

Technical note

Making Employment Services and Active Measures Sensitive to the Needs of Young People

Recommendations for Youth Employment Programs in Kosovo¹

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ▶ **Young people are particularly disadvantaged in Kosovo’s labor market**, facing high unemployment and precarious working conditions. In response, promoting youth employment has become a policy priority for the Government of Kosovo.
- ▶ **Supporting young people’s employment prospects must take into account that young people are different than adults.** First, they face age-specific barriers in the labor market, such as lack of work experience and limited professional networks. Second, the youth years are a time of transition where young people build autonomy and identity and are strongly influenced by their social environment. These realities need to be considered for program design and implementation.
- ▶ **Youth employment policies and interventions should therefore be sensitive to the specific needs and preferences of young people.** In practice, interventions can be considered “youth sensitive” when they respect the following 10 principles. There are many good practices in Kosovo, neighboring countries and the European Union that can serve as inspiration.
 1. Know your clients, in order to be able to design interventions according to the specific beneficiary profiles.
 2. Develop socioemotional skills, such as social skills, communication and self-control.
 3. Coach youth through goal management, to help think about the future and pursue their goals.
 4. Strong guidance and follow-up support, including after placement as needed.
 5. Facilitate direct exposure and contact with the labor market, to help see and feel the realities of different types of work.
 6. Create positive adult-youth relationships, based on caring and supportive interactions with program staff.
 7. Adopt peer-to-peer engagement strategies, for example through peer trainers or mentors, interactive learning formats, and youth-led activities.
 8. Adopt age-appropriate communication channels, such as leveraging social media where appropriate.
 9. Work with multiple stakeholders and across settings, involving young people’s families and fostering collaboration with other relevant agencies and institutions (e.g. schools)
 10. Support staff engagement and development, to ensure commitment and contribution
- ▶ **Adopting the principles of “youth sensitive” programs is particularly important for public sector agencies** working with young people such as the Public Employment Agency and the Ministry of Youth, in order to better serve their clients and become more attractive service providers. Practical steps to enhance the youth-sensitivity of current and future youth employment programs could include:
 - i. Conducting a more in-depth diagnostic of current interventions to assess their strengths and weaknesses regarding their “youth-friendliness”;
 - ii. Engaging with non-public providers implementing youth employment programs in Kosovo to foster inter-institutional learning and exchange;
 - iii. Considering partnerships between public agencies and non-public providers in order to enhance the public providers’ service offering for young people; and
 - iv. Sensitizing current staff and ensuring that future recruitments consider the requirements for counselors, trainers, etc. to implement youth-friendly services.

I. RATIONALE

Young people are particularly disadvantaged in Kosovo's labor market. Young people in Kosovo rate the lack of job opportunities as their biggest challenge.² As in many other countries in the world, they face more difficulties in the labor market than adults. For instance:³

- **High unemployment:** 55 percent of Kosovar youth (ages 15-24) are unemployed, compared to less than 30 percent for adults. Around 50% of unemployed youth are long-term unemployed (more than 12 months).
- **Low quality employment:** Those youth who find employment often have poor quality jobs, working for low wages and under precarious conditions. More than half of the youth are either self-employed, unpaid family workers, or work in a very small firm. Close to 60 percent are working without a contract. Among those with a contract, approximately 80 percent are working under a temporary employment contract.
- **Young women are particularly affected:** They face higher unemployment rates than young men, and often transition from education into inactivity (as they often start a family in their late 20s but lack affordable child-care services).

This underutilization of young people's potential is costly for the youth and society. Cross-country evidence suggests that an unsuccessful school-to-work transition for young people can lead to long-lasting "scarring" effects. Indeed, it has been shown that unemployment and low earnings early in life can negatively affect future job prospects, life-time earnings, as well as their physical and mental health.⁴ At the same time, high levels of youth inactivity and unemployment reduce economic growth, while also negatively affecting tax revenues. Disaffected youth whose aspirations have been shattered and who lack other perspectives can also have negative effects on social cohesion, security, and political stability.⁵

In response to young people's difficulties in the labor market, promoting youth employment has become a policy priority for the Government of Kosovo. For instance, the Government put in place an intersectoral Action Plan on Increasing Youth Employment 2018-2020. Moreover, improving the employment situation for young people has been featured as a key objective in the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare's Sector Strategy 2018-2022 as well as in the Employment Policy for the Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo 2019-2021.

In order to successfully support young people's transition to employment, Public Employment Services and other agencies must develop a strong understanding of this specific target group and design its services and measures with a youth-lens in mind. Promoting employment is no simple task, and requires a policy mix that spans efforts strengthening the demand for workers (e.g. strong business environment and adequate sectoral policies), the quality of labor supply (importance of education, health, and an enabling environment to work), and adequate labor market and social protection policies to facilitate the matching between supply and demand. This is where relevant ministries, Public Employment Agency, and other service providers can play an important role, fostering young people's transition to work through targeted support measures. Yet, for these measures to be successful, it is crucial that they are designed with a good understanding of the key target groups. This note therefore seeks to summarize existing experience from other countries and good practices from Kosovo on how employment services and activation measures can be made more sensitive to the needs of young people in order to make them more effective.

