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# STUDY ON THE SITUATION AND THE NEEDS OF RURAL YOUTH IN THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES

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In cooperation:



# CROSS-COUNTRY SYNTHESIS: SITUATION AND THE NEEDS OF RURAL YOUTH IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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## Contents

Foreword.....	4
List of abbreviations.....	5
1. INTRODUCTION.....	6
1.1 Background.....	6
1.2 Methodological approach.....	7
2. CONTEXT ANALYSIS OF RURAL YOUTH IN THE WESTERN BALKANS.....	12
2.1 Macro-level trends.....	12
2.1.1 Macroeconomic conditions.....	12
2.1.2 Rural areas – current state and trends.....	14
2.2 Overview of the institutional settings and legal framework for supporting rural youth.....	19
2.2.1 Institutional and legal setting.....	20
2.2.2 Policies supporting rural youth.....	23
3. SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS OF RURAL YOUTH – CHALLENGES, NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES.....	27
3.1 Youth socio-demographics.....	27
3.2 Education.....	32
3.3 Digital divide.....	39
3.4 Employment and economic opportunities and mobility.....	43
3.5 Young people neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET).....	49
3.6 Youth involvement in agriculture.....	51
3.7 Wellbeing – Quality of life.....	58
3.7.1 Rural infrastructure.....	59
3.7.2 Social Inclusion.....	63
3.8 Rural youth aspirations, civic engagement, and political participation and inclusion.....	69

4.	CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	76
4.1	Policy implementation and coordination .....	76
4.2	Labour market and employability of rural youth.....	78
4.3	Agriculture and rural youth .....	80
4.4	Wellbeing and quality of life .....	82
4.5	Civic engagement and political participation .....	85
4.6	Data gaps and needs.....	87
4.7	Country-specific issues and recommendations .....	88
5.	NATIONAL REPORT FOR ALBANIA.....	97
6.	THE NATIONAL REPORT FOR BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA.....	110
7.	NATIONAL REPORT ON KOSOVO*.....	121
8.	NATIONAL REPORT MONTENEGRO .....	132
9.	NATIONAL REPORT NORTH MACEDONIA .....	146
10.	NATIONAL REPORT - SERBIA .....	159

*\*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo\* Declaration of Independence.\**

## Foreword

Rural youth are the backbone of many communities across the Western Balkans, yet they face persistent challenges that threaten their opportunities for economic mobility, social inclusion, and overall well-being. As these young individuals navigate a rapidly changing global landscape, they encounter obstacles such as limited access to quality education, high unemployment rates, and inadequate infrastructure in rural areas. Despite their resilience and potential, they remain underrepresented in policy dialogues and economic development strategies.

The aim of the study is to better understand the challenges and needs of rural youth and includes various aspects of youth such as employment opportunities, training, infrastructure, fulfilling their aspirations in terms of social inclusion and engagement. A specific focus will be on gender differences and the often undertapped potential of female youth. As a result, the study is expected to provide insight into possible solutions for more informed decision-making when making policies to encourage youth to stay or return to rural areas. This study seeks to shed light on the realities faced by rural youth in the Western Balkans. Through a comprehensive cross-country synthesis, it provides a deep understanding of their challenges, needs, and aspirations. By integrating national data with qualitative insights, the study identifies critical policy gaps and offers evidence-based recommendations to foster a more inclusive and sustainable future for young people in rural areas.

A key focus of this research is the growing trend of rural youth migration—both within and beyond national borders—driven by a lack of economic opportunities, limited access to essential services, and a disconnect between rural realities and national development policies. If left unaddressed, this trend could further erode the social fabric of rural communities, leading to demographic decline and reduced agricultural productivity. Conversely, if properly supported, rural youth can play a transformative role in revitalizing these communities through innovation, entrepreneurship, and engagement in sustainable agrifood systems. The study highlights the need for targeted interventions, including improved access to education and vocational training, enhanced digital connectivity, better employment opportunities, and stronger institutional support for youth participation in decision-making processes. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of gender-sensitive approaches, recognizing the distinct challenges faced by young women in rural areas and the untapped potential they represent.

The insights presented in this report aim to serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, researchers, civil society organizations, and international development partners working towards a more inclusive and prosperous future for rural youth in the Western Balkans. It is our hope that the findings will inspire coordinated efforts to implement practical solutions that empower rural youth, ensuring they are not only the future but also the present drivers of rural development.

We extend our sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to this study—the young men and women who shared their experiences, the national experts who provided their invaluable analysis, and the institutions that supported this initiative. Their collective voices and insights have helped shape a roadmap for action that can lead to meaningful change in the lives of rural youth and the communities they call home.

## List of abbreviations

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>EXAMPLES Description</b>
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPARD	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance for Rural Development
NEET	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
SWG	Standing Working Group
WB	Western Balkans

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

Rural youth in the Western Balkans (WB) represent a demographic segment often overlooked in discussions on development and progress. Yet, they constitute a significant portion of the population, with unique challenges and potential.

Rural areas across the Western Balkans are characterized by limited economic opportunities, inadequate infrastructure, and underinvestment in education and healthcare. These challenges are exacerbated for rural youth, who often face additional barriers to accessing quality education, employment, and healthcare services. High levels of unemployment, particularly among young people, perpetuate a cycle of poverty and marginalization in these regions.

Furthermore, rural youth in the Western Balkans are disproportionately affected by migration, as many seek better prospects in urban areas or abroad. This exodus further depletes rural communities of talent and potential, exacerbating the already existing socio-economic disparities.

The Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group in South-Eastern Europe (SWG), supported by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the German Federal Ministry for Food and Agriculture (BMEL), conducted a study to gain a comprehensive insight and better understand the needs and challenges of young rural women and men in the Western Balkans. The main aim of the study is to provide evidence on youth's prospects for sustainable livelihoods, decent employment and training opportunities, engagement in agrifood systems, their mobility decisions, their roles as innovators and contribution to rural development as well as fulfilling their aspirations with regards to social inclusion and participation in policy processes. A specific focus is dedicated on gender differences and the often under-used potential of female youth.

Rural youth in Western Balkans play a crucial role not only in shaping the future of rural areas but also in driving the agricultural sector and food production. As such, prioritizing policies to support young individuals in rural environments is imperative. Such policies aim to provide the necessary conditions for rural youth to thrive, fostering their potential and enhancing their adaptability and resilience within their communities. Addressing these issues is vital for mitigating the concerning trend of migration, both within the Western Balkans region and globally. The report identifies the urgent requirement for innovative policies and interventions in rural areas, focusing on empowering youth and facilitating decent employment opportunities while overall improving their quality of life and possibly their communities.

The Regional Synthesis Report has been compiled from the findings of the six national studies, aiming to consolidate and analyze the data and information gathered from each Western Balkan

country/territory into a unified report. It delineates the common needs, constraints, and challenges faced by young people in the rural areas while also generating policy recommendations. These recommendations are derived from both the individual country studies and the overarching assessments provided in the reports. Consequently, the primary significance of the Regional Synthesis Report lies in its establishment of a regional perspective derived from the insights of the six national studies, serving as a foundational resource for regional initiatives.

## 1.2 Methodological approach

The methodology applied in this study was used consistently in all six national studies, each of which was developed by national consultants with the support of SWG and FAO staff. The research approach combined desk research, key stakeholder interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and a survey of rural youth.

*Desk Research:* The desk research included a comprehensive review of policy documents, research papers, reports, studies and other materials from government agencies, academia, and international organizations. In addition, national statistics on demographics, education, employment, agriculture, and infrastructure among other areas were analyzed. Given the limited availability of national data, databases from ILOSTAT, FAO Stat, Eurostat and the World Bank were also consulted to gain insights into the situation of rural youth.

However, the availability and comparability of data remains a major challenge in the region. While data is essential for tracking youth-related progress, there is a lack of sufficient, up-to-date and reliable information on rural areas and their populations. As a result, the report is limited by the lack of up-to-date and consistent data, which affects its comprehensiveness.

Key data-related challenges include:

- Lack of standardized definitions and criteria for urban/rural delineation: in many countries, there are no clear or consistent definitions of what constitutes a rural versus an urban area. This inconsistency results in a lack of demographic data for rural populations, including youth, making it difficult to compare data across countries and track changes over time.
- Census delays and shifts: Delays in conducting population and agricultural censuses have led to significant gaps in time series data in many countries. As a result, there are very few indicators that provide a continuous overview of both rural areas and the young people living there.
- Variability in data availability across the Western Balkans: Of the Western Balkan countries, Serbia has the most comprehensive and up-to-date data, accessible through both the national statistical office and the EUROSTAT database. North Macedonia follows,

although its data has not been updated in recent years. In contrast, countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo\* face greater challenges, as only fragmented data is available from both domestic and international sources, making it difficult to develop a comprehensive understanding of the situation in these areas.

Table Definitions of rural areas and rural youth

Country	Definition of rural areas	Definition of youth
ALB	<p>There is no official definition of rural areas in Albania. However, the degree of urbanization of local administrative units is measured according to EU methods by INSTAT in 2014 based on 2011 Census data. Consequently, there are only 10 local units classified as urban (densely populated areas); 57 are intermediate density areas, and 306 are rural local units (thinly populated areas).</p>	<p>Law 75/2019 “On Youth” which defines youth as individuals aged 15 to 29 years old.</p>
B&H	<p>Based on the SRBiH number 33/75 and the Systematic List of Inhabited Places of BiH, it was defined which inhabited places have the character of a populated place with the designation urban (U) or other (O).</p>	<p>Implemented on Entity(s) level; population 15-30 years old</p>
XK*	<p>According to Law No. 04/L-174 on Spatial Planning in the Republic of Kosovo*, a Rural Area is defined as “an area that is characterized by a low amount of construction, population density, and technical, public and social infrastructure, as well as employment through the development of agriculture, rural tourism, healing centers and production that does not pollute the surrounding environment”.</p>	<p>Law No. 03/L – 145 on the Empowerment and Participation of Youth defines youth as any person belonging to the age group between 15 and 24 years of age.</p>
MN	<p>According to IPARD program, settlements - municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants in urban centers should be excluded from the rural area, i.e., settlements that the National Statistical Office (MONSTAT) classifies as urban and that administratively belong to urban centers, while the remaining area of a municipality falls into the rural area. Additionally, municipalities which, according to the 2011 Census, have fewer than 10,000 inhabitants in urban settlements will be considered rural areas. Rural areas at the regional level are classified according to OECD methodology.</p>	<p>Law on youth (2019); population 15-30</p>
NMK	<p>By IPARD programme, all settlement with population under 30 thousands, small towns and villages are considered as rural.</p>	<p>Law on youth participation and youth policies;</p>



people aged 15 to 29

SRB	In Serbia, there is no formal definition of rural areas. The Statistical office follows an approach in which urban settlements are explicitly defined by law, while the remaining territory is categorized as "other settlements" This residual category is thus automatically considered rural.	Law on Youth, 2022; population 15-30
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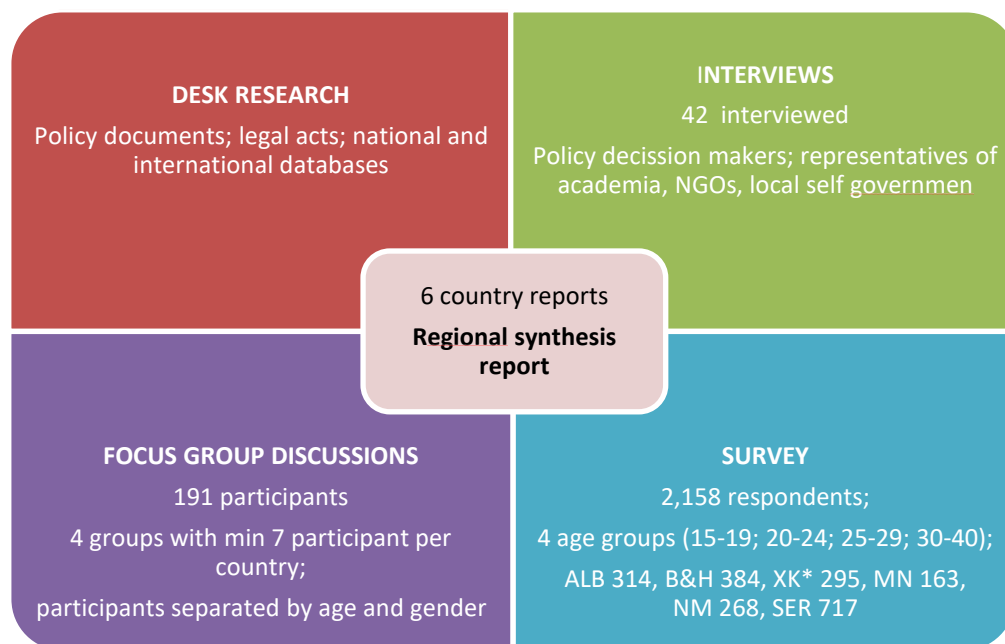
**Interviews:** Interviews were conducted with selected resource persons representing key stakeholders in each country, including:

- A local representative from civil society, specifically from organizations or networks of young people in rural areas.
- A representative from the Ministry of Agriculture, responsible for rural youth policies.
- A representative from the Ministry of Youth/Labour/Social Policy, responsible for youth policies.
- A local authority representative from a rural municipality, involved in implementing rural youth policies at the local level.
- A professor from a University/Faculty of Agriculture.
- An academic researcher specializing in youth or rural youth.
- A representative from a non-governmental organization (NGO) focused on rural women's issues or a career advisory center.

An interview template was developed as a guide for the interviews with the national stakeholders. SWG staff planned, conducted and documented these interviews and ensured that different perspectives, including those of women and men of different ages and backgrounds, were taken into account.

The interviews focused on several thematic areas, including:

- The most pressing issues for rural youth and potential solutions; personal perceptions of their current situation, challenges, and opportunities.
- Personal opinions on the effectiveness of institutions overseeing rural youth issues and the programmes or policies targeting rural youth; identifying missing crucial institutions or policies.
- Awareness and opinions on various strategic documents, programmes and support schemes related to youth and specifically to rural youth, such as national youth strategies, operational and monitoring plans, youth guarantee funds, or subsidies.
- Evaluation of specific state-support measures for rural youth, including their suitability and accessibility.
- Insights on donor-funded projects targeting rural youth
- Ongoing activities and plans of institutions or organizations to improve rural youth well-being.



**The focus group discussions (FGDs)** aimed to identify the current limitations and opportunities for rural youth, providing a platform for them to voice their concerns and contribute to shaping youth-responsive policies. FGDs were conducted in each country/territory using a standardized methodology. Each focus group comprised at least seven participants, resulting in 28 participants per country/territory and 191 participants across the region. Separate focus group discussions were organized for young people in two age groups – 15 to 24 years and 25 to 40 years, and additional discussions specifically with young men and young women.

To ensure a balanced representation, the national experts in consultation with SWG staff, ensured a 50-50 percent split between participants working in agriculture and those not working in agriculture. This approach was intended to capture a broad range of perspectives on rural youth issues.

FGDs focused on the following key topics:

- **Education and employment:** Exploring the educational and employment conditions for rural youth.
- **Economic opportunities:** Discussing the available economic opportunities and the challenges rural youth face in accessing them.
- **Social life:** Examining the social dynamics and community engagement of rural youth.
- **Rural infrastructure:** Assessing the state of rural infrastructure and access to essential services like healthcare.

- Civic engagement and political participation: Analyzing rural youth's involvement in civic activities and political processes.
- Inclusion: Investigating issues related to the social and economic inclusion of rural youth.

In addition, open-ended questions were posed, such as: “What are the issues that concern you most as a young person living in a rural area?” and “Are there other important topics that we haven’t mentioned?” These discussions aimed to give rural youth the opportunity to voice their perspectives and influence future policy decisions.

**The survey** was conducted with a sample of 2 000 rural respondents, aged 15 to 40, through both in-person interviews and online platforms, accessed via smartphones and computers. In total, responses were collected from 2,158 individuals across all countries, with the number of respondents varying according to the population size of each country: Albania (314), Bosnia and Herzegovina (384), Kosovo\* (295), Montenegro (163), North Macedonia (268), and Serbia (717). The sample was designed to proportionally represent different age groups (15-19, 20-24, and 25-29 years old).

Given that the 30-39 age group constitutes a significantly larger portion of the rural population in most countries—often more than double that of the younger age groups—this group was allocated a fixed 20 percent of the sample to ensure balanced representation across all age groups. The minimum number of respondents for each age group was set at 90 percent of the calculated sample size, allowing for a  $\pm 10$  percent variation between categories without affecting the overall sample size per country/territory.

This methodology ensured a representative distribution of responses, providing a solid foundation for analyzing the situation of youth in the Western Balkans.

## 2. CONTEXT ANALYSIS OF RURAL YOUTH IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

### 2.1 Macro-level trends

#### 2.1.1 Macroeconomic conditions

The Western Balkan region comprises small, economically weak, and politically vulnerable countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, with a total population of 17.3 million (Table 1).

The region's economy has experienced diverse developments over the last few decades, influenced by a long and complex transition process and contemporary challenges. While progress has been made in governance, legal frameworks, and regional cooperation, issues such as corruption, political instability, and ethnic tensions continue to hinder further advancements. These problems undermine public trust in institutions and discourage investments, thus hindering economic growth. Consequently, economic growth remains low, poverty remains high, and the Western Balkan economies continue to lag well behind those of Central and Eastern European and EU countries.

Table 1: Key macroeconomic economic indicators

	ALB	B&H	XS*	NM	MNE	SRB
Total area, km <sup>2</sup>	28 748	51 197	10 905	13 812	25 713	88 499
Population, (000) 2021	2 830	3 475	1 774	620	1 837	6 623
<b>Macro-financial management</b>						
Real GDP growth, Q3 2023	3.5	1.9	3.0	1.2	6.6	3.6
GDP per capita, \$ (2024 IMF estimates)	8,924	8,416	6,389	8,847	12,646	12,384
Inflation, Dec 23	4.0	2.2	2.3	3.6	4.3	7.6
Employment rate, 2023	57.2	41.5	35.4	45.4	55.6	50.3
<b>Inclusive growth</b>						
Poverty rate,* 2022	23.5	–	23.4	18.3	10.3	8.5
GINI index,* latest	29.4	33.0	29.0	33.5	36.8	35.0
Labor force participation (LFP) gender gap,* 2023	15.2	23.4	34.0	19.2	12.7	14.1
Unemployment rate,* 2023	10.7	13.2	8.8	13.1	13.1	9.4
Youth unemployment rate,* 2023	25.7	29.9	16.9	29.4	23.7	25.1
<b>International economic integration</b>						
Exports, 2022	37.4	48.1	38.6	74.0	51.5	62.9
Imports,* 2022	47.8	61.9	71.4	94.9	74.4	74.5
Current Account Deficit (CAD), 2022	-6.0	-4.3	-10.3	-6.1	-12.9	-6.9
Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), 2022	6.7	3.0	6.3	5.0	13.2	7.2
Remittances, 2022	5.5	7.9	13.4	2.7	6.5	6.2

Sources:

<https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPDPC@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEO WORLD?year=2024;>

WB Group (2024) Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No.25- Invigorating Growth<sup>1</sup>;

The Western Balkan countries face a range of economic, political, social, and environmental challenges. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive and sustained efforts from national governments, regional bodies, and international partners. Key priorities include fostering economic growth and diversification, improving governance and institutional capacity, addressing social inequalities, and building resilience to environmental and demographic changes. The prospect of EU integration remains a key driver of reforms in the region.

The region suffers from low productivity and competitiveness. This is due to factors such as outdated infrastructure, limited access to finance, and a slow pace of technological adoption and innovation.

In 2023, economic growth in the Western Balkans has slowed to 2.6 percent from the 3.4 percent achieved in 2022, reflecting the impact of sequential shocks in the EU economy. Growth performances were over the projected in Serbia and Montenegro, while the other four countries performed below expectations. However, while the region is expected to return on its pre-pandemic trend in 2024, this is insufficient to enable meaningful convergence with EU income levels over the medium term. Measured in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, GDP per capita in the Western Balkans remains at just 40 percent of the EU average<sup>2</sup>.

Unemployment rates, especially among youth, remain high across the region. This challenge is compounded by a disconnection between education systems and labor market demands, as well as a scarcity of job opportunities. The overall employment rate for the Western Balkans (age 15+) reached a record high of 48.1 percent in 2023, and unemployment rates decreased across all countries, with the regional rate falling to 10.9 percent. However, despite a drop in youth unemployment to 25.5 percent, it remains significantly higher than the EU average of 13.8 percent for the same period. Moreover, after two years of improvement, the female-to-male participation gap in the region increased by 0.5 percentage points (pp) in 2023, reaching 19.7 percent<sup>3</sup>.

Poverty in the Western Balkans resumed its downward trend in 2023, but the pace was slower than before the pandemic. This slowdown in poverty reduction is attributed to the region's decelerating economic growth and the sharp rise in food and energy prices during 2022–2023, which put pressure on household purchasing power. Despite advancements in reducing poverty,

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<sup>1</sup> *Macro-financial management: Notes: Real GDP growth, inflation and credit growth are expressed as year-on-year, employment as a rate and NPLs as percent of total loans. Sources: National statistical offices; central banks; World Bank staff. International economic integration: Notes: Indicators are expressed as percent of GDP. Exports and imports refer to exports and imports of goods and services. Sources: National statistical offices; central banks; World Bank staff*

<sup>2</sup> WB Group (2024) Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No.25- Invigorating Growth

<sup>3</sup> WB Group (2024) Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No.25- Invigorating Growth

a significant level of vulnerability to income shocks persists. The Gini coefficient of inequality in the Western Balkans varies in the range of 29 in Kosovo\* to 36.8 in Montenegro. These figures indicate a moderate level of income inequality in the region, and putting them in a similar range to many European countries indicating that income inequality levels in the Western Balkans are comparable to those in the broader European region.

Pollution, deforestation, and inadequate waste management are significant environmental issues in the region. Addressing these challenges is crucial for sustainable development and public health. The Western Balkan countries are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including extreme weather events, floods, and droughts.

The governance indicators, as measured by the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), highlight significant challenges across various dimensions of governance in the Western Balkans<sup>4</sup>. While there are variations in governance quality among the Western Balkan countries, all face substantial challenges. North Macedonia and Montenegro tend to have slightly better governance indicators, reflecting more effective public administration and regulatory frameworks. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, and Serbia face significant challenges across most governance indicators, with low scores particularly in government effectiveness, rule of law, and control of corruption.

### **2.1.2 Rural areas – current state and trends**

Rural areas of Western Balkans are characterized by huge diversity of natural and climatic conditions, geographic features, demographic and social structures, regional specificities, as well as diverse development issues and settings.

The diversity of the landscape is one of the most important features of the region. The region stretches from the Pannonian plain in the north, through the mountain ranges in the central part, to the coasts of the Adriatic and Ionian Seas in the south. Climate varies from Mediterranean on the coast, to continental and alpine in the interior and northern parts. This geographical diversity contributes to a rich palette of ecosystems and to the region's distinctive natural heritage.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?id=ceea4d8b&Report\\_Name=WGI-Table](https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?id=ceea4d8b&Report_Name=WGI-Table)

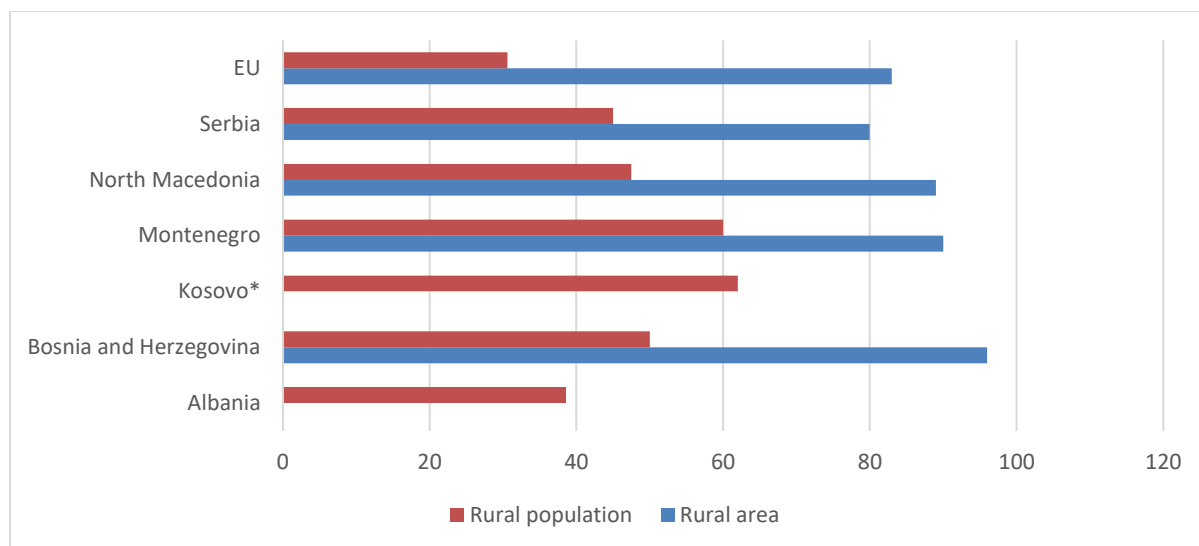


Figure 1. Share of rural areas and rural population in the Western Balkans (Source: National statistics, UNDP, 2020, CEIC, 2015, Rural vision EU, 2024)

## Demography

Demographic trends in the Balkans reflect complex social and economic processes taking place in the region.

Depopulation trends have been evident in the region for decades, and potential to slow them down are limited by a number of unfavourable demographic performances, including low fertility rates, aging, and negative net migration rates. None of six countries meet the demographic renewal threshold of 2.1 children per woman, which is essential for sustaining population levels in countries with adequate healthcare. The average fertility rate across the region is just 1.5, which is on par with the EU average but lower than that of several Central and Eastern European nations. The low fertility rate is a concern that extends beyond the Western Balkans, but in this region, the situation is particularly critical<sup>5</sup>. Falling fertility, emigration of people mostly of working and child-bearing age, immigration of mostly newly retired people: all these factors are leading to a rapid ageing of the population in the Western Balkans<sup>6</sup>. However, these factors are compounded by a number of socioeconomic factors and trends, such as changes in the economic environment and structure as a result of the post-socialist transition and subsequent economic and political crisis, peripheral location, and poor accessibility.

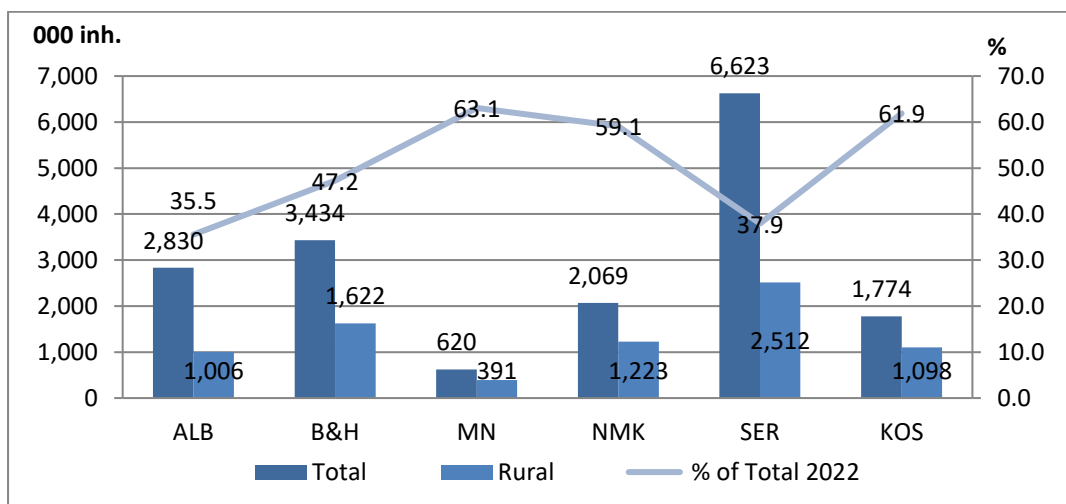
<sup>5</sup> Visegrad Insights. *Western Balkan 2030 Trends*; <https://visegradinsight.eu/app/uploads/2020/12/WB-2030-Trends.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> [https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/PB\\_230720\\_Demographie-Balkans\\_Marchais\\_EN.pdf](https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/PB_230720_Demographie-Balkans_Marchais_EN.pdf)

Between 2012 and 2018, an average of 155,000 people per year emigrated from the region to an OECD country, with the number reaching 175,000 in 2018 alone.<sup>7</sup> Dissatisfaction with public institutions, poor living conditions, high levels of inequality and relatively easy access to EU labour markets, have resulted in a steady stream of population moving abroad in search of better opportunities. Although recent studies indicate that some circular movement is present in the patterns of migration, many of those who emigrate do not return<sup>8,9</sup>. Negative demographic trends are particularly pronounced in rural areas and are the cause of numerous development challenges.

8.2 million inhabitants live in the rural areas of the Balkans, making up 46 percent of the region's total population. Over the period 2010-2022, all countries in the region have experienced a decline of rural inhabitants, as well as its share in overall population. The share of the rural population is highest in Montenegro, Kosovo\* and North Macedonia (63.1 percent, 61.9 percent and 59.1 percent, respectively), followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina (47.2 percent) and Serbia and Albania (37.9 percent and 35.5 percent respectively). However, as countries in the region use different definitions of rural areas, these figures are not suitable for a cross-country comparison.

Figure 1: Rural population in Western Balkans



Source: national reports; [www.macrotrends.net](https://www.macrotrends.net) - <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/ranking/rural-population>.

Notes: ALB data refers to 2022 - total number of inhabitants from the national report; number of rural inhabitants from "www.macrotrends.net"; B&H, 2022 - total number of inhabitants from the national report; number of rural

<sup>7</sup> Omic, E., and Handeland, C., *Social Infrastructure in the Western Balkans. Increasing the Region's Economic Resilience, Enhancing Human Capital and Counteracting the Effects of Brain Drain*, Research Papers Series, Paris: Council of Europe Development Bank.

<sup>8</sup> Aspen Institute Germany. 2020. Emigration from the Western Balkans. <https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/2020-Emigration-from-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> CSD: The future of the Western Balkans in the shadow of the war in Ukraine. Policy Brief No. 129, March 2023



inhabitants from "www.macrotrends.net"; MN 2021 – national report; NMK – 2020, national report; SER – 2023, <https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-latn/oblasti/stanovnistvo>; KOS 2011, national report.

While population decline is a common trend in rural areas across the Balkans, certain regions are experiencing stagnation or even population growth. These areas are typically near major cities, larger towns, or popular tourist destinations, such as coastal regions. The increased interest in purchasing houses in rural areas, which began during the COVID-19 pandemic, continues to drive this trend in some parts of the region. In addition, it is important to emphasize that misreporting the rural population can lead to incorrect demographic data. Indeed, living outside the officially registered residence is a common phenomenon among the rural population in the region, which tends to be registered in cities due to various socio-economic factors (including access to health services, education and/or family circumstances).

Demographic data from Serbia, which is representative of broader regional trends (except for Albania and Kosovo\* where fertility rates and the youth population are higher), highlights significant rural-urban disparities. In Serbia, the rural population is, on average, two years older than the urban population. The aging index reveals stark contrasts between these areas, with rural regions showing a much higher proportion of elderly individuals compared to younger generations. For example, in rural areas, there are nearly twice as many older women as there are younger women and girls (193.2 per 100), indicating a pronounced gender imbalance.

The dependency ratio in rural areas stands at 62.0, meaning that a substantial portion of the population is not actively engaged in the labor market. This places increased pressure on social services, including education, healthcare, and elder care. Additionally, the proportion of women of childbearing age (15-49 years) in rural areas is lower than in urban regions and is continuing to decline. This trend of depopulation and demographic aging could further intensify existing demographic imbalances, leading to greater economic and social challenges in the future.

The aging population, combined with declining fertility rates and fewer working-age adults, especially women, poses significant long-term challenges for rural areas, potentially straining both the economy and social services.

Table 2: Population by type of settlement, Serbia 2023

	Total			Male			Female		
	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural
<b>Average age of population</b>	43.9	43.0	45.4	42.5	41.3	44.3	45.3	44.6	46.5
<b>Aging index</b>	150.5	136.5	175.3	128.9	112.1	158.5	173.4	162.3	193.2
<b>Dependency ratio</b>	58	55.7	62						
<b>Elderly dependency ratio</b>	34,7	32	39,2						
<b>Population in fertile age</b>	21,2	22,6	18,9						

Source: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-latn/vesti/statisticalrelease/?p=13622>

## **Rural economy**

The main industries in the rural areas of the region are agriculture and food processing, forestry and wood products, mining, manufacturing (textiles, automotive components, machinery) and rural tourism. These stagnant or declining industries that dominate rural areas in the region, lack the capacity to create knowledge-based jobs or significantly improve the living standards of the rural population. Most companies operate in low-value-added sectors, resulting in a prevalence of low-quality, often unstable jobs. Additionally, rural areas generally have few large industrial enterprises capable of driving economic growth, and they suffer from a lack of investment, innovation, and modern technologies<sup>10</sup>.

### **Box XY:**

*Kosovo\*, female participant in FGD, saying “180 Euros was my salary [as a residential cleaner] and when I pay bus tickets [from Reçan to Prizren], it means I earn almost nothing. When you calculate time spend on work and expenses you decide to be housewife and to spend time with the family”.*

Small family farms with mixed farming systems and fragmented land parcels prevail in the region. The sector is generally characterized by limited access to modern technologies, low adoption of innovative practices, and challenges in meeting quality standards. Additionally, farmers often face restricted access to finance and, in some cases, high input costs, all of which contribute to low productivity and reduced value added per worker. Despite these challenges, agriculture remains one of the most important economic sectors in the region. It also serves as a crucial social safety net, providing subsistence farming opportunities for a significant number of poor and elderly individuals who rely on it for their livelihoods.

The structure of the agricultural sector of Western Balkans is characterized by small and subsistence family farms. In Bosnia and Herzegovina over 50 percent of agriculture holdings are estimated to be of less than 3 ha; the average farm size in Kosovo\* is about 3.2 ha, of which on average 1.6 ha is arable land, typically fragmented into six to eight plots. 97 percent of holdings are less than 5 ha, while less than 1 percent of holdings above 10 ha; Covering a relatively small area and benefiting from a Mediterranean climate, Montenegro’s agriculture is quite diversified – from growing olives and citrus fruits in the coastal region, to early seasonal vegetables and tobacco in the central areas and extensive sheep breeding in the north. The average size of utilised agricultural land per holding is 4.6 ha, but it is 72 percent of agricultural holdings are 2 ha in size or less.<sup>11</sup> However, in the northern part of the Western Balkan region, in Panonian (Serbia) and peri-Pannonian areas (Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) agriculture is characterized by

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<sup>10</sup> Bogdanov, N., Todorović, S. 2023. Deliverable 3.1 First Living Lab Report Zaječar district. RUSTIK project

<sup>11</sup> [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/international/international-cooperation/enlargement/candidates\\_en#candidates](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/international/international-cooperation/enlargement/candidates_en#candidates)

diverse farming practices, larger farms (the average farm size in Vojvodina region is over 13 ha) and high productivity due to the region's fertile soils and favorable climate.

**Box XY: Good practice of youth involvement in agritourism initiative in Albania**

Female participant in the FGD, represents an inspiring example of young people involvement in agritourism. Marjana is the youngest daughter in her family, which lives in an isolated mountainous area near Komani Lake. Marjana saw an opportunity to promote the natural beauty, rich cultural heritage, and warm hospitality of her community through agritourism. She started to transform her family tower into a guesthouse, thanks to the love for her origin and a desire to raise awareness for nature, culture, and local traditions.

Over the past decade, certain segments of the rural economy have undergone significant transformation. There has been a visible increase in farms engaging in on-farm activities across the region, including the on-farm processing, the expansion of organic farming, and the rise of rural tourism sector. Additionally, there has been substantial investment in viticulture, winemaking, and orchards etc.. These developments have diversified the income sources of the rural population, created new and stable employment opportunities, and helped sustain the vitality of rural communities in some regions.

## **2.2 Overview of the institutional settings and legal framework for supporting rural youth**

All of the Western Balkan countries aspire to become EU members, and tend to adjust their policies and strategies according to the EU policy and legal frameworks. Most countries in the region have made considerable progress in establishing and consolidating their youth policy framework, by adopting relevant laws, strategies, and action plans. However, a fully functional youth system that ensures effective youth empowerment, engagement and participation in decision-making has yet to be developed. There are various weaknesses ranging from wider political issues and a lack of willingness to prioritise youth as an inter-institutional and cross-sectorial policy, to very specific types of difficulties in the systematic monitoring and evaluation of youth policy development and implementation, data collection, etc.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Regional Cooperation Council. 2021., Mapping of youth policies and identification of existing support and gaps in the financing of youth actions in the Western Balkans – Comparative report; REX/553 – EESC-2022-00778-00-01-AC-TRA (EN) 3/9

## 2.2.1 Institutional and legal setting

In terms of the institutional and legal framework, provisions on youth differ across the Western Balkan countries. However, all the countries in the region established institutional structures and have enacted youth laws, aimed at regulating various youth-related issues, ensuring youth empowerment, improving their social position, supporting youth organizations, and enhancing youth participation in decision-making.

Regarding institutions dealing with youth across the region, youth policy is typically integrated with education, sports, or culture at the ministerial level<sup>13</sup>:

- Albania - The Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, with a dedicated Deputy Minister for Youth, is the primary public institution responsible for youth policy. The National Agency for Youth is in charge of implementing youth policies, including youth funding.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina - At the state level, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, through its Department for Mobility and Youth within the Education Sector, oversees youth policy. In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Department of Youth within the Federal Ministry for Culture and Sport is responsible for youth policy and the implementation of youth action programs. The Ministry of Family, Youth, and Sport of the Republic of Srpska develops the Youth Policy and Action Plan. The Brčko District Department for Administrative Affairs implements the Youth Law and youth policy, with the Brčko District Assembly establishing the Commission for Youth.
- Kosovo\*: The Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports, through its Department of Youth, manages youth policy and its implementation.
- Montenegro: The Ministry of Sports and Youth is responsible for youth policy and its implementation.
- North Macedonia: The Agency of Youth and Sports is the main authority on youth policy, with additional involvement from the Ministry of Education and Science. In North Macedonia, unlike in Bosnia and Herzegovina where youth policy is overseen at the central state level but lacks competences, the youth portfolio is managed by the Agency for Youth and Sports.
- Serbia: The Ministry of Youth and Sports is responsible for youth policy, with the Provincial Secretariat for Sports and Youth managing youth affairs in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.

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<sup>13</sup> Regional Cooperation Council. 2021., Mapping of youth policies and identification of existing support and gaps in the financing of youth actions in the Western Balkans – Comparative report

Local self governments also play a role in youth policy at the local level. Additionally, line ministries in areas such as employment, education, health and social protection, justice and internal affairs, and agriculture are responsible for youth-related policy areas. However, there is limited inter-institutional coordination and cross-sectoral harmonization, a common issue across the region.

Beyond state institutions, there are other forms of institutions and organizations in each country in the region that are active in the field of rural development and also focus on rural youth.

- **Albania:** Several local organizations empower rural youth, such as Agrinet, which implements capacity-building activities and assists young farmers in forming associations. Agrinet has also established the Regional Forum of Rural Women, which supports rural youth and women in addressing their problems and challenges. ADAD malore (Organization of Agriculture Development in Mountainous Regions from Albania) focuses on the empowerment of young people in rural areas. The Albanian Network for Rural Development (ANRD) and its member organizations are working to establish the Rural Youth Hub (RYH), a platform for rural youth activism. The Local Youth Council also addresses youth issues at the municipal level. Organizations like AME All Mind in Power, World Vision, Balkan Youth Activism, Tjeter Vision, Muzat Rinore, and LIBURNETIK engage with challenges faced by rural youth.
- **Montenegro:** The Youth Council, established by the Ministry of Sports and Youth (MSY), promotes youth policy development. Local youth councils, though not mandatory, exist at the municipal level and include representatives from municipal youth policy bodies and NGOs. Despite multiple entities dealing with rural youth, there is no specific unit or appointed person responsible for rural youth issues. Effective coordination among these entities is crucial.
- **North Macedonia:** Youth civic engagement is facilitated by the National Youth Council of North Macedonia (NYCM), a coalition of 55 organizations advocating for youth rights, representing both urban and rural areas, covering various thematic focuses.
- **Kosovo\*:** Several organizations focus on rural development and youth empowerment. The Rural Development Network of Kosovo\* (NORDK) works on improving living conditions through initiatives like training farmers and community projects. NGO Lens offers education and skills development programs, and the Kosova Education Center (KEC) implements educational reforms in rural schools. The Youth Initiative for Human Rights - Kosovo\* (YIHR) promotes youth rights and education on human rights, including in rural areas. Artpolis engages rural youth in cultural activities, while the Initiative for Agricultural Cooperation and Rural Development (IACRD) focuses on agricultural development and women's empowerment.

- **Serbia:** The National Association of Youth Workers (NAPOR) is a key player in the non-governmental youth sector, comprising 47 youth organizations and 36 individual youth workers across Serbia.

In Albania, the Law on Youth was approved in November 2019, establishing the National Youth Council (NYC), Local Youth Council (LYC), and National Youth Representative Organization (NYRO) as the umbrella organization for youth, along with a fund for youth grants from the state budget. Bosnia and Herzegovina lacks a state-level youth law, but each entity has its own: The Law on Youth of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Law on Youth Organizing of the Republic of Srpska, and the Law on Youth of Brčko District. In Kosovo\*, the Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth (LEPY) was approved in 2009, with a new draft law published in November 2020 for consultation. Montenegro adopted a new Law on Youth in April 2019. The most recent law, the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies (LYPYP), was approved in North Macedonia in January 2020. Serbia has a more established legal framework for youth, with the Law on Youth adopted in 2011 following a broad participatory process. In 2018, the National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS), NAPOR, and the National Association of Local Youth Offices (NALYO) agreed on priority goals for amending the Law on Youth and the Law on Volunteering to enhance the institutional framework and create better systemic care for young people. A new Law on Youth was adopted in 2022.

Table 3: Youth specific Laws and Strategies and responsible Ministries for implementation

	Law on Youth	Responsible Institution(s)	Youth Strategy (period)	Law on Agriculture and Rural Development and Support measures for young farmers
Albania	Law for youth - 2019 (youth 15-29)  National Youth Agency	Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, with a dedicated Deputy Minister for Youth	National Youth Strategy for the period 2022-2029	Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management/Economy  (young farmer 18-40)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Federation BiH (2010)  Republika Srpska Youth Law (2004)  District of Brčko Youth Law (2017)	Ministry of Civil Affairs; Department for Mobility and Youth	No national strategy  RS adopted the Youth Policy of the RS for 2016-2020.  Several strategies on youth have been	

	Implemented on Entity(s) level (youth 15-30)		developed on the cantonal and municipality levels.	
Kosovo*	Law on Empowerment and Participation of Youth - 2009 (youth 15-24)	Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport	The Youth Strategy 2019 - 2023 (including the Action Plan)	
Montenegro	Law on youth – (2019) (youth 15-30)	Ministry of Sport and Youth	Youth Strategy (2022-2026)	
North Macedonia	Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies (2020) (youth 15-29)	Agency for Youth and Sports	National Youth Strategy for the period of 2016-2025	
Serbia	Youth Law – 2022 (youth 15-30)	Ministry of Tourism and Youth	National Youth Strategy for the period 2023–2030	

Source: National reports

## 2.2.2 Policies supporting rural youth

In terms of the policy framework, except of Bosnia and Herzegovina, all Western Balkan have a national strategy on youth in place. In Bosnia and Hercegovina, at the federal level there is no youth strategy, a national action plan on youth, or any other similar document that strategically deals with youth on the state level. The mechanisms for and the extent of policy coordination and harmonization differs across economies. However, the limited inter institutional and cross-sectoral coordination is a common feature of the youth policy frameworks in the region.

In all the Western Balkans, youth-specific policies implementation is funded from various sources: central government budget, provincial/entity or budgets of local authorities, international organizations, and donor funded projects. The most common form of support for youth is through open calls, transfers, and subsidies for youth organizations. In all countries funds

(central government and local budget) for youth policy and youth issues are disbursed through public calls, transfers, or subsidies (of ministries in charge of youth) targeting Non-governmental organizations. The data on total budget funds for youth support by country is not available.

Box Y - According to the data for Serbia<sup>14</sup> the percentage of allocated to youth through MoYS amounted to 0.08 percent of the annual republic budget in 2022, and if social protection benefits from the budget within the Fund for Young Talents are excluded, the percentage of the budget allocated for the youth amounts only to 0.03 percent. In addition to the modest funds, their regional distribution is also disputed. In the case of the open call for the implementation of the National Youth Strategy, civil society organisations from Belgrade received more than RSD 63 million, which corresponds to 61.2 percent of the total amount of RSD 103 million. In the case of the open call for employment, Belgrade CSOs received RSD 34.1 million out of a total of RSD 88 million, and the Belgrade and Vojvodina regions received RSD 55.1 million in total, which represents 62.6 percent of the total of 88 million. Such regional allocation of projects does not contribute to reducing unemployment among young people, if we take into considerations that the number of unemployed young people in Belgrade is significantly lower compared to the number of unemployed young people in other regions.

The most youth programs focus on enhancing youth employability and entrepreneurship, rewarding youth excellence, and supporting youth organizations in their operations and implementation of activities related to youth strategies.

The countries of the Western Balkans have committed to developing and adopting plans for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee<sup>15</sup>. This fund is important for ensuring that all young people under the age of 30 a good quality of employment, continued education, apprenticeship, or continued education within 4 months of either leaving formal education or becoming unemployed (young people aged 15 to 29 who are not in employment, education, or training - NEETs). To this moment, only North Macedonia established a “Youth Guaranty Fund” in 2017, whereas Serbia adopted Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan 2023-2026 in 2022.<sup>16</sup> In 2023, the Albanian Government planned to start piloting a new programme for the inclusion of young people in the labour market, through the implementation of the Youth Guarantee Scheme. Through this programme, it is intended that young people between 15 and 29 years of age will be offered either a job or professional training. It is predicted that the effectiveness of this project will be significant, however, the applicability still remains to be evaluated.

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<sup>14</sup> KOMS. 2022. Alternative Report on the Position and Needs of Youth in the Republic of Serbia

<sup>15</sup> The Youth Guarantee is implemented by all EU Member States, as a key flagship of the Economic and Investment Plan 2021 to 2027, launched by the European Commission for the Western Balkans in response to the Covid-19 crisis and the twin digital and green transitions (ETF, 2021)

<sup>16</sup> Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No 120/23



Box XY - North Macedonia has been the most successful country in the region in implementing the Youth Guarantee. From 2017 to 2019, youth unemployment decreased by nearly 9 percent. In March 2023, the government adopted a new Implementation Plan for the Youth Guarantee for 2023-2026, setting a target of 30 percent success, meaning at least 30 percent of participants should find employment, apprenticeships, volunteering, or further education within four months. In 2021, 41 percent of the 19,322 participants achieved these outcomes, and in 2022, 43 percent of over 20,000 participants were successful, exceeding the target.

Despite this success, North Macedonia's youth unemployment rate in 2022 was 34.9 percent, nearly double the EU average of 14.5 percent, and the highest in the region. The implementation of the Youth Guarantee has strengthened institutions, with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy leading the process and a Coordination Council overseeing the programme. However, the European Commission Progress Report for 2023 noted inadequate monitoring, evaluation, and assessment of the programme. A major challenge is the limited financial resources that the government can secure for its implementation<sup>17</sup>.

When comes to rural youth, apart from support for young farmers and the promotion of entrepreneurship, there are few examples of support aimed specifically at their needs.

As illustrated by the example of Albania (Box XY), similar support measures for young farmers also exist in other countries in the region, with more or less similar conditions for the potential beneficiaries and similar types of investments allowed. In Serbia, support programs for young farmers are financed not only from the state budget, but also from the funds of the Regional Secretariat for Agriculture of AP Vojvodina and the local self-government unit.

Box.1 Planned intervention mechanisms in the agriculture and rural development sector, including forestry, targeting young farmers within the SARDF 2021-2027<sup>18</sup>

**Direct payments Farm income support per utilised agricultural area.** The measure targets young farmers – users of agricultural land. It provides complementary income support for young farmers for a maximum duration of five years, starting from the first year of submission of the application for the payment.

