

Strategies for Engaging and Outreaching NEETs in Italy: Insights From Active Labour Policies

Adriano Mauro Ellena ^{1,2} , Daniela Marzana ^{1,2} , and Maura Pozzi ^{1,2} 

¹ Department of Psychology, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Italy

² CERISVICO (Research Centre on Community Development and Organisational Quality of Life), Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Italy

Correspondence: Adriano Mauro Ellena (adrianomauro.ellena@unicatt.it)

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Abstract

Outreaching and engaging young people who are not in education, employment, or training (i.e., NEETs) represents a significant challenge for public policies. They often belong to marginalized and disadvantaged categories and find themselves isolated with low levels of trust in the future, in their capacities of finding a job, and, above all, in institutions. Much research has emphasized how insufficient and unsuitable the strategies used so far have proved to be. However, there is a lack of clear mapping in the literature of what approaches have been suggested and addressed by the different guidelines. This study explores the strategies that a specific active labour policy uses to intercept and engage vulnerable youth and NEETs. This research employed a qualitative methodology that centres on the examination of official documents of the regional plans for the guaranteed employability of workers (Garanzia di Occupabilità dei Lavoratori). To conduct the analysis, the MAXQDA software package was utilized, and a content document analysis was implemented. Three main themes emerged from the analysis: capillarity of services, digitalization, and communication, each with its respective sub-themes. These themes provide valuable insights into the current strategies employed to engage vulnerable NEET youth, as well as other demographic categories, highlighting the potential strengths and weaknesses of these policies. The study holds the potential to contribute significantly to the development of more targeted and sustainable public policies, aiming to address the challenges faced by vulnerable NEET youth in Italy.

Keywords

active labour policy; guaranteed employability for workers; Italy; NEETs; vulnerable youth

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted societies worldwide, with Italy being one of the hardest-hit countries (Ellena, Aresi, et al., 2021). Among the vulnerable groups affected by the crisis are NEETs: young individuals who are neither working nor pursuing further education (Odoardi et al., 2022). The pandemic-induced economic downturn has resulted in widespread job losses and reduced employment opportunities (Andrei et al., 2022). NEETs, who were already struggling to find employment before the economic crisis (Sergi et al., 2018), now face even greater difficulties (Aina et al., 2021; Cefalo & Scandurra, 2021; Siza, 2022). The closure of businesses, limited job openings, and increased competition for available positions have created a highly challenging environment for these young individuals (Carta & De Philippis, 2021; Cefalo & Scandurra, 2021). At the same time, the pandemic has disrupted educational systems, leading to school and university closures, remote learning challenges, and limited access to vocational training programs (Consolazio et al., 2022; Pastore & Choudhry, 2022; Pozzoli et al., 2022). This disruption has significantly impacted NEETs (Fiaschi & Tealdi, 2022), as they often lack the necessary qualifications and skills that employers demand (Ellena, Marta, et al., 2021). The digital divide further exacerbates the situation, with disadvantaged NEETs facing difficulties accessing online education and training resources (Girelli et al., 2020; Srivastava & Agarwal, 2020). The prolonged period of uncertainty, isolation, and anxiety caused by the pandemic has taken a toll on the mental health of many young individuals, including NEETs (Fiorenzato & Cona, 2022). Feelings of hopelessness, low self-esteem, and increased stress levels can further impede their motivation and ability to actively seek employment or training opportunities (Ellena, Marta, et al., 2021; Parola et al., 2020). Addressing the psychological well-being of NEETs is crucial for their successful reintegration into the labour market (Jongbloed & Giret, 2022). The pandemic has magnified existing socioeconomic inequalities, disproportionately affecting disadvantaged groups, including NEETs. Those from marginalized backgrounds with limited access to resources and support networks face a greater risk of prolonged unemployment and social exclusion (Giannoni et al., 2023). These disparities must be addressed through targeted policies that promote inclusivity and equal opportunities.

2. The Engagement Challenge

Engaging NEETs in Italy poses significant challenges due to various factors such as limited skills, lack of work experience, and personal barriers (Rosina et al., 2021). One major obstacle in engaging NEETs is their limited skills and qualifications (Ellena, Marta, et al., 2021). Many NEETs lack the necessary educational credentials or vocational training to secure employment opportunities (Bynner & Parsons, 2002). Addressing this challenge requires the provision of accessible and relevant skill development programs tailored to the specific needs of NEETs (Coalter et al., 2020). Vocational training centres, apprenticeships, and internships can help bridge the skills gap and improve employability (Marzana & Poy, 2019). Furthermore, NEETs often lack practical work experience, making it challenging to compete in the job market. Employers may prefer candidates with prior experience, leaving NEETs disadvantaged (Petrescu et al., 2021). To tackle this issue, internships, job shadowing programs, and subsidized employment initiatives can be implemented to provide NEETs with valuable work experience and enhance their employability (Marzana & Poy, 2019). Moreover, many NEETs face personal and socioeconomic barriers that hinder their engagement (Mawn et al., 2017). Factors such as mental health issues, social exclusion, poverty, and unstable living conditions can significantly impact their ability to participate in education or employment programs (Ose & Jensen, 2017). Addressing these barriers requires a holistic approach that combines counselling, social support services, and financial assistance to