II. HOW ARE YOUNG PEOPLE DIFFERENT?

Youth are not just "young adults", they are different than older people in many regards. To fully understand and promote young people's employment, it is important to appreciate the entire

² UNDP, 2018.

³ World Bank and Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, 2019.

⁴ See for example McQuaid, 2015; Nichols, Mitchell and Lindner, 2013.

⁵ World Bank, 2012.

context of their lives. Young people are going through multiple life-transitions (becoming more independent, forming their identity, starting a family, etc.) and are strongly determined by the influences around them, such as family and peers.⁶ Indeed, the transition to employment does not happen in isolation and depends on many other factors in young people's lives. Against that background, Public Employment Services and other service providers need to understand how young people are different than other target groups to adequately work with them and meet their needs.

Youth-specific barriers in the labor market

Young people face additional barriers to employment than adults. While poor employment outcomes also affect adults, some barriers to labor market integration tend to be more severe for youth. Specifically, young people in Kosovo are often more likely to face the following constraints compared to older people:

- **Lack of skills and experience:** Recruiting firms maintain that young jobseekers lack the skills and experience they need. A majority of recruiting firms in Kosovo find hiring new workers challenging because applicants have neither the skills nor work experience they require.⁷ This appears to be particularly true for hiring young people entering the labor market. The main underlying reasons include the poor-quality basic education system (e.g. reflected in low PISA scores⁸) as well as limited relevance (university graduates gaining degrees in areas not demanded by the economy) and practice-orientation of higher education. Moreover, many firms lack the necessary Human Resource Management capacity to recruit, train and retain staff.⁹ This, along with the lack of systematic industry/education engagement also constrains firms from offering high quality

internships/apprenticeships to young people making it hard for them to get the work experience they need to make them more employable.

- **Lack of social and professional networks.** Studies suggest that young people in Kosovo feel they do not have access to information on job/internship vacancies or counseling services for career planning. Rather they are heavily reliant on families which may also limit their understanding of available opportunities and their willingness to move within Kosovo for work.¹⁰ At the same time, when recruiting, Kosovo firms tend to rely on informal channels such as personal networks, recommendations and poaching trained staff from other firms.¹¹ Such recruitment approaches (which may also be driven by firms' lack of trust in education credentials) penalize new labor market entrants who have less work experience and fewer social or professional networks. Indeed, research confirms that (young) people are highly frustrated by their perception that connections and nepotism are more important for finding a job than merit.¹²
- **Lack of access to affordable finance and business support limits youth opportunities for self-employment.** Finance from banks is difficult to access for microentrepreneurs in Kosovo, and more so for marginalized young men and women who do not have collateral for small loans (collateral requirements range from 160-230 percent of the loan).¹³ The largest Banks have stopped serving the microenterprise segment and do not finance startups. Simultaneously, the microfinance sector is small.¹⁴ In addition to financial exclusion, youth entrepreneurship in Kosovo is constrained by limited opportunities for

⁶ World Bank, 2006.

⁷ World Bank, 2019.

⁸ In the 2015 PISA study, 68 percent of students are below the level required for basic proficiency in science, 77 percent are below basic proficiency in reading and 78 percent are below basic proficiency in mathematics. World Bank, 2019, p. 53).

⁹ World Bank, 2019b.

¹⁰ World Bank, 2016; Qirezi, Nika, Xhemajli, 2018.

¹¹ World Bank, 2019, p.76.

¹² See for example World Bank blog competition for university students; UNDP, 2017; UNDP, 2018.

¹³ World Bank, 2017.

¹⁴ European Investment Bank, 2016.

post-creation support and linkages with promising value chains.

- **Misaligned aspirations and expectations.** Although work opportunities are shrinking in Kosovo's public sector, young people are still strongly attracted by the government jobs due to job security, higher wages, and non-cash benefits.¹⁵ There are also signs of a "pessimistic" mindset among many youth, who are disappointed by the education system, nepotistic hiring practices, and the apparent lack of work opportunities in Kosovo, thus fueling disengagement from the labor market and intentions to migrate.
- **Mobility constraints.** A large share of new jobs in Kosovo is concentrated in Pristina, but less than 60 percent of unemployed youth aged 15-29 is willing to move within the country for a job.¹⁶ There are many barriers to move (transport cost, lack of information and networks, administrative and logistical burdens) that may discourage some of the youth to migrate where the jobs are.¹⁷
- **Gender-specific constraints.** Young women face additional barriers to the labor market, in particular time constraints when starting a family while lacking affordable child-care services. Conservative social norms (assigning family responsibilities almost exclusively to women), traditional gender roles (fueling occupational segregation), hiring discrimination by employers (e.g. due to costly maternity leave), and limited access to productive inputs also restrict young women's participation in the labor market.¹⁸

