



Empowering
young people



**Dialogue with stakeholders and
policymakers on rural youth, social and
digital inclusion of NEETs in the Danube
Region**

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About the YES Forum

Established in 2002, the YES Forum is a European network of national youth and social work organisations. We strive for a Europe where every young person, regardless of their background, has the skills and support they need to reach their full potential. We aim to influence relevant EU legislative, political, and funding processes while supporting our member organisations to use policies and funding to benefit disadvantaged young people in EU member states. Our work is rooted in a commitment to ensuring that youth and social policies are prioritised within the European Pillar of Social Rights, contributing to a fairer and more inclusive Europe.

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Introduction

"Because a Europe that leaves rural youth behind is a Europe that limits its own future. But a Europe that invests in them is a Europe that invests in itself." Csaba Borboly

From 17–19 November 2025, the YES Forum Policy Event "**Connecting regional realities with European strategies: advancing youth employment and social inclusion**" brought together more than 80 young people, youth and social workers, and professionals from over 15 European countries in Brussels. The event created a space for direct dialogue between grassroots actors and EU-level policymakers working on key initiatives such as the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the Anti-Poverty Strategy, and the Youth Guarantee. Central to the event was ensuring that young people could share their lived experiences and concerns, an essential step towards more inclusive and responsive European policymaking.

The 2025 Policy Event focused on rural NEETs (young people not in education, employment, or training) in the Danube Region, reflecting one of Europe's most pressing social challenges. Disparities between urban and rural youth continue to widen, while many rural areas lack adequate support structures to help young people transition into education, work, and active participation. Limited access to services, restricted mobility, digital divides, skills mismatches, and demographic decline increase the risk of social and economic exclusion for rural youth. At the same time, the region holds significant potential. Strong traditions of community engagement, youth-led initiatives, and local innovation coexist with strategic European cooperation frameworks such as the Interreg Danube Region Programme. This combination of challenges and opportunities makes the Danube Region a valuable testing ground for understanding how European strategies can effectively support young people at risk of exclusion.

Throughout the event, participants examined how European goals, such as reducing NEET rates below 9% by 2030, strengthening social rights, and revitalising rural areas, translate into concrete practice. The exchange was genuinely two-way: young people and youth workers deepened their understanding of EU policies, while policymakers gained first-hand insight into the everyday realities of working with rural NEETs.

The event's bridging role was exemplified by the presentation of the Back on Track project. Implemented by 13 partners across several countries, the project shows how regional cooperation can turn European social-rights principles into tangible local opportunities. Through outreach, mentoring, digital inclusion, and skills development, it demonstrates effective ways to support rural NEETs.

This report summarises the key discussions, insights, and recommendations from the event. It reflects a shared commitment to ensuring that no young person is left behind and that rural NEETs in the Danube Region are recognised not as a problem to be managed, but as young citizens whose potential is vital to Europe's future.

Day 1 - Connecting and getting into the topic

On the evening of 17 November, our welcome gathering brought together participants from over 15 countries, offering an important moment to connect and exchange experiences in preparation for the policy dialogues to come. Through interactive and engaging sessions, participants got to know each other and warmed up for the content of the following day.

More than 20 young people from YES Forum member organisations and associates travelled from across the EU to join the event. For most of them, it was the first time visiting Brussels and engage with EU stakeholders. They discovered Brussels through an EU-themed treasure hunt, visited the Parliamentarium and the European Parliament, and learnt how EU institutions shape daily life and how young citizens can influence political processes.

