GAMIFY RURAL YOUTH WORK

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MAPPING NATIONAL AND REGIONAL RURAL YOUTH WORK REALITIES

GAMIFY RURAL YOUTH WORK (GRYW)

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The aim of the project is to **promote high-quality non-formal education (NFE) and innovation among the youth organisations in at least six countries.** During the project, partners will carry out various intellectual outcomes and empower their youth workers in gamification and NFE. The project is implemented by a **consortium of six European organisations**:

- Umbrella (Applicant/Lead), **Georgia**
- Rural Youth Europe (Partner), a Pan-European Network based in Brussels, **Belgium**
- Civic organisation "Development and Initiative" (Partner), **Ukraine**
- Active Cypriot Programs and European Learning Into Acceptance, ACPELIA (Partner), **Cyprus**
- EBAGEM (Partner), **Turkiye**
- Youth Mix (Partner), **Armenia**

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Introduction

This comparative research maps the diverse and evolving realities of rural youth work across five distinct yet interconnected contexts: **Georgia, Armenia, Cyprus, Ukraine, and Türkiye**, framed within the broader **European Youth Strategy**. In a period marked by rapid digital transformation, territorial instability, and shifting demographic patterns, rural youth often find themselves at a crossroads between traditional communal identities and the globalized opportunities of the 21st century. This study seeks to identify the "catalyst mechanisms" that allow youth work to bridge the gap between geographical isolation and active civic participation, moving beyond mere service delivery toward a model of community-led resilience.

By examining the historical trajectories, from post-Soviet transitions and colonial legacies to modern tech-centric reforms, this research highlights how non-formal education serves as a fundamental pillar of territorial cohesion. Through a combination of institutional analysis, legislative mapping, and "human-face" case studies, the following pages provide a roadmap for policymakers and practitioners. The goal is to ensure that the "Right to a Future" for a young person in a remote mountain village is as tangible and supported as that of their urban counterparts, anchored in the universal principles of **EU Youth Goal #6: Moving Rural Youth Forward.**

GEORGIA

Mapping of National and Regional Rural Youth Work Realities

The conceptualisation of youth work in Georgia has undergone a radical transformation, mirroring the nation's transition from a Soviet state to an aspirant for European integration. Today, **youth work** is defined as *educational and social activities conducted outside formal education, family, or work contexts, aimed at fostering well-being, active participation, and societal integration.*[1] However, for rural Georgia, this practice is shaped by a complex historical legacy and a deepening demographic crisis that necessitates a specialised approach to empowerment.

Historical Continuum: From Indoctrination to Autonomy

Pre-Soviet Period (Before 1921)

Before the Soviet occupation in *1921*, Georgia experienced a brief period of **pluralistic youth engagement** where political parties, artistic circles, and scientific groups flourished organically. This was abruptly replaced during the Soviet occupation by state-controlled mobilisation.

Soviet Occupation (1921 – 1991)

For *70 years*, youth work was synonymous with the rigorous three-tiered hierarchy of organisations: the **Little Octobrists** (ages 7-9), the **Young Pioneers** (ages 9-14), and the **Komsomol** (ages 14-28), which served as the "helper and reserve" for the *Communist Party*. These organisations utilised Pioneer Camps, such as *Artek*, as sites for ideological socialisation, military preparation, and communal labour education. The Komsomol served as a primary vehicle for political education and mobilisation, providing a sense of community, identity, and leadership positions while simultaneously bolstering the Soviet military and generating state propaganda. Hundreds of thousands of young people annually enrolled on those organisations and went through the soviet communistic educational system, including Georgian rural youth. Besided communistic education and organisational and structural management soviet government has established some basic infrastructure for the rural youth work, such as: rural clubs, various spaces for sport or cultural activities and education.[2]

Transition & Post-Independence (1991 – 2003)

Following independence in *1991*, Georgia faced civil war and economic collapse, which dismantled much of the state-sponsored youth infrastructure. During this transitional period, youth engagement often followed the previously established camp format but was stripped of its political component; many camps were abandoned or remained inactive for a long period, and the broader youth field

[1]Georgian National Youth Policy Document, 2014.
[2]WOSM, Georgia membership data.

lacked a stable institutional framework. A concrete sign of this ecosystem shift is the re-establishment of international youth movement formats such as **Scouts** in *1994* and Georgia's joining of the global movement in *1997*, embedding non-formal, volunteer-led youth education beyond the school system.[2]

Post-Rose Revolution (2003 – Present)

The *Rose Revolution* of *2003* catalysed a pivot toward Western civil society models. The 2000s saw the emergence of **newly established youth NGOs, youth organisations, and EU-supported international projects** such as *Youth in Action, Erasmus+, and the European Voluntary Service (EVS), later followed by the European Solidarity Corps (ESC).*[3] Programmes began to shift youth work away from top-down mobilisation and toward **individual empowerment, non-formal learning, international mobility, solidarity, inclusion, and intercultural dialogue.** In practice, these programmes influenced youth work values and methods in ways highly relevant for rural youth work: they consistently framed youth activity as competence-building, active citizenship, and youth-led participation, offering models that youth NGOs could replicate in regions. *EVS and ESC* explicitly linked volunteering to solidarity, mobility, and formative experience, while *Erasmus+* youth mobility emphasised non-formal learning designed to engage and empower young people as active citizens.[4] In practice, these programmes helped youth workers to shift youth work (including rural youth) away from one-off events toward competence-building, youth-led projects, and rights-based participation language.

Modern Youth Work Reality and Governmental/Institutional Reforms

The reality of youth work in Georgia is defined by a stark divide between urban centres and rural municipalities, where systemic neglect has only recently begun to be addressed. In the *2000s*, **state-supported camp formats** such as *Patriot Camps* revived the seasonal camp model in a depoliticised form. Instead of political ideology, these camps mostly served as *places for leisure, patriotism, and socialisation*, without clearly structured competence-based educational opportunities. Yet continuities and constraints remain, and camp culture (**Anaklia & Shaori**) still persists as a seasonal norm.[5]

Institutionally, the last decade brought clearer state "rules of the game." The *2014 National Youth Policy* formally defined **"youth work"** as *educational activities beyond formal education, family, and work contexts*, and defined a **"youth worker,"** anchoring non-formal education and volunteering within official policy. In *2019*, the Government of Georgia established *the Youth Agency of Georgia* as a legal entity of public law, tasked with developing, implementing, and coordinating youth policy strategy. In *2020*, the Parliament of Georgia approved the **Youth Policy Concept 2020–2030** and explicitly called on municipalities to support implementation, which is critical for rural areas where municipalities are the main service-delivery platform. This direction was further operationalised through the **State Youth Strategy 2023–2026**.

[2] WOSM, Georgia membership data.
[3] Youth in Action; Erasmus+ Programme Guide; ESC Guide.
[4] Youth work and local youth policy studies in Georgia.
[5] Youth Agency of Georgia, 2019 decree.

A pivotal institutional driver in reshaping these rural realities has been the *"Teach for Georgia"* program. Initiated in *2009*, this movement focuses on deploying qualified teachers to remote and mountainous regions where teacher shortages are most acute. By bringing fresh perspectives and more interactive methodologies into neglected rural schools, these educators often act as **social catalysts**, narrowing the educational divide between urban centres and isolated villages.[6] For many participants, the assignment transcends traditional instruction, as they become important agents of social change in communities where formal NGOs are absent.

The program's most significant legacy is the evolution of some of these educators into "real" youth workers who continue their engagement beyond the formal school setting. A prominent example is *Lado Abkhazava*, a civics teacher from the village of Chibati in Guria, whose work has gained international recognition. Through initiatives such as the *"Democratic Revolution,"* an after-school project allowing students to simulate state administration, and the establishment of a *"Family House"* to provide a safe home for children fleeing domestic violence, Abkhazava exemplifies how teachers in rural Georgia can bridge the gap between formal education and practical youth work.[7] This hybrid role ensures that rural youth are not only taught **academic subjects** but are also mentored in **active citizenship, rights advocacy, and social resilience.**

Rural Youth Participation / Initiatives

A second important impact channel is **NGO-supported municipal youth policy and council development**. *World Vision Georgia (WVG)* piloted a municipal youth policy development model in *two municipalities in 2016*, after which the model was adopted and scaled by the *National Youth Agency to 30 municipalities*, with youth advisory councils in *15 municipalities and multiple youth advocacy forums*.[8] This is a concrete example of young people shaping daily work in an operational sense: the model treats youth as participants in diagnosis, agenda-setting, and advocacy rather than only as service recipients.

Case Study: From Participant to Youth Leader in Rural Areas

A *19-year-old Nino* from the village of *Kvemo Khodasheni* in the Telavi district participated in school clubs supported by **World Vision Georgia** and established in villages, covering topics such as youth participation, bullying prevention, and personal development. She later joined her school's anti-bullying work and moved into a youth leadership role **supporting other young people** through skills development and mentoring. Nino's own words in the brief underline a classic youth-work mechanism: *long-term engagement that builds confidence, skills, and civic orientation. She describes the organisation as "a catalyst for my growth and success," linking participation to later leadership and community impact.*[9] The same brief connects her pathway to structured youth activities and to local economic identity in *Kakheti*, illustrating how rural youth work can link civic skills with place-based livelihoods rather than treating employability and participation as separate tracks.

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[6] OECD, Creating a Highly Qualified Teaching Workforce.
[7] Reporting on Lado Abkhazava and the Global Teacher Prize.
[8] World Vision Georgia, Youth Brief, 2024.
[9] Ibid

Mobile Youth Work and Overcoming Geographical Barriers

The **Mobile Youth Worker program** was initiated through the *"Skills4Success" project (2020-2023)*, in partnership with *Save the Children*, the *Youth Agency*, and youth work actors in Georgia. The initiative was designed to **bridge the gap in services for youth in rural** and remote municipalities who lack access to permanent youth centres or established NGOs. By deploying professional youth workers to municipalities and villages, the program aimed to provide non-formal education, career orientation, and social support within local communities.[10]

Scaling Advisory Structures and National Policy Dialogue

Recent public reporting also suggests that youth advisory structures are being scaled. A news release on Parliament's website reports a *National Forum of Youth Advisory Councils* hosted in Tbilisi with participation of **more than 200 young people from 31 municipalities**, in cooperation with *UNFPA* and an association of youth advisory councils.[11] This kind of multi-municipality convening is a potential bridge between rural youth voices and national policy agendas, especially when councils are empowered to feed into municipal budgeting and planning cycles.

Networked Infrastructure: Youth Centres as Civic Hubs

In parallel, youth participation is strengthened through **youth work spaces** and services delivered by civil society. A national *network of 15 youth centres* run by the **United Nations Association of Georgia** describes youth centres as free educational and civic hubs welcoming ages 14-29, providing **volunteering, employability support, career guidance, internships, entrepreneurship opportunities, and civic-learning topics such as human rights, gender equality, and media literacy**.[12] Even though these centres are not "rural youth work" by definition, their location list includes several regional municipalities, illustrating a practical model for extending youth-work infrastructure beyond the capital.