The youth years as a time of transition

Youth-focused organizations and interventions also need to consider the important personal developments during adolescence and youth. In addition to the specific age-related barriers to labor market integration, it is crucial to also consider the broader changes occurring during this phase in life. The youth years are marked by profound physical, emotional, and social transitions. Young people become legally independent, renegotiate their relationships with peers and adults, and develop their own identity. Young people's experiences during this period play a critical role in shaping their futures as adults. Ultimately, young people are expected to make the transition to adulthood, including entering work, becoming financially independent, and starting a family.¹⁹ Against this background, some of the key features of adolescence and young adulthood include:

- **Brain development and learning.** The brain is malleable until at least the mid- to late twenties. In addition to early childhood, adolescence and young adulthood make up the second critical window of opportunity for developing a person's skills and competencies.²⁰ This includes higher-order cognitive functions (e.g. attention, memory, planning, calibrating risk and reward) and other socio-emotional skills (e.g. emotion regulation, self-awareness, collaboration).
- **Building autonomy, identity, and setting goals.** As young people mature, they renegotiate their relationships with parents, peers, teachers, and other adults. In that process, youth develop greater autonomy and practice adult roles and responsibilities.²¹ At the same time, the youth years are the most active phase for identity development. Growing more autonomous and defining one's role in society requires young people to adopt a personal value system and

¹⁵ UNDP, 2018; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2019.

¹⁶ World Bank estimates based on 2016 Life in Transition Survey.

¹⁷ For instance, transport costs have been found to be a common constraint to youth employment in many countries, negatively affecting young people's ability to attend programmes, conduct job search, and getting to their job. See S4YE, 2018.

¹⁸ Brodmann and Hempel, 2018.

¹⁹ Hempel, Wuermli and Lundberg, 2012.

²⁰ Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2011; Child Trends, 2015.

²¹ Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2011.

establish personal and vocational preferences and aspirations. This includes becoming aware of their strengths and preferences and making decisions about their educational pathways and employment prospects. Indeed, the ability to define goals and act towards them becomes a foundation for young people's subsequent development.

- **Strong dependence on social environment.** Young people are not isolated individuals. Instead, they are the product of influences, experiences and interactions across different settings, such as family, peers, institutions (e.g. school) and the media.²² As they are growing more independent, young people are still very much subject to parental influence, while also being highly sensitive to, and motivated by, actions and attitudes in their peer network (e.g. friends, other young people). Indeed, young people are looking for a sense of belonging and peer group acceptance. Hence, positive influences (e.g. positive role models) during that time can be a strong asset to a young person's development, while negative influences can lead to undesirable behaviors (e.g. substance abuse, radicalization).

Box 1: Formation of vocational preferences in Kosovo

A study on Kosovar's perceptions on vocational education and trainings found that a vast majority of elementary school students (84%) identified their families as the main source of influence when it comes to education and career. Even when the family does not provide a direct suggestion, children are still affected by the family. This can be because of the prevalent field of work in the family (like medicine, mechanics etc.) or because of the situation that the family is in (i.e., a family that owns a restaurant can affect the child to study something related to hospitality and tourism. In addition, students also indicated that friends affect them in choosing educational and professional paths.²³

- **Different interests, values and forms of communication.** As young people are part of a different generation than older cohorts, they are naturally subject to different influences across all spheres of life (e.g. technology, media, etc.). This can have important implications on how young people think, their values and expectations, and how they communicate and interact with others. For instance, today's young people tend to communicate more electronically than face to face, using instant messaging, texting, and social network sites more so than older people.

Box 2: Use of internet and social media among youth in Kosovo

Internet use is omnipresent among young people in Kosovo. One study found that 56% of youth access it "practically all the time" and another 40% "every day or almost every day".²⁴ Over 80% of youth mainly use the internet for communication with friends or relatives and social networking like Facebook. The internet is also a key source for getting information according. According to another study, 94.6% said the internet was useful for informational purposes. The same study also suggests that the majority of young Kosovars use the Internet to search for job vacancies.²⁵

Life-stage characteristics and labor market barriers are linked

It is essential to understand that young people's general life-stage characteristics can directly influence their labor market outcomes, even if they are not directly employment related. For instance:

- When young people do not develop key skills early on (e.g. planning, critical thinking, emotion regulation), this negatively affects their ability to take advantage of subsequent education and work opportunities.
- When young people struggle with personal relationships, (limited) self-esteem, or unclear goals and vocational identity, they are likely to face severe difficulties navigating

²² Nagoaka et al. 2015, based on Bronfenbrenner model of human development.

²³ EYE-Helvetas, 2018a and 2018b.

²⁴ Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2019.

²⁵ Lens, 2015.

their lives, including pursuing higher education and finding employment;

- When young people have weak support structures (e.g. limited parental involvement), they are less likely to receive adequate advice on decisions related to education and work.

Hence, practitioners need to develop a holistic view of young people and their lives (including their health, families, etc.) in order to best support them.