enable NEETs to overcome personal challenges and fully engage in opportunities (Rosina et al., 2021). In addition, NEETs often lack access to accurate information about available educational and employment opportunities (Nardi et al., 2015). They may be unaware of support programs or initiatives designed to assist them in re-entering education or finding suitable employment (Rosina et al., 2021). Improving outreach efforts and strengthening collaboration between educational institutions, employment agencies, and community organizations can help ensure that NEETs receive comprehensive and up-to-date information and guidance (Petrescu et al., 2021; Rosina et al., 2021). Finally, the lack of coordination and integration among various support systems poses a significant challenge in engaging NEETs effectively (Jessoula & Vesan, 2011). Multiple agencies and organizations are involved in assisting NEETs, but the fragmented nature of these systems can lead to duplication, inefficiency, and gaps in service delivery. Creating a more coordinated and streamlined support system through improved communication, data sharing, and collaboration can enhance engagement efforts and facilitate better outcomes (Alfieri et al., 2020).

3. Contributions From a National Research

After several years of implementing the Garanzia Giovani (Youth Guarantee) program, it has become evident that the difficulty of reaching the most vulnerable NEETs is critical (Petrescu et al., 2021). To shed light on this phenomenon, a study was conducted in collaboration with the Ministry of Youth Policies, the Catholic University of Milan, and the Toniolo Institute (Rosina et al., 2021). The aim was to provide insights on how to build more effective proximity strategies through interviews with young NEETs, non-NEETs, and stakeholders, based on a study of four cases: Giugliano in Campania, Turin, Bari, and Genoa (Rosina et al., 2021). The results highlighted several key aspects that emerged across all the cities and target groups, with specific variations based on the territorial location (North and South) and the different perspectives of the stakeholders. Here is a summary of these aspects:

1. Network: The need to establish and strengthen a network between the municipality and associations, organizations, and entities operating on the territory was strongly emphasized;
2. Territorial presence: The network should be anchored in a territorial presence, particularly at the municipal level, to become a visible and reliable reference point for youth policies and NEET programs. This presence also acts as a coordination centre for the network, supporting engagement, monitoring the NEET phenomenon, strengthening relationships with young people, raising awareness among families and communities, and disseminating information about local opportunities;
3. Collaboration between institutions: The network should involve local authorities, the third sector, associations, social and educational services, and other relevant entities. Schools, training centres, youth associations, organizations working with immigrant communities, employment centres, and youth information services should be actively engaged in the network. The collaboration should also extend to parents, teachers, social services, young people engaged in civil service, and law enforcement agencies;
4. Role of operators/tutors: Operators involved in projects for NEETs play a crucial role that goes beyond technical expertise. They act as tutors, establishing trust-based relationships with the young people involved and offering listening skills and emotional support. Training for these operators should focus on building and maintaining strong relationships, especially in group settings;
5. Peer group as a learning and growth tool: Peer groups offer opportunities for positive effects on individuals and the group as a whole. Sharing, circularity, reflection, emotional resonance, conflict

resolution, rituals, and common goals are all elements that contribute to the positive development of participants;

6. Psychological attention: The complexity of the NEET condition, beyond the lack of job opportunities, was acknowledged by the young participants. They clearly understood the psychological and relational factors underlying their exclusion from education and employment. They emphasized the need for psychological support during this transitional phase, recognizing the importance of support in mental, familial, and social distress;
7. Diversified strategies for engagement and intervention: The research highlighted the necessity of diversifying intervention strategies. These strategies should take into account territorial differences (North and South, urban and rural) and different types of NEETs;
8. Flexibility and adaptability: Programs and policies must be flexible and adaptable to NEETs' changing needs and circumstances. The study emphasized the importance of dynamic and responsive approaches that quickly adjust to evolving situations;
9. Multi-dimensional approach: The research findings stressed the importance of adopting a multi-dimensional approach when designing interventions for NEETs. It is not sufficient to focus solely on employment or education. Instead, interventions should address various aspects of young people's lives, including social inclusion, personal development, mental well-being, and community engagement;
10. Awareness and communication: Effective communication strategies and awareness campaigns are necessary to reach and engage NEETs. Communication efforts should leverage various channels, including social media, local media outlets, educational institutions, and community networks;
11. Evaluation and continuous improvement: Ongoing evaluation and monitoring of interventions are essential to assess their effectiveness and make necessary adjustments. Regular feedback loops involving stakeholders and young people themselves can provide valuable insights for program improvement. Evaluation should not only focus on quantitative outcomes but also consider qualitative factors, such as the experiences and perceptions of NEETs.