Grassroots Initiatives and Youth-Driven Local Spaces

At the beginning of the *2020s*, some active young people also started implementing local youth initiatives and creating youth-driven spaces in various parts of Georgia. **Independent youth centres** such as *Sachkhere*, *Gori*, *Algeti*, *or Martkopi youth centres* supported by *Umbrella* began emerging in the *early 2020s*, some of them hosted ESC volunteers from Europe. In regions like Kakheti, initiatives such as the "*Udabno Community Festival*" demonstrate how youth-led local action can revitalise rural prosperity.

Legislative Challenges and the Shrinking of Civic Space

In 2024-2026, youth NGOs and youth-serving CSOs have operated in a much tighter civic space linked to the adoption of the **Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence in 2024** and later **restrictions affecting foreign-funded civic activity**. Many youth-led NGOs refused to accept the stigmatising label imposed by this legislation, viewing it as an attempt to suppress independent civic engagement. International bodies, including UN experts and EU institutions, warned that the law would have a chilling effect on civil society, while donors paused or reallocated funding in response to democratic backsliding. Press and monitoring reports documented some organisations announcing **temporary or permanent closure** due to these laws and the uncertainty surrounding them, while youth-focused EU

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[10] Skills for Success project reporting.
[11] Organic Law of Georgia, Local Self-Government Code Article 85, Matsne, especially provisions on citizen participation in local self-government; Parliament of Georgia, Concept of State Youth Policy 2020-2030.
[12] https://www.una.ge/Youth_Centers

programmes also described a more difficult operating environment for CSOs.[13]

This legislative environment has resulted in severe sector attrition, *undermining part of the progress made during the 2000s*, when newly established youth work elements such as EU-supported projects and professionalised NGOs first emerged. A very large share of Georgian CSO funding has traditionally depended on international grants, which means that restrictive policies on foreign-supported civil society **directly affect the availability of non-formal education, civic participation, and support services**, especially in rural areas where independent structures are fewer and more fragile.

Rural Youth Issues & Needs for Empowerment

Rural Georgia is experiencing a process of demographic and social hollowing out, shaped by ageing, migration, and shrinking local opportunities. This has profound implications for the youth sector. Rural youth work is therefore not just a social service but also a **strategic necessity for community sustainability**. While youth work is relatively more professionalised in large cities such as Tbilisi, Batumi, and Rustavi, *rural areas often rely on school-based initiatives, libraries, or one-time municipal activities in the absence of dedicated NGOs and youth workers*. To achieve sustainable growth, the rural youth sector requires systemic strengthening of both its physical infrastructure and its professional workforce.[14]

Based on the *2020* **survey** conducted by the *Youth Agency* and later **qualitative mapping** by *UNICEF*, the challenges facing rural Georgian youth can be summarised into four key areas.

Participation

Participation remains one of the clearest challenges for rural youth in Georgia. Regional studies show that many young people **do not participate in local decision-making processes** and often **lack information** about municipal youth programmes, services and engagement mechanisms. The *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung* and *Youth Agency* study found that in some municipalities, the vast majority of young people had not participated in making important decisions affecting youth during the previous 1-2 years, while low civic engagement was linked to limited awareness, lack of information about participation mechanisms, and low expectations of support from decision-makers or peers. This contributes to a sense of civic nihilism, where many young people in provinces **feel that their voices carry little weight** and that local youth work does not yet provide meaningful pathways for isolated communities.

Economic and educational barriers

These form a dual challenge, as **50% of rural youth aged 18-25 are unemployed** despite actively seeking work, often due to a lack of local employment services and professional "connections". While **92% of students recognise the importance of STEM**, they struggle to link this knowledge to

[13]Civil society monitoring and press reporting on CSO pressure after 2024.
[14]UNICEF Georgia, Skills Mapping and Needs Assessment; Youth Agency assessments.

practical career opportunities in vital rural sectors like *agriculture or energy productionas* many rural young people face unemployment, weak local labour markets, and poor connections between education and practical career opportunities. Lack of non-formal and informal educational opportunities makes the issue more severe; qualitative findings also point to *functional gaps in communication, critical debate, and self-expression*. For ethnic minority youth in rural regions such as Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti, l*imited proficiency in Georgian* remains a major barrier to full academic, social, and professional participation.

Infrastructure and youth space

A severe lack of infrastructure contributes to social isolation, with **44%** of respondents reporting **no designated physical space for youth** and **37% of rural youth stating that existing spaces are too distant to access**. This isolation is a major factor in a growing *mental health crisis*, characterised by rural *teen suicide rates that are 70% higher than those in urban areas*. These combined pressures of economic despair and limited social outlets are driving a "hollowing out" of the countryside, as **26% of youth intend to migrate** to urban centres or abroad in search of better education and stable livelihoods.

Recognition of youth work

Youth work and the role of the youth worker are *still not fully recognised* as a profession in Georgia's labour and education systems, despite recent policy progress. Empowerment needs, therefore, include: first, an **academic pathway,** moving from short-term training to longer-term qualifying education and certification for youth workers; and second, **in-service training systems**[15] for municipal supervisors and practitioners so they can develop annual plans and master specialised youth work competences.

Conclusion: A Regional Perspective

The evolution of youth work in Georgia, from the ideologically driven monopolisation of the Soviet era to the more pluralistic and EU-influenced model of today, marks a major shift toward democratic and participatory principles. However, the analysis also shows that this progress remains *fragile and incomplete*, particularly in rural areas. The hollowing out of the countryside, the persistent **skills gap**, the **weak infrastructure** for youth participation, the **lack of full professional recognition** for youth workers, and recent **governmental pressure** on civil society all create systemic challenges that may undermine Georgia's long-term social and economic development if not addressed in a coordinated and rural-sensitive way.

[15]Needs and challenges of the youth, at the municipal and regional levels : Adjara a/r, Mtskheta-Mtianeti, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, South Caucasus Office, 2021

UKRAINE

The Conceptualisation of Youth Work in the Ukrainian Context

Youth work in Ukraine is currently undergoing a significant shift from a traditional service-delivery approach toward a stronger focus on resilience and community support, largely shaped by the ongoing war. Historically rooted in the post-Soviet transition, youth work is formally governed by the **Law of Ukraine "On the Basic Principles of Youth Policy"** (2021), which defines the overall framework, principles, and mechanisms of youth policy implementation.

According to the law, **youth work** is defined as

> *"an activity aimed at involving children and youth in public life, carried out by children and youth, together with them or in their interests, using tools of participatory decision-making"* [16]

In practice, youth work in Ukraine can be understood more broadly as a set of activities that support young people's self-realisation, development, and participation in community life, particularly in the context of ongoing social and security challenges.

Despite the existence of a legal definition, youth work in Ukraine is not yet fully institutionalised as a distinct professional field. It is implemented by a diverse range of actors, including **non-governmental organisations, local authorities, educational institutions,** and **youth centres**, which form part of the national youth infrastructure defined by the law.

A significant part of its development has been supported by international cooperation and reform processes, particularly since 2021, when the adoption of the new law gave impetus to structural changes in the youth sector, including funding mechanisms and institutional support for youth initiatives.[17]

This shift is reflected not only in the expansion of activities but also in changing priorities, including a stronger focus on participation, social cohesion, and support for young people affected by crisis conditions. At the same time, these developments remain uneven across regions, particularly in rural and frontline areas, where access to infrastructure, trained professionals, and stable funding is **still limited**.

In rural areas, youth work has become an important **support mechanism**. It addresses both social needs and the consequences of displacement and insecurity. In these contexts, it often compensates for the lack ofother social

[16] Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, Law No. 1414-IX "On Basic Principles of Youth Policy", Article 1.
[17] Kruhlashov, A. M., & Sabadash, N. V. (2024). Youth policy in territorial communities under the conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Socio-Economic Problems of the Modern Period of Ukraine: Vol. 166 (2) (pp. 3-13)

services and combines **educational**, **social**, and **community-support functions**, especially under wartime conditions that have significantly affected young people and local communities.[18] This evolving and context-dependent nature of youth work in Ukraine can be better understood through its historical development and institutional transformations.

Historical Continuum: From Soviet Monopolization to the "Maidan Generation"

The Soviet Legacy and the Komsomol (Pre-1991)

During the Soviet period, organized youth activities in Ukraine were largely shaped by state-controlled structures focused on ideological mobilization. Organizations such as the **Young Pioneers** and **Komsomol** operated through rigid hierarchical systems. In rural areas, institutions such as *"Houses of Culture"* and local clubs served as key centers of social and cultural life. Following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, many of these institutions experienced decline and underfunding, particularly during the economic crisis of the 1990s.

The Post-Independence Transition (1991–2013)

After independence, Ukraine faced challenges in developing a coherent youth policy. Youth engagement during this period often retained elements of earlier formats, such as *camps* and *organized activities*, but lacked stable institutional support and strategic direction. At the same time, organizations such as **Plast** (the National Scout Organization of Ukraine) played an important role in promoting national identity and non-formal education values, particularly in Western and Central Ukraine.

The Revolution of Dignity and Europeanization (2014–2021)

The events of 2014 accelerated a shift toward *European approaches* to civil society development and youth participation. Supported by international organizations, including the **EU**, **Erasmus+**, and **UNICEF**, Ukraine began to strengthen the professional dimension of youth work. The establishment of the **All-Ukrainian Youth Center** and the launch of the **"Youth Worker"** programme in 2014 marked an important step toward recognizing youth work as a distinct professional field, including the development of training initiatives and emerging professional standards.

Modern Youth Work Reality and Wartime Institutional Reforms

Since *February 2022*, the reality of youth work in Ukraine has been significantly reshaped by wartime conditions, requiring a rapid shift toward **emergency response**, **community support**, and **service adaptation**.

The "SpivDiia" and Volunteer Mobilization

In practice, youth work has increasingly relied on volunteer-led initiatives and flexible coordination mechanisms. Platforms such as *"SpivDiia"*, supported by state institutions, facilitate cooperation between volunteers, local actors, and service providers, particularly in the delivery of humanitarian aid and social support. This

[18] Anna Peycheva, Alexandra Deac, Asmau Abba, Asma Abubakar, Rebecca Voropaeff, Renata Solórzano de Souza, Sharon Varghese, Joy Muhia, Anna Chavez, Julian Eaton. Mental health, children, and the war in Ukraine. Mental Health Innovation Network, Centre for Global Mental Health, London, UK: London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, 2023.

reflects a broader trend identified in national recovery assessments, where community-based and volunteer-driven responses play a critical role in maintaining access to essential services under crisis conditions **(World Bank, United Nations, European Commission, 2023)**.