#### **Rural Development (Pillar II-types)**

**Grants for young farmers** (up to 40 years old), farm managers with appropriate training or skills. Financial support is provided for starting rural businesses, including new farms. Priority is given to high value-added sectors and organic agriculture as well as young graduates of agricultural universities. Young farmers shall have priority in training related to innovation.

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.centaronline.org/en/news/13017/is-there-any-progress-in-western-balkan-economies-in-implementing-the-youth-guarantee-programme>

<sup>18</sup> The content of the box is taken from the Strategy for Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries (SARDF) 2021-2027

**Grants for rural businesses and start-ups** targeting rural enterprises registered in rural areas.

Investments in fixed assets and marketing measures of existing rural businesses or rural start-up businesses (start-ups only for young people up to 40 years and female entrepreneurs) in priority sectors: MAPs, NTFP, apiculture products, aquaculture products, non-typical agricultural products, activities in the service sector which are favourable for young and female entrepreneurs or activities directly linked to the agricultural or rural tourism sector such and handcrafts. Priority in the intensity of aid for mountain areas, creation of local employment.

**Grants for rural tourism, including** on-site touristic infrastructure, such as refurbishment of farmhouses and houses in traditional architectural style for accommodation purposes, furnishing, professional kitchen equipment, sport, recreational and agro-tourism equipment, internal road and parking places, wastewater and waste disposal facilities. Priorities target: a) on-farm agrotourism development, b) young and/or female farmers, c) young and/or female rural entrepreneurs, e) linkage with direct marketing on the farm, d) linkage to integrated rural development/CLLD initiatives aiming at improving local touristic infrastructure.

### **Strengthening institutional and administrative capacities toward EU integration, knowledge transfer and promotion of innovation**

**Start-up support for young graduates in the agriculture sector** covers special start-up programme for university graduates for business development in rural areas (TA and access to grants) linked to the agriculture, forestry, and fisheries sector.

In addition to the national support programs for agriculture, the I IPARD III program provides for support for young farmers in the candidate countries (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) in the form of the following measures: Investment in physical assets of agricultural holdings and Farm diversification and business development. In addition, the measure "Implementation of local development strategies - LEADER approach", which focuses on the creation of public-private partnerships (Local Action Groups) that design and implement local development strategies from the bottom up, Local Development Strategies, requires at least two young people under the age of 35 on the LAG board.

Also worth mentioning are the programs to support young families in buying houses and settling in rural areas, which have been implemented in Serbia for more than a decade. This support was first introduced in AP Vojvodina and was aimed at young families from urban areas who wanted to settle in rural areas. Recently, the Ministry of Rural Affairs has been awarding grants for the purchase of houses in rural areas to interested young families throughout the country. The maximum amount of support is EUR 10,000. Since the beginning of this year alone, 365 families have been helped in this way, and the total number since the start of the program is 3015 (12 thousand people).

Overall conclusion, confirmed by surveyed rural youth, is that policy documents often lack clear objectives specifically addressing rural youth issues, alongside a limited understanding of their specific needs. Additionally, many stakeholders involved in youth-related initiatives are interconnected, with overlapping responsibilities, which can lead to policy inefficiencies. As a

result, various country-specific documents that pertain to youth in general, such as those on internship programs, higher education, student standards, student associations, volunteering, local self-government, and strategies for promoting and developing volunteering, also apply to rural youth.

Table 1. Selected indicators of creation and implementation of effective and purposeful youth policies and improvement of the rural youth setting

COUNTRY	AL	BiH	XK*	MN	MK	SRB
Government authority on youth	√	√	√	√	√	√
Definition of the Intended beneficiary group of young people	√	√	√	√	√	√
Strategy and action plan	√	X	√	√	√	√
Mapping of the different needs of different categories of young people	Only as a cross-cutting issue – not targeted specific to rural youth!					
Research on the topic of rural youth	Only as a cross-cutting issue – not targeted specific to rural youth and not on Western Balkans level					
Statistics, and empirical information	X	X	X	X	√	√
Youth Guaranty Fund	X	X	X	X	√	X
Meaningful youth participation in creation of youth policies/youth associations/agricultural organization	X	X	X	X	X	X

### 3. SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS OF RURAL YOUTH – CHALLENGES, NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

#### 3.1 Youth socio-demographics

##### *Rural youth population*

According to Eurostat , the total youth population in the Western Balkans is around 3.6 million, which makes up approximately 21 percent of the total population. Kosovo\* has the highest share of youth in the total population (26.29 percent), followed by Albania (23.4 percent), Bosnia and Herzegovina (20.37 percent) and North Macedonia (20.32 percent), Montenegro (19.49 percent) and Serbia (16.8 percent). The ratio of men and women in the youth population is similar in all Western Balkan countries, with the male youth population being slightly larger – 51.16 percent of the youth population are men and 48.84 percent are women in the Western Balkans.

When it comes to young people in rural areas, there are no universally comparable data for all countries of the Western Balkans (Kosovo\*, B&H), or data is not regularly updated (North Macedonia). However, the available data clearly indicate a decline in the number of young people in the 15-29 age group and a decrease in their share of the total rural population.

Table : Rural youth population (15-29 years) in Western Balkan countries

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	% of rural population
<b>Albania</b>	459.0	443.1	430.8	411.7	392.9	30.2
<b>Bosna i Hercegovina</b>	646.3	622.5	600.3	579.4	559.5	34.5
<b>North Macedonia</b>	440,8	433,5				35.4
<b>Montenegro</b>	119.8	118.6	117.3	116.0	114.5	29.3
<b>Serbia</b>	888.7	875.7	862.8	848.3	781.6	29.6

Source: For Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, Eurostat database; [urt\_pjangrp3\_\_custom\_12361883]

Note: The data for Albania and Serbia presents the sum of youth living in predominantly rural and intermediate regions; the data for North Macedonia and Montenegro refers to intermediate regions.

All countries in the region are experiencing a decline in the number of youth in rural areas. Low birth rates and migration are the two main demographic forces determining the pace of population decline in rural areas. Regarding the gender balance among rural youth, the available data for North Macedonia and Serbia show a higher proportion of young males in relation to the young female population (by 5.7 percentage points in Serbia and 3.9 percentage points in North Macedonia), which, together with the aforementioned low fertility rates, indicates a threat to the demographic renewal. Furthermore, these data suggest that it is mostly young women leaving rural areas, either to further education or to find employment opportunities in the cities, especially in low-paid tertiary and public sector jobs (e.g. trade, catering, public service, etc.). Gender imbalances are also common in some other rural parts of Southern and Eastern European

States, where high rural-to-urban migration of females has caused a “masculinisation” of the rural population, have also led to a secondary effect on lowering fertility rates further<sup>19</sup>.

Table : Urban and rural youth population by gender, Serbia and North Macedonia,

	Serbia				North Macedonia			
	Urban		Rural		Urban		Rural	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
<b>Population</b>								
Youth 15-29	328.492	323.251	202.764	184.289	79,8	76,1	122,7	115
Youth 30-39	272.023	281.039	356.114	317.840	64,3	64,1	101,7	94,1
<b>Structure of rural youth by sex</b>								
<b>Youth 15-29</b>	50,4	49,6	52,4	47,6	51,2	48,8	51,6	48,4
<b>Youth 30-39</b>	49,2	50,8	52,8	47,2	50,1	49,9	51,9	48,1

Source: National statistical offices; <https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/18010502?languageCode=sr-Latn>

Note: There is a significant difference in the number of young people between the previous table, which is based on Eurostat data, and the current table (sum of both sexes), which presents data from the National Statistical Office. These discrepancies arise from the differing definitions of rural areas used by the two sources.

### **Migration**

Migration from the Western Balkans has been a long-standing problem caused by economic, social and institutional issues, threatening the development prospects of the region. migration is likely to continue in most of the region for the foreseeable future.

The region's young population is increasingly leaving their home countries in search of better opportunities abroad. This exodus is largely motivated by the lack of quality job prospects, inadequate wages, limited access to education and professional development, and overall dissatisfaction with the socio-political environment. The consequences of this migration are profound, leading to a "brain drain" where the most educated and skilled young individuals leave, reducing the potential for economic growth and innovation in their home countries. Brain drain is reducing the regions' human capital, which is necessary for economic growth, while existing social infrastructure is failing to improve the living conditions of those who stay behind<sup>20</sup>.

A study by the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (WIIW) revealed that all Western Balkan countries experienced net emigration of young people across all educational

<sup>19</sup> European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, Unit E2. 2008. Poverty and Social Exclusion in Rural Areas, Final Study Report; [https://iris.unimore.it/retrieve/handle/11380/606205/209247/rural\\_poverty\\_en.pdf](https://iris.unimore.it/retrieve/handle/11380/606205/209247/rural_poverty_en.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> EESC. 2022. OPINION European Economic and Social Committee. Youth Policy in the Western Balkans, as part of the Innovation Agenda for the Western Balkans. REX/553

levels between 2010 and 2019, with notable differences in the extent and age distribution across the region. For instance, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo\* saw significant emigration of highly educated individuals, commonly referred to as "brain drain." However, in Albania, nearly 40 percent of young emigrants were highly educated, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this figure was around 6 percent<sup>21</sup>.

There is a lack of data and research on the scale and direction of rural youth migration, making it difficult to compare these migration patterns with established trends or those of other countries. Survey research conducted on a sample of rural youth reveals that in all surveyed countries, more than 50 percent of those willing to migrate are motivated by the search for work. However, this percentage varies significantly across countries. The highest willingness to migrate is observed among young people in Albania (77.8 percent) and North Macedonia (74.6 percent), while the lowest is seen in Montenegro and Serbia (51.5 percent and 55.5 percent respectively).



Figure Y: Willingness of rural youth to move abroad for employment reasons

Source: Survey results

Further differences are evident within specific sub-categories of respondents and between genders, as outlined below:

- Albania:** A large proportion of surveyed youth, ranging from 68 percent in the 30-40 age group to 82 percent in other age categories, are willing to move abroad for employment. Rural youth are less inclined to move internally within the country than abroad, with men showing a stronger willingness to migrate than women – 76 percent and 72 percent of respondents in the younger age categories, 15-19 and 20-24 years old respectively, willing to move within the country borders.

<sup>21</sup> Leitner, M. S. 2021. Net Migration and Skills Composition in the Western Balkans between 2010 and 2019: Results from a Cohort Approach Analysis, Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies,

- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** There is a strong willingness among youth to leave the country for job opportunities, with 60 percent of survey respondents willing to move abroad, especially those in the 15-19 and 25-29 age groups. Among the respondents, there is somewhat lower interest in migration within the country, ranging from 51 of those in age category 20-24 years, to 68 percent of those 15-19 years.
- **Kosovo\*:** Education and employment are the primary drivers of migration, both internally to urban areas and internationally. 63 percent of survey participants expressed a willingness to move abroad for employment, with women showing a higher inclination (68 percent) than men (57 percent). A significant portion of respondents (65 percent) would also consider internal migration for better job opportunities.

#### Box XY

Although they have not lived or worked abroad, focus group participants are quoted as follows when asked about migration and returning to Kosovo\* after working or studying abroad:

*“The life here and there cannot be compared”*

*“Most of rural youth who left rural areas are not returning due to the lack of job opportunities and lack of good health services”.*

Upon further discussion with focus group attendants on how employment and economic opportunities affect the out-migration of young people from rural communities, the participants are quoted saying: *“they are going abroad and studying different things and programs, things that do not even exist in Kosovo\* like AI for example. And if they come back, no jobs exist for them, so they don’t.”*, making it understood that the lack of opportunities and further development is a powerful driving force for migration.

- **Montenegro:** Many young people express doubts about finding suitable employment within the country, leading to a balanced willingness to consider both internal migration and emigration abroad. Around 52 percent of participants are willing to move abroad, with a slightly higher percentage of men (54 percent) compared to women (46 percent). Similarly, 50 percent of surveyed are willing to move within the country for employment, again with higher percentage of men (57 percent) compared to women (43 percent). Factors such as comfort, enjoyment, and family tradition play significant roles in the decision to stay in one’s current location. A significant proportion of youth (3 percent) mentioned: *“My family has always been here”* as a reason for staying.
- **North Macedonia:** The country has experienced significant emigration, with more than 160,000 Macedonian citizens moving abroad between 2010 and 2020, 23.4 percent of whom were youth aged 15-29. A significant proportion of rural youth indicated a desire to seek employment abroad, with 68 percent of those aged 20-24, 78 percent of those aged 15-19, and up to 82 percent of those aged 25-29 expressing this intention. Additionally, there is a

notable inclination among rural youth to pursue job opportunities internally, with women showing a stronger preference for this compared to men. The pattern of responses regarding internal migration is similar: 63 percent of individuals aged 20-24 and 70 percent of those aged 25-29 are willing to relocate within their own country.

- **Serbia** - 55.5 percent of young people from rural areas in Serbia expressed a willingness to emigrate abroad in search of work. The highest propensity to emigrate is observed in the 15-19 age group, where 69 percent express this desire, despite having limited experience in the labor market. In contrast, the percentage is lowest in the 30 to 40 age group at 44 percent, which is probably due to established survival strategies. There are no significant differences between the sexes, with 55 percent of men and 56 percent of women expressing an interest in migrating.

The findings above suggest that the migration trend among young people is likely to continue. This complex issue needs to be addressed as a distinct policy area at both national and local levels. However, migration should not be viewed solely as a negative phenomenon, as it is often the case. Instead, it should be recognized as a potential opportunity for socio-economic development, leveraging the financial resources, expertise, and networks of the young diaspora<sup>22</sup>, and supporting redistribution of resources among those who remain.

## 3.2 Education

Education is crucial for rural youth as it plays a significant role in shaping their future opportunities and overall well-being. It provides essential skills and knowledge for accessing better job opportunities and breaking the cycle of poverty. Education also empowers rural youth, increasing their confidence and enabling informed decision-making. Furthermore, education drives social mobility, offering opportunities to improve socioeconomic status and bridge the rural-urban gap. Quality education can also help reduce rural-urban migration by equipping youth with the skills needed to succeed in their local communities.

Primary education is compulsory in all of the countries in the region, and high school education is only compulsory in North Macedonia. Given the small number of children in schools in rural, especially remote settlements, basic education is organized differently in different countries. For example, Serbia and Albania operate satellite schools, whereby a central school runs a cluster of

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<sup>22</sup> Icoski, M. 2022. *Toward a New Youth Brain-drain Paradigm in the Western Balkans*. ReThink.CEE Fellowship. GMF



other schools to pool administrative and staff costs<sup>23</sup>. In Serbia, children attend classes in their village up to the 4th grade of elementary school. For grades 5 through 8, they are taught in larger neighboring settlements. Local governments cover the transportation costs or organize transport for the students. In Bosnia and Herzegovina - which has some of the smallest schools in the region – some education authorities make use of multi-grade schooling. This practice involves students from different grade levels sharing the same classroom and teacher at the same time, which eliminates the need to have two teachers teaching very small classes. While similar practices can be found in other developing education systems and even OECD and EU countries, the effects of such approaches are highly dependent on the preparation and support teachers receive when working in these challenging circumstances (OECD, 2018)<sup>24</sup>.

The quality of primary school education is however predominantly marked by poor facilities, insufficient teaching quality and shortage of teachers (one teacher for more than one grade, and combined classes). Another unique feature of Western Balkan education systems is the level and distribution of school resources. Compared to international benchmarks, education spending in the region is low, especially when considering the significant infrastructural investment that many schools need.<sup>25</sup>

Many countries in the region do not allocate education resources equitably. Schools with more students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and rural schools generally perceive their level of resourcing to provide instruction to be lower than schools with more students from advantaged backgrounds and urban schools.<sup>26</sup>

Box XY PISA 2018 results showed that students enrolled in schools in urban areas generally outperform those enrolled in rural schools, though the gap disappeared once the socio-economic status of students and schools was accounted for (OECD, 2019[11]). The only education systems in the Western Balkans with enough 15-year-old students enrolled in rural schools to be analysed — Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>6</sup> and Kosovo\* — show considerable rural-urban gaps in reading performance (OECD, 2019[12]). In these three education systems, students in urban schools outperformed those in rural schools by about 50 score points, similar to the gap observed across OECD countries. After controlling for students' socio-economic status, gaps ranged from 34 to 36 and were all statistically significant<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Maghnouj, S., E. (2020), OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Albania, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/d267dc93-en> (accessed on 2 June 2020); Maghnouj, S., E. (2020), OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Serbia, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/225350d9-en>.

<sup>24</sup> OECD (2020), Education in the western Balkans, Eastern Europe and Central Asia: findings from PISA 2018, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/764847ff-en>.

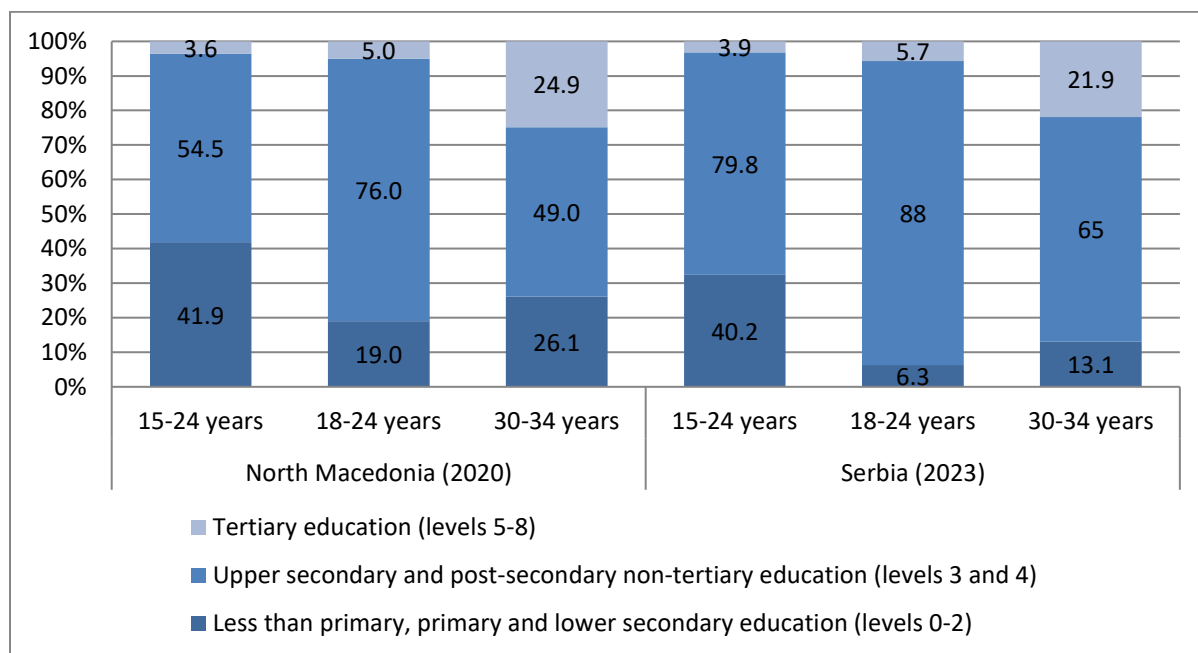
<sup>25</sup> OECD (2020), Education in the Western Balkans: Findings from PISA, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/764847ff-en>.

<sup>26</sup> OECD/UNICEF.2022. Education in the western Balkans, Eastern Europe and Central Asia: findings from PISA 2018

<sup>27</sup> OECD (2020), Education in the Western Balkans: Findings from PISA, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/764847ff-en>.

While the general level of education of people living in rural areas has increased significantly over time, the proportion of rural youth who have a university degree is still relatively low. As the data for North Macedonia and Serbia show (Figure XY), rural youth mostly have secondary education (upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education), followed by those with the lowest education (less than primary, primary and low secondary education) and finally those with tertiary education. The exception to this pattern is in the age cohort 30 to 34 years, among whom there are more people with tertiary education than primary education in both countries.

Figure : Rural youth by educational attainment level (%), North Macedonia and Serbia



Source: Eurostat; [edat\_ifs\_9913\_\_custom\_12418346]

A substantial body of research has focused on identifying the causes of school dropouts, revealing that it is not attributable to a single factor but rather a combination of multiple factors. These factors can be categorized into several groups: individual, familial, school-related, and broader social, community, or systemic influences.<sup>28</sup>

Dropout rates in rural areas of the Western Balkans are higher compared to urban areas, influenced by several factors such as economic poverty, lack of access to quality education, the mother's education etc.<sup>29</sup> Overall, boys tend to have higher dropout rates in many Western Balkan countries due to economic pressures and the need to support their families. However,

<sup>28</sup> Krstić, K., Stepanović Ilić, I., Videnović, M. 2017. Student dropout in primary and secondary education in the Republic of Serbia. Psihološka istraživanja, Vol. XX (1) 2017. <https://scindeks-clanci.ceon.rs/data/pdf/0352-7379/2017/0352-73791701027K.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> [https://www.unicef.org/serbia/sites/unicef.org.serbia/files/2018-04/MICS\\_Analysis\\_Education\\_in\\_Serbia\\_0.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/serbia/sites/unicef.org.serbia/files/2018-04/MICS_Analysis_Education_in_Serbia_0.pdf)

girls also face significant dropout rates influenced by cultural norms, early marriage, and limited access to education in rural areas.

Table Early leavers from education and training by degree of urbanization; EU-27 and Western Balkan countries; population 18-24 years old; %

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
<b>Total population</b>						
European Union - 27 countries (from 2020)	10,5	10,1	10,0	9,8	9,7	9,5
Bosnia and Herzegovina	:	:	:	4,7	3,6	4,2
Montenegro	4,6	5,0	3,6	:	:	:
North Macedonia	7,1	7,1	5,7	:	:	:
Serbia	6,8	6,6	5,6	6,3	5,0	5,9
<b>Rural areas</b>						
European Union - 27 countries (from 2020)	11,0	10,7	10,8	10,1	10,0	9,9
North Macedonia	5,3	6,3	6,3	:	:	:
Serbia	10,3	9,3	6,7	8,3	5,8	6,2
<b>Towns and suburbs</b>						
European Union - 27 countries (from 2020)	11,3	11,1	11,3	10,8	10,6	10,6
North Macedonia	6,7	6,1	6,2	:	:	:
Serbia	5,8	7,3	7,3	6,7	5,8	6,8
<b>Cities</b>						
European Union - 27 countries (from 2020)	9,4	9,0	8,7	8,8	8,7	8,6
North Macedonia	9,5	9,2	4,8	:	:	:
Serbia	3,8	3,2	2,9	3,7	3,6	4,9

Source: Eurostat; [edat\_lfse\_30\$defaultview]

Youth in rural areas often lack comprehensive educational support systems, such as career guidance services, counselling centres, and mentoring programmes. The lack of these support mechanisms can make it difficult for youth in rural areas to overcome educational challenges and barriers, leading to early school dropout. In addition, geographical barriers can make access to schools much more difficult for rural youth, especially in areas with inadequate transportation infrastructure (figure J).

Survey results indicate that rural youth in Serbia and Albania report the highest levels of satisfaction with the availability of childcare and education facilities, reflecting a stronger infrastructure in these areas. Conversely, respondents from Kosovo\* and Montenegro expressed the most critical views, citing limited access and quality issues in these essential services. This disparity highlights regional differences in the provision of care and education, which play a crucial role in shaping the well-being and future opportunities for rural families.

Serbia, FGD: Respondents stressed out:

*"I've always wanted to join the drama section, but opportunities were lacking in our village".*

*“I had to change teachers several times in my elementary school”*

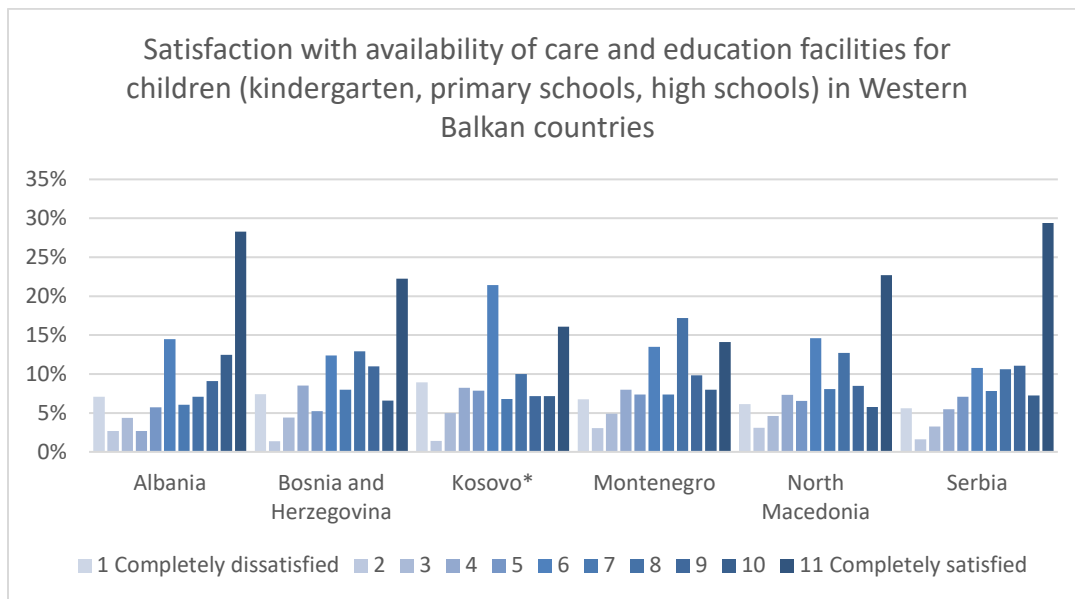


Figure J: Satisfaction of rural youth with availability of care and education facilities for children

Source: Survey results

Findings from FGDs indicate several key reasons for these disparities which differ across the age categories and can be summarized in the following conclusions: rural youth often encounter obstacles in accessing education due to factors such as geographic distance and inadequate transportation infrastructure; rural areas may suffer from a shortage of qualified teachers, making it challenging to attract and retain skilled educators; retention and dropout rates among rural youth are elevated, especially in the older male youth categories who have higher return rate to their birth place after their education.

This situation further attributes to the socioeconomic constraints, limited employment prospects, and a propensity for migration to urban areas in pursuit of further education opportunities. Summary of the situation of the education prospects in the different countries and seen through the lens of rural youth of different age categories is given in Table X.

Table . The perspectives of rural youth in the Western Balkans across the different youth categories and between the sexes

	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-40
ALB	Female: vocational education is undervalued in rural areas	Female: challenges related to access, including the absence of laboratories and sports facilities in some villages		

	<p>Male: difficulties in accessing higher secondary education and the need for improved infrastructure</p> <p>Male: completed their secondary education in urban areas due to the lack of educational opportunities in their own rural areas.</p>	<p>Both male and female: inadequate qualifications of teachers in rural areas</p>
B&H	<p>Female: “one teacher for all grades”</p> <p>no kindergartens: “you need to have someone to help you enroll kids in kindergarten”</p>	<p>Male: “there are no extracurricular programs or training”</p> <p>“urban school reputation, more attractive, better learning environment, better equipment”</p>
XS*	<p>Both male and female: “We are learning what we think is needed but it is not a very stable job market”</p> <p>Centralization of the higher education (University level) in the capital Pristina – unaffordable for students from the rural areas.</p> <p>Situation which is quite unfavourable for the ethnic minorities who do not speak Albanian – limited education opportunities.</p>	
	<p>24 percent received their education abroad, 24 in other urban areas</p>	<p>23 percent received abroad and 37 percent in urban areas</p>
MN	<p>Male: Their education provides better reputation among the older population and they are willing to accept innovations.</p> <p>They are highly aware of climate change and effects on agriculture. Willing to continue education and specialize in rural tourism and agriculture.</p>	<p>Male: Poor state support and education.</p> <p>There is a lack of education; the local population has no idea what they can do in their municipality</p>
	<p>Female: Since high school is not available in the rural areas, they have to travel in order to continue their education, and they travel 50 km at a time. They are aware that in order to gain experience and education, it is best for them to stay in the city, that they do not have opportunities in their surroundings.</p>	<p>Female: Lack of practical training through education.</p> <p>Education in entrepreneurship is necessary, as well as tools to overcome gaps between the older and the younger population.</p>
NMK	<p>Both female and male stay within their rural locales, often residing close to larger</p>	<p>For both sexes, the major driving force for out-migration is the lack of educational and economic prospects in the rural areas, not only for themselves but also for their children</p>

cities where high school education is accessible:

- **males** opt for professional schools that will give them competencies for the local labour market, while

**females** tend to pursue generally high school profiles, necessitating further training and education which often does not fit the local labour demand

*For males, "The main drawback of education in the higher levels of the educational system is the absence of practical education"*

All youth categories encounter difficulties in transitioning to employment after finishing high school education, mostly due to *"mismatches between educational programs and the real sector's needs, compounded by a lack of vocational education"*

SER The proportion of young people with less than primary, primary, and lower secondary education has been gradually decreasing for both women and men

**Rural youth are more likely to drop out of school early than the total youth population**

Pros and cons for primary education in rural areas:

Pro: smaller class sizes (more common in rural regions) provide better working conditions and higher teacher commitment.

Con: adverse selection process for school staff members in rural areas. School teachers often change, and students are often forced to change them.

All participants in the FGDs agree that there are **not enough extracurricular activities in schools.**

**Outdated educational programs** do not adequately prepare young people for the job market and **informal education system is significantly better in urban areas.**

Educational possibilities are mainly influencing young people's movement from rural to urban regions, with notable distinctions between men and women in this aspect.

**While most female participants do not want to return home after completing their education in urban areas**

**Most male participants are more likely than girls to leave school early since they frequently need to handle farm chores, this return to their rural birth places** after finishing their education - this is particularly intense among the group of older male participants

Older male participants in the FGD state that it is **necessary to work on raising the capacity of teaching staff in rural areas**, which they stated has significantly decreased in the last decade

Source: country reports

### 3.3 Digital divide

Digital inequality significantly affects young people in rural areas, limiting their potential to access vital information and hindering their successful integration into economic activities and the labor market.

Rural areas are at risk of experiencing a "double digital divide." On the supply side, they continue to lag in the provision of Next Generation Access infrastructure, necessitating ongoing investment to close this gap. On the demand side, many rural areas lack basic digital skills and awareness of digital technology's potential. As a result, even if the 'digital highways' are established, they may remain underutilized in terms of service provision, business use, and customer adoption<sup>30</sup>.

The digital divide between rural and urban areas in the Western Balkans is a significant issue, affecting access to information, education, economic opportunities, and social services. This divide is characterized by disparities in internet access, digital literacy, and the availability of digital infrastructure. Although the Western Balkan region has a high internet penetration rate of 75 percent to 96 percent, it is geographically diverse, making it difficult and in some cases impossible to have high-speed broadband coverage<sup>31</sup>.

- **Albania** - The penetration rate of fixed broadband in Albania is 10 percent, the lowest in the region, with coverage for only 30 percent of households. There is a significant urban-rural divide, with an average of 15 percent in urban areas and only 1 percent in rural areas. According to the latest ITU data, 72.2 percent of people in Albania used the Internet in 2020, which is below the European region average of 84.9 percent. However, internet usage is steadily increasing, with a yearly growth rate of 3.3 percentage points over the past three years.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/sites/default/files/s4\\_rural-businesses-factsheet\\_digital-hubs.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/sites/default/files/s4_rural-businesses-factsheet_digital-hubs.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.oegfe.at/policy-briefs/the-role-of-digitalisation-in-transforming-western-balkan-societies/?lang=en#15>

<sup>32</sup> [https://albania.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Digital%20Development%20Country%20Profile\\_Albania\\_final\\_02.22.pdf](https://albania.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Digital%20Development%20Country%20Profile_Albania_final_02.22.pdf)

- **Bosnia and Herzegovina** - 77.8 percent of urban households have internet access compared to 73.8 percent in rural areas. Digital divides also disadvantage older generations, women from rural areas, and Roma populations. Women in rural areas face a "triple divide" encompassing digital, rural, and gender factors. Additionally, the use of digital financial services (DFS) is low overall, with women less likely than men to own a credit card, use e-banking services, engage in e-commerce, and make online payments. Barriers to DFS adoption include challenging topography, reliance on traditional community-based and cash-based financial structures, low trust in digital platforms, and low levels of financial inclusion and digital literacy.<sup>33</sup>
- **Kosovo\*** - In March 2023, Kosovo\* connected all rural settlements to broadband Internet infrastructure. Despite this progress, Kosovo\*'s fixed Internet access penetration per 100 inhabitants remains among the lowest in the Western Balkans, at 22 percent. According to a 2023 survey on ICT usage, 98.6 percent of households now have Internet access, with a slight majority of users being women (51.7 percent). Mobile/smart phones are the predominant means of access (94.8 percent). However, advanced applications like e-education and e-health remain underutilized due to the limited availability of corresponding e-services. Kosovo\* lacks policy initiatives aimed at promoting digital technology usage among marginalized groups, ensuring digital inclusion regardless of age, geographic location, education level, ethnicity, or ability.<sup>34</sup>
- **Montenegro\*** - According to the Human Development Report for Montenegro 2020 - Towards a Digital Future for All (UNDP), digital access is unevenly distributed between urban (80 percent) and rural areas (63 percent), and between the north (65 percent) and south (79 percent) of the country. Large differences are also observed in internet use between young people and those over 65 (99.6 percent vs. 72.8 percent). More recent data from the Statistical Office of Montenegro (MONSTAT) shows that the gap between urban and rural areas decreased from 17 percent to 14 percent, with 84.9 percent of urban areas and 70.9 percent of rural areas connected in 2020<sup>35</sup>.
- **North Macedonia** - Approximately 80 percent of North Macedonia's population is connected to the internet. However, only 32 percent possess basic digital skills, revealing a significant digital divide that particularly affects older and vulnerable populations. North Macedonia exhibits widespread internet access, with approximately 80 percent of the population connected. However, despite high connectivity rates, about 19 percent of the population, particularly those aged 60 and above, remain disconnected.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-02/BiH%20DECA.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/digital-society\\_de4be518-en.pdf?itemId=%2Fcontent%2Fcomponent%2Fde4be518-en&mimeType=pdf](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/digital-society_de4be518-en.pdf?itemId=%2Fcontent%2Fcomponent%2Fde4be518-en&mimeType=pdf)

<sup>35</sup> Ministry of Public Administration, Digital Society and Media. 2021. MONTENEGRO DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY 2022-2026 WITH ACTION PLAN 2022-2023.

<sup>36</sup> [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-01/dra\\_mk\\_06.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-01/dra_mk_06.pdf)



- **Serbia** - In Serbia, 85.6 percent of households have an internet connection, with all of them being broadband connections. However, significant differences exist between urban and rural areas: 88.9 percent of urban households have internet access compared to 79.8 percent in rural areas. Similarly, 81.5 percent of urban households have computers, whereas only 66.1 percent of rural households do. Among the young population (16-24 years), computers are used more frequently by men than women (98.8 percent vs. 95.4 percent). However, in the 25-54 age group, this trend reverses, with women using computers more often than men (91.0 percent vs. 89.9 percent). Serbia has made investments in increasing broadband access, establishing digital innovation centres, and building training programmes for digital skills. Additionally, e-government services have also been introduced as a result of the approach, streamlining administrative processes and enhancing transparency.<sup>37</sup>

Beyond geographic coverage, the devices used to access the internet are crucial indicators of digital development. Although the percentage of households in rural areas with internet access is increasing, they use desktop computers less frequently compared to urban households. This highlights a significant limitation in the digital development of rural areas. The widespread use of mobile phones improves connectivity statistics and addresses certain deficiencies in ICT infrastructure. However, using the internet on a mobile phone does not enhance digital literacy or provide the skills needed to help young people in rural areas overcome social and economic challenges.<sup>38</sup>

Table: Devices available in households in Serbia, (multiple answers)

	Urban	Rural	Total
<b>Personal computer (PC)</b>	81,5	66,1	75,9
<b>Laptop</b>	59,0	48,2	55,0
<b>Mobile phone</b>	95,6	92,2	94,4

Source: SORS. 2023. Use of information and communication technologies in the Republic of Serbia, 2023.

The available data on digital skills indicator<sup>39</sup> for the countries of the Western Balkans indicate that in terms of the Individuals with above basic information and data literacy skills indicator, Serbia is closer to the EU average, with a lag of 3 percentage points, and that Montenegro and North Macedonia exceed the EU average in terms of the share of Individuals with above basic

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.oegfe.at/policy-briefs/the-role-of-digitalisation-in-transforming-western-balkan-societies/?lang=en#15>

<sup>38</sup> COST Action CA 18213: Rural NEETs and Sustainability – Diverse, Multisectoral, and Multifunctional Environments Shaping Rural Areas and Daily Life”

<sup>39</sup> The overall digital skills indicator is a composite indicator based on five types of skills: information and data literacy skills, communication and collaboration skills, digital content creation skills, safety skills and problem-solving skills.

communication and collaboration skills in the total population. The data for Macedonia indicates a significant gap between the rural population and the population living in cities and towns and suburbs.

Table: Individuals' level of digital skills, EU-27 and Western Balkan countries

	All individuals					North Macedonia			
	EU - 27	ALB	B&H	MN	SRB	All individuals	Individuals living in		
							cities	towns and suburbs	rural areas
Individuals with above basic information and data literacy skills	68,35	49,1	55,6	63,3	65,4	61,3	71,2	58,6	49,1
Individuals with above basic communication and collaboration skills	77,48	69,2	68,2	80,4	72,4	80,3	85,6	77,5	76,2
Individuals with above basic digital content creation skills	45,23	17,1	24,5	40,8	33,5	16,2	23,5	12,7	9,8
Individuals with above basic safety skills	43,64	14,9	14,4	29,0	23,3	28,6	37,3	23,0	23,9
Individuals with above basic problem solving skills	52,73	8,7	18,4	20,9	35,5	21,4	25,4	19,2	18,4

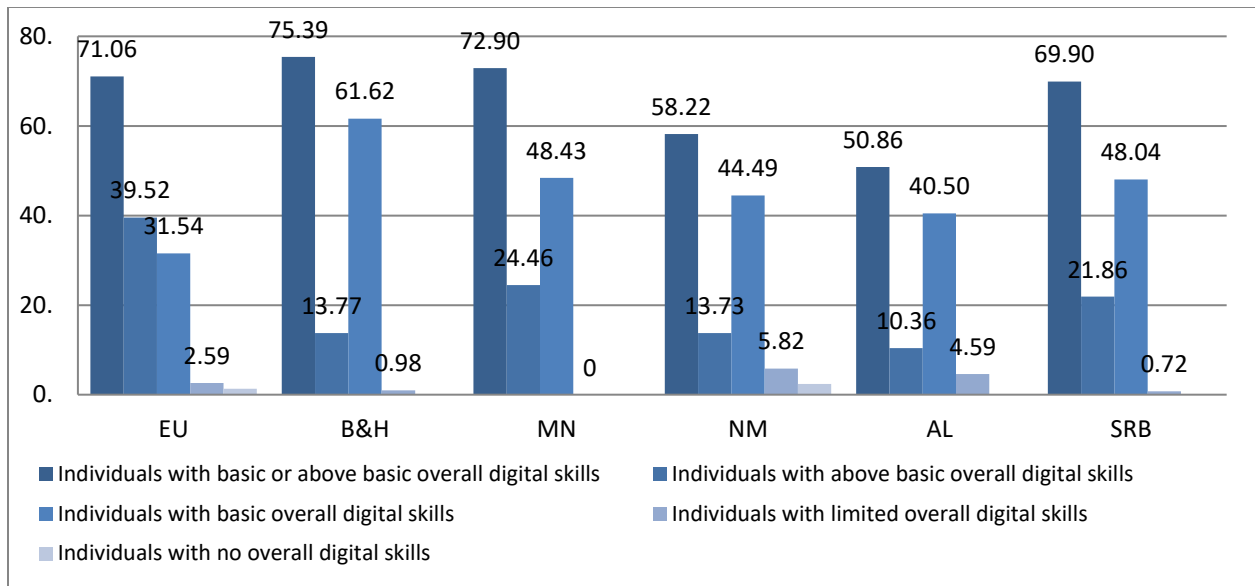
Source: Eurostat; [isoc\_sk\_dskl\_i21\_\_custom\_12477084]

[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ISOC\\_SK\\_DSKL\\_I21\\_custom\\_3532399/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=24669757-c889-436d-bea2-d965730bbecf](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ISOC_SK_DSKL_I21_custom_3532399/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=24669757-c889-436d-bea2-d965730bbecf)

In 2023, nearly four-fifths (77 percent) of young people aged 16-29 in the EU reported that they had, at some point, performed basic computer tasks such as copying or moving a file or folder. Slightly fewer, 72 percent, had downloaded or installed software or applications. However, more technical skills, such as writing code in a programming language, were much less common, with only 13 percent of young people in the EU reporting they had written code in the three months preceding the survey.<sup>40</sup> As far as young people in the Western Balkans are concerned, they are well behind the proportion of young people with more than basic digital skills, some of them (NM) are above average in terms of the proportion of those with no overall digital skills (Figure XY).

Figure: Individuals' 16-29 old, level of digital skills, Western Balkan countries; %

<sup>40</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/SEPDEF/cache/39761.pdf>



Source: Eurostat; [isoc\_sk\_dskl\_i21\_\_custom\_12514652]

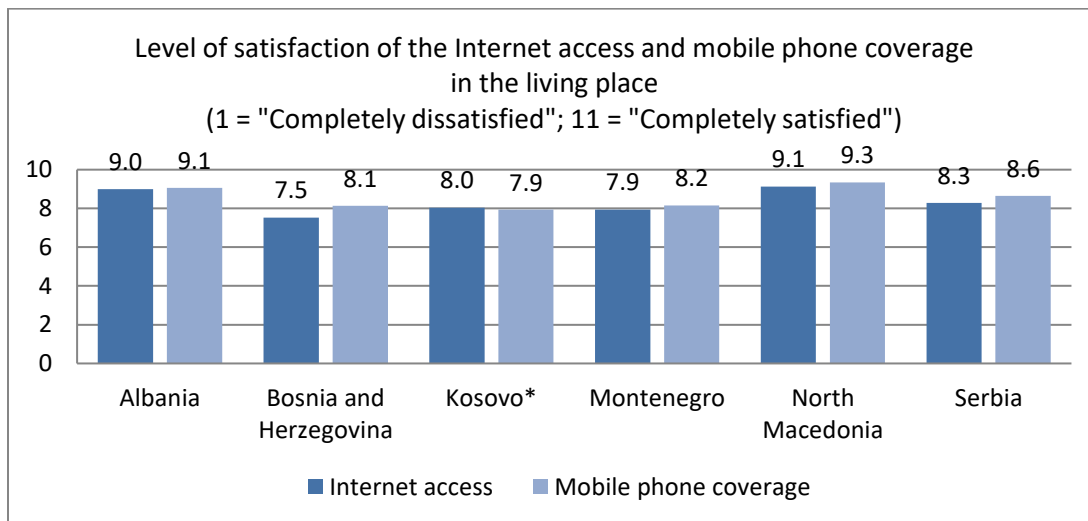


Figure: Satisfaction of rural youth with access to Internet and mobile phone coverage

Source: Survey results

### 3.4 Employment and economic opportunities and mobility

Over the last few years, the youth unemployment rate has continuously decreased in all countries in the region. However, unemployment varies from country to country and remains higher

compared to EU member states.<sup>41</sup> Despite the significant reduction, youth unemployment still remains a challenging issue. Although economic growth over the last decade has addressed this issue to some extent with hundreds of thousands of new jobs being created young people, Western Balkan labour market faces many challenges including lack of good quality jobs that match skills of youth. A significant number of young people are engaged in informal employment, which often means lower wages, lack of social protection, and job insecurity. The available jobs are often in sectors where the demand for labor fluctuates greatly depending on the season, which further increases the uncertainty for rural youth and their families (tourism, agriculture, construction).

Addressing the skills mismatch, enhancing vocational training, and supporting entrepreneurship are key strategies to reduce youth unemployment and foster economic growth in the region. In Western Balkans, efforts and initiatives taken by national governments are mostly directed towards education and training, and entrepreneurship support in some countries. Different measures and support programs that are available in the region include:

- Vocational training programs to bridge the skills gap and better align education with labor market needs;
- Internships and apprenticeships programs to provide young people with practical experience and improve their employability.
- Startup incubators initiatives to support young entrepreneurs with funding, mentorship, and resources.
- Financial assistance programs by grants and loans to help young people start their own businesses.

However, due to widespread labor shortages across nearly all countries, many of them have opted to address the issue by importing workers from other countries. This approach is particularly used to fill low-paid jobs that local workers are not interested in, such as the construction, tourism and hospitality, healthcare, engineering and manufacturing sectors.

- In 2023, the National Employment Service in Serbia issued a total of 50,397 work permits to foreign nationals, as reported by the Ministry of Labor and Employment. The highest number of permits were granted to citizens from Russia, followed by China, Turkey, India, and Nepal. In the realm of seasonal agricultural work, 1,091 foreign workers have been engaged since the beginning of the year. Seasonal workers, including foreigners with

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.centaronline.org/en/news/13017/is-there-any-progress-in-western-balkan-economies-in-implementing-the-youth-guarantee-programme>

registered residence in Serbia, are not subject to special employment conditions for foreigners and are treated equally to Serbian citizens<sup>42</sup>.

- In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are currently approximately 3,500 issued work permits for foreign nationals, and when it is taken into account that according to the Law on Foreigners of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in certain cases, a foreigner is allowed to stay for the purpose of work without a work permit, the number of foreign workers in Bosnia and Herzegovina is even higher is confirmed to Fena from the UNIDAD Employment Agency<sup>43</sup>.
- According to the statistics from the Interior Ministry of Albania from 2019 to 2023, there were 24,590 work permits granted to foreign nationals, however, there is no data on how many of them are currently in Albania<sup>44</sup>

Regarding youth employment in rural areas, the data is available for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia (Figure XY). Data for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia show a relatively more favorable employment rates for rural youth compared to urban ones. In these countries, young people in rural areas are more likely to be economically active and employed than their peers in urban areas). The difference in employment rates is particularly evident among men from rural and urban areas, and in the 25-29 age group it is also visible among the female population. However, while in Serbia more women are employed in rural than in urban areas, the situation is reversed in Bosnia. Young women in rural areas are significantly less employed in Bosnia and Herzegovina than in Serbia and less than in urban areas. These data suggest that young people from rural areas enter the labor market earlier and become economically active under the influence of "push" factors, such as the need to contribute to the family budget, to replace seasonal workers on the farm, to be forced to stay on the farm to care for elderly family members, etc.

As of Montenegro, the situation is opposite. Employment is higher in urban areas, and among female comparing with male population.

