

YouthTOK Agenda: Let's hear the voice of youth

YOUTH TOK AIM, RATIONALE AND COURSE OF ACTIONS

Held in December 2022, the 4th Regional Funds Annual Thematic Seminar for project representatives focused primarily on youth issues as our part of celebrating the European Year of Youth. We wanted to hear their voices and opinions. The aim of the YouthTOK was simple and revolutionary – let's give the platform to the youth and see what happens! We gathered NEET beneficiaries and youth workers contributing to NEET projects to share their experiences. Instead of following rigorous and robust research protocols, we started a discussion with those most affected by the turbulent labour market environment. We asked them to set questions – what do you need from projects? What are your daily obstacles/concerns? What was working for you, and what was not? What are the issues that have not yet been recognised and addressed? What could we do for you?

The youth participated in the online preparatory workshops, introducing them to analysing their project's experiences, strengths and weaknesses. All participants independently prepared the detailed SWOT analysis, trying to evaluate their project experiences not only from their perspective but also from other participants, projects' limitations. They were insightful, critical and savvy!

Finally, D-day arrived, and participants met in person during the workshop in Brussels. We further discussed their reflections from the SWOT analysis and the additional essays they prepared as homework. We identified seven main areas of their key concerns, such as mental health in the labour market, skills mismatch or particular needs of youth with a refugee background or with disability experiences.

They were thirsty for discussion, critical and mindful of obstacles to their labour market participation and proactive in suggesting solutions on what could be improved. They battled and argued, compared their experiences and asked themselves – is that reflection unique only to my experience? Or is it an issue other youths across the countries have in common?

They spent hours discussing "it", the core of what we wanted to hear from them – what bothers youth in the labour market? They talked about undeclared work, little awareness about workers' rights, starting their careers as chefs, yoga instructors, individual contractors, researchers, and other topics and issues. They identified seven key issues: mental health, work-life& care balance, starting a business, skills mismatch in the labour market, entry into the "real" labour market, youth with specific needs and the desired approach to designing youth-centred solutions.

There were so many things that they wanted to vocalise in these areas, but they needed to be brief and specific. Participants were very conscious of the agenda limitations and wanted to be sharp and on the point! In the end, participants presented their elaborate, 7-points YouthTOK agenda, sharing their opinions and personal stories. We are proud to present **the heroes, their stories and their agenda!**

Ewelina Wolosik
Consultant & Facilitator, Fund Operator



PARTICIPANTS PROFILES

Name and surname: Voinea Valentina Cristina

Project: SEPAL, Supporting Employment Platform through Apprenticeship Learning.

Quote: "The universities/ schools have a syllabus that is not up to date with labour market requirements. I learned social work but without actually putting a social survey into practice. There is no direct line between schools and employers."



Name and surname: Beatrice Scambi

Project: YES! Young Entrepreneurs Succeed

Quote: "There is a strong need to support and mentoring youngsters in order for them to feel motivated, inspired and excited to enter the world of work. In addition to this, creating a network is essential for youngsters to feel part of something bigger. Let's create a sense of community, let's invest our energy in education and training!"

Name and surname: Anna Saroukou

Project: YOUTHShare, A Place for Youth in Mediterranean EEA: Resilient and Sharing Economies for NEETs

Quote: "I come from a place with very few opportunities regarding job choices and personal development, and one of the biggest issues is that places like this tend to get abandoned (especially by the youth). It is more than necessary for the young people not to leave these places behind, therefore local economy needs a boost by applying both: i) creating opportunities and job positions related to unknown and new (for these places) sectors and ii) maintaining the existing job positions alive, strengthening the cultural identity."





Name and surname: Ciara McFadden

Project: Cowork4YOUTH

Quote: "One of the main findings from our research is that NEETs are an extremely heterogeneous group and policies need to be tailored according to the specific needs of the individuals but also the country and region. There are wide disparities in the labour market both between European countries but also within, particularly in rural and remote regions. More research is needed on how to engage economically inactive youth and how emerging labour market trends such as remote working and the green transition could impact NEETs."



Name and surname: Erika Margevičiūtė

Project: Direction: Employment

Quote: "I'm a member of the LGBTQ community and being invited to this course to test myself felt really like support. To be honest, this relatively short course on IT was more of an introduction to the field of IT, which made me realise whether it's for me and what I would be best suited to, whether it's web design, front-end or back-end, but unfortunately, the skills I've acquired aren't enough for my employers to employ me. Anyway, I am grateful for the opportunity!"