Adaptation of Youth Spaces under Wartime Conditions.
Another important development is the partial adaptation of youth centers into multifunctional spaces that combine educational, social, and, where possible, safety-related functions. However, such transformations remain limited. According to the *Ukraine Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA2)*, a large share of social infrastructure, including educational and community facilities, has been damaged or destroyed, particularly in frontline and rural regions.

In addition, assessments by *United Nations Children's Fund* indicate that many young people face **restricted access to safe and adequately equipped spaces for learning, socialization, and support**, especially in conflict-affected areas.[19] In some cases, youth centers have been equipped with generators, internet connectivity (including satellite-based solutions), or basic shelter facilities, often with the support of international donors and local initiatives. Nevertheless, these examples remain selective rather than systemic. Evidence from *United Nations Development Programme* recovery reports shows that access to social infrastructure remains highly uneven and dependent on local capacity, security conditions, and external assistance.[20]

Overall, wartime conditions have reinforced the role of youth work as a flexible and community-oriented practice, while simultaneously exposing structural gaps in infrastructure, coordination, and long-term sustainability.

Current Local, Municipal, and Regional Programs

Youth work in Ukraine is highly **decentralized**, with *local hromadas* (communities) playing a leading role in implementation.

Local Recovery and Youth Engagement Initiatives

In many regions, particularly in de-occupied and rural areas, youth-focused initiatives are increasingly **integrated into local recovery processes**. These initiatives often involve young people in community activities, local decision-making, and small-scale reconstruction efforts. While approaches vary, they reflect a broader shift toward participatory practices in local development. *Evidence from Building Ukraine Together (BUR)* shows that youth engagement in reconstruction activities can contribute to community cohesion and strengthen young people's sense of agency[21].

Municipal Youth Councils and Digital Participation Tools

Despite the challenges of wartime conditions, municipal youth councils continue to operate in many hromadas, supporting youth participation at the local level. Digital tools such as **U-Report Ukraine**, implemented by *UNICEF*, are used to

[19] UNICEF, U-Report Ukraine Analytical Briefs, 2022-2024
[20] UNDP Ukraine, Human Development Report: Ukraine, 2023; UNDP Ukraine, Municipal Recovery and Development Assessments, 2023-2024
[21] Building Ukraine Together (BUR). Annual Impact Report, 2023

collect feedback from young people on their needs and priorities[22]. These tools provide municipalities with real-time insights, although their integration into formal decision-making processes varies across regions.

Mobile Youth Work in Frontline Regions

In frontline and border regions such as *Sumy*, *Chernihiv*, *and Kharkiv*, mobile youth work practices have been developed to reach young people in remote or affected communities. These initiatives, often supported by civil society organizations, typically involve multidisciplinary teams that provide **non-formal education activities** and **basic psychosocial support**. According to available assessments, including those conducted by *NGO Youth Platform*, such approaches help address social isolation and the psychological impact of war, although their scale and sustainability remain limited.[23]

Rural Youth Participation and Initiatives

Participation in rural Ukraine is increasingly characterized by strong engagement in **volunteering** and **community-based initiatives**, particularly in the *context of wartime recovery*.

Volunteer-Based Reconstruction and Civic Engagement

One of the most visible forms of youth participation is volunteering in **reconstruction activities**. The initiative *Building Ukraine Together (BUR)* organizes volunteer camps where young people from different regions of Ukraine support the rebuilding of homes and community infrastructure in affected rural areas. These activities combine physical work with elements of non-formal education, civic engagement, and intercultural exchange, contributing to community cohesion and youth participation in local development.

Local Recovery and Youth Engagement Initiatives

In addition to volunteering, rural youth are increasingly involved in **small-scale local initiatives** and **social innovation projects**. Programs such as *UPSHIFT Ukraine*, implemented by *UNICEF*, provide mentorship and seed funding for youth-led projects, including community spaces, local cultural initiatives, and digital literacy activities. These initiatives demonstrate how young people can contribute to local resilience and social cohesion, particularly in communities affected by demographic decline and displacement.[24]

Rural Youth Issues and Needs for Empowerment

Rural youth in Ukraine face challenges shaped by both **structural conditions** and the **impact of the ongoing war**. One of the key issues is limited access to safe and functional infrastructure, as many educational and community facilities have been damaged or destroyed. According to the *RDNA2*, rural areas are particularly affected by gaps in access to social infrastructure and basic services. [25]

[22]UNICEF. U-Report Ukraine Analytical Briefs, 2022-2024
[23]NGO Youth Platform. *Youth Needs Assessment in Ukraine*, 2023
[24]UNICEF. UPSHIFT Ukraine Programme Overview / Results Reports, 2022-2024.
[25]World Bank, United Nations, European Commission. Ukraine Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA2), 2023.

At the same time, the role of youth workers has expanded to include **psychosocial support** and **community coordination**. However, this shift is not yet matched by sufficient professional recognition or training systems. *Reports by United Nations Development Programme* highlight the need for strengthening competencies in **crisis response** and **trauma-informed approaches**.[26] Internal displacement has further increased pressure on rural communities, making the integration of displaced and local youth an ongoing challenge. Youth work can support social cohesion through participatory and community-based activities, although its impact depends on local capacity and available resources.[27]

Conclusion: A Perspective of Resilience

Overall, youth work in Ukraine has evolved from centrally organized activities toward **more participatory and community-based approaches**. At the same time, wartime conditions have exposed significant structural challenges, including unequal access to infrastructure, limited institutional capacity, and ongoing security risks.

In this context, youth work plays an **important role in supporting community resilience and recovery**. Its further development will depend on strengthening sustainable frameworks that enhance youth participation, social cohesion, and local development, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas.

ARMENIA

The Conceptualization of Youth Work in the Armenian Context

Youth work in Armenia is understood as *a set of educational, social, and civic activities conducted outside formal structures, aimed at fostering personal development and social inclusion*. This understanding is formally guided by the *Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport (MESCS)* and is heavily influenced by Council of Europe standards.

For rural Armenia, where approximately **1.1 million people** (35% of the total population) **reside**, youth work is a vital intervention against economic stagnation. The rural reality is marked by a **26.2% youth unemployment rate** (ages 15-24), which is 1.7 times the national average. Furthermore, **20% of Armenian youth** fall into the **NEET category** (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). Consequently, rural youth work is framed as a "bridge" to the labor market and a tool for social re-engagement.[28]

[26] UNDP Ukraine. Recovery and Human Development Assessments, 2023
[27] UNICEF. U-Report Ukraine Analytical Briefs, 2022-2024.
[28] Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia, Labor Market and Poverty Data (2024); UNICEF Armenia, NEET Youth Analysis.

The formal definition by the *Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport:*

> *"A set of organized activities based on non-formal and informal learning, designed to provide young people with opportunities and spaces to acquire knowledge, skills, and values necessary for their personal development, social integration, and participation in the democratic life of the community."* [29]

Historical Evolution: From Soviet Decay to NGO Leadership

The trajectory of Armenian rural youth work has moved through several distinct phases:

- **Soviet Era**

  The youth work, including rural one was identical to the Georgian context.

- **The Post-Soviet Decline (Early 2000s)**

  Most engagement relied on **fading Soviet-era cultural centers**. These institutions weakened due to limited funding and an inability to adapt to the needs of a new generation.

- **The NGO Emergence (Mid-2000s)**

  Non-governmental organizations, supported by international actors like *UNICEF* and the *Eurasia Partnership Foundation*, took the lead. They introduced non-formal learning and established the **first modern youth centers** in rural communities.

- **The Institutional Phase (2015-Present)**

  The **"Youth Worker"** was **officially recognised in 2015** via *Government Decree N 56*. However, while the legislative framework exists, a formal national training system remains absent, which impacts the consistency of youth state programs. Organizations like the *Armenian Progressive Youth (APY)* and *Gyumri Youth Initiative Centre (YIC)* began introducing European non-formal education standards. This period saw the birth of the **"Youth Center" model as an alternative to the formal school system**, particularly in the earthquake-affected regions of Shirak and Lori.

- **Post-2018: Decentralization and "Youth Capitals"**

  The *2018* **Velvet Revolution** catalyzed a major policy shift toward **decentralization**. The government introduced the "*Youth Capital of the Year*" initiative, which rotates national focus to different regional towns each year (e.g., Kapan, Dilijan). This has helped shift the "gravity" of youth work away from the capital, Yerevan, toward the rural provinces, encouraging local municipalities to invest in youth-led infrastructure.[30]

Modern Institutional Framework and Recent Laws

The field is currently in a state of rapid formalization. In *2025*, the *National Assembly* approved the country's **first Law on Youth Policy**. This landmark legislation creates a clearer legal basis for youth organizations and participation in decision-making, intended to move the sector beyond

[29] Government of the Republic of Armenia, Glossary of Youth Policy and Non-Formal Education Standards, p. 11.
[30] Youth Events Holding Center SNCO, Analysis of the "Youth Capital" Program Impact on Regional Development (2019-25), pp. 18-22.

temporary, project-based funding toward long-term institutional stability.

Despite this, implementation remains **uneven**. While the *MESCS* plans and monitors policy, **delivery relies on a complex network of NGOs, foundations, and international programs** like *EU4Youth* and *Erasmus+*. These programs are the primary drivers of professional development for rural youth workers, offering the certification that the domestic labor market still lacks.[31]

The rise of digital education hubs, such as the *COAF (Children of Armenia Fund) SMART Centers* in rural Lori and Armavir, has revolutionized the "marz" reality. These centers provide **world-class non-formal education in robotics, arts, and languages** to children from dozens of surrounding villages. This reflects a shift in youth work values: empowerment is now defined as providing "urban-quality" opportunities in a rural setting.[32]

Rural Youth Participation / Initiatives

Youth work in Armenia is increasingly localized, focusing on the **specific needs of the border regions.**

The "Syunik Resilience" Initiatives

In the Syunik region, which faces significant *security challenges*, youth work is focused on **"Psychosocial Support and Civil Defense."** Regional NGOs, in partnership with the *World Vision Armenia*, operate "*Impact Hubs*" that combine **vocational training with leadership skills**. These programs are designed to keep young people in their home regions by linking their skills to local industries like sustainable mining and high-tech agriculture.

Municipal Youth Councils (Community Youth Centers)

Under the *Law on Local Self-Government*, many hromadas (amalgamated communities) have established **Community Youth Centers**. For example, in the Amasia community, the youth center operates as a "social enterprise" that hosts a local bakery and a craft workshop. This model treats youth as participants in the local economy rather than just service recipients.

Participation in rural Armenia is currently driven by the **integration of displaced youth** and **social entrepreneurship**.

Integration of Displaced Youth (Nagorno-Karabakh)

Since the mass displacement of 2023, youth workers in the regions of Ararat and Kotayk have focused on the **social integration of displaced youth**. Through "*Solidarity Camps*" and *joint community service projects*, youth workers facilitate dialogue between local residents and newcomers, using non-formal education to prevent social friction and foster collective healing.[33]

"Startup Armenia" in the Regions

Programs like the "*Rural Youth Entrepreneurship*" *project* provide training and seed funding for **youth-led businesses in the provinces**. In villages near the border, young people are launching projects in "*Gastro-Tourism*" and "*Eco-Farming*," proving that youth work can bridge the gap between civic skills and sustainable livelihoods.