By considering these key aspects and incorporating the findings from the study, policymakers, organizations, and stakeholders could develop more effective strategies and initiatives to address the NEET phenomenon, such as those described in the NEET Plan 2022 (Rinaldi, 2022).

4. The 2022 NEET Plan in Italy

Following the previously mentioned study, the 2022 NEET Plan was launched, which provides strategic guidelines for implementing active labour projects and policies for young people (Ministero per le Politiche Giovanili, 2022). The plan also focuses on engagement strategies. It was accompanied by an awareness campaign by the Department for Youth Policies to organize targeted territorial animation initiatives to reach, engage, and activate NEET young people. In this regard, the Department intended to promote the organization of an itinerant information tour in various parts of Italy characterized by a high vulnerability index. The tour, scheduled for the first half of 2022, visited approximately ten to twelve urban centres identified as having the highest presence of NEET young people, according to data published by the National Agency for Active Labour Policies. The truck tour spent one or two days in each municipality, stationed in areas identified with the support of individual municipalities and associations, particularly those with high school dropout rates and youth unemployment. The campaign aimed to physically approach young people by providing them with information and knowledge tools to access opportunities offered by national

and European public entities. It aimed to facilitate encounters and address one of the critical aspects identified in the public consultation held in April 2021 through the GIOVANI2030 Portal (an online platform designed to be the digital home for young people), which involved over 15,000 young people between the ages of 14 and 35. One of the challenges highlighted was the difficulty of accessing relevant information due to the fragmentation of interventions and actors in the territory. The main means of the campaign was a camper van, which had specialized personnel available to support young people in various ways, such as contacting employment centres, using new technologies for gaming and simulation, writing CVs or creating video CVs, preparing for job interviews, enrolling in subsidized training courses, participating in civil service calls, accessing opportunities provided by the Youth Guarantee program, accessing national or regional incentives and subsidies, and obtaining the *sistema pubblico di identità digitale* (SPID; public system of digital identity) to facilitate communication with public administration. The information campaign was carried out in collaboration with the National Youth Agency, which provided personnel and information on European programs such as Erasmus+, Youth in Action, and the European Solidarity Corps. The Agenzia Nazionale per le Politiche Attive del Lavoro (ANPAL; National Agency for Active Labor Policies) and the ministry of labour also contributed by providing regional contacts for program promotion.

5. The Workers' Employability Guarantee Program

The Garanzia Occupabilità dei Lavoratori (GOL; Employability Guarantee Program), also known as Guaranteed Employability for Workers, is a crucial reform action outlined in Italy's Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (PNRR; National Recovery and Resilience Plan). Its primary objective is to support individuals in their pursuit of employment by providing essential tools and measures to facilitate their entry or re-entry into the labour market and offering opportunities for retraining (Esposito & Di Carluccio, 2023; Saraceno, 2023). A central aspect of the GOL program revolves around personalized services tailored to the specific needs of everyone. By offering a more targeted and in-depth orientation, the program can comprehensively assess a person's employability and direct them toward the most suitable pathway. The GOL is designed to benefit a wide range of individuals, including those receiving social security or income support, young people, NEETs, women, persons with disabilities, individuals above the age of 55, those with very low incomes, and individuals who have been unemployed for more than six months. To access the program, interested individuals are scheduled for an in-depth induction interview with a Public Employment Services (PES) operator. During this interview, the person's professional career trajectory is reconstructed, skills are analyzed, and any objective or subjective factors that might hinder their employability are identified. Based on the employability profile determined from the interview, the individual is then directed towards one of the various paths offered by the program:

1. Occupational reinsertion: This path is suitable for individuals who possess skills relevant to the local labour market and mainly require orientation and support to secure employment;
2. Upgrading: Geared towards individuals who need to update their skills to enhance their chances of reintegrating into the local labour market;
3. Retraining: Designed for those who require a professional retraining program to adapt their skills to the evolving demands of the local labour market;
4. Work and inclusion: This path caters to individuals facing vulnerability and fragility due to unemployment and additional social or health challenges. It includes services that activate the network of territorial services, covering social and health aspects.