Name and surname: Paulina Pojawis

Project: SEPAL, Supporting Employment Platform through Apprenticeship Learning

Quote: "We, the youth, are very grateful for all projects and possibilities available. There are already so many great projects and findings on national levels, that other projects can learn from. That being said, we need more- more support, more projects and more initiatives"





Name and surname: Gabor Pribitek

Project: L.I.K.E., Life Investment is the Key to Employment

Quote: "Youth with disabilities needs to be recognised in the labour markets. We need support and assistance, but also feeling that we belong and that we are part of the team, just like any other employee"



Name and surname: Maria Prats

Project: YES! Young Entrepreneurs Succeed

Quote: "I found it very interesting other young entrepreneurs from different countries share our ideas. I would have liked to have had the opportunity to meet companies and people who are sponsors of projects like mine."

Name and surname: Marina Kyriakou

Project: YENESIS

Quote: "I always knew that I wanted to be a green architect, someone who contributes to a sustainable living in our urban communities, but it was very challenging to practice this on my small island. The YENESIS project provided me with this opportunity to get more hands-on experience, to travel and see good practices and reimagine myself as a professional in sustainable development"





Name and surname: Ozgur Tas

Project: YES! Young Entrepreneurs Succeed

At first, employment coaching sessions enabled me to walk through the job identification process with the use of powerful tools such as my SWOT analysis and a 6-months action plan with practical steps to follow for successful job seeking. As a result, I found a job at a Greek restaurant as a chef, which was my goal.

Once my priorities and goal setting changed, I attended business coaching sessions so as to be supported on my way of setting up my own business idea (restaurant) along with mentoring under which I was matched with a Greek, English-speaking mentor. At the moment, my coach and I are working on a "readiness plan" which will hopefully facilitate my access to funding and will allow me to make my dreams come true.

Quote: "Being a refugee, I have experienced several moments of distress and anxiety, which were further exacerbated by my effort to enter the labour market and then the entrepreneurial field so as to afford life and be able to stand on my feet again. Similar emotions and situations apply to most persons with a refugee background. Having components on mental well-being in projects and services, adjusted to the needs of a refugee, where possible, is essential.

No one chooses to become a refugee. Therefore, special attention should be given to this target group. More projects and programmes should include people with a refugee background, both as beneficiaries and as coaches/mentors/staff members.

Moreover, refugees usually lack a supportive environment in the reception country. Thus, the issue of **networking** and having "key persons" as intermediaries informing them about existing services and liaising them with actors who run projects and offer services targeting them, is of major importance.

Language and cultural issues could often prove barriers in the process of finding a job. Learning the language as part of the job training and running awareness-raising campaigns to enterprises and employers for the recruitment of refugees, could be an option.

Asides from the profile of someone with a refugee background, I would also stress the importance of having **longer coaching and mentoring programmes** which could also last even during the first months after identifying a job. This would provide deeper guidance and enhancement of skills, especially soft ones.

Additionally, in the case of NEETs who want to become entrepreneurs, I would highlight the need for financial support through **funding opportunities/trainings on ways to access funding.**

Last but not least, considering the **broadening of the NEETs' age ranges from 29 to 35** could prove meaningful, especially in view of the difficulties youth face in entering the labour market.





Name and surname: Petar Terziev

Project: Lost Millennials

Quote: "To solve the challenges of the future, it is vital that the youth of Europe become active participants in the democratic deliberation and decision-making process. By engaging in the democratic process, young people can contribute their unique perspectives and ideas and help shape the decisions that will impact their future."



Name and surname: Renārs Kalniņš

Project: Go Remote

The project's aim is to give youth basic, overall tools applied to remote/hybrid labour market which come in handy in any remote/hybrid work as well as ability to participate in specialty - one of three courses (Customer Support, Data Input, Digital Marketing) aimed to give the necessary knowledge in these fields to later apply to potential employers via Speed Dating Job interviews organised by Visas Iespējas, in the latter part of the project. Before Speed Dating Interviews there are planned workshops for CV, motivational letters preparation and coaching sessions for each participant.

Quote: "Mental health is just as important as physical health, especially for young people entering the labor market. Taking care of one's mental well-being is not a luxury, it is a necessity for overall health and success in both personal and professional endeavors especially when starting in a new sector or going through career change."

Name and surname: Androniki Nyktari

Project: DARE, Day One Alliance for Employment

The aim of the project was to entail Job Labs and Entrepreneurship Labs for 1.400 young people not in education, employment, or training. A system of validation with the Open Badges system.

