

NEET: A Phenomenon Yet to Be Explored

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Received: 13 April 2016 / Accepted: 15 July 2016 / Published online: 18 October 2016
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Abstract Who are the NEET? How much do we know about this? What do institutions and the media know about them? How different definitions could get to shared policies? This paper tries to provide an initial overview of the situation regarding the NEET, through an analysis of the emerging international literature on the subject. Different definitions across nations are analyzed in order to reflect on the cultural differences and economics-work policies, in order to then analyze more in depth the Italian situation. In Italy, the phenomenon is still little known in society and, often, not recognized by the acronym NEET, with the many variables that define it, despite statistics showing a rise in numbers (26 % of the total population for the age group considered).

Keywords NEET · Cultural differences · Education · Occupational guidance

Introduction

The European framework and Italy

The term NEET is an acronym of the English expression Not in Education, Employment, or Training, and it indicates the population aged between 15 and 29 years old who are not engaged in any kind of path of education, training, and work and who have stopped looking for work or who do not have plans to do so (Clark et al. 2007). The Neet therefore are also generally characterized by inactivity. Originally the term was used in the UK in July 1999 in the report “Bridging the Gap” of the Social Exclusion Unit. As reported in the preface of Bridging the Gap

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1999, Prime Minister Tony Blair had made this request because, in his view, “the best safeguard against social exclusion is to have a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education, with the right training and experience. However, every year approximately 161,000 young people aged between 16 and 18 are not engaged in education, training and work. For the most part, these guys live frustrating years, and this inevitably will lead to a lowering of wages and worsening employment outlook in the future” (*Bridging the Gap* 1999, p. 6) (Fig. 1).

Fonte: Istat

In Italy, the share of the population defined as NEET is growing and represents 26 % of the population of the reference range of age (one out of five is NEET, in prevalence among females). This percentage represents a value second only to the one of Greece. Therefore, in this ranking, Italy is in second place, followed by Bulgaria and Spain.

In Italy, the composition of NEET sees the female component as a majority. The national distribution sees percentages above 35.5 % of NEET in the southern regions of the country, particularly in Campania, Calabria, and Sicily (Fig. 2).

