporate combinations of the above will also be included.

Comparison: While it is unlikely that studies with concurrent control or comparison groups will emerge in the review process, if they are present, they will be included. If sub-group analysis is possible this will be explored specific to the impact of initiatives, interventions and programmes on NEETs' relationships with education, employment and training.

Outcomes: The impact of initiatives, interventions and programmes on NEETs' relationships with education in terms of re-engagement and/or progression with learning or employment outcomes will be included as will studies that report on the impact of initiatives, interventions and programmes on holistic wellbeing outcomes.

2.3. Search Strategy

As part of an initial investigation, the research team carried out an initial search for extant systematic reviews and meta-analyses. This initial search revealed a dearth of reviews and meta-analyses focusing on initiatives, interventions or programmes targeted at rural NEET re-engagement with education, employment and training. This systematic review will employ a standardised search strategy using defined terms within search strings (Table 1) developed by members of the research team. Databases deemed most likely to return a high number of relevant results will be searched. It is acknowledged by the research team that additional searches may be warranted. The following databases will be searched: Web of Science, SCOPUS, EBSCOhost, ERIC and ProQuest. Internet searching through Google Scholar will be carried out as well as forward and backward tracking of citations from studies that are included in the review. Hand searches of journals will be carried out if warranted. Where necessary, additional follow-up contact with authors, experts and research groups will further inform this review. The review will only include peer-reviewed studies published in English, however, if a study published in an alternate language is deemed relevant it will be included. Consequently, no grey literature will be included in this review. The result of the search will be downloaded and saved to Mendeley. Informed by PRISMA guidelines, duplicates will be removed. The titles and abstracts of all remaining studies will be screened by at least two independent reviewers informed by the study inclusion and exclusion criteria. Where a decision to include or exclude cannot be reached by the two independent reviewers, an additional reviewer will adjudicate. All results and screening process results will be documented in tabular form and communicated in a PRISMA flow diagram.

Table 1. Protocol Search Strings Developed by Research Team.

Search String	
S1	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND Adolescent*
S2	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND Child*
S3	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND Teen*
S4	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND Youth*
S5	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND Young*
S6	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND Student*
S7	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND "Minors"
S8	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND "Juvenile"
S24	S1 OR S2 OR S3 OR S4 OR S5 OR S6 OR S7 OR S8
S9	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND "NEET"
S10	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND Unemploy*
S11	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND "Socially vulnerable"
S12	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND "Socially excluded"
S13	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND "Disadvantaged"
S14	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND "Not in work"
S15	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND "Not in employment"
S16	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND "Not in education"
S25	S9 OR S10 OR S11 OR S12 OR S13 OR S14 OR S15 OR S16
S17	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND "Initiative"
S18	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND "Intervention"
S19	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND "Measure"
S20	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND "Study"
S21	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND "Pilot"
S22	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND "Policy"
S23	("Rural" OR Agri*) AND "Report"
S26	S17 OR S18 OR S19 OR S20 OR S21 OR S22 OR S23
S27	S24 AND S25
S28	S24 AND S26
S29	S25 AND S26
S30	S24 AND S25 AND S26

2.4. Data Extraction and Quality Appraisal

After the final research returns have been collated, two independent reviewers will read all titles and abstracts after duplicates have been removed. The titles and abstracts will be screened in accordance with inclusion and exclusion criteria. Where it is not possible to determine relevance from the title and abstract alone, at this stage, the full paper will be accessed to determine whether it should be included. Where there is a disagreement between reviewers, a third independent reviewer will review the paper and attempts will be made to resolve the disagreement through discussion. If, at this point, there is still disagreement the paper will be retained for future reference.

The next step in this process will be full paper screening. Where a paper is deemed not to meet the review inclusion criteria, it will be rejected following the dual appraisal method as described above. Papers that meet the inclusion criteria will have the following data extracted and highlighted in table format with brief descriptions where appropriate:

- Authorship
- Year of publication will be listed. This will be a time-limited study of 10 years.
- Aims of the study
- Sampling strategy and characteristics (also process of recruitment, dropout)
- Methodology
- Description of the interventions
- Key findings/outcomes
- Overall quality rating of the study using the CASP Appraisal Tool Checklist ([Majid and Vanstone 2018](#)).

2.5. Assessing the Risk of Bias

Initially, each study will be reviewed by two independent reviewers (SB & FS) for quality using the CASP Appraisal Tool Checklist (2018). The intention of the review is not to exclude studies on the basis of bias rather it is to note the quality of the studies being reviewed. To examine for selective reporting of results, papers will be examined for indicators of multiple uses of samples included in the papers. For example, this may include indicators that data have been drawn from larger projects, a published thesis, or other papers. Papers that are determined to fall under this category will be checked against alternate sources, where available, to which outcomes relevant to this review are being presented. Finally, GRADE-CERQual guidelines will also be followed in the assessment of outcome quality for methodological limitations, coherence, adequacy of data and relevance.

3. Conclusions

This rapid review protocol will identify, synthesise and consider evidence of the impact of initiatives, interventions or programmes that specifically target the re-engagement in education, employment and training of rural young people aged between 15 and 34 years. It will achieve this by providing a time-limited state-of-the-art evidence narrative style report, specific to the challenges experienced by rural NEETs, that will help those involved in policy development, policy response initiatives and proximal implementation. It is intended that, depending on the outcome of the review process, additional opportunities for innovation and/or research may be communicated to relevant stakeholders. Hence, they will be able to create a useful framework for embedding rural youth in the context of a much-needed structural transformation of rural communities.

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