

The Impact of Multilevel Governmental Policy on Rural Catalonia: Voices From the Grassroots

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Abstract

One decade on from the launch of the European Youth Guarantee Initiative, there is still limited research into its efficacy in rural areas. In Spain, a country with significant urban-rural disparity, the complexity of the governmental structure across the country has made investigations into the effectiveness of youth employment strategies less common as compared with other European states. Our study analyses the meso-level structure of the Spanish government and how the Public Employment Services (PES) factor into the overall process of disseminating active labour market policies across the country. The study is based in the autonomous community of Catalonia and includes a case study in the region of Lleida. Through open-ended interviews with members at different levels of the local PES, including the director and various other staff, as well as with local policymakers, youth workers in local organisations, and the youth themselves, we aim to shed light on how the Youth Guarantee is being implemented on the ground. This will take into account the structural constraints, needs, and challenges under the new law as expressed by the various stakeholders. The results indicate that both youth and local PES are negatively impacted by some centralised aspects of employment policy, such as the stringent requirements for training courses that prove prohibitive for rural areas, as well as the urban-centric design of training courses. Further, the youth collectively express a strong desire for their voice to find expression in the design of active labour market policies.

Keywords

halfway federal state; multilevel governance; rural NEET youth; rural policy framework; Spanish youth unemployment; top-down government; urban-rural disparity; urban-rural gap

1. Introduction

Addressing the deep-seated problems related to youth unemployment has gradually become a focal point in EU policy since its inception almost three decades ago. These issues, among other related factors, primarily led to the development of the “not in employment or education” (NEET) status typology (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999), which represented a step forward in remedying these problems but also posed a significant risk: that of reducing youth to a single category of stakeholders with similar life circumstances (Furlong, 2006). The Youth Guarantee was launched in 2013 as the definitive European-wide strategy to address youth unemployment-related issues. It stipulated that member countries must provide good quality employment or training options to NEET youth within four months of their becoming unemployed. The Guarantee itself, first put forward by the European Commission through the 22 April 2013 Council Recommendation, follows the same norm among EU policies of this kind; a soft law that provides a channel for funding, in this case chiefly through the European Social Fund and the Youth Employment Initiative, but with little guidance over how these policies are implemented, leaving member states in a position where they must design their own measures to achieve the intended goals. Therefore, its lack of legal binding has led it to be criticised for not being incisive enough, since it primarily relied on the political will of each member state to be effectively put in place (Morales-Ortega, 2013). While it yielded some overall positive results and signified yet another step forward, the Guarantee has also been criticised widely for its overall shortcomings, not least in the Spanish context (Rodríguez & Ramos, 2016; Strecker et al., 2021).

The Spanish case, however, is unique within the EU. The country has been among the highest in unemployment and NEET rates across the EU for years, a factor bolstered by the economic crisis of 2008 and the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019 (Agahi & Prieto-Flores, 2022). Further, Spain has led the EU in rates of temporary, short-term employment contracts. In the late 1980s, pre-EU discussions led Spain to focus strongly on tourism in their economic development approach. This factor is a key contributor to Spain’s history of temporary and precarious employment, dating back to the inception of the EU, since these contracts have been commonly used by private companies to meet the demand for seasonal workers during peak tourist season to the detriment of the labour market in Spain. This element distinguishes the Spanish labour market from that of other EU countries. While this type of contract is present in other countries, Spain holds the highest rate in the EU, which in 2021 was at 25% compared to the EU average of 14%. This poses a challenge to young people, works against their training prospects (Adecco Group Institute, 2022), and represents a failure on the part of the Youth Guarantee, since many of the jobs available through it were temporary, leading to poor job stability (Hernández-Bejarano, 2022). It should, however, be noted that this situation is improving with an increase in permanent employment as of the start of 2022 (Adecco Group Institute, 2022). Nonetheless, this is one of the key factors that led to the implementation of the Youth Guarantee in Spain being described as haphazard, poorly defined, and not matched to the labour market (Rodríguez & Ramos, 2016).