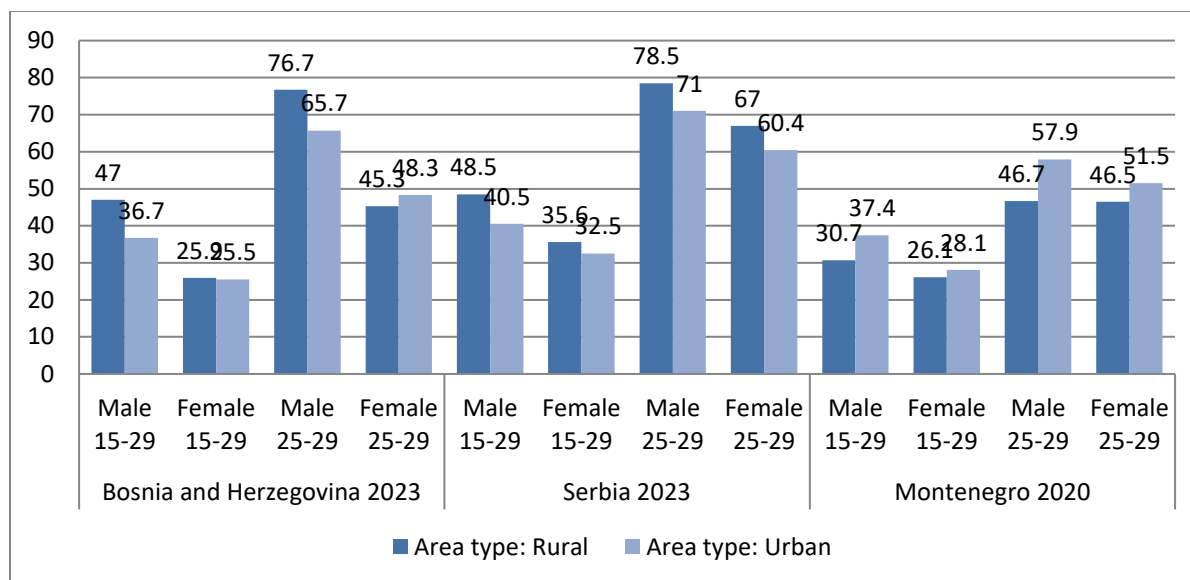
Figure : Youth employment to population ratio by sex, age, and rural/urban (%)

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<sup>42</sup> [https://welcometosrbia.org/en/our\\_news/serbia-issues-over-50000-work-permits-to-foreign-nationals-in-2023/](https://welcometosrbia.org/en/our_news/serbia-issues-over-50000-work-permits-to-foreign-nationals-in-2023/)

<sup>43</sup> [https://sarajevotimes.com/there-are-3500-foreign-workers-in-bih/#google\\_vignette](https://sarajevotimes.com/there-are-3500-foreign-workers-in-bih/#google_vignette)

<sup>44</sup> <https://visaguide.world/news/albania-to-bring-over-thousands-of-filipino-workers-for-tourism-manufacturing-industries/>



Source: ILOSTAT;

[https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer25/?region=ROECA&lang=en&id=POP\\_3WAP\\_SEX\\_AGE\\_GEO\\_NB\\_A](https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer25/?region=ROECA&lang=en&id=POP_3WAP_SEX_AGE_GEO_NB_A)

Youth opinions on the availability of attractive jobs vary across regions, with many rural youth expressing frustration over limited options that match their skills and expectations. This perception is compounded by dissatisfaction with wages and the role that political connections play in securing employment, particularly in public enterprises and government sectors. Survey results reveal that rural youth view local businesses as offering limited employment opportunities that align with their skills and education (see figure X). They are particularly dissatisfied with low wages despite the shortage of skilled labor in rural areas (see figures T). This dissatisfaction is most acute among young people in Albania, where many feel there is a mismatch between labor demand and available jobs, leaving them with limited options.

In contrast, Serbia shows relatively higher satisfaction with job availability and wages, though other challenges persist. Meanwhile, young people in North Macedonia report a smaller gap between their qualifications and the local labor market, suggesting a better alignment between skills and available jobs compared to other countries. This combination of limited opportunities and poor compensation leaves rural youth feeling marginalized and demotivated, driving many to seek better prospects in urban areas.

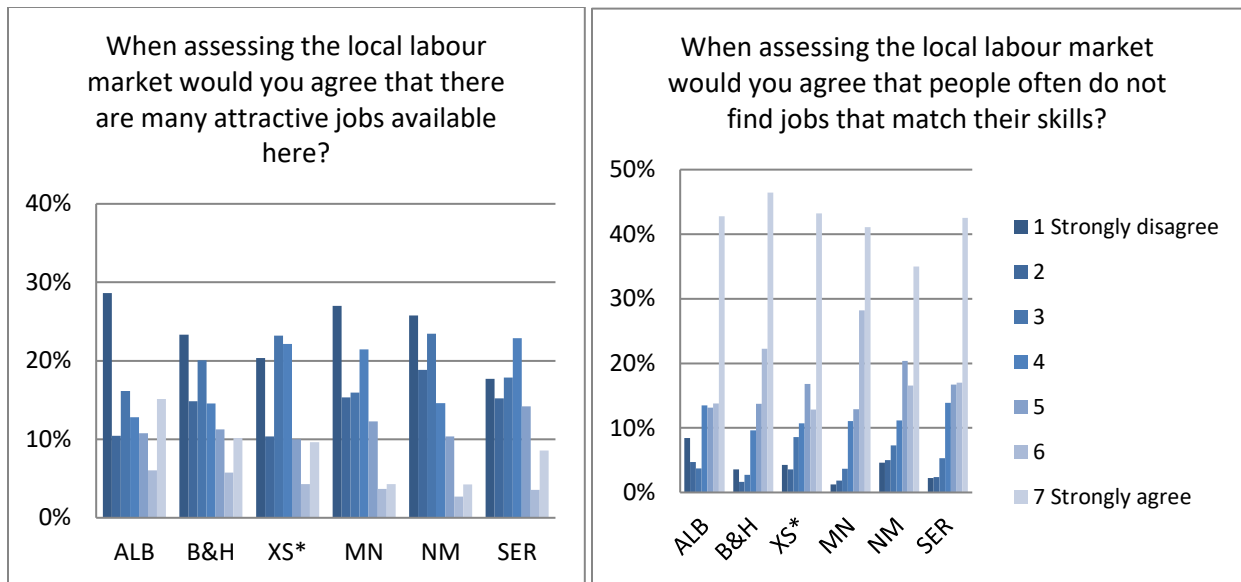


Figure X: Youth opinions on the availability of attractive jobs and jobs that match their skills

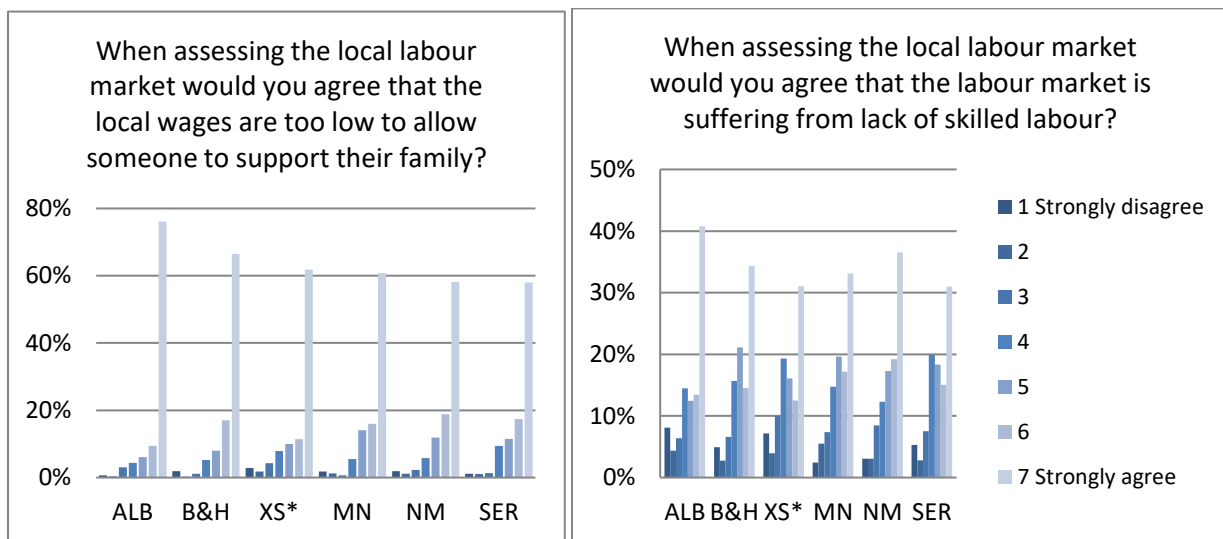


Figure T: Youth opinions on the wages and availability of skilled labour

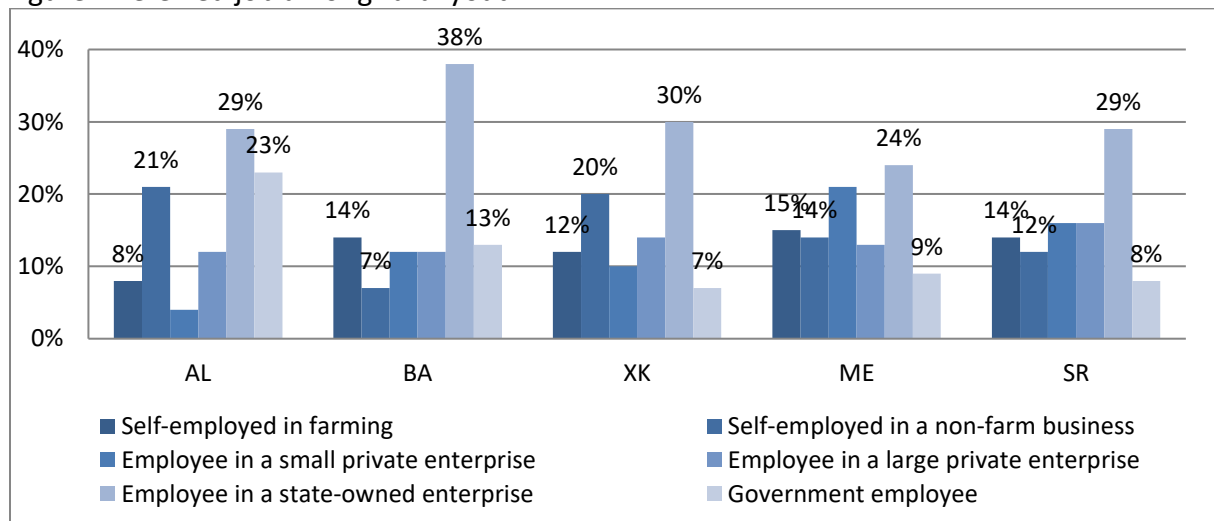
The following conclusions summarize the key findings of the survey on the state of the rural labor market and the challenges faced by young people:

- The majority of the youth from the sample, between the ages of 25 and 40 years old, have paid jobs i.e., they are working for money. The majority of youth who are looking for a job belong to the age category of 20-29 years old.
- State-owned enterprise job is the first choice of the surveyed rural youth in all countries, ranging from 24 percent of respondents in Montenegro, to 38 percent in Bosnia and

Herzegovina. The second choice is government employment (public sector), which is mostly preferred by the female participants. However, in most of the Western Balkans, there is undue political influence in state employment: “State jobs are being driven by political agendas”.

- In all countries, women were more dissatisfied with wages. There were only a few exceptions where rural youth were satisfied with the local labor market. In Kriva Palanka, North Macedonia, for example, the young men working in the local construction companies were quite satisfied with their jobs, and were not thinking of moving (FGD, 2023). However, this was not the case for young women living in the same area - they did not see their future jobs in their hometown.
- Rural youth further emphasize the struggle to secure positions that truly utilize their skill sets, underscoring a prevalent mismatch between available jobs and the expertise of young people. In Serbia, most of the youth opt for employment in the cities, because the earnings there are higher (FGD, 2023).

Figure: Preferred job among rural youth



Source: Survey findings

- Being an entrepreneur, but in non-farm business, was among the most preferred job among rural youth in Albania and Kosovo\*, where the interest in farming is the lowest comparing with the other countries.
- Farming was not a preferred job. However, only those participants who own their farms are willing to engage in the farm business in Serbia; working on other people's farms is not an option. None of the younger group of female participants plans to engage in agriculture, nor do they find this activity attractive, even if they have the conditions for it because they are family farm members.



- Some rural youth, especially in Serbia, mostly belonging to the older age categories, considered there was a good chance for young people to return to the countryside if they utilized benefits from internet opportunities.

*Serbia, FGD: “We believe the COVID-19 period made many people realize they can work online, freeing them from location constraints. This shift will encourage young individuals seeking a better quality of life to return to the countryside”.*

Gender differences regarding employment are evident in the entire Western Balkans:

- More men than women work for money, and this difference is particularly pronounced in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo\*, and least pronounced in Montenegro and Serbia (Survey, 2023).
- In Serbia, young men had the initiative to start their businesses, while young women did not (FGD, 2023). Women were more likely to be categorized as inactive, discouraged, or unpaid family workers than men (Survey, 2023).
- In Bosnia and Herzegovina, self-employment was not initiated and entrepreneurship programs are not even promoted. Moreover, traditional professions in villages (e.g. blacksmith, crafting, etc.) were disappearing (FGD, 2023).
- Young women aspire to work in the public sector, and this was especially emphasized in Serbia: “We believe public jobs are more secure and enable more flexibility to balance our family life”.
- In Kosovo\* women in rural areas face additional challenges, including societal prejudice and opposition to working outside the home or in mixed-gender environments. This has led to lower employment rates for women compared to men, with only 40 percent of women employed, compared to 62 percent of men.

*Kosovo\*, FGD: “Living in rural areas, as a woman is very hard because there is a lot of prejudice, a lot of shaming and opposition [about not staying at home, or working with other men] so you have to be very brave to be able to move forward with what you want to do.”.*

- One positive gender aspect is that young women in most of the Western Balkans tend to have lower levels of job mismatch compared to young men across most age categories (Survey, 2023).

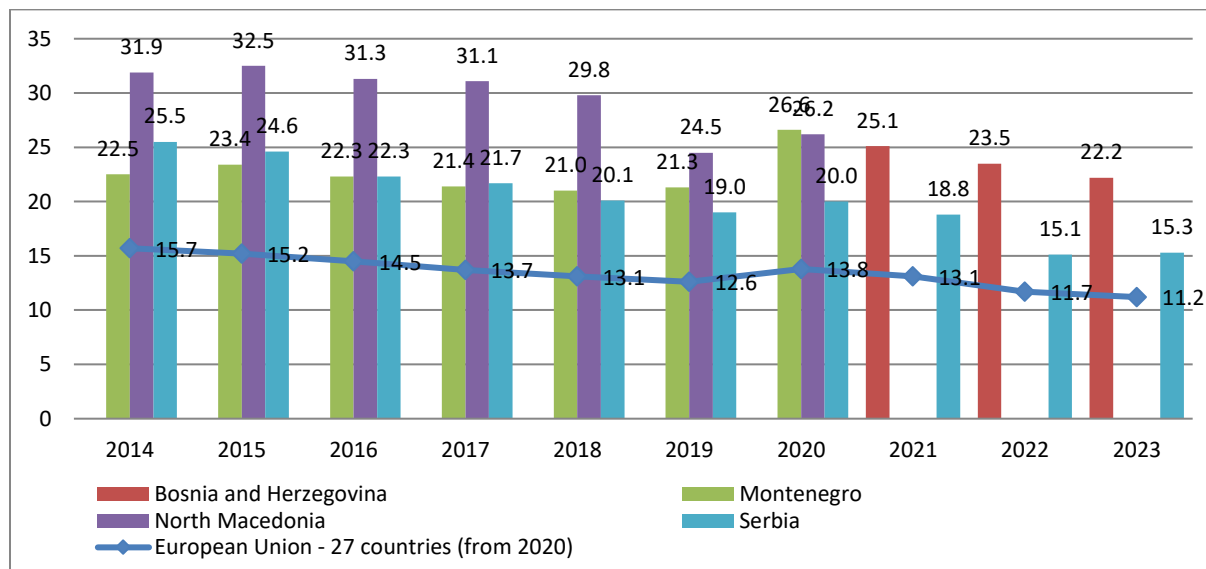
### **3.5 Young people neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET)**

The term "young people neither in employment nor in education and training" (NEET) refers to individuals, typically aged 15-29, who are not engaged in any form of employment, education, or vocational training. This status can result from a variety of factors, including economic conditions, lack of opportunities, or personal/family circumstances. NEET rates are often correlated with youth unemployment rates - countries with higher youth unemployment tend to have higher NEET rates, as job market challenges contribute to a lack of engagement in education and training. Addressing NEET rates is important for ensuring that young people have the support and resources they need to enter the workforce or continue their education. There are risks, both for the individual and in the long run for the whole society, if young adults find themselves disengaged from both education and the labour market.<sup>45</sup>

In 2023, the share of young people (aged 15–29) in the EU who were NEETs was lowest in cities (10.3 percent) and about the same level in towns and suburbs (11.7 percent), and rural areas (12.3 percent).<sup>46</sup> In recent years, many EU countries have seen a decline in NEET rates. This trend is partly due to improved economic conditions and targeted policies aimed at increasing youth employment and educational engagement.

NEET rates in the Western Balkans are higher than in the EU, although there is a clear downward trend. Serbia has the lowest NEET rate among the Balkan countries (15.3 percent), although the value of this indicator is lower than in some EU countries (Greece, Italy, Romania).

Figure: Young people (15-29 age) neither in employment nor in education and training (%)



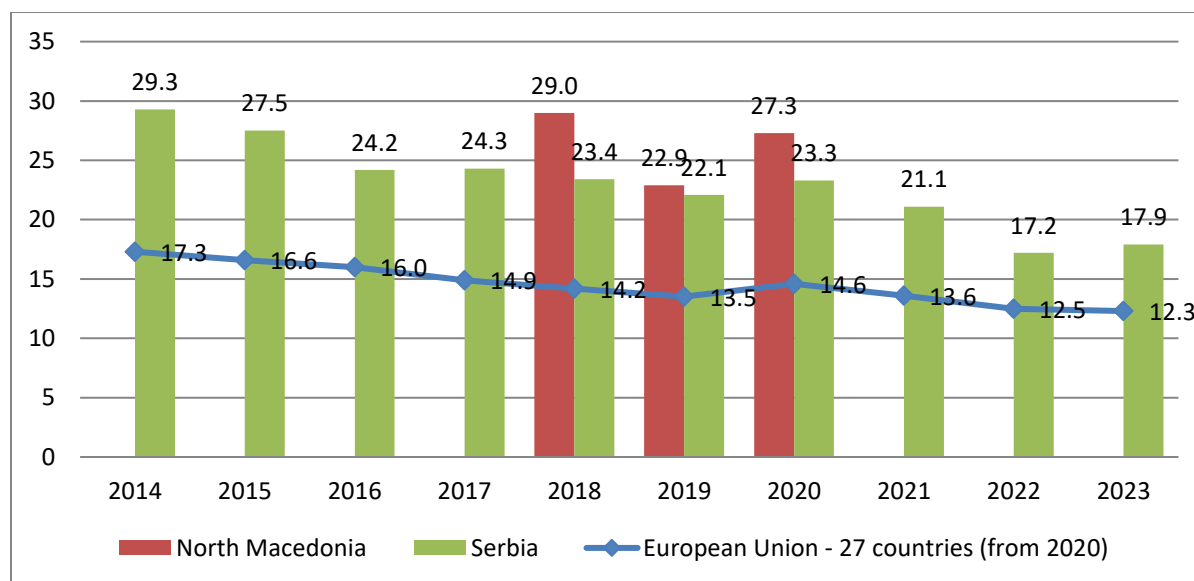
<sup>45</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics\\_on\\_young\\_people\\_neither\\_in\\_employment\\_nor\\_in\\_education\\_or\\_training](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training)

<sup>46</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics\\_on\\_young\\_people\\_neither\\_in\\_employment\\_nor\\_in\\_education\\_or\\_training#Does\\_it\\_matter\\_where\\_you\\_live.3F\\_A\\_glimpse\\_at\\_the\\_degree\\_of\\_urbanisation](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training#Does_it_matter_where_you_live.3F_A_glimpse_at_the_degree_of_urbanisation)

Source: Eurostat; [edat\_lfse\_29\_\_custom\_12509200]

In both the EU and the Western Balkans, the pattern of having the lowest NEET rates in cities compared to rural areas and towns and suburbs is consistent. The difference in NEET rates between cities and rural areas is evident in the countries where data is available according to level of urbanisation: Serbia, with a 6.8 percentage point difference, and North Macedonia, with a 1.8 percentage point difference (Figure XY).

Figure: Rural youth (15-29 years) neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET rates)



Source: Eurostat; [edat\_lfse\_29\_\_custom\_12509200]

Data from ILO database for Bosnia and Herzegovina (2023) and Montenegro (2020) for the population of young people aged 15-24 indicate higher NEET rates in rural areas compared to urban areas (3.9 percentage points and 5.4 percentage points respectively) and higher NEET rates among the young male rural population compared to the female population (in B&H this difference is 3.2 percentage points)<sup>47</sup>.

### 3.6 Youth involvement in agriculture

Globally, most rural youth work in the informal economy as family workers, subsistence farmers, home-based micro-entrepreneurs, or unskilled laborers. They earn low wages, often through casual or seasonal work, and face unsafe, exploitative conditions that drive many to migrate to urban areas<sup>48</sup>. Re-engaging youth in agriculture can revitalize rural areas, prevent depopulation,

<sup>47</sup> ILOSTAT Explorer; [https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer0/?lang=en&id=EAP\\_3EAP\\_SEX\\_AGE\\_GEO\\_NB\\_A](https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer0/?lang=en&id=EAP_3EAP_SEX_AGE_GEO_NB_A)

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.fao.org/rural-employment/work-areas/youth-employment/en/>

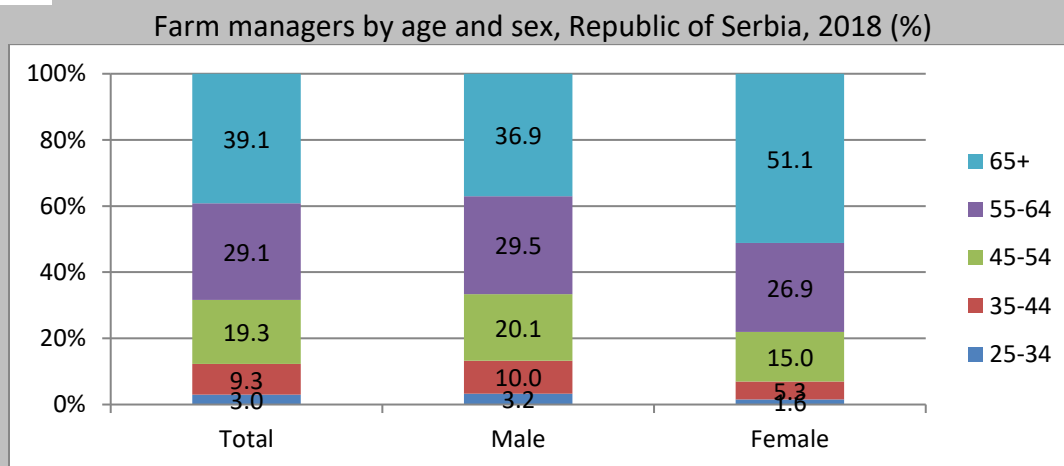
and strengthen rural communities. However, this requires addressing barriers that hinder their participation, such as limited access to education and skills development, scarce resources, and exclusion from decision-making processes.<sup>49</sup>

Only 11.9 percent of EU farm managers were under the age of 40 years old in 2020. Young farmers remain scarce; in 2005, 7.3 percent of farm managers in the EU were under the age of 35 years old but this share had fallen to 6.5 percent in 2020. Nevertheless, this was higher than in 2016 (a 5.1 percent share), with numbers increasing between 2016 and 2020 for female farm managers in all age groups below 55 years, whereas for male farm managers increases were observed for the two age classes below 35 years<sup>50</sup>.

The unfavorable age structure of farm managers and its negative trend is a significant feature of the agricultural sector in the region. The decline in younger people in management positions on farms is due to several complex factors. These include the general deterioration of the demographic situation in rural areas, the migration of rural youth to urban centers, increase of wage employment opportunities, decrease of dropout rates of rural youth etc.

#### Box XY - Farm structure in Serbia, by age of farm managers

According to the results of the FSS (2018), farm managers in Serbia are mostly older people—almost 40 percent of farm managers are of 65+ years. The age structure of female and male farm managers differs significantly. Of the female farm managers, more than half are 65 years and older.

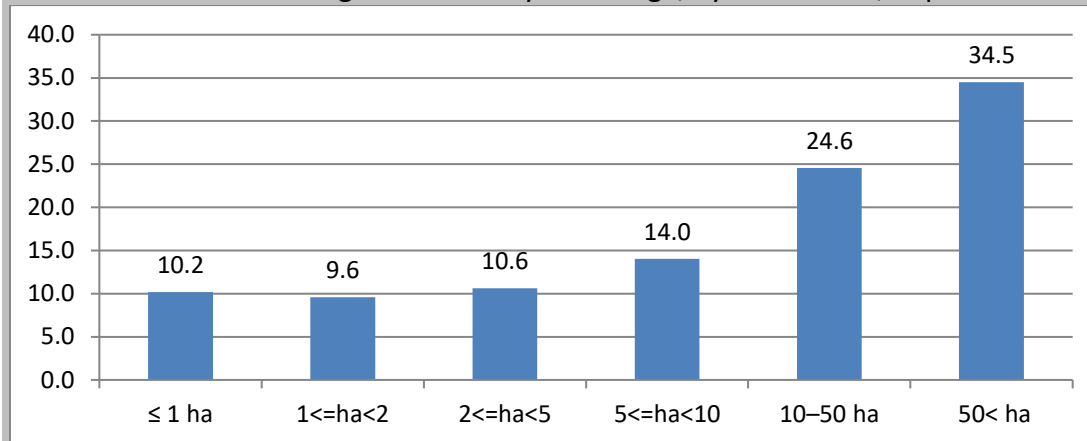


The regional differences in the age of farm managers are significant, indicating a notably smaller number of older farm managers in the Vojvodina region (only 31 percent of farm managers are 65+). This region has larger average household sizes and a more developed agricultural sector compared to the rest of the country.

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.youthpower.org/youthpower-issues/topics/youth-engagement-agriculture>

<sup>50</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?oldid=431368#Farm\\_managers\\_are\\_typically\\_male\\_and\\_relatively\\_old](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?oldid=431368#Farm_managers_are_typically_male_and_relatively_old)

Share of farms with managers under 45 years of age, by size of UAA, Republic of Serbia, 2018 (%)



The data on farm size by the age of farm managers indicates that the proportion of younger farm managers tends to increase with the size of the farm. This trend suggests that younger farmers often manage larger farms, which generally require more capital investment and offer greater potential for development. It also suggests that many young farmers are well established and able to take on the challenges of managing more complex farming operations. These younger farm managers are likely to be more open to adopting modern farming techniques, investing in new technologies and expanding their businesses, which bodes well for long-term growth and sustainability in the agricultural sector. This trend also reflect a generational shift where younger farmers are more business-minded and willing to expand their farming activities, contributing to the modernization and diversification of agriculture.

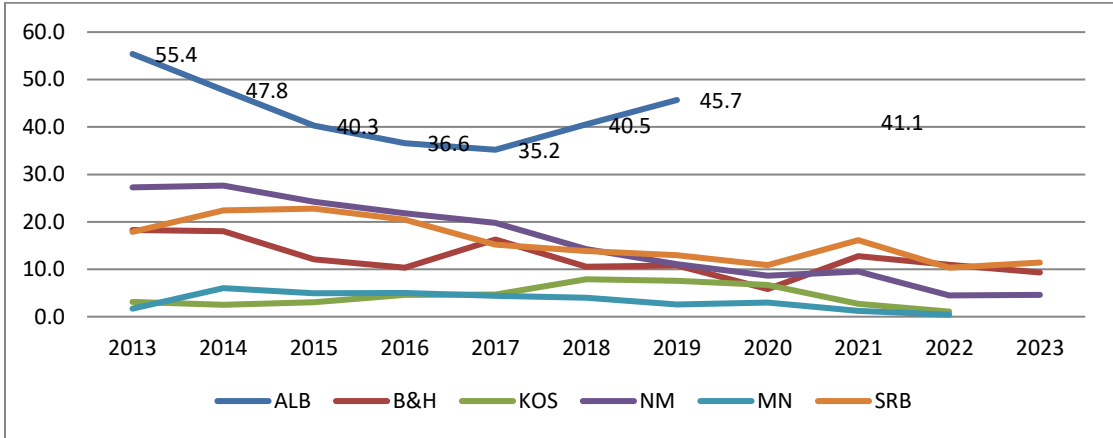
Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. 2019. Farm Structure Survey, 2018– Farm Labor and Employment – Status and Trends

Youth involvement in agriculture in the Western Balkans is increasingly important due to the aging farming population and agriculture's potential to drive economic development. Many young people in the region work in agriculture, mainly on family farms. However, several challenges and opportunities shape their engagement. Agriculture related jobs are often informal and characterized by low wages and seasonal work. Additionally, there is a substantial gap in agricultural education and vocational training, hindering young people's ability to adopt modern farming techniques and improve productivity.

The employment of young people (15-24) in agriculture in the Balkans varies both between countries and between years. In recent years (2022-2023), about 450 thousand young people aged 15-24 were employed in agriculture in the Western Balkans. The highest number is in Albania where, according to the latest available data, they accounted for over 40 percent of the total employed in this age group. The sharpest decline in youth employment in agriculture was recorded in North Macedonia, from 27.3 in 2013 to 4.6 percent in 2023. In Serbia and Bosnia and

Herzegovina, around 10 percent of young people work in agriculture, while in Montenegro and Kosovo\* this indicator is around 1 percent (Figure B).

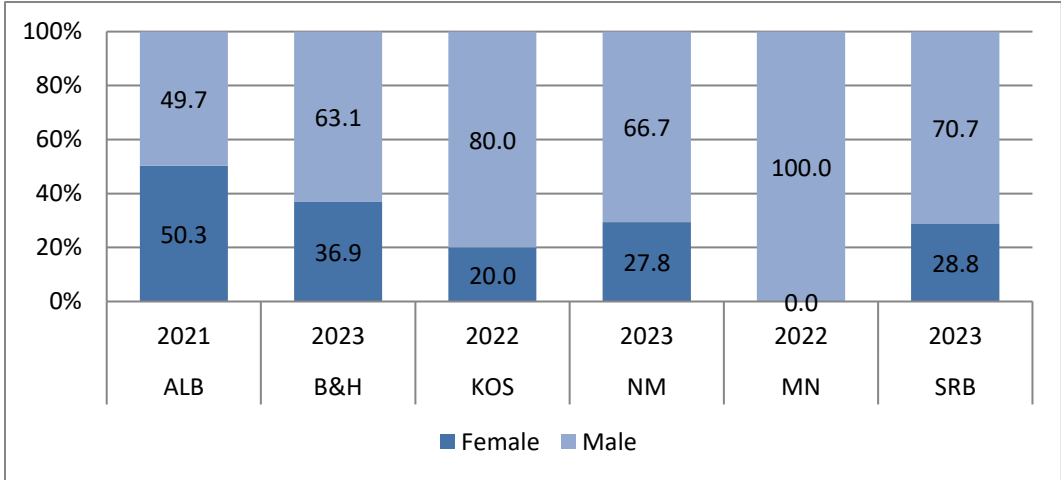
Figure B: Employment in agriculture; Youth, adults: 15-24 (% of total employment)



Source: ILOSTAT Explorer;  
[https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer34/?lang=en&id=EMP\\_TEMP\\_SEX\\_AGE\\_ECO\\_NB\\_A](https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer34/?lang=en&id=EMP_TEMP_SEX_AGE_ECO_NB_A)

As far as the gender structure of agricultural workers is concerned, male workers dominate in all countries except Albania, ranging from 63 percent in Bosnia and Herzegovina to 100 percent in Montenegro.

Figure: Labor force in agriculture by gender; Youth, adults: 15-24 (%)



Source: ILOSTAT Explorer;  
[https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer34/?lang=en&id=EMP\\_TEMP\\_SEX\\_AGE\\_ECO\\_NB\\_A](https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer34/?lang=en&id=EMP_TEMP_SEX_AGE_ECO_NB_A)

Similar challenges to youth engagement in agriculture were identified in all countries, leading to a decline in the number of farmers as many young people seek to avoid the agricultural sector and rural areas, but some challenges were particularly highlighted in certain countries. These

challenges reflect the different contexts and specific problems faced by the agricultural sector in each country.

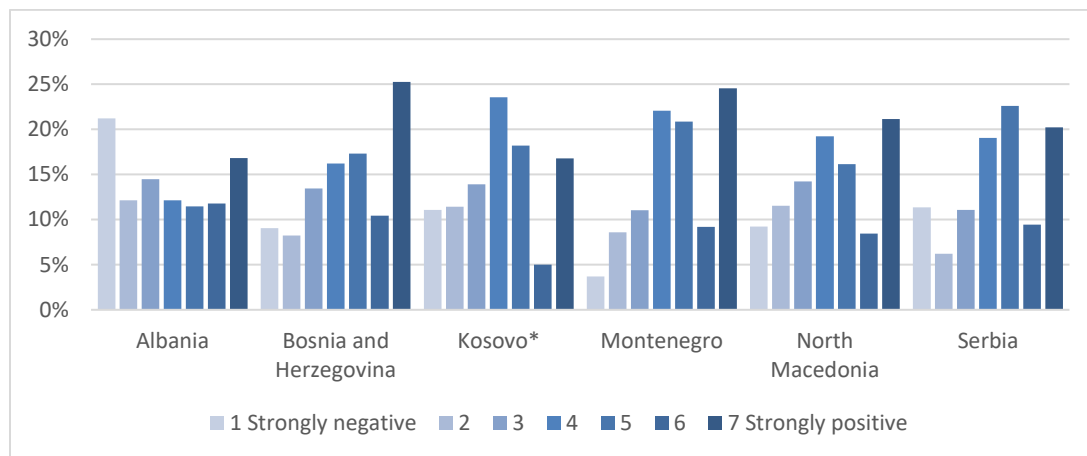


Figure N: Attitude towards working in agriculture

Source: Survey results

Many young people in the Western Balkans perceive agriculture as an unattractive sector due to factors such as low profitability, lack of access to land, limited access to finance, and the perception of agriculture as hard manual labor. Young people in Albania (average score: 3.83) and Kosovo\* (4.09) have a particularly negative attitude towards the profession of farmer, which can be attributed to a lack of interest in or attractiveness of agricultural professions. In contrast, young people in Montenegro (4.74) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (4.57) show a more positive attitude, which indicates a relatively stronger acceptance or appreciation of farming as a viable profession (figure N). However, as can be seen from the following text, there are differences in the attitudes of young people in all countries depending on their age and gender.

Agriculture not only lacks of popularity as a career choice among rural youth but also farming is unappealing due to its lack of profitability. Young women have less interest and involvement in agriculture due to cultural attitudes and a lack of desire. They find it challenging to start a business from scratch without inheriting one or possessing significant capital (land, machinery). There is also concern regarding strong family pressure to stick with traditional way of farming and doing business.

FGD from Bosnia and Herzegovina (woman, 15-24) “parents often do not allow to start something different, in my case they did not want to allow me to start innovative horticultural practice, luckily I had my own money and started doing it”; or “I am not the owner of the land, everything should be communicated with my parents” (man, 15-24, Bosnia and Herzegovina). Land ownership issue was addressed by many participants.

In Albania, a significant obstacle to youth becoming farmers was the lack of intergenerational transfer of agricultural assets, particularly affecting young females who seldom inherit farms or

assume farm management responsibilities. One discussant in Albania expressed that starting and managing a farm as a young person was too challenging: *“It's like embarking on a journey with no destination”* (FGD, 2023). This trend was also evident in Montenegro and North Macedonia.

Albania FGDs highlighted the limited inclusion of girls in agriculture due to traditional gender roles that discourage them from engaging in agricultural activities, inheriting farms or taking on leadership roles on the farm. There is a perception that farming is more suited for men, and girls are expected to marry and move to their husband's household: relatives and extended family members often do not accept the idea of a son-in-law working on their land. *“A girl is born in a foreign home and goes to her own home when she gets married”* – is a commonly cited phrase in rural areas (FGD men participants age group 15-24). In addition, young women highlighted prejudice faced by female agronomists and the male-dominated nature of the agricultural sector.

On the other hand, there is an increased interest in continuing the family farm, especially among young farmers aged 25-29, which is particularly evident in North Macedonia and Serbia, even if the proportion is still very low. Survey participants in Montenegro also generally have a positive attitude towards work on the farm, with a significant percentage (43 percent) in the 30-40 age group having a strongly positive attitude. Both men and women express positive attitudes towards working on the farm.

Serbia FGD, male participant: *“The landscape is evolving, and there's a gradual shift. Young people are increasingly entrusted with the responsibility of managing farms and participating in decision-making. For instance, upon entering the Faculty of Agriculture, my father empowered me to collaborate in making decisions for our farm,”*

Despite the generally negative attitude towards agricultural occupations, there are notable exceptions about the rural life style. Young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia have the most positive attitude towards rural life style (31 percent and 29.5 percent are strongly positive), while young people in Albania have a negative assessment of this lifestyle. On the other hand, the percentage of young people who are inclined towards an urban lifestyle is by far the highest in Albania (55.2 percent rate the urban lifestyle strongly positively) (figure K). Research in Kosovo\* reveals an interesting trend: while the attitude towards farm work is moderate to negative, the attitude towards rural living is much more positive, particularly among the 25-40 age group. This age group shows a similar percentage of positive attitudes towards both rural and urban lifestyles. However, a higher percentage of men prefer a rural lifestyle compared to women, who tend to favor an urban lifestyle.



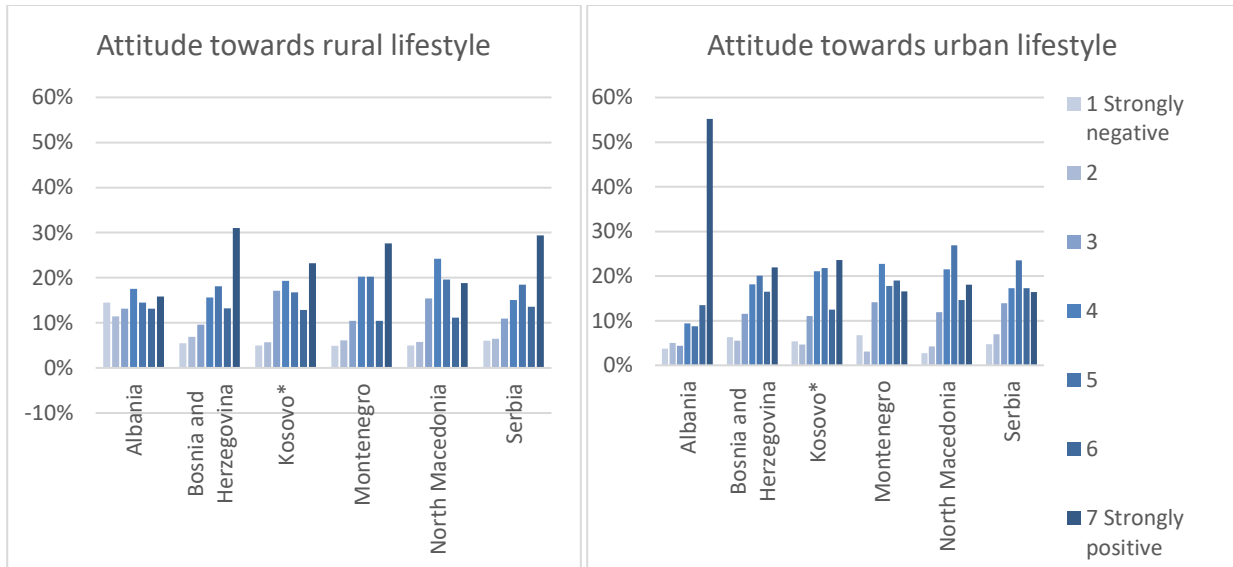


Figure K: Attitudes of rural youth towards rural and urban life styles

Source: Survey results

Parents typically encourage their children to relocate to urban areas and steer clear of agriculture, a trend particularly pronounced in Bosnia and Herzegovina (FGD, 2023). Relying solely on agriculture to sustain a living is demanding, prompting many young people to leave their villages and opt for emigration due to limited economic prospects is also emphasized in Albania (FGD, 2023).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, major constraints for youth farmers included high agricultural price fluctuations, unstable agricultural policies, and the absence of support programs specifically tailored to young farmers (FGD, 2023). Moreover, reluctance among most current farm owners to depart from traditional farming methods complicated efforts to access niche markets targeted by youth.

In North Macedonia, challenges included the absence of stable markets for agricultural products, along with traditional barriers such as complex land inheritance procedures, limited access to finance, and low decision-making authority within households.

In Montenegro and Serbia, youth involvement in farming shows significant variation by age. Younger age groups tend to engage more in part-time farming, while older age groups are more inclined toward full-time farming.

The likelihood of young individuals inheriting farms or gaining farm management responsibilities is minimal, if not non-existent, especially emphasized in Albania.

Albania, FGD: In rural communities, family farm inheritance practices often favor sons, but this typically occurs after the death of the family head. The inheritance process is complicated by the limited capacity of farms, such as small plots of agricultural land or a restricted number of

livestock, which must be equally divided among all children. This division becomes increasingly challenging when multiple beneficiaries are involved, leading to difficulties for young men in taking over farm management. Additionally, it is common for daughters to relinquish their share of the inheritance to their brothers, reflecting their lower social and economic status and resulting in the loss of their property rights.

Fostering youth involvement in agriculture in the Western Balkans requires a comprehensive approach that addresses challenges while capitalizing on opportunities to build a vibrant and sustainable agricultural sector for the future. Farm advisory and extension services have the potential to address these challenges, but they necessitate a more proactive approach to engage rural youth in agriculture. As of now, none of the countries offer specialized advisory services tailored specifically for rural youth (FGD, 2023; Interviews, 2023). Furthermore, most countries, with the exception of Serbia, struggle with underdeveloped counselling services, although some countries, such as North Macedonia, have made remarkable progress in this regard (Interviews, 2023). Furthermore, government policies that reduce taxes and increase subsidies are needed to incentivize youth participation in entrepreneurship in rural areas, promote economic growth and encourage young people to remain engaged in agriculture and rural communities (FGD, 2023; interviews, 2023).

### 3.7 Wellbeing – Quality of life

The well-being is shaped by a complex interplay of economic, social, and environmental factors. Economic factors include the types of jobs available, the affordability of housing, and the productivity and competitiveness of businesses. Social factors influence the accessibility of social services, the strength of community networks, and the overall cohesion within communities. Environmental factors affect the quality of the air we breathe, the land we can use, and our broader living environment. Together, these factors determine how resilient the society is and what opportunities are available for future generations. They also play a critical role in shaping the attractiveness of regions, which in turn influences where people choose to live over the long term<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> OECD (2020), Rural Well-being: Geography of Opportunities, OECD Rural Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/d25cef80-en>.

The well-being of rural youth is a complex and multidimensional issue, encompassing various dimensions such as education, employment opportunities, health, and social inclusion. These factors are deeply interconnected, and shortcomings in any of them can have a profound impact on the overall well-being of young people in rural areas. Rural youth are particularly vulnerable, largely due to high rates of youth unemployment. However, their vulnerability extends beyond just employment challenges, as discussed in previous sections, because the other factors such as limited access to quality education, healthcare, social services and isolation, also play significant roles.

### **3.7.1 Rural infrastructure**

Rural infrastructure encompasses various essential physical assets, including energy systems, transportation networks, information and communication technologies, water and sanitation facilities, irrigation systems, and market and storage facilities. These components are crucial for connecting remote communities, reducing isolation, and addressing climate vulnerabilities. Key infrastructure elements like roads, water supply, broadband access, and affordable housing are vital to ensuring prosperous rural communities with a high quality of life.

Many rural areas in the Western Balkans suffer from deteriorating or non-existent infrastructure due to deferred maintenance, low investment, and limited access to capital. This underinvestment has led to disparities in access to basic needs, ultimately hindering economic growth or health outcomes in these communities.

The development of rural infrastructure in the Balkan countries exhibits significant regional disparities, with pronounced differences not only between countries but also within regions of the same country. Remote and isolated high mountain regions are generally more likely to face challenges related to inadequate infrastructure and limited access to public services. These areas often struggle with poor quality infrastructure and numerous barriers that make access to essential services difficult. The challenges in these areas are often due to low population density, resulting in significantly higher costs per user for infrastructure development and often underinvestment.

In some regions, the primary issue is the complete lack of infrastructure, while in others, the focus shifts to the poor quality or difficult access to existing infrastructure and public services. Dissatisfaction with the quality of available services is a common theme across all Western Balkan countries. Key issues identified across the region include:

*Road network and public transportation:*

- Inadequate transport infrastructure: Rural areas across the region frequently suffer from poor road conditions, limited public transport options, and limited access to rail transport. This hampers the mobility of rural residents and limits their access to markets, employment opportunities, and services, thus placing rural areas at a competitive disadvantage for youth population. Additionally, these areas often face challenges with impassable roads during adverse weather conditions. According to the survey data, young people in both Albania and Kosovo\* are less dissatisfied with the state of the roads and public transport than young people in other countries. Young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro were particularly dissatisfied with transport conditions (Figures P and O). In Bosnia and Herzegovina 20 percent of surveyed were completely dissatisfied with local roads and 35 percent with availability of public transport.

Albania - A male participant in the 25-40 age group stated: *“Good infrastructure makes people return to rural areas”*. While a woman participant in the 25-40 age group noted: *“Infrastructure plays a significant role in influencing our decision to leave; the road is like the artery of our livelihood”*.

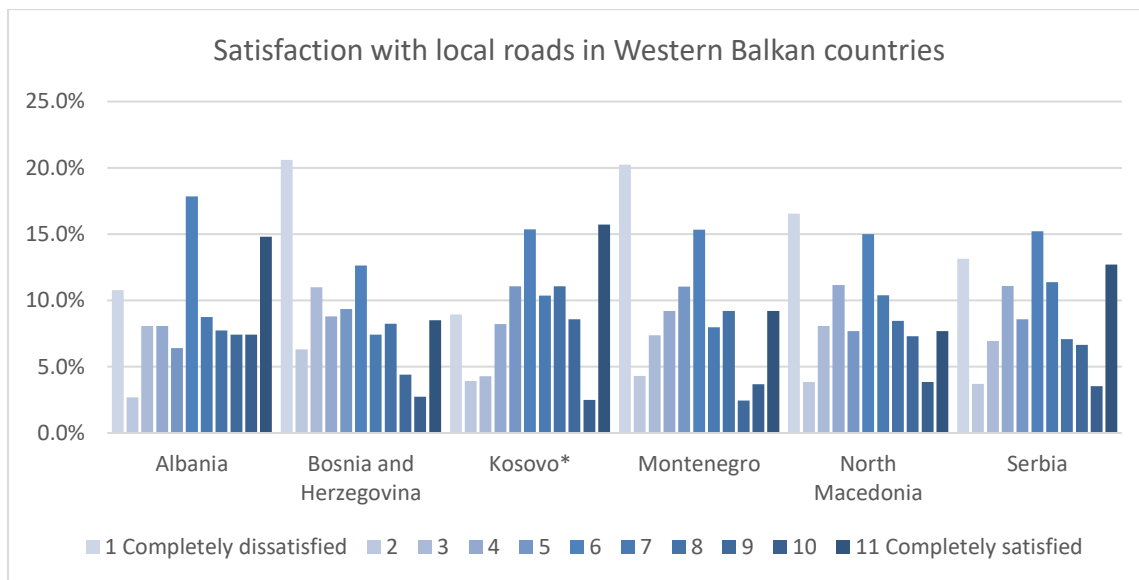


Figure P: Satisfaction of rural youth with local roads

Source: Survey results

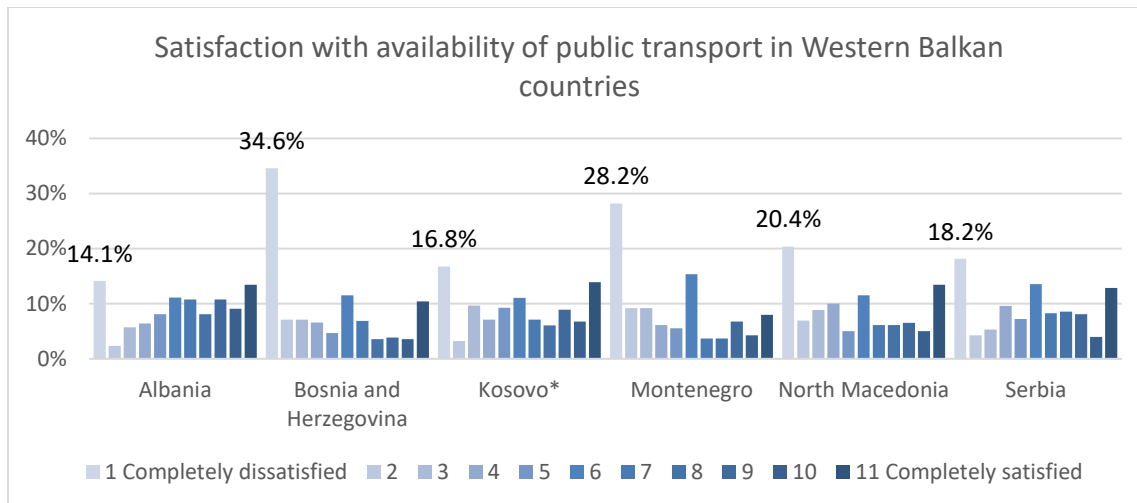


Figure O: Satisfaction of rural youth with availability of public transport

Source: Survey results

- Quality of public transportation: This issue is particularly emphasized by FGDs participants in Kosovo\* and Serbia. In Serbia, following the privatization of municipal transport companies, the responsibility for rural and suburban passenger transport has shifted to private companies or other entities designated by the municipality. Common complaints include high service costs, poor quality of service (e.g., infrequent departures, unreliable schedules, and the poor condition of vehicles), even in municipalities where transportation is provided for free or fully subsidized by the local government.