Quote: "During the project, social situations worldwide were in turmoil as Covid-19 spread. As I was unemployed and there was little chance of finding a job easily, I felt many days of despair, sadness and disappointment about the future. The subject of the project gave me a bright outlook. I felt there was still hope for everything. I'm glad I found it so serendipitously, and I hope that more projects like this will come"



YOUTHTOK AGENDA 2022: YOUTH IN THE LABOUR MARKET

We, the participants of the YouthTOK workshops, would like to call upon including youth perspective on the issues related to youth participation in the labour market. In particular:

- **We want to stress the importance of mental well-being and youth participation in the labour market.** NEETs are, in particular, exposed to distress due to their difficulty in finding employment, worried about their future career options and ability to make a living. Further, the mental well-being of youth was negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased the hardships of job-seeking. Further, reductions in social safety nets, dysfunctional governments, and flexible, precarious employment contracts combined with self-employment negatively impact the mental well-being of youth (in the labour market).

We recommend maintaining (or introducing) components on mental well-being in existing projects/ programmes/ actions/ policies and services, where possible, developing actions explicitly addressing that issue. Notably, the possible solutions could include: including components on mental well-being in the career guidance activities, including mental well-being in the learning curriculum, developing actions/ programmes/ projects teaching youth about stress management, creating spaces/ youth support groups to get resilience and finally,, involve companies to provide mental- health friendly working environments.

- **We would like to underline the importance of work-life & care balance in youth participation in the labour market.** The largest subgroup of NEETs (25%) in Europe are those with family and caring responsibilities, which hamper entering the labour market or/ and having stable career development. These NEETs are particularly exposed to less favourable working conditions and difficulty making a living—further, precarious working conditions of the youth may negatively impact work-life balance.

We recommend ensuring the existing solution accommodates young people with caring responsibilities. Notably, a possible solution could include flexibility to allow the participation in projects/ programmes/ actions of youth with caring responsibilities, counselling on management and strategies for juggling salary work and care work.

- **We want to acknowledge that starting a business as a young adult still remains an issue.** While some youth have few possibilities of obtaining starting capital, there are possibilities but little knowledge about existing solutions in other cases. Further, the youth's knowledge about running a business, local economy needs and company management still needs to be deepened. Notably, the youth, starting their first business has a high chance of failure and starting a small business and competing against mature companies puts the youth in a disadvantaged position. Further, learning how to manage a company and making own position on labour is, by default, a long and challenging process, especially in times of economic instability and a drop in local citizens' purchasing power due to global economic events. Considering these difficulties, we want to stress the importance of networking and mentoring activities, supporting youth at the beginning of their hardship.

We recommend continuing and creating projects/ programmes/ policies/ activities/ supporting youth in starting their businesses aimed at sharing knowledge and experiences, awareness raising on funding possibilities, connecting youth with investors, informing on legal obligations and possibilities on running the business, connecting with an organisation supporting youth in running the business, acting as "middle-man" between youth and investors. We want to stress that special attention should be paid to supporting young females in setting up their businesses and developing social enterprises among the youth.

- **We want to stress that skills mismatch remains an issue in youth employment.** While there are deficiencies in youth education to match labour market needs in some cases, in other situations, there are surpluses of education for youth without possibilities of quality employment and trapped in under-employment. We see that there is a need for learning possibilities, especially providing practical knowledge (not theory only) and soft skills, up-to-date digital knowledge, involvement of companies and their economy-based skills in learning curriculum, skills for how to start and run a business, and possibilities of vocational education. Further, securing sufficient financial support for youth training, providing quality teaching and setting fair entry requirements for educational courses is needed.
- **We want to acknowledge that youth entry into the "real" labour market remains challenging.** We experience difficulties using projects/ skills from projects in the "real" labour market and transitioning to professional careers. There are still significant entry barriers to entry into the labour market, such as high requirements for entry-level jobs, not enough paid traineeships possibilities to get the experience, only seasonal opportunities not guaranteeing income resilience, few jobs offered for people working in remote areas, few legal awareness about workers rights aimed at preventing youth workers exploitation, obstacles for minority groups, companies reluctance to hire youth workers.
- **We want to stress that all actions should consider youth with specific needs.** We recognise precisely two groups that, in our opinion, should have tailored approaches:
 - People with disabilities- NEETs with an illness or disability that restricted their access to the labour market. There will be a variety of different and specific needs that need to be addressed accordingly, such as assisting, technological solutions, and training for people working with youth with disabilities on how to behave and include their peers with disabilities.
 - Refugees and migrants- we recognise the specific needs of youth having language obstacles in the new working environments and significant distress due to unexpected changes in their life situation, both having a considerable impact on their working situation. We would like to stress that resolving these issues is critical to ensure their sense of safety, belonging in a new environment, dignity and the possibility of full engagement in social life in a new place.

