

EURYO POLICY BRIEFS:

Exploring rural young people's futures



Rural communities are diverse regarding their geography, values, social resources, and collective priorities (Ahlmeyer & Volgmann, 2023). However, they are often defined through strict demographic and economic criteria for setting policies and establishing the local institutional bureaucratic apparatus. Adopting administrative norms to define rurality perpetuates a senseless post-industrial urban-rural dichotomy condemning rural communities

to be spaces of decline and decay. Instead, rurality encompasses alternative futures, meaning that the opportunities must not be overshadowed by existing challenges in these territories, which must be acknowledged (Kuhmonen & Kuhmonen, 2015).

A canvas of alternative futures is especially needed for young people living in rural areas. More than anyone, rural, younger generations need to weigh the tension between the possibilities associated with living in the countryside and the negative consequences of that option. This tension is evident across various domains.

Rural young people in rural areas, including those in a more vulnerable socioeconomic situation, are committed to **social participation**, through collective decision-making processes, particularly those aimed at solving pressing local challenges (Simões et al., 2022). Still, they often lack solid and continued support through programs and infrastructure to do so (Ferreira et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, in terms of **employment**, youths living in rural communities are usually more exposed to risks such as precariousness, performing underqualified jobs or being in and out of the NEET (Not in Employment, neither in Education and Training) condition. In addition, they struggle with a large farming sector and family-owned businesses that show limited levels of innovation and **entrepreneurship** (Mujčinović et al., 2024). Still, the alternatives offered by more sustainable and technologically supported farming, shrinking supply chains associated with deglobalization or responsible local consumerism, or the dissemination of remote work can provide a framework for more lively and qualified rural youth labour markets.



It is also undeniable that rural young people tend to show worse **education** attainment. Overall, indicators such as the shares of early school leaving from education and training are higher in rural areas. The underuse of vocational

education and training, the misfit between the curricula and local economic opportunities (Jale & Tosun, 2019), adding to the lower levels of specific skills such as self-directed learning (Kõiv et al., 2022) are formidable obstacles to the improvement of educational attainment in rural settings. Still, results in rural areas are not worse everywhere, with some countries (e.g., Portugal) showing progress in this domain (Garcia et al., 2023).

The European Rural Youth Observatory (EURYO) members are aware of the outstanding challenges and of the considerable promises that rural communities and livelihoods can offer to rural young people aged 15 to 29 years old across Europe. However, we believe it is important to contribute to alternative futures in rural areas (Kuhmonen & Kuhmonen, 2015) by addressing them with a renovated energy based on evidence, young people's voices and perspectives, and open discussions that can influence relevant policies and programs. To do so, EURYO is launching its Policy Briefs series, a set of thematic, short reports aiming at untangling the pros and cons of rural young people's social participation, employment, entrepreneurship and education. The EURYO Policy Briefs are (1) clinic, short, and to-the-point documents; (2) data-driven, combining hard indicators with qualitative, narrative elements offered by rural young people themselves; (3) prescriptive, as they include recommendations for evidence-based policies and programs.

The backbone of EURYO's Policy Briefs series is the Future Information for Youth in Rural Areas (FYI-R) project (<https://www.euryo.org/web/fyi-r/>). This research initiative, funded by the European Commission through COST Association, via the mechanism COST Innovators Grants, will help our teams to collect and organize data related to each topic focused by this series. Each Policy Brief is led by one of the EURYOs dedicated Working Groups (<https://www.euryo.org/web/thematic-areas/>) thus ensuring the scientific soundness of our work.



As a result, we expect to launch four Policy Briefs, one every six months. The first one will be prepared by EURYOs Working Group 1 (Social Networks and Social Inclusion) published in June 2025 and will be entitled *Strengthening youth rights-based approaches in rural policies and programmes by focusing on non-discrimination and participation*. The second one will come in December 2025 prepared by Working Group 3 (Employment and Employment Services) with a focus on the *Quality of Youth Employment in Rural Areas*. Importantly, each Policy Brief series will be further supported by a collection of infographics, ensuring that the main conclusions of our research teams reach the general public as well.



As the Chair of the EURYO, I am certain that our Policy Briefs series represents an opportunity for dialogue with society at large, particularly with public and private institutions that help rural young people move forward. I am also confident that these short reports will reflect rural young people's own views, something unusual that needs to be more often a priority among researchers. Only that position will add a transformative value to our work, contrary to a reactive position in the face of the massive societal changes rural areas are going through.

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