The implementation of the Guarantee in Spain suffered from inadequate coordination between regional and local Public Employment Services (PES; Rodríguez & Ramos, 2016). Looking deeper into this problematic structure, the role of the European Commission in Spanish youth employment policymaking is, of course, significant, as with all member states. The additional layers of the Spanish system, however, which include the national government, the governments of each of the 17 autonomous communities of Spain, the local governments, and several other centralised national institutions result in an extensive vertically-oriented

government whose structure, along with the various charges at each level, can be regarded as complex and nuanced, resulting in a high degree of institutional incoherence (P. A. Hall & Soskice, 2001). While each autonomous community has the authority to design its own programs for employment and training, the Youth Guarantee and the funding associated with it are still the chief driving force behind the employment endeavour of Spain as a whole, for which the central government is responsible. Further, while the role of PES within each member state has typically been central to achieving the goals of the Guarantee in their respective contexts (Hall et al., 2014), within Spain this responsibility lies instead with the Ministry of Labour and Social Economy, a division of the Spanish national government, leaving the PES of Spain in a role that is much less central to the Guarantee than in other EU countries. This has led to Spain typically being excluded from research (Doyle et al., 2015; Trein & Tosun, 2019), despite the Spanish case having great relevance to the study of the Youth Guarantee at large due to its higher-than-average NEET rate, significant rural-urban disparity, and leading levels of temporary contracts.

The 2020 reinforced Youth Guarantee includes among its measures the need for states with particularly high unemployment levels (which include Spain) to acquire more knowledge about the young people the Guarantee is designed to serve and their inherent heterogeneity (Council of the European Union, 2020) since the young NEET group comprises a whole range of different individuals with different life circumstances and reasons for being inactive. It is therefore imperative that Spain comes to understand this category better. Among the most significant, and perhaps the most neglected, of these groups of NEETs are those who live in rural areas, a condition that scholars also appear to neglect (Simões et al., 2021). Rural NEETs are more likely to become NEETs than their urban counterparts; in the past decade, the rural NEET rate has almost always been higher than that of any other area in Spain by population density. According to 2021 data, the NEET rate in rural areas was 1.5% higher than in Spanish urban areas (Figure 1).

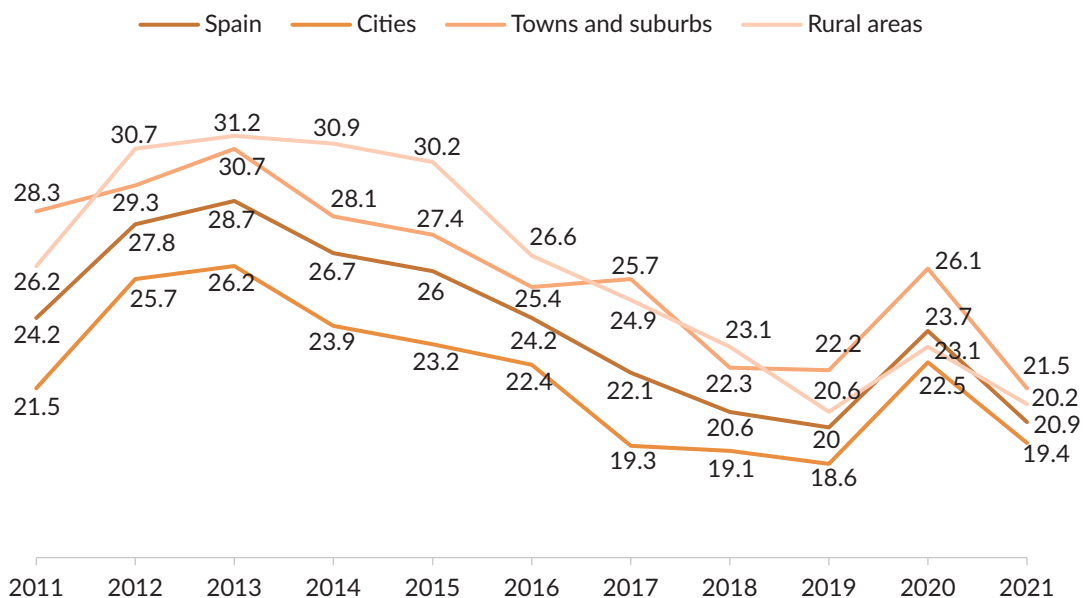


Figure 1. NEET rate in Spain (25–29 years) by degree of urbanisation for the years 2011–2021. Source: Own elaboration based on Eurostat (2021).