We recommend continuing and starting activities/ projects/ programmes/ policies that ensure fair inclusion of these groups in the labour market. We would like to stress the need for continued funding and assistance for these groups, not only until they find their first employment/ set up a business but also once their start employment to ensure resilience and sustainability of the current situation. Further, some solutions could include actions specifically addressing and connecting these groups, such as language possibilities for migrants and refugees or creating a support network or/ and talent centres dedicated to these groups.

- **Finally, we would suggest avoiding the "one solution fits all" approach as the guiding principle for all activities/ projects/ programmes.** NEETs are an extremely heterogeneous group in terms of their characteristics and background: education, social class and family background, education, skills, employment (inexperience) and future career pathways (as white-collar and blue-collar workers), income status, gender, disabilities, migrant and refugee background.

Further, there are substantial differences across Europe (Western vs Eastern Europe), countries and even specific regions, urban and rural differences. In some cases, identification of NEETs can be difficult for those who are economically inactive and not registered with a public employment service. These groups may be challenging to mobilise and engage.

Therefore, we call for adjusting solutions to specific NEETs group in each project/ programme/ policy.



HEAR MORE AND UNDERSTAND BETTER! FOLLOW-UP

While the agenda allows a brief and on-the-point presentation, it was impossible to involve all participants' ideas, thoughts and precise propositions. These have been vocalised during workshops and within their high-quality written outputs.

Participants debated about the differences, not only between them but between youth in the labour market. They talked about disparities: gender, income, disability, migration status and millions of others! Valentina, from Romania, pointed out to substantial rural-urban differences and impact on the labour market:

"While in big cities, young graduates can more easily find a suitable job, in the rest of the country, this process can take much longer. Young people end up working in unfulfilling jobs or in low-paid jobs far from home."

Marina, from Cyprus, also pointed out the spatial limitations to the participation in the labour market:

"It is important to address the island-specific needs more specifically in training. My experience, was an island-specific program; it would have been good to have a workshop or training to identify the specificities of islands in regards to green jobs"

Beatrice from Italy elaborated on another form of spatial difficulty, discussing that being placed in a remote location can cause a feeling of isolation:

"The fact of being isolated could represent a strength for the peculiarity of the place but also a problem for people who want to reach it easily"

Valentina added another important point on another form of inequality:

"Roma face a higher rate of unemployment. Those employed often work in low-quality jobs, and the pay gap between Roma and non-Roma is almost 50%."

During the workshops, participants discussed difficulties in their professions and differences in requirements, duties and skills needed. Anna, from Greece, shared an interesting perspective on the profession that is not commonly known, as it is less and less attended:

"Jobs like sponge diving, which can keep the tradition alive, must not remain vulnerable in a constantly technologically developing world. The reason for the importance of the reentrance of the sponge diving job is that it can be done regardless of one's educational outcome and is a peculiar job found in certain places (...) by providing contemporary diving equipment and appropriate training, most of the problems can be solved, turning this risky job position into a beneficiary and safe one"

Beatrice, follow-up on the difficulties in maintaining a job related to non-essential services:

"It's been very hard in a period such as 2022 to be able to find a job, especially in the yoga field, which is a leisure and non-essential activity."



Maria, from Spain, added her perspective as a thriving entrepreneur:

"At the beginning, there were many obstacles: high production cost, Little profit margin, difficulties in access to financing, limmited budget and diffusion".

Ozgur, soon to be world-famous chef, added his considerations on making a name in the business:

"How long does it take to create a brand? 3 years or 10 years ? Of course, the answer to this question can may vary significantly but, it depends on what the venture plan is, the entrepreneur's competence and how uses the tools. Sadly, educations and trainings help a lot but they are not enough to create a brand. Starting a startup/venture can be a big step, but the brand creation process will be long and painful."

Androniki, from Greece, summarised the general struggles in the labour market:

"The educational system of many countries is more theoretical instead of practical. The systems do not prepare young people with the right equipment and tools to be ready for the job market. He is not even guiding the youth properly. Labour market advisers are absent from schools. The choice of their profession until now is based on the social stereotypes that the family environment transmits to the child."

