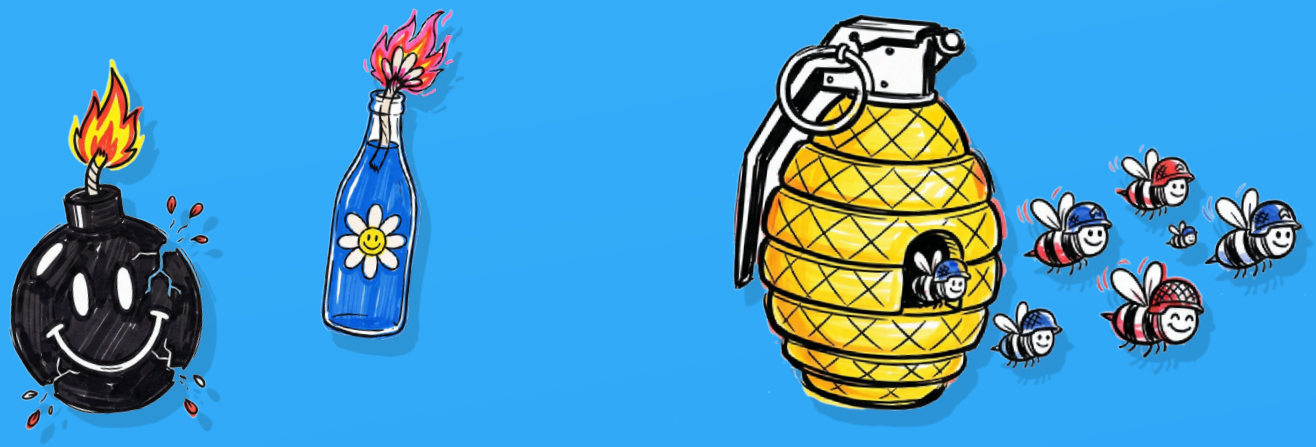
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POLICY BRIEF · 2026
DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION

RURAL RE-GEN lab

Youth Work Policy Brief

Youth workers as changemakers for rural regeneration: recommendations for municipalities, youth councils and regional authorities



ST'ART HUB ANGRI ETS · APS

ITALY · SPAIN · TÜRKIYE · HUNGARY · POLAND

IN ONE PAGE

Key messages

> **Rural territories will not be regenerated *for* young people, but *with* them. Youth workers are the bridge, and today that bridge is fragile.**

01 **Depopulation is a youth issue.**
Nearly half of Italian municipalities lie in inner areas, which lost 5% of their population in ten years. Those who leave are mostly young.

02 **Youth workers are the missing link.**
They reach young people where institutions do not, and turn frustration into projects. Yet in Italy there is still no national definition or recognition of youth work.

03 **Young people want a say, not a slogan.**
European Youth Goal #6 asks that rural young people take part in decision-making. Many small municipalities have no youth council and no youth budget.

04 **Rural places are rich in unused resources.**
Empty buildings, traditions, landscapes and networks of trust can become youth hubs, if access is made simple.

05 **Small, stable investment works better than big, one-off events.**
Multi-year funding for local youth work, micro-grants for youth ideas and support to access Erasmus+ multiply impact.

This brief proposes six recommendations, one for each step of the Rural RE-GEN LAB method, with concrete first steps for local, regional, national and European actors.

THE CHALLENGE

Places are emptying, and the young leave first

83%
of EU territory is rural

30%
of Europeans live there (137 million)

48.5%
of Italian municipalities are in inner areas

13.3 M
people live in Italian inner areas, 1 in 4 residents

–5%
inner-area population, 2014–2024

82%
of inner-area municipalities expected to shrink by 2043 (92.9% in the South)

192k
Italians aged 25–34 emigrated in 2019–2023; only 73k returned

107k
young graduates moved from the South to the Centre-North in 2019–2024

Inner areas are older than the rest of the country: there are 214 people over 65 for every 100 children under 15, against 200 nationally. When schools, transport and meeting places close, staying becomes harder for those who would like to stay. Depopulation and youth exclusion feed each other.