Kosovo\* FGD: *“Every morning you have to get up super early to get on the bus. And if classes are ever cancelled or delayed, we must wait outside in the cold until the next bus comes – for a long time, because buses are rare and irregular”.*

#### Healthcare facilities and services

The availability of healthcare facilities and services in the rural areas of the Balkan countries is rated moderately (average score 6.3/10), slightly better by Albanian, Kosovo\* and Serbian young people (figure K).

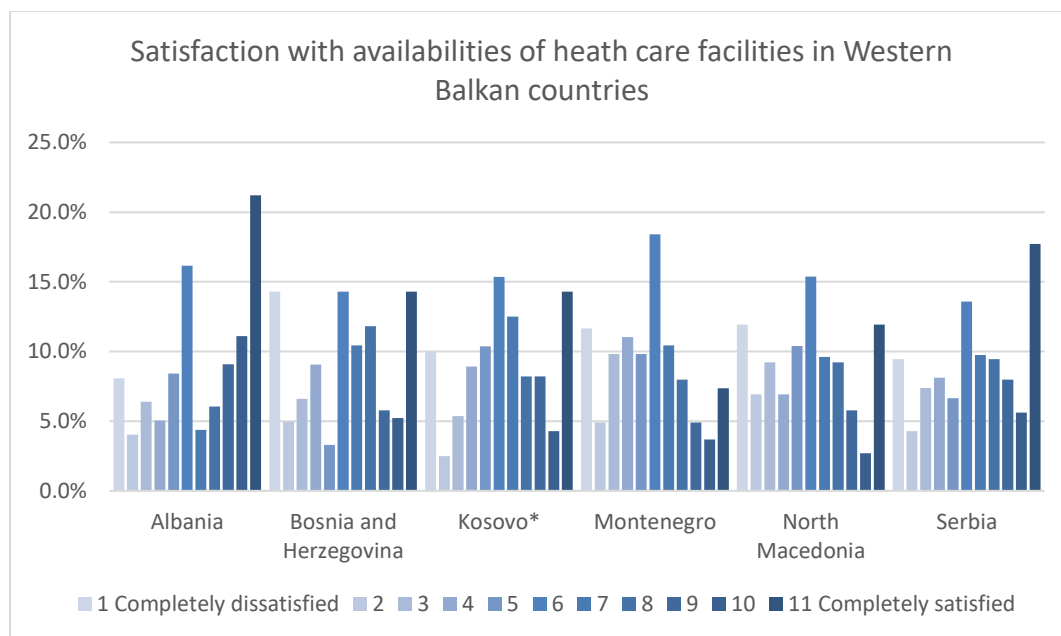


Figure K: Satisfaction of rural youth with availability of healthcare facilities

Source: Survey results

Some of key issues identified through FDGs include:

- Facilities in rural regions are frequently under-equipped, and the medical staff may lack specialized training.
- There is a significant shortage of healthcare professionals in rural areas, including doctors, nurses, and specialists.
- In some rural areas, due to the inadequacy of public healthcare, residents rely on private healthcare providers, which can be costly. Informal payments to healthcare workers are also a common practice, further burdening low-income rural families.
- Lack of maternity leave benefits for most rural women - women working on farms or in agriculture often belong to the informal sector, where employment contracts are either non-existent or loosely defined. This makes it challenging for them to access formal maternity leave benefits.

Kosovo\* FGD: *“We need to buy our own medicine and supplies since the hospitals do not have anything.”* and *“the five Euros given to the doctor make a big difference in the approach to the patients”*.

#### *Water supply and sanitation*

- There is a significant disparity between urban and rural areas regarding access to clean water and sanitation. While urban centers often have more developed infrastructure, rural regions, particularly in mountainous or remote areas, are underserved.

- In some regions, the infrastructure is either non-existent or severely degraded due to years of underinvestment and lack of maintenance.
- Large portion of population is still without access to safe potable water and adequate sanitation.

In addition to the broader challenges related to transportation, health facilities , water supply and sanitation, focus group discussions and surveys have identified specific issues that further exacerbate the living conditions in these regions. Among these are the prevalence of illegal waste dumps and improper waste disposal practices by households. These practices not only pose serious environmental hazards but also contribute to public health risks.

Moreover, inadequate street and path lighting in rural areas have been highlighted as a significant concern. The lack of proper lighting not only diminishes the safety and security of residents but also exacerbates feelings of isolation, particularly for those who must navigate these areas during early mornings or late evenings.

Another critical issue identified is the poor supply of everyday goods in rural communities. Residents often face difficulties in accessing basic necessities, such as food, medicine, and household supplies, due to a combination of poor infrastructure, limited transportation options, and the economic unavailability of maintaining well-stocked local shops.

### **3.7.2 Social Inclusion**

Social inclusion in rural areas is crucial for creating strong, resilient communities. While rural regions offer beautiful landscapes and close-knit communities, they often struggle to provide equal opportunities for all residents. Ensuring social inclusion means giving everyone in rural areas access to the same resources and opportunities, enabling active participation in society.

On the basis of the FGDs and survey results, it can be concluded that the challenges faced by rural youth in the Balkans in terms of social inclusion, are caused by several factors:

- Rural areas in all Western Balkan countries lack the social and cultural infrastructure found in urban settings, such as cinemas, theaters, cafes, and sports facilities. The absence of these amenities restricts opportunities for socialization outside the home, particularly for young people who may feel isolated and disconnected from current trends and/or marginalized. Survey results show that youth in Albania frequently express dissatisfaction; in contrast, around 20 percent of respondents in Serbia reported being fully satisfied with entertainment options and sports facilities, indicating a more favorable environment for leisure and physical activities (figures X and Y).

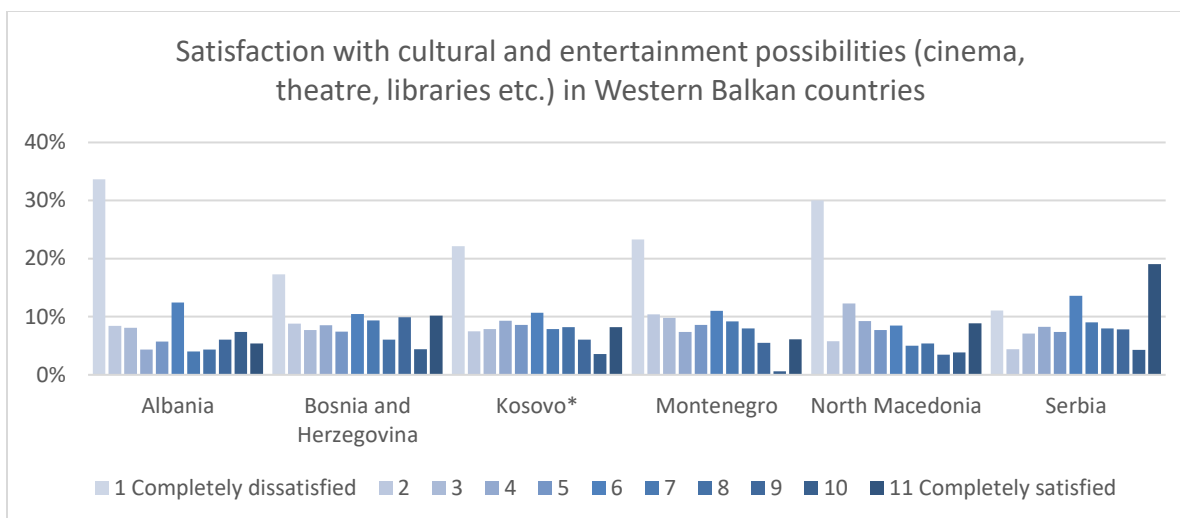


Figure X: Satisfaction of rural youth with entertainment possibilities

Source: Survey results

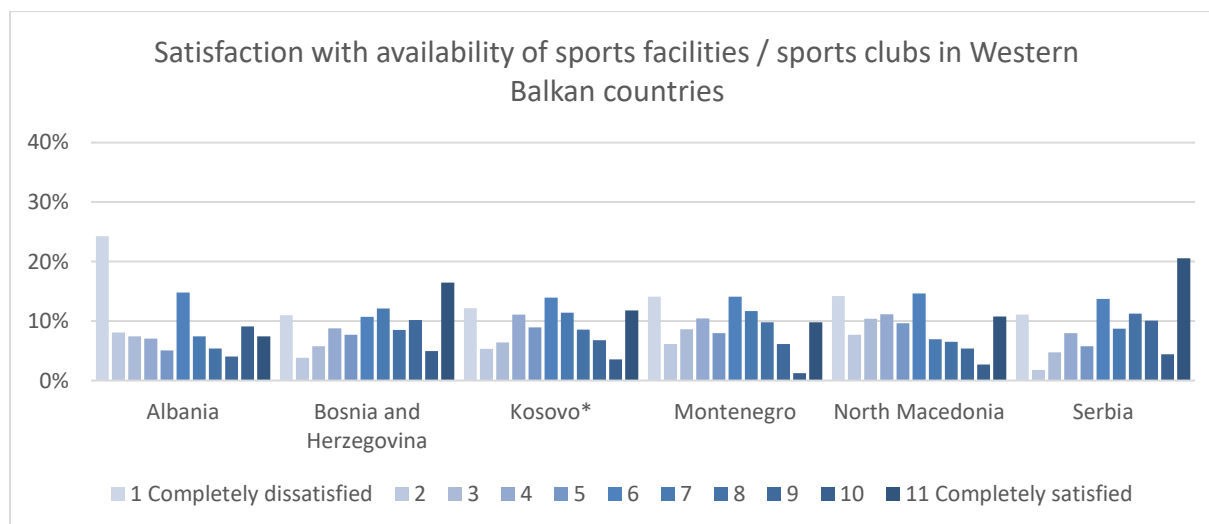


Figure Y: Satisfaction of rural youth with sports facilities

Source: Survey results

Albania - In rural areas, civil society organisations are limited and there are no youth centres. In the city of Shkodër, VIS Albania and ARKA centre are active. However, ARKA is not popular among young people due to their lack of interest. The Cultural Centre for Children and Youth has limited involvement in social life, as parents do not allow their children to stay after school hours, the distance to the centre is considerable, and the road infrastructure poses challenges. A girl like me faces a significant risk if she travels after 2 PM” (FGD, woman participants in the 25-40 age group).

- Role of tradition and cultural norms - Tradition plays a significant role in shaping social life in rural communities. Cultural events, religious ceremonies, and local festivals are often



the main social activities, bringing people together and reinforcing community bonds. However, these traditional practices can also reinforce conservative values that may limit social progress, particularly in terms of gender roles and expectations.

Albania - FGDs show a consensus among participants regarding the limited social life in rural areas. For specific areas like Malësi e Madhe, the lack of social life is considered a factor for leaving the village, as it is often perceived that “there is only the presence of people and mountains” (FGD, women participants of 25-40 years old). “A group of girls wear traditional dress called xhubleta – UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage – during festive events as a way to earn income and engage in social community life” (FGD, men participants of 25-40 years old).

- Gender dynamics and social participation - In many rural areas of the Balkans, gender roles are more traditional, with women often having less social freedom and fewer opportunities for participation in public life. This dynamic can limit women's social interactions and lead to gender imbalances in social, economic, and political participation.
- Economic hardships, including unemployment further strain social life for many rural youth. These challenges can lead to frustration, a sense of stagnation, and even social conflict, as people struggle to maintain their livelihoods and support their families.
- Young people in the rural areas also feel that protection of minority rights and equal opportunities for all ethnic groups are unsatisfactory in North Macedonia and Kosovo\*, and these issue is rated with moderate grade in Montenegro.
- The mental health of rural youth in the Balkans is increasingly becoming a concern, as various socio-economic factors converge to create a challenging environment for young people. The combination of limited access to quality education, scarce employment opportunities, social isolation, and inadequate healthcare services significantly impacts the well-being of rural youth. Surveys conducted across multiple countries in the region have highlighted the importance of this issue, indicating that young people themselves are aware of the mental health challenges they face.

Close-knit communities and family ties are important for rural youth in western Balkans. In rural areas, social life often revolves around the family and close community ties. People tend to know each other well and there is a strong sense of community and mutual support. In some ways, it is surprising that these features of rural life are recognized by young people as particularly important values and benefits of living in the village, which is particularly pronounced in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia.

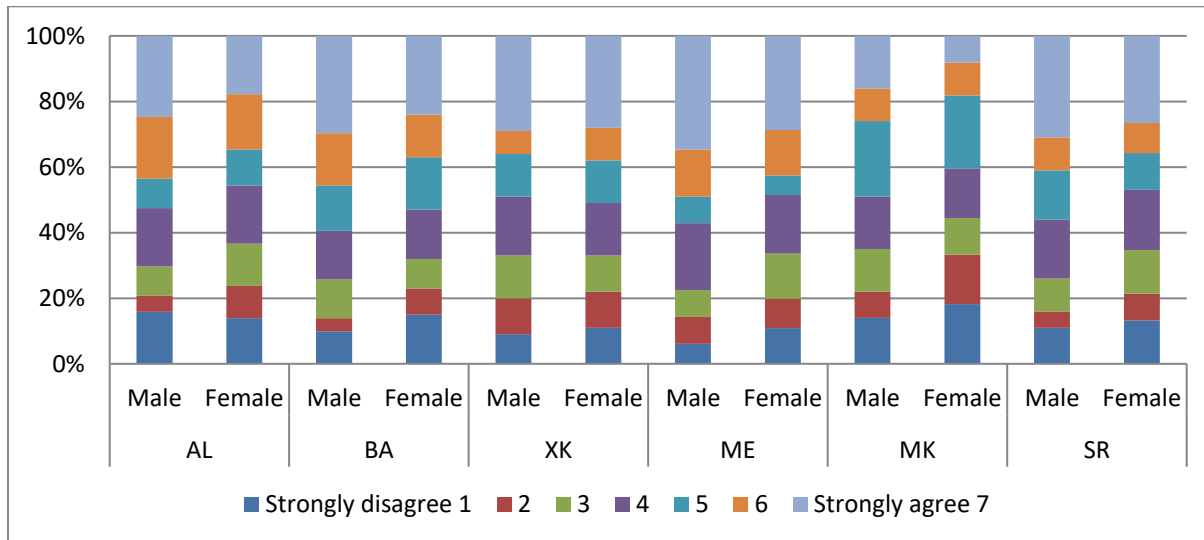
Both focus group participants and the participants in the survey identify that rural areas have many factors that make them attractive enough for people to live and stay in rural areas, confirmed by the positive attitudes towards the rural lifestyle.

An interesting and positive conclusion from the Bosnian survey results is that youth perceive rural areas as a place offering more opportunities for rural youth, and generally, female participants are having stronger positive attitudes toward more opportunities for rural youth than male participants “*have (in rural areas) a sense of safety, freedom, minimum traffic jams, better lifestyle, healthy food for kids*” (female, 25-40), “*more suitable for families as we have more*

space” (female, 25-40). “Love towards the village keep me in rural area” (male, 25-40), while some of them identify “I want to continue family job (horticulture) but raising business to the next level” (Bosnia and Herzegovina, female, FGD 25-40 years old).

The respondents of the rural youth survey generally enjoy their life in rural areas, with male respondents reporting slightly higher levels of satisfaction. Survey results from Montenegro and Serbia show high levels of satisfaction regarding life, family, health, and social relations. In Kosovo\*, satisfaction is moderate, while rural youth in Albania and North Macedonia expressed lower levels of agreement with the statement, “Rural youth enjoy where they live – rural areas,” particularly among young females.

Figure : Rural youth enjoy living in the rural areas



Source: Survey findings

Nationally specific challenges regarding the infrastructure and well-being of rural youth, according to the FGDs and survey research, are as follows:

**Albania** - Focus group discussions (FGDs) across different demographic sub-groups highlighted a consensus on the inadequacy of social and economic infrastructure in rural areas. Participants consistently pointed out issues related to poor road conditions, unreliable electricity, inadequate water supply, transportation challenges, and outdated healthcare facilities. Women emphasized the need for social and health insurance coverage specifically tailored to rural women, addressing the lack of maternity leave benefits and the limited access to healthcare services. Furthermore, a significant majority of surveyed youth, particularly those in the 25-29 age category, strongly agree that improving mental health and well-being conditions for rural youth is crucial. Interestingly, this concern is shared almost equally across genders, reflecting a widespread recognition of the importance of addressing these issues to enhance the quality of life in rural areas.

**Bosnia and Herzegovina** - The state of rural infrastructure in Bosnia and Herzegovina is widely regarded as inadequate, with significant deficiencies in road networks, public transportation, education facilities, and entertainment opportunities. The healthcare infrastructure in rural areas is severely lacking, with insufficient availability of doctors and nurses. This forces many residents to seek private healthcare services, and the issue is exacerbated by the ongoing emigration of medical professionals from the country.

Despite the challenges, there is a notable positive attitude among youth towards rural living, with over 30 percent expressing a favorable view of the rural lifestyle, while participants in the focus groups mentioned the benefits of living in rural areas, such as stronger family relationships, a peaceful environment, and the desire to continue family businesses. Survey data indicate that rural areas are perceived to offer various opportunities, particularly by female participants, who are more likely to see the positive aspects of rural life, such as safety, freedom, minimal traffic, a better lifestyle, and healthier food for children. However, while these opportunities exist, they are not fully developed or utilized.

Young people in B&H face numerous risks, including the lasting effects of the war, deteriorating living conditions, substance abuse, poor mental and physical health, and a lack of information on sexual and reproductive health. Alarming, 10 percent of the youth population does not have health insurance. Survey results strongly suggest that efforts should be focused on improving mental health and well-being conditions in rural areas, as this is a significant concern among the youth.

**Kosovo\*** - Public transportation in rural areas is a major issue, with limited and irregular services that leave residents feeling isolated and disconnected. Also, healthcare services in rural areas are rudimentary and often inadequate. Basic health services are available, but for more serious medical needs, residents must travel to urban centers. The local health clinics are frequently understaffed and under-equipped, forcing residents to purchase their own medical supplies. This lack of resources leads to a situation where informal payments to doctors are common to ensure better care.

The absence of social engagement centers, such as clubs, sports areas, and youth centers, is another major issue in rural areas. This lack of facilities has significantly impacted young people, contributing to feelings of isolation and even prompting some to migrate to urban areas. Survey data show that satisfaction with cultural and entertainment options are notably low, particularly among those aged 25-40. The need to travel to nearby cities for social activities further exacerbates the challenges posed by poor transportation.

Mental health is another area of concern, with rural youth recognizing the need for greater attention to their well-being. Despite high satisfaction with family life and social relations, poor employment and education prospects negatively impact their mental health. The lack of focus on mental health in Kosovo\* is seen as a significant issue, with many young people acknowledging its importance to their overall quality of life.

Financial dissatisfaction is prevalent among rural youth, largely due to the broader economic situation in the country. Survey data indicate that 37 percent of respondents see a worsening situation for rural youth, which has led to reluctance among some, particularly women, to start

families. Among the youngest age group (15-19), there is a notable lack of trust in their peers and a heightened sense of self-reliance, likely influenced by recent trends of outmigration from rural areas. However, this distrust does not extend as strongly to institutional bodies like the legal system or police.

**Montenegro** - Life in rural areas is perceived as healthier than in urban areas, but there is a strong attachment to family, often resulting in young people staying in the household until marriage. This is further complicated by a strong hierarchy in households, where older family members make decisions, limiting the autonomy of younger members.

Gender inequality is evident, particularly in terms of inheritance rights, where women are at a disadvantage compared to men. Survey results show that 46 percent of rural youth live in three-generation households, and 56 percent in two-generation households. While most participants reported having sufficient income, a small percentage struggled to cover essential needs, with men more likely to report financial difficulties than women.

Social life in rural areas is limited, with few cultural amenities like theatres and cinemas. Women often face poor treatment and are encouraged by family members to leave the villages. However, the coastal region stands out as a positive example, where women inherit land and play significant roles in the economy.

**North Macedonia** - Rural areas in Macedonia offer more affordable housing but often lack the necessary infrastructure and services found in urban centers. Young people in these regions face significant disparities in well-being, not only between different regions but also among various ethnic groups. These disparities are exacerbated by a lack of resources, making it difficult for youth to achieve personal development and ensure family well-being.

While younger rural residents (aged 15-24) generally accept modest living standards, they express dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunities for education and employment. Although they value effort, intelligence, and skills, they also recognize the importance of political connections in achieving success. There is a strong consensus that more investments are needed to create opportunities for rural youth.

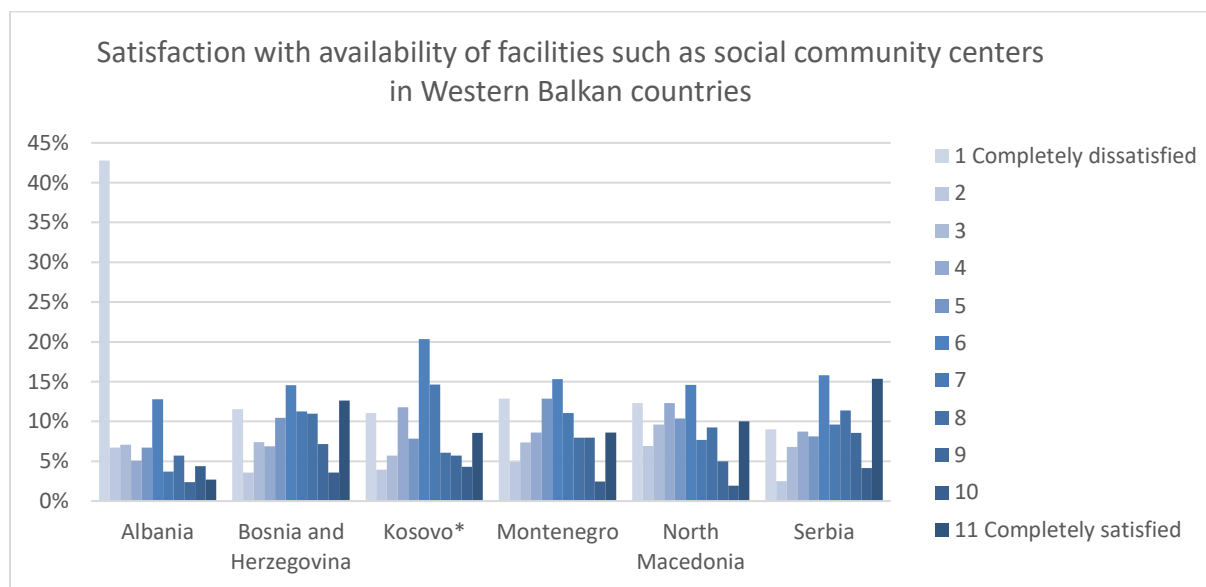
Social life in rural areas is limited, with few cultural activities and entertainment options. Most events and facilities, such as cinemas, theaters, and sports grounds, are concentrated in Skopje, the capital city, leaving rural youth with poor transport options to access these amenities. Despite these challenges, there is a moderately positive attitude toward urban living among rural youth, which grows stronger as they age and settle into family life.

**Serbia**- Rural infrastructure in Serbia, despite some improvements, is still rated poorly, particularly regarding transportation and healthcare. Young people, in particular, face challenges such as high transportation costs and infrequent local transport services, which vary significantly across different regions due to local government responsibilities. Survey results indicate that while Serbian youth report high levels of overall life satisfaction, this decreases with age, particularly in personal financial situations. The 25-29 age group shows the lowest satisfaction levels across multiple aspects of life.

### 3.8 Rural youth aspirations, civic engagement, and political participation and inclusion

Rural youth aspirations are the hopes, goals, and ambitions shaped by the social, economic, and environmental contexts of rural life. These aspirations often encompass a wide range of personal, professional, and community-oriented objectives, reflecting a desire to improve both individual circumstances and the broader community. Youth civic engagement involves the active participation of young people in activities aimed at realizing their aspirations, improving their communities, and addressing societal challenges. This concept highlights the crucial role that youth play in shaping their societies, emphasizing their potential to contribute positively to community development and influence decision-making processes. By engaging in civic activities, rural youth not only work towards their own goals but also help to foster a more inclusive and responsive society.<sup>52</sup>

Youth in the Western Balkans are increasingly active in civic life, taking steps to advocate for social change. They are joining youth organizations, civil society groups, and grassroots movements to tackle critical issues such as corruption, social inequality, and environmental sustainability.



Source: Survey results

<sup>52</sup> Salto – European solidarity corps. Mapping Study of European Civic Engagement Frameworks and their links with Youth Volunteering; <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/solidarity/volunteering/>

When it comes to rural youth, across the regions there is a significant disinterest in activism. This trend is reflected in their minimal participation in political parties, community organizations and activities of common interest in their local communities (figure B). In this regard, the situation is slightly better in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina comparing with other countries. This lack of participation reflects a broader issue of civic apathy, lack of trust in institutions and disappointment with the political system, which appears to fail in addressing their needs and aspirations. Volunteerism and membership in civic or political organizations are low, indicating a broader trend of disengagement.

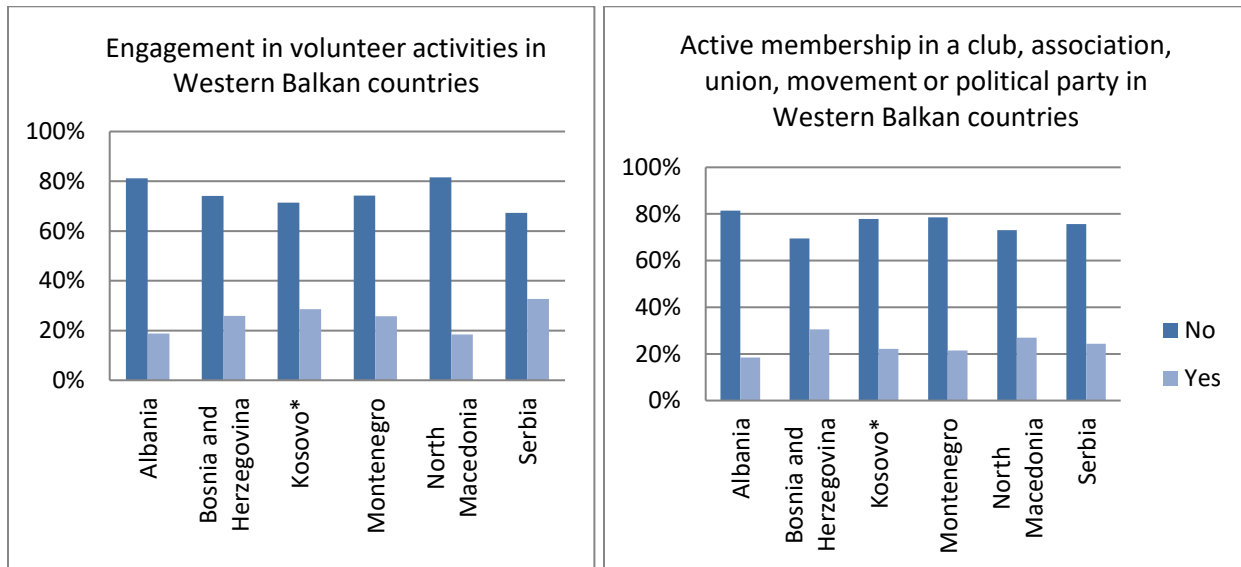


Figure B: Engagement in volunteering, community organizations or political parties

Source: Survey results

Activism among rural youth in the Balkans often centers around issues directly affecting their lives, such as environmental protection, social equality, the preservation of cultural heritage, etc. These grassroots movements often involve collaborations with NGOs and local authorities to amplify their impact.

Across the region, youth are generally dissatisfied with policies and government actions. They feel under-represented, excluded from decision-making processes, and disillusioned with the effectiveness of current policies.

This dissatisfaction is compounded by a lack of trust in political systems and the perception that government actions do not align with their needs or aspirations. The lack of trust is a significant factor influencing youth engagement in activism and politics across the Western Balkans. Corruption is a pervasive issue impacting youth across these countries and contributing to a sense of hopelessness. Here's how it manifests in different countries:

- Albania - Both young men and women (ages 15-24) believe that political engagement is largely driven by personal gain or party affiliation. This perception discourages political activism and engagement among youth.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina - There is a low level of political activity among youth due to a lack of trust in political parties, especially in rural areas. The situation is exacerbated by gender disparities, with more men than women participating in political groups or parties.
- Kosovo\* - Rural youth feel under-represented and undervalued, with very little engagement in activism or politics. Societal expectations and a belief that political connections are essential for success further demotivate them. Civic engagement is scarce, and community involvement varies by area, with some areas showing more activity than others.

Kosovo\* FGD: One focus group participant was quoted as saying *“You need to know somebody if you want to have some of the political support. I know several people in the municipality who helped me get a donation for my business”*.

- North Macedonia - Rural youth are generally disengaged from volunteer activities and political groups, with only a small percentage (21-36 percent) advocating political views. Men are slightly more active in political advocacy, especially in the older age group (30-40 years).

North Macedonia: Youth participation, was highlighted by the interview discussants as a still unsettled issue, since: *“Young people are in most instances excluded from the dialogues that are creating their future, and from planning and policy processes that affect their lives and well-being”*.

- Montenegro - There is widespread distrust in the state system and skepticism toward foreign projects. A significant portion of the surveyed (74 percent) does not engage in volunteer activities, with males more likely to participate than females, indicating a gender gap in community engagement.

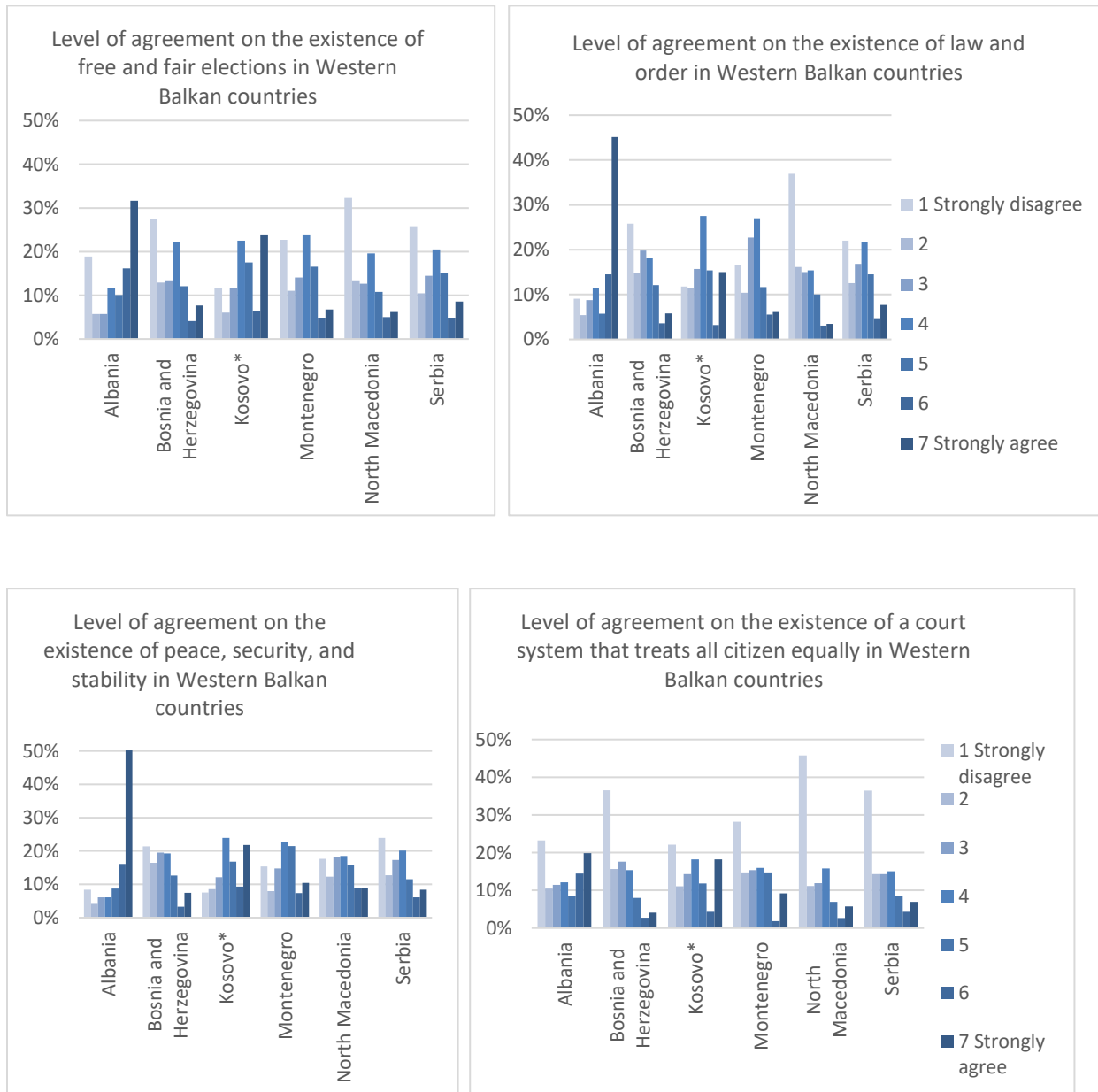
Montenegro, FGD: *“I know that money from the foreign project went into the pockets of local government representatives. That is why I do not trust nor expect to receive foreign funds”*

- Serbia - Youth engagement in volunteer activities and activism decreases with age. In rural areas, activism is sporadic and often initiated by individuals, but the lack of community support and cultural barriers, especially for women, limit broader participation. The perception that political influence is reserved for older generations further hinders youth involvement.

Gender and cultural norms are mentioned as specific challenges faced by girls in rural areas. These norms discourage women from participating in public life, including activism and political

engagement. In countries like Albania and Kosovo\*, these cultural expectations are particularly strong, making it difficult for women to assume leadership roles or to be active in public spaces.

The results of a survey on young people's attitudes towards the availability of political rights and freedoms—considered important preconditions for greater participation in public life and the realization of personal and professional aspirations—indicate that satisfaction with political opportunities is significantly higher among young people in Albania, followed by Kosovo\*, compared to other countries, particularly Serbia and North Macedonia (Figure W).





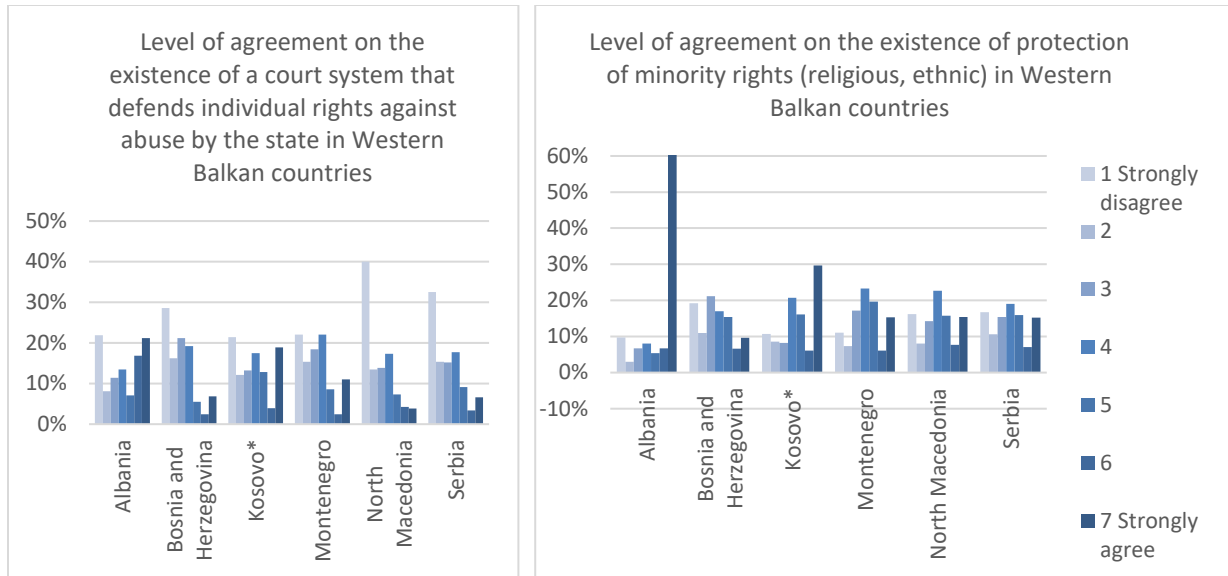


Figure W:

Source: Survey results

Nationally specific challenges regarding the well-being of rural youth, according to the FGDs and survey research, are as follows:

**Albania** - Focus group discussions reveal that both young men and women, especially those aged 15-24, view political engagement as driven by personal gain or party affiliation. Gender norms and patriarchal mindsets are significant barriers, particularly for girls in rural areas, limiting their political participation and leading to a lack of motivation and solidarity. Older men (25-40 years old) tend to be more politically engaged, while women across age groups perceive fewer opportunities for civic involvement.

Besides gender norms, the lack of transportation further restricts girls in rural areas from engaging. Overall, youth feel they have limited impact on changing the political landscape, leading to a general sense of demotivation and low proactivity. Most youth believe that government officials are not interested in their problems and that policies are not tailored to their needs. Additionally, rural youth show low engagement in volunteer activities and political advocacy, with only 23 percent advocating for political views, mostly among older age groups and slightly more among men.

**Bosnia and Herzegovina** - Youth participation in community organizations, political parties, and youth representative bodies is extremely low, with only 5 percent of young people involved in community organizations, 6 percent in political parties, and 1 percent in youth representative bodies. This lack of engagement contributes to a general lack of knowledge among youth about

their rights, obligations, and opportunities, particularly in rural areas where social activities and opportunities for development are scarce.

Youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina are also largely inactive in volunteering, with low levels of trust in political parties contributing to their disengagement. Male youth are more likely to be involved in political groups, further limiting opportunities for female participation and progress in these areas.

**Kosovo\*** Rural youth exhibit a significant lack of trust in government institutions, with dissatisfaction across the political system, public administration, and the judiciary. There is a pervasive sense of demotivation among rural youth, who feel underrepresented, undervalued, and largely excluded from decision-making processes. Many believe that political connections are essential for securing jobs, and there is a general perception that hard work and skills alone are not sufficient for success. Youth engagement in activism, civic participation, and political involvement is minimal, with only small number of involved, primarily through women's associations or (minor) local projects. Despite the existence of civil organizations in rural areas, actual youth participation remains low, with 71 percent of survey respondents not engaged in volunteer activities and 78 percent not affiliated with any club, association, movement, or political party. Additionally, most rural youth do not advocate for political views, though a majority still participate in voting. The overall consensus is that young people do not believe they can effect change through activism or civic engagement, leading to a generally undeveloped sense of community.

**North Macedonia** - Political parties suffer from low credibility, leading to a growing disengagement among youth from political processes. Only 30 percent of individuals aged 18 to 35 are very likely to vote in parliamentary elections. Youth involvement in policy-making and dialogues is limited, with many feeling excluded from decisions that impact their lives. Institutional support for youth, particularly in agriculture, is insufficient, with low membership in agricultural cooperatives and weak involvement of women and young farmers.

Most rural youth believe that government officials are indifferent to their issues and that policies do not cater to their needs. Rural youth show minimal engagement in volunteer activities and political parties. While a small percentage advocate for political views, voting participation increases with age, with those 25-40 years old voting more frequently. Men are slightly more likely to vote compared to women.

**Montenegro** - The situation for rural youth is viewed negatively by 36 percent of participants, who believe it is worsening. Rural areas face limited social amenities and cultural activities, with traditional gender roles particularly disadvantaging women. However, FGDs reveal that the coastal region is noted for better female economic participation and land inheritance rights.

Distrust in state systems and skepticism towards foreign aid are common. There is a call for transparent state support, simplified grant procedures, and increased local activism.

Survey results show that 74 percent of participants do not engage in volunteer activities, and only 21 percent belong to a group or political party, and only 24 percent of individuals actively involved in organizations or political parties, with men being more likely to participate in both areas compared to women. There is a general sense that youth policies are ineffective, with older age groups particularly critical of their impact. This indicates a need for improved policy effectiveness and increased community engagement.

**Serbia** - In Serbia, rural youth show sporadic engagement in activism, with a low level of interest and participation. Initiatives are often started by individuals rather than groups, and unsuccessful attempts have led to discouragement and reduced community efforts. Younger individuals are less likely to be involved in such groups, but involvement tends to increase in the 30-40 age category, potentially due to changing responsibilities and priorities. Overall, rural youth in Serbia are largely passive observers, with limited engagement in civic and political processes.

Survey data reveals a widespread belief among rural youth that their situation is deteriorating, with 68 percent expressing negative views about rural conditions. This sentiment increases with age, suggesting growing awareness and concern. There is also a pervasive feeling that public officials are indifferent to rural youth issues, and policies are failing to address their needs effectively.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report was developed through a multi-method approach, combining desk research, focus group discussions, and surveys targeting rural youth. The aim was to gather in-depth insights into the challenges faced by young people living in rural areas across the Western Balkan countries. By engaging directly with rural youth, the report captures not only the obstacles they encounter but also their aspirations for the future and their perspectives on the changes they wish to see. The findings reflect the voices of young people, offering comprehensive insights on their needs and priorities for driving positive transformation in their communities.

While some discrepancies between the FGD results and survey data were observed, many universal conclusions and recommendations emerged, alongside several that were country-specific. Addressing these recommendations through targeted interventions will be critical to fostering rural development and improving the lives of young people in rural areas of the Western Balkans.

### 4.1 Policy implementation and coordination

An analysis of institutional frameworks and a review of strategic documents and laws shows that most Western Balkan countries have established comprehensive policy and institutional frameworks to support youth. In very few cases specific measures to support rural youth are in place. However, interviews with policy makers and survey data from rural youth suggest that the effectiveness of current policies is undermined by weak implementation, poor enforcement and a lack of coordination between different institutions.

A large proportion of rural youth who participated in FGDs and surveys expressed the belief that government officials are not interested in addressing issues relevant to youth, noting that conditions for rural youth are worsening and policies are not tailored to their specific needs. These challenges are exacerbated by low levels of trust in public institutions and widespread perceptions of high levels of corruption. As a result, rural youth have limited opportunities and feel little motivation to engage in efforts for change.

To address the issues outlined above, a set of recommendations can be proposed:

- **Strengthen policy implementation and coordination:** Governments in the Western Balkans should improve the implementation of existing policies and ensure better coordination between institutions at national and local levels. Establishing clear accountability mechanisms will help ensure that rural youth policies are enforced effectively. To address the weak implementation of policies, governments should create

clear action plans with timelines, responsibilities, and measurable outcomes for youth-related programs, particularly those targeting rural areas. Coordination between national and local institutions is crucial for policy success. Establishing inter-agency bodies or working groups specifically dedicated to rural youth could improve communication, minimize overlap, and ensure that the right stakeholders are engaged at every level of governance.

- **Tailor policies to rural youth needs:** National and local governments must revise and adapt policies to reflect the unique circumstances of rural youth, such as geographic isolation, lack of infrastructure, and limited access to education and employment. Local governments, being closer to the specific needs of rural communities, should play a leading role in customizing national policies to their local contexts. This could involve establishing rural youth councils or advisory boards to consult directly with young people in these areas and ensure their voices are reflected in policy-making processes. Create youth advisory councils within LAGs that specifically focus on youth-related issues. This would ensure that rural development projects incorporate the needs and perspectives of rural youth.
- **Increase engagement with rural youth:** Public officials and policymakers should actively engage with rural youth to rebuild trust and demonstrate that their voices are being heard. Regular consultations and youth participation mechanisms can help ensure that rural youth are part of the decision-making process. Local governments can organize this by holding regular town hall meetings, establishing youth forums, and creating digital platforms where young people can share their concerns, ideas, and feedback. Additionally, governments should create incentives for rural youth participation in civic and community activities, helping them feel that they have a stake in shaping their own futures.
- **Combat corruption and increase transparency:** Efforts should be intensified to combat corruption and increase transparency in public institutions. This can be achieved through stronger anti-corruption frameworks and greater transparency in the implementation of youth-related programs. Governments should prioritize anti-corruption measures by enforcing strict procurement standards, increasing oversight, and ensuring community participation in monitoring public funds. Creating publicly accessible platforms that track the progress of youth initiatives can also help rebuild trust in public institutions and foster greater accountability.
- **Foster youth-led initiatives:** Encouraging youth-led initiatives and supporting rural youth organizations can empower young people to advocate for their own needs. Providing financial and technical support to such initiatives can foster greater community engagement and leadership. Governments should support youth-driven projects by providing small grants, training, and technical assistance. Rural youth organizations

should be encouraged to design and implement initiatives that address local challenges, such as creating social enterprises, organizing community service projects, or leading advocacy efforts around rural development. This will allow young people to be agents of change in their own communities, promoting innovation and local solutions.

- **Promote public awareness campaigns:** Launch campaigns to raise awareness about the challenges facing rural youth and the importance of their inclusion in policy agendas. This can help shift public perceptions and gain broader societal support for addressing rural youth issues. These campaigns should target both rural and urban populations, raising awareness about the importance of rural development, and advocating for the inclusion of youth voices in policy debates. Special attention should be paid to showcasing success stories and the positive impact that empowered rural youth can have on their communities.
- **Establish and support collaboration between local governments and rural youth organizations:** Local governments should collaborate closely with rural youth organizations and civil society groups to implement youth programs. By fostering partnerships between public institutions, NGOs, and the private sector, rural youth will have greater access to the resources and networks they need for personal and professional development. Local governments can act as facilitators and bring stakeholders together to ensure that all initiatives for rural youth are well coordinated and effective.
- **Monitor and evaluate policy impact:** Implement regular monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of youth policies and programs. Collecting data on their impact, particularly in rural areas, will allow for timely adjustments and improvements. In addition, local governments should establish local M&E frameworks that feed into national reporting systems. This will help track progress at the grassroots level and ensure that the experiences of rural youth are accurately reflected in national assessments. Ensure that rural youth are regularly consulted in the planning and evaluation of LEADER-funded projects. This could be done through surveys, focus groups, or advisory boards..

These recommendations aim to create more inclusive, responsive, and effective policies that better respond to the needs of rural youth in the Western Balkans.

## **4.2 Labour market and employability of rural youth**

According to the finding from surveys and FGDs, rural youth across all countries often face a significant mismatch between their education and the job opportunities available in their regions. This mismatch is driven by various factors such as a lack of job diversity, underdeveloped local

industries, low salaries and education that do not align with the local labor market needs. The absence of quality jobs in rural areas has become a major challenge for young people in the Balkans, leading to high unemployment rates and limited career prospects.

This shortage of quality jobs forces many young people to migrate to urban centers or abroad in search of better opportunities. As a result, rural areas suffer from a "brain drain," where educated and skilled young individuals leave their communities, weakening local economies and further exacerbating the lack of development in rural regions. These factors, coupled with low economic diversification, leave many rural youth with few viable options to build sustainable livelihoods in their local communities.

Recommendations for improving labour market and employability in rural areas are as follows:

- Strengthen vocational training programs and provide entrepreneurship education tailored to the needs of rural youth. Establish partnerships between schools, vocational training centers, and local businesses to create internship and apprenticeship programs tailored to the needs of the local economy. These programs should provide practical experience in relevant industries, such as agriculture, tourism, renewable energy, and digital services, thereby improving the employability of rural youth.
- Expand digital infrastructure, especially access to high-speed internet, to enable rural youth to participate in remote workplaces and online businesses. This is particularly important to connect rural youth to national and international labor markets. Promote remote work as a viable option for rural youth by offering training in digital skills such as programming, digital marketing, graphic design and e-commerce. This allows young people to access better-paying jobs without having to migrate to urban areas. Establish digital job centers or online platforms that connect rural youth with remote work opportunities, including freelancing and "gig" economy jobs.
- Promote economic diversification - Encourage investment in rural industries that can provide diverse job opportunities for youth, such as agro-processing, sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, and eco-tourism. Provide tax preferences, grants, and subsidies to businesses that establish operations in rural areas or employ rural youth. Encourage investments in rural enterprises through favorable loan conditions, reduced interest rates, etc. Develop incentives for businesses to set up operations in rural areas by offering tax breaks, subsidies, or access to infrastructure. This could attract private-sector investment, boosting job creation and economic growth in these regions.
- Foster innovation in rural sectors by supporting start-ups and small businesses, providing access to micro-loans, grants, and business incubation services. Special attention should be given to digital and tech-based solutions that can operate remotely, allowing rural youth to participate in a global economy without leaving their communities. Offer seed funding, microloans, and startup grants to young entrepreneurs in rural areas (Youth

Guarantee program). In addition to financial support, provide access to business development services, mentorship programs, and networking opportunities.