For individuals receiving forms of income support, such as citizenship income or unemployment benefits (Nuova Assicurazione Sociale per l'Impiego; New Employment Social Insurance), participation in the pathways is mandatory. The implementation of these pathways is carried out by the entities within the Active Employment Network. With the support of PES operators, individuals schedule their first appointments to activate the agreed-upon services at accredited private institutions or their respective PES (Acocella, 2022). For a program like GOL, reforming active labour policies and wide dissemination of information, advice, and guidance on the services offered is crucial. Access should not be just a bureaucratic step for economic benefits but a pathway to tailored services to improve employability. Employment centres must act as gateways to GOL by engaging with the community and being accessible locally. During the pandemic, distance communication tools rapidly developed, proving essential in maintaining services during movement restrictions. These digital services aim to simplify access and delivery, including automatic registration and improved contact with centre staff. For some tech-savvy users, e-services may replace in-person provision with informed consent. Physical presence remains vital for those without digital skills or specific needs. Widespread presence also helps reach difficult target populations (Acocella, 2022). Establishing “light” structures like mobile units or temporary offices through agreements with municipalities facilitates access, guidance, and consultation for vulnerable individuals. Specific targets for physical presence should be defined, aiming for at least one facility for every 40,000 inhabitants. The plan should integrate digital services and consider exceptions for specific areas (Faioli, 2023).

6. The Present Research

The goal of this work is to highlight the strategies that the regions have planned to reach the beneficiaries of the GOL active policy. Specifically, to verify if there are targeted strategies to reach individuals residing in mountainous or rural regions, with a particular focus on NEETs. GOL is implemented by the 19 Regions and two Autonomous Provinces, each of which drafts its own plan based on national guidelines. The Piano Attuativo Regionale (PAR; Regional Plans) created are then subject to approval by ANPAL. All 21 documents were meticulously analyzed to address and fulfil the specific objectives of this study. The documents were retrieved from the websites of the respective regions and autonomous provinces, with the links being cited in the references section (Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano, 2022; Provincia Autonoma di Trento, 2022; Regione Abruzzo, 2022; Regione Basilicata, 2022; Regione Calabria, 2022; Regione Campania, 2022; Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2022; Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia, 2022; Regione Lazio, 2022; Regione Liguria, 2022; Regione Lombardia, 2022; Regione Marche, 2022; Regione Molise, 2022; Regione Piemonte, 2022; Regione Puglia, 2022; Regione Autonoma della Sardegna, 2022; Regione Siciliana, 2022; Regione Toscana, 2022; Regione Umbria, 2022; Regione Autonoma Valle D'Aosta, 2022; Regione Veneto, 2022). The methodology used was a qualitative analysis of the documents implemented through the MAXQDA software package. The three authors of this article actively participated in the data analysis, engaging in the coding process, as well as defining the themes and sub-themes to ensure robust inter-judge reliability.

7. Analysis and Results

Data were analyzed following a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). During the analysis, only references to engagement and outreach issues were considered, leaving out anything that did not relate to this topic. Main themes and sub-themes were identified and are summarized in three different figures. Three

main themes emerged with consequent sub-themes, which will be described in detail in the following sub-sections.

7.1. Theme 1: Actions Concerning the Capillarity of Services

The first theme addresses all the actions the regions have planned and proposed to enhance the capillarity and distribution of services (see Figure 1).

Five sub-themes emerged from the thematic analysis related to the theme of *capillarity of services*. As illustrated in Figure 1, the primary strategy used by PES to expand their services and reach the most vulnerable and underserved areas, such as upland and rural regions, is by establishing partnerships with other public bodies such as municipalities or health departments (sub-theme of *availability of offices/resources in other public administrations*). This approach involves opening PES offices within municipal or other public offices, typically operating one day or half a day per week. This extension of PES services allows them to reach locations where establishing a full office might be complex due to logistical and economic reasons. In this sense, the Regione Piemonte and the Regione Toscana state that:

To be able to reach even the mountainous areas or those to some extent not involved in the existing territorial networks, the Piemonte Work Agency is promoting, where possible (for example, in some valleys of the Cuneo area, in Val di Susa, in the Pinerolo area), agreements between the Employment Centers and the interested Municipalities, aimed at facilitating the use of services, including through the provision of Center operators who periodically make themselves available to provide first-level information and individual or group workshops at the same locations of the Municipalities. (Regione Piemonte, 2022, p. 37)

The main line of action on which interventions aimed at proximity will focus relates to the establishment of desks/locations within public administrations, through which the current network of desks and services operating in Tuscany will be expanded and made more widespread. (Regione Toscana, 2022, p. 37)

Nevertheless, some Italian regions have allocated funds to open new PES offices (sub-theme of *possible new offices*) and two have invested in reopening previously disused offices (sub-theme of *restoration of PES territorial points*). In these regards, the Regione Marche (2022, p. 39) pointed out that:

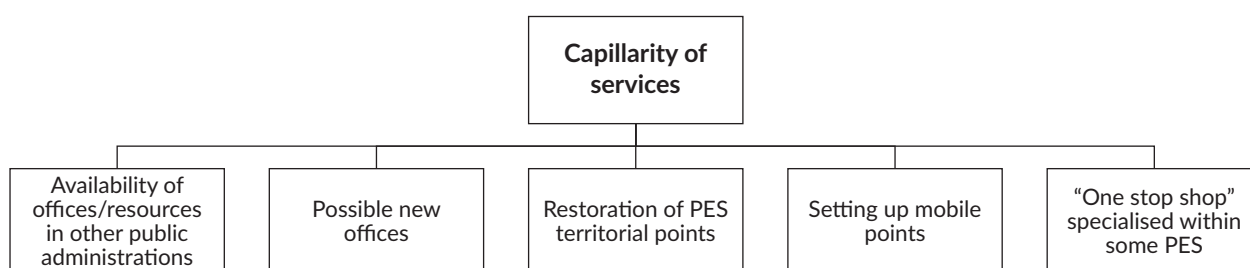


Figure 1. Actions concerning the capillarity of services.

Currently, in relation to the territorial points, 6 are closed, mainly due to the earthquake in 2016 that rendered various facilities unusable: Matelica, Passo San Ginesio, Amandola, Montegiorgio, Porto Sant'Elpidio, San Severino Marche. To reconfirm the proximity and comprehensiveness of the services during the current year (2022), the following are planned: The restoration of some of the aforementioned territorial points.

Another strategy adopted by some regions is the use of mobile hubs (sub-theme of *setting up mobile points*), temporary units without fixed offices, which enable outreach to isolated areas and vulnerable populations, including people with disabilities as declared by the Regione Lazio and Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia:

In order to ensure the full achievement of the target, the regional administration intends to use a series of temporary mobile desks (GOL Corner) for information and guidance on the Program (e.g., roaming campers or information points at other institutions and organizations), mainly in the Metropolitan City of Rome and in the provinces of Latina and Frosinone. (Regione Lazio, 2022, p. 70)

Regarding the creation of mobile points, one desk will be set up in the Trieste area and one in the Pordenone area. (Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia, p. 41)

An interesting approach proposed by Puglia involves the creation of “one-stop shops” within existing PES centres (sub-theme of *one-stop shop specialized within some PES*). These centres aim to provide access to all necessary services in one location, inspired by the clear, holistic approach derived from the German experience. Regarding this creation, the Regione Puglia (2022, p. 104) planned to:

Establish “one-stop shops” specialized in some of the locations of the regional Employment Centers. With a clear, holistic approach inspired by the German experience, the model involves centralizing services for employment, training, assistance, and support in a single location. In this regard, the region participated in a technical meeting on the model of the German employment centres organized by the Goethe Institut–Rome, on November 16, 2021. Following this meeting, there was a consensus to implement good practices aimed at offering specific target groups of users (i.e., youth, women, people with disabilities, and long-term unemployed) a range of integrated proximity services, including planning for desks related to territorial welfare within some of the Employment Centers. This would allow for the support of individuals with multi-dimensional needs while at the same time ensuring a single point of access.

7.2. Theme 2: Actions Concerning Digitalization

The second theme addresses all the actions the regions have planned and proposed to enhance the *digitalization* of services, which is helpful in terms of outreach. Five sub-themes emerged from the thematic analysis regarding the theme of digitalization, which will be illustrated below. As Figure 2 illustrates, several services are to be digitalized, with some already undergoing this process in various regions.

The situation is quite consistent, with all regions upgrading their websites to become interactive tools rather than just operational platforms. This will allow for the online execution of various operations (sub-theme of *access to online administrative matters*). Among the first, we encounter access to online documentation as

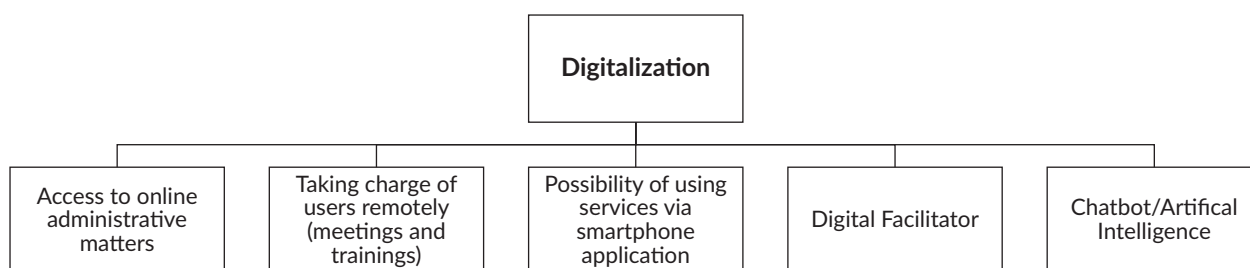


Figure 2. Actions concerning digitalization.