III. MAKING LABOR MARKET PROGRAMS “YOUTH-FRIENDLY”

Public Employment Services and other youth-serving institutions need to consider these age-specific barriers and characteristics when designing and implementing labor market services and programs. This is particularly important for disadvantaged youth, whose barriers are likely to be more severe and whose social environment provides less positive stimulation, thus putting them more at risk to be unprepared for a successful school to work transition.

An understanding of young people’s specific barriers to employment points to selected priority areas of intervention that are needed to facilitate their transition to sustainable employment (“What to do”). These primarily include:

- **Quality education responsive to labor market needs:** Quality education is key to gain the skills needed to succeed in work and life. In addition to developing the basic skills (literacy and numeracy), soft skills (e.g. communication, problem-solving, etc.) and technical skills (according to the needs of different occupations), the education system should also provide opportunities for early exposure to the labor market in order to mitigate the lack of work experience (e.g. through internships or apprenticeships).

- **Career orientation and guidance:** In order to address young people’s limited information on the labor market and lack of professional networks, as well as to foster realistic expectations about the world of work, practical orientation and guidance about education and labor market choices are key. Such guidance must start early (no later than secondary school) and be available throughout higher education.

- **Active labor market programs (ALMPs) for youth:** Young people who are not able to independently transition into employment will need additional support. Depending on the needs, this will typically include a mix of employment services (provide orientation and guidance), training (build skills), entrepreneurship assistance (provide skills and resources), or subsidized employment (offer temporary income and work experience).

In turn, an understanding of young people’s personal characteristics and situation points to the implementation modalities that are conducive to make interventions more attractive and responsive to young people (“How to”). There is an increasing recognition that the quality of implementation is at least as important as the “what” for effective interventions. Hence, the remainder of this note will focus on what youth-focused employment programs can do to be better aligned with the age-related preferences and needs of young people.

Principles of youth-centered approaches

In order for young people to successfully navigate their lives, including their transition to employment, they need a range of resources (or assets). These include internal resources/assets, i.e. the skills, commitments, and values needed to make good choices, take responsibility, and be independent. Moreover, they also need external resources/assets, i.e. the support, opportunities, and relationships to succeed.²⁶

²⁶ See for example Search Institute, 2019.

Hence, organizations and interventions need to look beyond their narrow objective of improving employability and employment of “program participants” and integrate the lessons and success factors of broader youth development interventions to build these resources. This requires developing a nuanced understanding of how to promote the different internal and external assets conducive towards young people’s development in general. For instance, it is often not enough to teach youth new skills as a mere “mechanical service”, but it is equally crucial to create an enabling environment in which these skills are being taught, such as the importance of supportive adult-youth relationships in promoting the young person’s positive growth.²⁷ Indeed, helping youth build trust through “caring” adults is considered a crucial success factor in (employment) programs for youth.

In practice, this approach to look at youth not only through a negative lens (e.g. unemployed youth to be supported) but through a more comprehensive approach that seeks to foster positive experiences, relationships and environments for young people has been coined as “positive youth development”.²⁸ Table 1 provides an overview of factors of young people’s daily settings and experiences that are known to promote positive youth development.

Table 1: Features of Positive Developmental Settings

Features	Description
Opportunities for Skill Building	Develop different skills, competences and passions; focus on soft skills (e.g. social skills, self-control, communication); support goal setting and achievement
Supportive Relationships	Warm and caring interactions with adults; guidance; family support; positive role models; healthy peer relationships
Sense of Belonging	Opportunities for inclusion; feeling of recognition; being valued; group connectedness
Motivation & Engagement	Taking youth seriously; empowering practices that support responsibility, autonomy

²⁷ Child Trends, 2015.

	and contribution (e.g. involvement in decision making, leadership opportunities); meaningful challenges; focus on improvement rather than current performance
Structure	Clear and consistent rules and expectations; clear boundaries; continuity and predictability
Positive Social Norms	Promote mutual respect; foster prosocial values and morals
Safe Spaces	Emotional and physical safety; facilities and practices that promote trusting and safe interactions
Integrated Services	Coordination among stakeholders (e.g. family, school, community, etc.)

Source: Adapted from Eccles and Appleton Gootman, 2002 and USAID, 2017

Operationalizing youth-friendly employment programs

There are many things organizations and programs can do to operationalize these principles. While a particular intervention may not adopt all of the following strategies, ensuring alignment with as many youth-friendly practices as possible is likely to increase the attractiveness and effectiveness of the program.