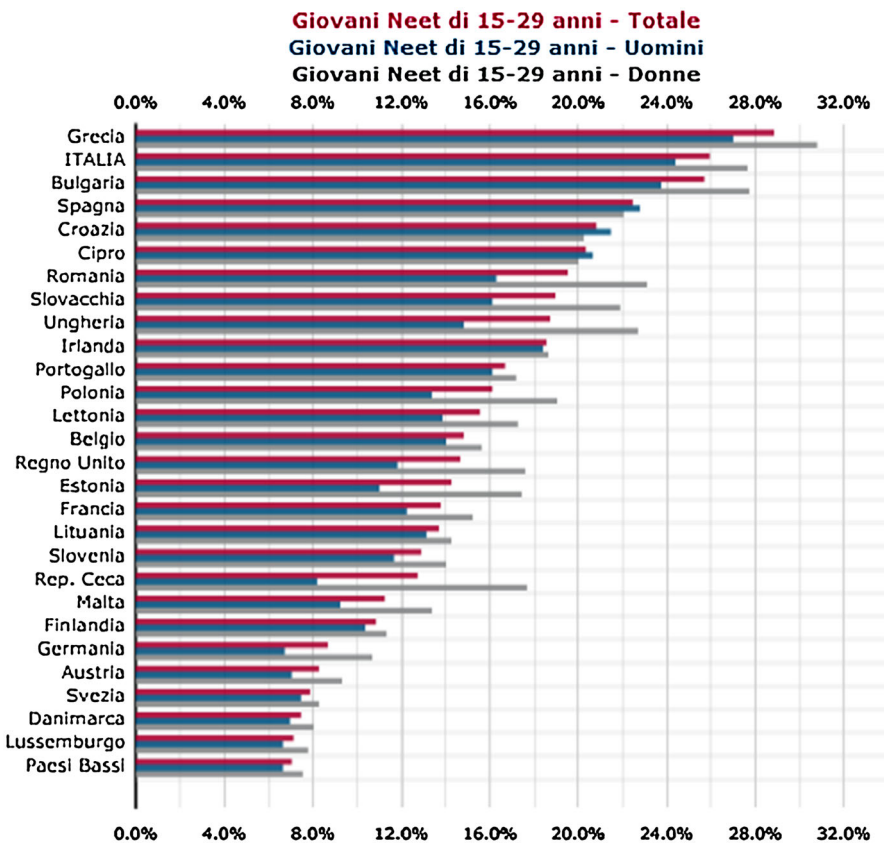


Fig. 1 Young people NEETs aged 15–29 years by sex in EU countries



Fig. 2 Young NEETs of 15–29 years in Italy

Fonte: Istat

The Definition: Origin

According to a first delineation of the phenomenon, the term NEET indicated only subjects aged 16–18 who had completed the compulsory school path and who decided not to continue the path of education, nor to take courses of professional qualification and as a result they can not find a job (Fahmy 2006; France 2007). In Italy, this first age delimitation of the phenomenon overlaps completely with early school leaving (the age group is considered, generally, relative to the years when you are still right/duty for education/training).

Following the creation of the term, NEET has spread rapidly in the national context of most countries of the world.

From the early 2000th, the topic of NEET has begun to be addressed systematically at the European level, thanks to the statistics compiled by supranational institutions like the European Commission or the OECD. These, especially in recent times, have begun to pick up, in different countries, a significant amount of data about the phenomenon, each country adopting its own definition of the category. Initially, an important distinction is that the OECD refers to the term NEET as the age group between 15 and 24 years, whereas the European Commission extends the limits of the phenomenon up to 29 years.

Compared with the first British definition, these later definitions broaden the horizon of analysis. The object is no longer only the period immediately following the end of compulsory education and the right and duty to education/training (and in Italy inside the right-duty to education/training), but it extends to the entire youth (although there are known phenomena called “longevity” of youth that is protracted up to 35 years and over). Hence, it is insufficient to consider the phenomenon as a result of a particularly critical time in life of a young person, and you must use it as a measure of the overall level of distress experienced by today’s youth in the transition from education and training to employment, which in economic crisis times, could last for longer.

The Different Definitions of NEET Around the World

Although there are some international studies on it, the category of NEET is difficult to analyze and compare because different parameters are used. Starting from different age ranges taken into account in the various countries, there’s the ambition to generalize the phenomenon, although we can find in literature different approaches of study that lead to specific definitions.

In England, the government’s attention is referred, in particular, to young people included in the age group 16–18 years who are classified as NEET. The dynamics of change are linked to the individual’s age (DfES 2007), who see a greater participation of 17 year olds NEET in the labor market compared to the previous ten years (recording the lowest rate of NEET among 17 year olds in 1994), even if the general trend is an increase in unemployment. It should be specified how the 16 year olds are instead identified as NET (with one “E”) as the work placement is not yet possible and therefore it refers only to education and training (DfES 2007).¹ The variability of the group is already represented in several studies: “Research on young people who are classified as NEET shows that it is a non-homogeneous group and includes a set of groups: some with low levels of achievement, but in some cases with a high level of previous achievements; some with no future aspirations, but others with clear aspirations; others were classified as NEET for a long period, while others only for a little. [...]” (Offer 2013, pp. 36–37).

Some authors describe the “levels” of being NEET, which depend upon the timing of belonging to the group of NEET, including “only young people who are classified as NEET for at least 6 months as those of level 0” (Bynner and Parsons 2002, p. 298).

Other statistics and research focuses, rather, on the age group 16–24 years old, because this allows you to observe and highlight more accurately the time when the transition takes place in the direction of the labor market (Sisson and Jones 2012).

In Italy, NEET “identifies the share of the population aged 15–29 years not occupied, nor inserted into a path of education and training. The reference is to any kind of school education/university and any kind of educational activity (regional vocational training courses, other types of vocational training courses, other training

¹ The particular interest in these age groups is motivated by the approval of the Raising the Participation Age (2013) which expands the number of years of compulsory education/training.

activities such as seminars, conferences, private lessons, language courses, computer science, etc.) with the exception of ‘informal’ learning activities such as self-learning” (Istat 2012, 2013a, b, 2014, pp. 78, 80, 82). Although there is a definite age range related to NEET, in some Italian studies, the group NEET is identified in young people between 15 and 34 (Cascioli 2011, p. 64). The actions taken at the regional level have allowed different interpretations of the specific category, both in terms of definition and classification, and in the identification of the corresponding age group.