[31] National Assembly of Armenia, Law on Youth Policy (Approved 2025).
[32] Children of Armenia Fund (COAF), Impact Report: Transforming Rural Landscapes through SMART Education, pp. 34-36.
[33] Armenian Progressive Youth, Report on the Integration of Displaced Youth through Non-Formal Education (2024-2026), pp. 12-15.

The Rural Face: From Passive Residents to Community Heartbeat

Ani, a 19-year-old from the village of Gosh in the Tavush region, exemplifies the **"youth-led community development"** model.[34]

1. Engaging in Community Mapping
Ani participated in a series of workshops hosted by a local NGO focused on identifying local needs and assets.

2. Advocating for Change
She led a group of peers to advocate for the renovation of an abandoned village building to create a shared space.

3. Establishing the "Youth Corner"
The team successfully transformed the building into a functional hub equipped with internet and a library.

4. Mentoring Future Leaders
Ani moved into a mentoring role, helping younger students in Gosh develop their own local micro-projects.

> **Ani, 19** — *Youth Mentor, Tavush Region*
> *"Before the project, we thought our only path was to move to Yerevan. Now, we see ourselves as the **'heartbeat' of the village**."*

Youth Mix is the organisation that promotes local and international youth work via several initiatives, including projects record shows how this approach supports civic participation in practice. Its activities in *entrepreneurship*, *rural tourism*, *digital skills*, *environmental awareness*, *inclusion* and *social entrepreneurship* have given rural young people opportunities to build confidence, practical competencies and a stronger sense of responsibility toward their communities.

One of the examples is the *Cafe Terev*, a rural social enterprise in Yeghvard, giving space and employment to local youth. Youth Mix's international projects also *give space and non-formal education opportunities* to Armenian youth, mainly from rural areas, to improve digital, entrepreneurial and green competencies via *EU-funded Erasmus+* and other international programs. Luckily, there are dozens of other youth organisations operating in similar programs and fields. Such projects demonstrate a pattern: **youth are not treated only as beneficiaries, but as active contributors** who learn how to respond to local economic, social and environmental challenges.

Rural Youth Issues and Needs for Empowerment

Despite progress, **four significant obstacles** remain for the Armenian rural sector:

Participation Gap
Rural youth still **feel detached from municipal institutions**, with very few involved

[34] World Vision Armenia, Case Study Series: Youth-Led Change in Tavush and Syunik Regions, p. 9.

in local decision-making or community planning. Young people in rural Armenia often have *limited opportunities* to take part in *local decision-making*. Involvement in municipal governance or community planning is relatively rare, and awareness of these processes is generally low. Although recent initiatives, such as youth councils and civic engagement programs, have sought to improve participation, levels of involvement remain uneven, especially in more remote areas.

Economic & Skills Mismatch

Rural economies remain over-dependent on low-income agriculture, and there is a persistent **gap between school outcomes and labor market demands**. These represent some of the most significant challenges for rural youth. *Job opportunities are scarce*, resulting in high rates of *unemployment and underemployment* among young people. There is a mismatch between educational outcomes and labour market demands, making the transition from education to employment difficult. *Limited access to non-formal education and skills development programs* further constrains young people's growth and opportunities.

Professional Recognition

"*Youth Worker*" **is still not a recognized occupation** in the national labor system, leading to a lack of clear career pathways and institutional backing.[35] While certification exists, "*Youth Worker*" is not yet a highly paid or widely recognized career in the rural labor market. To achieve sustainable growth, the sector requires an academic pathway that links youth work to community development and social psychology, ensuring that practitioners have the social guarantees needed to work in the regions.

Infrastructure & Isolation

Many villages lack safe, designated youth spaces. **Weak transportation and digital connectivity** further increase the sense of social exclusion. Youth in the border marzes report high levels of anxiety regarding security. Empowerment needs include "*Conflict-Sensitive Youth Work*" that provides young people with tools for *stress management* and *community leadership* during crises. Approximately 40% of rural youth cite "security concerns" as their **primary reason for considering migration**.[36] While *SMART Centers* are world-class, they are still few in number. Many villages remain **"digital deserts"** with poor internet connectivity and no designated youth spaces. There is an urgent need for the state to fund **"Modular Youth Hubs"** that can be rapidly deployed to the most remote mountainous villages.[37]

Conclusion: The Road to 2030

The Armenian case demonstrates that youth work is strongest where it is local and genuinely participatory. While the **2025 Law on Youth Policy** provides the legal "bones" for the future, the "flesh" *must be provided by increased investment in rural infrastructure and the full professionalization of youth workers*. By bridging the gap between Yerevan and the remote marzes, Armenia can ensure that its rural youth remain a driving force for national development rather than a demographic destined for migration.

[35] UNDP/EU4Youth, Mapping of Rural Youth Work Challenges in Armenia, Final Recommendations.
[36] UNDP Armenia, Survey on the Socio-Economic and Security Perceptions of Youth in Border Communities, Data Summary pp. 4-6.
[37] European Commission, Eastern Partnership Youth Policy Country Profile: Armenia, Final Recommendations p. 38.

TÜRKIYE

The Conceptualisation of Youth Work in the Turkish Context

The conceptualisation of youth work in Türkiye has undergone a profound transformation, mirroring the nation's journey from a multi-ethnic empire to a modern, secular republic, and finally to a regional leader in digital and social infrastructure. Today, youth work is largely defined through the lens of **"Youth Services,"** *a state-led framework that encompasses educational, social, and cultural activities* conducted outside formal schooling.

For rural Türkiye, a vast geography stretching from the Aegean coast to the mountainous borders of the East, youth work is not merely a leisure activity. It is a **strategic mechanism** designed to counter the "*hollowing out*" *of the countryside*. This practice is shaped by a complex historical legacy of state-led modernisation and a modern demographic reality that *necessitates a specialised approach to empowerment, digital literacy, and local participation.*[38] In the *current 2024-2026 period*, the focus has shifted toward **"Social Inclusion"** and **"Digital Entrepreneurship,"** aiming to ensure that a young person in a mountain village in Artvin has the same developmental trajectory as one in Ankara.

In Türkiye, the **National Youth and Sports Policy Document does not provide a single formal definition** of youth work, but frames youth policy around activities and measures that support young people's personal, social, cultural and educational development, active participation, volunteering, mobility, access to information, and use of youth centres and youth activities. In this sense, youth work in Türkiye can be understood as *a broad field of non-formal and community-based activities supporting young people's empowerment, participation and transition to adult life.*[39]

Historical Continuum: From Imperial Mobilization to the Village Institutes

The history of youth engagement in Türkiye is a *history of nation-building*.

The Paramilitary & Pre-Republican Era (1908-1922)

In the late Ottoman period, *specifically after 1908*, youth work was heavily influenced by **European scouting and paramilitary trends**. Organisations like the "*Youth League*" *(Genç Dernekleri)*, founded in *1916*, targeting peasant boys for physical education and military preparation. These early efforts were top-down, utilising village headmen (muhtars) as the primary network to reach the rural masses.

[38]Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Youth and Sports, The National Youth and Sports Policy Document, 2013; European Commission Youth Wiki, "Türkiye: National Youth Strategy"; European Commission Youth Wiki, "Youth policies in Turkey", 2021
[39]Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Youth and Sports, The National Youth and Sports Policy Document; European Commission Youth Wiki, Youth policies in Turkey, section "Definition or understanding of Youth W, targetedork."

The Golden Age of Rural Empowerment & Its Closure (1923–1954)

Following the **foundation of the Republic in 1923**, the role of youth was elevated to the **"guardians of the revolution."** The most significant and uniquely Turkish contribution to rural youth work was the *Village Institutes (Köy Enstitüleri)*, established in *1940*[40]. These were not mere schools; they were revolutionary youth centres.

- **The Catalyst Model:** They trained village children to *return to their communities as catalysts for social change* — not just as teachers, but as technical experts, agricultural innovators, and cultural leaders.
- **Democratic Pedagogy:** Unlike the rigid structures of the time, the Institutes utilised *student-centred learning*. Students managed their own daily affairs, built their own facilities, and engaged in "*cooperative learning*" that fostered a sense of autonomy and civic responsibility.
- **Infrastructure Legacy:** They created the first widespread network of *rural libraries and theatres* in Anatolia. Although closed in the 1950s due to political shifts, the legacy of the Village Institutes remains the "gold standard" for rural empowerment in the Turkish collective memory.

The Era of Centralized State Services (Post-1950s to Present)

By the *1950s*, political shifts led to the closure of these institutes, moving youth work toward a more centralized **"Public Education"** *(Halk Eğitimi)* and **sports-oriented framework**. This period marked a *transition from the "Village-led development" model to a "State-provided service"* model that persists today.

Modern Youth Work Reality and Governmental Reforms

Modern youth work in Türkiye is characterized by one of the most extensive state-led infrastructures in Europe. The primary "rule of the game" is the **National Youth and Sports Policy Document** (and the recent **National Youth Strategy 2023–2028**), which defines the youth worker's role and the objectives of non-formal education.

The Ministry of Youth and Sports (GSB) Framework

The Ministry operates a network of over **400 Youth Centers** *(Gençlik Merkezleri)* nationwide.[41] These centers are the primary delivery platform for youth work. In rural areas, where building a permanent center is not always feasible, the Ministry has deployed **"Mobile Youth Centers."** These are specially *equipped vehicles* that bring STEM workshops, traditional games, psychological counseling, and artistic activities to remote villages. This **"mobile worker" model** is critical for reaching the millions of young people living in Anatolia's interior who lack the means to travel to district centers.

The Role of Technology (T3 Foundation Model)

In recent years, the reality of youth work has pivoted toward **"The National Technology Move"** *(Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi)*. This is exemplified by the **Deneyap Technology Workshops**, which aim to provide rural youth with *high-tech competencies* in robotics, AI, and coding.[42] This reflects a shift in youth work values: empowerment is now seen as synonymous with digital competence. Youth workers

[40] M. Asım Karaömerlioğlu, "The Village Institutes Experience in Turkey," British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 25, no. 1 (1998): 47-73; İsmet Türkmen, "Rural Revitalization and the Village Institutes Experience in Turkey (1940-1954)."
[41] Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Youth and Sports (GSB), General Directorate of Youth Services Annual Activity Report.
[42] T3 Foundation, National Technology Move (Milli Teknoloji Hamlesi) Strategy and Deneyap Workshops Reporting.

are increasingly trained to use *gamification and digital tools* to engage young people who might otherwise feel disconnected from the national economy.