- Encourage local governments and businesses to adopt gender-sensitive policies that promote equal opportunities for both men and women in employment, education, and entrepreneurship. This could include flexible work arrangements, parental leave, and other benefits. Offer specialized financial support, training, and mentorship programs for female entrepreneurs in rural areas. Create networking opportunities and provide platforms for women to showcase their businesses and share best practices.

The key to addressing labor market and employability challenges for rural youth lies in creating diversified economic opportunities, improving the alignment between education and local industry needs, and supporting entrepreneurship. Additionally, enhancing access to education, training, and financial resources will provide the tools they need to succeed, making rural living a more viable and attractive option.

### **4.3 Agriculture and rural youth**

While agriculture remains a significant source of employment in rural areas, it is often seen as an unattractive career option by young people. Many rural youth are discouraged from pursuing agricultural careers due to perceptions that farming is labor-intensive, offers low financial rewards, and lacks modern appeal. This negative perception is compounded by the challenges of limited access to modern technology, outdated farming practices, and a lack of support for agricultural entrepreneurship.

The results of the survey and focus group discussions highlighted a significant lack of interest in agriculture among young people, especially young women across all countries in the region. Despite the existence of various support measures targeted at youth and women in the agricultural sector, the vast majority do not view agriculture as a viable career path. Many perceive it as labor-intensive, low-paying, and offering limited opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Young women, in particular, face additional challenges, including cultural expectations, limited access to land ownership, and in some cases a lack of tailored support for women-led agricultural businesses. The only exceptions noted were cases where young people anticipated inheriting large family estates or well-established farms, which provided them with a stable foundation and more promising prospects. This highlights the need for a more innovative, targeted approach to attract young people and women into agriculture.

- Where not available, implement subsidies and grants for young farmers who adopt sustainable and modern agricultural practices. Provide access to subsidized equipment,



technology, and training programs focused on improving productivity and profitability in agriculture, including diversification. Diversification allows for multiple revenue sources and reduces reliance on traditional crops or livestock. Encourage young people to explore non-traditional forms of agriculture, such as aquaculture, agroforestry, organic farming, agro-tourism, and renewable energy production on farms. Expand LEADER funding for green jobs in rural areas, focusing on renewable energy projects, environmental conservation, and sustainable tourism. This would diversify employment opportunities for rural youth beyond traditional farming.

- Help rural youth access farmers' markets, online sales platforms, and sustainable public procurement food programs that allow them to sell directly to consumers. This reduces dependence on middlemen and increases financial returns. Promote short food supply chains and direct connections between farmers and consumers through local food movements. This can help young people create businesses that serve urban populations with fresh produce while reducing the distance between producers and consumers.
- In addition to direct agricultural work, rural youth can find meaningful and sustainable employment in services that support agriculture, as well as across the broader food supply chain. These areas offer significant potential for economic diversification and provide a wide range of career paths, making them appealing alternatives for young people who may not be interested in traditional farming. Invest in small-scale food processing centers where young entrepreneurs can use shared facilities to process agricultural goods. These centers can reduce costs for startups while helping rural communities retain more of the economic value of their produce. Collaborate with agricultural businesses to offer internships and apprenticeships that give young people hands-on experience in agricultural services, logistics, and processing. Practical work experience will improve their employability and provide insight into various career paths. Offer certification programs that train rural youth to operate and maintain modern agricultural technologies, such as drones, automated irrigation, or livestock management systems. These certifications can make them more competitive in the job market.
- Integrate agricultural education into rural school curriculums, with a focus on modern, sustainable farming practices. Partner with local agricultural institutions to offer hands-on training and internships in innovative agricultural methods. Enhance the capacities and role of advisory services to disseminate knowledge, develop entrepreneurial skills, and improve vocational training opportunities. Create programs that teach young people how to start and manage agricultural businesses, including training in marketing, financing, and business development.
- Support farm succession planning and make it easier for young people to acquire land and resources are crucial to revitalizing interest in agricultural careers and retaining youth in rural areas. Create programs that help young farmers lease or purchase land, such as land-

sharing initiatives or public-private partnerships that allocate unused public land for agricultural use. Additionally, reform land ownership policies to make it easier for young people to access and inherit family farms.

- Focus on policies that promote gender equality, particularly in land ownership and property rights, ensuring that women have equal opportunities and resources in rural areas. Reform policies to ensure young women have equal access to land ownership and inheritance. Develop women-specific agricultural training programs that offer mentorship from successful female farmers. These programs should focus on modern farming techniques, leadership skills, and entrepreneurship to empower women in agriculture.
- The experience in Serbia highlights that rural women show a higher level of participation in training organized by extension service related to financial operations and accounting. These areas of expertise are crucial for running successful businesses, managing finances, and supporting agricultural or entrepreneurial activities. Incorporating these skills into existing financial training programs will ensure women can apply their accounting and financial management skills to create sustainable and scalable businesses. Design training programs that cover not only financial operations but also marketing, branding, digital marketing strategies, and online business tools. These programs should provide women with a holistic understanding of how to build and grow a business.

To address the employment challenges in agriculture faced by rural youth, it is essential to diversify the job market beyond traditional farming. Expanding opportunities in agriculture-related services, logistics, and the food supply chain will not only provide new career paths but also help retain young people in rural areas. By promoting agro-processing, investing in infrastructure, supporting agricultural entrepreneurship, and providing targeted vocational training, rural youth can be empowered to build sustainable livelihoods while contributing to the growth of the agricultural sector. These initiatives will be key in reversing migration trends and fostering economic development in rural communities across the Western Balkans.

#### **4.4 Wellbeing and quality of life**

The results indicate that a significant number of young people, across various age groups in each country, highly value on certain aspects of rural life. However, their overall quality of life is influenced by several interrelated factors, including limited job opportunities, inadequate infrastructure, lack of access to quality education and healthcare, and insufficient social and recreational facilities.

Based on these insights, the following recommendations aim to address these challenges and improve the wellbeing of rural youth:

- Investment in rural infrastructure, including roads and transportation, water supply and sanitation systems, and digital connectivity, is critical to improving the quality of life in rural areas. This would significantly help to reduce feelings of exclusion and remoteness, increase mobility and interaction with surrounding urban areas and potentially attract people from urban areas to the countryside. Governments should allocate specific funding for rural infrastructure in national budgets. This can be achieved through dedicated rural development funds and collaboration with IPARD funds.
- Governments should subsidize public transport services, specifically for rural youth, where commercial transport operators may not find it financially viable. This could include offering contracts to private transport providers to ensure consistent service in underserved regions. Subsidized transport schemes can ensure that rural youth have affordable or free transport to school and universities. This would not only improve attendance but also encourage young people to continue their education beyond primary levels. It also helps reduce dropout rates and increases access to quality education, enabling rural youth to pursue academic and vocational training that can enhance their future prospects.
- Implement flexible and demand-responsive transport models, such as on-call minibuses or ride-sharing schemes, which can be scheduled based on the needs of rural residents. These systems can be supported through mobile apps or community call centers to arrange transport when required. Develop or utilize existing apps that allow rural youth to check bus schedules, or track the arrival of public transport vehicles in real time. This will make rural transport systems more accessible and reliable for young people who need to coordinate their schedules around limited transport options. These options should be supported by local government or local youth councils to ensure safety and affordability.
- Invest in educational infrastructure in rural areas to ensure access to quality and equal education for all. This includes building and maintaining rural schools and ensuring that schools are equipped with modern educational tools and resources. This includes providing access to basic facilities such as clean water, reliable electricity, and internet connectivity. Modernizing schools will make them more attractive to teachers.
- Improve teacher training and provide ongoing professional development to ensure that educators in rural areas are equipped to deliver quality education. Support mechanisms should be in place to retain or attract qualified teachers in rural regions. Offer subsidized or free housing to rural teachers, especially in areas where housing may be scarce or expensive. In addition, governments can offer higher salaries, bonuses, or hardship allowances to teachers working in rural areas. Governments could also provide housing construction support in remote areas. These financial incentives make rural postings more attractive compared to urban areas.

- Establish mobile education units to deliver specialized training or extracurricular programs to the students in remote areas (sports, arts, music). This could involve partnerships with NGOs and mobile units supported to provide skills training directly in rural communities, but also qualified local people interested to find additional job, volunteers etc.
- Create peer networks for rural teachers, where they can share resources and experiences. Regular regional meetings or virtual platforms can help foster a sense of community among rural teachers. Governments or universities can offer scholarships specifically for rural students who commit to returning and teaching in rural areas after graduation. Local youth are more likely to stay and teach in their home communities.
- Increase the availability of healthcare services in rural areas by building more health facilities, deploying mobile health units, and incentivizing healthcare professionals to work in rural regions. Deploy mobile health units to serve rural areas lacking permanent healthcare facilities and these in remote areas. These units could offer primary care, prenatal care, reproductive health and general check-ups, addressing the specific needs of rural youth. These units can be equipped with medical staff, diagnostic tools, and telemedicine capabilities to address common healthcare needs. Develop outreach programs where healthcare professionals visit rural areas periodically to offer services like screening for diseases, health education, and preventive care. Collaboration with local organizations and health workers ensures regular contact with isolated communities. Regularly evaluate healthcare service delivery in rural areas by collecting feedback from patients and tracking health outcomes. This can help identify gaps in care and guide improvements.
- Develop and implement mental health programs tailored to the needs of rural youth, addressing issues like social isolation and stress. Providing access to mental health professionals in rural areas is crucial. Provide mental health services through telemedicine platforms, allowing rural youth to access counseling, therapy, and psychiatric care remotely. Train local healthcare workers to provide basic mental health support and identify patients who may need more specialized care. Raising awareness about mental health among rural youth and communities can reduce stigma and encourage people to seek help.
- Supporting investment in social infrastructure like community centers, cinemas, and libraries in rural areas is essential for improving the quality of life and fostering community engagement. Use LEADER funding to create or improve community centers, youth clubs, and recreational spaces that serve as hubs for youth engagement. These spaces could also host training programs, workshops, or networking events for rural youth. These spaces not only provide recreational activities but also serve as hubs for social interaction, learning, and cultural exchange. Organize regular movie screenings,

theater performances, and cultural festivals in community centers or cinemas. These events can bring together residents and create opportunities for social interaction, while also offering entertainment and cultural enrichment.

- Promote rural living as a healthy way of life, i.e. improving the image of rural areas through better marketing/dissemination of success stories. Linking urban youth to rural areas is also a way to encourage young people to spend time in villages and experience life in a traditional rural environment; Partner with digital influencers who focus on sustainability, nature, or rural entrepreneurship to create engaging content that resonates with youth interests. Use platforms that young people frequent, such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, to create content that highlights the lifestyle benefits of rural areas. Position rural living as offering a healthier lifestyle, with access to nature, fresh air, and outdoor activities. Highlight mental and physical health benefits such as reduced stress, a stronger connection to nature, and a more balanced work-life environment. Use LEADER funds to promote the benefits of rural living among youth, such as a healthy lifestyle, community engagement, and the potential for entrepreneurship. Awareness campaigns could include testimonials from successful young rural entrepreneurs or highlight the unique opportunities available in rural regions.

#### **4.5 Civic engagement and political participation**

Across the Balkans, rural youth exhibit low levels of civic engagement and political participation. There is a significant lack of trust in public institutions, such as government bodies, the legal system, and law enforcement. Rural youth often feel disconnected from these institutions, believing that their voices are not valued or heard. Additionally, many young people in rural areas are not actively involved in community service or volunteerism, often due to a lack of awareness, opportunities, or support structures that encourage such participation. This distrust is exacerbated by perceived corruption, nepotism, and the belief that political connections, rather than merit, dictate access to opportunities and resources. A pronounced gender disparity exists in political participation, with women being significantly less involved than men. Cultural norms and traditional gender roles often discourage women from engaging in political and civic activities, further limiting their influence in decision-making processes.

Addressing the low levels of civic engagement and political participation among rural youth in the Balkans requires a multifaceted approach, targeting both institutional reforms and community-driven initiatives. The following recommendations aim to rebuild trust in public institutions, increase opportunities for youth participation, and foster a culture of civic responsibility that is inclusive of both young men and women:

- Create youth councils, forums, and advisory boards at local and regional levels to involve young people. These councils can serve as consultative bodies where rural youth can voice their concerns, propose solutions, and participate in decision-making processes. Special attention should be given to including young women to ensure gender balance. Introduce structured dialogue mechanisms where local governments are required to regularly consult youth groups on key policy issues affecting rural areas, such as education, employment, and infrastructure. Youth consultations should be followed by concrete feedback, ensuring young people feel their input is valued and acted upon.
- Implement educational programs and awareness campaigns focused on the importance of civic engagement, political rights, and the impact of political participation on community development. Target both young men and women, with special attention to overcoming gender barriers. Promote the value of volunteerism and civic engagement through campaigns that highlight success stories of rural youth who have made meaningful contributions to their communities. These campaigns should leverage social media, radio, and community events to reach a wide audience, including youth who may not be aware of existing opportunities.
- Encourage the formation of youth-led political organizations or interest groups that allow rural youth to collectively advocate for issues important to them, such as education, employment, and infrastructure. Equip rural youth organizations with advocacy and lobbying skills, helping them engage with policymakers, influence local government decisions, and ensure that the interests of rural youth are represented in policy discussions. Establish small grants or micro-funding programs specifically targeting rural youth organizations, allowing them to finance community projects, workshops, or educational campaigns. Encourage youth organizations to actively include women, minorities, and marginalized groups in leadership roles. Gender-sensitive leadership programs will ensure that diverse voices are represented within these organizations.
- Increase transparency, accountability, and responsiveness in local governance to rebuild trust between rural youth and public institutions. This can include regular public consultations, transparent reporting of government activities, and anti-corruption measures. Implement transparency initiatives at the local level, such as open budget sessions, public reporting of government expenditures, and online platforms for tracking policy implementation. These efforts will help rural youth monitor government actions and reduce perceptions of corruption. Create easily accessible and anonymous channels for reporting instances of corruption or nepotism. Youth should be made aware of these mechanisms and encouraged to use them without fear of retaliation.
- Establish structured volunteer programs in rural areas that align with the interests and needs of rural youth. These programs should be well-organized, accessible, and supported by local authorities and NGOs.

- Introduce incentives for volunteering, such as certificates of participation, academic credits, or recognition through awards and public acknowledgment. Additionally, link volunteer experiences to career opportunities by collaborating with employers to value volunteer work in hiring processes. Collaborate with local NGOs, schools, and community centers to provide rural youth with structured volunteer opportunities. These partnerships can focus on areas such as environmental conservation, elderly care, or education, offering practical ways for youth to give back to their communities. Integrate volunteerism into school curricula and extracurricular activities, encouraging students to participate in community service projects as part of their education.
- Establish women's groups or forums where young women can discuss political issues and develop civic initiatives in a supportive environment. These groups should actively engage with local decision-makers to advocate for gender-sensitive policies and equal representation in governance. Run awareness campaigns in rural communities that challenge traditional gender roles and promote the importance of women's participation in civic and political life. Involve community leaders, religious figures, and local influencers in these campaigns to foster cultural acceptance of women's involvement.

By strengthening local governance structures, combating corruption, fostering volunteerism, empowering women, and leveraging digital tools, rural youth can become active participants in shaping their communities. Equally important is the role of education and political engagement initiatives, which can inspire a new generation of civic-minded leaders in rural areas. These recommendations, when implemented, will help close the gap between rural youth and the institutions that serve them, fostering a more engaged, motivated, and empowered youth population.

#### **4.6 Data gaps and needs**

There is a critical lack of disaggregated data on urban versus rural youth, particularly concerning education, employment, and the performance of young farmers and their farms. This data gap hinders the development of targeted policies and interventions aimed at rural youth. The absence of specific and disaggregated data on rural youth obstructs the formulation of effective national and regional rural youth policies. Without detailed data, it is challenging to identify and address the unique needs and challenges faced by rural youth, and current national policies often treat youth as a homogeneous group, failing to differentiate between urban and rural contexts.

The following recommendations aim to bridge these data gaps and improve the development and implementation of policies that account for the specific needs and challenges of rural youth:

- Improving data collection and analysis is essential. This includes ensuring that data on youth education, employment, and farming activities are disaggregated by age cohorts and gender. Regular surveys and studies should track the performance and challenges faced by rural youth. Establish a dedicated observatory or data hub that monitors and reports on the situation of rural youth across key indicators such as employment, education, health, and social participation. This observatory could be a collaboration between national governments, universities, and research institutions, and should publish annual reports with policy recommendations.
- Engage rural youth and other stakeholders in the data collection process. Their input will provide valuable insights into the challenges they face and help ensure that policies are responsive to their needs.
  - Leverage mobile technology to conduct surveys and gather data from rural areas. Mobile apps can facilitate real-time data collection, improve accessibility, and reach rural youth more effectively. Interactive features can also enhance engagement and data accuracy.
  - Create digital platforms managed by local governments where rural youth can self-report their challenges and needs. This platform would allow young people to submit information on topics like access to education, employment opportunities, or farm performance. This bottom-up approach complements traditional way of communication with local authorities and captures real-time concerns.
  - Use social media and digital platforms to gather data and feedback from rural youth. Online surveys, social media polls, and forums can be effective tools for reaching younger populations and collecting qualitative and quantitative data.
- Use interactive data visualization tools to present data in a more accessible and engaging manner. These tools can help policymakers, stakeholders, and the public better understand complex data and trends related to rural youth.

These conclusions and recommendations underscore the necessity for a comprehensive, inclusive, and data-driven approach to rural youth development. Addressing data gaps, enhancing civic engagement, and promoting gender equality are crucial to empowering rural youth and fostering resilient, equitable communities.

## 4.7 Country-specific issues and recommendations

**Albania** - The conclusions and recommendations for addressing the challenges faced by rural youth in Albania emphasize the need for a more focused approach. Albania has recently established a policy and institutional framework to support youth, but this framework struggles to effectively address rural youth issues due to weak institutional settings and a lack of specific



data. There is a need for high-quality, disaggregated data to guide policy-making, as current policies do not sufficiently differentiate between urban and rural youth.

To address this gap, it is recommended that institutions at both national and local levels, such as the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) and municipalities, appoint dedicated units or personnel to focus on rural youth issues. This would enable more targeted and effective policies and programs.

Education in rural areas is a critical issue, with declining infrastructure and quality contributing to the migration of young people to urban areas. To combat this, both national and local governments should invest in improving educational infrastructure, ensuring the availability of qualified teachers, and promoting vocational education. Subsidizing transportation costs for rural students and offering incentives for agricultural studies are also recommended to retain youth in rural areas.

The social and economic infrastructure in rural areas is inadequate, with limited facilities and opportunities for social activities. This contributes to the outmigration of youth, although many still feel attached to their rural communities. Improving infrastructure, such as roads, electricity, water supply, and internet access, is essential to make rural areas more livable and attractive.

Employment opportunities in rural areas are limited, particularly in agriculture, due to cultural attitudes, lack of resources, and insufficient state support. To encourage rural youth to engage in agriculture and related sectors, policies should provide tax exemptions, subsidies, grants, and support for young entrepreneurs. Enhancing vocational training and reducing bureaucratic barriers are also crucial.

Civic and political engagement among rural youth is low, with gender disparities and transportation challenges hindering participation, especially for girls. Promoting active involvement in civic and political activities, addressing gender barriers, and supporting youth civil society organizations (CSOs) are recommended to empower rural youth and increase their participation in decision-making processes.

Finally, while local municipalities have adopted action plans for youth, they often lack the financial resources and capacity to implement them effectively. Enhancing the role of municipalities in policy formulation and implementation is essential for engaging rural youth in the social and economic development of their communities.

**Bosnia and Herzegovina** - The complex social, political, and economic situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina has led to several adverse outcomes, including significant population outmigration, brain drain, high unemployment, and social exclusion, particularly affecting youth and women in rural areas. This report underscores the urgent need for new policies and interventions aimed at empowering youth, improving employment opportunities, and enhancing the overall quality of life in rural regions. However, current policies remain largely traditional and insufficient, with

minimal financial support specifically directed towards youth, such as those in agricultural sectors.

The decentralized government structure has resulted in a fragmented approach, with numerous institutions involved in youth issues, yet their responsibilities are often unclear, and their capacity to address these challenges is limited.

Rural youth face numerous obstacles, yet many remain unaware of the broader issues affecting their communities, often focusing instead on immediate concerns highlighted on social media. This disconnect is exacerbated by strong social media influence, leading to a "chain effect" where the departure of some individuals encourages others to leave as well.

Perceptions of rural life, especially agricultural work, are generally negative among young people, driven by family expectations and a preference for employment in state-owned companies. The trend of rural depopulation makes it difficult to sustain essential services like schools and transport, further driving migration to urban areas. This trend is particularly pronounced among the younger age groups (15-24), though there is a slightly more positive attitude towards agriculture among those aged 30-40.

The research identifies three main problems: the absence of clear policy goals for addressing youth issues, a lack of youth-oriented hubs and programs, and underdeveloped youth entrepreneurship skills. The lack of clear policies stems from a low understanding of youth needs, which hampers the development of tailored programs that consider the socio-economic conditions of specific regions. Moreover, the absence of youth-oriented hubs limits opportunities for networking, collaboration, and social innovation, which are crucial for rural development and youth engagement.

To address these challenges, the report recommends several interventions:

1. Policy development and implementation: Establish clear goals and policy frameworks that address the specific needs of youth in different regions, accompanied by modern monitoring and evaluation tools to track progress.
2. Youth hubs and social innovation: Develop youth-oriented hubs and centers in rural areas to foster networking, collaboration, and social innovation, which can help break negative perceptions of rural life and encourage young people to explore opportunities in agriculture and other rural activities.
3. Youth entrepreneurship: Enhance youth entrepreneurship skills through targeted programs, supported by educational initiatives that integrate entrepreneurship from an early age. This includes promoting innovative approaches to farming and encouraging a new generation of farmers characterized by openness and knowledge-sharing.

The report concludes that while government action is essential, youth themselves must also take the initiative to become active and valuable members of society. A tailored approach, considering the specific capacities and resources of each region, is crucial for these interventions to succeed.

**Kosovo\*** - The research highlights significant gaps in data availability in Kosovo\*, particularly in the sectors of employment and education, and even more so concerning rural youth. The absence of data categorized into "rural" and "urban" further complicates the understanding and addressing of rural youth issues. A major concern identified is the widespread migration of young people from rural areas, driven by inadequate education, poor job opportunities, and limited prospects. However, despite these challenges, rural life is generally viewed positively by the youth, who see rural areas as fulfilling, though lacking in opportunities.

The quality of education available to rural youth is notably poor, with study programs often failing to align with labor market demands. This mismatch exacerbates unemployment and financial insecurity, contributing to the migration trend. The lack of sufficient funding and weak inter-institutional cooperation further hinders efforts to support rural youth. The need for targeted policies and greater inclusion of rural youth in decision-making processes is emphasized.

Kosovo\*'s policy framework, tends to focus narrowly on rural development without adequately addressing the specific needs of rural youth. The implementation of national policies remains unsatisfactory, with a pressing need for more focused legislation and action plans targeting rural youth. Civic engagement among rural youth is low, with many feeling disillusioned about their ability to effect change through activism or politics.

To address these issues, several recommendations are proposed:

1. **Education reform and skill development:** Improve curricula to match job market needs, enhance ICT infrastructure in rural schools, and create partnerships for internship programs to improve job prospects.
2. **Strengthening policies and financial support:** Develop specific policies for rural youth, increase funding for education and employment, and adopt a multi-sectoral approach to rural development.
3. **Civic engagement and community development:** Encourage rural youth participation in decision-making, strengthen civil society outreach in rural areas, and promote leadership development to foster activism and community involvement.
4. **Monitoring, evaluation, and implementation:** Implement strong monitoring mechanisms to ensure the effectiveness of policies, and provide capacity-building programs for stakeholders involved in rural youth development.

Incentivizing rural youth to remain in rural areas by improving job opportunities, working conditions, and strengthening the local economy is crucial. This can be achieved by modifying

funding schemes, supporting start-ups, and enhancing institutional cooperation. The inclusion of rural youth in the decision-making process is vital to creating a favorable environment that offers better opportunities and reduces migration.

In conclusion, Kosovo\*'s existing policies and strategies, while present, are insufficiently targeted at rural youth and suffer from poor implementation. There is a critical need for more effective policies, better funding, and improved cooperation across sectors to support rural youth and prevent the ongoing migration trend.

**Montenegro** - Montenegro is facing significant challenges related to population decline and uneven economic development, particularly between its coastal and central regions compared to the northern region. The northern region lags behind with lower per capita income, higher unemployment, underdeveloped infrastructure, and unfavorable demographic and educational conditions. The neglect of agriculture has exacerbated these issues, negatively impacting GDP, employment, and triggering a migration from rural to urban areas.

Although there are institutional and legal mechanisms in place that recognize the needs of rural youth in Montenegro, delays in adopting new strategies and ineffective implementation of local policies have hindered progress. There is a clear need to improve institutional support for rural youth, including addressing depopulation, providing funding and incentives for young entrepreneurs, improving knowledge and competencies, and strengthening networking opportunities.

Women in rural areas are particularly disadvantaged, often facing traditional gender roles that encourage them to leave their villages. The transition from extensive to intensive agricultural production, without adequate training and support, has further strained rural areas. Challenges such as a lack of state support, difficulty accessing funds, and issues with product sales persist. Additionally, disparities between urban and rural areas, coupled with inadequate infrastructure and limited employment and education opportunities, contribute to the poor availability and quality of health services in rural regions.

The trend of migration from rural to urban areas is driven by the pursuit of better employment opportunities, with public sector jobs being preferred over private sector and self-employment options. Societal expectations often favor men in the inheritance of property, further limiting opportunities for women to remain in their family properties or start families in rural areas. Rural areas also suffer from a lack of social and cultural activities or amenities, making them less attractive for young people.

Research indicates that while there is a generally positive attitude toward farm work and rural living among the youth, there is a negative perception regarding equal job opportunities and education. Political connections are deemed crucial for success, highlighting the need for more

opportunities and support for rural youth organizations, as well as efforts to promote gender equality and active participation in decision-making processes.

Key recommendations can be summarized as follows:

- **Policy and institutional strengthening:** Implement the Youth Strategy (2022-2026) focusing on rural youth, with active involvement from the Ministry of Youth and Sports; Enhance institutional capacities for youth-related policies by improving the knowledge, skills, and resources of responsible institutions.
- **Infrastructure, services, and job creation:** Invest in rural infrastructure, including transportation, healthcare, and education, to improve the quality of life; Support rural entrepreneurship through financial incentives, access to credit, and public-private partnerships, especially in sectors like agriculture, IT, and rural tourism.
- **Education, skills, and civic engagement:** Improve education in rural areas by focusing on practical, vocational skills relevant to local industries and decentralizing higher education; Encourage civic engagement and leadership among rural youth through forums, associations, and community participation initiatives.
- **Gender equality and rural sustainability:** Promote gender equality, particularly in land ownership, and ensure equal opportunities for women; Prevent village abandonment by developing policies to attract new industries, support entrepreneurship, and incentivize home-buyers.
- **Meritocracy and collaboration:** Foster meritocracy in recruitment processes and reduce reliance on political connections through independent monitoring; Promote collaboration between government, civil society, private sector, and local communities for comprehensive, sustainable rural youth policies.

By implementing these recommendations, Montenegro can address the challenges facing its rural youth, promote sustainable development, and create a more inclusive and vibrant rural economy.

**North Macedonia** - The report on rural youth in North Macedonia highlights several challenges and provides recommendations for improving the situation of young people in these areas. Despite North Macedonia's relatively well-developed legal framework and institutional setup for addressing young people, significant issues persist, particularly concerning rural youth.

Key challenges:

1. **Awareness and implementation gaps:** While policies exist, many young people, particularly those aged 15-19, are unaware of these policies. Older youths believe that current policies do not adequately support rural youth. The lack of specifically appointed

persons or departments to address rural youth issues, along with poor implementation and coordination among institutions, exacerbates these challenges.

2. **Migration trends:** Rural areas are experiencing significant migration, particularly among young, qualified, and highly educated individuals seeking better education, employment opportunities, and earnings abroad. This migration poses a severe obstacle to the demographic and economic sustainability of rural areas, leading to a labor shortage in agriculture and other sectors.
3. **Education and infrastructure deficits:** Rural areas suffer from inadequate educational opportunities and poor infrastructure, which limits access to quality education and vocational training. This lack of resources and facilities leads to temporary migration for education, with the risk of it becoming permanent.
4. **Economic opportunities and job mismatch:** There is a significant mismatch between education and employment opportunities in rural areas, compounded by low salaries and a lack of infrastructure for potential economic developments, such as rural tourism. Agriculture, a major source of income, is seen as unattractive due to legal and property rights issues and the influence of older generations discouraging agricultural pursuits.

#### Recommendations:

- **Consistent and inclusive policies:** Develop a Rural Youth Strategy, action plans, and specific programs designed for rural youth, ensuring compatibility and consistency with existing policies. This strategy should include the active involvement of rural youth in the policymaking process.
- **Enhanced support mechanisms:** Introduce specific measures within the Youth Guarantee Fund to address the needs of rural youth, focusing on skills training, employment opportunities, and entrepreneurship support tailored to rural contexts.
- **Educational and vocational training:** Improve the quality and accessibility of education in rural areas by developing tailor-made study programs that match local needs, enhancing advisory services, and promoting educational and work mobility.
- **Economic and job creation initiatives:** Invest in infrastructure and create job opportunities in rural areas to discourage youth migration. Support innovative business models and coordinate efforts between relevant ministries to enhance youth inclusion in rural employment.
- **Support for agriculture and property rights:** Implement policies to facilitate property and land transfer to younger generations, making agriculture more attractive to rural youth. Empower municipalities to address sustainability issues in rural areas and collaborate with NGOs to advocate for youth needs at higher levels of governance.

By addressing these challenges and implementing the recommended strategies, North Macedonia can work toward reducing rural youth migration, enhancing economic opportunities, and ensuring the sustainable development of its rural areas.

**Serbia** - The report on rural youth in Serbia outlines various challenges and provides comprehensive recommendations to improve the situation for young people in rural areas. Key issues include limited employment opportunities, inadequate infrastructure, and low levels of political participation, all of which contribute to significant migration from rural areas to urban centers.

Key challenges:

1. Rural youth in Serbia face significant employment challenges, including: job mismatch, as many available jobs in rural areas are low-skilled, low-paying, and often not aligned with the education and skills of young people, leading to job dissatisfaction; migration for better employment prospects and higher salaries; need for better digital infrastructure and skills training to be fully effective.
2. Infrastructure deficits and its variable quality: while some rural areas have seen infrastructure improvements, others still suffer from poor road conditions, unreliable access to water, electricity, and inadequate sanitation systems.
3. Education and healthcare: Rural youth often struggle with inadequate access to quality education and healthcare services, which are essential for improving their overall well-being and future prospects; There is a need for vocational training programs aligned with local economic needs to equip rural youth with relevant skills.
4. Political participation and trust in institutions: Rural youth show low levels of political involvement, with younger people perceiving political participation as reserved for older generations; Women are particularly underrepresented in political activities due to cultural and customary barriers; There is a lack of trust in public administration, government, and the legal system, which undermines rural youth's confidence and willingness to engage in community development.
5. Migration from rural to urban areas, especially among young women, creates demographic imbalances and depletes rural areas of a skilled workforce. The difficulties of working in agriculture, combined with a lack of land ownership, deter many young people from pursuing farming as a viable career.

Recommendations:

- Adoption of a comprehensive rural youth strategy: Develop a strategy that includes financial support, incentives for young entrepreneurs, and mentorship programs to promote small businesses and start-ups in rural areas; encourage economic

diversification beyond traditional agriculture by promoting sectors like tourism, renewable energy, and creative industries.

- **Infrastructure improvement:** Invest in improving roads, water, electricity, and sanitation systems in rural areas to enhance the quality of life and access to services; promote digital inclusion by enhancing internet access and offering digital skills training to support online employment and entrepreneurship.
- **Educational and vocational training programs:** Establish vocational training programs tailored to local economic needs, and improve access to quality education and healthcare in rural areas; promote informal education and skills training to support educational and work mobility.
- **Political engagement and trust-building:** increase youth representation in decision-making bodies and create platforms for rural youth to express their opinions and engage with policymakers; Address gender disparities by encouraging women's participation in political and civic activities.
- **Local Economic Development:** Develop Local Economic Development Strategies that include incentives to slow down migration and retain youth in rural communities; launch awareness campaigns to inform rural youth about available opportunities and support programs within their communities.

By addressing these challenges and implementing these recommendations, Serbia can work towards creating a more supportive and sustainable environment for rural youth, reducing migration, and fostering economic and social development in rural areas.



## 5. NATIONAL REPORT FOR ALBANIA

Evelina Azizaj<sup>53</sup>

### 1. Introduction

Rural youth in Albania face a series of challenges and opportunities that significantly impact their integration into the socio-economic fabric of the country. This study aims to explore these challenges and opportunities, providing a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing rural youth out-migration in Albania. A comprehensive understanding of the situation will help stakeholders to develop targeted strategies to support rural youth in addressing their challenges and ensuring their integration and development in the socio-economic efforts of the country.

Youth has gained significant attention on the political agenda in Albania over the past five years, indicating recognition of the importance of addressing youth-related issues. There is a relatively new policy and institutional framework in place at the national and local levels to support youth, aiming to create an enabling environment for the protection and promotion of youth rights. However, effective youth policy relies on the availability of high-quality data to inform decision-making processes related to Albanian youth. The lack of specific data on rural youth poses a significant challenge in understanding their needs and formulating policies and programs tailored to their circumstances. Without accurate and disaggregated data, it becomes difficult for policymakers to identify the areas that require targeted interventions to improve the well-being and prospects of rural youth.

This study seeks to shed light on these diverse challenges and opportunities, providing insights that can inform targeted strategies to better support rural youth in Albania. The findings underline various critical factors affecting the overall well-being of rural youth and influencing their decision to migrate. These factors, described below, encompass a range of socio-economic, educational and infrastructural elements that interact to influence the aspirations and opportunities of these young people. This study shows how unequal access to resources, limited educational opportunities and inadequate infrastructure significantly affect the life trajectories of rural youth, prompting them to seek better opportunities elsewhere.

### 2. Rural areas – current state and trends

According to INSTAT data for the period 2012-2021, Albania's population has a relatively young age structure, with a median age of 35.4 years. The largest age group is those aged 25-54,

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comprising 41.8 percent of the population. The 15-29 age group accounts for 24.5 percent, while the 15-39 age group represents 36.8 percent. Over the past decade, the median age of the population has risen from 33 years in 2012 to 38 years in 2022. This demographic shift is attributed to a decline in population growth due to low fertility rates and high levels of emigration.

The same is for rural population, which share in total population constantly declined from 42.57 percent in 2015 to 38.89 percent in 2019, caused by outmigration and generally lowers birth rates (GoA, 2022)<sup>54</sup>. The trend of rural-to-urban migration, as indicated in Figure 1, shows that the rural population has been declining over the years, with a negative percentage change each year, while the urban population has been growing steadily.

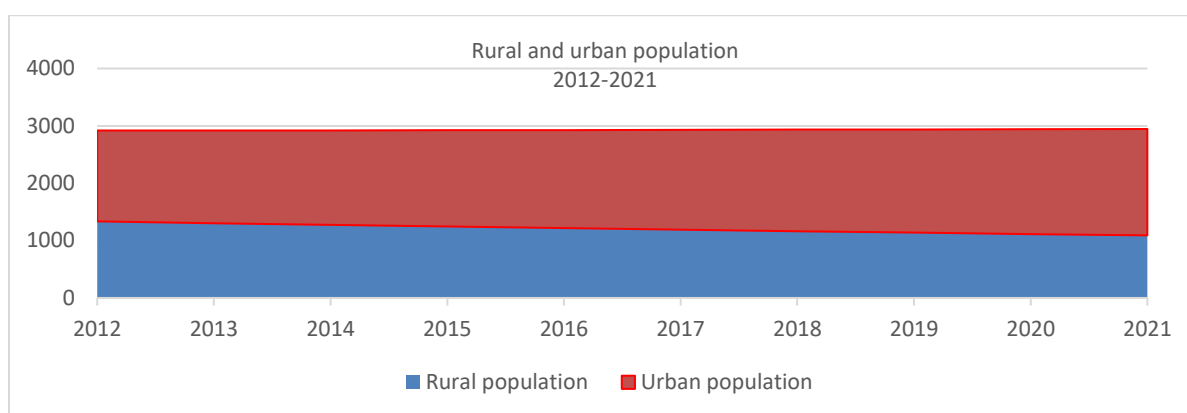


Figure 1. Rural and Urban population, 2012-2021 (FAOSTAT, 2023)

## 2. Overview of the institutional settings and legal framework for supporting rural youth

The line ministries responsible for rural youth include the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (responsible for agriculture and rural development, including support for rural youth in the agri-food sector); the Ministry of Finance and Economy (MFE), responsible for employment, vocational training, education and training, and housing policy; the Ministry of Education and Sports, responsible for the formulation and implementation of national policy in the fields of education, research and sports; the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MHSP), responsible for youth health and social inclusion; the Ministry of Culture (MoC), responsible for arts and cultural policy, etc.

There are several key institutional actors involved in youth policy in Albania, including governmental bodies at national and local level, non-governmental organizations and advisory bodies. Line ministries, including other central government institutions, are responsible for

<sup>54</sup> There are no official population data available according to the urban/rural classification in a time series. The only data provided by INSTAT regarding the urban/rural division is based on the 2011 Population and Housing Census.

developing sectoral policies, laws and regulations necessary for youth rights and contribute to the development of cross-sectoral policies and programs as part of their governmental activities. Other tasks include providing the necessary resources for the realization of youth rights in the annual or multi-year budgets and cooperating with the relevant institutions to ensure the protection of youth rights.<sup>55</sup>

From the interviews with the stakeholders, it is clear that they are aware of the National Youth Strategy (NYS), but that there is uncertainty about its current status and effectiveness, as implementation is only planned for the coming years. Respondents, including NGO representatives, emphasize the need for improved policy measures to promote youth inclusion. In particular, the NGO representative emphasizes the importance of better coordination between all institutions involved in the NYS Action Plan in order to increase its impact.

Furthermore, the interviews indicate a lack of specific government support for rural youth in Albania. The representatives interviewed were generally unaware of any targeted measures for this group. However, they acknowledge the existence of broader initiatives to support youth, such as business start-up programs and vocational courses to improve employability. Access to these measures is perceived to be difficult, particularly for young people in remote rural areas, possibly due to insufficient dissemination of information. A representative of the National Youth Agency (NYA) notes that inclusion is a priority in all the youth activities it supports, but that there is an urgent need for more targeted support for rural youth, considering their particular employment, social and educational challenges.

A similar issue arises with the Local Action Plans for Youth (LAPYs), whose implementation is often hampered by limited financial resources and a lack of capacity among local governments. These plans also tend to lack a specific focus on rural youth (with the term "rural" appearing only three to four times in most local plans). Despite these obstacles, there has been progress in the development and implementation of LAPYs in Albania, and there is growing recognition of the importance of youth development at the local level.

The interviews with stakeholders highlighted that the institutions and programmes targeting rural youth are comprehensive, covering a range of areas such as education, health, employment, and entrepreneurship. Various key institutions collaborate as a cross-sectoral group for youth-related matters.

### **3. Situational analysis of rural youth – challenges, needs and opportunities**

#### **3.1. Youth socio-demographics**

According to data from 2011, the majority of the Albanian population lived in urban areas, with the proportion of urban and rural dwellers in the younger age groups (15-24 years) being roughly equal. In the older age group (25-39 years), however, the proportion of rural residents decreases

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<sup>55</sup> The Law 75/2019 "On Youth", Article 6

slightly (Figure 2). Within the total population, the 15-24 and 25-39 age groups had a similar percentage share of 18 and 19 percent respectively (Instat, 2022c).

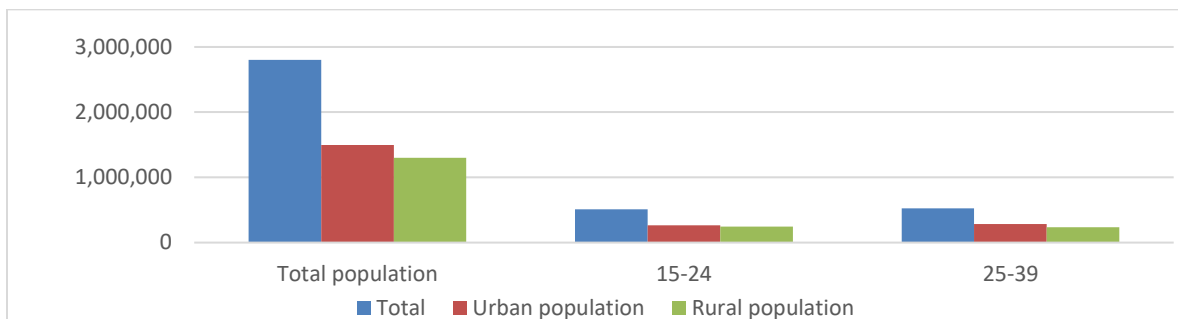


Figure 2. Urban/rural population in 2011 (Source: Instat, 2022 c)

The proportion of youth (age 15-29) in the total population has been gradually decreasing from 26 percent in 2012 to 23 percent in 2020 and 2021. However, the share of youth (age 15-39) remains relatively stable at 37 percent from 2012 to 2017, with a slight decrease to 36 percent from 2018 to 2021.

A significant proportion of surveyed rural youth in Albania (68 to 82 percent) express a willingness to move abroad in search of employment. In contrast, there is a lower willingness among rural youth to relocate within the country for job opportunities, with men displaying greater openness to internal migration compared to women. This trend is mirrored in the responses about moving within the country, where 76 percent of respondents aged 15-19 and 72 percent aged 20-24 indicate a readiness to relocate domestically. The young men report a higher willingness to move compared to their female counterparts (Survey, 2023). This finding suggests potential gender-related factors over the decisions regarding moving for job.

### 3.2. Education

The 2019 FES study<sup>56</sup> highlights that rural youth tend to underperform academically compared to their urban peers. Rural youth, particularly those aged 18-21, face significant challenges in pursuing education beyond compulsory levels, largely due to limited access to higher educational opportunities. Official data (MES, 2023) reveal a concerning trend of decreasing educational infrastructure and enrolment rates across all education levels in rural areas.

In response to falling student numbers, the Albanian government introduced a school consolidation reform. By 2021, over 20,000 students were taught in more than 2,500 combined

<sup>56</sup> FES, 2019. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Albanian Youth 2018/2019.

classes, in which students from different grades learn together. As a result, children from smaller villages have to travel to larger schools, which is often hindered by a lack of public transportation. This model of combined classes also exacerbates educational disparities. These challenges underline the urgent need for long-term strategies to improve both the quality and accessibility of education in rural areas.

Over the past fifteen years, primary education enrolment in rural villages has seen a continuous decline. In 2006, there were 232,172 students enrolled, including 112,705 girls (48.5 percent). By 2021, this figure had dropped to 113,364 students, with girls' enrolment decreasing to 54,149 (48 percent). Similarly, secondary education in rural areas has followed this downward trend between 2017 and 2022. In 2017, there were 234 schools with 30,537 students, of whom 15,546 (51 percent) were girls. By 2022, the number of schools decreased to 227, with total enrolment falling to 21,103, including 10,888 girls (52 percent). This decline reflects the broader demographic and educational challenges in rural regions (MES, 2023).

In the four FGDs, young people expressed concern about the challenges of accessing quality education and the impact on their future. In all groups, the lack of infrastructure — such as poor road conditions, unreliable electricity supply and transportation difficulties — was a recurring theme. Another common concern was the poor quality of education and the limited provision of vocational training.

Although there were similarities in the feedback, there were also differences between the groups. Younger women (15-24) emphasized the importance of prioritizing issues such as citizenship and environmental issues, while older women (25-40) focused on practical challenges such as the lack of laboratories and sports facilities in some villages. The younger group of men (15-24) emphasized the difficulties in accessing higher secondary education and the need for improved infrastructure, while the older men expressed concern about the overall decline in the quality of education.

Both men and women in the 25-40 age groups pointed out that many teachers in rural areas were inadequately qualified. Teachers often had to teach subjects outside their expertise to meet their required hours, compromising the quality of education. Additionally, younger women noted that vocational education is undervalued in rural areas, as it is often seen as a fallback option for students with lower academic performance.

The lack of good-quality education was identified as a key factor contributing to outmigration in rural areas. Parents made choices based on educational opportunities for their children, and lack of access or good-quality education affects the desire of students to study often leading to the decision to leave the area. In the focus group discussion, there was no specific observation regarding the role of gender in parents' decisions about outmigration due to education.

Therefore, there is no indication that parents made decisions based on gender when considering whether to allow their children to migrate for education.

### **3.3. *Employment, economic opportunities and mobility***

Despite the reform efforts undertaken in Albania, there is still a significant skills shortage and skills gap in the Albanian labor market, mainly due to insufficient cooperation between the education and labor sectors.

The FGDs highlighted the multiple challenges faced by rural youth and the urgent need for targeted interventions to support their success in agriculture and entrepreneurship. Participants of all ages and genders agreed that employment opportunities in rural areas are significantly less than in urban centers. Political connections were seen as crucial to securing jobs in the public sector, with the perception that the sector is politically influenced. The private sector also offers few opportunities in rural areas, particularly outside of farming and family businesses.

Rural men (aged 25-40) indicated that villages close to industrial areas offer more opportunities, particularly in construction, manufacturing and oil companies. In addition, there were more employment opportunities for young people in areas with tourism potential, but these were very localized.

Women aged 25 to 40 emphasized that employment prospects in rural areas were so limited that many young graduates either left or only returned if they obtained a job through personal or political connections. Economic opportunities for young people in rural areas were often tied to land ownership or family businesses, limiting their access to new and diverse forms of employment.

The results of the survey show that there is a significant mismatch between the skills of young people and the employment opportunities available. The majority of respondents agree that it is difficult to find a job that matches their skills. This indicates a mismatch between training and employment opportunities for young people. There is a clear difference in the extent of the mismatch between the employment opportunities reported by young men and young women. Young women tend to report a lower level of job mismatch than young men in most age categories.

The survey results show significant differences in the job preferences of rural youth, particularly between age and gender groups. Younger respondents (ages 15-19) show a strong preference for government jobs, with 53 percent indicating this as their first choice. Older respondents, particularly those aged 25-29 and 30-40, on the other hand, tended to prefer working for state-owned companies, indicating a desire for job stability and security.

Self-employment in non-agricultural businesses is the most popular choice among young people aged 20-24, which indicates an entrepreneurial inclination in this age group. However, self-

employment in agriculture and other employment categories is a less popular option across all age groups. Overall, the preferred occupation of rural youth is employment in a state-owned enterprise, followed by employment with the government.

There are also gender differences: young rural women prefer jobs in state-owned enterprises, while young rural men are more inclined towards self-employment in non-farm enterprises and government jobs. This divergence reflects different priorities and perceptions of job security and independence between men and women in rural areas.

### **3.4. Youth involvement in agriculture**

Although agriculture was identified by the participants as a potential employment sector, they also had different views.

Participants in the focus group discussions (FGDs) pointed out an important issue concerning the intergenerational transfer of agricultural assets. The labor-intensive nature of agriculture and its low income status drive rural youth to leave their communities and seek opportunities elsewhere. It was also pointed out in the FGDs that traditional gender roles limit girls' participation in agriculture. These roles prevent them from participating in agricultural activities, inheriting farms or taking on leadership positions on the farm. There is a perception that farming is more suited to men, while girls are expected to marry and join their husbands' households.