Day 2 – Connecting local realities with EU Strategies: Dialogue on Policy and Practice

Session 1: EU-level Initiatives to enhance social rights for vulnerable young people

Panelists:

- *Massimiliano Mascherini, Head of Social Policies Unit, Eurofound*
- *Urszula Romańska, Deputy Head of Unit D3 (Poland, Czech Republic & Slovakia), DG EMPL, European Commission*
- *Csaba Borboly, Vice-President, Harghita County Council; Second Vice-Chair, SEDEC Commission, European Committee of the Regions*
- *Caroline Lercher Tauber, Austria, Danube Youth Council*



The morning session on the 18th November, titled "*EU-level initiatives to enhance social rights for vulnerable young people*," provided a strong policy-oriented framework for the day and opened with a keynote address from **Massimiliano Mascherini (Eurofound)**. He unpacked the complex reality of being a NEET, highlighting structural barriers such as skills mismatches, limited employment opportunities, and persistent digital divides. He noted that digitalisation and labour shortages simultaneously create challenges and opportunities for vulnerable young people, stressing the importance of targeted policies that equip them with the tools to navigate changing labour markets.

Next, **Urszula Romańska** from the European Commission outlined the role of the European Semester and the Youth Guarantee in reaching the EU objective of reducing NEET rates to below 9% by 2030.

Drawing on her work covering Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia, she presented data illustrating both differences and convergences in NEET profiles across these countries. Crucially, she highlighted how gender identity, including identifying as LGBT+, and ethnic background, for example, belonging to the Roma community - deeply shape young people's opportunities and experiences.

A vital regional perspective followed from **Csaba Borboly** of the European Committee of the Regions, who showcased innovative regional projects that invest in people, maximise human potential, and expand labour-market access for disadvantaged youth. Drawing on experience from rural Romania, he emphasised the distinct challenges faced by rural NEETs and the importance of cultural engagement and youth-led community participation in strengthening social inclusion.

Finally, **Caroline Lercher Tauber** from the Danube Youth Council reminded participants that young people must be involved in decision-making from the very beginning. She explained how the Council brings together youth from across the Danube Region to contribute directly to regional governance - participating in institutional meetings, formulating policy recommendations, and helping shape local and regional agendas. Her intervention powerfully illustrated the potential of institutionalised youth participation and the need to see young people as co-creators of policy rather than passive beneficiaries of EU-funded programmes.

The session concluded with an engaging Q&A, where participants shared experiences from their work and communities. Key issues raised included the growing impact of mental health challenges, particularly for young women, as highlighted by a participant from the Netherlands - and the need for policies that better reflect the experiences of Roma youth. The discussion gave youth professionals and young participants from the Back on Track project an invaluable opportunity to present their insights directly to EU stakeholders, ensuring that future NEET strategies in the Danube Region are grounded in lived experience

Session 2: From Policy to Practice — The Back on Track Case: Delivering Social Inclusion for Rural NEETs in the Danube Region

Speakers (first half):

- *Julia Probst, ÖJAB*
- *Ákos Horváth, Human Innovation Group Non-Profit (HICS), Hungary*
- *Back on Track Youth Participants*

The afternoon session, *"From policy to practice: the Back on Track case,"* presented the Back on Track project as a concrete regional contribution to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). Launched in 2024 and funded by the Interreg Danube Region Programme, the project brings together 13 partners across the Danube region. Responding directly to the EU target of reducing NEET rates to below 9% by 2030, Back on Track aims to reach, motivate, and integrate inactive young people, particularly those living in rural areas.

The project seeks to establish sustainable methods for the social and educational inclusion of rural NEETs by offering individual support and strengthening basic and life skills. A strong emphasis is placed on digital inclusion, enabling young people to access opportunities often concentrated in urban areas

while remaining rooted in their home regions. Planned activities include building a transnational stakeholder network, developing an outreach strategy, implementing a mentoring programme, and designing a digital training model. The overarching goal is to create new pathways for personal development and career orientation without requiring young people to leave rural communities.

In the afternoon, project partners and young participants shared lived experiences from the Danube Region through roundtables focused on outreach, remote work, skills development, and mentorship.

The first part of the session featured contributions from Back on Track partners. **Julia Probst** opened with a comprehensive overview of the project's objectives, activities, and timeline. She was followed by **Ákos Horváth**, who explored the mentoring programme in greater depth, highlighting both learnings and challenges. Two young participants then briefly presented their personal experiences within the project, an inspiring moment that showcased their growing confidence and empowerment.