International Integration and Erasmus+

Since joining the *Erasmus+ program* in 2004, the *Turkish National Agency* has become a **pivotal driver in reshaping rural realities**. International mobility projects have introduced Western civil society models to Anatolian NGOs. This has helped **shift local youth work** away from "one-off events" toward structured competence-building. For rural youth, programs like the *European Solidarity Corps (ESC)* offer a rare bridge to international solidarity and mobility, allowing them to frame their local identity within a broader European context. Erasmus+ has shifted the language of local youth NGOs toward **"competence-building" and "youth participation,"** moving away from purely recreational activities toward structured non-formal learning.[43]

Current Local/Municipal, and Regiosnal Youth Program

The modern landscape of rural youth work in Türkiye is defined by a **multi-layered approach** involving *central government, metropolitan municipalities, and regional development agencies.*

The "DOKAP" and "DAP" Regional Models

Regional Development Administrations such as the *Eastern Black Sea Project (DOKAP)* and the *Eastern Anatolia Project (DAP)* have initiated specialized youth empowerment tracks. These programs focus on **"Agri-Youth Entrepreneurship."** By providing grants and non-formal training to young people in rural districts, they aim to modernize traditional farming through youth-led innovation. These regional bodies often fund the establishment of **"Reading Halls"** and **"Digital Transformation Offices"** in villages where the central Ministry infrastructure has not yet reached.

Municipal "Gençlik Meclisleri" (Youth Councils)

At the municipal level, the *Union of Municipalities of Türkiye (TBB)* encourages the **"Youth Friendly City" model.** Large metropolitan municipalities like Gaziantep, Konya, and Erzurum have developed **"District Youth Hubs"** that specifically target the rural-urban fringe. These hubs provide transport services for village youth to attend *weekend workshops on debate, theater, and foreign languages.*

The "Genç Kart" Initiative

Several municipalities have introduced **digital cards** that provide rural youth with *free access to cultural events and online learning platforms*, effectively lowering the economic barrier to participation that often isolates rural populations.

Local Micro-Grants

In provinces like Çanakkale and Muğla, municipal governments have started offering **micro-grants for "Village Social Innovation" projects**. This allows youth-led groups to pitch ideas for *local waste management, cultural festivals, or community gardens*, fostering a sense of municipal belonging.

[43]Turkish National Agency, "Erasmus+ Programme"; European Commission, "Turkey set to join the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes 2021-2027," 29 October 2021; SALTO-YOUTH, "Study Visit with Partnership Building: Rural Youth Work," Kars, Türkiye, 20-25 April 2026.

The "Youth Offices" in Universities and High Schools

To bridge the gap between formal and non-formal education, the GSB has established **"Youth Offices"** *(Genç Ofis)* within provincial vocational schools and universities. For rural youth who move to a district center for high school, these offices serve as **a primary contact point for volunteering and Erasmus+ opportunities**, ensuring that the transition from a village to a town includes an introduction to the national youth work ecosystem.

Youth Camps as a National Outreach Mechanism

One important element to add to rural youth work in Türkiye is the **Ministry of Youth and Sports' National Youth Camps**. Alongside *Youth Centres*, *Mobile Youth Centres and Youth Offices*, these camps form a large-scale access mechanism for young people from rural or economically disadvantaged areas. Organised annually by the Ministry and provided **free of charge**, they cover accommodation, meals and transport, reducing key financial and geographical barriers to participation. In *2024*, the Ministry planned to reach **around 220,000 young people** through the camps, with a longer-term target of 1 *million participants*. Organised in thematic formats such as "sea" and "nature" camps, they should be understood not only as leisure activities but as part of Türkiye's national youth work infrastructure: Mobile Youth Centres reach villages, Youth Centres connect young people to district-level opportunities, and Youth Camps bring them into a wider national experience network. The paper should also update the Youth Centres figure **from "over 400" to 522**, according to the Ministry's 2025 budget communication.[44]

Rural Youth Participation and Initiatives

Participation in rural Türkiye flows through a **mix of state-led councils** and **grassroots local initiatives**. While the state provides the infrastructure, the "voice" of rural youth is often channelled through local municipalities and civil society.

Field-Based Educators as Social Catalysts

Similar to the "Teach for Georgia" model, Türkiye's teachers in remote villages, often young graduates themselves, frequently act as the only "real" youth workers in their communities. These educators lead extracurricular projects, such as **school clubs and local sports initiatives**, that bridge the gap where formal NGOs are absent. They act as mentors in *active citizenship and social resilience*, often working in mountainous or border regions where teacher shortages and social isolation are most acute.

Place-Based Livelihoods and Civic Skills

Rural youth work in Türkiye is increasingly connected with **rural development, local identity and community-based opportunities**. The *SALTO-YOUTH European Training Calendar* includes study visits in Kars focused on rural youth work, where participants explore how youth work is implemented in rural areas and how it

[44] Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Youth and Sports, "Gençlik kamplarında hedef 1 milyon genç," 17 November 2024, available at: https://genclikhizmetleri.gov.tr/genclik-kamplarinda-hedef-1-milyon-genc/; Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Youth and Sports, "GSB Gençlik Kamplarına Rekor Başvuru Aldık," 10 June 2024, available at: https://www.gsb.gov.tr/tr/haber-detay/278778-gsb-genclik-kamplarina-rekor-basvuru-aldik; Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Youth and Sports, "Gençlik ve Spor Bakanlığının 2025 yılı bütçesi TBMM'de kabul edildi," 14 December 2024, available at: https://gsb.gov.tr/tr/haber-detay/280984-genclik-ve-spor-bakanliginin-2025-yili-butcesi-tbmmde-kabul-edildi

contributes to rural development by empowering young people. The 2024 study visit highlighted Kars as a region with cultural heritage and rural development initiatives, while the 2026 follow-up activity refers to rural development projects in *education, youth, culture and economic development*. These examples suggest that rural youth work can link employability and participation by helping young people see their villages, cultural heritage and local environment as assets rather than limitations.[45]

The Rural Face: From Geographical Isolation to Local Innovation

Mehmet, a 20-year-old from a high-altitude village in the Erzurum province, represents the impact of the **"Mobile Youth Center"** initiative.

1. Engaging with Mobile Teams
Mehmet first engaged with a Ministry mobile team that brought "Coding and Robotics" workshops directly to his isolated local school.

2. Specialized Tech Training
He later utilized the **Deneyap Technology Workshops** in the district center to deepen his technical skills beyond the initial mobile intervention.

3. Developing Smart Solutions
Mehmet developed a sensor-based irrigation prototype for his family's potato farm, applying digital tools to traditional rural livelihoods.

4. Bridging the Digital Divide
By turning geographical isolation into a laboratory for solutions, he evolved from a curious participant into a recognized local innovator.

> **Mehmet, 20** — *Local Innovator, Erzurum Province*
> "*The youth center was the bridge that connected my village life to the digital world.*"

Rural Youth Issues and Needs for Empowerment

Despite the massive physical infrastructure, rural Türkiye faces a "social hollowing out" shaped by *migration* and a *mismatch between education and employment*. To achieve sustainable growth, the rural youth sector requires systemic strengthening in **four key areas**:

The Participation Deficit and "Civic Nihilism": A significant portion of rural youth feel their *voices carry little weight* in national policy. While they have access to Youth Centers, their involvement in the design of these services is often limited. This leads to a sense of "*civic nihilism*," where young people view youth work as a top-down state service rather than a platform for their own autonomy. In the 2024-2026 period, the demand for "*Participatory Budgeting*" at the municipal level has become a key advocacy point for rural youth leaders.

The NEET Barrier and Economic Despair: Türkiye has **one of the highest youth NEET rates in the OECD:** *in 2023, 28.4% of young people were not in employment, education or training, compared with the OECD average of 12.6%.*[46] This challenge is especially relevant for rural areas, where limited local labour markets and dependence on seasonal or traditional agriculture can reduce young people's realistic pathways to stable livelihoods. Youth work can help bridge this gap by

[45] SALTO-YOUTH, European Training Calendar, "Study Visit in Türkiye: Rural Youth Work," Kars, Türkiye, 10-15 September 2024; SALTO-YOUTH, European Training Calendar, "Study Visit with Partnership Building: Rural Youth Work," Kars, Türkiye, 20-25 April 2026.
[46] Government at a Glance 2025: Türkiye, 2025; OECD, "Youth not in employment, education or training (NEET)" indicator; D.S. Gedik et al., "Young Farmer Project within the Scope of Rural Development Supports," Journal of Tekirdag Agricultural Faculty; C. Solmaz, "Evaluation of Young Farmers Project Support Program in terms of Agri-Entrepreneurship in Turkey."

offering vocational non-formal education linked to the rural economy of the future, including **digital work, social entrepreneurship, sustainable agriculture and agri-tech.** *Türkiye's "Genç Çiftçi" / Young Farmer support model* has attempted to address rural youth employment by supporting young people in agriculture and rural production, but future approaches should go beyond traditional farming support and place stronger emphasis on innovation, social entrepreneurship and diversified rural livelihoods.

Infrastructure and Distance: Social isolation remains a major factor in the rural mental health crisis. While "*Mobile Centers*" are a solution, **approximately 40% of rural youth still report that physical spaces for social interaction are too distant to access.** There is an urgent need for "Youth Corners" within existing rural libraries or village schools to provide a permanent, safe space for social socialization.

Professional Recognition of the Youth Worker: The role of the "Youth Worker" is still **not fully recognized as a distinct profession** in Türkiye's labor system. Empowerment needs include an academic pathway—moving from short-term ministerial training to long-term qualifying certification. Rural youth work requires practitioners who are *not just* "*sports coaches*" *or* "*civil servants*," but **specialists in non-formal education, mediation, and community development.**

Conclusion: A Regional Perspective

The evolution of youth work in Türkiye, from the revolutionary "Village Institute" model to the modern, tech-centric "Youth Center" network, reflects **a nation striving for social cohesion**. However, the progress remains incomplete. The "*Anatolian Divide*" — the socio-economic gap between the industrialized West and the agrarian East — remains the *primary challenge for the youth sector*. The persistent skills gap, the high rate of NEET youth, and the lack of full professional recognition for youth workers create systemic challenges.