In this connection, the interaction of the Youth Guarantee with the Spanish governmental framework is not understood in Spain as well as in other EU member states. This is especially true when taking into account

those youth who live in less densely populated areas and are therefore subject to the vulnerabilities inherent in rural spaces.

This article therefore aims to shed light on some of these issues that contribute to the elevated NEET rates in Spain, with a particular focus on rural areas. We aim to explore, first, how the structure of the Spanish government either contributes to or detracts from the process of integration of these youth into the labour market and how the Youth Guarantee is finding expression in rural areas. We will attempt to gauge the effectiveness of active labour market policies used in these less densely populated parts and hypothesise that the function of this policy domain in Spanish law does not help rural youth to exit NEET status. In the following section, we will describe the history and structure of the Spanish government.

2. The Spanish Governance System

Following the end of the Franco dictatorship in 1977, the Spanish constitution implemented the following year directly put in motion a process of governmental decentralisation, which resulted in the transition of Spain to a halfway federal state, in contrast to other EU member countries. Initially, 22 competences were delegated to each of the 17 autonomous communities Spain is comprised of, a process that kept gathering momentum in the years immediately following these changes. Most of these competences pertain to environment-specific domains, such as city planning, housing, railways, roads, and agriculture. However, employment policy is one of the competences that remain firmly within the jurisdiction of the central government, “without prejudice to its implementation by the institutions of the autonomous communities” (Constitución Española, 1978, Art. 149). Further, over the last decade, the EU’s implementation of soft law to improve youth employment outcomes across its member states has led to a reversal in this process in Spain within the policy domain of youth employment, most surely stimulated by the Youth Guarantee in 2013. Accordingly, through the lens of youth employment policy, stirrings of a process of recentralisation are visible within Spain, a process which appears, at least in part, to result from the top-down design of the Youth Guarantee. The subsequent European Commission Council Recommendations also provide impetus to this process (Agahi et al., 2023), resulting in a unidirectional flow of information from the upper levels of the government, and leaving the actors at the grassroots with very little control over localised solutions.

Classifying Spain by its governmental structure is, accordingly, not straightforward. We take as a basis of this Scholten et al.’s (2018) typology, which asserts that all state governments are either (a) centralist, where national and local governments are organised in a top-down manner, (b) localist, where the local governments are given the authority to design and tailor policies at their level, essentially making this system bottom-up, (c) multilevel, which involves vertical interaction between government actors, or (d) decoupled, which is characterised by the absence of joint policy coordination (Scholten et al., 2018). Spain does not fit distinctly within any of these categories, instead exhibiting various characteristics of these different types of governments (with the exception of the localist model, of which no instance is visible).

Multilevel governance is perhaps the best way to visualise the governance structure in Spain due to its vertical nature, the complexity of which none of Scholten et al.’s (2018) other models encompass. The term itself we first coined by Gary Marks in 1992, who conceptualised it to explain the function of member states under the EU. Although the full definition has been the subject of debate (see Tortola, 2017), Marks’ original definition is most appropriate here, since he described “a movement of EU policy involving continuous

negotiation among nested governments at several territorial tiers—supranational, national, regional and local” (Marks, 1993, p. 392), much like the structure that has materialised in Spain. Yet, in practise, these processes may not be as synchronised and harmonised as the multilevel model would suggest. An example of this, we present an instance of policymaking from the last five years in Spain, to illustrate the pattern of how policymaking in this domain functions in Spain: The Spanish government implemented a central Directive in 2021 (Ministry of Labour, Migration and Social Security, 2021) in response to a European Commission Council Recommendation, tightening various restrictions on training course requirements across Spain and implying significant change in how training courses are implemented on the ground at local levels (Council of the European Union, 2018). This had a direct effect on the ability of training centres across the country to carry out courses due to the more stringent requirements and caused the functioning of some courses in rural areas to cease, directly impacting the efficacy of the youth guarantee process nationwide. Accordingly, not only did this new policy perpetuate the urban-rural gap, but it also widened it, despite the clear Eurostat figures showing the dire situation in terms of education and employment opportunities for rural youth. A series of events such as this renders the multilevel dimension of the government somewhat obsolete and implies the operationalisation of a centralised, top-down structure “in action,” since all autonomous communities were obligated to implement these same restrictions. Further, the strong focus of the Spanish economy on tourism is yet another factor to consider here. While this approach has been successful and has economically benefitted various service sectors in Spain, it has also been detrimental to many regions in other areas related to, for example, job creation, which placed many of these regions in a low position in the EU ranking relating to human capital and employment (Guisan & Aguayo, 2007). This is another instance of the top-down, centralist model, since what originated as a centralised priority resulted in a set of circumstances that has transcended and permeated other priorities since the inception of the EU. Thus, despite the various diverse dynamics seen in Spanish governance resembling multilevel governance, we suggest this centralist, top-down governance type as the primary model in operation within the policy domain of youth employment in Spain.