The second half of the session continued with roundtable discussions, giving partners the chance to exchange practices and hear directly from young people. Each table addressed one of the project's core objectives, enabling diverse perspectives and fostering cross-organisational dialogue. Participants rotated between tables to encourage broad engagement.

Roundtable Themes:

- *Table 1 – Outreach & Strategy: NERDA & YES Forum*
- *Table 2 – Understanding the Needs of NEETs: Philanthropy*
- *Table 3 – Developing a Future Mentorship Programme: HICS*
- *Table 4 – Increasing Awareness of Remote Working Opportunities: SZ REDA*
- *Table 5 – Training and Upskilling NEETs: IPC / SMRDA*



Several key insights emerged from the discussions. Participants emphasised that the most effective partnerships are those that bring together local institutions, education providers, social services, youth organisations, and employers. The complexity of supporting rural NEETs demands **cross-sectoral collaboration** and a coordinated approach across different actors. Community-based partnerships, in particular, were identified as especially impactful, as they rely on local trust, stable relationships, and strong reputations built over time.

Regarding outreach strategies, partners shared diverse approaches. Some organisations adopted **mobile outreach methods**, conducting field visits in local communities and working alongside youth ambassadors, young people who already know their peers and enjoy community trust. Others relied

more heavily on **social media outreach**, using online networks to identify and engage NEETs. Hearing these contrasting strategies helped highlight the importance of tailoring outreach to local contexts and realities.

Day 3 – Bridging the gap between EU Parliament, professionals and young people

Dialogue with MEPs

On Wednesday the 19th of November, YES Forum members met three Members of the European Parliament to share their experience and discuss common challenges in social and youth work across different European countries. Participants were divided into groups based on their expertise and country preferences, bringing together youth professionals, and with representation some young participants themselves. This offered a valuable chance to learn about the daily work of MEPs and to understand how young people's interests are represented at the EU level. The meetings fostered meaningful mutual exchange and helped establish connections that bridge local realities with EU policymaking.

YES Forum representatives met with MEP Estelle Ceulemans (Belgium), MEP Marit Maij (Netherlands), and the office of MEP Maria Oihialo (Finland). Discussions centred on key issues such as supporting disadvantaged young people and NEETs, implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, combating youth poverty, strengthening ESF+ and youth funding in the next Multiannual Financial Framework, and recognising the essential role of youth and social work across Europe.



Visit to the European Parliament

While these meetings took place, young participants and some Back on Track participants joined the *EU Up Close* experience, discovering first-hand how EU decisions are made and forming new intercultural friendships along the way.

Back on Track - supporting NEET young people in the Danube Region

'NEET' is used used to refer to young people who are not in education, employment or training. In 2015 in the European Union, 12% of 15-to 24-year-olds (6.6 million people) were not in a job, training or an internship.

Factors contributing to the number of NEET young people in the Danube region:

- Rural exclusion
- Lack of childcare
- Disabilities
- Labour market barriers
- Discrimination
- Early school leaving

In 2024, Romania's NEET rate (ages 15–29) was more than double that of Slovenia, despite both being EU Member States in the same macro-region.

- Romania: 19.7% of young people aged 15–29 were NEET
- Slovenia: 8.9% in the same age group
- Gap: 11 percentage points, the widest spread within the EU Danube countries