For rural Türkiye to thrive, youth work must be treated as a **strategic necessity for community sustainability**. This requires moving beyond the "service-delivery" model toward a rights-based, participatory framework. By integrating municipal micro-grants, regional development projects, and a professionalised workforce, Türkiye can ensure that the Anatolian heartland remains a place of opportunity and innovation, rather than a site of departure. The future of the Turkish rural youth sector depends on transforming the young person from a "recipient of state care" into a **"co-creator of local reality."**

CYPRUS

The Conceptualization of Youth Work in the Cypriot Context

The conceptualization of youth work in Cyprus is defined by a *unique intersection of post-colonial state-building, Mediterranean communal traditions, and the ongoing socio-political reality of a divided island*. In the Republic of Cyprus, youth work is formally categorized under the **broader umbrella of "Youth Policy,"** overseen by the *Youth Board of Cyprus (ONEK)*[47]. Unlike the centralized state-led models seen in larger neighbors, youth work in Cyprus operates through a **"shared responsibility" model**[48], where the state provides the statutory framework, but local communities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are the primary engines of delivery.[49]

For rural Cyprus, specifically the Troodos mountain range, the Pitsilia region, and the remote villages of the Tillyria peninsula, youth work is a **vital tool for social cohesion**. In these areas, the practice is shaped by a deepening **demographic crisis**: the "hollowing out" of villages as young people migrate to urban centers like Nicosia or Limassol. Consequently, rural youth work in Cyprus is increasingly framed as a **"resilience strategy,"** aiming to transform traditional villages into *hubs of innovation, agrotourism, and digital entrepreneurship*.[50]

According to the *Youth Board of Cyprus (ONEK)*[51], **youth work** is conceptualised as:

> *"a broad sector encompassing a wide variety of social, cultural, and educational activities conducted by, with, and for young people. This sector is predicated on the methodologies of non-formal and informal learning, focusing on the development of youth competencies, volunteering, active participation, and social inclusion. It's an educational and social practice that provides young people with a safe space for personal development, active citizenship, and social inclusion through non-formal learning methods, tailored to the specific local needs of the community."*

The Cyprus Youth Council (CYC) provides a complementary technical definition[52], identifying youth work *as any planned program of personal and social education based on non-formal education values, specifically designed to improve skills outside the formal educational curriculum*. To support this field, the *Human Resource Development Authority of Cyprus (HRDA)* has been

[47]Republic of Cyprus (1994). Youth Board Law of 1994 (N. 33 (I)/94). Established as a Legal Entity of Public Law under the Ministry of Education.
[48]Youth Board of Cyprus (ONEK), Youth Policy Glossary and Standards, p. 14
[49]Cyprus Youth Council (2021). Policy Paper on the Recognition of Youth Workers. Defines youth work as responding to needs and interests between ages 14 and 35.
[50]Council of Europe (2019). Final Report of the Advisory Mission Delegation. Recommendations for youth work development in rural settings, pp. 12-13.
[51]Youth Board of Cyprus (2024). Youth Work: Introduction and Council of Europe Definitions.
[52]European Union (2026). Youth Wiki: National Policies - Cyprus (10.1 General Context).

developing **vocational qualification standards** to professionalize the role of youth workers and validate the skills acquired through these non-formal processes.[53]

Historical Continuum: From British Colonialism to the Modern State

The trajectory of youth engagement in Cyprus differs significantly from continental European models, having evolved through *three distinct historical phases*.

The Colonial and Post-Independence Foundation (1940s-1960s):

During the *British colonial period*, organized youth activity was often linked to either the **scouting movement or political mobilization**. Following independence in *1960*, the new Republic viewed youth as the c**ore of national development.** However, the tragic events of *1974* and the subsequent displacement of a large portion of the population fundamentally shifted the focus of youth work. In the *late 1970s and 1980s*, youth work was primarily **"rehabilitative,"** focusing on the social integration of displaced youth and the reconstruction of communal identity in newly established settlements and surviving rural villages.[54] During *the 1970s and 80s*, after the invasion (1974), youth clubs were strictly overseen by the *Department of Social Welfare Services (Ministry of Labour)*, which provided technical guidance but viewed young people primarily as **agents for implementing community actions decided by adults**. In this era, rural youth often performed the "donkey work" for village councils and elders, possessing little to no formal voice in decision-making.

The Institutional Turn and the 1994 Law

The modern era of youth work began with the **Youth Board Law of 1994 (N. 33 (I)/94)**, which established the *Youth Board of Cyprus (ONEK)*[55] as a public legal entity. This was a watershed moment that moved youth work away from ad-hoc charitable activities toward a **professionalized, policy-driven field**. For rural areas, this meant the beginning of a structured network of *Youth Information Centers (KEPLI)* and the formal recognition of youth clubs as **legal partners in community development.**

The European Integration Phase (2004-Present)

Cyprus's **accession to the European Union in 2004** catalyzed a pivot toward the **"Western NGO model."** The infusion of Erasmus+ funding and the adoption of the *EU Youth Strategy* shifted the focus toward *non-formal learning, individual empowerment, and international mobility.*[56] In rural Cyprus, this era saw the emergence of a new generation of youth workers who utilize "European values", solidarity, inclusion, and environmentalism, to revitalize village life.

The pivot toward modernization occurred in *2008* with the founding of the *Cyprus Youth Clubs Organisation (KOKEN)*. KOKEN was created to qualitatively upgrade the institution of Youth Clubs, moving away from the state-led model toward a **"by youth, for youth"** philosophy.[57]

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[53]Cedefop (2025). VET Policy Briefs 2024 - Cyprus: National Developments 2023-24. Finalization of youth worker qualification, p. 1
[54]Youth Board of Cyprus (2026). Historical Evolution of Youth Clubs and the Founding of KOKEN. Growth intensive between 1975 and 1985.
[55]Republic of Cyprus Law N. 33 (I)/94, Establishment of the Youth Board of Cyprus.
[56]Connected Youth (2021). Cyprus Desk Research: Non-Formal Learning and EU-funded Youth Work.
[57]Council of Europe (2020). Cyprus Country Sheet: Youth Work (JB). Section 5.3 on KOKEN establishment, p. 7.

A critical structural change took place *between 2011 and 2013*, when a consultation involving *over 100 village clubs* resulted in their transformation into **formal legal entities (NGOs).**[58] This shift allowed clubs to manage their own financial resources and access European funding schemes, such as the *European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+*, while maintaining a common statute for administration.

Young people have been the **primary architects of this evolution**. Historically sidelined by traditional village structures, they cascaded the creation of new clubs *between 1975 and 1985* to demand a **formal role in society**. Key milestones shaped by youth advocacy include:

- **Professional Recognition:** *In 2016*, young advocates organized the "*Recognition of Youth Work(er)*" *conference*, which successfully pressured the state to begin certifying youth work as a distinct profession and validating non-formal learning.[59]
- **Digital Innovation:** Modern rural clubs have moved beyond social/athletic activities to lead sophisticated projects like *eAkrounta*, which utilizes **digital tools for heritage preservation and intergenerational dialogue**.[60]
- **Co-Decisional Governance:** The current design of the **National Youth Strategy 2030** is being co-created with youth from mountainous and coastal zones to ensure policies address **"real needs"** rather than just urban interests.[61]

As Cyprus moves toward its 2030 horizon, these youth-led NGOs remain the most significant cells for social engagement in remote areas, transitioning from passive recipients of welfare to **active catalysts of regional development.**

Modern Youth Work Reality and Institutional Frameworks

Modern youth work in Cyprus is characterized by a sophisticated interplay between national strategy and local implementation. The **National Youth Strategy (2017-2022)** and the upcoming **National Youth Strategy 2030** provide the legal and ethical "rules of the game."

The Youth Board of Cyprus (ONEK) and KEPLI

ONEK acts as the **central coordinator**, providing funding, expertise, and infrastructure. A critical component for rural youth is the *network of Youth Information Centers (KEPLI)*. These centers serve as "one-stop shops" where rural youth can access **career counselling, psychological support, and information on European mobility programs.**[62] By **decentralising** these services to regional hubs (such as Agros or Paphos), the state ensures that geographical distance does not equate to a lack of opportunity.

The "STEAMers" and Digital Innovation:

A significant recent institutional driver is the "*STEAMers*" *program*. This initiative focuses on bringing non-formal education in **Science, Technology, Engineering,**

[58]Council of Europe (2020). Forms and Examples of Youth Work in Cyprus. Administrative independence of youth clubs, p. 7.
[59]National Youth Council of Cyprus (2016). Conference: Recognition of Youth Work(er). Funded by Erasmus+ to empower youth dialogue with policymakers.
[60]Participation Pool (2024). eAkrounta: A Community's Journey to Preserve Local Heritage.
[61]European Commission (2024). Youth Wiki: National Youth Strategy 2030 Roadmap. Kick-off in April 2022.
[62]Youth Board of Cyprus (2024). Programs and Services: Youth Wiki Information Portal.

Arts, and Mathematics to youth across the island.[63] In rural districts, the program acts as a digital catalyst, providing **workshops in robotics, coding, and digital arts** that would otherwise be inaccessible outside the capital. This reflects a shift in youth work values: empowerment is increasingly defined by the ability to thrive in a digital economy while remaining rooted in one's rural community.

Current Local, Municipal, and Regional Programs

Current youth work in Cyprus is increasingly localized, **focusing on the specific needs** of regional clusters.

Municipal and Community Youth Councils

Based on the *European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life*, Cyprus has established a robust **network of Municipal and Community Youth Councils.**[64]

Advisory Power

These councils provide formal advisory support to local authorities. In rural communities like Athienou, Lefkara, and Ayia Napa, these councils allow young people to feed directly into municipal budgeting and infrastructure planning.

The "Youth Initiatives" Project

ONEK provides financial support for specific projects proposed by these councils. This allows rural youth to implement local festivals, environmental clean-ups, or social entrepreneurship pop-ups, fostering a sense of "local ownership" over their villages.

Regional Heritage and Agrotourism Initiatives

In the *Pitsilia and Troodos regions*, youth work is frequently linked to the **preservation of cultural heritage.** Programs like the "*Asinou Village Heritage Project*" demonstrate how youth-led action can revitalize rural identity.[65] These initiatives treat heritage not as a static past, but as a living asset. Youth workers in these regions facilitate projects where young people **map their villages, collect oral histories from elders, and develop digital tours**, linking civic skills with local livelihoods in agrotourism.

The Role of Cross-Border Cooperation

Due to the island's unique status, "Peace-building Youth Work" remains a critical regional pillar. Organizations based in the buffer zone or operating across the Green Line facilitate bi-communal rural youth exchanges. These programs focus on shared environmental challenges, such as water scarcity or fire prevention in rural forests, using non-formal education to bridge the political divide through practical, place-based cooperation.[66]

[63] Youth Board of Cyprus (ONEK), STEAMers Program: Empowering Youth through Digital Innovation and Arts.
[64] ONEK (2024). Policy Proposals: Municipal and Community Youth Councils.
[65] Pieri, C. (2022). Asinou Village Heritage Project: Youth Activities and Rural Development. Published in Taylor & Francis
[66] ResearchGate (2023). Civic Water: Bridging Culture, Nature, and People. Addressing water scarcity in a divided territory.

Rural Youth Participation and Initiatives

The impact of youth work structures on civic participation in Cyprus is defined by a **"democratic paradox"**: while young Cypriots are exceptionally well-educated and frequently volunteer, they remain **structurally distanced from formal governance**. National research shows that Cyprus records one of the lowest rates of youth activity in societal change initiatives, at **31%** compared to the EU average of **48%**.[67]

This disengagement is often rooted in **deep institutional distrust**; for instance, the *2025 "Youth Barometer"* revealed that young people rate political parties at just *3.26 out of 10*. Approximately **57% of youth** express an aversion to politics, viewing civic engagement as a burdensome obligation.[68] This is not merely apathy but a result of **survival pressures**, such as cost-of-living insecurity, creating a **"locked out" generation**. Without these inclusive channels, Cypriot youth would remain on the periphery of the decision-making processes that determine their futures.