Diagnosis & analysis

1. **Know your “clients”.** Youth are a heterogeneous group, with diverse preferences and needs. Understanding the specific characteristics of prospective beneficiaries (e.g. in terms of socio-demographics, time use, employment barriers, internal and external assets) through an adequate target group assessment and profiling is therefore essential. Based on this information, programs can segment their services and tailor them to the young people’s specific needs (e.g. based on their distance to the labor market and (lack of) internal and external assets). For instance, when dealing with particularly vulnerable groups such as early school leavers or

²⁸ See for example Alvarado et al., 2017; YouthGov, 2019.

long-term unemployed, interventions likely need to address some basic barriers first (e.g. mental health, basic skills) before providing more targeted skills training and work experience. Moreover, practitioners should also seek to understand young people’s aspirations (i.e. priorities in work and life) and how these are formed, which in turn can help tailor subsequent program design (e.g. in terms of outreach messaging, coaching and guidance needed, etc.).²⁹

Example 1 (Poland): In 2014, an activation package was introduced targeting young people under 30, regardless of how long they had been unemployed. The package consists of a training voucher and a traineeship voucher (Bon Szkoleniowy and Bon Stażowy). The implementation of these measures adopts an individualized approach, applying an in-depth diagnosis of a person’s employability and skills needs. Following this, training and traineeships are adjusted according to the beneficiary’s situation.³⁰

Example 2 (Ireland): The Youthreach program takes an integrated approach to the needs of unqualified young people who have left full-time education and who find it particularly difficult to gain a foothold in the labor market, or to take their place in society as young adults. The program aims to provide early school leavers with the knowledge, skills and confidence required to participate fully in society and progress to further education, training and employment. Participants are provided with individualized education plans, career counselling assistance and arrangements for work program placements and apprenticeships. The curriculum delivered to learners is flexible to individual and local needs, with a strong focus on literacy, numeracy, personal development, health promotion, sports and vocational subjects.³¹

2. **Develop socioemotional skills.** Rather than focusing solely on technical, vocational, and academic skills, youth employment interventions should support the development of transferable competencies that are key for young people’s general development and increasingly required in the labor market. The five types of soft skills that have been found to be most important for labor market success include: (i) social skills (getting along with others, resolving conflict, empathy), (ii) communication skills, (iii) higher order thinking skills (problem solving, critical thinking, decision making), (iv) self-control (manage emotions, regulate behavior), and (v) a positive self-concept (self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-awareness, etc.).³²

Example 1 (Kosovo): As part of its project “Supporting employability through self-development”, the NGO partnership of IPSIA/THY in Prizren has implemented a broad range of workshops to build young people’s soft skills through non-formal learning. For instance, the workshops seek to build self-confidence, communication skills (including presentation and persuasion skills), teamwork, time management, sense of initiative, etc.³³

Example 2 (Romania): The “Career Dream” initiative was designed to prepare secondary school students to select a career direction. Besides the activities directly related to career guidance and job search support, the program approach emphasized activities designed to build self-esteem, communication skills, conflict resolution techniques, teamwork, decision-making, personal marketing abilities and entrepreneurial know-how. By focusing on personal development, the goal was to help young people take responsibility for their futures and be able to successfully interact with a prospective employer.³⁴

Cross-cutting design “ingredients”

²⁹ Seiwaa Boateng and Löwe, 2018.

³⁰ Eurofound, 2017.

³¹ Eurofound, 2012.

³² Lippman et al, 2015. See also Guerra, Modecki and Cunningham, 2014, for an alternative classification of socio-emotional skills for the labor market. The importance of

personal and social skills, such as critical thinking, teamwork, and problem-solving has also been reflected in the revised European Reference Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning. See European Commission, 2018a.

³³ THY, 2018.

³⁴ Thorup, 2004.

3. **Coach youth through goal management.** More than adults, young people often need support in setting and managing goals, especially when they are discouraged and/or lack aspirations. They need to be encouraged to think about their future in a way that is both challenging and realistic. This often includes teaching how to break larger goals down, identify training opportunities, set goals and plan for the longer term.³⁵ This is also closely related to encouraging a “growth mindset” among youth, i.e. the belief that one’s abilities can be developed through dedication, hard work and input from others – hence fostering a culture of learning and continuous improvement.³⁶ By making young people feel more in control about their future, they can become more optimistic and proactive in pursuing education and work opportunities, while preventing them from undertaking negative behaviors (e.g. substance abuse, radicalization)).

Example (North Macedonia): The Ministry of Education and Science, with support from the World Bank, implemented several interventions to promote “grit” among 6th and 7th grade students, encouraging them to invest effort, persevere in the face of difficulty, seek feedback, approach work with full concentration, and learn from their own study behaviors. A rigorous evaluation found that the program significantly increased socio-emotional skills as well as academic achievement among students who participated in the intervention, especially for disadvantaged students (e.g. Roma).³⁷

4. **Strong guidance and follow-up support.** Good quality guidance, including both career guidance and more holistic advice and support related to their lives, is a key ingredient for interventions to support young people’s transition from school to work or to reintegrate them into education, training or employment.³⁸ In practice, guidance and support may be required over longer periods of time, including after placing youth into

education or employment. Such support can be key in order to anticipate and mitigate challenges youth may face after program completion, such as conflict with work supervisors or other issues, which could trigger impulsive decisions and dropping back out.