Our ten recommendations for better supporting NEETs in the Danube Region

1. Disaggregate the NEET category and adopt **individualised**, context-sensitive approaches that reflect the group's deep heterogeneity
2. **Empower** local and regional actors such as youth organisations, municipalities, and community networks to deliver NEET interventions, as they are best placed to deliver **inclusive, effective, and trust-based outreach** on the ground
3. Prioritise small-scale, community-led projects and micro-initiatives with **stable long-term funding** schemes to enable sustained support for NEETs in the Danube region
4. **Simplify EU funding procedures** to make grants flexible, accessible, and manageable for local actors
5. **Promote cross-sectoral collaboration** to address the complex needs of NEETs across the Danube Region effectively
6. Data on rural NEETs must be strengthened and systematically channelled to local and EU authorities, **Integrating evidence from communities**, research institutions, and youth networks to support informed and targeted policymaking
7. Address the Digital Rural Gap by creating **structured local support** for young people experiencing vulnerable conditions
8. Bridge the skills mismatch by **aligning training pathways with labour-market needs** in the Danube Region
9. Realise the **ambition** of the Union of Skills
10. Ensure the **active involvement of young people** and rural communities as co-designers of policies and projects



Country	NEET % (15–29), 2024	2023	2019
Romania	19.7	19.6	16.9
Bulgaria	12.9	13.9	16.7
Hungary	12.4	11.7	13.8
Austria	11.8	11.8	10.2
Croatia	11.1	12.9	14.6
Slovak Republic	11	11.3	14.5
Czechia	9.3	10.8	9.9
Germany	9.1	9.2	8.1
Slovenia	8.9	9	9.4

NEET rates by Danube country (excluding non-EU for data reasons), OECD Youth Database (June 2025)

Key Messages from the Dialogue

1. Disaggregate the NEET category and adopt individualised, context-sensitive approaches that reflect the group's deep heterogeneity.

In this upcoming section, the report outlines the key challenges and related recommendations that emerged from the discussions during our Policy Event. As highlighted both by the Head of Social Policies at Eurofound and by professionals involved in the Back on Track project, it is crucial to recognise the deep heterogeneity encompassed within the term *NEET*. As Ákos Horváth from the Human Innovation Group Non-Profit (HICS) emphasised, drawing on his experience coordinating the mentoring programme: *"Each NEET has unique backgrounds and challenges."* He illustrated how a young person's situation can be shaped by multiple interacting risk factors, including place of residence, family environment, peer networks, individual capacity, institutional support, and unexpected life events.

Mascherini similarly underlined that this heterogeneity is both a major strength allowing policies to capture a wide set of needs and a major limitation, since the diversity within the NEET category complicates the design of targeted interventions. The range of profiles, as presented in his typology of NEET subgroups, shows that young people face very different barriers depending on their circumstances.

Discussions among panellists and youth workers reinforced this understanding. They stressed that the experience of being NEET is shaped by several structural variables: gender differences, where young women are statistically more exposed; ethnic background, as illustrated by the situation of Roma youth highlighted by Urszula Romańska; and, central to our debate, the persistent rural–urban divide. As academic research consistently argues (see Lorinc, Ryan, D-Angelo, Kaye 2020; McPherson 2021), the concept of NEETs should not be understood as an individual condition alone, but as an outcome strongly determined by structural contexts.

This challenge leads to a clear recommendation. For policymakers, it is essential to disaggregate the NEET category and acknowledge the internal diversity it contains. Policies must move away from one-size-fits-all approaches and address the specific forms of vulnerability within the group. For project developers, this means prioritising individualised approaches tailored to small-scale, context-specific needs, which are often best met by local communities and organisations rather than national authorities. This point will be explored further in the next recommendation.

2. Empower local and regional actors such as youth organisations, municipalities, and community networks to lead NEET interventions, as they are best placed to deliver inclusive, effective, and trust-based outreach on the ground.

A central theme throughout our discussions was the vital role played by local communities, particularly youth organisations, civil-society networks, municipalities, and regional bodies such as the Danube Youth Council. Participants repeatedly stressed that local, decentralised, and regional governance models are often far more effective than national-level implementation when addressing the needs of

rural NEETs. Decentralisation enables more targeted approaches and draws on the value of community knowledge, trust, and local support systems, ultimately fostering stronger local ownership of initiatives.