To bridge this gap, national youth work structures facilitate platforms for influence. The *Youth Board of Cyprus (ONEK)* and the *Cyprus Youth Council (CYC)* lead the *EU Youth Dialogue*, allowing young people to shape policy recommendations every six months. Structural reforms, such as the **2025 constitutional amendment** to lower the **voting age to 17,** aim to institutionalize engagement habits early in life.

In this context, youth work functions as a **"laboratory of democracy,"** where programs like *Erasmus+* provide **"civic credits"** that convert grassroots activism into institutional capital. Thus, we see the participation in rural Cyprus is often more **"communal"** than **"individualistic,"** flowing through established local youth clubs and NGO networks.

The Cyprus Youth Clubs Organization (KOKEN). With *over 90 member clubs*, KOKEN is the backbone of grassroots youth work in rural Cyprus.[69] These clubs are often the only social outlet in remote villages. They provide a space for "*organic*" *youth work*, where volunteering and community service are *part of daily life*. It facilitates the training of local volunteers, ensuring that even the smallest village has *a* "*youth leader*" capable of organizing non-formal educational activities.

ACPELIA (Active Cypriot Programs and European Learning Into Acceptance), *founded in 2019* in rural Pissouri, operationalizes these goals through internal policies centered on empowerment and inclusion. Reviewing its internal framework, ACPELIA's daily work is shaped by a **"by youth for youth"** philosophy where participants *aged 13-30 act* as **active partners** in project design rather than passive beneficiaries. *Internal mentoring programs* for young leaders ensure that youth perspectives drive strategic planning and identify "real needs" outside urban centers. The organization specifically targets marginalized groups, including NEETs and rural youth, ensuring inclusion is a daily practice. Past project reports demonstrate how youth-led initiatives directly shape

[67] Kountouris, V. (2011). Youth and Democracy Survey Findings. Cited in Participation Paradox reports.
[68] IMR/University of Nicosia (2024). 6th Cyprus Youth Barometer. Findings on institutional distrust and economic uncertainty. [, S_R89]
[69] Cyprus Youth Clubs Organization (KOKEN), Annual Reporting on Rural Youth Participation and Volunteering.

organizational impact. Projects like "*Participation Beyond Voting*" and "*EuroQuest*" engaged youth in policy labs and European Parliament simulations, fostering active citizenship. At the local level, the "*Inclusion in Pissouri village*" project connected youth with seniors through storytelling, addressing the "rural penalty" by building community cohesion.

Field-Based Educators and Social Catalysts: Similar to the "Teach for Georgia" model, teachers in regional primary and secondary schools in Cyprus (such as the *Asinou Regional Primary School*) often act as de facto youth workers. Because many small village schools have closed, these regional schools have become the **new "social heart" of the countryside**. Educators here often lead extracurricular heritage and environmental projects that serve multiple villages, narrowing the social divide between the urban centers and the isolated mountainous regions.

Local "Human Face" & Personal Stories

Eleni, a 21-year-old from the mountainous village of *Agros in the Pitsilia region*, found her path through a local youth club supported by **KOKEN**. Initially joining a project focused on **"Mountainous Heritage,"** Eleni participated in workshops on sustainable agrotourism and traditional food preservation.
Her engagement evolved from local volunteering to coordinating a cross-border *Erasmus+ exchange* focused on **"Rural Revitalization."** Today, she **leads a youth initiative** that maps abandoned heritage sites in her region to create digital hiking trails. Eleni's story highlights the link between civic skills and "place-based livelihoods." She notes, "*The youth club taught me that staying in my village wasn't a limitation, but an opportunity to build something modern on old foundations.*" Her pathway shows how structured youth activities can convert "rural flight" into "rural leadership."

Rural Youth Issues and Needs for Empowerment

Despite high levels of education, rural Cypriot youth face **systemic barriers** that drive the continued "exodus" to the cities.

The "Rural NEET" Challenge and Geographic Isolation: Rural youth in Cyprus face **higher risks of becoming NEET** *(Not in Education, Employment, or Training)* compared to their urban counterparts. This is driven by *inadequate transportation and a lack of local labor markets*. Youth work must address this by advocating for "*Integrated Territorial Investments*", ensuring that youth work infrastructure is linked to transport and employment services.

The Infrastructure Gap and Mental Health: While "Youth Houses" exist in larger municipalities, many rural youth report a **total lack of designated physical space** in their own villages. This contributes to social isolation, which is a significant factor in the **rising mental health concerns** among rural teens. Empowerment needs include the creation of "*multi-functional spaces*" where youth can gather, work remotely, and access counseling services *without travelling for hours*.

Furthermore, **investment disparities** remain acute. Evaluations of youth service spending show that rural areas receive *approximately 25% less* funding per person compared to urban centers. This fragmentation extends to **mental health services**; UNICEF policy briefs highlight a "*stigma of help-seeking*" in small Cypriot communities and a lack of youth-led prevention initiatives, leaving rural youth with limited access to confidential support outside of schools.

Another significant barrier identified in national and European reports is **transportation**. Research indicates that rural transport *inequality* is not just a logistical issue but a **driver of social exclusion**. In Cyprus, the lack of frequent, subsidised public transport often forces rural youth to rely on private vehicles, creating a "*mobility divide*" that restricts access to urban education and labour markets. This is compounded by a widening **digital divide**; OECD data from late 2024 shows that the absolute gap in broadband speeds between urban and rural areas *has grown to 58 Mbps*, effectively barring rural youth from full participation in the gig economy and high-tech remote work.

Professional Recognition of the Youth Worker: In Cyprus, while the field is professionalized through ONEK, the specific role of the "Rural Youth Worker" **requires further specialization**. There is a need for academic pathways that train practitioners in "*Community Development*" and "*Rural Animation*," moving beyond general youth work to address the specific socio-economic challenges of the Cypriot countryside.

Conclusion: A Mediterranean Perspective

The evolution of youth work in Cyprus, from the rehabilitative efforts of the post-1974 era to the high-tech, EU-integrated model of today, reflects a resilient society. However, the **"Urban-Rural Divide"** remains a persistent threat to the island's social fabric.

For rural Cyprus to thrive, youth work must be treated as a **"Strategic Necessity"** for community sustainability. This requires a shift from a "service-delivery" model to a "*co-creation*" *model*, where rural youth are not just recipients of state programs but the architects of a new, digital, and sustainable reality. By bridging the gap between traditional village life and modern European opportunities, Cyprus can ensure that its rural heartland remains a vibrant place for the next generation to live, work, and lead.

THE EUROPEAN SCALE

The Conceptualisation of Youth Work in the European Context

At the European level, youth work is conceptualised as a tool for social inclusion, active citizenship, and the personal development of young people. This understanding is governed by the **European Youth Strategy (2019-2027)** and the **Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 203**0. A more recent and highly relevant reference specifically for rural youth is the **Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2025)3** *on the social, economic and political participation of rural youth, adopted in May 2025.*

This Recommendation recognises that rural youth face **specific barriers**, including *weaker infrastructure, limited access to youth services, lower participation in decision-making structures, mobility obstacles, and fewer youth engagement opportunities*. Importantly, it calls on member States to financially and structurally support rural youth organisations, youth clubs, youth centres and informal youth groups, while creating accessible youth services and democratic participation structures in rural areas.[70] Within the *European policy framework*, youth work is guided by the three pillars of the **EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, Engage, Connect, and Empower**, which shape the EU level approaches to participation, mobility, inclusion, and youth development. This Strategy emphasises equal access to participation, mobility, and opportunities for all young people, including those facing geographical disadvantages such as living in rural or remote areas.[71]

The Formal Definition

According to the *Council of Europe*, **youth work** is defined as:

> *"A broad term covering a large scope of activities of a social, cultural, educational, environmental and/or political nature by, with and for young people, in groups or individually. It is based on non-formal and informal learning processes and voluntary participation."* [72]

A similar definition has the *European Commission*:

> *"Youth work is a broad term covering a wide variety of activities of a social, cultural, educational, environmental and/or political nature by, with and for young people."* [73]

Historical Continuum: From Post-War Reconstruction to the "European Year of Youth"

The evolution of youth work across Europe has moved through four distinct **"Continental Shifts"**.

The Post-War and Reconciliation Era (1945-1970s)

Following *WWII*, youth work in Europe was primarily focused on **reconciliation and peace-building**. The establishment of the **European Youth Centre** in Strasbourg by the *Council of Europe in 1972* was a milestone. In rural Europe, this period saw the rise of traditional agrarian youth movements (such as *Rural Youth Europe*, *MIJARC Europe* etc), which focused on maintaining rural identity amidst rapid industrialisation.

The Expansion of the European Project (1980s-2000s)

The launch of the first **"Youth for Europe" program** in *1988* marked the beginning of a structured *European youth policy*. This era introduced the concept of **"European Mobility"**. For rural youth, this was the first time that EU-funded grants allowed them to travel outside their villages for non-formal learning, breaking the cycle of geographical isolation.

[70] Council of Europe, Recommendation CM/Rec(2025)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the social, economic and political participation of rural youth.
[71] European Commission, EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027: Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people.
[72] Council of Europe, Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on youth work p.3.
[73] Council of the European Union, Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the Framework for establishing a European Youth Work Agenda, 2020/C 415/01; Council of the European Union, Resolution on youth work policy in an empowering Europe, C/2024/3526.

The Professionalisation and Digital Shift (2010–Present)

The last decade has seen a drive toward the formal recognition of youth work. The **Bonn Process**, initiated *in 2020*, represents a pan-European effort to strengthen the youth work community of practice.[74] Alongside these structural developments, youth work policy increasingly engages with emerging themes such as *the green and digital transitions*, encouraging young people to participate in *shaping sustainable and digitally connected communities*.

Modern Institutional Frameworks at the European Level

Modern youth work on a European scale is characterised by **"Top-Down Support for Bottom-Up Action"**.

Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps (ESC)

The *Erasmus+ programme* is the primary **financial engine** of rural youth work. For the 2021–2027 cycle, the program has a specific focus on "*Inclusion and Diversity*", with increased funding for youth from "*Geographically Remote Areas*." The European Solidarity Corps programme further supports rural reality by funding volunteering projects that help **revitalise small communities**, from restoring heritage sites to providing social services in ageing villages.

The Role of SALTO-YOUTH Resource Centres

The *SALTO* (Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities) network provides the **technical expertise for the sector**. *SALTO Inclusion & Diversity* provides practical tools and methodologies that help youth workers engage young people with fewer opportunities – including those in rural areas – in **international mobility, participation, and civic engagement initiatives** linked to *Erasmus*.[75]

Current Pan-European Rural Programs and Initiatives

European youth work is increasingly implemented through **transnational cooperation structures**, including cross-border partnerships among different organisations and pan-European organisations and networks that span multiple countries, which enables collaboration among different countries on shared priorities such as *inclusion*, *youth participation and youth work*.

