

Synthesis report on the evaluation of initiatives addressing 25+ NEETs

OUTPUT 6.5

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**IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT 'LOST
MILLENNIALS – TRANSNATIONAL RESEARCH
NETWORK FOR THE EVALUATION OF INITIATIVES
TARGETING 25+ NEETS'**

Project summary:

The project 'Lost Millennials' focuses on a regularly neglected group of the generation of Millennials: young people aged 25-29 neither in employment or education and training (25+ NEETs). This generation started their working life shortly after the economic crisis of 2008, perceiving uncertainty and lack of security for work and well-being, they are more likely to be inactive or in precarious jobs. The main objective of the project is to contribute to the successful integration of 25+ NEETs to the labour market through increasing knowledge on the effects of employment initiatives on 25+ NEETs, building capacity of stakeholders to perform impact studies and thus improving the quality of labour market interventions. This objective will be achieved through the creation of the transnational research network which will share know-how and good practices, the evaluations of governmental and community-based initiatives targeting 25+ NEETs, as well as the engagement of stakeholders to increase the policy-relevance of project results.

For more information, please visit our [website](#), contact us on lm.leadpartner@hetfa.hu and follow our social media ([Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#)).

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1. Introduction

The following report is the synthesis of the main results of nine evaluations carried out by the Beneficiary Partners of the 'Lost Millennials' project. The main aim of the report is to provide a translational perspective on the results of the evaluations of initiatives addressing 25+ NEETs in each country. In addition, it is also our objective to create a meaningful basis for the development of relevant and transferable recommendations for policy and practice on how to support 25+ NEETs in diverse contexts for successful integration to the labour market.

This report is built on a series of research activities: project partners first carried out desk research and secondary statistical analysis to increase the understanding of the situation of young people aged 25-29, who are not in employment, education and training (25+ NEETs) and the systemic and micro-level challenges they face; then conducted an analysis of policies addressing 25+ NEETs to establish country-level contexts in which the project is embedded. Subsequently partners mapped already existing initiatives supporting 25+ NEETs in their country, as well as existing evaluation practices assessing such initiatives. One initiative was selected for evaluation per country from the list of existing initiatives and partners carried out the evaluations. The nine evaluations have focused on nine different initiatives in nine different countries, project partners assessing their chosen initiatives with regard to 25+ NEETs. The countries of Beneficiary Partners – where the evaluations were conducted – are the following:

- Bulgaria;
- Czechia;
- Greece;
- Hungary;
- Malta;
- Poland;
- Romania;
- Slovakia;
- Spain.

This report is based on the overall knowledge gathered throughout the project's lifetime, and specifically on the nine evaluation reports of Beneficiary Partners. Throughout this report when we refer to the evaluations of the above countries, we refer to these evaluation reports – the references to all evaluation reports are included in the References.

For this synthesis report, we have taken into account the content of the evaluation reports: the details of the chosen initiatives, the challenges of the evaluation process, and the results themselves. Due to the initiatives being very different in scope, and the evaluations themselves being carried out using

different methodologies, a quantitative comparison could not yield results. Thus, we have utilised a more qualitative approach: in the case of results, we used a thematic synthesis approach, where we identified the most relevant themes in the evaluation reports, and pinpointed the most common, generalisable results, which either were most often repeated or particularly important in content.

The structure of the report will be the following: first, we summarise the evaluated initiatives' main characteristics, in order to provide context for the results. A methodological section will follow, about evaluation in general, and the methods that have been used. This section is important for understanding the work which the project partners have carried out; also, to better understand the challenges and limitations of evaluations. Then we will showcase the synthesised results of the evaluations – these can be either policy-, practice-, or evaluation-related.

2. The evaluated initiatives

The **scope** of evaluated initiatives was almost evenly (55% – 45%) nationally or locally focused – note that local in this case could either mean settlement, county or region. And while it is mostly true that smaller-scope projects were carried out by non-national organisations or institutions, a few exceptions can be found: there is a national-level project which is implemented by NGOs; and in the case of a regional program, the implementer is a national organisation.

None of the evaluated initiatives have 25+ NEETs for their primary **target group**, and only two of them target NEETs specifically – the other ones have a broader target group (mostly unemployed persons), which includes 25+ NEETs.

The **main activities** of the evaluated projects fall into two broad categories: one is training, the other is employment-related services. Training can focus on basic skills and competencies, specific skills, language, soft skills etc.; and in many cases it is accompanied by counselling and/or mentoring. Employment-related services can mean the aforementioned counselling, mentoring, and job placement, job search assistance, coaching, career guidance, or mediation. One evaluated initiative could not be classified into these categories: it provides legal counselling and a rental subsidy scheme. However, these services also serve the purpose of making it easier for the target group to find secure employment.