Drawing on his experience both as Vice-President of the Harghita County Council and as someone who grew up in rural Romania, **Csaba Borboly** strongly advocated within the SEDEC Commission for community-led approaches. He explained: *"We argued for accessible cultural services, support for local creative industries, and more investment in rural heritage, from churches to folk traditions. Young people are central. The report says rural areas must attract and keep youth by offering cultural opportunities, skills, and spaces where they can lead and create. We also demanded that local and regional authorities play a stronger role, because they understand communities best."*

Insights from the roundtable discussions reinforced this perspective. Several project partners explained that working closely with communities, often through community leaders, youth ambassadors, and trusted local actors, is essential to reach rural NEETs in remote areas across the Danube Region. As Borboly further emphasised, EU-funded projects must rely on local resources and personnel and collaborate closely with each community to ensure relevance and long-term impact.

The significant potential of cooperation with local organisations and networks was also highlighted by Caroline Lercher Tauber from the Danube Youth Council, who underlined how regional youth structures can bridge gaps between institutions and young people while ensuring that local realities are represented in policymaking.

3. Prioritise small-scale, community-led projects and micro-initiatives with stable long-term funding schemes to enable sustained support for NEETs in the Danube region

Building on the previous point, many participants and panellists stressed the need to prioritise small-scale, community-based projects over large, centralised megaprojects. As Csaba Borboly succinctly put it: *"Young people do not need only mega-projects - they need micro-opportunities."* Youth and social workers from different countries echoed this perspective, highlighting the importance of local mentors and the value of consistent, face-to-face communication, as demonstrated in the Back on Track project.

However, this recommendation must go hand in hand with a shift towards long-term, stable funding rather than short-term, project-based cycles. During the roundtable session, several participants emphasised that local organisations and institutions require sustained support to accompany young people through multiple stages of their development, noting that *"real change takes time."* In the Back on Track project, working closely with NEETs across the Danube Region meant supporting them from initial outreach and motivation, through training and skill development, to employment and long-term retention.

4. Simplify EU funding procedures to make grants flexible, accessible, and manageable for local actors

Another key issue that emerged from the discussions focused on the need to increase flexibility in EU grants and significantly simplify bureaucratic procedures for accessing grants for organisations working with vulnerable young people. Participants stressed that rigid administrative frameworks often create

barriers that disproportionately affect smaller organisations, precisely those best positioned to reach rural NEETs in the Danube Region. Complex application processes, heavy reporting requirements, and limited flexibility in how funds may be used can discourage community-based actors from applying or limit their ability to respond quickly to young people's needs.

This challenge is closely tied to the crucial role of local actors, who possess the trust, proximity, and contextual understanding needed to effectively engage rural NEETs. For these organisations to fully participate in EU-funded initiatives, grants must be accessible, easy to understand, and adapted to the realities of small institutions with limited administrative capacity. Cutting unnecessary paperwork and reducing bureaucratic hurdles would allow youth organisations, social workers, and community networks to redirect their time and resources towards direct support, where their impact is strongest.

In the context of the Danube Region, where many NEETs live in remote rural areas with limited infrastructure, overly complex funding systems can unintentionally widen the gap between policy intentions and on-the-ground realities. Ensuring that EU funding mechanisms are flexible and streamlined is therefore essential to ensure that resources genuinely reach the young people who need them most and empower the local actors best equipped to support them.

5. Promote cross-sectoral collaboration to address the complex needs of NEETs across the Danube Region effectively.

During the roundtable discussion, project partners widely agreed that the complexity of working with NEETs cannot be addressed by any single institution or organisation. Instead, it requires **multi-sectoral collaboration** that brings together diverse actors with complementary expertise. The experience of the Back on Track project has already demonstrated that establishing **cross-sectoral networks**, linking local institutions, education and training providers, social services, youth organisations, and employers, offers the most effective strategy for supporting young people with multifaceted needs.

Participants also highlighted that the involvement of the **private sector** is essential. Companies and employment stakeholders play a crucial role in offering real labour-market opportunities, shaping relevant training, and helping bridge the gap between skills development and sustainable employment. By engaging employers as active partners rather than external observers, cross-sectoral cooperation becomes a driving force for creating meaningful pathways for NEETs in the Danube Region.