well as the request for certificates, ensuring that people living far from the PES will not need to visit for minor operations. At the same time, the regions declare their intention to also implement online mechanisms for demand and supply management, profile management, as well as evaluation and monitoring of activities. These newly implemented digitalized activities will allow PES operators to save time that can be devoted to more engaging activities. Regarding this theme, the Regione Campania (2022, p. 77) advanced that:

The push towards the digitalization of services is indeed changing, even radically, the ways of managing, producing, and communicating in the world of work and public employment services in the territory. Through the management module that allows the release of certificates online, it is now possible to manage, depending on the level of certification to be achieved, the issuance of documents by the offices of the public service. In fact, the module allows the automatic generation of documents that report data possessed by the Public Administration through the Informative Work system, available directly online for the user who accesses through authentication with SPID. A booking system for appointments online for public employment services also allows citizens to view the availability of offices online and book an appointment based on the configurations of days and times made available, avoiding long waiting times and dispersion of information. The release of the Declaration of Immediate Availability (DID) online completes the process of administrative services that can be provided online, aiming to facilitate access to the Employment Centers' services in the region.

Another fundamental sub-theme of digitalization is the ability to conduct interviews, virtual meetings, and even participate in online training through the use of online video conferencing platforms (sub-theme of *taking charge of users remotely [meetings and training]*). This is particularly interesting as digitalization enables easier access to services without eliminating the human element from the equation. In fact, the human component remains, only the tool used changes. In relation to this sub-theme, the Regione Abruzzo and Regione Veneto established that:

In order to ensure the delivery of online courses, a virtual help desk for Employment Centers will be established. To facilitate services for individuals who do not have computer equipment, it will be possible to set up a room within a new online platform with free access to the public through the Virtual Help Desk system and to offer services even in the most remote locations without the physical presence of an operator. Moreover, the new online platform will also enable the provision of services such as seminars and online training courses, in order to facilitate participation in all initiatives throughout the regional territory, trying to limit mobility constraints. (Regione Abruzzo, 2022, p. 66)

Specifically, as a first response to new requirements, the range of digital services has expanded, offering the possibility to conduct remote sessions through major videoconferencing platforms (Skype and Google Meet), including individual meetings with PES operators, as well as intake procedures and the online signing of the Service Agreement. (Regione Veneto, 2022, p. 55)

Many regions have also optimized their websites to be accessible through smartphone applications (sub-theme of the *possibility of using services via smartphone application*). It is well-known that young people tend to use smartphones more than computers and are much more familiar with this tool. Consequently, regional authorities have planned to make all online activities accessible through a smartphone-friendly version. This can be observed through the following statements made by Provincia Autonoma di Trento and Regione Puglia:

The delivery of employment services, harmonized with the Essential Levels of Benefits, is already partly carried out remotely in the Province of Trento through the use of digital tools. This applies to appointments with the Employment Centers as well as to services that users can independently access. It also pertains to the activities carried out by private entities accredited for work and training through SPIL (Provincial Labor System), Filemaker (Training System), and the provincial portal for employment services, including the associated App. (Provincia Autonoma di Trento, 2022, p. 40)

The Puglia Region intends to initiate an extraordinary communication campaign about the new digital tools offered by the Regional Employment Services System, particularly regarding the use of the functionalities of the “Lavoro per Te’ portal and its related app.” (Regione Puglia, 2022, p. 104)

Another notable aspect is the presence of digital facilitators (sub-theme of *digital facilitator*), which some regions have implemented. These facilitators assist individuals with limited digital skills, establishing offices and co-working spaces equipped with computers and internet access. Additionally, a knowledgeable figure is available to guide people in navigating various online procedures. This is demonstrated through Regione Toscana and Regione Calabria in the way that:

The role of the digital facilitator will be present: in total, there are about 40 operators who, via phone or in person, support users in accessing and using the “Toscana Lavoro” portal (also through assistance with the use of SPID), with an overall aim of promoting and educating citizens on the use of digital technologies, particularly those who lack adequate knowledge and skills (reducing the digital divide). (Regione Toscana, 2022, p. 39)

To support users who require assistance, it is planned to have one or more trained operators available at service delivery points, acting as digital facilitators. Their role will be to provide assistance with the accreditation process and the utilization of services. (Regione Calabria, 2022, p. 94)