In Japan, “the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare defines NEET as young people between 15 and 34 who are not currently in education, employment or training” (Kiura et al. 2014, p. 4).

In New Zealand, the term generally refers to “young people aged between 15 and 19 years not included in education, but who are employed or into training courses, for at least 1 h a week” (Hill 2003, p. 5).

“The Ministry of Social Development (MSD) uses the term NEET as an indicator of ‘inactivity’—a term that can include young people who are not formally enrolled in an educational program and those not formally registered such as those who are engaged in raising children” (Benseman 2006, p. 2).

In Australia and Brazil, the NEET are young people between 15 and 29 years not engaged in education and work (Education at a Glance 2013: OECD Indicators 2013). In Scotland, “the social and economic strategy of the Scottish Executive aims to halve the proportion of NEETs aged 16–19 years” (Scottish Executive 2000). A reduction of this portion is one of six ‘high level indicators’ to assess the progress of lifelong learning strategy (Scottish Executive 2003) and is included “in the strategic priority for Careers Scotland” (Raffe 2003, p. 2).

In Wales, “the decisive source for estimating NEET [...] is the annual Statistical First Release (SFR), currently published about 19 months after the reference year.” (Full 2010, p. 1).

In Northern Ireland, “the term NEET refers to young people aged 16 to 19 who are not engaged in education, training and work. Later this age group has been extended up to 24 years old” (Department for Employment and Learning Adelaide House 2010).

The Nordic Sociological Association, Alliance of sociological associations of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, during the 26th conference, held in August 2012 in Reykjavik, explained the phenomenon of NEET considering young people between 16 and 34 years (Arnardottir 2013).

In Taiwan, the term NEET was introduced to the public in 2004 by the local magazine “Business Weekly,” who used to refer to young people aged between 15–24 years outside of every system (Chen 2011). The term then became part of the official statistics.

In Spain, particularly in Catalonia NEET refers to young between 15 and 29 years old “In the Spanish region of Catalonia and throughout Spain, NEET has become a negative label that helped to stigmatize the entire young generation. The Spanish expression NEET is ‘*ni-ni*,’ referring to those people who neither study nor work. However, the media and popular understanding believe that this group is formed by those who do not want to study or work” (Serracant 2014).

In the American context, the NEET category was “addressed” long before in the UK. The phenomenon has been studied during the government proposals in favor of the economically and culturally disadvantaged class. According to researchers, however, the failure of such initiatives was determined by an inappropriate support from the state (Hoffman and Graham 2006; Sullivan and Unwin 2011). Today, the NEET category in the United States, “includes young people aged 16–24 years” (Szczesniak and Rondón 2012, p. 733).

In Austria, the NEET group includes people aged between 16 and 24 years, “because compulsory education in Austria ends after 9 years of school, then at the age of 15/16 years.” This means that if we took into consideration young people aged 15–24 years in Austria, then the rate of NEET would be lower because of compulsory education, and therefore, we would underestimate the problems of transition faced by young people in Austria” (Tamesberger et al. 2014, p. 222).

In Mexico, the NEET fall within the age group of 15–29 years. “The limits of this age group is related to the lower limit that refers to the cycle of formal education, since it is expected that at 15 years old people are still studying or completing compulsory. basic education The upper limit is based on ‘the age at which the majority of individuals has passed through a transition event to adulthood’” (Bermúdez-Lobera 2014, p. 245).

In South Africa, the young people who “are in the condition ‘Not in Education, Employment, or Training,’ are not only a problem of education, but also a huge social and economic damage,” (Sheppard and Cloete 2009, p. 35) and “they are aged between 18 and 24 years” (Szczesniak and Rondón 2012, p. 732).

In Korea, instead, “the NEET population also includes some people who are not classified as included into formal education, but who are preparing (in training) for a job or for the entrance examination to higher education” (OECD 2013, p. 184).

In South Korea, the category of NEET “refers to people aged 15–34 years, similar to Japan” (Szczesniak and Rondón 2012, p. 735).

From the definitions of the various countries, it is clear the difficulty of understanding such a phenomenon, and how this is favored by the inability to consider the NEET as a single homogenous group, even in order of age ranges. The group of NEET represented in different countries is a group of young people with different characteristics and experiences, with subdivisions and sub-groups, with different conditions and age limits. Table 1 attempts to provide a framework summary:

Different Interpretations: The Different Boundaries of Discomfort

The synthetic picture presented shows that the NEET phenomenon is a reality of global concern, although is not yet recognized the conditions that necessarily lead to the “status” of NEET.