Top-down models have classically been criticised since they emerge from the perspective of the decision-makers and, accordingly, fail to involve other actors and stakeholders in the shaping of policies, approaches, and strategies (see Barrett & Fudge, 1981; Elmore, 1978). Within the policy domain of youth employment, it is clear by the same token that this model fails to take into account the voices of youth in policy formation. Sabatier (1986) also pointed out that the use of a top-down model is commonly criticised for being ineffective within a situation that is more complex and has an entire range of moving parts, a category within which the Spanish government could distinctly be placed. Yet, in criticising the top-down approach, it is important not to “romanticise” the grassroots movement (Smith, 2008) which also has its issues, including what is often a critical lack of capacity of local institutions to facilitate the changes necessary (Carr, 2002) and a fundamental lack of resources at these levels (Clever, 2001). In contrast, this bottom-up structure, or Scholten et al.’s (2018) localist model, would allow the voice of youth to take on a more pivotal role in policy formation, it implies a vast and complex change across government.

In summary, a survey of the history and the structure of the Spanish government presents it as primarily centralised and top-down-oriented within the policy domain of youth employment; by extension, the voices of those at the grassroots appear to be absent from the relevant policy debates. It follows that adopting these individuals’ perspectives will provide insight into how the policies are falling short, and how they may be shaped to develop in a positive manner. Through this research, we seek to gain insight into the

experiences of key stakeholders on the ground in rural areas, which are the areas typically most neglected and most profoundly affected by centralist, top-down governance. These same areas are also characterised by lower infrastructure, the youth residing there often have limited options for employment and training (De Hoyos & Green, 2011), and the number of job offers, as well as available training centres and courses for youth, are significantly lower when compared to urban areas (Agahi et al., 2023). We investigate this reality taking chiefly into account the various social, economic, and political facets that feed into the employment trajectories of young people, putting them in contrast to the aims of the Youth Guarantee at the highest levels of government, to understand what occurs in between these two levels and to assess the effectiveness of the governance that occurs to this end.

3. Methodology

The region of Catalonia is one of the 17 autonomous communities of Spain and ranks among the highest in Schakel's (2018) Regional Authority Index. By this token, we expect Catalonia to serve as a strong example of the interplay between the regional and national governments. The region itself has four provinces. Of these, Lleida is the largest of the four by area, but also the least populated, making it the most rural by population density, with a value of 36.3 inhab/km² (IDESCAT, 2022), well below the OECD (2016) definition of rural, which is below 150 inhab/km². Within this province, the two counties of Pallars Jussà and Pallars Sobirà were selected for the study. These two counties are among the biggest in Catalonia, occupying 1,343 and 1,378 km² respectively, while also being among the least populated with around 13,500 and 7,200 inhabitants, making them the third-least and the very least densely populated regions within Catalonia, with values of 9.8 and 5.2 inhab/km² respectively (IDESCAT, 2022). The rurality of these counties made them ideal for this study and, accordingly, it was felt that they would provide the best platform possible for bringing to light the relevant challenges encountered in rural areas. Further, the population density of Lleida is similar to that of the other Spanish autonomous communities considered to be rural, such as Aragon, Extremadura, and Castilla y Leon, which have a population density of 28, 26, and 25 inhab/km² respectively (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2021), and since the governments of these autonomous communities share the same basic relationship with the central government, we anticipate results that will largely be indicative of the situation across wider rural Spain.