Lastly, the implementation of artificial intelligence is a prominent concern that the PES has considered. Numerous regions have planned to incorporate algorithms and chatbots to assist in delivering various services and facilitating the matching of supply and demand (sub-theme of *chatbot/artificial intelligence*). In this sense, Regione Umbria and Regione Lombardia have stated that:

The new services created to support citizen access to Employment Centers and active labour market policies will be further implemented to support the GOL program policies. In particular, in line with what is foreseen by the GOL Program and continuing in the intent described above to offer an increasingly broad range of services for citizens, Umbria Region aims to ensure a service for citizen self-profiling with the assistance of technological tools (e.g., Chatbot) and the development of new digital content and services. (Regione Umbria, 2022, p. 34)

In line with the expectations set forth by the GOL Program and continuing in the intention described above to offer an increasingly wide array of services for citizens, the Lombardy Region model includes the self-profiling of citizens. Users, aided by technological tools (e.g., Chatbot), will carry out their own professional demographic registration on the portal. Once validated, this will grant access to orientation support tools and the utilization of digital content. (Regione Lombardia, 2022, p. 59)

7.3. Theme 3: Actions Concerning Communication

The third theme addresses all the actions that the regions have planned and proposed to communicate all the information related to the PES policies and programs (three sub-themes emerged; see Figure 3).

Finally, Figure 3 illustrates the different actions planned by the regions to engage with their various beneficiaries. There is uniformity in the measures, with all regions planning to implement multi-plan and multi-level communication activities. The goal is to reach as many people as possible by employing diverse strategies. Firstly, similar to the Youth Guarantee initiative, leaflets and brochures will be distributed on the streets and in locations of high interest for the policy beneficiaries (sub-theme of *information products* [flyers, brochures, posters]). Concerning this, the Regione Marche (2022, p. 45) declared that:

The orientational communication will be directed towards informing various target beneficiary groups and guiding them on how to access services. This includes preparing and distributing guides, handbooks, and orientation materials in print and digital formats. Additionally, there will be organization of dissemination events through webinars or live events via social networks. The service communication, being more precise, is dedicated to specific measures of the Program and to public notices that have been adopted. Furthermore, informational materials such as posters and/or brochures, possibly in digital format...or for publication on internet sites.

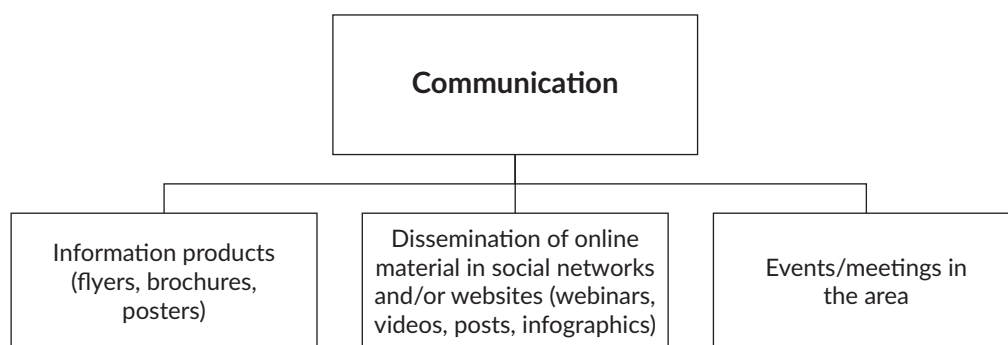


Figure 3. Actions concerning communication.

Additionally, efforts are made to bolster online presence, particularly on social networks, by creating infographics, videos, and webinars to capture people's attention. This entails using a range of platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok (sub-theme of *dissemination of online material in social networks and/or websites [webinars, videos, posts, infographics]*). For that reason, the Regione Liguria (2022, p. 61) established that:

Considering the diverse range of recipients, the communication products will employ various media channels within the regional circuit, creating a comprehensive approach to information dissemination. This includes utilizing pages from the regional portal and the website, ensuring that essential information and updates are readily accessible. Furthermore, regional social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube will be leveraged to extend the reach and engagement, fostering a more connected and informed community. Newsletters serve as another pivotal channel, delivering curated content directly to the recipients and keeping them updated on the latest developments and opportunities. In addition to these regional media outlets, the strategy will be complemented by the use of radio spots and television segments on local broadcasters. These traditional media channels will help penetrate areas where digital reach might be limited and will cater to a broader audience, ensuring the communication is inclusive and far-reaching. This holistic communication approach reflects the commitment to ensuring that all stakeholders, regardless of their media consumption habits, are kept in the loop and actively engaged.