However, factors that facilitate the entry into the condition of NEET are clearly identified: low level of parental education, previous unemployment of parents, divorce of parents, low family income, residence in remote areas, low educational attainment, immigrant background, and some kind of disability (Mascherini et al. 2012).

Table 1 Comparison of definitions of NEET around the world

Country	Age	Name	Motivation	Sample	Compulsory education	Reference
Japan	15–34 years	NEET	The number of NEETs in Japan rose to 0.6 million, with 90,000 people aged 15–19 years, 150 thousand in the age group 20–24, and 180,000 in both ranges 25–29 and 30–34	The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare defines Neet young men between 15 and 34 who are not currently in education, employment or training	9 years (6 + 3)	Kiura et al. (2014)
New Zealand	15–19 years	NEET	Hill argues that this broad definition is more useful than a simple total of the unemployed or young people not in education or training for a number of reasons - i.e., including those who are unemployed but have been discouraged from registering as unemployed or by choosing not to seek menial jobs from minimum wage and the whims of people who rarely make entry/exit from the workforce	Young people aged 15–19 years not in education, employment or training of at least one hour a week	6–16 years old	Hill (2003)
Australia, Brasil	15–29 years	NEET		Young people not engaged in education and career paths	For Australia: 5 to 16/17 years old (depending on state of residence) For Brasil: 7 to 14 years old	OECD (2013)

Table 1 continued

Country	Age	Name	Motivation	Sample	Compulsory education	Reference
Scotland	16–19 years	NEET	The social and legal strategy of the Scottish Executive aims to halve the proportion of 16–19 years who are NEET (Scottish Executive 2000). A reduction of this proportion is one of six ‘high level indicators’ to assess the progress of the lifelong learning strategy of the Executive (Scottish Executive 2003) and is included in the strategic priorities for Careers Scotland		5 to 16 years old	Raffe (2003)
England	16–18 years;	NEET		Young people who are classified as Neet at any time	5–16 years old	(DfES (2007), cited in Offer (2013))
	16–18 years			Only the young people who are classified as Neet at least six months.		Bynner and Parsons (2002)
	16–24 years		Since this age group shows more accurately the transition to the labor market in different parts of time			Sisson and Jones (2012)
Wales	16–18 years	NEET			5 to 16 years old	Full (2010)
Norther Ireland	16 - 19 years, thereafter up to 24 years.	NEET		Young people not engaged in education, training and work	4 to 16 years old	Department for Employment and Learning Adelaide House (2010)

Table 1 continued

Country	Age	Name	Motivation	Sample	Compulsory education	Reference
Nordic Sociological Association (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden)	16–34 years	NEET			Finland: 7 to 16 years old Denmark: 6 to 16 years old Norway: 6 to 16 years old Sweden: 7 to 16 years old Iceland: 6 to 16 years old	Amardottir (2012)
Taiwan	15–24 years	NEET	Range given by the statistics		9 years of schooling	Chen (2011)
Spain	Between 15 and 29 years	‘Ni-Ni’		People that neither study nor work. However, the media and the popular understanding believe that this group is formed by those who want neither study nor work	6 to 16 years old	Serracant (2014)
U.S.	16–24 years	NEET		Young people who do not study, do not work and do not take advantage of the cultural or professional training courses	5/8 years old to 16/18 years old depending on the state	Szceśniak and Rondon (2012)
Austria	16–24 years	NEET	Compulsory education in Austria ends after nine years of schooling, which tends to be at the age of 15 and 16		6 to 15 years old	Tamesberger et al. (2014)

Table 1 continued

Country	Age	Name	Motivation	Sample	Compulsory education	Reference
Mexico	15–29 years	Generation Ni-Ni	The delineation of this age group is related to the lower limit referred to by the cycle of formal education, since it is expected that in 15 years people are still studying or in order to complete basic compulsory education and the upper limit is based on the age at which the majority of individuals is passed through a transition to adulthood		6 to 15 years old	Bermúdez-Lobera (2014)
South Africa	18–24 years	NEET		The largest group consists of young people who have left school after completing the tenth grade, and before you finish twelfth	7 to 15 years old	Sheppard and Cloete (2009), Szcześniak and Rondón (2012)
South Korea	15–34 years			Neet population includes some people who are not classified as formal education, but who are training (in training) to work or tertiary entrance exams. In South Korea are young people who have left school, did not prepare to enter the world of work, are not married, they have no children or family responsibilities	6 to 12 years old	OECD (2013), Szcześniak and Rondón (2012)

We consider as NEET those individuals who, regardless of age, are young and not included in a course of education, training and who are not employed.