Table 1. Summary of the evaluated initiatives

Country	Name of the initiative	Scope	Implementer	Target group	Activities category	Activities detail
BG	Career Start Programme	national	National employment agency	University graduates with no work experience (up to 29) and registered at the labour office	Employment-related services	Job placement: work experience in public administration
CZ	Choose Employment Step Correctly For the Second Time! Transit Jobs in Social Enterprises in the Moravian-Silesian Region Let's Step Forward Together	regional	NGOs	25+ NEETs are strongly represented but not targeted specifically (target groups are broader – includes elderly, low-skilled and disadvantaged)	Training	5 projects: - (re)training (soft skills, financial and civic literacy, employment-relevant skills) - counselling - both group and individual activities - placement in social enterprise - psychosocial support
ES	Comprehensive Qualification and Employment Programme	local	Local public body	NEETs aged 16-29 (+ being registered in Youth Guarantee and at the Ministry)	Training	Training Plan: - vocational guidance - core training (digital skills, soft skills, etc) - specific training (professional skills – accredited) - mediation actions: involvement of companies (potentially apprenticeship)

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						Mobility Plan (not in place now)
GR	Training Voucher Programme	national	National labour office	All who are registered at OAED - unemployed - employed - underemployed - NEETs - persons with disabilities	Training	Funding to participate in training courses (tuition + course materials, stipend, additional support, guidance and counselling, certification)
HU	Incorpora Programme	local	NGO	Disadvantaged jobseekers (especially new entrants, disabled jobseekers, those living in extreme poverty, women, homeless people and single parents)	Employment-related services	Job placement, job search assistance, counselling, coaching, mentoring, and trainings for potential entrepreneurs
MT	Documentation = Employability	national	NGO	Persons encountering difficulties securing personal documentation (mostly vulnerable, socially excluded groups such as migrants, LMBTQ+ and nonbinary people)	Legal counselling and rental subsidy	Legal counselling, rental subsidy scheme
PL	Training Programme	national	Labour offices	Unemployed, jobseekers, and employed persons aged 45+ registered at the employment office	Training	Training

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RO	Find Your Way to the Word of Work	local	NGO	15-29 age-group of secondary school aged youth, with completed primary school with a high risk of school dropout and NEETs – with special attention to economically disadvantaged groups and the Roma community	Employment-related services	Mentoring and career guidance (+ trainings, meetings with employers, camps, study trips, lectures, city tours)
SK	Activation Work Programme through Small Scale Municipal Services	national	Local labour offices	Jobseekers who are long-term unemployed	Employment-related services	Activation work via working for municipalities

Source: authors, based on evaluation reports

3. Evaluations and methodologies

3.1 About evaluations in theory and practice

Evidence-informed policy-making has become a growing expectation in recent decades. Evidence-based policy can be defined as an approach which helps people make adequately-informed decisions about programmes or policies, by giving them scientific evidence for doing so (Davies, 1999). The concept and the method of randomised control trials (RCT) first spread to the field of health policies, and in the 1990s RCT and other evaluation methods took on a greater role in the design of social and economic policies, as opposed to opinion-based decision making (Banks, 2009) – a major driver for the spread of evaluation practice has been the European Structural Funds across the EU.

But it should be stressed that evidence-based policy-making is based on the assumption that knowledge of the facts eliminates most of the risks inherent in the experimental nature of policy-making. Critical studies show that policy is often made in spite of the evidence. Sometimes, however, evaluations are designed to collect data that support policy, or if the results of an evaluation are politically sensitive, they may not be published or may be ignored (Guenther – Williams – Arnott, 2010). It is recognised by proponents of evidence-based policy that not all sources of evidence are sufficiently robust to form the basis of policy making (Nutley & Davies, 2000). On the other hand, a recent study (Bundi & Trein, 2022) has highlighted that (in certain parameters) decision-makers do use the results of evaluations; and the more salient and technically complex the issue is, the more they engage in “policy learning” from them.