The first location that was visited was the capital municipality of one of the counties, where the headquarters of the local PES and many of the NGOs involved in education and training in the county are found. The city has a population of 6,000 inhabitants. The municipality, while being the capital, has a relatively low population, with a population density of 19 inhab/km². The second was the capital of the other county selected for the study, with a population of 2,000 and a population density of 20 inhab/km².

A total of 15 open-ended interviews and three focus groups were conducted with various stakeholders. In total, 12 youth and nine workers were involved in the interviews.

The interviews took place with the director of a local SOC office (the PES in Catalonia), two technicians within SOC headquarters, two technicians from supramunicipal authorities, two from the main NGO working in the field of youth employment, two from a private business providing training under the Youth Guarantee, and finally twelve youth themselves. All of the youth were between 23 and 29 years old. No youth outside of this age group participated in the study. All youths were registered in the PES databases and five were what we could identify as NEET. One of them had children (see Table 1).

Table 1. Details of participants.

	Youth	PES staff	Total
Participants	12	9	21
Male	6	2	8
Female	6	7	13
Age (average)	26	N/A	
Migrant status	2	N/A	
Working at the moment	7	N/A	
Primary education	1	N/A	
Secondary education	3	N/A	
Tertiary education	8	N/A	

Within the group of youth, five of them were interviewed in person and the remaining seven were interviewed online. The online interviews were conducted because some of the youth were put in contact with the research team after the final field visit had concluded. Youths were found with the help of PES, which was contacted directly for assistance. The themes in the script pertained to personal status, their perspective on the availability of jobs, training courses, transportation and housing in the area, whether they would like to stay or leave, their perception of PES and their programs and services, how PES could improve and the levels of employment in their region, the youths relationship and connection with PES, their participation in training courses, and about their previous work experience. The interviews were carried out following the ethical procedures of the Track-IN project, which were approved by the ethics board of ISCTE, Lisbon, Portugal, the leading partner of the project, prior to commencing the interviews.

The research team, which included a senior researcher and two junior researchers, visited the area twice in one year and held online meetings before and in between the two visits. The senior researcher was responsible for coordinating the field visits, which involved correspondence with the PES in the target areas, arranging the visits, conducting the interviews, and processing the data. The junior researchers were part of the field visits and interviews, with each one attending one of the research trips, and were responsible for transcribing, organising, analysing, and processing the data. The objectives of the primary visit were to become familiar with the main actors on the ground and conduct a first round of interviews. This visit helped strengthen the relationship and collaboration between PES officers and the local network of technicians who support the implementation of Active Labour Market policies at the grassroots. Some of them collaborate with youth workers or are placed in youth offices. Thus, when the team returned to the area seven months later for a second visit, it was easier for the team to reach NEET youth and interview new technicians. The two visits were deemed to be sufficient since the body of data collected was more than adequate and provided substantial information on the research theme.

The collected interviews were subsequently transcribed, translated, manually coded by theme, and classified accordingly for review. Finally, a selection of the most significant quotes was made totalling around 19,000 words, and was classified again into one of four categories based on whether the comments were made by a youth or a worker and based on whether the content related to perceived challenges or opportunities among the various themes. Following this, a smaller selection was identified through investigator

triangulation (Archibald, 2016; Denzin, 1970) among the three researchers to identify the most focused number of quotes that fit most appropriately within the specific scope of the research area.

Sourcing a representative sample to participate presented a challenge to the project, since collaboration with PES on this project led to contact with youths who were registered with PES, most of whom had university undergraduate degrees or higher at the time contact was made. This tends to happen because power relationships are embedded in the natural social network that informants and technicians have on the ground (Noy, 2008) so they have more difficulties with outreach when seeking NEET youth without higher education. Further, this trend may be more pronounced when conducting fieldwork with hard-to-reach populations. This was somewhat contrary to what was intended by design, since the aim was that the study would feature as many youths with a primary level of education as possible; this was most representative of rural Catalonia since, as is well established, youth in rural areas typically have a lower level of education compared to their urban peers (Eurostat, 2023). Throughout the process, and in communication with PES, different strategies were implemented. Despite the efforts made, however, circumventing this issue altogether proved to be not feasible within the resource constraints of the project.