Younger women (aged 15 to 24) showed less interest in agriculture due to cultural attitudes and lack of motivation. In contrast, older male participants (aged 25-40) reported challenges related to inheriting farms and agricultural businesses. Younger participants emphasized the need for specialized training and infrastructure to promote employment in sectors such as agritourism. They also emphasized the need for better access to training and extension services to improve their skills. Both younger and older participants, regardless of their gender, cited financial constraints as the main barrier to starting a business or investing in agriculture.

Limited access to land, bureaucratic hurdles and insufficient financial support further hinder young people's ability to engage in entrepreneurial activities. Participants emphasized the need for supportive government policies, including tax breaks, increased subsidies and easier access to credit, to encourage entrepreneurship and job creation in rural areas.

Men from both age groups (15-24 and 25-40) noted that income-generating activities such as livestock rearing, agriculture and beekeeping are often not enough to sustain livelihoods. Young people working in agriculture often lack formal education and have difficulty finding employment outside the sector. Starting a business without inherited assets or capital is a particular challenge. Men of both age groups also spoke about the difficulties of inheriting farms and agricultural businesses. It is unusual for young men to run farms, as inheritance usually only takes place after the death of the head of the family. The inheritance process is often complicated by factors such

as limited farming capacity and the need to divide assets among several children, making it difficult for young men to enter farm management. In addition, girls often give their shares to their brothers, emphasizing their lower social and economic status and loss of property rights.

Despite these challenges, participants recognized the potential of agritourism models and the marketing of local products as alternative ways for young people to engage in rural areas. In rural areas of Albania, a new generation of young entrepreneurs is successfully running agritourism initiatives. Despite facing various obstacles, these young men and women are harnessing the potential of their rural communities to create a sustainable income while preserving local traditions and cultural heritage.

### **3.5. Rural infrastructure and quality of life**

The focus group discussions (FGDs) on infrastructure revealed a broad consensus on the inadequacy of local social and economic infrastructure in rural areas. Participants of all genders and ages groups mentioned similar problems with roads, electricity, water supply, transportation and health facilities. Inadequate infrastructure was often cited as one of the main reasons for deciding to leave rural areas. The most common problems included damaged roads, lack of public lighting, unreliable public transportation, outdated health facilities and insufficient access to basic amenities such as clean drinking water, waste disposal systems and electricity. Seasonal problems such as road closures in winter and weather-related power cuts were also mentioned.

Young people in Albania face major challenges when it comes to social engagement, including internships and volunteering. Around 19.7 percent of young people have participated in internships, with a slight lead among female respondents. In 2017, only 16 percent of young people were involved in voluntary activities (FES, 2019).

The FGDs also revealed a consensus on the limited social life in rural areas. Key findings from the discussions include:

- The absence of facilities such as cinemas, sports fields, and clubs contributes to a perception of limited social life and fewer opportunities for social activities. Religious institutions play a notable role in providing socialization opportunities through summer camps and social events.
- Younger participants (ages 15-24) indicated that technology and the Internet serve as primary sources of social interaction in the absence of physical social facilities. While younger men in rural areas have more options, such as gathering in cafés, community prejudice often restricts girls from visiting these venues. Additionally, activities organized by religious authorities are typically available only to men.
- Although the limited social life is not viewed as the main reason for young people leaving rural areas, it is seen as a factor contributing to their reluctance to return. Some



participants expressed a strong attachment to rural areas, appreciating their tranquillity and untapped potential despite the limited social amenities.

### 3.6. Rural youth aspirations, civic engagement, and political participation and inclusion

The majority of young people in Albania show a remarkable lack of interest in political processes. In 2019, 62 percent of young people said they had no interest in politics, a significant increase from the 40 percent in 2015. Furthermore, the percentage of very interested youth dropped to 3 percent in 2019, compared to a higher figure in 2015. This disinterest is widespread among both urban and rural youth, indicating widespread indifference across the country (FES, 2019).

In terms of political representation, 31 percent of young people do not feel represented at all, while 30 percent feel only slightly represented. Although this is a slight improvement on 2015, when 54.5 felt underrepresented (FES, 2015), the perception of inadequate representation remains.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) revealed that young people in the 15-24 age group, regardless of gender, believe that political engagement is often driven by personal gain or party affiliation. A patriarchal mindset is cited as the main barrier to girls' political participation. Older men (25-40 years) generally show a higher level of political engagement than younger age groups. Women in both age groups see limited opportunities for civic and political engagement, leading to lower levels of motivation and solidarity among young people.

Particular challenges faced by girls in rural areas include gender norms and inadequate transportation. Despite these differences, all groups agree that they have limited opportunities to bring about change. There is a general feeling of demotivation and lack of proactivity in terms of civic and political engagement. Many of the young people interviewed feel that government officials are indifferent to young people's problems (Figure 3) and that policies are not tailored to their needs (Figure 4).

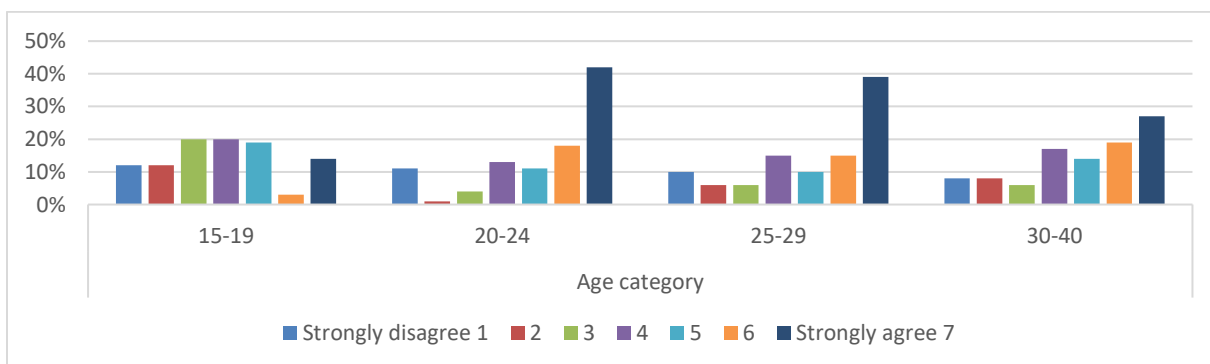


Figure 3. Young people's opinions on the issue of whether government officials are interested in youth problems (disaggregated by age)

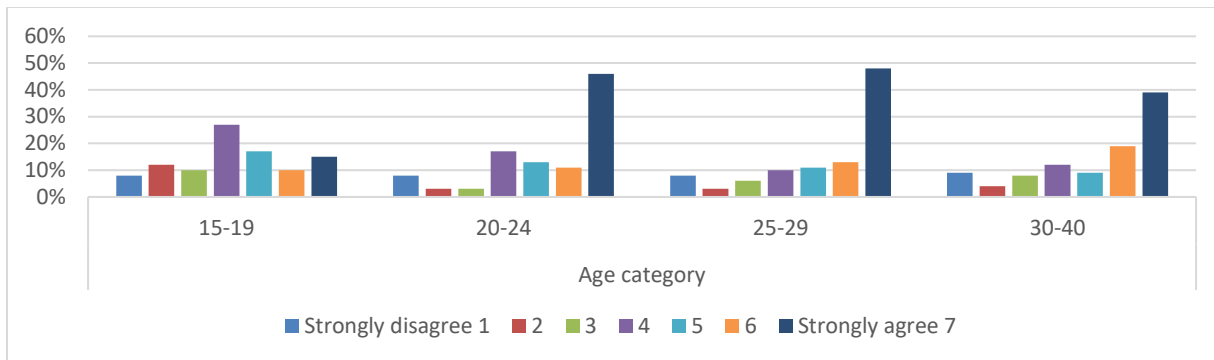


Figure 4. Young people’s opinions on the issue of whether government policies help youth (disaggregated by age)

Rural youth are also not engaging in volunteer activities nor are they part of a group or party member. A large share (77 percent) of the sample do not advocate for political views, while 23 percent do advocate for political views, ranging from 8 percent to 36 percent, being more emphasized in the older age category (25-29 and 30-40) with a slightly higher frequency among men.

#### 4. Conclusions and recommendations

While a relatively new policy and institutional framework supports youth at both national and local levels, a weak institutional framework and limited data availability make it difficult to address the specific problems of rural youth. Effective rural youth policy rely on high-quality data to support decision-making, but there is a notable lack of specific data on rural youth. National policies tend to treat youth as a homogenous group and may overlook the unique challenges and needs of rural youth.

Both national and local institutions do not currently have dedicated sectors or staff responsible for rural youth issues, which hinders targeted efforts to support this group. Strengthening the institutional framework and improving data availability is crucial for evidence-based decision making and the development of policies that address the specific needs of rural youth.

To address these needs, it is important that key public institutions at the national and local levels, including the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) and municipalities, designate specific departments or staff responsible for rural youth issues. This designation would demonstrate a proactive approach to addressing rural youth concerns. The designated departments or staff should have the necessary knowledge and skills to develop and implement effective policies and programs tailored to rural youth.

Given the specific support needs of rural youth, it is recommended that government-funded interventions be developed and implemented to address the unique challenges of rural youth. While existing youth measures take into account the gender perspective and provide inclusive

support, they do not adequately address the specific problems of rural youth in areas such as employment, social life and education. Policy makers should work with relevant stakeholders to develop and implement targeted support measures that meet the needs of rural youth.

In addition, it is crucial for municipalities, particularly in rural areas, to prioritize the establishment and strengthening of rural economic development directorates. Municipalities play a crucial role in local youth policy and rural economic development, and building their technical capacity is essential for supporting farmers and other rural residents, including young people. Investing in technical expertise for rural economic development will enable municipalities to effectively contribute to sustainable local economic growth and improve the well-being of rural communities.

***Rural areas in Albania face major challenges in providing quality education***, which is reflected in a steady decline in several key indicators, including a reduction in the number of educational institutions at all levels, a decline in the number of students, fewer teachers and the presence of combined classes. In addition, access to education is further hampered by inadequate transportation infrastructure. This lack of quality education is seen as a key factor in the exodus of young people from rural areas, highlighting the urgent need to improve education in rural areas to retain young people and improve their future prospects.

Addressing these educational challenges requires significant investment in infrastructure, including schools, laboratories, sports facilities and transportation systems. The availability of qualified teachers and the promotion of vocational training as a valuable alternative are also crucial. The inclusion of subjects such as civics and environmental education could further enrich the curriculum.

To encourage youth to stay in rural areas, several strategies are suggested. These include:

- Subsidizing transportation costs for primary and secondary education to improve access. Subsidizing tuition fees and offering scholarships to students who choose to study at the Faculty of Agriculture. This would incentivize young people to opt for agricultural education and thus acquire skills relevant to rural development. Lowering the grade point average for young people enrolling in agricultural higher education. This would facilitate access to agricultural courses and encourage more young people to study in this field.
- Creating employment opportunities in rural areas to incentivize the return of educated people. Establish a special fund to support young entrepreneurs from rural areas to start their businesses. The financial support would provide incentives for young people to start their own businesses.
- Support family businesses and promote strong community ties to create a sense of belonging.

Such targeted policies, especially for young people aged 18-25, could help address the migration issue and create sustainable opportunities for rural youth. The following proposed measures might be helpful in this regard:

In rural areas, ***inadequacies in social and economic infrastructure*** contribute significantly to the out-migration of young people. Youth are dissatisfied with outdated infrastructure such as poor roads, unreliable electricity, limited water supply, inadequate transportation and insufficient health services. Religious institutions and technology provide some degree of socialization, but are insufficient to meet the needs of young people. Although limited social life is not the main cause of migration, it does discourage many from returning to rural areas after leaving them. Efforts should be made to increase internet penetration rates and broadband access in rural areas, promote connectivity and facilitate social and economic development.

***Employment opportunities in rural areas are scarce***, and political influences often play an important role in securing jobs, particularly in the public sector. Agriculture offers potential employment opportunities, but cultural attitudes, limited resources and bureaucratic barriers discourage youth from participating. Sectors such as agriculture, livestock and agri-tourism attract varying levels of interest, with the lack of intergenerational transfer of agricultural assets encouraging youth to leave.

Key recommendations include granting tax exemptions, facilitating land acquisition, offering subsidies and interest-free loans, reducing bureaucratic hurdles, providing grants and support to young farmers and entrepreneurs based on minimal criteria and providing productive resources, and developing infrastructure, mentorship and support programmes to facilitate rural youth participation in agritourism and rural tourism as a viable employment option. To address these issues, policies should focus on promoting entrepreneurship and innovation in agriculture and supporting young farmers in land acquisition..

**Gender disparities** further exacerbate the situation, as traditional roles limit women's participation in agriculture and leadership positions, and girls are restricted in their activities. The patriarchal mindset also discourages girls' political engagement, while transportation issues hinder their civic engagement. Young women's participation in agriculture is limited as traditional gender roles discourage girls and women from becoming agricultural entrepreneurs and managing farming due to families and internalized perceptions that agricultural entrepreneurship is reserved for men.

When it comes to ***civic and political engagement***, rural youth generally lack proactivity and demotivation. Rural youth believe that political engagement is primarily determined by personal gain or party affiliation. The presence of a patriarchal mentality is seen as an obstacle to girls' political participation of girls. Gender segregation and transportation problems are barriers to girls' political and civic engagement in rural areas.

To improve the civic and political participation of rural youth, it is important to encourage and support their active engagement. Addressing gender inequalities and roadblocks that hinder girls' participation in political and civic activities should be prioritized. In addition, creating platforms that enable young people to express their opinions and participate in decision-making processes will contribute to their empowerment and meaningful contribution to society. To this end, youth civil society organizations and networks should be supported to consolidate their role and increase their influence on policy-making processes that promote the interests and priorities of rural youth.

While **gender mainstreaming and inclusivity** in government support measures are noted, it is important to consider whether these measures adequately address the specific challenges faced by young women in rural areas, such as cultural barriers to participation in agriculture and limited opportunities for civic and political engagement. Policies should aim to promote gender equality at sectoral, community and family level to ensure that women have equal access to education, employment, opportunities and the ability to participate in decision-making processes.

**Local youth action plans** adopted by communities have limited funding and local governments lack the capacity to fully implement the plans. Measures to support rural youth are perceived as insufficient and there is a need for more targeted support that specifically addresses the challenges of rural youth. Since municipalities are the level of government closest to rural youth and know their problems from practical experience, it is imperative that they strengthen their role in formulating and implementing policies. This proactive approach by municipalities is crucial in creating a sustainable perspective for the involvement of rural youth in the social and economic development of local communities.

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## 6. THE NATIONAL REPORT FOR BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Alen Mujčinović<sup>57</sup>

### 1. Introduction

Young people around the world are facing many challenges. Apart from rising youth unemployment, the socio-economic conditions that "shape" the youth environment exert additional pressure on this vulnerable group of people. Particularly vulnerable to such influences are marginalized populations, especially rural youth and rural women, highlighting the need to examine and focus on their challenges and needs in order to develop better policies and interventions to support youth development. Challenges and needs are heterogeneous and highly dependent on many interrelated factors, making it difficult to identify causal relationships and predict possible outcomes. However, youth is widely recognized as a cornerstone for future development, especially for the development of rural areas, which is reflected in various programs and strategies (e.g. Youth Guarantee or CAP programs). Nevertheless, countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) have only recently realized that youth is an important contributor to society and, more importantly, to stable economic growth, but programs and policies are still lacking.

Surprisingly, rural areas are becoming more and more depopulated and the rural population is being neglected, which puts the future prospects of these areas at risk. Therefore, it is crucial to change this picture and focus on rural revitalization from different angles (and with different programs). The first step is to provide more detailed information about the challenges and needs of rural youth. As the lack of data severely limits the possibility of detailed analysis, this study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining desk research with qualitative and quantitative data collection to reduce the lack of data and provide a comprehensive overview of the main challenges of rural youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

### 2. The institutional settings and legal framework for supporting rural youth

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) does not have a national youth strategy, as youth policy is primarily conducted by the entities. While the Republika Srpska (RS) has adopted a youth policy for 2016-2020, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and the District of Brčko (BD) do not have youth strategies. Some cantons and municipalities have developed strategies that focus on areas

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such as employability, participation, health and leisure. Non-governmental organizations are also working to improve conditions for young people, although the general legal framework often fails in practice despite its emphasis on transparency, equality and results, as evidenced by the deteriorating conditions for young people and the lack of reliable data.

Key institutions have implemented measures to promote youth employment, but these are often poorly designed and do not effectively target youth. Youth participation in political dialogs remains limited, especially among rural youth, due to a lack of interest and trust in political institutions. Migration from rural areas to cities and abroad is increasing and youth issues are hardly on the political agenda at all levels of government. Focus group participants agree that poor infrastructure — such as roads, internet, healthcare and education— - discourages young people from staying in rural areas or considering business development.

Policy measures to promote youth employment focus primarily on wage subsidies, social security benefits and tax incentives. Although there are programs such as "First Work Experiences", "Self-Employment Programs in Sarajevo Canton" and "Youth Entrepreneurship Programs", they are not sufficiently targeted at youth and early school leavers. Although there are training programs and wage subsidies, the results remain unclear. In addition, youth entrepreneurship is hampered by bureaucratic hurdles and limited access to finance, and the institutional framework for entrepreneurship is still in its early stages. Overall, the policy does not sufficiently address the specific needs of youth, especially in rural areas.

### **3. Situational analysis of rural youth – challenges, needs and opportunities**

Total population in BiH is shrinking, together with high and increasing age dependency ratio (i.e. 49.86 percent in 2022), and high and increasing elderly dependency ratio (i.e. 32.30 percent in 2022) putting the pressure on functioning of whole society.

#### **3.1 Education**

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is experiencing several negative demographic trends, such as population migration and a declining fertility rate, which have had a significant impact on school enrollment across the country. The complex and fragmented policy environment poses additional challenges, particularly in coordinating the education system across regions and ensuring cost efficiency (ETF, 2020). Although the Ministry of Civil Affairs is trying to create synergies through framework laws and strategic initiatives, political instability and mistrust are hindering broader progress in the education sector (ETF, 2020).

Focus group discussions revealed widespread concerns about the quality of education, slow adaptation to market demands and limited availability of resources, particularly in rural areas. Over 50 percent of survey respondents strongly agreed that access to quality education is not

equal, especially in rural areas. Rural education faces particular challenges, such as insufficient school capacity, reliance on one teacher for multiple grade levels (as mentioned by a young woman aged 15-24) and persistent prejudices regarding the poor infrastructure of rural schools. In addition, focus group participants expressed concerns about the lack of after-school programs, educational opportunities, and kindergarten facilities in rural areas. One participant (male, 25-40) said, "There are no after-school programs or educational opportunities," while another (female, 25-40) said, "You need help to enroll kids in kindergarten," leading to a "chain effect" where families move to urban areas for better educational opportunities.

Despite these challenges, some rural residents feel that their schools provide a better education, although the prevailing opinion is that urban schools are better (male, 25-40). In addition to the above, both key stakeholders and focus group participants note a mismatch between the availability of educational programs and the needs of rural youth. Some respondents said, "There are no topics that help me/us understand the broader context of the agriculture and food system" (male, 15-24), "There are no topics that improve my management and organizational skills" (male, 25-40), or "I can not choose topics that interest me, they (the education system) are not flexible" (male, 15-24).

### **3.2. *Employment, economic opportunities and mobility***

Employment trends show a significant increase in female employment, while male employment is declining in both rural and urban areas. Despite these shifts, unemployment rates are rising for both genders.

The discussions in the focus groups indicate that more women are actively seeking employment, particularly in the service sector. One participant (female, 25-40) mentioned that "rural areas cannot offer an attractive job" This could be due to the social pressure to find work, which causes many young people to seek employment opportunities at a young age. In addition, the lack of cultural, sporting, educational and other opportunities in rural areas could "push" residents to move to urban areas.

These observations are consistent with the views of focus group participants that rural areas offer fewer employment opportunities, leading to migration to urban centers. However, there were also some differing views among the survey respondents. The survey results show that the majority of younger participants, particularly 15-19 year olds (97 percent) and 20-24 year olds (82 percent), do not work for money. In contrast, a smaller percentage of older participants aged 25-29 (26 percent) and 30-40 (22 percent) are not in paid employment. In addition, a higher percentage of female participants (64 percent) do not work for money than male participants (36 percent).



These findings were confirmed by focus group participants, who noted that women in rural areas are often occupied with household tasks, which limits their ability to pursue more productive or attractive work. This contributes to a negative perception of life in rural areas, where agriculture and male-dominated activities predominate. These trends highlight the slow integration of rural youth, especially women, into the labor market and increase the risk of youth becoming economically inactive and falling into the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) category. As already mentioned, this could lead to further social exclusion.

The survey results are consistent with the focus group discussions in identifying state-owned enterprises as the preferred source of employment. Across all age groups, 38 percent of respondents selected SOEs as their preferred employment option, followed by self-employment in agriculture (14 percent), government employment (13 percent), employment in a small private business (12 percent), a large private business (12 percent) and self-employment in a non-farm business (7 percent). Interestingly, self-employment in agriculture is viewed more positively by older age groups, particularly 25-29 year olds and 30-40 year olds.

There are also differences between the genders: female respondents show a stronger preference for jobs in state-owned companies (46 percent) than male respondents (26 percent). Conversely, men have a more positive attitude towards self-employment in agriculture (24 percent) than women (8 percent). This was also reflected in the focus group discussions, where many male participants noted that while their wives were willing to stay in rural areas, they were generally not interested in agricultural.

The focus groups also revealed a low level of interest in entrepreneurship among rural youth. While some participants said, "We lack specific skills to start a business" (male, 15-24), others pointed to the lack of visibility of entrepreneurship programs: "Entrepreneurship programs and generally business support programs are not very well known" (female, 25-40). In addition, concerns were raised about labor shortages: "How can you start a business if there is no labor force in rural areas" (male, 25-40).

Regarding migration in search of better employment opportunities, opinions were mixed. While many respondents strongly agreed with the idea of emigrating for better jobs (Table 14), as mentioned earlier, the majority were not actively seeking employment. Female respondents were particularly positive about emigrating for better employment prospects. Both male and female respondents confirmed the "chain effect": the more young people leave rural areas, the more likely it is that others will follow.

### **3.3. Youth involvement in agriculture**

Data on the number of young farmers in Bosnia and Herzegovina are unavailable, making it difficult to assess their position within the overall agricultural sector. However, the number of farmers is decreasing as many young people actively avoid entering the agricultural sector and

staying in rural areas. This trend is supported by focus group discussions and survey responses, with participants noting that "parents are also pushing children out of the agricultural business" (male, 25-40). Several factors contribute to this decline, including agricultural price fluctuations, unstable policies, and the lack of support programs specifically targeted at young farmers. Some participants highlighted that while they are aware of support programs, "we heard about some programs, but we do not know how they work" (female, 25-40), emphasizing the communication gap.

Additionally, inheritance laws in BiH, which divide land ownership among all children after parents pass away, complicate the situation. Many young farmers face resistance from parents who are reluctant to adopt new methods, hindering access to niche markets that younger generations are interested in, such as horticulture, organic agriculture, and traditional products with geographical identification. As one respondent mentioned, "parents want to stick to the traditional way of doing agriculture, not changing anything, and we do not have land, so it is difficult to start something new" (male, 25-40). This generational divide further limits opportunities for young people in agriculture.

Still, farm succession rate is very low, indicating many problems in the agricultural sector. Many focus group participants say that farm labour has already become a problem, and part of the problem lies in the negative perception towards agriculture, but contrary to this, as observed from survey results, youth believe it is not a problem (51 percent of respondents among all observed age groups say that farm succession will not be an issue in the coming years).

### **3.4. Rural infrastructure**

Rural infrastructure in most parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is very poor, as noted by almost all stakeholders. Problems include poor road infrastructure, inadequate public transportation, poor educational facilities, a lack of teachers and limited entertainment options. There is a general consensus that rural infrastructure needs to be significantly improved. An ongoing debate suggests that digital nomads and remote workers could help reverse the negative trend of migration from rural to urban areas, but this would require a significant improvement in broadband internet access.

The 2012 household survey (UNDP, 2012) provides some insight into rural living conditions: 83 percent of rural households had a water tap in the house, 32 percent had a sewage system (62 percent had a septic tank), 99 percent heated with wood or coal, 63 percent had a cell phone, 50 percent had a PC and 44 percent had internet access. Elementary school, stores and local clinics are the closest facilities for rural households, while banks, hospitals and post offices are the furthest away. In their free time, rural residents tend to meet in cafés or religious institutions and spend much of their time in front of the television.

The survey results show that young people have a positive attitude towards improving rural infrastructure. 60 percent of respondents believe that investment is needed in better public services, data connections and housing. However, many young people perceive rural life as outdated, labor-intensive and undesirable, especially the younger age groups (15-19 and 20-24). In contrast, older participants (25-29 and 30-40) have a more positive image of farming and life in the countryside, according to the survey results. Improving the image of rural areas is seen as crucial to engaging youth and combating the negative perception that hinder their involvement in rural communities (Table 1).

Table 1. Youth opinions on the importance of improving the image of rural areas, by age (Survey, 2023)

Improving the image of rural areas	Age category				
	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-40	Total
<b>Strongly disagree 1</b>	1%	1%	3%	0%	1%
<b>2</b>	1%	1%	0%	2%	1%
<b>3</b>	5%	1%	2%	1%	2%
<b>4</b>	9%	4%	6%	10%	7%
<b>5</b>	14%	16%	13%	11%	13%
<b>6</b>	19%	18%	18%	19%	19%
<b>Strongly agree 7</b>	50%	59%	57%	57%	56%

### 3.5 Wellbeing and quality of life

The survey results suggest that young people generally believe that rural areas offer more opportunities for young people, especially among female respondents who have a more positive attitude towards these opportunities than their male counterparts. Female respondents particularly highlighted the sense of safety, freedom, lack of traffic, better lifestyle and access to healthy food for children in rural areas: "*There is a sense of safety, freedom, less congestion, better lifestyle, healthy food for children*" (female, 25-40), and "*more suitable for families as we have more space*" (female, 25-40). However, when asked how they viewed the rural lifestyle overall, agreement was not as high, indicating a gap between recognition of rural opportunities and full acceptance of rural living.

Focus group discussions also reflected this sentiment. Participants frequently mentioned that rural areas have the potential to attract young people and offer numerous benefits, but that the underdevelopment of these areas prevents them from realizing their full potential. While young people see opportunities in rural areas, they feel that these opportunities are not yet fully developed or utilized.

The complexity of the healthcare system in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a significant obstacle to improving healthcare for the population. The system is managed at entity and state level, with 13 ministries of health overseeing the operation of the system. In FBiH, the system is

decentralized, while in RS it is centralized. While BiH has a solid legal basis for health care, including several laws that indirectly affect adolescent health, four laws specifically address adolescent health: the Law on Prevention and Combating Substance Abuse, the Law on Road Safety, the Law on Gender Equality, and the Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education.

Healthcare infrastructure in rural areas is particularly poor, with limited access to doctors, nurses and facilities, often forcing residents to seek treatment privately. As one participant noted, doctors in the villages are only available at certain times, for example from 10am to 12pm, and in emergencies there is no one there to intervene" (Man, 25-40). This problem is exacerbated by the ongoing exodus of healthcare professionals: 267 doctors reportedly left the country in 2018, leading to regional shortages.

The efficiency of the healthcare system can be measured using various indicators such as fertility rate, life expectancy, prevalence of diseases, smoking and obesity rates and the availability of medical staff. Youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina face significant health risks, including the lingering effects of war, deteriorating living conditions, increasing substance abuse, poor mental and physical health, peer violence and lack of information on sexual and reproductive health. In addition, 10 percent of the young population does not have health insurance. The survey results show that young people are strongly in favor of improving mental health and well-being in rural areas.

### ***3.8. Rural youth aspirations, civic engagement, political participation and inclusion***

The lack of participation of young people can have a negative impact on their awareness of their rights and responsibilities in society and limit their ability to express or fulfill their needs. Although there is no data on the number of organizations that cater to rural youth, it is known that there are women's associations, farmers' groups and youth organizations in many communities. These groups are active in different ways and offer training programs or opportunities to participate in projects. However, many of these organizations are traditionally oriented and face the challenge of developing an entrepreneurial mindset and contributing to income generation.

The survey results show that young people are largely inactive when it comes to volunteering and political engagement. This low level of participation is attributed to a lack of trust in political parties. The survey results indicate that more male than female participants are involved in political or social groups, further limiting opportunities for female youth to make significant progress.

A key barrier to youth engagement identified in both the focus group discussions and the survey results is the limited social opportunities in rural areas. There is often a lack of cinemas, theaters or cultural spaces, and when such facilities do exist, they are not utilized by young people.

Interestingly, the survey data shows that more than 50 percent of youth participants believe that there is support for youth organizations in rural areas, which contradicts the results of the focus groups where participants noted that such organizations often lack support. Across all age groups, most survey respondents emphasized the need for dedicated youth spaces and more opportunities for youth democratic participation and autonomy. Such spaces could provide valuable opportunities for youth to actively participate in various forms of social engagement and help them develop skills and build trust among community members. The survey results also underline the importance of improving the conditions for youth participation in decision-making processes. This issue was frequently raised in the stakeholder interviews and focus groups, emphasizing the need to create both space and the necessary skills for greater youth participation in local governance.

Youth perceptions of peace, security and stability are also of great concern. Many young people are dissatisfied with the current situation, which leads to demotivation, disengagement and marginalization. This feeling is particularly pronounced in the 15 to 19 age group, where 32 percent disagree with the statement about peace and security, followed by 25 to 29-year-olds (28 percent), 20 to 24-year-olds (15 percent) and 30 to 40-year-olds (14 percent). This indicates an urgent need to address the concerns of young people in these areas to encourage greater participation and reduce social exclusion.

Table 1. Youth peace, security, and stability by age (Survey, 2023)

Peace, security, and stability	Age category				
	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-40	Total
<b>Strongly disagree</b> 1	32%	15%	28%	14%	21%
<b>2</b>	19%	14%	20%	14%	16%
<b>3</b>	15%	21%	21%	20%	20%
<b>4</b>	16%	24%	14%	21%	19%
<b>5</b>	11%	15%	10%	13%	13%
<b>6</b>	1%	2%	2%	7%	3%
<b>Strongly agree</b> 7	5%	8%	6%	10%	7%

#### 4. Conclusions and recommendations

Bosnia and Herzegovina faces a complex social, political and economic situation that has led to significant challenges, including high out-migration, brain drain, unemployment, social exclusion and particularly high NEET rates among youth and women in rural areas. The report underlines the urgent need for new policies and interventions aimed at empowering rural youth, promoting employment and improving the overall quality of life. However, policy makers

currently focus on traditional approaches with limited financial support for youth, especially in agriculture, leaving rural areas underdeveloped.

The overarching challenges facing rural youth in areas such as Bosnia and Herzegovina are rooted in inadequate policies, limited opportunities for empowerment and social innovation, and a lack of support for entrepreneurship. A comprehensive approach is needed to address these issues. Policy makers need to adopt a data-driven strategy, create an enabling environment for youth collaboration and innovation, and provide robust support for youth entrepreneurship. By implementing these recommendations, rural areas can be revitalized and the trend of youth out-migration reversed to ensure sustainable development for the future.

Key themes include:

***The lack of clear, actionable policies that address the needs of rural youth*** is a fundamental problem. There is a lack of understanding of the unique socio-economic conditions in rural areas, resulting in policies that do not meet the real aspirations of youth. The digital divide exacerbates the problem, as many young people lack the skills they need to succeed in a rapidly digitizing economy. Addressing this, requires a comprehensive policy framework that not only recognises the realities of rural youth, but actively incorporates them..

*Recommendations:*

- Conduct thorough research to understand the specific needs of rural youth, especially through data collection and surveys. Based on this information, tailor policies to local socioeconomic realities.
- Introduce programs to improve digital skills, as these are essential for accessing modern economic opportunities. In rural areas, this would mean improving access to the internet and providing practical training.
- Use technology and modern tools to track the impact of youth policies to ensure continuous improvement. Transparent reporting will help to build young people's confidence and encourage their engagement and ownership..

If these gaps are left unaddressed, young people will remain disconnected from opportunities, creating a cycle of low motivation and trust in policy initiatives.

***There is a lack of youth-oriented hubs, centres and programmes*** (especially in rural areas) to promote youth networking and activate youth. Youth empowerment is key to revitalising rural areas, and the creation of youth hubs and programmes that promote networking, social innovation and entrepreneurship can help. The lack of such facilities smothers creativity and opportunities for collaboration and discourages engagement in rural development initiatives. Encouraging rural youth to engage in agriculture, rural tourism and entrepreneurial activities can boost local economic growth.

*Recommendations:*

- Create rural youth centers that serve as platforms for networking, sharing skills and promoting social innovation. These centers should be places where youth can share ideas, explore new ventures, and work on community projects. Encouraging cooperation and collaboration can generate new solutions to long-standing challenges in rural areas.
- Encourage youth participation in social innovation projects, especially in agriculture and rural tourism. Programs such as WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) provide a model for exposing youth to organic farming and sustainable practices and sparking interest in rural development.
- These centers should aim to change perceptions of rural life and break down prejudices by demonstrating the value of agriculture, rural tourism and handicrafts. Young people who gain practical experience in these sectors are more likely to develop a positive attitude towards remaining in rural areas.
- Entrepreneurship can be a viable alternative to traditional employment in rural areas. However, young people need support to overcome their fear of failure and the perception that corruption will affect their chances of getting grants or starting a business. If these fears are alleviated, youth in rural areas will feel more able to venture into entrepreneurial ventures.
- Programs that focus on promoting entrepreneurship should go beyond financial support and offer mentoring, leadership training and innovation workshops. Involving parents in these programs is crucial, as they play a key role in shaping young people's aspirations and decisions.

***Rural youth face significant challenges in entrepreneurship due to a lack of trust, fear of failure, and insufficient information.*** There is a low uptake of current programs to support young entrepreneurs, partly due to a lack of awareness and perception of corruption. In addition, There is an urgent need to improve youth skills of young people, particularly in the areas of digital technology and agriculture, which are central to rural development.

*Recommendations:*

- Introduce comprehensive financial support packages for young entrepreneurs, especially those interested in agriculture. This could include tax exemptions, interest-free loans and grants. However, beyond financial support, measures are also needed to enhance the learning, leadership and negotiation skills of rural youth.
- The modern economy requires youth to be proficient with digital tools. Stronger programs should be introduced to promote digital literacy in rural areas, especially for

youth who do not have access to such opportunities. This can be achieved through partnerships between schools, local governments and private technology companies.

- Since the family plays a crucial role in the career choices of youth in rural areas, entrepreneurship programs should involve parents, especially in agricultural entrepreneurship. Promoting family farms can inspire a new generation of farmers who are open to innovation and collaboration.
- It is important to address traditional cultural norms that discourage young women from participating in agricultural entrepreneurship and leadership roles. Gender-specific measures should be taken to ensure that women have equal access to resources, education and decision-making power. Addressing patriarchal attitudes and providing women-specific support will enable a more inclusive development process.

A solid and consistent approach is needed to create a new generation of innovative young farmers and entrepreneurs. Such initiatives should focus on developing partnerships, promoting knowledge sharing and encouraging youth to actively contribute to their communities to ultimately promote rural revitalization and sustainable development.



## 7. NATIONAL REPORT ON KOSOVO\*

Vlerë Krasniqi<sup>58</sup>

### 1. Introduction

This report examines the challenges and needs of rural youth in Kosovo\* using a comprehensive mixed methods approach combining desk research, interviews, focus group discussions and a survey.

The methodology included an analysis of relevant legislation and policy related to rural youth, a review of statistical data and interviews with key institutional representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture, NGOs and academia. Four gender and age segregated Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with participants from different communities. In addition, a survey of 280 rural youth was conducted to collect data on their demographics, education, employment and lifestyles.

The report identifies several key issues facing rural youth, including limited access to quality education and training, high unemployment rates and insufficient economic opportunities that encourage out-migration. Poor infrastructure also affects the quality of life in rural areas. Many young people are disconnected from civic and political life because they lack opportunities for participation and institutional support.

To address these issues, the report makes several recommendations: Improve data collection for more informed policy decisions, develop specific initiatives for rural youth, increase investment in education and training to provide marketable skills, promote entrepreneurship and improve rural infrastructure to improve living conditions and stem out- migration. In addition, efforts to promote greater civic and political engagement of rural youth are essential for their integration into the socio-economic fabric of Kosovo\*. These measures aim to create a more favourable environment that promotes the growth and empowerment of rural youth and ensures their important contribution to Kosovo\*'s future development.

### 2. Institutional settings and legal framework for supporting rural youth

The policy and institutional framework to support youth in Kosovo\* is broad and includes various legal and strategic documents, action plans and programs to promote youth rights and

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development. However, the absence of specific laws or initiatives aimed exclusively at rural youth is striking. Instead, existing policies benefit rural youth indirectly through broader measures.

Key institutions include:

- Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports (MCYS): oversees youth activities and provides support through soft skills training, cultural events and educational assistance.
- Agency for Agricultural Development: A department of the MAFRD that focuses on rural youth by approving support schemes for rural development, prioritizing youth projects.
- Directorates of Youth and Culture (municipal): These institutions carry out youth-related activities and collect feedback on their needs.
- Youth and Civil Society Organizations: They make an important contribution to youth empowerment and receive grants from international donors such as the EU, KfW and EBRD. Organizations such as the Initiative for Agricultural Development in Kosovo\* (IADK) and the Network of Organisations for Rural Development in Kosovo\* (NORDK) work to increase agricultural production, advocate for improvements in rural policies and disseminate best practices.
- International organizations (USAID, GIZ, UNICEF): They provide resources, expertise and training opportunities for rural youth and empower them with entrepreneurial thinking and market-oriented skills.

At the local level, municipalities usually have their own departments for youth and rural development, but most lack a specific focus on rural youth. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development (MAFRD) primarily supports young landowners, especially women, through its Agency for Vulnerable Groups.

However, the report points to gaps in the accessibility and targeting of government-funded measures to the actual needs of rural youth. Applying for government support is often complicated and costly, which discourages rural youth from applying. In addition, youth-specific problems in rural areas are primarily addressed by non-institutional actors such as NGOs.

Organizations such as NORDK, NGO Lens, Kosova Education Center (KEC) and Youth Initiative for Human Rights - Kosovo\* (YIHR) contribute significantly to improving rural conditions through vocational training, educational reforms and advocacy for youth rights. Artpolis and the Initiative for Agricultural Cooperation and Rural Development (IACRD) also contribute by involving rural youth in cultural, community and agricultural development initiatives.

This combination of institutional and non-institutional support provides a multi-faceted approach to rural youth development in Kosovo\*, but is unable to provide a fully coherent strategy specifically tailored to the unique challenges of youth.

In Kosovo\*, rural policy focuses primarily on narrow areas such as agriculture and rural development, which are shaped by the National Program for Rural Development and the

operational strategies implemented by the government. These programs are often supported by international organizations such as IADK and USAID.

Kosovo\* is striving to join the EU. This goal influences policy making, particularly in the alignment of rural development plans with LEADER+ principles. Kosovo\* is developing its administrative capacity to prepare for a possible future implementation of IPARD.

However, the results of the interviews show that there is a gap between policy formulation and implementation, mainly due to insufficient funding. Government support measures for young people, including in rural areas, face challenges such as strict financial criteria and complex application procedures that restrict access for young people in rural areas. In addition, institutional cooperation remains weak, although NGOs and civil society organizations play an active role in supporting rural youth in the areas of education, employment, entrepreneurship and community development.

### **3. Situational analysis of rural youth – challenges, needs and opportunities**

Kosovo\*'s economy, largely supported by remittances and foreign aid, has seen some growth, but remains fragile, with high youth emigration being a persistent issue. Around 42 percent of Kosovo\*'s land is rural, with agriculture as the central economic activity.

#### **3.1. Youth socio-demographics**

Kosovo\*'s rural areas are characterised by low building density, limited infrastructure and an economy that is mainly based on agriculture and rural tourism. Demographic data on rural youth in Kosovo\* is outdated and based on the 2011 census, which showed that 62 percent of the population lives in rural areas. There are no specific publications on youth, and even less on rural youth. Moreover, the available information on youth is prepared in such a way that it is very difficult to segregate and obtain data on rural youth from the statistics. However, it is known that one of the main problems is the exodus of young people from rural communities (“brain drain”), which poses a threat to long-term economic and social development.

In terms of data availability, although there is data on youth, this is mostly presented as part of education and employment, which are the main drivers of migration, both locally (to urban areas) and internationally (to other countries). This was evident both in the focus group discussions and confirmed by the survey data: 63 percent of participants stated that they would move abroad for a job, with a higher percentage of women (68 percent) than men (57 percent). In addition, 65 percent of participants would move domestically for better job opportunities. Many participants agree that the comfort and enjoyment of their current life, as well as family ties, are among the main reasons that keep them in their place of residence. Furthermore, property ownership does

not appear to be a barrier to moving, but attachment to and identification with the region does, and they tend to think the region is the best place to work.

### **3.2. Education**

The Kosovo\* Strategy on Education (2022-2026) shows that the level of education in Kosovo\* is currently unsatisfactory. The results of the 2018 PISA study show that a significant percentage of students do not have the basic skills needed for successful social and economic participation. Educational attainment has a strong impact on employment prospects, with lower unemployment rates observed among those with higher education (19.2 percent) and vocational training (26.5 percent) (MEST, 2022).

Education has become one of the main reasons for the migration of young people from rural areas, both within Kosovo\* and abroad, as it is seen as a pathway to better employment opportunities and a higher quality of life. Focus groups, interviews and survey data indicate that opportunities for higher education in rural areas are extremely limited. Challenges include:

- Poor quality of programs: Outdated curricula, outdated materials, and a focus on theoretical rather than practical skills.
- Mismatch with labor market needs: Available programs often do not meet market demands.
- Limited soft skills training for rural youth.

Youth in rural areas, especially those from ethnic minorities, face additional barriers due to a lack of educational materials in their native languages. The survey results show that most rural youth rely on primary and secondary education, with many of them pursuing higher education opportunities abroad or in urban areas. Of particular note, 24 percent of 20-24 year olds and 23 percent of 25-29 year olds pursued education abroad, with a significant proportion migrating to urban areas for better opportunities.

These results underline the need for reforms in rural education, both in terms of quality and accessibility, to meet the needs of the labor market and reduce migratory pressures.

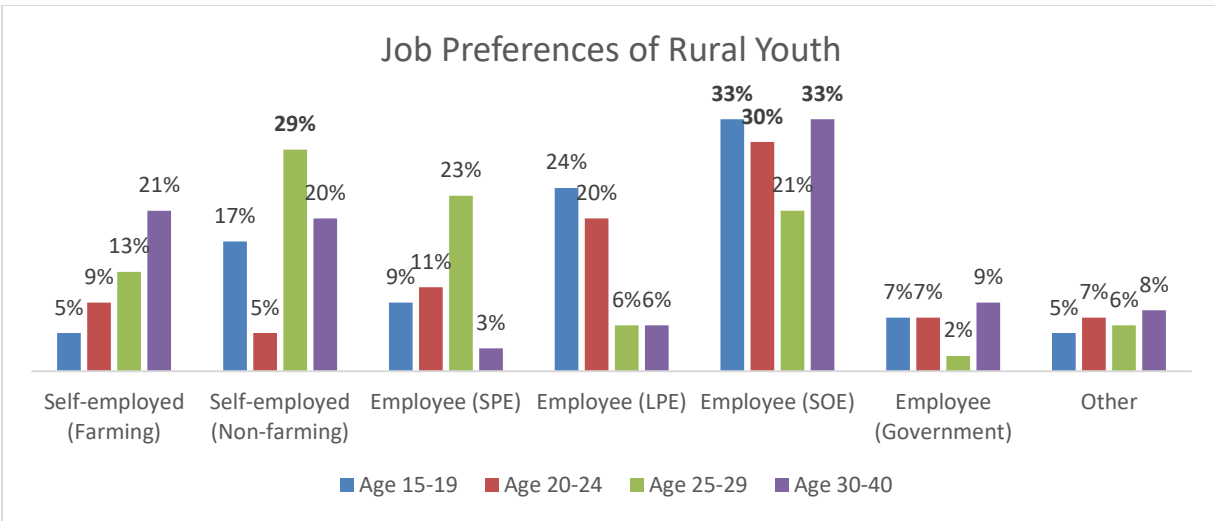
### **3.3. Employment, economic opportunities and mobility**

The focus groups and interviews conducted show that the rural labor market in Kosovo\* is perceived as small and that the available jobs are unattractive for rural youth. Key findings include:

- Jobs in rural areas generally offer very low wages. While the national average wage in Kosovo\* is 521 euros, wages in rural areas often stay close around the minimum wage of 150 euros. 65 percent of focus group participants reported earning less than half the average wage. This forces many young people to commute to the cities for work, which

is associated with considerable costs. In addition, securing well-paid jobs usually requires personal relationships, as nepotism is widespread.

- Youth in rural areas often struggle with resume writing, interviewing and filling out job applications, further hindering their chances of employment. Most of the jobs available are in less attractive fields such as manual labor, sales, waitressing and farm work, and offer little to no opportunities for advancement.
- 53 percent of respondents stated that there are no attractive jobs locally and 54 percent agreed that wages are too low to support a family. In addition, 43 percent of respondents, particularly women, fully agreed that it is difficult to find a job that matches their qualifications, with this opinion most prevalent in the 15-19 and 30-40 age groups.
- Youth in rural areas generally start earning at the age of 25. The survey data shows that 75 percent of 25-29 year olds are in employment, while this figure rises to 85 percent in the 30-40 age group. Men are more likely to be in employment (62 percent) than women (40 percent).
- Unemployment in rural areas remains high due to a lack of employment opportunities, exacerbated by low wages and substandard working conditions. Many rural employers offer wages below the legal minimum wage, meaning they do not receive government or international funding. The weak rural economy has led to widespread migration both to urban areas and abroad. In addition, youth in rural areas often lack the necessary start-up capital to start an agricultural business.
- The majority of respondents, especially women, stated that they would prefer to work in state-owned companies. Self-employment is more popular in the 25-29 age group, although only 13 percent are interested in agriculture, while a larger proportion (29 percent), especially men, prefer non-agricultural businesses.
- Despite a considerable number of individuals actively seeking employment (ranging from 50 percent to 56 percent within the 20-29 age group), over 30 percent of respondents report a shortage of available jobs. This mismatch between the skills of rural youth and market demands is a recurring theme in both the focus groups and desk research.



\*SPE: Small Private Enterprise; LPE: Large Private Enterprise; SOE: State-Owned Enterprise

Figure 1. Job preferences of rural youth by respondents' age (Survey, 2023)

Employment plays a crucial role in persuading rural youth to migrate abroad or to urban areas within the country. It also discourages many from returning home after training elsewhere, as they have limited employment prospects in their chosen fields and few show interest in agriculture. The problem of emigration due to employment concerns is further confirmed by the survey data. A remarkable 62 percent of respondents, predominantly aged 20-29, agree that out-migration is in search of better employment opportunities, with 68 percent of these respondents being women. These findings highlight a critical disconnect between the aspirations of rural youth and the limited economic opportunities available, exacerbating the trend of out-migration and underemployment in rural areas.

### 3.4. Youth involvement in agriculture

A statistical analysis from 2014 showed that only 29 percent of family farms were run by young people aged 25 to 45, while only 2 percent were run by people under 25 years. In 2021, €28.9 million was made available as direct payments to farmers, with a striking gender gap: 93 percent of the funds went to male applicants and only 7 percent to female applicants. However, data on the age of recipients of agricultural grants, loans or subsidies is not available.

According to the results of focus groups and surveys, the interest of young people in agriculture is declining. Agriculture is perceived as unattractive due to low wages, low profits and underdevelopment of the sector. In a focus group conducted in a well-known cattle-breeding area, many farms were closing because rural youth were not interested in continuing family farming traditions and preferred to migrate or pursue other employment. Participants mentioned a negative attitude towards agricultural work, which was exacerbated by the economic challenges of the sector.

Despite the negative attitudes towards agricultural work, the survey revealed more positive attitudes towards rural life, particularly in the 25-40 age group. Interestingly, men showed a stronger preference for rural life, while women tended to prefer the urban lifestyles.