The situation can be summarized with one definition and often with the same or similar definitions for different groupings related to age ranges. The homogeneity of the definitions referred to different age limits makes international comparisons really complex: there's the risk of "slipping" in several generalizations about targets that are different, united only by a definition. The problem, however, arises even within some countries, like Italy, featuring a mix of personal boundaries in relief and in the national and regional policies aimed at this target (see later in this section). The confusion spreads, often, also to the reference literature in which sometimes authors refers to different age limits. In such a condition the eventual design of supranational policies, preliminarily require the construction of a coherent definition and, above all, of shared age limits (or replacement with other elements of definition).

From the first appearance of the term in the UK in the second half of the 1990s, several studies have sought to identify the categories of people at risk of becoming NEET. According to Offer (2013) the factors that impede young people's participation in any type of road, fall into three categories: physical factors, social factors, and emotional factors (Offer 2013, p. 6). On the contrary, the issues highlighted by the young people are: negative experiences in school; incomplete or distorted advices and guidance received; qualifications seen as worthless; the desire to secure the occupation rather than continue a course of education or training, even if they often meet difficulties in finding a job without experience (Spielhofer 2009 in Offer 2013, p. 37).

Other analysis from England, among young NEET, identify three major subgroups quite distinct one from the other: "those who were in temporary transition states involving a period NEET; young parents who take a conscious decision to be Neet for a defined period, to care for their children; young people who are NEET and that also show a number of complications or 'risk' in their lives (such as being homeless or needing care, engaged in the margins of legality or over, have emotional and/or behavioral problems, do not attend school, etc.) (Yates and Payne 2006, p. 334).

In Scotland, an individual classified as "NEET" is often a young parent who have parental responsibilities that makes difficult for him to find a job; a young person with physical disabilities or behavioral difficulties; a young person who takes care of one of the senior members of the family or a not an autonomous one; a young woman who has decided to take a year off before enrolling at a university; a young man who has abandoned a university course but has already decided the next step (Stephen and Peacock 2006, p. 8).

In publications that have covered the topic in Italy between 2011 and 2013 the group of NEET has been presented according to different criteria of division: exogenous and endogenous NEET (Zoja 2011); vulnerable and not vulnerable groups (Sutherland et al. 2013); unemployed and inactive for reasons other than the education (Assirelli 2013). As we have seen for age differences, the characteristics of NEET vary greatly among the various Member States in Europe. In Italy and Romania the majority of NEET are idle with no previous work experience, while in

Spain and Sweden the young people who are NEET are more likely to be unemployed with previous work experience. Despite similar characteristics, the size of the population NEET differs greatly between Spain and Sweden, while that of Italy and Romania is altogether comparable (Mascherini et al. 2012).

In the publication written by Julie Nelson and Lisa O'Donnell, The NFER Research Programme, “presented an analysis of ‘segmentation’ that identified three distinct sub-groups of young people NEET aged 16–17 years” (Nelson and O'Donnell 2012, p. 2):

-NEET ‘open to learning’: young people who are more likely to re-engage in education or training in the short term and with higher levels of achievement and positive attitudes toward school; - ‘sustained’ NEET: young people characterized by a ‘negative experience in school, with higher levels of absenteeism, exclusion and lower academic achievement compared to other young NEET. They are more likely to remain NEET in the medium term; ‘indecisive’ NEET: similar to the ones open to learning, but who are dissatisfied with the available opportunities and with their inability to have access to what they want to do (Nelson and O'Donnell 2012, p. 2).

In a study carried out in Northern Ireland, this category is interpreted as persons in situations of physical and emotional stress. Based on these criteria, they are divided internally into more smaller groups, formed according to the characteristics of the components. According to the Department for Employment and Learning Adelaide, the most common groups of NEET could be people in care who have left care, or that are on the edge of care. They could be people who have had a negative experience in education, or who have problems with literacy or people who have suffered from bullying at school. They could be people with mental illness or physical disability or who have economic disadvantage. People who have committed a crime, who are homeless or drugs and alcohol addicted.