Concerning education and employment, Ciara, from Ireland, pointed out to the difficulty in NEET identification and reaching them:

"Identifying NEETs in the first instance is challenging, particularly for those who are economically inactive and not registered with a public employment service. This issue is important because if you cannot identify the person, you cannot provide them with help, offer job opportunities etc. Therefore, outreach services will be required. There are some programmes which have been working on this issue and, for example, have used social media to target young unemployed people."

Participants discussed who NEET are, how they reach them, and ideal candidates in the labour market. Renars, from Latvia, provided a clever perspective on employers chasing "holy grails", instead trying to employ youth:

"More often than not employers ask for a degree or experience of 2+ years in certain field which young people may not have. But they may have other skills gained from various experiences elsewhere, perhaps. So, it would be good to have some kind of unified metric to accurately show off some of them. Employers always want to fill the position ASAP with the best possible candidate, but is that always the best option?"

Then, he continued on another employability obstacle- connections:

"I get that employers and HR department are struggling to find the appropriate candidates to fill the gap so they feel safer to rely on existing employees to recommend anyone suitable for position before looking to take one from "outside". But it is a big issue for young people trying to fill that position when "looking in from outside" without any good connections."



Further, Androniki provided a detailed and insightful analysis of the reasons for youth unemployment in Cyprus and referred to the issues relevant to the wider, European context:

“Youth unemployment in Cyprus is due to structural, institutional, economic, and political factors. All these factors weaken the position of young people in the labor market, as the labor market is shrinking, there is a mismatch between the skills available to young people and the skills sought by employers. Young people are trapped between unemployment and undeclared work, without being able to gain meaningful work experience and practical skills to strengthen their position in the labor market.

The skills mismatch between young people's skills and the skills that firms require from workers is considered a factor causing youth unemployment. On the one hand, there are many young people who are looking for work, but companies do not hire them as they are looking for candidates who have work experience.

Over-education is another issue that prevents young people from finding full-time work. At this point there is a mismatch between the supply of education that individuals acquire and the skills that the labor market needs. This phenomenon can be observed in many countries around the world. However, this fact has its consequences, as while individuals are studying, they do not have the time to work full-time and in a very demanding job; thus, the individual reaches a point where he or she lacks work experience, which is a much more important factor in the context of competition in the labor market. Work experience is challenging to obtain, as young people move between unemployment and casual employment, usually well below their skills and qualifications and usually in areas unrelated to their studies. On the other hand, however, not having an advanced degree is seen as a disadvantage for the individual (...) The problem is that the more education young people receive, the more difficult it is to employ them.”

During participants' discussions, it became clear that some youth need support more than others due to their specific life situations. Gabor, from Hungary, shared his perspective on employment as a person with a disability:

"It is difficult for young people who come with different problems to separate themselves from their problem and therefore find it difficult to create relationships/dissociate from their own problem/this makes it difficult for them to achieve their goals (anxious young people, job search)."

Ozgur added his perspective as a working refugee. During the workshop, Ozgur had a strong feeling of the mission to make refugees' perspectives visible and kept referring to that "this cause is greater than himself":

“It is a big problem for a job seeker refugee not knowing the native language. While this significantly reduces the probability of finding a job, also cultural integration negatively affects. Because working is more than just making money. Having a job also improves one's structure and social relationships and makes one feel needed. Having a job gives one a sense of participation.

Learning a language can take more than a year with a full education, there is a vicious circle here; you can't have a job without knowing the national language also you can't improve with language without working and being social and having full-time language education affects the job seeking process.”

While participants discussed problems, issues and obstacles, they also were very proactive and suggested measurable solutions. Ozgur shared his ideas on working refugees:

“Part-time job opportunities could be provided while Refugees take language courses. For example, providing regular part-time job opportunities can be part of language courses. Language Centers can include an office for these programs.”



Further, he had the idea how to utilise refugees talents:

“A Refugee Talent Center can be set up, regularly organizing company visits, work experience programs and other work-related events. All of these activities are to increase Refugee NEETs’ chances of getting a job. Also job counselling and mentoring programmes shall be included into the schedule of the Refugee Talent Center. Companies or institutions involved in this project can be encouraged by the government.”

Valentina proposed some other tangible solutions, with "reality-check":

"Involvement of local public authorities in creating counselling and training services for developing skills needed for labour market insertion. Providing at public authority level counselling and training services for developing skills needed for labour market insertion."

Androniki continued on the solutions to education:

“In recent years, there have been actions to strengthen vocational training, but there is further scope for development. Further strengthening the vocational aspect of the education system through more elaborate and varied programs mainly targeting the 15-25 age group should minimize the risk of unemployment for many young people.”