For those interested in farming, the easiest route is often through the family farm, but research shows that agricultural opportunities (e.g. grants, training) are scarce for young people. This lack of support has led to fewer and fewer young people seeing farming as a viable option. Survey data showed that only 24 percent of participants owned a family farm, and 58 percent of these farms were for subsistence rather than commercial production. Inheritance patterns also showed that male children tend to inherit farms, and only 36 percent of family farms have a designated successor, with 75 percent of these successors being male.

The overall sentiment underscores the need for increased youth-oriented agricultural support, training and modernization to encourage more young rural dwellers to remain in the sector.

### **3.5. Rural infrastructure**

Kosovo\*'s rural infrastructure generally meets basic needs, although there are still challenges. Electricity and water supplies are generally reliable, but sewerage is a common problem affecting both rural and urban areas due to outdated infrastructure.

In terms of housing, residents of rural areas tend to own their homes, which contributes to overall satisfaction. However, satisfaction is slightly lower in the 30-40 age group, particularly in terms of shopping facilities.

Telecommunications (internet and mobile phone coverage) are relatively well developed in most rural areas. However, road infrastructure is problematic, especially secondary roads, which are often in poor condition or missing altogether, limiting transportation and access to important services.

One of the biggest challenges is public transportation, which is minimal and inefficient, leaving many rural residents feeling isolated. While healthcare is available, it is basic and inadequately equipped, so many rural residents have to travel to urban centers for better care.

The lack of social and recreational centers (such as youth clubs or sports facilities) is a major problem that many young people cite as a reason for their migration. The survey data shows that older young people (25-40 years) in particular are dissatisfied with youth cultural and entertainment facilities.

In terms of education, satisfaction is higher with primary and secondary education, but lower with higher education due to the limited availability of universities and training programs. (Figure 2).

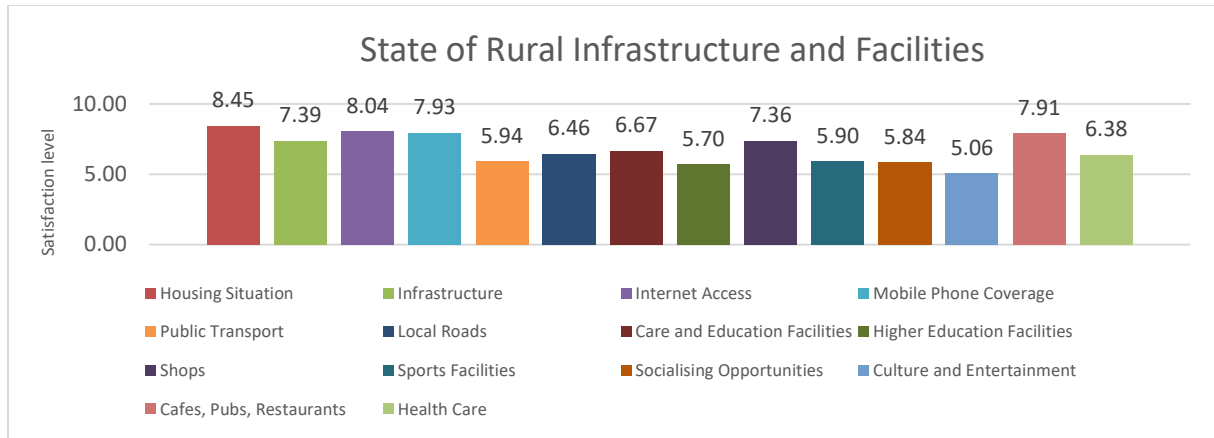


Figure 2. State of rural infrastructure and facilities according to survey respondents, with 0 being completely dissatisfied, and 10 being completely satisfied (Survey, 2023).

### 3.8. Rural youth aspirations, civic engagement, and political participation and inclusion

In Kosovo\*, trust in government institutions is generally low among rural youth. There is widespread dissatisfaction with the political situation, public administration, government, and judicial system, which many see as untrustworthy. The only institution receiving relatively higher satisfaction is the police, likely due to their visible presence and community engagement.

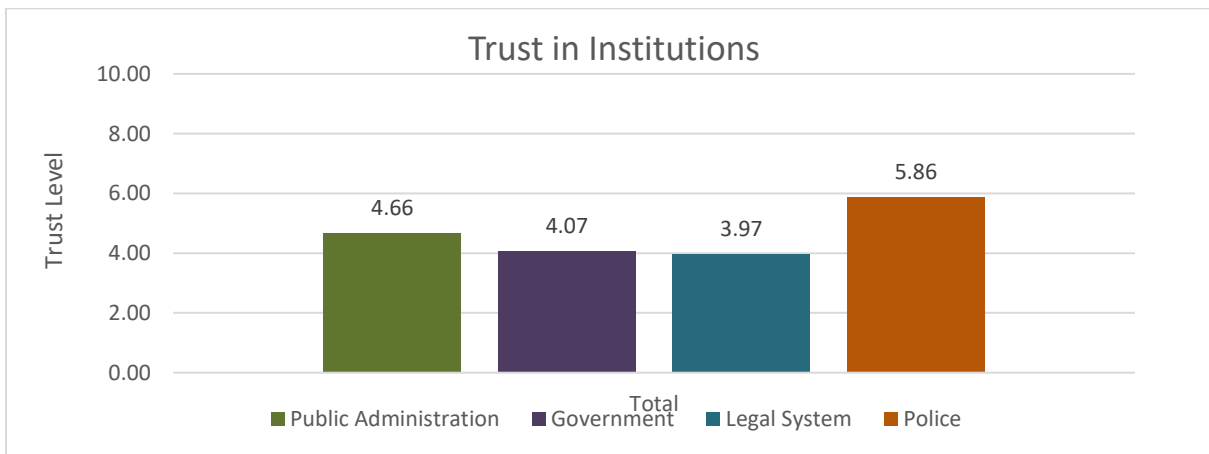


Figure 3. Trust in institutions according to survey respondents, with 0 being no trust at all, and 10 being completely trust (Survey, 2023).

A sense of demotivation pervades rural youth, reflected in their belief that that political connections and networks are the key to getting jobs and that hard work or merit take a back seat. This has led to a lack of civic engagement and political activism. Many young people feel underrepresented and disconnected from decision-making processes and feel they have no say in shaping their future. The survey data shows that 71 percent of rural youth do not volunteer and 78 percent do not belong to any organization, association or political party.



Rural youth also express frustration with limited opportunities and a lack of belief in equal opportunities for success, with many associating success with political affiliations or even unethical behaviour such as breaking the law. The protection of minority rights and the functioning of the court system are also criticized, as many do not perceive these systems to be fair or independent.

Despite these problems, it is acknowledged that freedom of expression and security are better managed and there is more optimism in these areas. However, there is little confidence in the independence of the press or in the existence of a strong political opposition.

One of the top priorities of rural youth is to secure quality jobs and improve educational opportunities. Respondents also emphasize the need for gender equality, mental health support and creating more opportunities for rural youth. Youth organizations and democratic engagement are also considered important, but are areas where young people are currently reluctant to actively participate.

#### **4. Conclusions and recommendations**

The research highlights several key challenges and gaps for rural youth in Kosovo\*, in particular the lack of data. There is insufficient statistical information, especially on employment and education, and even less when distinguishing between rural and urban categories.

The most important problem is migration. The reasons for this are the poor quality of education, the lack of employment opportunities and the general lack of prospects in rural areas. While life in the countryside is perceived as positive in itself, young people feel restricted by the lack of opportunities, leading many to migrate internally or externally. This problem is exacerbated by the limited availability of higher education and the mismatch between educational programs and the demands of the labor market, leading to demotivation and financial insecurity.

Kosovo\*'s rural policy is narrowly defined and often follows the EU framework. However, the implementation of these measures is inadequate due to insufficient funding and inter-institutional cooperation. A more comprehensive rural development policy is still emerging and there is a lack of targeted measures for rural youth. As a result, youth feel disconnected and underrepresented in the decision-making process and show little civic engagement and activism.

While the agricultural sector is important, it is underdeveloped and unattractive to youth. Government-funded interventions for rural youth often do not meet actual needs, and there is a heavy reliance on external organizations and donor-funded projects.

Institutional cooperation between ministries and municipalities is necessary to improve policy implementation. The report recommends incentivizing rural youth to stay by increasing employment opportunities, improving working conditions and strengthening the rural economy. This could be achieved by changing funding programs, supporting start-ups and improving

collaboration between institutions, universities and industry. In addition, involving youth in decision-making processes and strengthening civic engagement are highlighted as crucial for long-term rural development.

Based on the problems highlighted, some recommendations are given below that could help solve these problems in specific areas and sectors:

- Education system reform and skill development:
  - Curriculum Revamp: Collaborating with educational institutions and industry experts to update curricula in rural areas to align with the needs of the job market, promoting vocational and practical skills training.
  - ICT and Technology Integration: Enhancing access to information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and training in rural schools to bridge the gap between urban and rural education standards.
  - Partnerships and Internship Programs: Forging partnerships between educational institutions and local businesses to create internship and apprenticeship programs, providing practical experience and increasing job prospects for rural youth.
- Strengthening policies and financial support:
  - Targeted Policies for Rural Youth: Developing and implementing specific policies focusing on rural youth development, encompassing education, employment, entrepreneurship, and mental health support.
  - Increase Funding: Advocating for increased funding dedicated to improving rural education quality, employment opportunities, and overall infrastructure in rural areas.
  - Multi-sectoral Approach: Encouraging a shift from conventional rural development models to more comprehensive, multi-sectoral strategies that address the diverse needs of rural youth.
- Civic engagement and community development:
  - Youth Involvement and Empowerment: Encouraging and facilitating the active participation of rural youth in decision-making processes at local and national levels to increase their sense of ownership and responsibility towards their communities.
  - Civil Society Engagement: Strengthen civil organizations' outreach in rural areas and actively involve rural youth in their programs and activities, fostering a sense of community engagement and empowerment.
  - Promote Activism and Leadership: Encouraging leadership development programs, workshops, and training sessions that instil confidence in rural youth to engage in activism, civic duties, and local politics for positive change.
- Monitoring, evaluation, and implementation:

- Accountability and Monitoring Mechanisms: Implementing robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess the effectiveness of policies and initiatives targeted at rural youth, ensuring accountability, and identifying areas for improvement.
- Capacity Building: Providing training and capacity-building programs for government agencies, NGOs, and stakeholders involved in rural youth development to enhance their effectiveness in implementing policies and programs.

It is crucial to incentivize rural youth in Kosovo\* to stay in rural areas by providing more employment opportunities and better working conditions. Strengthening the local rural economy can be achieved through various methods, such as modifying financing programs targeting rural youth and young farmers, supporting business start-ups and improving institutional cooperation. In addition, the promotion of partnerships between institutions, universities and industry is crucial, as is the improvement of cooperation between the public, private and civil sectors.

An essential element is the greater involvement of youth in decision-making processes, especially rural youth. This would help address the migration issue by creating an environment where young people feel empowered and recognize the potential of living in rural areas.

There are currently policies in Kosovo\* in the areas of youth, agriculture and rural development, but there is a lack of targeted measures specifically for rural youth. The implementation of existing measures is insufficient and rural youth are demotivated because there are no good jobs in rural areas, which leads to migration to urban centers or other countries. Better inter-institutional cooperation, more inclusive decision-making and targeted funding for rural youth are essential to address these challenges and reduce out-migration trends..

## 8. NATIONAL REPORT MONTENEGRO

Ana Velimirović<sup>59</sup>

### 1. Introduction

The study seeks to understand the challenges faced by young rural women and men in Montenegro, specifically those aged 15 to 40 by investigating various aspects such as livelihoods, aspirations, mobility decisions, contributions to rural development, policy influence, and engagement in agri-food systems. Data was sourced from Monstat and international databases, though there is a noted scarcity of disaggregated data, particularly concerning rural youth by municipality and age group.

The study's findings were categorized into several thematic areas, which explored critical concerns such as institutional effectiveness, strategic documents, state support, donor involvement, and community support.

Despite Montenegro's institutional mechanisms that recognize the needs of rural youth, there are delays in adopting and implementing policies such as the Youth Strategy (2022-2026). The study highlights the necessity of improving local policy implementation and institutional capacity.

Montenegro's rural economy faces significant challenges. Agriculture plays a limited role due to the country's difficult terrain, with most agricultural land used for meadows and pastures. Livestock farming is prevalent but in decline, and rural areas are underdeveloped compared to urban and coastal regions. Depopulation and poor economic prospects exacerbate the situation.

The survey revealed that rural youth prefer public sector jobs over self-employment or private sector roles. Only 13 percent expressed interest in farming, with non-farm businesses being more attractive, particularly to men. Despite general positivity towards farming, few youth view it as a viable career path due to limited job opportunities and education in agriculture. Women, in particular, face barriers due to traditional gender roles and limited access to resources, which hinders their participation in entrepreneurship. Traditional gender expectations significantly restrict women's economic opportunities in rural areas. Political connections are often perceived as crucial for accessing desirable jobs. These limitations extend to inheritance practices and access to resources, further curbing women's ability to participate fully in the rural economy. The study noted a lack of civic engagement among youth, limiting their ability to influence policy decisions or improve their communities.

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<sup>59</sup> Ana Velimirović, National Expert

The study found that rural areas suffer from inadequate infrastructure, especially in terms of educational and employment opportunities, which negatively affects health services and overall quality of life. Many rural youth are compelled to migrate either to urban areas or abroad in search of better employment opportunities. The study identified migration as one of the most significant trends, driven by the limited job market and low wages in rural areas.

In conclusion, the study emphasizes that while Montenegro has made progress in recognizing the needs of rural youth, significant gaps remain in policy implementation, institutional support, and job creation. Addressing these challenges is essential for reversing depopulation trends and improving rural livelihoods.

## **2. Rural areas – current state and trends**

Montenegro's rural terrain is predominantly sloped (65 percent of the land has a gradient above 10°), limiting agricultural potential. In 2020, the total agricultural area amounted to 257.9 thousand hectares, representing 18 percent of Montenegro's territory, with the vast majority (94.3 percent) being meadows and pastures. Only 14 thousand hectares are arable land, suitable for plant production. Agriculture is structured around small farms, with an average farm size of 2.1 hectares.

Key crops include maize, wheat, barley, and forage crops like alfalfa and clover, which occupy 39 percent of arable land. Vegetable production takes place on 3.7 thousand hectares (28 percent of the used land), but Montenegro still relies on vegetable imports. Fruit production, while including traditional crops like apples, plums, and citrus, is hindered by limited yields and inadequate logistics, leading to substantial fruit imports. Olive groves, some over 200 years old, remain vital on the coast, while vineyards, largely for commercial grape and wine production, cover nearly 3,000 hectares.

Livestock farming is a critical component of rural life, especially cattle, sheep, and goat farming. However, the number of cattle has declined due to aging farmers and younger generations' disinterest. Sheep and goats are typically raised on family farms, while poultry farming has seen growth due to increasing demand.

Rural households rely heavily on agriculture for income, but employment rates and income levels lag behind urban areas, contributing to higher poverty rates. The lack of diversified income sources exacerbates economic vulnerability. Poor infrastructure further limits access to healthcare and education, exacerbating economic vulnerability. Environmental challenges, particularly the limited land suitable for agriculture, continue to affect rural sustainability and productivity.

## **3. Overview of the institutional settings and legal framework for supporting rural youth**

Montenegro has established several policies and frameworks aimed at supporting rural youth, but effective implementation remains critical. Enhanced collaboration between ministries, local governments, and NGOs is essential for addressing the specific challenges faced by rural youth, such as unemployment, migration, and lack of education. The Law on Youth, enacted to improve the social standing of young people, regulates youth policy, but the delay in updating this law since its proposed amendments in 2022 demonstrates gaps in addressing the needs of rural youth, especially in employment and education access.

Several institutional and legal mechanisms recognize the needs of young people in rural areas. Delays in the adoption of new strategies and policies are encountered in many sectors. Local policies and programmes are not effectively implemented.

The Youth Strategy (2022-2026), yet to be adopted, identifies rural youth unemployment as a key issue, with 48.2 percent of rural youth unemployed. It emphasizes the need for a strong support system, particularly for vulnerable groups. The National Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development (2023-2028) also prioritizes rural youth, offering financial incentives and knowledge transfer to attract young farmers. Programs like the IPARD (2021-2027) and the Agrobudget provide funding and direct payments for young farmers, aiming to improve rural livelihoods and economic sustainability.

Local Youth Action Plans, mandated by law, require municipalities to develop strategies focused on youth, but many municipalities have yet to comply. This has resulted in insufficient funds and limited attention to rural youth needs. The Rural Tourism Strategy also plays a role by promoting rural entrepreneurship through grants for young people and focusing on training and community activation.

Programs from the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, including the EU Youth Guarantee, promote youth employability. However, NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth, particularly in rural areas, require more targeted outreach. While initiatives like the Agrobudget provide economic support, delayed adoption of key strategies and weak local implementation have led to missed opportunities, impacting both economic development and social stability in rural regions facing depopulation.

#### **4. Situational analysis of rural youth – challenges, needs and opportunities**

##### **4.1. Youth Socio-Demographics**

The population distribution in Montenegro has remained relatively stable over the past five years (2017-2021), with more than 60 percent of the population residing in rural areas. However, migration to the capital city, particularly for employment and education, is often underreported by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) due to infrequent official changes of residence.

Employment opportunities and access to higher education institutions located predominantly in the capital city are the primary reasons for this internal mobility.

Based on the 2011 census, Montenegro had 620,029 inhabitants, of which 21.4 percent (132,702 individuals) were aged 15 to 29. This demographic consisted of 51.39 percent males and 48.61 percent females. Approximately 66.1 percent of these young people resided in urban areas, while 33.9 percent lived in rural regions. Due to migration trends for education and employment, it is likely that the concentration of youth in urban areas has increased since the census, leading to a demographic shift towards urban centers.

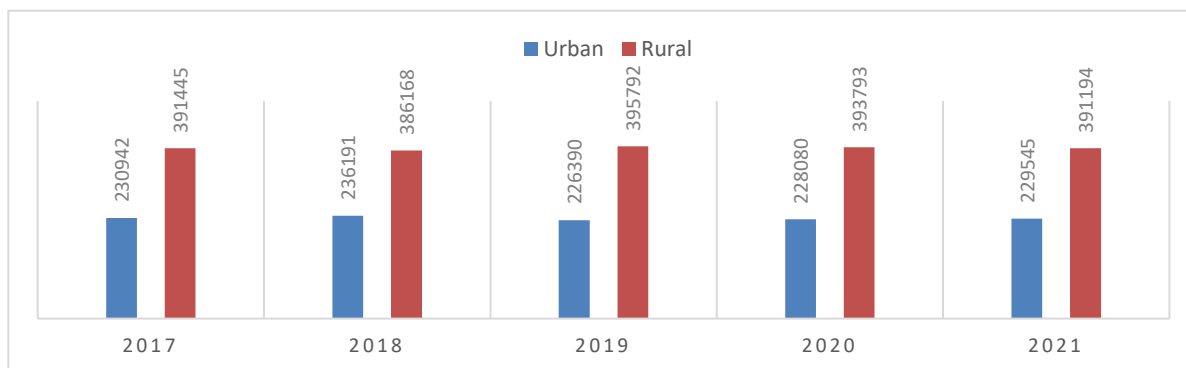


Figure 1. Population in rural and urban areas in the period 2017-2021 (Monstat, 2022)

#### 4.2 Education

Rural youth consider higher education an opportunity to leave villages for better future. Location of agricultural schools and faculties in urban areas is considered as one of the major constraints affecting agricultural development in rural regions. Young people often have to travel long distances to access education in urban areas.

In Montenegro, there has been a decrease of young individuals with lower qualifications and early school leavers in rural areas (Figure 2).

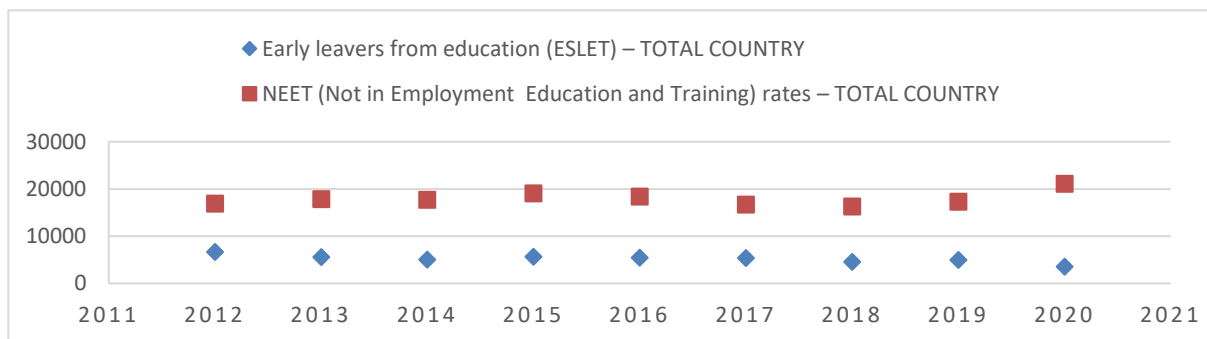


Figure 2. Early leavers from education (ESLET) and Not in Employment, Education, and Training (NEET) rates in the period 2012-2020 (ILOSTAT, 2022)

Insights provided through FGDs revealed numerous issues. Young people in rural areas often have to travel long distances to continue their education since most schools, including agricultural schools, and faculties are located in urban centres. Additionally, village schools are gradually closing down, and there is a noticeable lack of schools in the north, particularly in the field of agriculture, despite its economic importance in the region.

While education is considered good in rural areas, state support and educational resources are often lacking or difficult for young people to access due to demanding procedures and lack of knowledge and experience. As a result, many youths believe that staying in the city is the best way to gain the necessary experience and education, as they perceive limited opportunities in their rural surroundings. Furthermore, dissatisfaction with the social, educational, and healthcare systems in rural areas discourages young people from starting families in these regions. Poor state support and a lack of practical training through education compound the challenges faced by rural youth.

#### ***4.3 Employment, economic opportunities and mobility***

In Montenegro, the general unemployment rate decreased from 19.7 percent in 2012 to 15.1 percent in 2019. However, it rose slightly to 17.9 percent in 2020 before decreasing to 16.6 percent in 2021. Employment rates consistently show higher participation among the urban male population, followed by urban females, rural males, and the lowest rates recorded among rural females. In 2021, a decrease in the overall unemployment rate was noted, though specific data on employment, education, training, and NEET rates for rural and urban populations are not consistently available.

The youth employment rate has exhibited fluctuations over the years, ranging from 28.6 percent in 2012 to 39.2 percent in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a significant decline in 2020, reducing the youth employment rate to 31.3 percent. Unfortunately, detailed breakdowns by gender and urban/rural status were not available, making it challenging to analyze disparities among different demographic groups.

Survey results indicate there is a notable preference among young people in Montenegro for urban living, as they perceive urban areas to offer superior infrastructure, social life, educational opportunities, and employment prospects compared to rural areas. The lack of job opportunities, limited state support, and the perception that agriculture is a last resort contribute to the negative view of agriculture as a career option. Rural youth often feel that finding employment locally is challenging and are therefore more inclined to seek opportunities abroad.

Family connections and political affiliations are seen as crucial for securing employment, reinforcing the belief that personal competencies alone are insufficient. Women face additional



barriers, including traditional gender roles, limited inheritance rights, and job selection biases, which restrict their career options, especially in rural areas. FGDs with women revealed that they frequently encounter limited employment opportunities on their own properties.

Insights into employment patterns, preferences, and perceptions across different age groups and genders highlighted a strong dissatisfaction with job opportunities across all age and gender groups, which drives many to leave their villages in search of better prospects.

Among all age groups, 41 percent of participants feel that their current job aligns with their skills, with this perception being consistent across different demographics. Despite a desire to remain in urban areas for perceived better job opportunities, many believe that securing employment may require political and family connections, reflecting a lack of trust in the state system to provide equal opportunities. Only the youngest age group views political connections as less crucial for job finding; for all other age and gender groups, over 45 percent consider them very important.

Gender roles also influence job preferences, with a prevailing prejudice favoring roles that allow women time to raise children. Consequently, 31 percent of women prefer employment in state-owned enterprises, which are perceived as less demanding. State jobs are also valued for their perceived stability and lower personal responsibility. Young people, especially men, view rural employment opportunities as limited and consider agriculture a last resort. Although 24 percent of survey participants preferred self-employment in farming, only 6 percent actually work on farms.

Participants aged 30-40 show a preference for self-employment in farming (28 percent), followed by state-owned enterprises and small private enterprises (26 and 23 percent, respectively). For the 25-29 age group, these three categories are equally desirable (24 percent each). The 20-24 age group favors employment in state-owned enterprises and small private enterprises (21 and 29 percent, respectively), while the youngest age group prefers employment in large private enterprises (29 percent) and self-employment in non-farm businesses (24 percent).

Among the 21 percent of survey participants seeking jobs, the majority are women (28 percent) and are concentrated in the 25-29 (22 percent) and 30-40 (26 percent) age groups. These groups show the highest preference for self-employment in farming and employment in state-owned enterprises. Both men and women are nearly equally represented among those working for money, with the percentage of participants working for pay increasing with age (from 83 percent in the 15-19 age group to 21 percent in the 30-40 age group).

#### ***4.4 Youth involvement in agriculture***

Surveys, interviews, and FGDs reveal a pronounced contrast in lifestyle between rural and urban areas, with a prevalent prejudice against rural populations. Agriculture is often viewed as requiring intense dedication, which can lead to a perceived lack of social life. The absence of cultural amenities and a vibrant social scene in rural areas further drives the preference for urban living. Rural youth face challenges related to motivation, education, and fear of failure. The small size of rural communities, the migration of young people to urban areas for education and jobs, and the perception of rural life as harsh and unsatisfactory contribute to a diminished interest in agriculture. These prejudices are frequently reinforced by parents. To bridge the generational gap and improve opportunities for young people, local-level entrepreneurship education is seen as a key strategy.

Participants noted that agricultural production is self-sustaining, and there is a high awareness of state support funds available for skilled individuals. However, in 2020, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management (MAFWM) support for young farmers constituted only 1.07 percent of the budget for rural development. That year, 580 young farmers (4.3 percent) were involved in direct payment subsidy schemes. Given that young farmers often lack sufficient skills, the Agricultural Strategy emphasizes the need to modernize agriculture and rural areas. Encouraging knowledge sharing, innovation, and digitization in agriculture is a strategic goal that aims to create knowledge networks for transferring expertise, integrating scientific research, and continuously monitoring production.

Despite these challenges, young people recognize the potential for combining agriculture with tourism as a means of economic growth. Many express a willingness to engage in agriculture if they see successful examples, value rural life, and find more diverse job opportunities. Evidence suggests that ethno-tourism initiatives in certain villages have led to improvements in infrastructure and overall conditions. The limited availability of local products is seen as an opportunity for domestic production.

The survey also highlighted gender disparities in farm involvement, successor determination, and perceptions of farm successor gender. The level of youth involvement in farming varies significantly by age. Younger age groups (15-19 and 20-24) are more involved in part-time farming (64 percent and 60 percent, respectively), while older age groups (25-29 and 30-40) are more engaged in full-time farming (56 percent and 64 percent, respectively). Women are primarily involved in part-time farming (74 percent), whereas men are almost equally involved in full-time (54 percent) and part-time farming (46 percent). This gender disparity may be influenced by cultural norms and responsibilities.

Farms are evenly divided between commercial and subsistence production, with 54 percent engaged in commercial farming and 46 percent in subsistence farming. Men are more likely to be involved in commercial farming (59 percent), while women are more engaged in subsistence farming (62 percent). The survey indicates that a successor has been determined in 38 percent

of cases, with the likelihood of successor determination increasing with age. The highest percentage of successor determination is in the 30-40 age group (54 percent). Gender significantly influences successor determination, with a higher percentage of men (54 percent) having identified a successor compared to only 15 percent of women. Consequently, the majority of farm successors are men, with only 10 percent being women.

Overall, survey participants generally have a positive attitude towards farm work, with 43 percent in the 30-40 age group expressing a strongly positive outlook. Both men and women display positive attitudes towards working on farms.

**4.5 Rural infrastructure**

Main issues identified in interviews and FGDs include lack of road infrastructure, water supply and even in some cases electricity supply. Additionally, rural areas grapple with critical infrastructural deficiencies, which hinder both economic and social development. Road networks in rural areas are still unsatisfactory. Water supply systems are well distributed in Montenegro, but there are still remote places where water is not available. Sewerage systems in Montenegro are not sufficiently developed. It is necessary to increase the Internet coverage in rural areas in order to enable access to public services supported by digitization and the use of digital tools in remote cooperation activities. Health services are not provided in the majority of rural areas and access to health services implies travel to cities.

Need for investment into improved infrastructure in rural areas in order to provide equitable delivery of public services, data connectivity and housing opportunities for young people is strongly agreed by majority of participants in all age and gender groups, with the majority belonging to the age group 30-40 (74 percent) (Figure 3).

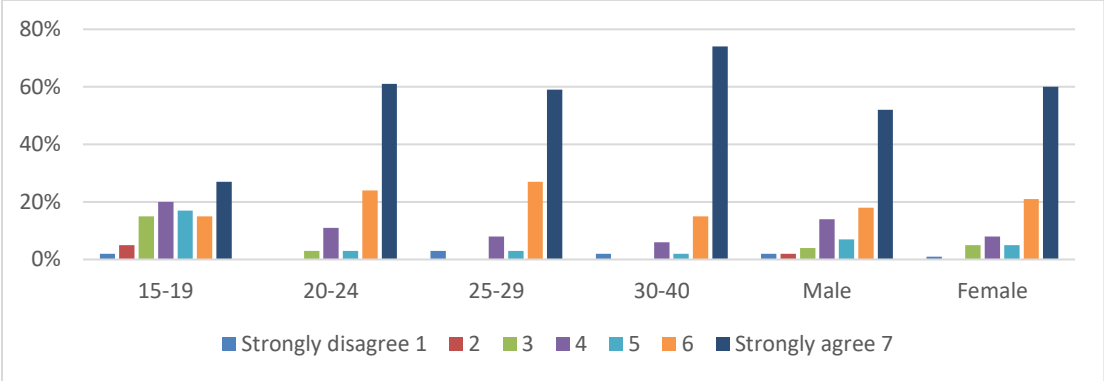


Figure 3. Investing into improved infrastructure in rural areas in order to provide equitable delivery of public services, data connectivity and housing opportunities for young people, by age and gender (Survey, 2023)

#### **4.6 Migration**

Young people from rural areas are increasingly drawn to urban centers, especially in search of stable jobs in the public sector, which are perceived as more attractive than private sector employment or self-employment. Once they have experienced the benefits of urban life, it becomes difficult to persuade them to return to rural areas. Strategies to prevent village exodus and promote long-term rural development are urgently needed, even though the COVID-19 pandemic has rekindled interest in rural life.

Many rural youth doubt their chances of finding suitable employment in the country and are therefore considering emigrating. Despite these concerns, there is a willingness to stay in rural areas if the employment opportunities go beyond agriculture and tourism. The survey results show that the willingness to move either abroad or within the country for employment is almost equal: 52 percent are willing to move abroad, 48 percent prefer to stay in the country. Both abroad and within the country, more men than women are willing to relocate.

Comfort, enjoyment, and family tradition have a significant influence on the decision to stay in the current location, with these factors becoming more important with increasing age. Many respondents cite family ties as the main reason for staying, particularly older people and men. To prevent depopulation, it is crucial to address the lack of diverse employment opportunities and the lack of strong farmer organizations to advocate for rural interests.

Rural youth awareness of climate change and its impact on agriculture is also growing. Many are expressing an interest in further education, particularly in the areas of rural tourism and sustainable agriculture, indicating a move towards environmentally friendly practices. This change in mentality is an opportunity for the revitalization of rural areas.

#### **4.7 Wellbeing and quality of life**

Young people from rural areas express dissatisfaction with the social, educational, and healthcare systems available to them. They see potential in combining tourism and agriculture for economic growth, but the lack of job opportunities beyond these sectors remains a significant concern. Many acknowledge that village life is healthier than urban living, yet a strong family hierarchy often prevents younger members from making independent decisions. Parents frequently discourage children from continuing agricultural work. Women, in particular, face disadvantages regarding inheritance rights compared to men, as highlighted by survey results showing that 46 percent of respondents live in multi-generational households.

The survey also shows that most participants feel financially secure, with 42 percent able to cover extra costs and 31 percent having sufficient income for essential needs. However, a small percentage (6 percent) report struggling to meet basic needs. Wage income is the primary source of financial support for 66 percent of participants, especially those in the 20-24 age group, while

farm income is the main source for 23 percent, with a higher percentage among the 25-29 age group. Political connections are deemed important, particularly among women, reflecting Montenegro's transitional political landscape.

Rural areas lack cultural amenities such as theaters and cinemas, and women are often treated poorly, with many advised by their families to leave the villages. In contrast, the coastal region provides a more positive example, where women inherit land and contribute significantly to the economy. The previous generation's shift from extensive to intensive production without adequate training has negatively impacted rural communities, alongside issues like insufficient state support, difficulty accessing funds, and challenges with product sales.

Despite the challenges, a substantial number of participants value hard work, intelligence, and skills, emphasizing the importance of effort in overcoming obstacles. However, many believe that equal opportunities for employment and education are still lacking across rural areas.

#### ***4.8 Rural youth aspirations, civic engagement and political participation and inclusion***

Survey results reveal mixed sentiments regarding minority rights and law enforcement, with 24 percent of participants rating the protection of minority rights moderately effective (grade four) and 27 percent rating law and order similarly. However, there is widespread distrust in the fairness and independence of the court system, with 28 percent disagreeing that it is fair and 44 percent expressing either strong disagreement or moderate agreement about its independence.

Personal freedom to travel abroad is highly valued, with 27 percent strongly agreeing that this freedom exists. Interestingly, 32 percent of participants, especially women, report feeling no guilt about moving abroad. Routine is cited by 31 percent as the main reason for staying in their current location, with men more likely to cite this than women. Attachment to the region is a strong reason for staying, with 42 percent agreeing.

A significant number of participants (36 percent) believe that the situation for rural youth is worsening, with both men and women sharing this concern. Many feel that officials do not prioritize youth issues, with policies for young people rated poorly by 35 percent of those aged 25-29 and 34 percent of those aged 30-40, indicating frustration with the lack of meaningful support.

Social life in rural areas is limited due to a lack of cultural amenities, and women often face poor treatment, although the coastal region offers a positive example where women play a prominent role in the economy and inherit land. Participants cite a lack of state support, difficulty accessing funds, and problems with selling agricultural products as major issues in rural areas. Distrust in both state systems and foreign projects is common, and participants call for more transparent state support, simplified grant processes, and the establishment of farmer associations.

Community engagement is low, with only 26 percent of participants involved in volunteer activities, and 21 percent affiliated with a group or political party. Men are more likely than women to participate in volunteer activities (33 percent vs. 19 percent) and to belong to groups or political parties (30 percent vs. 13 percent). This disparity may reflect differing interests or priorities between genders in community involvement.

## ***5. Conclusions and recommendations***

Montenegro is facing significant rural depopulation, with economic development concentrated in the coastal and central regions, while the northern region lags behind. This disparity is driven by lower income levels, higher unemployment, underdeveloped infrastructure, and insufficient educational opportunities. Agriculture has been neglected, contributing to GDP declines, unemployment, and rural-urban migration.

Although institutional and legal mechanisms recognize the needs of rural youth, there are delays in implementing strategies and policies. Rural youth in Montenegro face challenges such as depopulation, limited funding for young entrepreneurs, inadequate skill development, and weak networking opportunities. Women in rural areas face traditional gender roles that often push them to leave villages, and inheritance laws tend to favor men, further limiting opportunities for women. Additionally, infrastructure deficits and a lack of diverse job opportunities hinder the quality of life in rural areas.

Survey results show that rural youth are generally positive about farming and rural life, but they express dissatisfaction with job and education opportunities. Political connections are deemed crucial for success, and there is widespread distrust in state systems. Strengthening institutional support, improving rural infrastructure, and diversifying job opportunities are key recommendations for improving conditions for rural youth.

Main recommendations include:

- a) Develop and implement targeted policies: Adopt and implement the Youth Strategy (2022-2026) to address the specific needs of rural youth that will address unique challenges and requirements faced by young people. However, generic policies often overlook the specific challenges faced by young people in rural areas. Staff from the Ministry of Youth and Sports (MYS), with expertise in youth development, engagement, and empowerment, can play a key role in agricultural and rural development policies by collaborating with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management (MAFWM). Involving them in joint initiatives, such as training sessions, workshops, and collaborative projects, will help integrate the needs

and perspectives of rural youth. This collaboration allows both ministries to share best practices, enhance skills, and address the challenges faced by rural youth more effectively.

- b) Enhance institutional support: Strengthen the capacity of institutions responsible for implementing youth-related policies and programmes, investing in knowledge, skills, and resources necessary for organizations to effectively carry out their mandates related to youth development. This includes providing training opportunities, technical assistance, and access to relevant information and expertise. It is necessary to translate youth-related policies and programs into concrete actions that are easily accessible. Institutions should deliver essential services, such as education, employment assistance, healthcare, and social services. It was noted lack of capacities and solution to deliver this services.
- c) Improve infrastructure and services: Invest in the development of rural infrastructure, including transportation, communication, healthcare facilities, educational institutions, and access to basic services. This will enhance the quality of life and make rural areas more attractive for both living and working. Enhancing communication infrastructure, such as broadband internet access and mobile networks, fosters connectivity and enables rural residents and businesses to access information, services, and markets more easily. In this way, opportunities for the rural youth engaged in businesses other than agriculture may arise. Easily accessible vocational trainings in different subjects intended for all age groups might enhance the productivity and willingness to remain in rural area. For example, organisation of summer schools in agro-tourism might empower residents with the knowledge and skills needed to pursue entrepreneurship in this field.
- d) Basic services: Investing in basic services like clean water supply, sanitation, electricity, and waste management improves living conditions and public health in rural communities. Access to reliable and affordable basic services enhances the quality of life, attracts residents and businesses, and promotes sustainable development and reduces poverty in rural areas.
- e) Promote entrepreneurship and employment opportunities: Provide financial support, grants, and incentives for young entrepreneurs in rural areas. Facilitate access to credit and provide business development services to help rural youth establish and grow their businesses. Encourage public-private partnerships to create more employment opportunities in sectors relevant to rural areas, such as agriculture, rural tourism, and sustainable development. Direct payments for young agricultural producers and support for starting the business for young producers exist in Agro budget, however it is necessary to increase this funds and facilitate the procedures for obtaining them.
- f) Enhance education and skills development: Improve the quality of education in rural areas, with a focus on practical and vocational skills that are relevant to local industries. This can be done through vocational training, apprenticeship programmes, and partnerships with

industries to provide hands-on experience. Decentralizing higher education facilities, particularly by focusing on the Nord region, will improve access of rural residents to education.

- g) Job creation and diversification: Efforts should be made to create more job opportunities in rural areas beyond traditional agriculture and tourism. IT services can create remote job opportunities in rural areas. These include jobs in software development, digital marketing, graphic design, and virtual assistance. Rural residents can work remotely for companies worldwide. Enhancing healthcare facilities can create job opportunities for healthcare professionals in rural areas. Educational institutions and training centres in rural areas can create jobs in teaching, administration, and support services. These institutions can offer courses in vocational training, adult education, and skills development tailored to local needs. Furthermore, encouraging creative industries such as crafts, arts and cultural heritage can generate employment opportunities in rural areas. Development of diversified jobs can lead to development of social life through local markets, festivals, and events, contributing to cultural preservation and economic vitality.
- h) Promoting civic engagement: Encouraging civic engagement and community participation can empower rural youth and enable them to contribute to decision-making processes. Establishing farmer associations and other platforms for collective action can help address common challenges and amplify the voices of rural youth. Organizing youth forums for young people in rural areas gives platform for their opinions, concerns, and ideas that can facilitate discussions on community development. For example, a youth committee can be established to collaborate with local authorities on issues like infrastructure development, education, and environmental conservation. Encouraging rural youth to participate in volunteer activities and service-learning opportunities cultivates a spirit of altruism and civic responsibility. Providing leadership focused on communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and project management empower young people to initiate positive changes and become effective community leaders.
- i) Gender equality and empowerment: Policies should focus on promoting gender equality and empowering women in rural areas. Policies that promote gender equality related to land ownership and property rights, ensuring that women have equal rights to land and other productive resources. This may involve legal reforms to recognize and protect women's land rights, as well as awareness campaigns.
- j) Preventing village abandonment: Policies and programmes should be developed to prevent village abandonment and encourage young people to stay in rural areas. State could involve attracting new industries through incentives like tax breaks. Encouraging entrepreneurship



can be done through policies providing start up grants and mentorship programs tailored to rural entrepreneurs. Policies could include offering subsidies for homebuyers.

- k) Youth involvement in farming: Policies should focus on promoting agriculture as an attractive career option for young people. This can be achieved through practical training programmes, successful examples, and diversifying job opportunities in the agricultural sector. Encouraging the integration of agriculture and tourism can create additional job prospects and attract young people to rural areas. Success stories of young farmers can inspire other young people to pursue careers in farming through organizing farm tours or agricultural fairs where young farmers can share their experiences and insights.
- l) Addressing political connections: Efforts should be made to promote meritocracy and discourage reliance on political connections for success. Establishing independent commissions monitoring and recruitment that can investigate allegations of nepotism or corruption.
- m) Foster collaboration between the government, civil society, and the private sector: Establish partnerships between various stakeholders to develop comprehensive and sustainable policies and programmes that address the needs of rural youth. Encourage the involvement of local communities in decision-making processes. This can be done through development of youth employment programs tailored to the needs of specific rural areas.

## 9. NATIONAL REPORT NORTH MACEDONIA

Emelj Tuna, Ivana Janeska Stamenkovska and Ana Simonovska<sup>60</sup>

### 1. Introduction

Understanding the situation and needs of rural youth in North Macedonia is essential for effective policymaking and development planning. However, reliable data on this demographic group remains limited, posing a significant challenge to evidence-based decision-making. Of particular concern is the quality and availability of data pertaining to rural youth education, training, and their status as Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET). Despite these challenges, there have been notable improvements in the collection and dissemination of rural youth employment statistics, with disaggregated data now publicly accessible.

Recognizing the importance of obtaining more insights into the role and challenges faced by rural youth in North Macedonia, a mixed data gathering approach was adopted for the purpose of this report. This approach combined quantitative and qualitative methodologies, including desk research, focus group discussions (FGDs), interviews with stakeholders from relevant institutions concerning youth issues. Moreover, a survey was conducted among 268 young living in rural areas spanning different regions in North Macedonia.

### 2. Overview of the institutional setting and legal framework for supporting rural youth

The institutional framework for youth in North Macedonia is defined by strategic and legislative documents aimed at the development and empowerment of youth. The National Youth Strategy 2016-2025 serves as the central document for youth-related activities. It targets nine key areas such as education, employment and health, with a particular focus on vulnerable youth groups such as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) and those facing geographical or financial challenges. Despite its broad vision, the strategy has been hampered by the lack of specific budgetary allocations, which limits its full implementation. In response to the changing needs of youth, a new national youth strategy for the period 2023-2027 is currently being developed, with a draft to be finalized through a public consultation in 2023. This initiative is supported by international organizations such as the UNDP, the UNFPA and the OSCE.

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The Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy (2020) is another important milestone in youth policy, as it sets the age limit for young people at 29 and introduces mechanisms such as a national advisory body for youth policy and a register for youth organizations. The law also obliges municipalities to adopt youth strategies and establish youth centers, institutionalizing youth participation at all levels. However, despite gender-specific budgetary frameworks designed to support rural areas, there are still gaps in comprehensively addressing rural youth issues.

The Program for Financial Support of Rural Development (under MAFWE) provides crucial support for rural youth, offering grants under measures 112 and 113 to help young farmers enter agricultural activities. Additional support is provided by the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance in Rural Development (IPARD), which encourages youth involvement in agriculture by providing financial, technical, and capacity-building assistance.

The Agency for Youth and Sports plays a leading role in youth policy and coordinates with various institutions such as the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and local self-governments. However, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management (MAFWE) does not have a separate unit for youth in rural areas, although it is responsible for many measures that affect rural communities. Although MAFWE offers various grant programs and support measures for rural youth, there is a recognized need to improve the dissemination of knowledge and entrepreneurial skills among this population group.

Youth civic engagement is spearheaded by the National Youth Council of North Macedonia (NYCM), which brings together 51 organizations advocating for youth rights. However, there remains a gap in addressing specific rural youth issues, as much of the youth advocacy is focused on broader urban and regional concerns. The Parliamentary Club on Youth Affairs and Policies, established in 2017, provides a platform for youth voices within government and works with youth organizations and policy groups to address key issues facing young people.

### **3. Situational analysis of rural youth – challenges, needs and opportunities**

#### ***3.1 Youth demographics***

Rural areas in North Macedonia encompass approximately 88.7 percent of the nation's territory, and are home to 47.5 percent of its total population. The country is divided in 80 municipalities containing 1 783 settlements including 34 cities and 1 749 villages (SSO/NMF, 2022). According to the Population Census from 2002, the number of uninhabited settlements was 145, i.e. 8.5 percent, a number which increased to 205 uninhabited places in 2021, i.e. 11.5 percent of the total registered settlements in the country (according to the last census of 2021) (SSO, 2022).

Between 2016 and 2020, rural youth aged 15 to 29 years account for about 20 percent of the total rural population, with an average of 251.8 thousand people, reflecting a declining trend. Meanwhile, the rural population is experiencing an aging process, particularly with a slight increase in the 30-39 age group, which averaged around 194.5 thousand people and made up around 16 percent of the rural population. Urban areas show similar trends, with a smaller youth demographic; urban youth aged 15-29 averaged 161 thousand, while 30-39 year olds averaged 130 thousand over the same period.

According to the official statistics' the percentual share of rural youth in the total rural population is gradually decreasing, from 38 percent in 2016 to 35 percent in 2020, with decrease of 1 percent each year in the 15 to 29 age category of rural youth. In terms of female/male distribution, both age groups show a rather equal representation of male and female rural youth.

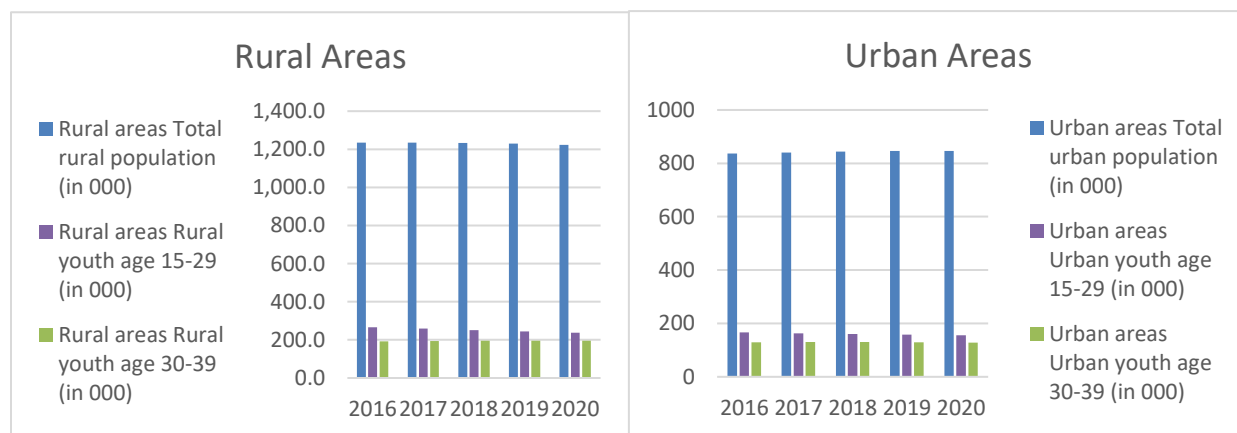


Figure 1. Number of population in rural vs. urban areas, 2016-2020 (Source: SSO, 2022)

### 3.2 Education

The analysis reveals several critical challenges faced by rural youth in North Macedonia, especially in education and employment opportunities. Rural youth primarily receive their education locally, with 86 percent of respondents aged 15-19 attending schools in rural areas. However, the educational attainment level varies significantly, with high school education being the most prevalent among the economically active rural population (45 percent of the labor force). Despite this, the quality of education in rural areas is perceived as lower, particularly in elementary education, where many teachers lack subject-specific expertise due to staffing shortages.