As it can be seen, the strategic role of monitoring and evaluation in informing policy-making processes is widely recognised by the international community (Head, 2016; Pattyn et al., 2018; Stephenson et al., 2019). Monitoring and evaluation support evidence-based decision-making in many ways:

- It assists government ministries and agencies in the management of policy measures, programme and project levels.
- Using performance indicators, costs and performance can be compared between different administrative units, regions and neighbourhoods.
- Comparisons can also be made over time, identifying good, bad and promising practices, and prompting a search for the reasons behind performance. This is the learning function of monitoring and evaluation, and can be the starting point for a search for the reasons for this performance.
- Finally, transparency and accountability are enhanced through monitoring and evaluation (Mackay, 2007).

Policy evaluation is a key tool for understanding, developing and modernising EU policies (European Commission, 2015) as well as national and regional policies. This underlines the value of good programme evaluation, especially in the case of intricate issues. Previous research in the ‘Lost Millennials’ project has unearthed that the matter of 25+ NEETs has many facets in different countries and policy systems, and that their issues might require a multi-dimensional approach.

According to the definition of the OECD, evaluation is “the systematic and objective assessment of an on-going or completed project¹, programme or policy, its design, implementation and results. The aim is to determine the relevance and fulfilment of objectives, development efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. An evaluation should also provide information that is credible and useful, enabling the incorporation of lessons learned into the decision-making process of both recipients and donors” (OECD DAC, 2010, p. 4).

Evaluation, in this sense, encompasses more than an impact assessment – another term closely related to evaluation. The term impact assessment is used to describe the method of identifying and measuring the impact generated by a programme, and its main characteristic is that it aims to identify causal relationships. Evaluation, on the other hand, can include not only the assessment of the impact, but the assessment of the (planning and implementation) process as well.

Evaluation is also more than just monitoring – while the latter is the observation or measurement of the progress made during the implementation, the former encompasses a more holistic view, which goes beyond mere data collection.

There is a plethora of different methodologies one can utilise in evaluation, depending on the purpose, time, resources, and available data. Usually evaluators combine different methods: it is advisable not only for triangulation² reasons, but because in many cases, only this way can the evaluation questions be answered (due to there not being sufficient quantitative/qualitative data, time for field research, access to all necessary documents etc.).

The approach and the evaluation questions chosen will determine the methods used in the evaluation. In the evaluations carried out in the Lost Millennials project, we expected the evaluation to be designed according to the evaluation criteria defined in the OECD guidelines (OECD DAC, 2010, pp. 13-14), which are the following:

¹ There is also ex-ante evaluation, which is used to predict the likely impacts of an intervention – it is used in the design of interventions.

² Triangulation in research means that researchers combine multiple research methods in the study of the same phenomenon, in order to mitigate the intrinsic biases of single-method research.

- **RELEVANCE:** The extent to which the measure is suited to the priorities and policies of the target group, recipient and donor.
- **EFFECTIVENESS:** A measure of the extent to which an activity attains its objectives.
- **EFFICIENCY:** Outputs – qualitative and quantitative – in relation to the inputs. It is an economic term which is used to assess the extent to which aid uses the least costly resources possible in order to achieve the desired results.
- **IMPACT:** The positive and negative changes produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended.
- **SUSTAINABILITY:** Sustainability is concerned with measuring whether the benefits of an activity are likely to continue after donor funding has been withdrawn.

It is important to note that while evaluations can have huge added value to policy-making and project-design, they also have limitations, which need to be taken into account when one is interpreting results and drawing conclusions. First of all, evaluations only can answer the evaluation questions which were posed at the beginning; thus, they are very limited in giving input to other aspects. Moreover, each research method has its shortcomings and limits. Mixed-methods approaches can help overcome this issue; however, one has to bear in mind that research methods can only be used with limitations, and to help answer the previously-set evaluation questions. Lastly, measuring impact can be very tricky due to the fact that programmes do not happen in a vacuum, but in an interconnected environment, where many factors interact to affect people and institutions – thus sometimes it might not be possible to isolate the effects of the evaluated intervention. Moreover, in many cases, the long-term impact could only be measured after several years, which is out of the scope of most evaluations (and most policy-cycle as well).

3.2 Methods used in the evaluations

As has been indicated before, the partners did not follow a uniform methodology during the evaluation. This is due to the fact that the chosen initiatives vary in many ways: for one reason, there are great differences in each country in terms of policies and available programmes; another reason is that, in some cases, partners had to change their initial decision due to unavailability or decline of participating in the evaluation of the initially chosen project – thus even if in the beginning initiatives would have been similar, the reality of the evaluation process would have rewritten it. To accommodate this variance, a flexible approach was utilised, where partners were free to choose the evaluation methods best suited for the characteristics of the chosen initiatives.