4. Results

Through the means described above, our aim with this process of data collection was threefold. First, we sought to understand the attitude of youths regarding the current state of affairs for education and training in rural Catalonia. Second, we sought to learn about their thoughts, perspectives, and experiences regarding governance and the way their situation has been managed by those who have control over it. Finally, to we tried to develop an understanding of how these stakeholders felt their education and employment situation could improve. Ultimately, analysis of the qualitative data shed light on the consequences of the operationalisation of top-down government in Spanish rural areas. Evidenced by the data is the profound impact of the Spanish governance style, not just on the rural youth of Catalonia, but also on the PES of these same localities; evidently, the negative effects are experienced at both levels. In this section, we divide the results into three categories based on the above objectives.

4.1. Youth Attitudes Towards PES and Available Opportunities

The main issue raised by the youth in this regard was their lack of awareness of the services offered by PES, which highlights issues with the channels they use for communication under the current system:

I found out about the employment service because I was unemployed and to claim benefits you had to sign up, that's how I knew it existed. (Youth, Pallars, female, 23)

In the case of the following quote, the youth points out that, under the current structure, he doesn't feel as though PES are successful in relaying information to him as a youth, but he also expresses that he feels that their services are not useful to him:

I must say that the information does not reach me through the SOC but through the 80 Studies' Center [an NGO]. You sign up for the SOC because you have to sign up, but what happens? (Youth, Pallars, male, 29)

These comments reflect the lack of capacity for local PES in rural areas to meet the demands of youths, indicating that these offices must reach a higher level of development to respond to the needs of local youth.

Another theme that commonly appeared, specifically in the interviews with rural youth, pertained to the negative connotations many of the young people have regarding the tourism industry in Spain. Specifically, they expressed their perception of the negative effects of tourism on their local economies, which youths also perceive as influencing their employment and educational situations. This is not unexpected since the history of tourism in Spain—and its associated negative impact on certain facets of the Spanish economy—are well-documented (see Guisan & Aguayo, 2007; Martinez, 2002):

The investment in tourism that only leads to a precarious and temporary situation for young people could be changed, putting them in other sectors that provide non-temporary work. (Youth, Pallars, male, 25)

4.2. Insights on Governance

Above all, the theme that recurred most prominently in the interviews among both PES officials and youth was a perceived lack of power and influence over the employment and educational outcomes of the youth. While the lack of a suitable platform upon which youth could feed information upwards was another common theme, PES also expressed facing the same challenge about the upward flow of information from PES to the national government:

There is only dialogue with the high central charges of the SOC if you insist. During this year [2023] was the transition to territorial meetings. Contribute the ideas you have about what? Of projects? The discussion will take place halfway through the territorial consultation tables. (Director of a local PES office, Pallars, male)

Despite the halfway federal structure of the Spanish government, which in theory decentralises policy operations related to youth employment as much as possible, the following excerpt from an interview evokes an image of Spain more in-line with Scholten et al.'s (2018) definition of top-down, centralised governance, a mode where local governments have virtually no role in agenda-setting and policy formation:

The strategy is thought from the decision-making levels of the employment service and local SOC officers have no decision-making power over what has been decided. (Director of a local PES office, Pallars, male)

The dependence that employment and training courses at the local level have on EU funding is yet another issue attributable to the top-down model in operation in this context. The multilevel nature of the Spanish government has resulted in a state of perpetual transition, where the government entities and bodies are frequently changing into new ones with slightly different mandates with the underlying aim of progressing the government into a better functioning system. Since the Spanish approach to employment policy also allows autonomous communities to create new training programs (following the central set of restrictions mentioned above), new training courses are initiated constantly across the country. This necessitates all local PES offices to provide the relevant paperwork each time to meet the administrative requirements for receiving

EU funding. This creates severe issues within PES offices in rural areas, since there are limited staff who are already carrying out an excess of other tasks to keep their offices functional. This process and the issues that stem from it was a theme raised more than once by the same director:

European funds are suffocating the entities and the SOC can request the same original official documentation three years in a row because the auditing entity changes. There is no administrative muscle to back it up. It is done by the same technicians who serve young people, organise festivals, the employment officer is dedicated to the justifications and sometimes they have been robbed of money for a bill that has not been returned or for a young person who was considered not to be registered youth. (Director of a local PES office, Pallars, male)

The lack of agency the youth have, as well as the local and regional PES, in policy design and implementation in the employment and education arena appears counterintuitive in that these bodies have access to the most valid, culturally relevant, and current information about the realities of their areas of jurisdiction. Access to this valuable information appears inconsequential, however, since the local PES are afforded very little capacity to use it as an input for refining the approach:

They regulate, we execute, follow up, and evaluate, but we don't have the capacity to regulate in the first instance and that is what kills us. (Previous SOC coordinator, female)

Analysis of the interview material in its totality brought into focus a key element underpinning most of the comments, which was a shared recognition on the part of many of the youth and also PES workers that the current trajectory of Spanish policy is contrary to what is required for positive change, that the related issues are deep-rooted, and, accordingly, that the required changes are profound. In this connection, the following quote highlights the recognition of a SOC worker that the local institutions lack the immediate capacity to implement a bottom-up model and conveys her view of the role that politics plays in this area of policy:

Sometimes you see that each department takes out a different summon....If I take all this money I propose only one solution for the whole territory...but of course, I don't know to what extent the administrations are sufficiently mature to be able to carry out a proposal that solves the real problems because, in the end, it's a political bet, not a technical one, because we don't decide. (SOC technician, Pallars, female)

This comment resonates with some of those previously mentioned, along with the theme of lack of resources, manpower, and general capacity these local institutions have. The SOC technician indicates these profound changes to the local institutions to facilitate their maturity as a primary prerequisite to implementing any ideal solution to solve the main problems. Further, they also suggest that the nature of policymaking severely limits the solving of the manifold problems related to youth employment, since political agendas will typically serve as the primary driving force behind how the relevant decisions are made.

4.3. Areas for Improvement

The youth in particular also articulated several instances where they envisioned opportunity and potential emerging from the existing systems, such as the evolution of the current operationalisation of training course

design into a more participatory format. The general view of the youth, as conveyed through the interviews, indicated that if rural PES were given the authority and capacity to operate in a more decentralised manner, they could use this autonomy to take advantage of the strengths inherent to rural areas, such as the strong networks that exist in these locales as well as the natural resources that can stimulate employment and training, and draw on these strengths to assist youth to advance on their career paths. Further, they expressed that if they are given a platform to voice their experiences, views, concerns, and feedback, this will gradually shape the employment and educational reality of rural areas to the needs of these young people:

The most participative model is the key because it is easy to weave a network between the people here; perhaps it is a way to make it more horizontal, so that everyone is part of it. I imagine it as more participatory, that you can end up deciding what is happening in the territory and which training offers you will end up having. (Youth, Pallars, female, 23)

Another youth described an instance in their locality where a more democratic approach was taken in deciding how a set of activities was implemented on one particular occasion. Although such a system is not applied to training courses in this region, it provided this youth with a window into the potential benefits of the successful functioning of such a system:

They had a list of topics and they made a form and you answered what you were most interested in and the ones that got the most votes were the ones that were done and of course you can see that what you are going to do is of interest. (Youth, Pallars, female, 25)

5. Conclusions

In this article, we set out to analyse the functioning of employment policy in rural Spain, through an analysis of the history of these policies, an inspection of the governmental structure, and by capturing the voices of the various stakeholders related to employment and training outcomes in rural Catalonia. Through these means, we aimed to shed light on the effect of recent changes in the governmental structure, in Spain, on these outcomes and provide an outlook on how the current implementation of the Youth Guarantee may be impacting rural youth “on the ground.” The research revealed that the input from these stakeholders is very much in line with common criticisms of top-down government models in the wider literature. At face value, the decentralised governance structure of the autonomous communities should result in a more horizontal format for how the youth guarantee is disseminated in Spain. The findings portray a more vertical reality that, in effect, appears to be conducive to rural-urban disparity.