Example (Germany): The “Career entry support by mentoring” program implemented by the Federal Employment Agency aims at guiding young people who have difficulties to make a transition from secondary school to vocational training. Support starts two years before young people leave the school and ends about six months after the beginning of a vocational training course. The evaluation showed that providing support to youth both whilst still at school and after having started the vocational training increased effectiveness.³⁹

5. **Facilitate direct exposure and contact with the labor market.** Young people need to see and “feel” the realities of work and the labor market to shape their vocational aspirations, develop their professional identity and enhance their professional networks. Interventions should therefore always seek to facilitate direct contact with employers (e.g. firm visits, internships) and other types of practical and experiential learning (e.g. interview and job simulations).

Example (Montenegro): The “Prilike” (Opportunities) initiative gives secondary schools students the opportunity to visit up to three companies operating in a variety of sectors, such as telecommunication, energy, finance, services, trade and IT sectors. This direct exposure to the labor market allows youth to learn first-hand about their desired professions and the labor market conditions. Thanks to the initiative, students reported a greater understanding of their career options, a more optimistic view of employment opportunities, as well as more realistic expectations about salaries.⁴⁰

³⁵ Seiwa Boateng and Löwe, 2018.

³⁶ See for example Dweck, 2015; Mindsetworks, 2019.

³⁷ Eskreis-Winkler et al. (forthcoming).

³⁸ Eurofound, 2012.

³⁹ European Commission, 2018b.

⁴⁰ Giant’s Shoulder and University of Mannheim, 2017.

Implementation modalities

6. Create positive adult-youth relationships.

Building caring and supportive relationships with youth beneficiaries has shown to be a key success factor, as trusting and positive relationships are a foundation for further engagement with the youth.

- Treat them with respect, take interest in their lives, value their opinions and understand what matters to them – often via informal interactions.
- Ensure program staff has the right profile and skills to be able to provide appropriate support and nurture such relationships with the beneficiaries.
- Expose young beneficiaries to positive role models in the community, as they often lack alternative ways of living and earning due to limited social mobility. Peers, parents or community members who have found new and interesting ways to get employed and make a living may be particularly inspirational to the youth.⁴¹

Example 1 (Kosovo): The Peer Educators Network (PEN) implements a range of programs tackling youth employment and empowerment, including the “Innovations Lab Kosovo”. Skills building activities heavily rely on volunteer mentors (typically between 25-35 years old) who are trained by the project and bring a strong motivation in supporting young people. The mentors serve as positive role models and provide a supportive relationship for the young people, helping them to implement their own entrepreneurial and social ventures.⁴²

Example 2 (Slovenia): The Project Learning for Young Adults (PLYA) supports the social integration of young people with multiple barriers to employment. One of the key success factors is that mentors act as role models by demonstrating what individuals can achieve and supporting them in dealing with the wide range of problems they might face. The mutual trust and respect between the

mentors and young people have been found to be an effective way of ensuring the young person’s engagement.⁴³

7. Adopt peer-to-peer engagement strategies, incl. youth-led activities.

Getting and keeping youth engaged in activities and learning typically works better when they are not just “recipients” of information but actively involved.⁴⁴

- Involve youth participants in program design and evaluation, for instance through consultations, advisory roles, and concrete responsibilities (e.g. testing of questionnaires). Incorporating youth perspectives can enhance the understanding of target group problems and needs and generate new ideas.
- Leverage peer trainers, counselors or mentors during implementation, as this can help relate to youth beneficiaries.
- Foster interactive learning among youth through group work and enlisting youth to work as equal partners alongside adults in organizing activities, serving as facilitators, etc. For instance, this can involve joint problem solving, joint reflections and sharing of experiences. Compared to purely adult-led activities, participant-centered and participant-led approaches can help empower youth to take leadership roles and can also improve program attendance and engagement.⁴⁵
- Create safe spaces for sharing opinions and experiences, encouraging participants to listen to each other’s perspectives without judgement or critique, and supporting each other.
- Provide avenues to apply and deepen new skills through practical activities, for instance by facilitating young people’s own entrepreneurial or social projects, volunteering, campaigning, community engagement, etc.

⁴¹ Seiwa Boateng and Löwe, 2018.

⁴² Interview with program representative.

⁴³ European Commission, 2018c.

⁴⁴ Algorhythm, 2017.

⁴⁵ Alvarado et al., 2017.

- Create a sense of community and belonging, for instance through involving program graduates/alumni, joint recreational and team-building activities that promote friendships among participants (e.g. joint meals, small celebrations, excursions, cultural and social events), positive branding (e.g. “class of 2020”, T-Shirts, etc.), etc.

Example 1 (Kosovo): The “Support for Kosovo’s Young Leaders” program implemented by Mercy Corps actively involved youth participants in program design and evaluation. For instance, they conducted interviews to test the baseline questionnaire, and provided feedback on the wording of survey questionnaires to both ensure that they were translatable in Serbian and Albanian languages and those culturally sensitive questions were articulated appropriately.⁴⁶

Example 2 (Kosovo): Open Data Kosovo has implemented several initiatives to support youth employability through digital skills. Programs leverage previous trainees as trainers (under the age of 25), thereby attracting youth into the program because they can learn from their peers and hear their experiences, challenges etc. Peer trainers are viewed as “role models”. Programs also focus on building a community (e.g. former participants invited to events, can reach out for support, etc.), so participants feel like still part of the group even after program completion.