Thus, most evaluation utilised a sort of mixed method approach, where both quantitative (data analysis) and qualitative (interviews) elements were present – however, in most cases it has meant that qualitative data collection (usually interviews) was prominent. A smaller proportion of evaluation,

though, used predominantly quantitative data collection and analysis. In all cases, desk research has been utilised as a complementary data collection method.

Table 2. Methods used in the evaluations

	Name of the initiative	Methodologies used	Beneficiaries reached
BG	Career Start Programme	Qualitative: desk research, interviews (12); quantitative: admin data analysis and online survey among stakeholders - implementer	Yes
CZ	Choose Employment Step Correctly For the Second Time! Transit Jobs in Social Enterprises in the Moravian-Silesian Region Let's Step Forward Together	Quantitative (project data analysis) and qualitative (interviews with implementers)	No
ES	Comprehensive Qualification and Employment Programme	Qualitative (document analysis, interviews - 2 with implementers, 1 with programme designer at national level)	No
GR	Training Voucher Programme	Quantitative: online survey (self-evaluation of participants) + qualitative analysis of open questions	Yes
HU	Incorpora Programme	Qualitative (desk research and 4 interviews with implementers/ mentors)	No
MT	Documentation = Employability	Qualitative (desk research and 3 interviews – 2 implementers/case officer and 1 external expert)	No
PL	Training Programme	Quantitative: analysis of LFS data (logit model)	No
RO	Find Your Way to the Word of Work	Qualitative (desk research, interviews with beneficiaries and non-participants, qualitative comparative analysis) and quantitative (survey)	Yes

SK	Activation Programme Small Scale Services Work through Municipal	Quantitative: descriptive analysis of admin data; qualitative: desk research and interviews (35) with implementers, NGOs, labour office representatives, policy makers and beneficiaries	Yes
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Source: authors, based on the evaluation reports

Cooperation of implementers for the realisation of evaluations is challenging

Although it is widely accepted in the policy-making field that evaluations have a positive effect, and added value to programmes and policies alike, project implementers did not necessarily see it that way. It was a recurring issue in the evaluations that even if partners were cooperating initially, as the process went on, they became more and more reluctant to give the necessary data and information, or provide contact for interviews (especially in the case of target group members). In some cases, they were dismissing from the beginning: they did not see the point, thus they had to be convinced that it had added value for them.

Reaching and engaging beneficiaries proved to be especially challenging for the evaluators. Most implementers either refused to facilitate contacting them, or were reluctant to help. According to the experiences of the evaluators, the potential reasons for this behaviour lie in the notion that evaluation is a form of monitoring and control – which implementers do not want from an outside party. Evaluators have needed to “clear the air”, first, to clarify that this is not the case, and their interest is of a scientific nature. However, even after this, in many cases, it became impossible to reach beneficiaries.

The Maltese initiative offers legal consulting and rental subsidy to persons encountering difficulties securing personal documentation, including third-country nationals, asylum-seekers, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and other vulnerable groups. During the evaluation, the partner would have liked to reach out to beneficiaries for interviews. This, however, could not happen: according to the implementers, clients do not see any advantage in participating in these types of events, are exhausted by them (having multiple previous experiences with interviews). (Kósa, 2023)

Another problem was – both for implementers and evaluators alike – that sometimes an evaluation gets to negative conclusions, or unfavourable results. This might cause a dilemma: how to communicate this to the implementers who were cooperating and gave information, and their time to us? The experience has been that if a good partnership with the implementers has been established, any criticism has been well received and considered constructive.

4. Results of the evaluations

As it has been summarised in earlier chapters, there were vast differences between the evaluations – both in methodology, depth and available information. Thus, the results of the evaluations vary over a relatively wide range. This also means that it was not possible to summarise them in a purely quantitative way – so to formulate this chapter, we have utilised another approach.

The analysis followed a thematic synthesis approach, which aimed at identifying the key themes in the results of the evaluations, examined in parallel to each other and synthesised based on those identified themes. This approach allowed for determining thematic statements based on the synthesis of the identified themes – which could be generalised for the purposes of this report. Due to the variety of the evaluations as well as the contextual differences in which the evaluations were carried out, these statements do not reflect all evaluations and are therefore not necessarily generalisable in a wider context, but with the use of the thematic synthesis approach, we were able to pinpoint thematic results which emerged in the majority of the evaluations or were particularly prominent.