A key milestone in the European youth policy framework is EU Youth Goal #6: Moving Rural Youth Forward, developed through the 6th cycle of the *EU Youth Dialogue*. The goal focuses on **improving access to infrastructure, services, and opportunities** for young people in rural and remote areas, including transport and digital connectivity. It also highlights the need to *enhance the attractiveness of rural life* and ensure that young people in all territories can access comparable opportunities. This can be interpreted as part of a broader shift in *European youth policy* towards addressing territorial disparities and strengthening equality of opportunity across geographic contexts.[76]

[74] European Youth Work Academy, The Bonn Process: Strengthening Youth Work in Europe (2020–30) Monitoring Report, pp. 11–13.
[75] An example of such a toolkit is the Inclusion A to Z: A Compass for International Youth Work by SALTO-YOUTH Inclusion & Diversity.
[76] EU, The 11 European Youth Goals: Results of the 6th Cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue, Goal #6: Moving Rural Youth Forward.

The European Rural Youth Parliament (ERYP)
is a **recurring transnational youth forum** linked to the *European Rural Parliament process*. It brings together young people from rural communities across Europe to discuss shared challenges and co-develop youth declarations on issues such as connectivity, transport access, and rural services. These outputs feed into broader European rural development discussions and contribute to policy advocacy on rural youth issues.

Smart Villages and Youth Innovation
The EU-supported **Smart Villages approach** shows how rural communities can use **social and digital innovation** to improve local services, strengthen resilience and create new opportunities. However, for youth work, the concept becomes especially relevant when connected with **youth-led rural participation models.**

Romania offers a concrete example through the **European Youth Village initiative**, where rural communities are recognised for creating *youth-friendly local environments* and where young people, youth workers and local authorities cooperate to improve **participation, community life and local development.**

This youth dimension was also recognised through the *SALTO "European Youth Villages" study visit* in Romania in *July 2024*, which gathered rural youth workers and leaders to visit active villages, learn from their experience and discuss **quality rural youth work**. In this sense, youth centres and local youth organisations can act as **community innovation spaces** where young people test *green, digital and social ideas* and contribute directly to the future of their villages.[77]

The Rural Face: Gabija's ESC Experience in a Greek Mountain Village

A concrete "rural face" of European youth work can be seen in Gabija's European Solidarity Corps story. *Gabija*, a young person from *Lithuania*, spent one month **volunteering in a very small mountain village in Greece**, where she supported community life through gardening, helping local families, working with a kindergarten, and learning sustainability practices from local residents. Her experience shows how ESC can turn rural areas into *spaces of intercultural learning, solidarity and personal growth*, while also helping young people feel connected to local communities beyond their own country.[78]

Participation on a European scale is supported by the **EU Youth Dialogue**, which allows youth (also rural youth) to **communicate directly with policy-makers.** However, many rural areas are impacted by the so-called *"Geography of Discontent"*[79]: people in rural areas, including youth, may feel politically disengaged and less connected to European institutions, often due to perceptions that their communities are overlooked in policy development and decisions. In this context, rural youth work could be a strategic response to *Cohesion policy*: aiming to strengthen participation, expand opportunities, and reinforce the connection between young people in rural areas and European-level processes, by addressing structural rural-urban disparities,

[77] European Commission, "Supporting Smart Village strategies", available at: https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/cap-my-country/rural-development/supporting-smart-village-strategies_en; SALTO-YOUTH, "European Youth Villages", Study Visit, 20-24 July 2024, Romania, available at: https://www.salto-youth.net/tools/european-training-calendar/training/european-youth-villages.12231/

[78] European Youth Portal, "European Solidarity Corps" – story of Gabija from Lithuania, updated 17 February 2026, available at: https://youth.europa.eu/stories/european-solidarity-corps-0_en

[79] European Commission, The geography of EU discontent and the egional development trap, 2023

including youth outmigration due to unequal access to services and opportunities.

In response to such challenges of democratic inclusion, the *Council of Europe's European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life* provides a key policy framework promoting youth participation at local and regional levels, including the **development of youth councils and other participatory structures** at the local level. By strengthening local democratic youth structures -including rural youth organisations- and empowering young people in rural areas to participate actively *in society, democratic participation and social cohesion* across Europe can be reinforced.

Rural Youth Issues and Needs for Empowerment (European Perspective)

Despite the EU's substantial policy efforts and funding instruments, rural youth across Europe continue to experience forms of **"peripheralisation"**, reflected in unequal access to services, opportunities, and participation in decision-making processes.

Transport Poverty and the Digital Divide: Rural young people continue to face structural barriers linked to **mobility and connectivity**. Limited or unavailable public transport can prevent young people from reaching youth centres, educational opportunities and community activities, while unequal access to digital infrastructure can limit participation in digital youth work and online learning. These barriers are increasingly recognised at EU level: transport poverty is now discussed through the dimensions of *availability, accessibility and affordability*, while the *EU Digital Decade target* aims for all populated areas *to be covered by 5G by 2030*[80]

The Professional Recognition Crisis and the Bonn Process: Across Europe, the recognition and professional status of youth workers **remains uneven**. In some countries, youth work is *supported through formal education pathways, public funding and recognised professional structures*, while in others it still *relies heavily on volunteers, project-based work and fragmented recognition systems*. This creates a European-level **need for stronger competence frameworks**, common quality standards and better recognition of learning and professional experience in youth work. The *European Youth Work Agenda* and its implementation process, known as the **Bonn Process**, directly respond to this challenge by promoting stronger framework conditions, quality development, and the visibility and recognition of youth work across Europe.[81]

Mental Health, Informal Support and Social Isolation: Post-pandemic European research shows that rural youth face interconnected barriers linked to *limited services, weaker institutional support, mobility constraints, and reduced access to leisure, culture and social spaces*. Youth work therefore needs to strengthen community-based support, using non-formal education, peer learning, intergenerational dialogue and local youth spaces to rebuild

[80]European Commission, Transport poverty: definitions, indicators, determinants, and mitigation strategies - Final report, 2024; European Parliament, Research for CULT Committee - EU educat,ion, youth and sport policy: overview and future perspectives, 2024.

[81]European Commission, Working with young people: the value of youth work in the European Union, 2014, section 2.8.7 "Professionalisation of youth work"; 3rd European Youth Work Convention, Bonn Process: Growing Youth Work throughout Europe, 2020/2021; Youthpass, European developments related to recognition.

the social fabric of rural communities affected by migration, demographic decline and the closure or weakening of local services. The EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership's 2026 report, ***Here to stay? The transitions of rural youth before and after the Covid-19 pandemic*** highlight the importance of informal support networks and recommend investment in "soft infrastructure" — **community-based support systems** that use local social capital to keep young people connected to their communities.[82]

The same study highlights that rural youth across Europe face interconnected challenges related to **education, employment, mobility, participation, and access to services, including leisure and cultural opportunities**. The research also notes that rural youth are often not explicitly recognised as a distinct policy group, with their needs frequently embedded within broader youth or rural policy frameworks. These findings contribute to ongoing policy discussions on the **territorial and social inequalities** affecting rural regions and rural youth, including issues related to well-being, access to support systems, and participation opportunities.[83]

Conclusion: The "Long-Term Vision for EU's Rural Areas"

The evolution of youth work on a European scale reflects a continent striving for "*Balance*." From the peace-building roots of the 1950s to the high-tech, green-focused hubs of today, youth work is the "glue" that holds the European project together in the countryside.

Looking ahead, the upcoming *EU Strategy* on the **"Right to Stay"**[84] is especially relevant for rural youth work, as it aims to ensure that people in rural areas can *imagine and build viable futures in their own communities*, supported by infrastructure, services and economic opportunities. Rural youth organisations can play a focal role in this process by turning the "right to stay" from a policy slogan into lived reality: creating spaces for participation, local innovation, volunteering, skills development and community belonging. In this sense, strengthening rural youth work is not only a youth policy measure, but also a **concrete territorial cohesion strategy** for keeping rural Europe alive and future-oriented.

For rural Europe to thrive, youth work must be treated as a **Fundamental Right**. This requires moving beyond temporary *Erasmus+ projects* toward a permanent, **"Rural-Proofed" youth infrastructure**. By ensuring that every village in Europe is a site of opportunity, the EU can ensure that the "Generation of the Future" is a **generation that chooses to stay, innovate, and lead from the rural heartland**.[85]

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[82]EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership, Here to stay? The transitions of rural youth before and after the Covid-19 pandemic, Council of Europe and European Commission, January 2026, pp. 9-11, 52-55, 79, 85.
[83]EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership, Here to stay? The transitions of rural youth before and after the Covid-19, 2026.
[84]European Committee of the Regions, Empowering rural futures: The right to stay in rural areas, 2026.
[85]A good example of the EU's actions on strengthening rural areas is the following: European Commission, A Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040.

Final Synthesis & Conclusion

The mapping of rural youth realities across the Caucasus, the Mediterranean, and Eastern Europe reveals a singular truth: youth work is the **most effective "social glue" for maintaining the viability of the countryside**. While each territory faces unique pressures, ranging from the *wartime emergency in Ukraine* and *border security in Armenia* to the "*hollowing out*" *of Anatolian and Cypriot villages*, **the fundamental needs remain universal.** Across all five contexts, the transition from a "passive beneficiary" to an "active community leader" is triggered by three essential factors: *safe physical or digital spaces, the presence of a professionally recognized youth worker, and the linkage of civic skills to local economic identity*.

However, the research also exposes a persistent **"Implementation Gap."** Despite the landmark *2025 Youth Policy Law in Armenia*, the *massive infrastructure in Türkiye*, and the *resilience hubs in Ukraine*, rural youth continue to battle **"Transport Poverty"** and a **"Digital Divide"** that threatens to leave them behind in the **"Twin Green and Digital Transition."** The professionalization of the youth worker remains an unfinished project across the region; without formal career pathways and social guarantees, the sustainability of rural interventions remains dangerously dependent on temporary project-based funding and the tireless, often unrecognized, efforts of local volunteers and NGOs like **Youth Mix** and **KOKEN.**

Moving forward, the success of the **European Rural Youth Manifesto** and the **Bonn Process** depends on "*Rural-Proofing*" *all national and European policies*. We must move toward a rights-based framework where youth centers are treated as essential infrastructure, as vital as schools or hospitals. By investing in the "*Smart Village*" *model and fostering cross-border cooperation*, we can transform rural areas from sites of departure into laboratories of innovation. The **"Generation of the Future"** is already present in the rural heartlands of Europe and its neighbors; our task is to provide them with the tools to build their future where they stand, ensuring that no young person is ever "left behind" due to the coordinates of their birth.

GAMIFY RURAL YOUTH WORK

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