Example 3 (Kosovo): The soft-skills workshops implemented by the NGO THY in Prizren rely heavily on peer-to-peer learning (led by youth workers) and interactive formats, such as group work, simulation and role play, open discussion, debate, self-reflection and mutual feedback.⁴⁷

Example 4 (Bulgaria): In 2015, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy introduced the “Youth Mediator” approach. Unemployed young people who have completed tertiary education are eligible to be recruited as youth mediators. Their goal is to identify young NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) who are not registered

with the Bulgarian Public Employment Service, contact them, and inform them of careers’ services and opportunities for education, employment or training. This peer-to-peer approach has been found to be very successful in establishing contact with an otherwise hard-to-reach target group and activating them back into job search.⁴⁸

Example 5 (Albania): The Gjirokastra Youth Center forms part of the national network of youth councils for Albanian children and youth. In the early 2000s it initiated a comprehensive youth employment program targeting disadvantaged and vulnerable young people. Supplementing its core activities such as vocational training, entrepreneurship assistance and career guidance, the program organizes a range of complementary activities to encourage social integration of the youth in the area. These include activities like roundtable discussions, excursions, recreational activities, and cultural and social events.⁴⁹

8. Adopt age-appropriate communication channels. In order to reach out to young people and keep them engaged throughout program implementation, practitioners should leverage the communication channels the target group relies on the most.

- Leverage internet and social media. Where internet penetration is high, social media (e.g. Facebook, twitter, etc.) and online career portals are commonly used. Making information available through these online channels will therefore likely reach the largest audience (though additional channels may be needed to reach more vulnerable groups).
- Provide timely and regular communication and information. Since youth are exposed to constant influences and information flows, regular communication and motivation may be needed to keep them engaged. Again, social media platforms may help in this process (e.g. Facebook group, WhatsApp group, etc.).

⁴⁶ MercyCorps, 2012.

⁴⁷ THY, 2018.

⁴⁸ European Commission, 2017.

⁴⁹ Thorup, 2004.

- Establish a good ‘reputation’ or ‘brand’ which can be recognized by young people, their parents and employers (e.g. facilitated through catchy program name, logo, etc.). This is particularly important because young people are much more likely to engage in activities that have been recommended by their peers.

Example 1 (Kosovo): Youth-serving NGOs across Kosovo unanimously highlight the importance of social media (especially Facebook) as part of their outreach efforts. Leading youth-serving NGOs such as Innovation Center Kosovo and APPK also emphasize the importance of their reputation as a crucial factor to attract young people into their programs, since having satisfied graduates fuels word-of-mouth communication and hence facilitates attracting new participants. Several organizations have also put in place regular communication channels to continue engagement and exchange with their community of former participants, using mailing lists, collaboration tools (e.g. Slack) and other means to communicate with them, invite them to events, etc.⁵⁰

Example 2 (Serbia): The Education to Employment (E2E) project in Serbia leveraged YouTube as part of its career guidance and orientation services. Collaborating with a well-known young social media influencer with a strong follower basis among young people has significantly increased the outreach. The E2E project has developed a set of YouTube videos that describes and discusses different in-demand professions in the target communities in a modern and attractive way.⁵¹

9. **Work with multiple stakeholders and across settings.** Young people are strongly influenced by their surroundings. Hence, in order to effectively support young people’s employment, organizations and programs may need to find adequate ways to involve their key counterparts and influencers in family and community, for instance:

- Involve adults, especially parents, from targeted communities during design, outreach and implementation of interventions to foster buy-in and engagement.⁵² Since they influence young people’s choices and decisions, they should be familiar with the program contents in order to encourage participation and reinforce key messages;
- Work with relevant community groups, youth organizations/clubs, or local NGOs as they are often more effective at reaching young people. One may also consider the implementation of activities in those physical places (e.g. youth clubs) where targeted youth are more likely to be found and spend their time.⁵³
- Foster inter-agency collaboration. Given the variety of young people’s potential support needs, a range of stakeholders may need to be involved in the design and delivery of youth employment measures. This can include, among others, public employment services, education and training providers, employers, social partners, civil society organizations, health and social services, etc.⁵⁴

Example 1 (Estonia): The objective of the “Youth Prop-Up” program is to identify NEET youth, motivate them and provide individualized support in order to assist them in returning to school or work. A key component includes mobile outreach through youth workers (i.e. find youth in places they gather) in order to reach youth who do not go to or know about youth centers or the public employment agency. After establishing contact and trust with the youth and informing them about available services, skills trainings and guidance are offered in youth centers and youth workers keep regular contact with participants for at least six months after their exit from the program.⁵⁵

Example 2 (Sweden): The Swedish network of Navigator Centers was set up to provide one-stop-

⁵⁰ Interviews with program representatives.