6. Data on rural NEETs must be strengthened and systematically channelled to local and EU authorities, integrating evidence from communities, research institutions, and youth networks to support informed and targeted policymaking.

A cross-cutting issue highlighted throughout the Policy Event was the urgent need to strengthen **data collection, data sharing, and evidence-based policymaking** on NEETs in the Danube Region, particularly in rural areas where information gaps remain substantial. Participants stressed that effective policy design requires not only gathering reliable data, but also ensuring that **local and regional authorities can access, interpret, and apply this information in practice**.

Project partners, youth workers, and representatives of the Danube Youth Council all noted that current data on rural NEETs is often limited, fragmented, or insufficiently disaggregated. As a result, many structural challenges remain invisible, and policies risk being designed on incomplete or outdated evidence. Strengthening data collection in rural areas, including information on education levels, digital skills, employment barriers, and social conditions, is therefore essential for tailoring interventions to the realities faced by vulnerable young people.

However, improving data collection alone is not enough. Participants emphasised the need to create mechanisms that **connect data to policymakers** at the local, regional, and EU levels. Csaba Borboly, drawing on his experience as Vice-President of Harghita County Council, underlined that local authorities, including mayors, often lack access to existing data, which means that local policies are not always aligned with current evidence, even when relevant statistics are available. To avoid this gap, data must be actively circulated, translated into practical insights, and incorporated into policymaking processes.

The discussion therefore highlighted the importance of strengthening **triangular cooperation** between:

- **youth and social community organisations** (such as the Danube Youth Council or youth workers involved in Back on Track),
- **academic institutions and statistical/research centres,**
- **local, regional, national, and EU policymakers.**

Such collaboration would allow skills intelligence, labour-market forecasts, and insights from frontline work with rural NEETs to complement quantitative datasets, creating a richer and more accurate basis for policymaking. This approach is essential for identifying emerging skills needs, understanding local labour-market realities, and designing training, mentoring, and employment pathways that reflect the actual situation in different Danube regions.

Improved data systems also reinforce the other recommendations: disaggregated NEET categories, community-based approaches, micro-opportunities, and digital-skill development all depend on accurate, up-to-date evidence. A more integrated data ecosystem is therefore a cornerstone for effective NEET policies and for building a genuinely inclusive and forward-looking Danube Region.

7. Address the Digital Rural Gap by creating structured local support for young people experiencing vulnerable conditions

A recurring theme during the Policy Event was the persistent digital divide between urban and rural areas, particularly in the newer Member States across the Danube Region. Participants underlined that while young people in major cities increasingly benefit from digital infrastructure, career guidance, and diverse training pathways, many rural young people still face limited access to structured support that would allow them to translate connectivity into skills, confidence, and employment opportunities.

Insights shared by Csaba Borboly (European Committee of the Regions) highlighted how digital development in parts of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe has progressed at different speeds. In many

regions, digital connectivity expanded rapidly, often outpacing the capacity of public institutions to provide digital education and support services. This has contributed to what he described as a “*two-speed digital Europe*”: rapid digital transformation in capitals and major urban hubs, contrasted with much slower progress in rural, peripheral, and minority regions.

If unaddressed, this divide risks reinforcing a geography of inequality in which **young people's opportunities are largely determined by their postcode**. Mascherini's data from Eurofound further underscored this concern: digital skills remain highly correlated with formal education levels. While 80% of highly educated young people possess basic digital competences, only 34% of those with low or no formal education do. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or rural areas with fewer educational opportunities therefore face substantial barriers to acquiring the digital skills necessary for full participation in the labour market and society.

Participants emphasised that **policies promoting digital inclusion are essential** to prevent these gaps from widening. This includes investing in resilient digital infrastructure, adapting education systems to evolving digital demands, providing targeted support for disadvantaged youth, and promoting lifelong digital learning.