In Japan, within the category of NEET, there is a subcategory formed by hikikomori (social blocks), who not only avoid a professional involvement, but also avoid a social participation. They isolate themselves in their rooms for at least 6 months up to decades in some cases, without interacting with others, sometimes not even with their families (Norasakkunkit and Uchida 2011, p. 776).

In China, Japan, and other Asian countries, there are a multitude of different interpretations (Soetanto and Zhou 2009). In China, the group of NEET, (in Chinese “Ken Lao Zu”) is divided, like Japan, mainly in four groups:

- people who have a lack of skills and education, but who do not want a tough job and a low wages;
- people who are hyper-protected by their parents, and that without them certainly meet difficulties;
- People who have a strong desire to build their own businesses, as they do not want to be employed;
- people who have difficulties integrating in the workplace (Soetanto and Zhou 2010).

In South Korea, “the young NEETs are called ‘discouraged’, because as well as having left school, they did not prepare to enter the world of work, and they are not

married, nor have children or family responsibilities (OECD 2010)” (Szczęśniak and Rondon 2012, p. 735). In Mexico, the population of young people between 15 and 29 who are NEET is divided into two broad categories: young “Ninis” and adults “Ninis”. Ninis are subjects who have not made any transition to adulthood, those who occupy the position of children or grandchildren in households where they reside, a Young Ninis is unmarried and has no children. Those who have already experienced some transitions to adulthood, including those leaving the parental home, joined in marriage and having children, are considered adult Ninis (Bermudez-Lobera 2014, p. 245).

It is evident that the age limits, which should be the element on which we could find an agreement between nations on the definition of NEET, is not sufficient because it doesn't really identify the period of transition between professional training and the world of work. There's the effective risk to rule out those subjects who mostly need benefits support and intervention measures (Batini 2014). Obviously we still need to have a look to recent data (Istat 2015; Eurostat 2015) that shows that investment in education appears, even today, a profitable investment compared to the possibilities and the future quality of employment. Regarding to Italy, analyzed in a specific way in the second part of this contribution, the data is also of particular relevance for the low number of graduates still present in the country. In the XVII Report on the Employment Conditions of Italian graduates, the AlmaLaurea Consortium (which collects data on the Italians graduates every years, from decades) made a press release in which emerged as “Still today, and despite the difficulties of our country, graduation can protect the young on the work market more than a high school diploma”.

NEET and Moral Judgment

According to Toivonen, a dual nature can be attributed to the group of NEET (Toivonen 2011, p. 409). Initially there was only the connotation of “sociopolitical category,” but very soon this has taken the form of a second category, namely that of “social group” with strong moral connotations. By “sociopolitical category” Toivonen refers “to the definitions and technical labels that outline, and then build, a particular group based on some shared characteristics- whether it's young people who are unemployed, elderly victims of the atomic bomb, or unwed mothers- as a target for the measurements of policies and/or for official monitoring. These definitions are often conceived by analysts, leading politicians and/or government officials (Toivonen 2011, p. 409). With “social category” Toivonen instead indicates “the more explicitly symbolic labels—widely spread in the public sector—which denote groups of people who share certain characteristics of interest. This is clearly a wider concept than that of the target group category, something like ‘permanent worker’ (seishain) or ‘divorced person’ (batsu-ichi) up to ‘those around 30’ (Arasa) that can be considered a social category” (Toivonen 2011, pp. 409–410).

According to Raffe “at least two interpretations of the state of NEET are possible. In the best of perspectives it appears to be the product of an individual

choice and opportunity [...] In the less favorable interpretation the status NEET reflects disadvantage and impotence” (Raffe 2003, p. 2).

In social discourses, at least for Italy, a moral judgment against NEET often appears.

It is clear that “the population of young NEET is not only inhomogeneous (it is not composed entirely of young people who are criminally active or who use drugs, for example), but also very fluid. Many NEET often move in and out of that category, before entering fully into work, education or training, for longer time periods. In essence, this fluidity can tell a lot about the characteristics associated with a part of these young people, but that does not necessarily serves to tell a lot about the possible lack of skills or will or interests of some individuals” (Passey et al. 2008, p. 18).

In this contribution, and on the lights of the international literature, we wanted to analyze the state of Italy, which is particular. In social discourses, as mention, often it appears a judgment of a moral nature against NEET.