The most vulnerable are not reached by official employment programmes

As it was mentioned before, the evaluated initiatives did not have 25+ NEETs for their primary target group, but rather a broader one (mostly unemployed persons). 25+ NEETs are rarely a direct target of employment initiatives, since in many cases they are “invisible”, or not recognised as a separate group with specific needs. Even so, in many cases they were successfully involved in these programmes – but there are apparent hindrances in this process.

Many of the evaluated programmes are targeting participants who are registered at the local/regional labour offices (for example, it was the case in the Greek, Bulgarian, Slovakian, Polish and Spanish initiatives). It is easy to see the reason for his method of recruiting participants: there is an available database with important information, and ways to contact them, which saves time and resources (especially in the case of projects where there are no social workers/youth workers/locally embedded civil organisation who can help contacting unregistered people). Moreover, implementers can make the assumption that those who are registered with the labour office are more motivated to look for and stay in a job than those who are not.

Due to this skimming effect, however, these programmes cannot reach the most vulnerable (thus those, who might be in the greatest need for the programme), since in many cases, they are not registered, not “in the system”. These people (many of them NEETs) can be of minority ethnic background, living in deep rural areas, be stay-at-home mothers, be rough sleepers/have unstable housing conditions etc.

The Romanian initiative was an NGO-led project based in 2 counties, offering mentoring and career guidance (with training, meeting with employers, camps, study trips, lectures and city tours) to 15-29 age-group of secondary school aged youth, with completed primary school with a high risk of school dropout and NEETs. The project paid special attention to economically disadvantaged groups and the Roma community. It was a horizontal aim that at least 30% of the participants to be of Roma background – which could not be realised, since, “after the start, the Romanian project team realised, [...] that by the age of 15, the majority of the Roma population had already left the official education system, so they could not reach them in an organised way, meaning that through school-based activities” (Bálint, Lázár & Telegdy, 2023).

But how to reach the (seemingly) unreachable? Reaching and motivating the target group is always a challenge in programmes which focus on disadvantaged persons. It takes time and (human) resources to find them (have the necessary knowledge/embeddedness), to motivate them, to make it possible for them to participate and persist in participation. This means that projects need to be designed taking this necessity into consideration – an aspect which might be especially important when reaching 25+ NEETs, who are an “invisible” population in many countries.

Service provision should be adaptable but individualised

When considering the impact of employment initiatives, the most straightforward impact they can achieve is stable employment of participants – it is also the easiest to measure compared to increased levels of skills or improved well-being. Due to the challenges in the comparison of the evaluation results we cannot generalise directly on the impact of the evaluated programmes, at the same time, we can draw certain conclusions regarding the key factors which contribute to the success of employment initiatives.

The results of our evaluations show a few key factors of successful trainings for increasing employment chances. Considering the **thematic focus** or content of trainings, results show that teaching transversal skills as well as responding to local labour market needs are essential for success. From an **implementation perspective** the most often highlighted characteristic was flexibility.

The evaluation from Poland examined the differences in the impacts of national level training programmes (provided by labour offices) to individual learning that is based on the own initiative of individuals. The results showed that trainings provided by the labour offices have a positive effect on the likelihood on getting a job. At the same time, trainings showed a stronger short-term effect on increased employment chances, while self-learning rather had a long-term positive effect for employment. (Although the evaluation results do not provide explanation for this difference, the reason behind it might be different levels of motivation and dedication on the side of the participants.)
(Gajderowicz et al, 2023)

In terms of employment-related services, job placement measures showed some impact on employment chances. Most importantly, results emphasise the role of the work experience gained by participants as the key impact: for example, in the Bulgarian case, interview data suggest that many participating young people have managed to find work by continuing to work for the institutions that had initially hired them under the programme. The Romanian evaluation found that participation in the evaluated project is effective when the participants receive school-level career guidance and work-related experiences – but, participation combined with work-related experiences can be effective even in case of negative school experiences and lack of school-level career guidance. However, only work-related experience (combined with negative school experiences) did not yield high level of employability.

Job placement can also have a beneficial impact on employers, which was the case in Bulgaria, where providing temporary jobs for young people in the civil sector allowed for the rejuvenation of the sector. At the same time, certain job placement programmes could also have unintended negative impacts, as shown in the evaluation carried out in Slovakia with regard to the activation works programme: the programmes experienced a parking effect and created dependency on the system, overall, hindering participants' integration to the primary labour market on the long term.