The same pattern is visible across the partner countries of Rural RE-GEN LAB, from Andalusian villages to rural Anatolia, eastern Hungary and Poland: **the question is not only how to keep young people, but how to give them a role.**



Sources: European Commission, Long-term vision for rural areas; ISTAT, Demografia delle aree interne (2024); ISTAT, Migrazioni interne e internazionali 2023–2024 (2025).

WHY YOUTH WORK

The bridge between young people and their territory

Youth workers organise, listen, mediate and accompany. In rural areas they are often the only professionals who meet young people outside school, and the first to notice when someone is about to leave or to give up.

They connect

young people with municipalities, schools, associations and businesses.

They activate

participation: from an idea in a bar to a project with a budget.

They include

young people with fewer opportunities, often invisible in small places.

They open doors

to Europe: exchanges, volunteering, training and funding.

BUT THE BRIDGE IS FRAGILE

- In Italy there is **no formal national definition of youth work**; a framework law recognising the youth worker (Animatore socio-educativo per i giovani) is still under discussion. Only some regions, such as Piedmont, mention youth workers in law.
- Most rural youth work depends on volunteers and short project funding: when a project ends, the person and the know-how often leave.
- Small organisations find it hard to access European programmes because of complexity, co-financing and lack of staff.



Source: European Commission / EACEA, Youth Wiki, Italy, chapter 10 "Youth work".

POLICY CONTEXT

The frameworks already exist. Now they must reach villages.

EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 · Youth Goal #6 "Moving Rural Youth Forward"

Seven targets, including equitable public services and internet access, quality jobs, decentralised youth activities, participation of rural youth in decision-making, equal access to education, a positive image of rural areas and protection of rural traditions.

European Youth Work Agenda · Council Resolution of 20 November 2020

Commits Member States to the recognition, quality and innovation of youth work, to adequate resources "especially in local and rural areas", to competence-based training of youth workers and to the validation of non-formal learning.

Long-term vision for the EU's rural areas to 2040 · 2021

Aims at stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas. Its Rural Action Plan includes rural proofing of policies and the Rural Pact, a cooperation framework open to local actors and civil society.

Italy · National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI)

Supports local development strategies in inner areas around essential services: education, health and mobility. Youth workers and young people can be partners in these strategies.

The gap is not in strategies but in implementation at local level, where small municipalities lack staff, data and dedicated budgets for youth.

WHERE THIS BRIEF COMES FROM

Rural RE-GEN LAB is an Erasmus+ training course (KA153) co-funded by the European Union and coordinated by ST'ART HUB ANGRI ETS – APS. In June 2026, **25 youth workers from Italy, Spain, Türkiye, Hungary and Poland** spent six days in Cava de' Tirreni (SA) testing non-formal methods for rural sustainability: problem framing, territorial exploration, asset mapping, ideation, roleplay of local decision-making and a two-day rural hackathon.

25	5	6	1
youth workers	countries	days	hackathon

HOW THE RECOMMENDATIONS WERE BUILT

The recommendations follow the six steps of the Rural RE-GEN LAB method and combine three sources: the challenges and ideas that emerged during the training course, the experience of the partner organisations, and official data and European policy frameworks.

A LIVING DOCUMENT

This is a first draft for consultation. It will be discussed and validated with participants, partners and local institutions during the multiplier events in the five countries, and then presented to municipalities, youth councils and regional authorities.

Six steps: Notice · Explore · Imagine · Collaborate · Act · Multiply



RECOMMENDATIONS

Six recommendations



01 · NOTICE

Rural-proof every decision that affects young people

WHAT WE PROPOSE

Before closing a school, cutting a bus line or selling a public building, municipalities and regions should assess the impact on young people, with young people. Local youth data (how many, where, what services they use, who is leaving) should be collected regularly and made public.

WHO CAN ACT

MUNICIPALITIES · REGIONS · NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

First step **Add a short "youth impact check" to council decisions on services and public spaces.**



02 · EXPLORE

Map and open unused spaces to young people

WHAT WE PROPOSE

Every rural territory has empty buildings, land and facilities. Together with youth workers and young people, municipalities should map these assets and make them available to youth groups through simple, low-cost agreements (free loan, shared management), with clear rules and support.