It has already been established that how the Youth Guarantee is designed can lend itself to socio-spatial inequalities in the Spanish context (Emmanouil et al., 2023). The results of this article suggest that the recentralisation process on a national level across Spain may accelerate this phenomenon. The issues stemming from these processes are significantly felt by youth and local PES, and the characteristics of rural areas only magnify these issues. The most recent directives pertaining to youth employment occurred at the national level and apply all across Spain (Ministry of Labour, Migration and Social Security, 2019), meaning that despite the slight differences in levels of autonomy of these 17 communities of Spain, the new restrictions are in force nationwide. Since Catalonia is one of the autonomous communities in Spain that has the highest degree of regional authority (Shair-Rosenfield et al., 2021), the experiences of youth in Catalonia

can likely be shared across wider rural Spain, indicating that the validity of these results could be extrapolated nationwide.

Analysis of literature and documentation, along with the interview material, suggests that the central government is the major responsible for the lack of employment and educational options in rural Spain. The perspectives of PES workers reflect that the new national framework—and to an even greater degree, the local government—severely restricts the autonomous communities in effecting the necessary change, rendering them both partially obsolete. Within the rural context, these institutions struggle to put to task effectively the functions with which they are charged.

Rural PES feel as though their resources are severely limited, that they are overworked, and that despite all the tasks they are responsible for related to the upkeep of the services they offer, they still have very limited power or influence to help local youth. Designing new programs that effectively fill a niche in the job markets does not appear to them as a realistic possibility due to the constraints that recent policy changes have placed on them, and the government format lacks a platform for feedback to be issued upwards, which leaves little agency for them to effect changes of any kind.

Finally, rural youth expressed a lack of awareness of, and lack of confidence in, PES and their services. They also expressed that they are not given a voice and felt that their voice is important for policy evolution to lead to an improvement in their situations. The tourism industry is, according to the youths, directly interfering with their prospects. They do not perceive that they are presented with solutions that will function for them in their cultural context and, accordingly, recognise the promise that lies in a more horizontal, participatory system.

The recent policy movements at the European level, however, bring promise in this area. The Spanish government announced in 2021 its Youth Guarantee Plus Resolution for 2021–2027, in which they stipulate the promotion of “the development of a community of horizontal and vertical cooperation” for the different administrations and bodies involved in active labour market policies (Ministry of Labour, Migration and Social Security, 2021). This new resolution carries the potential that employment policy will be less constraining in rural areas. However, we cannot expect that any attempt to integrate a more bottom-up approach will come quickly, since institutional change occurs gradually in the vast majority of instances (Easterly, 2008).

Our findings also resonate with other rural studies across the EU; a study from 2022 indicated that in Portugal, Italy, and Romania no measures had been developed specifically for rural NEETs under the Youth Guarantee, implying a distinct absence of this group from the policy debate (Petrescu et al., 2022). In Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, however, development initiatives that distinctly target rural NEET youth from the local level have shown promise, but have also highlighted further the need to address the issues typical among youth in these areas (Kvieskienė et al., 2021).

Going forward, it would be important for future research to elaborate on how policy in Spain can continue to evolve for it to be shaped by the views of youth. Specifically, research could aim at capturing the voices of national PES to gather their perspectives and experiences on the rural dimension, as this could certainly provide more insight into the contrast between how the policies are envisioned and how they take form on the ground. It also seems pertinent for research to focus on the distinguishing features of top-down and bottom-up models through, for example, rural case studies, which could place the research from this article in a more

distinct context but could also elaborate further on the rural-urban debate at large. For policymakers, since the active labour market policies in Spain evidently fail to take into consideration rural areas, it seems clear that these measures must be adapted to allow rural courses to function, perhaps by modifying the requirements and making them less constrictive to rural areas. Further, policies must facilitate the provision of local offices with additional resources, also commensurate with the exigencies brought on by any policy adaptations made, in order to provide a smooth and efficient transition to this end. Finally, it appears crucial for policymakers to include the voices of youth and local PES in the policy debate; engaging them in a dialogical process that evolves in conjunction with the situation on the ground could ensure policymakers are provided with the most faithful reflection of the reality as it evolves.

Within Spain, bringing these factors to the centre of the relevant discourses is essential for researchers, politicians, and policymakers if the lofty goals of the Youth Guarantee are to be met in every intended sense.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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