From the other employment services evaluated within the project the following can be highlighted as key success factors: coaching sessions proved to be successful in raising employability; carrier guidance was seen as a key tool for success in the Romanian case, although all services were additional to trainings, while continuous contact and follow-up activities with participants, as well as understanding the needs

of participants were essential in the Hungarian evaluation for success. These results show that the individualisation of services is one of the most important success factors of employment-related services.

One of the key questions emerging from the results is: which activities prove to be the most successful in supporting the labour market integration of 25+ NEETs: training activities, job placement or other employment-related services. These activities aim to increase employment chances through different routes: trainings wish to provide the necessary knowledge and skills to acquire a job (e.g., how to write a CV) and to be able to stay in the labour market on the long term – whether through vocation-related skills, or transversal skills. Job placements' method is to provide participants with first-hand experience, create work-habits and enable on-the-job learning – in most cases in jobs participants would not have been able to get themselves. Other labour market services provide additional support which aims to help young people with technical aspects of getting a job (e.g., job search assistance, legal support), or with more personalised aspects of how to acquire and maintain a job that fits their preferences and needs the most – through coaching, mentoring or counselling.

This brings the question: **if the intended end result is the same, is it possible to determine which method used to get there is most beneficial for our target group of 25+ NEETs?** The limitations of comparability of the different evaluations carried out in the project does not allow us to directly compare the impacts of different types of activities, at the same time, it showed a key success factor is reflection on the needs of the individual – their situation, barrier they're facing, etc. –, as well as the (local) labour market. If trainings do not provide skills which enable young people to do get and maintain a job, then it will not contribute to their employability and their well-being. At the same time, gaining work experience for a limited amount of time, without enhancing the capacity of participants to find a job that suits their skills and needs will not be successful in the long run. This suggests that services need flexibility to adapt to the needs of participants, but also that one type of support might not be sufficient for long-term impact on increasing employability – especially in the case of the most vulnerable groups of 25+ NEETs who face multiple barriers. The combination of multiple types of services, supporting young people from multiple aspects could ensure a more stable long-term impact on employability and well-being, thus even if individual services offer some level of success, a flexible, individualised and complex support system could have a more targeted and lasting impact – especially for vulnerable youth.

Gender is not considered in most evaluated initiatives

Gender and gender equality was considered a horizontal analytical principle in the overall evaluation framework of all implemented evaluations, the following presents the main conclusions from this perspective.

Despite persisting gender gaps in 25+ NEETs rates in participating countries (Koller et al., 2022) and the different barrier men and women face in terms of employment, nearly all evaluated initiatives disregard the issue of gender. The main exception was the initiative in Malta, where the evaluation concluded that gender equality was a core element of initiative and its implementation. Considering the target groups, most evaluations did not mention women as specific target groups. Where it was mentioned, particular groups of women were part of the target group, such as domestic violence survivors (Maltese case), single mothers (Hungarian case), or disadvantaged and Roma girls at risk of early school leaving (Romanian case).

The most highlighted aspect where gender was considered was the gender distribution of participants: implementers of multiple initiatives expressed in interviews that they aim for equal share of women and men participants (or in case of the Romanian initiative 55% should be women) – although it was not included as an indicator for most cases. In the Spanish case, it was highlighted specifically by implementers (in an interview) that even though the project was not focused on combating gender biases, they aimed to involve equal number of women and men. Overall, the share of women and men participating in the evaluated initiatives is diverse, more than half of the participants were women in three initiatives out of the nine³.

As gender was not emphasised in the design of the evaluated initiatives (e.g., in target groups), it is not surprising that there were limited gendered information on the impacts or results of the projects. In some cases, however, results did consider the aspect of gender. For example, in the Polish case results indicated that the evaluated trainings were only effective for women on the short term and overall, proved to be more beneficial for men; and the Greek evaluation – which was based on a survey of programme participants – found that men and women evaluated their experience in a rather similar way, while women overall assessed the initiative in a slightly more positive way.

Some project results showed (unintended) gendered outcomes: in the Spanish initiative, women were more likely to participate in the training courses which were provided online, and in the Bulgarian case in the job placement services, women were more likely to take a specific type of job compared to men. The evaluation of the Slovakian activation works suggested that the reason behind the high share of women participants in Slovakia is likely to be that it can be a relevant option for women to increase their income in addition to their care responsibilities, while staying close to home. These results shed light on the different situations and circumstances of women, which mean that the same measures might not work or might not work the same way as for men. Some approaches might work better for women – e.g., offering work experience locally – close to their home –, which supports them with their care

³ There's no information on the share of women participants in the case of two initiatives.

responsibilities, while others might be more beneficial for men – e.g., in-person trainings, which provide the opportunity to learn skills which are more in line with the local labour market needs).