WHO CAN ACT

MUNICIPALITIES · REGIONS · SNAI AREA PARTNERSHIPS

First step **Run a participatory asset map (like the Six Capitals map) and offer at least one space to a youth group.**

RECOMMENDATIONS · 3–4



03 · IMAGINE

Fund young people's ideas with small, fast and simple grants

WHAT WE PROPOSE

Many youth ideas need hundreds, not thousands, of euros. Micro-grants with one-page applications and quick decisions, and a youth quota in participatory budgeting, let young people test ideas and learn by doing. Failure should be allowed: experimentation is the point.

WHO CAN ACT

MUNICIPALITIES · REGIONS · FOUNDATIONS

First step **Dedicate a share of the local budget to a youth participatory budget or a micro-grant call.**



04 · COLLABORATE

Give rural young people a real seat at the table

WHAT WE PROPOSE

Small municipalities can create youth councils, also at inter-municipal level, with a clear mandate, a budget line and the right to be consulted. Youth workers and youth organisations should be involved in local development strategies, in the SNAI area partnerships and in the EU Rural Pact.

WHO CAN ACT

MUNICIPALITIES · YOUTH COUNCILS · REGIONS · EU RURAL PACT

First step **Set up or relaunch a youth council, and invite it to at least one council meeting per quarter.**



05 · ACT

Recognise and resource youth workers

WHAT WE PROPOSE

Italy should adopt the national framework law on youth work and the professional profile of the youth worker, in line with the European Youth Work Agenda. Regions should provide multi-year funding for local youth work in rural areas, training paths for youth workers and the validation of their competences (for example with Youthpass and regional qualification systems).

WHO CAN ACT

NATIONAL GOVERNMENT · REGIONS · AGENZIA ITALIANA PER LA GIOVENTÙ

First step **Fund at least one stable youth worker for each group of small rural municipalities.**



06 · MULTIPLY

Help rural organisations access Europe and share what works

WHAT WE PROPOSE

Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps can transform rural communities, but small organisations need help: technical assistance, co-financing support, partner search and simplified procedures. Successful local practices should be documented and shared so other territories can replicate them.

WHO CAN ACT

AGENZIA ITALIANA PER LA GIOVENTÙ · REGIONS · EUROPEAN COMMISSION

First step **Create regional help desks for rural youth organisations applying to EU programmes.**

WHO DOES WHAT

An agenda for each actor

ACTOR	WITHIN 12 MONTHS
Municipalities	Youth impact check on decisions; open one unused space to youth groups; youth participatory budget or micro-grants; youth council with a budget line.
Youth councils & youth groups	Map the needs and assets of the territory; propose projects for public spaces; join local and regional consultations; connect with other rural youth councils.
Youth workers & organisations	Use and share non-formal methods (see the Rural Youth Work Toolkit); document local practices; act as bridges between young people and institutions.
Regions	Multi-year funding for rural youth work; training and validation of youth workers' competences; help desks for EU programmes; youth data for inner areas.
National government	Adopt the framework law on youth work and the youth worker profile; integrate youth in the National Strategy for Inner Areas; rural-proof youth policies.
Agenzia Italiana per la Gioventù	Targeted support and outreach for first-time rural applicants; promotion of rural projects and results; dialogue with regions on youth work recognition.
European Union	Keep rural youth central in the next EU Youth Strategy and programmes; simplify access for small organisations; strengthen the youth dimension of the Rural Pact.



NEXT STEPS

From paper to practice

01 **Validate**
Discuss this draft with the 25 participants and the five partner organisations, and integrate their feedback.

02 **Present**
Bring the brief to municipalities, youth councils and regional authorities during the multiplier events in the five partner countries.

03 **Commit**
Invite local institutions to choose at least one recommendation and one first step, and to announce it publicly.

04 **Monitor**
Collect commitments and results, and update the brief with real examples from the territories.

Are you a mayor, a councillor or a youth worker?

Tell us which recommendation you want to adopt. We can support you with methods, training and partners: **www.starthubangri.it** · **#RuralChangemakers**



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Staying is a choice. Regenerating is a mission.

Policies make it possible. Young people and youth workers make it happen.

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