There is a clear gender gap in the choice of secondary schools: Boys tend to opt for vocational schools, which are geared towards the demands of the local labor market, while girls attend general education schools, which often require further education in urban areas. These

differences affect their future employment prospects and migration patterns, as many young people leave rural areas to take advantage of better opportunities in urban centers and rarely return.

Higher education presents another challenge. While rural youth can access some high school education near larger cities, pursuing university education requires relocation to urban areas, leading to significant out-migration. This migration is compounded by the mismatch between educational programs and labor market needs, as well as a lack of practical vocational training, especially in agricultural fields. Many young people are aware of the decreasing appeal of agricultural education and emphasize the need for more practical experience in this sector.

Despite satisfaction with the general quality of education, rural youth struggle with transitioning to employment. The focus group discussions (FGDs) revealed that mismatches between education and the labor market, as well as a lack of vocational education, exacerbate these difficulties. Rural youth are also aware of the absence of practical education, which hinders their employability, particularly in agriculture and other rural industries. For those aged 25-40, a major driver for leaving rural areas is the lack of educational and economic opportunities, not only for themselves but also for their children.

These educational and economic challenges create a cycle of out-migration from rural areas, reducing the availability of skilled labor and further limiting the potential for local development. The disparity in opportunities between urban and rural areas, coupled with inadequate infrastructure and social services, continues to drive young people to seek better prospects elsewhere.

### ***3.3 Employment, economic opportunities and mobility***

Employment and the retention of rural youth in North Macedonia are crucial concerns, especially given that around half of the rural population is economically active. Males dominate the labor force in rural areas, with an average activity rate of 70 percent between 2012 and 2021, while the economically active female population ranges from 30 percent to 40 percent. In contrast, urban areas exhibit a slightly different dynamic, where approximately 58 percent of the total labor force is active, with males also dominating the workforce at a 67 percent rate.

Over the years, the rural employment rate has shown steady improvement. From 2012 to 2021, it surged by 23 percent, reaching 45.6 percent by 2021. This growth is primarily driven by rural male labor, which accounts for an average of 55 percent of total employment during this period. However, the rural female employment rate remains significantly lower, with an average of just 31 percent.

The unemployment rate has dropped dramatically, from 31.4 percent in 2012 to 16.9 percent in 2021. Importantly, this decline reflects an equal distribution of unemployment across both

genders, demonstrating progress in addressing unemployment among both rural men and women.

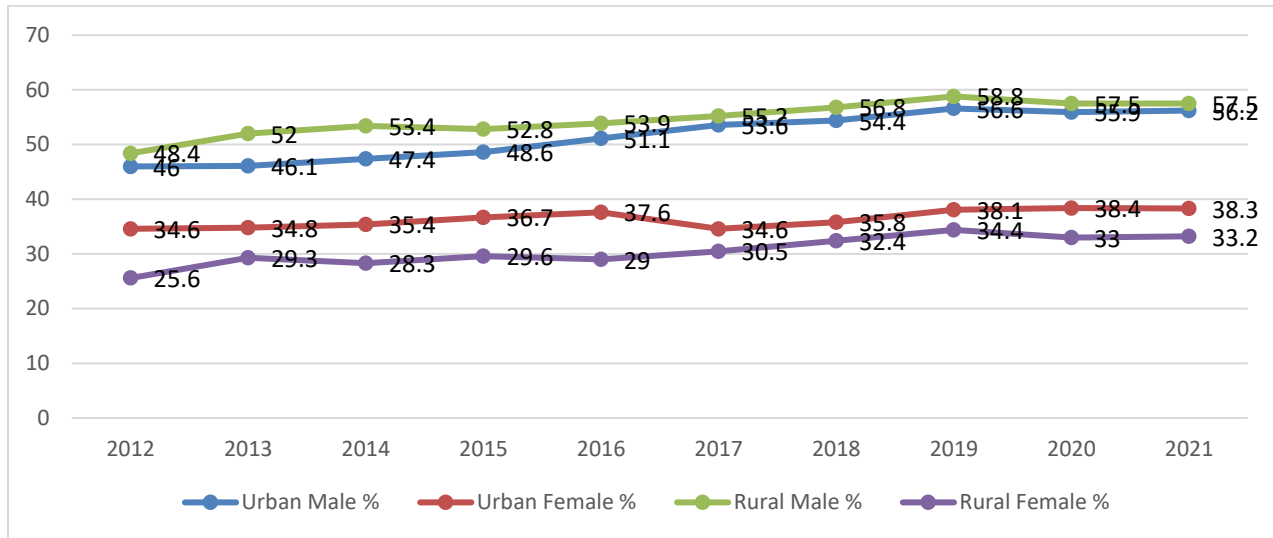


Figure 2. Employment rates of rural and urban population, 2012-2021 (Source: SSO, 2022)

The analysis of rural youth labor dynamics in North Macedonia offers a detailed picture of the challenges and prospects that this demographic faces. The highest concentration of labor-active individuals is in the 30-39 age group, with a significant presence in both rural and urban settings. The overall migration trend from rural to urban areas further contributes to the urban concentration of labor. However, younger rural populations, especially those aged 15-19, remain largely in education, with minimal participation in the labor market.

Rural youth face substantial employment challenges, especially due to the mismatch between their skills and the local job market demands. The survey data and FGDs reveal that while there are local employment opportunities in rural areas, they tend to be limited to a narrow set of professions. This results in many young individuals seeking employment opportunities in urban areas or even abroad, leading to migration trends that exacerbate the labor shortages in rural regions.

Employment preferences among rural youth vary significantly across different age groups. Younger individuals (15-19) favor jobs in large private enterprises or self-employment in non-farm businesses, while those in the 30-40 age group prefer non-farm entrepreneurship. The 20-24 age groups show the highest preference for employment in state-owned enterprises, with a marked interest in self-employment. Those in the 25-29 age group lean towards jobs in state enterprises, reflecting the varied career aspirations of different age brackets.

A striking observation is the gap in workforce participation across different ages. While 82 percent of respondents in the 25-29 age group and 90 percent in the 30-40 age group are employed, only 14 percent of high school-aged youth (15-19) engage in paid employment,

showing limited early entry into the labor force. Men tend to show more interest in entrepreneurial ventures, while women prefer employment in larger enterprises, both private and state-owned.

Despite these employment preferences, rural youth, regardless of gender, share a largely pessimistic view of the local job market, citing limited opportunities and difficulties in finding suitable employment in their regions. Focus groups and interviews emphasize that the lack of skills, training, and infrastructure are key contributors to youth unemployment in rural areas. There is a pressing need to create better conditions for skill development and job creation to retain young people in rural areas.

In terms of policy a response, the “youth guarantee” initiative is highlighted as a key program aimed at addressing the employment challenges of young people aged 15-29. This initiative is seen as an important step towards reducing youth unemployment and underemployment, which continue to pose societal challenges in North Macedonia.

Furthermore, the feedback collected from various rural youth underscores the urgent need for more diverse job creation initiatives, skills training programs, and the development of local economic opportunities to prevent further out-migration of rural youth in search of better prospects elsewhere.

### ***3.3 Youth involvement in agriculture***

North Macedonia’s agricultural sector, which covers about 50 percent of the country's territory, is predominantly small-scale, with 60.8 percent of agricultural holdings consisting of less than 1 hectare of land. The average farm size is 1.8 hectares, and livestock rearing remains minimal, with an average of 2.14 livestock units per farm. This sector is a key driver of the rural economy, accounting for significant employment, yet it faces structural challenges such as limited land and resources, low profitability, and an aging farmer population. Only 4 percent of registered farmers are under 35, and only 14 percent are younger than 40 years old, indicating an aging workforce.

Agriculture's importance to North Macedonia’s rural economy is undeniable. It provides employment and plays a critical role in poverty reduction. Yet, it faces numerous obstacles, including low wages, market instability, and biological challenges. The sector consistently offers some of the lowest incomes in the country compared to other industries, a deterrent for young entrepreneurs and workers. Most young people view agriculture as unattractive due to these economic factors, and only about 10 percent of young farmers perceive it as a viable business.

***“Due to their personal negative experience, the older generations are often motivating us, young people to abandon agriculture and leave rural areas“ (male FGD 25-40 years old)***

Another barrier is the complex and traditional land inheritance system. In rural areas, property is typically passed to male heirs, discouraging young women from pursuing farming careers. This is compounded by the fact that many young people live in multi-generational households, which limits their independence and decision-making power regarding farming. Survey respondents noted that property ownership among rural women is rare, weakening their connection to their communities. Furthermore, the sense of attachment to their rural areas diminishes as they age, especially for young women, making out-migration a common choice for those seeking better economic prospects.

Young people also expressed dissatisfaction with market conditions. In focus group discussions, participants emphasized that limited financial resources, poor access to innovative practices, and inadequate infrastructure hinder their ability to modernize farming techniques and scale up production. The unstable market for agricultural products further discourages investment in the sector. Many youth consider agriculture to be a low-profit, high-risk venture, contributing to its unattractiveness.

While the aging farmer population remains a pressing issue, only 14 percent of agricultural producers are under the age of 40, according to the Unified Register of Agricultural Holdings (ERZS). The bulk of registered farmers are over 55 years old, signaling a future labor shortage in agriculture. The limited participation of young people in farming is also evident in survey data, with only 12 percent of young people aged 25-29 identifying themselves as commercial farmers.

Rural youth, particularly those aged 25-40, have voiced the need to improve the image of rural areas. They recognize that a better-developed infrastructure and opportunities would be crucial to retaining young talent and encouraging youth to view agriculture as a viable career path. However, there is a clear consensus that without significant policy interventions, such as facilitating access to land and financial resources, the sector will continue to struggle to attract young people.

### ***3.4 Rural infrastructure***

The rural infrastructure in North Macedonia is underdeveloped, with minimal investment and innovation, which restricts the country's growth potential. The transportation system is of particularly low quality, posing significant challenges for rural residents, especially young people who face difficulties reaching schools and social or cultural events, primarily located in urban areas. Focus group discussions highlighted the lack of basic amenities such as taxi services after 10 p.m., street lighting, and paved pedestrian roads in villages, all of which exacerbate safety concerns. Young people stressed the need for infrastructure investments to ensure equal access to public services, data connectivity, and better housing options in rural areas.

Health system: Despite being designed for universal coverage, North Macedonia's healthcare system is limited in rural areas, with a shortage of regular doctors, specialists, and basic health



services. Rural residents, especially those facing poverty and social exclusion, struggle with access to secondary and tertiary healthcare, which is often concentrated in larger cities like Skopje and Kumanovo, located 70-100 kilometers away from many rural communities. In fact, young people in focus group discussions identified the absence of specialist doctors, surgeons, and dentists as significant shortcomings in rural areas.

**Digitalization:** While around 88.6 percent of households have access to high-speed internet, rural youth rely heavily on digital connectivity to access essential services and information. However, the digitalization of public services is lagging, with essential services like issuing personal documents not yet available online. Young people in rural areas are significant users of social media, with usage rates particularly high among those aged 15-19 (42 percent are within the category of spending more than 4 hours-less than 6 hours). The amount spent on social media decreases with the increase of the age (Survey).

**Child and elderly care:** The absence of child and elderly care services in rural areas, especially mountain villages (90 percent without childcare services), limits the ability of younger people, particularly women, to continue education or participate in the labor force. The distribution of kindergartens is highly uneven, with 41 of the 99 childcare institutions concentrated in Skopje, leaving other areas underserved. Even though the number of such institutions grew by 8.7 percent in 2022, rural communities still experience a lack of access to these essential services.

These infrastructure gaps, along with health and digital service limitations, significantly impact rural life, particularly for young people, hindering their ability to stay and thrive in these areas.

### ***3.5 Migration***

Emigration is a significant issue for North Macedonia, directly impacting its rural areas by weakening social networks and contributing to demographic aging. Between 2010 and 2020, over 160,000 citizens left the country, with 23.4 percent being young people aged 15-29. This trend has been exacerbated by economic disparities between urban and rural regions, with rural areas offering fewer employment opportunities and lower living standards, motivating a migration of roughly 13,000 people annually from rural to urban areas between 2014 and 2021.

In recent years, internal migration has increasingly turned into international emigration, with peaks in 2012 and 2021, where 14,000 people emigrated in each of those years. On average, 8,900 citizens have left North Macedonia annually from 2012 to 2021. Return migration remains low, with most returnees being young people aged 15-29 or those aged 30-39, typically having completed higher secondary education.

The exodus of rural youth is especially concerning. Rural areas are seeing young people leaving in large numbers, transforming once vibrant communities into villages dominated by elderly populations. This migration is largely motivated by a lack of access to education and economic

opportunities. For young people between 25-40 years old, the absence of services not only affects them but also their children, making relocation to urban areas or abroad more appealing. Focus group discussions (FGDs) reveal that this migration trend is particularly prominent among young females, who seek better opportunities for education and employment in cities.

The survey data shows a high willingness among rural youth to emigrate. Around 68 percent of those aged 20-24, 78 percent of those aged 15-19, and 82 percent of those aged 25-29 would consider moving abroad for a job. Additionally, many rural youth are also open to relocating within the country, with women showing a stronger willingness to migrate compared to men. In the 25-29 age group, 70 percent are willing to move within North Macedonia in search of better opportunities.

This large-scale migration poses a significant challenge for public policies and institutions working in rural environments, as the abandonment of these areas by youth threatens their future viability. Addressing these concerns requires strategic planning to improve living standards, employment opportunities, and services in rural areas to retain the young population.

### ***3.6 Wellbeing – Quality of life***

Over the last decade, North Macedonia has witnessed significant improvements in living conditions, demonstrated by a rise in GDP per capita. However, despite these economic gains, the country continues to face persistent challenges such as poverty, inequality, and uneven access to resources. Rural areas, in particular, are disproportionately affected, highlighting a clear urban-rural divide.

One significant indicator of the rising cost of living is the increase in household expenditures on basic necessities such as food, beverages, and tobacco. Between 2005 and 2010, these costs accounted for 36 percent of household spending, but by the period between 2017 and 2022, this figure had climbed to 44 percent. This increase is especially heavy for rural households, which often face higher prices for goods and fewer options for groceries and fresh produce. The disparity between rural and urban access to goods also extends to housing: while rural areas generally offer more affordable housing options with lower property prices and rental rates, urban areas like Skopje see high demand for limited housing space, driving prices upward. This urban-rural gap also reflects broader economic disparities, with rural areas facing underdeveloped infrastructure and limited services.

The disparities between regions and ethnic groups are even more pronounced, affecting the well-being and opportunities available to young people. Rural youth, particularly those aged 15-24, are generally content with modest living standards but are acutely aware of the lack of opportunities for personal development, especially when it comes to education and employment. According to focus group discussions, young people from rural areas strongly disagree with the notion that equal opportunities exist for accessing quality education or jobs.

However, they still believe that effort, intelligence, and skills are essential for their well-being, though they also point out the importance of political connections. Many express dissatisfaction with the lack of a fair judicial system and the limited freedom of speech, key factors they see as impediments to personal and professional growth.

Social and cultural life in rural areas also lags behind urban centers. Most cultural activities, events, and entertainment options are concentrated in Skopje, leaving rural youth with few opportunities for engagement in their local communities. Cinemas, theaters, libraries, and sports grounds are sparse in rural regions, and the nightlife is practically non-existent. In focus group discussions, young people emphasized that they often have to travel long distances to larger cities for any form of social activity. The lack of transport options further compounds this problem, limiting access to cultural and social events.

Despite these challenges, a significant portion of young people still exhibit a positive inclination towards urban lifestyles, with 49 percent of respondents rating their attitude towards urban living at a level of 4 out of 5 on a scale of 1 to 7. This suggests a moderately positive view of the advantages offered by urban areas, such as better job opportunities and services. Interestingly, older youth tend to show a stronger attachment to their rural birthplaces, likely due to their family ties and established lives in these areas.

### ***3.7 Rural youth aspirations, civic engagement and political participation and inclusion***

The political disengagement among youth in North Macedonia is growing, as reflected in declining trust in political parties and institutions. According to an IRI public opinion poll from 2021, only 30 percent of young people aged 18 to 35 said they were very likely to vote in parliamentary elections. This signals a broader trend of disconnection, where political processes and policy dialogues are increasingly alienating young people, particularly those in rural areas.

In institutional settings, youth concerns are not being addressed effectively. Many government bodies either lack a dedicated youth representative or have these positions filled merely for administrative purposes. There are some exceptions, such as the National Federation of Farmers, which has created a network for young farmers. However, broader engagement remains low—membership in associations and agricultural cooperatives is limited, with only 63 registered cooperatives, of which just 35 are active. Young farmers make up 103 of the 435 cooperative members, signaling a weak representation in these spaces.

Rural youth also perceive government officials as being disinterested in their problems. Policies, they argue, are not tailored to meet the needs of young people in these regions. While there have been some initiatives aimed at improving communication and offering programs, such as through extension offices for youth in agriculture, these efforts have not yet resulted in systematic or strategic development.

The lack of youth engagement extends beyond politics into civil society. Many rural youth avoid joining groups, volunteering, or becoming politically active. Surveys show that only 21 to 36 percent of rural youth actively advocate for political views, with higher participation in the older age group (30-40 years old), and men are more likely to vote and be politically engaged than women. For those who do vote, over half of the 20-24 age group and more than 70 percent of the 25-40 age group exercise their voting rights, showing a stronger connection with political participation among the older youth population.

#### **4. Conclusions and policy recommendations**

The report aims to understand the situation and needs of rural youth in North Macedonia to support effective policymaking and development planning. While North Macedonia has a relatively robust legal and institutional framework, including the Youth Guarantee Fund—first in the Western Balkans—there are no specific measures for rural youth within this fund. Agricultural support programs, particularly the National Agricultural Financial Support Program and the Rural Development Support Program, include measures targeting rural youth and women farmers. However, despite these well-designed measures, young people, particularly those aged 15-19, are often unaware of such policies, and older youth express dissatisfaction, feeling that these policies do not adequately support rural youth.

A major issue highlighted is the lack of implementation, enforcement, and coordination across institutions. This failure contributes to one of the country's most significant challenges—migration. Both internal migration (rural to urban) and emigration abroad, driven by better education and employment opportunities, continue to deplete rural areas, disrupting labor markets and hindering investment, particularly in agriculture. Emigration is also fueled by mistrust in government policies and institutions, exacerbating demographic and economic challenges.

To address these issues, the report underscores the need for targeted policies and support measures for rural youth to prevent further abandonment of rural areas, which suffer from poverty, isolation, and unequal opportunities.

##### **Aligning and harmonizing policies for rural development**

1. **Establish a national rural development task force:** Create a multi-sector task force involving representatives from education, healthcare, social services, and infrastructure ministries. This group will coordinate policy efforts to ensure joint work to improve rural living standards.
2. **Develop a rural infrastructure investment plan:** Design a targeted investment plan that prioritizes the development of essential infrastructure — roads, energy supply, and healthcare facilities—focusing on areas with the most urgent needs.

3. **Monitor and evaluate policy impact:** Implement a monitoring system to regularly assess the impact of policies on rural areas, using data to make adjustments and ensure alignment across sectors.
4. **Enhance policy integration:** Create a policy framework that requires any new rural development initiative to be reviewed for its compatibility with existing education, healthcare, and social protection strategies.
5. **Engage local governments and communities:** Strengthen the collaboration between local authorities and rural communities to identify key infrastructure gaps and prioritize projects that directly impact the quality of life, ensuring local relevance and engagement.

### **Recommendations for Rural Youth Development**

1. **Rural youth strategy and programs** - Develop a comprehensive Rural Youth Strategy, including action plans and programs specifically designed for rural youth. This should map relevant stakeholders, outlining their roles in improving the position of rural youth and supporting demographic renewal in rural areas.
2. **Active inclusion of rural youth in policy-making** - Involve rural youth in creating policies that address their needs. Youth representatives should be included in every thematic group within the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Economy to ensure their interests are considered.
3. **Enhanced support through the Youth guarantee fund** - Introduce specific measures within the Youth Guarantee Fund tailored to rural youth. This could include initiatives for skills training, employment opportunities, and entrepreneurship support designed for the rural settings.
4. **National support beyond agriculture** - Implement national measures that support not only young farmers but rural youth in general, with focus on job creation, entrepreneurship support, vocational training (including digital skills development), healthcare access, access to social services, cultural and recreational opportunities, and strengthening local networks.

### **Formation and engagement of rural youth organizations**

1. **Support for youth-led civil society organizations** - Strengthen the capacities of youth-led civil society organizations by offering skills training, advocacy training, leadership development, community engagement, sustainable funding and access to other resources, helping rural youth improve their competitiveness.
2. **Support structured dialogue with policy decision-makers** - Support regular, structured dialogues between rural youth and decision-makers to influence public policies. Measures

to support the establishment of local councils and youth centers in rural areas, **Addressing educational and employment challenges**

1. **Develop tailor-made study programs** – Create contemporary study programs that match the local rural context, including scholarships and paid practical training for high school and university students from the rural areas (especially those studying in the field of agriculture and rural development). Motivate local communities to actively participate in the development of these programs.
2. **Promote educational and work mobility** - Increase the number of mobility positions available within the Erasmus program, especially for students at rural and agriculture studies, to enhance opportunities for rural youth to participate in international educational and training experiences.
3. **Strengthen advisory services** – Enhance the advisory services to improve the dissemination of information, knowledge, and innovation, ensuring that new developments are effectively communicated to rural youth - to bridge gaps in their knowledge base.
4. **Establish local funds for youth employment** - Create local funds at the municipal or regional level to subsidize youth employment and entrepreneurship, stimulating economic growth within the rural communities.

### **Overcoming challenges in agriculture and land ownership**

1. **Eased access to land**
  - Policies that provide easier and faster access to land and thus investment for the younger generations.
  - Measure for leasing of Government-owned land – with frequently opened call, simple administrative procedures and time for completion of the process.
2. **Legal reforms and financial incentives can encourage succession planning** - Intergenerational farm transfer programs to support families in passing their farms to the next generation: include government financial aid, advisory services, and other resources to guide families through the transition process.
  - **Retirement incentives** – Program/s encouraging older farmers to retire or reduce workload while ensuring the farm stays within the family and knowledge and experiences is preserved during the transfer.

## 10. NATIONAL REPORT - SERBIA

Isidora Ljumović

### 1. Understanding rural youth context In Serbia

This study objective is to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the situation of rural youth in Serbia. To accomplish this, data was gathered from diverse sources, utilizing various methodological approaches. The significance of high-quality data cannot be overstated, as it plays a vital role in making well-informed decisions about rural youth based on solid evidence. Nonetheless, ensuring data quality poses a significant challenge when it comes to collecting statistics on rural youth in Serbia, especially in regard to education and training information and the category of youth classified as Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET).

### 2. Overview of the institutional settings and legal framework for supporting rural youth

The key institutions and organizations supporting rural youth in Serbia:

- **Ministry of Tourism and Youth:** This ministry formulates policies and implements programs aimed at rural youth development, creating opportunities for their active participation in society.
- **Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management:** Focuses on the development of agriculture and food industries, while recognizing the importance of engaging rural youth to ensure the future sustainability of the agricultural sector.
- **Serbian Youth Umbrella Organization:** A non-governmental body that empowers rural youth through resources, support, and advocacy, enhancing their leadership and well-being.
- **Youth Associations:** Several associations support rural youth in areas such as education, employment, and entrepreneurship. These associations often work with governmental bodies to implement initiatives that address the specific needs of rural youth.
- **Local Self-Government Units:** Play a vital role at the local level in implementing youth-related policies, providing resources, and addressing the specific challenges of rural youth through infrastructure and youth-focused activities.
- **National Employment Service:** Provides rural youth with employment and entrepreneurship support, offering job placements, training programs, and financial incentives.
- **Agricultural Extension Services:** Support young farmers with education, technical training, and market access, helping them improve farming practices and adopt innovations.

- Education and Research Institutions: Focus on improving educational opportunities for rural youth through resources and infrastructure development in rural schools, as well as vocational training programs to enhance employment and entrepreneurship skills.

### **3. Situational analysis of rural youth – challenges, needs and opportunities**

#### ***3.1. Youth Socio-demographics***

In Serbia, approximately 38.9 percent of the population over 15 years of age resides in rural areas. However, the country is facing a demographic challenge, with a declining population both nationally and in rural regions. Between 2017 and 2021, the young population displayed varying trends across different age groups. While there was a slight increase in the 15-19 age group, the population declined in four other age categories. A particularly noticeable trend is the decrease in young rural women, especially in the first three age groups, though there was minor growth in the last two groups despite the overall decline.

Rural youth in Serbia often grow up in multi-generational households, where extended families live together, fostering a strong sense of unity and solidarity. These living arrangements are deeply rooted in traditional values and agricultural lifestyles, with young people frequently involved in farming activities.

#### ***3.2 Education***

Educational attainment among rural youth in Serbia is generally lower than that of the overall youth population, due to challenges like geographic isolation, limited transportation, and teacher shortages in rural areas. These factors contribute to high dropout rates, with many rural youths leaving school early to seek employment or help their families. The focus group discussions (FDGs) revealed that while primary education is accessible in most rural areas, secondary and higher education often requires travel to urban centers, leading to increased migration.

The data show a gradual improvement in educational attainment in rural areas over time, with a rise in young people completing upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education. Females consistently attain higher educational qualifications than males at all levels, although males are more likely to return to rural areas after completing their education.

However, rural youth are significantly more likely to drop out of school compared to their urban peers, particularly males, due to economic pressures and responsibilities such as farm work. A high NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) rate in rural areas, especially among the 15-24 age group, further highlights the need for targeted interventions. The skills mismatch



between the education system and labor market demands also contributes to rural youth's struggles in finding suitable employment.

Focus group participants identified outdated curricula and a lack of practical, job-market-oriented education as major issues. Moreover, the lack of extracurricular activities, such as drama and art programs, and the absence of structured support like career guidance in rural schools further exacerbate the problem. While some are satisfied with smaller class sizes and the quality of their teachers, others highlighted the frequent changes in teaching staff and inadequate teacher training as key concerns.

The findings emphasize the importance of improving education infrastructure, offering gender-sensitive educational programs, and creating opportunities for temporary educational and work mobility to retain young talent in rural areas while addressing the disparities between rural and urban education systems.

The opinions gathered from FDG align with the perspectives of representatives from different institutions regarding the significance of education and training for rural youth. It is widely expressed an attitude that rural areas offer fewer opportunities due to limited access to social and educational services and inadequate infrastructure. To address this, promoting educational and work mobility among young people is deemed essential, encouraging temporary migration while minimizing the risk of it becoming permanent.

### ***3.3 Employment, economic opportunities, and mobility***

Employment disparities between urban and rural areas remain significant. Urban regions consistently have higher employment rates compared to rural areas, with men generally experiencing higher employment rates than women in both settings. However, rural employment has shown a gradual increase for both genders. In terms of unemployment, females in urban areas are more likely to be unemployed, while rural areas show a smaller gap between male and female unemployment rates. These trends highlight the need for targeted efforts to bridge the employment gap between urban and rural areas, alongside gender-sensitive policies aimed at ensuring equal labor market opportunities for both men and women.

Rural youth in Serbia face a complex array of employment challenges that are exacerbated by gender disparities, a lack of diversified economic activities, and limited access to career support services. Young women, in particular, are disproportionately affected by these challenges, with higher unemployment rates, fewer opportunities for career advancement, and greater barriers to entering the workforce.

Although the youth unemployment rate is slightly lower in rural areas, it is still a concern. The number of young people without jobs has significantly decreased since 2012, yet it is still alarmingly high (Figure 1).

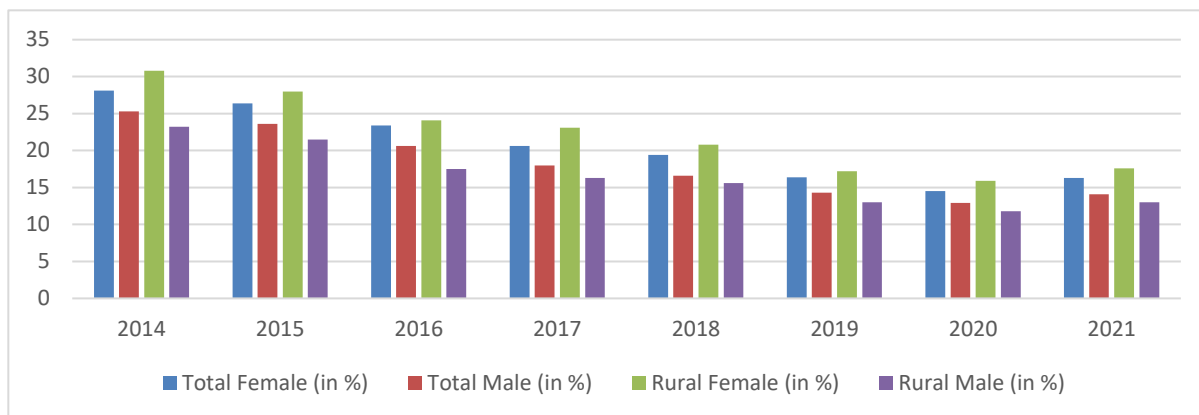


Figure 1. Unemployment rates for youth 15-39 by sex and degree of urbanization for the period 2014-2021 (Source: Eurostat, 2023)

According to focus group discussions (FDGs), the gender disparity in rural employment is one of the most significant challenges. Women, particularly young rural women, face higher unemployment rates due to a combination of cultural norms, limited job opportunities, and traditional gender roles that often restrict their participation in the workforce. This gender imbalance is exacerbated by the lack of diversified economic activities in rural areas, where agriculture and forestry dominate. Young women in rural Serbia often find it difficult to access stable employment, especially jobs that align with their skills and educational qualifications, further driving migration toward urban centers.

Young rural men, on the other hand, tend to gravitate toward private sector employment, where income prospects are higher. Many of the young male participants in FDGs expressed a preference for self-employment in farming or small enterprises, viewing it as a way to gain independence and manage family responsibilities. This trend was especially prominent among older male participants, who have stronger ties to family land ownership and are more likely to inherit agricultural property, thus securing some form of employment in the rural economy. However, this option is far less appealing to young women, who express a desire for more specialized job opportunities, particularly in fields such as pharmacy or other health-related professions. The lack of specialized education and career paths in rural areas further contributes to their migration to urban centers.

The issue of NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) status among rural youth is another critical challenge. The FDG results indicate that rural youth are more likely to fall into this category compared to their urban counterparts, largely due to the limited availability of job opportunities that match their qualifications, and the lack of adequate career guidance and training in rural areas. As previously noted, the NEET rates are particularly concerning among the youngest group (15-24), where the rural-urban gap is most pronounced. This situation highlights

the pressing need for interventions to improve job market readiness and vocational training programs tailored to the needs of rural youth, especially in sectors beyond agriculture.

One of the most striking findings from the FDGs is the role of informal networks in securing employment, particularly in the public sector. In rural areas, where job opportunities are more limited, personal connections often play a crucial role in obtaining jobs. This reliance on informal hiring practices creates significant barriers for those who lack these connections, further perpetuating inequality and limiting the ability of rural youth, particularly young women, to access stable employment.

*"We can grow in our jobs only in urban places",* stated one of the participants in the age group 15-24 of the FDGs.

In addition to the economic and employment challenges, young rural women face significant gender discrimination when it comes to career advancement. Many female participants expressed concerns over their ability to progress in their careers, particularly in rural areas where opportunities for upward mobility are scarce. They also highlighted the fact that employers in rural areas are often hesitant to hire young women with children, fearing that family responsibilities might interfere with their job performance. This further restricts their ability to compete in the already limited job market and often pushes them toward urban migration in search of better career prospects.

In contrast, young men, particularly those with access to family-owned land, are more likely to remain in rural areas and continue working in agriculture or small-scale enterprises. The focus on private sector employment among men also reflects a broader trend in rural Serbia, where many young people see entrepreneurship as a potential solution to their employment challenges. However, gender differences are stark here, with men being far more likely than women to pursue entrepreneurial ventures.

The Local Youth Offices, while providing some support to young people in their career development, face severe limitations due to understaffing and inadequate resources. FDG participants pointed out that while these offices are intended to help young people navigate the job market and develop their careers, their impact is often limited by the lack of personnel and resources. This leaves many rural youth without the necessary support to find jobs, further exacerbating the problem of unemployment and underemployment in rural areas.

### ***3.4 Youth involvement in agriculture***

Despite its longstanding tradition and diverse activities, agriculture in Serbia is not an attractive business for young people. However, with over 426 thousand people employed in 2021, the sector remains a vital source of employment, especially in rural areas where youth engagement

is essential. For young individuals in Serbia, agriculture offers employment and livelihoods not only in traditional farming but encompasses a broad spectrum of activities, from cultivation to food processing and distribution.

The FGD, the interviews, and the survey all came to the consensus that agriculture as a whole is not a very alluring business for youth in Serbia. The group of younger female participants in particular shows how little interest young people have in working in agriculture. Only those participants who own farms are willing to engage in the farm business. Working on other people's farms is not an option. None of the FGD participants in the younger female group plan to get engaged in agriculture, nor do they find this activity attractive, even if they have the conditions for it because they are family farm members. Most women work in agriculture because of necessity (they cannot find another job, are forced to stay on the farm to take care of elderly family members, etc.). On the other hand, participants perceive primary agriculture as a difficult job that is not suited for a woman. There is a chance for women to get involved in the later stages of processing agricultural products (production of jams and similar products).

Lately, it has become more likely that a young farm family member will take over the farm business. The older family members are becoming more inclined to hand over farm management to the younger generations. However, elderlies are still reluctant to hand over farm management to the younger generations because they perceive that they lack the necessary skills and expertise. In agriculture, tradition still reigns supreme, and young women taking up farm management are uncommon. Women are not decision-makers on farms but can participate in the work.

Participants in the FDGs stated that for young people, entering agriculture without having land and a farm is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. Aside from that, relying only on agriculture is only feasible on larger farms with a larger labour force. Young individuals working in agriculture in rural areas usually have additional jobs (working in factories and similar available jobs). Young people explained that associations in the field of agriculture are extremely difficult and are possible only based on apparent interests. All participants stated that business association is much more frequent and successful among females than males.

Young people believe that the existing subsidy scheme in agriculture is poorly designed, with insufficient financial support and no targeted measures specifically for rural youth. In contrast, experts from the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) assert that young people in rural areas are prioritized through incentive measures and substantial public funding. However, the lack of local organizations and youth empowerment initiatives remains a major issue. Experts further suggest that the subsidy measures need to be more consistent and should include enhanced job placement assistance, better credit policies, and investments in digital technology and healthcare infrastructure.

Advisory services, although equally accessible to young people, are criticized for not providing adequate information. Young respondents feel that these gaps discourage them from pursuing careers in agriculture. They also emphasize the need for initiatives focused on entrepreneurship and specially designed subsidies that address the unique challenges of rural youth.

Despite these challenges, many young people remain on farms due to strong ties to their community, family, and tradition. Although some are interested in gaining new skills abroad, most do not see this as a long-term solution. Survey data indicates that farming is often pursued part-time, with a gradual shift to full-time as individuals grow older. A significant gender disparity exists, as men are more likely to focus on commercial farming, while women tend to engage in subsistence farming.

### **3.5 Rural infrastructure**

Although improvements are being made, rural areas' infrastructure often receives very bad ratings. According to the FGD, one of the biggest problems young people face is the high costs and insufficient number and frequency of local transport lines. Because local governments are responsible for providing these services, the situation varies significantly from place to place. It appears that most rural residents are concerned with the high cost of local transportation. Additionally, the availability and quality of healthcare services are quite lacking. The community typically finds such services in the larger towns nearby.

According to most participants, the quality of roads, the availability and functionality of lighting and sewerage, and garbage removal are extremely poor. Water, power, and Internet connectivity are all assessed as being quite readily available. Despite the inadequate infrastructure in rural areas being evaluated by virtually all participants, this is not the primary driver of migration from rural to urban areas.

### **3.6 Migration**

Serbian youth are migrating in quest of better job possibilities and living circumstances. Based on migration data provided by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, it was recorded in 2022 that 149,511 individuals relocated their residence within the Republic of Serbia, indicating a permanent move from one locality to another<sup>61</sup>. The average age of these individuals who underwent residential changes was determined to be 35.4 years. As per OECD findings<sup>62</sup>, Serbia has experienced notable emigration, with approximately 10 percent of its population residing in OECD nations. Over the last decade, there has been an increasing trend in emigration from Serbia

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<sup>61</sup> The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. "Population - Internal Migration." Available at: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-us/vesti/statisticalrelease/?p=13629&a=18&s=1806>.

<sup>62</sup> OECD. "Labour Migration in the Western Balkans: Mapping Patterns, Addressing Challenges and Reaping Benefits." Available at: [https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/programme/Economies-2-Pagers\\_SRB\\_INTERACTIVE.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/programme/Economies-2-Pagers_SRB_INTERACTIVE.pdf).

to various European countries. From 2011 to 2019, Serbian migrants accounted for 23 percent of all initial residence permits granted to citizens from the Western Balkan within the EEA and Switzerland. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 led to a 35 percent decline in the issuance of permits compared to the preceding year.

Clarifying the situation, FGD revealed that young people relocate to urban areas to address educational issues. Outside of agriculture, most young workers in the rural areas undertake jobs that are unrelated to their area of employment, usually leaving them dissatisfied. This pushes individuals to move to urban areas in search of employment that fit their skills, pay more, and provide them a greater sense of job satisfaction. Migration to urban regions is not largely influenced by the perceived lack of social life in rural areas, despite what many people stated. Problem of internal migration to urban areas, university centres was also identified during the expert interviews (information collected in interview from Member of the NGO and activist in the Youth Office, Policy making representative, MTO and Assistant to the President of the local authority for youth issues, and the main coordinator in the local Office for Youth personal communication, 2022).

In addition, survey results showed that there is a significant percentage of respondents who expressed their attitude that people are leaving the region due to better job opportunities. There is a prevailing perception among respondents that people are leaving the region because they find better job opportunities elsewhere. This perception is consistent across different age groups and sexes, indicating a general attitude in the existence of job-related migration.

### ***3.7 Wellbeing and Quality of life***

The social activities in Serbia are mainly concentrated around big cities (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, Kragujevac and few other), and these facts were emphasized and confirmed in the FDG.

The quality of life in rural areas is far more influenced by factors like the environment, education, healthcare, safety, and social ties than it is by more tangible metrics like family income and gross domestic product. Most respondents from the focus groups stated that the quality of life in rural areas is better than in urban areas precisely because of the above-mentioned factors. Furthermore, young people living in rural areas are dissatisfied with the quality of health care services; even though they rarely need medical attention (primarily because they are young), they can usually only access primary care in their immediate communities, with secondary care only available in the larger towns nearby. They said that there is inadequate healthcare available nationwide as well as in rural areas.

Respondents from the focus groups generally express satisfaction with the accessibility and quality of elementary schooling, concerns arise regarding the availability of extracurricular

activities, the inadequacy of secondary education in rural areas, and a consensus that both formal and informal education systems are insufficient in preparing youth for the job market.

The areas which are at most risk at facing mentioned challenges, are the sparsely populated villages situated in remote and inaccessible hilly and mountainous regions. These settlements are marked by substandard living conditions, primarily due to their underdeveloped infrastructure and lack of adequate public sector services. Improving the quality of life in these areas is possible only by improving the infrastructure (utility, road, social infrastructure) and services related to healthcare, kindergartens, and cultural and entertainment activities.

Survey results shows relatively high levels of satisfaction with Serbian youth overall life, with average ratings ranging from 7.49 to 8.51. Respondents tend to report high levels of satisfaction with their life, family life, health condition, and social relations. However, satisfaction with personal financial situations shows a decreasing trend as age increases. The 25-29 age category generally reports relatively lower satisfaction across multiple aspects compared to other age categories.

### ***3.8 Rural youth aspirations, civic engagement and political participation and inclusion***

Young people in rural areas of Serbia engage in activism sporadically, with focus group participants showing a general disinterest. Initiatives tend to be driven by individual efforts, but the lack of participation or support, coupled with past unsuccessful experiences, discourages further efforts. This is particularly true among younger age groups, who display limited political involvement. They often perceive political influence as being reserved for older generations, a sentiment worsened by cultural barriers, particularly those limiting women's participation in politics.

Research from YouthHUB confirms these findings, noting that Serbia faces challenges with youth participation (ages 15-29) in political, economic, and social spheres. The Youth Participation Index for Serbia stands at 69 percent, with political participation especially lagging at 50.4 percent, well below the target of 100. In 2021, young people made up only around 5 percent of Members of Parliament, further illustrating the low level of youth involvement in the political process.

According to the survey, 68 percent of rural youth respondents have a negative view of the current situation in rural areas, expressing concerns about worsening conditions. This negative sentiment is more strongly felt among older respondents, who increasingly agree that the situation for rural youth is deteriorating as their age increases. This highlights a growing awareness among older rural youth about the challenges faced in rural communities.

Survey results indicate a consistent trend across age groups, with most rural youth perceiving that public officials are not genuinely interested in addressing their issues. This sentiment is most strongly felt among the 20-24 and 15-19 age groups, while the 25-29 group expresses slightly

lower levels of agreement. This reflects a broader lack of trust in policymakers and the feeling that rural youth concerns are underrepresented in policy-making processes. Additionally, many respondents believe that current policies are not effectively creating opportunities for young people in rural areas, and there is a general disengagement from actively addressing these concerns.

Survey results reveal that most respondents are not engaged in volunteer activities, with a noticeable decline in engagement as age increases. This trend suggests a need for targeted efforts to promote volunteerism, particularly among older age groups. Overall, only 24 percent of individuals are active members of any clubs, associations, unions, movements, or political parties, while 76 percent are not involved. Younger individuals, in particular, show lower participation rates, with engagement increasing in the 30-40 age category. This shift may be attributed to growing responsibilities, changing priorities, or evolving interests as people move into adulthood. Encouraging and promoting volunteerism across all age groups could foster community contribution and have a positive societal impact.

#### **4. Conclusions and Recommendations**

The findings based on the desk research, interviews, and results obtained from the conducted focus groups indicate that rural youth face numerous complex challenges across employment, infrastructure, political engagement, and migration. Improving policies for rural youth in Serbia requires a comprehensive approach that addresses their specific needs and challenges.

##### ***Employment and economic development challenges rural youth face include***

- **Limited job opportunities:** Rural youth have difficulty finding meaningful employment in their communities, often settling for low-skilled jobs or lower-paying agricultural vocations. There is a clear mismatch between the skills of rural youth and the jobs available, particularly in the private sector, which often pays less than jobs in urban areas. This issue is exacerbated by the lack of job opportunities in sectors outside agriculture, which limits career development for rural youth.
- **Skills mismatch and underemployment:** Many rural youth are employed in jobs unrelated to their education, leaving them dissatisfied and unmotivated. This further drives migration to urban centers, where jobs that match their qualifications are more abundant.
- **Barriers to entrepreneurship:** While some rural youth are interested in self-employment, there are significant barriers to starting businesses in rural areas, including limited access to financing, entrepreneurial training, and market exposure. Fear of failure, corruption,



and a lack of mentorship contribute to low utilization of existing programs designed to support entrepreneurship.

To address these challenges the following recommendations are provided:

- A strategy should be adopted that focuses on creating more diverse and rewarding employment opportunities. This includes financial incentives for rural youth entrepreneurship, business mentorship programs, and support for start-ups in agriculture, tourism, and creative industries.
- Expand access to credit and financial support for rural youth entrepreneurs, especially in agriculture. This should include grants, low-interest loans, and tax incentives to help young people start their businesses.
- Encourage sectors such as tourism, renewable energy, and creative industries to create job opportunities beyond traditional agriculture. By broadening economic activities in rural areas, youth will have more varied employment options.
- Vocational training programs that align with local needs should be introduced to equip youth with the necessary skills for employment. Training in digital skills and modern agriculture techniques can help make rural youth more competitive in the job market.
- Policies should support the modernization of agriculture through improved access to technology, credit, and sustainable practices. Programs should focus on making farming more profitable and appealing to young people by improving productivity through training and innovation.

***The rural infrastructure*** in Serbia varies from region to region and municipality to municipality. However, there is a broad consensus among rural youth that the poor quality of infrastructure is a major factor contributing to dissatisfaction with life in rural areas. Many respondents emphasized that inadequate infrastructure is a major obstacle to realizing their business ambitions and economic potential. The main challenges are:

- **Poor physical infrastructure:** many rural areas still lack basic infrastructure, including well-maintained roads, lighting, waste collection and sanitation facilities. Poor road conditions hinder access to markets, services and employment opportunities and exacerbate the rural-urban divide.
- **Limited digital infrastructure:** While internet access has improved in some areas, many rural communities continue to struggle with access to digital resources. The lack of digital infrastructure prevents rural youth from accessing online education, job opportunities and e-commerce platforms.

- Social isolation: Youth in rural areas are also isolated due to the lack of social and cultural infrastructure such as community centers, libraries and recreational facilities. This limits opportunities for social interaction, cultural expression and personal development.

By addressing the infrastructure gaps in rural areas, the government can improve the quality of life of residents and create an enabling environment for business growth and entrepreneurship.

To this end, the following recommendations are made:

- Governments should prioritize the improvement of rural transportation infrastructure, including road maintenance and public transportation development. This would improve connectivity between rural and urban areas and facilitate access to job opportunities, education and markets for rural youth.
- Invest in expanding internet access and teaching digital skills to rural youth. This will enable them to take advantage of online jobs, digital entrepreneurship and teleworking opportunities.
- Promote investment in social spaces such as community centers and libraries that can serve as hubs for youth activities, social cohesion and cultural expression. These spaces can foster a sense of belonging and engagement among rural youth and reduce feelings of isolation. To promote social cohesiveness and offer places for cultural expression, policies that promote investments in social infrastructure like community centres, libraries, and leisure areas are needed.
- With the increase in remote work, there is an opportunity to attract digital nomads and promote remote work opportunities for rural youth. This can drive local economic development while providing rural youth with access to global labor markets.

***Rural youth display limited political involvement***, with younger participants showing less interest and older ones finding it unappealing. There is a perception that political engagement is reserved for older community members, and women face additional cultural barriers to participation.

- Low political participation: Many rural youth show little to no interest in political participation, seeing it as the domain of older generations. There is a perception that their political voice is not strong enough to effect change and many young people, particularly women, face cultural barriers to political participation.
- Lack of trust in institutions: Trust in public administration, law enforcement and government is low among rural youth. This lack of trust hinders participation in civic activities and diminishes the desire to participate in local decision-making processes.

Recommendations:

- Governments should create platforms for youth to actively participate in policymaking, such as youth councils, advisory boards, and forums where rural youth can voice their concerns and contribute to local development policies.
- Foster trust in public institutions by improving transparency and accountability in government actions. Engaging rural youth through town hall meetings, consultations, and transparent governance can rebuild their confidence in these institutions.
- Introduce programs that educate rural youth on the importance of political participation and civic responsibility. Encouraging women's involvement in politics and addressing cultural barriers is crucial to ensuring equal representation.

***The implications of migration from rural areas*** in Serbia are complex and multifaceted. While migration offers opportunities for individual rural youth to improve their economic and educational prospects, it can also lead to challenges such as demographic imbalances, loss of skilled workforce, and social fragmentation in rural areas. Key findings are:

- Youth migration to urban areas: Rural youth continue to migrate to urban centers for better job opportunities, education, and a more diverse lifestyle. This trend is particularly strong among young women, who often see little incentive to stay in rural communities, especially given the limited opportunities in agriculture.
- Demographic imbalances: The migration of young people from rural areas has led to demographic imbalances, where older generations remain in rural communities while the youth population declines. This threatens the sustainability of rural economies and communities.

In order to overcome these problems, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Implement strategies that provide incentives for youth to stay in rural areas, such as housing grants, tax breaks, and career development programs. These strategies should target sectors beyond agriculture to create a broader range of employment opportunities.
- Provide guidance and incentives for farm succession planning to ensure the continuity of family farms and rural livelihoods. This is particularly important as many rural youth are not engaged in planning for the future of family-owned agricultural businesses.
- Inform rural youth about the opportunities available to them in their communities, including job prospects, training programs, and financial support for entrepreneurship. Raising awareness about local resources can help counter the perception that urban areas are the only places with viable opportunities.

By addressing these key challenges through targeted policy actions, Serbia can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for rural youth, enhancing their opportunities for employment, civic engagement, and community development.