It is clear, therefore, that when national governments have a negative opinion about the juvenile category comparable to that of NEET, it becomes difficult to build public policies that truly respond to the needs of the target.

The controversy in Italy began in 2007, before the economic crisis. The then Finance Minister Padoa Schioppa called young Italians “big babies”, thus referring to a supposed tendency of them to remain economically dependent on their parents.

Later the minister of welfare Elsa Fornero, during a conference in Assolombarda, in 2012, had recommended to the younger generation of “not be too choosy” (the English word was used directly from the minister), and “to take the first job offers”, because “you can not wait for the perfect job”. Finally, the Deputy Minister of economy Michele Martone, in 2012, had called “nerds” those youngster who at 28 years has not yet graduated. Italy has, according to the OECD survey, the highest number of NEET in Europe and is therefore an interesting case, also for the direct data we have.

How Much are We Informed About It and Who Are the Experts?

Despite the statistics shows numbers that are growing in Italy, with a total of about two and a half million NEET distributed unevenly throughout the country, this phenomenon is very unknown in society, but also within institutions who should be responsible for the instruments necessary to combat these phenomena. The low knowledge found among the insiders, indirectly testifies the limited effectiveness of policies.

The long-term impact of NEETs on the country is potentially devastating, even if the effects are still minimally visible. To the loss of productivity, we must also add the future costs for welfare and health care.

In Italy, the media have treated in a superficial way the phenomenon in most of the cases, although each of us, according to the figures, knows at least one young man in this situation, because of the large presence of NEET.

People have little information about who NEET are. To the question, “do you know who the NEET are?” you often get answers like: “Huh !? What? Who are

them?” and sometimes you get a wrong judgment or information about it (“Ah yes, those who do nothing and are borne by the families”).

Many articles in the most read newspapers in South and Central Italy, according to data Audipress 2011–2013, covered the subject in question, although not in detail. A research made until spring 2015 highlight that most of the articles only mention the consistency of NEET, the crisis in the world of work, school truancy and the economic crisis.

In most cases the meaning of NEET is only explained and translated, or are reported some statistics.

As it reads: “They are a small army, and represent one of the current social emergencies [...] These are young people who live in a limbo avulsed from the normal rhythms of life, study and work;”² “young people between 15 and 34 who are not working and have stopped studying or looking for a job;”³ “one in five does nothing all day.”⁴ NEET are again defined as those that “do not study, they do not work and do not even think to update themselves [...] they live suspended in a limbo where there are no work or school commitments, where there are no ambitions for the future and only where there is insecurity and disillusionment;”⁵ The growth of young NEET (outside the circuit of school—education—work) produces an increase in the Italian underworld, urging the foreign one.”⁶

So it remains to readers the difficult task to navigate around confused and contradictory data and information.

Methods and Results

Public Opinions: Our Research

In the context of a larger research project on NEET, we asked random people, met in random public places in cities of the province of South and Central Italy, to synthesize their knowledge about the phenomenon NEET through a short questionnaire with open questions. In a total sample composed of 450 subjects between South and Central Italy only 15 % showed an understanding of the phenomenon NEET and only the 10 % of the sample claim to have in their network of relationships, individuals identifiable as NEET. For example, people who have answered the questions, said that the young NEET are : “Young people who are not committed to find a job;” “Unemployed graduates;” “layabouts,” “inactive;”

² Supplementary data are available: <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2013/04/06/neetnestudentinelavoratoridodicimilargazzi.html?ref=search>.

³ Supplementary data are available: <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2011/06/10/recorddelladisoccupazioneenellisolabanitaliaun.html?ref=search>.

⁴ Supplementary data are available: <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2011/01/20/ungiovanesucinquenonstudiane.html?ref=search>.

⁵ Supplementary data are available: http://www.lanazione.it/arezzo/cronaca/2011/03/02/467302-generazione_perduta.shtml.

⁶ Supplementary data are available: http://archivistorico.corriere.it/2013/marzo/02/crisi_ingrossa_manovalanza_del_crimine_co_0_20130302_7fa83b76830511e2a6f4c9440d503f3e.shtml.