However, infrastructure alone is insufficient. Discussions strongly pointed to the need for **structured local support systems** in rural communities. Reliance on informal networks cannot meet the needs of young people in vulnerable situations. Instead, communities must establish **localised structures** capable of offering sustained digital learning opportunities, such as small digital labs, short training modules, and accessible community-based programmes that help NEETs develop essential digital skills.

The Back on Track project reflects this approach by integrating digital-skills development into its activities, including initiatives such as the Digital Career Fair, which aims to strengthen digital readiness and digital labour-market integration for rural NEETs across the Danube Region.

8. Bridge the skills mismatch by aligning training pathways with labour-market needs in the Danube Region

A significant challenge identified during the Policy Event is the growing **skills mismatch**, which affects both employers and young people across the Danube Region. Eurofound data indicate that Europe is simultaneously facing labour shortages and youth unemployment, two dynamics that coexist because available skills do not match labour-market demand. Nearly two thirds (63%) of small and medium-sized enterprises report difficulty finding qualified workers, a trend that is expected to worsen as the working-age population declines from 265 million in 2022 to 258 million by 2030. At the same time, many young people including rural NEETs lack the technical, vocational, and digital skills required in sectors facing acute shortages.

The Danube Youth Council underlined that this mismatch is particularly pronounced in the Danube Region: 73% of companies report a severe shortage of skilled workers, and 54% identify a gap between the skills required and those actually possessed by employees. Shortages are especially visible in

essential sectors such as health and education, where the lack of qualified professionals is becoming critical.

To address this challenge, participants highlighted the need to make employment more attractive to young people. Feedback shared by Caroline Lercher Tauber from the Danube Youth Council emphasised that young people are increasingly drawn to opportunities in the digital sector particularly in technology, artificial intelligence, data roles as well as in sustainability and the green economy. Employers must therefore provide conditions that respond to young people's expectations: flexibility (including remote work), clear and continuous training pathways, inclusive organisational cultures, and competitive salaries. Supporting youth entrepreneurship was also identified as a promising approach to create new employment opportunities within the region and counteract outward migration.

Another important point raised during the discussions was the need to recognise skills and competencies gained through volunteering, non-formal learning, and youth work, both within education systems and recruitment processes. For many NEETs, especially those with fragmented educational pathways, these experiences represent essential sources of transferable skills. Formal recognition would therefore enhance their employability and foster smoother transitions into the labour market.

The consequences of failing to address these issues are significant. A persistent skills mismatch can lead to underemployment, where young people work below their qualification level, as well as precarious employment, characterised by instability and limited opportunities for advancement. Both outcomes risk perpetuating cycles of vulnerability among NEETs in the Danube Region.

9. Realise the ambition of the Union of Skills

The European Commission's vision for a Union of Skills provides a strategic framework for addressing these challenges. The initiative emphasises the importance of linking education, training, and labour-market needs across Member States an approach that strongly resonates with the realities observed in the Danube Region. For rural NEETs, aligning training pathways with actual labour-market opportunities is essential to ensure that skill development leads to meaningful employment retention strategies that make working in the region attractive, sustainable, and future-oriented.

By bridging the skills mismatch through coordinated, locally anchored, and youth-centred approaches, the Danube Region can create meaningful employment pathways for NEETs and contribute to a more cohesive European labour market.

10. Ensure the active involvement of young people and rural communities as co-designers of policies and projects

A recurring conclusion from the Policy Event was the need to move beyond viewing young people, particularly NEETs in rural areas, as passive recipients of support. Instead, **their active involvement as co-designers of policies, programmes, and project activities must become a core principle** of youth inclusion in the Danube Region. Young people bring lived knowledge of the challenges they face and therefore play an indispensable role in shaping interventions that are relevant, accessible, and effective.

To this end, Caroline Lercher Tauber from the Danube Youth Council said, *"Young people must not only have a seat at the table, but a stake in the decision when policy decisions are being taken."*

Participants emphasised that rural communities should not only receive support but also contribute to setting the agenda. Local youth, community leaders, civil-society organisations, and grassroots professionals possess a deep understanding of regional realities, cultural norms, and the structural barriers affecting NEETs. Their direct participation ensures that programmes are grounded in the actual needs of rural youth rather than externally imposed priorities.