These results highlight the need of a gendered approach in programme design: considering the challenges and needs of women, as well as the possible impacts and implications of the designated initiative on women, which are embedded not only in the national, but in the local context – even in the case of national level programmes.

The initiative evaluated in Malta applied the following measures to ensure gender equality throughout implementation:

1. Ensuring that the service-provision team and interpreters are sensitive to the particular challenges faced by female beneficiaries through relevant internal debriefings.
2. Ensuring the availability of female lawyers and interpreters for those situations where beneficiaries require support from a female lawyer/interpreter. This is especially relevant for cases of trafficking, domestic violence and sexual violence.
3. Ensuring that the service delivery is gender-sensitive by promoting the empowerment of female beneficiaries.
4. In a situation of dependence, acknowledging the individual status of female beneficiaries.
5. In acknowledgement of the particularly challenging situation faced by female beneficiaries, the Rental Subsidy Scheme will adopt a positive discrimination approach in the formulation of its selection criteria (*Kósa, 2023*).

Filling a gap among other programmes increases relevance and coherence

In most cases, the evaluated initiatives are not “one of a kind” in their field – usually there are other labour market programmes in effect. However, what makes the evaluated programmes unique is either the targeting (focusing on groups which are not reached by other similar programmes) or the methods (different approach and/or activities than the other programmes). A common finding was that the

programmes evaluated mostly complement the range of services that otherwise exist in the country, and that the niche aspects increase the relevance of the projects and help sustainability.⁴

It, however, does not automatically mean that there is connection between the different labour market programmes.

The Slovakian case study concerned an initiative which activation work through small municipal services (targeting long-term unemployed). This programme was intended as an intermediate step between the status of a passive recipient of a benefit in material need and a full-fledged participant in the labour market. The results of the evaluation show that its link to other services is an issue, and while there is potential in the activities, they mostly remain untapped (partly because there are rare links to other programmes); and participation in this programme does not significantly affect later participation in other active labour market policy measures, nor participating in the primary labour market (Polačkova and Blizman Servilová, 2023).

Efficiency can be more than just the use of financial resources

When talking about efficiency in evaluations, we talk about the use of financial resources for achieving the desired outcomes of a project or programme: namely whether the money was spent efficiently to achieve objectives or not. Most of the evaluations carried out under this project reported adequate allocation of resources – although due to the lack of available information on details of the spendings, we cannot make sufficient observations on efficiency.

At the same time, efficient use of resources can refer to not only the financial aspect, but also to the efficiency of implementation in terms of human resources and cooperation. This aspect was highlighted in two of the nine evaluations. In the Romanian evaluation, efficiency was supported by the fact that the mentors participating in the initiative supporting young people had appropriate educational background to carry out support activities – thus they had relevant training for their tasks – while they have also received special training on mentoring, ensuring that they have the required knowledge and skills for the job. Another case was the Hungarian evaluation report which highlighted cooperation and networking as an essential element for successful implementation. The evaluated project was carried out by multiple organisations; therefore, cooperation was crucial in this case in order for efficient

⁴ On the other hand, in some cases the evaluated programmes themselves were completely unique in their field (e.g., the Maltese initiative), which make them extremely relevant, and more likely to continue on.

implementation: knowledge sharing among the organisations resulted in client referrals and enabled that the staff remained connected throughout implementation.

Possible tension between reaching the target group and reaching the indicators

Involvement of the most vulnerable target group members may also be hindered if project funding or continuation strongly depends on the (previously set) indicators being met – because if the implementers are in a pressure of time and expectations, they are less likely to put effort (and resources) in involving (or keeping in the programme) those who are “tough cases”, or need more attention. This risk-averse behaviour can enhance the aforementioned issue of not reaching those most in need.

Though almost every evaluated initiative has reached their target numbers (at least where they were defined), in some cases it was mentioned that focusing only on meeting indicators can have a negative effect on the results of the programme (for example this was the case in the Hungarian initiative, where there is some sort of tension between meeting indicators and attracting more difficult customers; or in the Maltase programme, where the official result indicators are not appropriate for the aims of the project).

Project-style implementation of initiatives is likely to create funding-dependency

Evaluated small-scale initiatives are mostly funded via project-style (implementing projects with fix-term funding and work plan). Project-based funding has many advantages: it gives opportunity to new ideas to pilot themselves; makes it possible to reach smaller, or localised target groups; in the case of periodic issues, it is more fitting than the formulation of a permanent infrastructure.