An innovative approach, in contrast to previous policies, involves organizing events in the community through partnerships with various stakeholders, including local communities, schools, and training institutions. The intention is to engage people through presentations, testimonials, and storytelling (sub-theme of *events/meetings in the area*). Regione Calabria (2022, p. 102) asserted that:

The anticipated actions outlined below aim to facilitate the adherence, participation, and informed decision-making of potential beneficiaries. These include a macro-level introductory event, which serves as the official presentation of the measures, as well as micro-level presentation events where the PES introduce the GOL program.

8. Conclusions

This study initially presented the Italian situation concerning the engagement of young people, particularly NEETs, in active labour policies. Its objective was to understand how the regional implementation plans of the new GOL measure attempted to address the shortcomings of previous policies and sought to structure engagement plans for both the most vulnerable individuals and those residing in remote, mountainous, and rural areas. In general, it can be stated that significant progress has been made compared to previous policies, such as the Youth Guarantee. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the explicit reference to NEETs has all but disappeared as the active GOL policy does not have them as its exclusive target beneficiary, but rather the general population in a state of vulnerability, be it NEETs, unemployed, women in distress, extreme poverty, etc. The principal conclusions, identified by considering the range of beneficiaries and, thus, the non-exclusive targeting of NEETs, will be presented in the next paragraphs. However, the strategies were developed to be as broad, diverse, and multifaceted as possible, aiming for comprehensive

outreach. Moreover, many of these strategies were found to align with the suggestions derived from the literature analyzed, including works by Petrescu et al. (2021) and Rosina et al. (2021).

The first theme that emerged is capillarity, which appears to be of fundamental importance in reaching the most vulnerable individuals through increased services, extending even to the most remote mountainous and rural areas. The strategies for achieving this are manifold. Beyond opening new PES offices and reactivating disused ones, there is significant interest in opening desks at other public administration offices. One of the main difficulties that young people report (Rosina et al., 2021) is not clearly understanding which services correspond to which administrative centre. Consolidating all services in a single physical centre significantly helps young people understand the system, which they find very complex and thus demotivating. It also supports the provision of services, which are more effective when networked. This model is prominently featured in the Puglia region. Digitalization, on the other hand, appears to be an exceptional measure for reaching those who are furthest away. However, this digitalization is not intended to replace the human element, which would harm the relationship between the operator and the user. Instead, it aims to reach those at a distance while maintaining a human-mediated interaction, thereby fostering the construction of a relationship that is crucial for genuine and authentic user engagement. Given the widespread problem of limited digital skills, many have considered introducing digital facilitators to accompany and train people, enabling them to use the services and avoid being left behind. The use of artificial intelligence is applied in profiling areas and is not intended to replace human relationships in any way; however, it could simplify bureaucratic issues for operators, freeing up time to take better care of users. Finally, in line with the proposals of the 2022 NEET Plan, proximity strategies in communications emerge, complementing the already-known flyers and social media campaigns.

For those reasons, we can affirm that regions' strategies for outreach and engagement are moving towards making services more capillary and, hopefully, integrating them with other existing services, utilizing digitalization without losing the human component and creating proximity events for communicating activities and programs offered by the PES. However, little reference is made to the NEET category regarding specific targeting of engagement and outreach. Instead, there is a move toward more systemic enhancement.

The current research has several limitations that are important to underline. Foremost, among these, is that the documents analyzed correspond to a declaration of intent and the planning of strategies, with little currently known about how these are actually implemented. In this study, no comparisons were made between the different regions or analyses of how strategies vary depending on geographical location.

Further research will be necessary to better evaluate and monitor the actions proposed here over time and to understand how they vary from one region to another. This additional scrutiny is crucial for providing a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of the strategies and ensuring that they are being implemented as intended. Moreover, it will help in identifying any potential regional disparities in the execution of these strategies, allowing for more targeted interventions and improvements where needed.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors



Adriano Mauro Ellena (psychologist) completed his PhD in psychology and is currently a research fellow in social and community psychology (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Italy). He is also a collaborator at the CERISVICO (Research Centre on Community Development and Organisational Quality of Life). His research interests concern young people, NEETs and the labour market, social representations, social identity, and community psychology. He teaches social psychology and is a member of a range of national and international projects.



Daniela Marzana is an associate professor of social and community psychology at the Department of Psychology of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano. She is a psychologist and individual and group psychotherapist. She deals with social and community psychology with a particular interest in research-action, NEETs, community development, and issues of civic engagement of young people and immigrants.



Maura Pozzi is an associate professor in social and community psychology at the Catholic University of Milan (Italy). She received a PhD in social and developmental psychology at the same university, where she has been a member of the Psychology Department and the Athenaeum Centre for Family Studies and Research, since 2001. Her research interests concern different forms of participation, from volunteerism to blood donation to collective action. She teaches social and community psychology and is a co-investigator in research on participation, volunteerism, family business, and family dynamics.