In this context, community-based partnerships were highlighted as one of the most effective approaches for building and maintaining trust, particularly when working with vulnerable young people who may have experienced institutional disengagement or past failures. Local actors are best placed to create safe, supportive environments and to sustain long-term relationships with NEETs. These partnerships allow youth workers, mentors, and community networks to work together in accompanying young people through different stages of their personal and professional development.

Existing EU frameworks already provide mechanisms to enhance youth participation. Tools such as the **European Youth Dialogue and the Youth Guarantee** offer structured ways for young people to influence decision-making at regional and EU level. Initiatives like Back on Track show how youth involvement can be embedded into project design. By incorporating lived experience, the project moves beyond merely consulting with young people and instead paves the ground for them to shape training pathways, outreach strategies, and mentoring models.

Ensuring the meaningful inclusion of youth voices through participatory decision-making strategies is therefore essential to improving policies for NEETs in the Danube Region. Co-design strengthens the legitimacy of interventions, increases their relevance, and supports young people's empowerment as active citizens. Beyond programme outcomes, it contributes to building stronger, more resilient communities where young people are recognised as partners in driving social change.

Conclusion

This Policy Event made clear that building a more cohesive and socially resilient Europe requires investing in the **social infrastructure** that supports young people, particularly rural NEETs in the Danube Region. Panellists repeatedly emphasised that inclusion is cheaper than exclusion, and the evidence presented throughout the event confirms this. As Mascherini illustrated, the economic cost of NEETs in the EU reached 0.62% of GDP in 2023, the equivalent of €99.6 billion in foregone earnings, unpaid taxes, and additional welfare expenditure. These figures underline the urgency of shifting from reactive measures to sustained investment in young people's skills, well-being, and opportunities.

Speakers also highlighted that investing in NEETs is not only an economic imperative; it is an investment in Europe's social fabric. As Csaba Borboly stressed, supporting the social inclusion and well-being of young people means creating future citizens, taxpayers, employees, and community leaders. This "human return on investment" requires policies that:

- invest in people, not procedures;
- value languages, cultures, and rural identities;
- and recognise that long-term inclusion generates far greater benefits than short-term interventions.

If Europe aims to remain competitive and cohesive by 2030, human potential must be treated as essential infrastructure, as vital as transport networks, digital connectivity, and energy systems.

A second key insight from the Policy Event concerns the importance of dialogue and shared spaces for exchange. Bringing together youth workers, community practitioners, policymakers, and young people themselves created a setting where concerns, experiences, and solutions could be openly discussed. For many young participants (including those from migrant backgrounds) fear and uncertainty about the future emerged as a real and constant issue. Being able to articulate this directly to policymakers in a structured and respectful environment helped build trust and fostered meaningful two-way communication.

The event also demonstrated the value of forums for exchanging practices, such as the contributions from Back on Track participants and youth professionals who used this opportunity to share their lived experiences with decision-makers. Policymakers not only listened but actively engaged, offering concrete avenues for further participation, such as EUAgora or opportunities within the Danube Youth Council. These exchanges reinforced the central message that **empowering young people to participate actively in policymaking strengthens democratic governance** and ensures that policies reflect the realities faced in local communities.

Finally, the discussions highlighted the indispensable role played by youth social workers, youth organisations, and transnational networks in supporting NEETs across the Danube Region. Their close connection to local realities and their longstanding trust with young people make them vital actors within Europe's social infrastructure. Strengthening youth participation and youth-led community structures is therefore essential. As one of the key recommendations throughout the event emphasised, "**young people must be present as co-designers, not passive participants**". Only by involving them fully and meaningfully can Europe build policies that unlock the potential of its young people and create pathways toward a more inclusive, cohesive, and prosperous future.