“Those who do not study and do not work;” “Unemployed with no prospects;” “Guys who do not seek employment;” “Maintained;” and “Young people between 14 and 30 who have no qualifications.” In their opinion, people could be considered to be NEET due to, for example: “Social, economic and family problems;” “For lack of stimulus and ambition;” “because they inactive and renounced;” “because they escaped from the school and with low education level;” “Because they are disheartened;” “Because they are unwilling and are spoiled by the family;” “for convenience;” “Because of disappointments at school.” It is evident the utter confusion characterizing the responses, which often gives the impression of being influenced by stereotypes built through definitions heard or seen on TV.

The lack of knowledge of the phenomenon and the presence of prejudices against the target does not allow the pursuit of a “public pressure” on the government policies which, indeed, may fear the effect of “boomerang” by policies aimed at population groups deemed “defeatist” or “indolent”.

The Experts: Our Research

To better understand the level of preparation with respect to the phenomenon of NEET, a survey was conducted within the employment centers of the regions of Calabria, Umbria and Tuscany.⁷ The recent measures relating to “Youth Guarantee” have in fact attributed to the employment centers the nodal function in welcoming NEET and young people in general, and in the management of the entire process provided for them by the Job’s Act.

In order to understand the actual availability and efficiency of the primary service available for NEET, we searched on institutional sites the contact details of 99 employment centers, which were then contacted in order to ask them to receive informations related to the phenomenon of NEET. The results are of great interest: a significant number of operators of the employment centers do not know what the phenomenon of NEET is. In some cases the answers were not relevant and absurd.

A considerable number have simply made an association between the acronym NEET and the project “Youth Guarantee”; Almost a third of the phone numbers are nonexistent; A significant number (as stated in the detail below) say they do not want to answer or reject the interview.

Specifically in Calabria 22 employment centers on the region were contacted: eight were found to be non-existent; one has not responded; three knew the NEETs phenomenon by association with the project Youth Guarantee; six said they had never heard of the phenomenon NEETs, one of them has a personal opinion calling them “bums” and concluded by expressing his disinterest to this regard; four refused to answer.

In Umbria, we tracked 26 employment centers present throughout the region: of which nine were found to be non-existent in some cases replaced by other bodies

⁷ The employment centers in Italy are the offices of the public administration faces to the task of administering the labor market at a local level with the aim of achieving a satisfactory balance between offers and requests for work. It should be pointed out that the survey was conducted by telephone, so we also want to emphasize the difficulties encountered during the retrieval of telephone numbers by institutional sites and search engines.

and this confirms an absence of updates of Web sites; eight did not respond to phone calls or were always busy; six did not know what the phenomenon of NEET was; four knew the NEET phenomenon, one of them explained the position of NEET as “a person who it is not interested in the job search, and who is not doing anything.”

In Tuscany 51 employment centers were contacted in the entire region: seven were found to be non-existent; six did not respond; seven responded that they knew the NEET phenomenon but said they could not give information by telephone for any reason; eight have reported the absence or unavailability of the service manager of the project “Youth Guarantee”; four said they did not know the phenomenon NEET; two knew the project “Youth Guarantee,” but they have never heard of the phenomenon NEET and among these one replied on behalf of nine other employment centers of the province, one sent away the request to another employment center, five claimed to know the phenomenon in question, one of them describing NEET as those who are unemployed and who are not doing anything, adding further that “it is their problem and they should activate themselves” and one hung up after hearing the question.

Conclusions

Towards Knowledge for Better Political Intervention?

Despite the redundant news about youth unemployment, in Italy, it seems that there is no awareness of the NEET phenomenon, nor its consequences or its dimensions. Particularly relevant in this regard is the poor accuracy of the information of the media, and coarse or absent informations owned by ordinary people, and the incompetent response or non-response of most employment centers investigated.

Policy makers and technicians need to resume the dialogue with the empirical research, in order to know the dynamics and dimensions of the phenomenon and to intervene in an effective manner, closely monitoring the actions and then model the interventions.

The qualitative and quantitative data suggest the need for a re-think, by restructuring the welfare policies, of the existence of this phenomenon and other related phenomena that affect young people. We need to re-think a different model of support and assistance. The characteristics of these new models should be centering on the progressive autonomy of the subjects, the development, since kindergarten, of skills of orientation, a general increase in education levels, especially for those who start at a socio-economic-cultural disadvantage level. High quality education, training and guidance are among the most effective devices to prevent future worsening of the situation. In addition to prevention strategies, we also need urgent intervention to restore motivation and ability for 2.5 million young Italians, that could push forward a new idea of the future for them.

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