On the other hand, project-cycles have innate issues, which can have lasting effect on the initiatives and the potential impact they could create. First, if funding is strictly connected to reaching indicators, then it can cause risk-averse behaviour (see in previous section). Moreover, if an organisation needs to apply new funding periodically, there is a risk that some of the staff will leave and look for work elsewhere because of the interrupted funding (since NGOs usually do not have the reserves to tide over the time between funding periods). This can cause serious problems in project implementation and reduces embeddedness with the target group – and potentially cause harm for the target group, since the ongoing service will be interrupted with unsure continuation.

The Czech, Hungarian and Maltese evaluated initiatives are being carried out by NGOs in project-based funding. In all cases it was raised during the assessment that continuous funding is an issue for them, since the participating NGOs don't have the capacity to continue in the same manner via their own resources. To ensure sustainable operation, implementers need to convince the funder of the benefits of the project and the need to continue (where this is an option).

Of course, funding is a key issue for national programmes as well, but in a different sense, since in their case it is a matter of national/EU budget allocation (and the decision-makers’ attitudes about the initiatives). For example, in the case of the Greek programme, the (ESF-based) funding is tied to key indicators: if unemployment falls below 20% in the country, the programme would be reduced.

5. Conclusion

In the synthesis report it was given a qualitative summary of the nine evaluations carried out by the Beneficiary Partners of the ‘Lost Millennials’ project. The evaluated initiatives had varied by scope, implementer and main activities, but all has targeted 25+ NEETs in some way.

Evaluation, which is a systematic and objective assessment of an on-going or completed project, programme or policy, can have multiple purposes: it can give input to make improvements in a given programme, or to help making decisions about whether to start, continue, expand or stop a programme. The implemented evaluations have mostly utilised mixed method approach, which in most cases has meant that interviews were prominent.

To synthesise the results, statements which can be generalised were identified, with a particular focus on giving input to recommendations for policy and practice.

The main common results were the following:

Table 3. Main results summarising table

Result	Short description	To whom it might be useful insight?
The most vulnerable are not reached by official employment programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The evaluated initiatives did not have 25+ NEETs for their primary target group 25+ NEETs are rarely direct target of employment initiatives, since in many cases they are “invisible” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policymakers Project implementers Youth workers
Service provision should be adaptable but individualised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The most straightforward impact employment projects can achieve is stable employment of participants – it is also the easiest to measure The results of our evaluations show a few key factors of successful trainings: teaching transversal skills as well as responding to local labour market needs are essential for success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policymakers Project implementers Youth workers

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From an implementation perspective the most often highlighted characteristic was flexibility • The results show that the individualisation of services is one of the most important success factors of employment-related services; and that services need flexibility to adapt to the needs of participants • The combination of multiple types of services, supporting young people from multiple aspects could ensure a more stable long-term impact on employability and well-being 	
Gender is not considered in most evaluated initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Despite persisting gender gaps in 25+ NEETs rates in participating countries, nearly all evaluated initiatives disregard the issue of gender • The most highlighted aspect where gender was considered was the gender distribution of participants: implementers of multiple initiatives expressed in interviews that they aim for equal share of women and men participants • Some project results showed (unintended) gendered outcomes • The results highlight the need of a gendered approach in programme design 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policymakers • Project implementers • Youth workers
Filling a gap among other programmes increases relevance and coherence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The programmes evaluated mostly complement the range of services that otherwise exist in the country • The niche aspects (targeting, methods) increase the relevance of the projects and help sustainability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policymakers
Efficiency can be more than just the use of resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efficiency can be the use of financial resources for achieving the desired outcomes of a project or programme • At the same time, efficient use of resources can refer to not only financial aspect, but also to the efficiency of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policymakers • Project implementers

	implementation in terms of human resources and cooperation	
Possible tension between reaching the target group and reaching the indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involvement of the most vulnerable target group members may also be hindered if project funding depends on the indicators being met • In some cases, it was mentioned that focusing only on meeting indicators can have a negative effect on the results of the programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project implementers • Policymakers
Project-style implementation of initiatives is likely to create funding-dependency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small-scale initiatives are mostly funded via project-style, which has many advantages • On the other hand, it has innate issues: if funding is strictly connected to reaching indicators, then it can cause a risk-averse behaviour • If an organisation needs to apply new funding periodically, there is a risk that some of the staff will leave and look for work elsewhere because of the interrupted funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project implementers • NGOs • Policymakers

Source: authors' compilation

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