⁵¹ See <https://znanjemdoposla.rs/en/meet-the-occupations/>

⁵² Alvarado et al., 2017.

⁵³ Eurofound, 2012.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ European Commission, 2018d.

shops for the hardest-to-reach excluded young people, based on collaboration between municipalities, the non-profit sector, social and labor market authorities and employers. Their aim was to provide a hub where young people can get all the help they need on the ‘path out of exclusion’. The centers employ a holistic approach to helping young people with their personal, social, family, health and other problems before helping them to integrate back into education or training or to find employment. The centers also conduct outreach work, such as visiting youth clubs and meeting with young people who are in touch with social services, in order to reach youth who are not captured by mainstream labor market support programs.⁵⁶

10. **Support staff engagement and development.**

Implementing youth-friendly interventions crucially depends on the commitment and contribution of the implementing staff. It is therefore essential to consider the required skills and attitudes during staff recruitment, while also creating a culture of learning and support among existing staff. Tapping into staff interests to shape programming, allowing them to try new things and reflect on their work, and encouraging continuous learning and improvement have shown to be beneficial to program success.⁵⁷

IV. **IMPLICATIONS FOR KOSOVO**

Increasing the effectiveness of employment promotion initiatives is a priority for the Government of Kosovo. The Employment Agency of the Republic Kosovo (EARK) has made “Increasing the effectiveness of Active Labor Market Measures and Employment Services” one of its core objectives in the 2019-2021 employment policy.⁵⁸ More broadly, improving youth employment has become a priority across different ministries and government agencies.⁵⁹

Making youth employment programs more effective will require making them more “client-centered”, i.e. sensitive to the specific preferences and needs of young people. Making employment services and activation measures more effective will require a number of reforms, including strong alignment of program design with international best practice and sound monitoring and evaluation.⁶⁰ Moreover, interventions targeting youth must also be proactive in incorporating the design and implementation features that have shown to be effective in youth development programs globally. In general, this will require moving beyond a narrow focus on enhancing skills and employability, and instead adopting a more comprehensive and “whole person” approach that also fosters supportive youth-adult relationships, peer-to-peer engagement, and age-appropriate communication in order to create an enabling environment in which youth beneficiaries can thrive. This “how to” often matters as much or more than the “what”.

Adopting the principles of “youth-friendly” programs is particularly important for public sector agencies working with young people such as the Public Employment Agency and the Ministry of Youth. In 2018, young people aged 15-24 represented about 20% of all registered unemployed, 37% of vocational training recipients and 23% of participants in other active labor market programs.⁶¹ These figures suggest that while youth are already a considerable target group for the Employment Agency, there remains potential to become more attractive towards this age group. Indeed, the Employment Agency and other publicly implemented initiatives are often not well known and have a weak reputation among young people. For instance, recent studies have found that EARK only plays a marginal role in young people’s job search, that the content and quality of employment counseling services are highly uneven, and that employment offices are often not able to maintain

⁵⁶ Eurofound, 2012.

⁵⁷ Algorhythm, 2017.

⁵⁸ EARK, 2018.

⁵⁹ See for example the intersectoral Action Plan on Increasing Youth Employment 2018-2020.

⁶⁰ See also GIZ, 2019 for a list of recommendations to improve Active Labor Market Measures in Kosovo.

⁶¹ EARK, 2019. These numbers would significantly increase if also considering youth older than 25 years, but disaggregated information for the 25-29 or 25-34 age group is not available.

close contact with beneficiaries during placements in activation measures.⁶²

Practical steps to enhance the youth-sensitivity of current and future youth employment programs could include:

- Conduct a more in-depth diagnostic of current youth employment programs implemented by EARK and/or other public providers, in order to assess their strengths and weaknesses regarding their “youth-friendliness”;
- Engage with non-public providers implementing youth employment programs in Kosovo to foster inter-institutional learning and exchange, as many of them have already adopted a “youth-friendly” approach to program design and implementation;
- Consider partnerships between public agencies and non-public providers in order to enhance the public providers’ service offering for young people;
- Sensitize current staff and ensure that future recruitments consider the requirements for counselors, trainers, etc. to implement youth-friendly services.

developmental needs of young people. Addressing the target group’s specific barriers to employment in the local context and labor market is a key condition for interventions to work. But it is not enough. In addition, interventions must address young people’s preferences and personal development needs, for instance through age-appropriate communication, peer-to-peer learning, positive adult-youth relationships, and support to goal management.

Ultimately, making employment interventions sensitive to the needs of young people requires quality staff. Hence, improving employment outcomes for young people will be strongly contingent on adequate recruitment and staff development to ensure they are in tune with young people’s realities and passionate about supporting them.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Young people are different than adults in many ways. First, youth face additional labor market barriers compared to adults, such as less work experience and fewer social and professional networks. Moreover, since young people are going through a crucial period of physical, emotional and social transition, they still face many uncertainties regarding their own identity and personal relationships, while remaining strongly influenced by their social environment.

Hence, for youth employment interventions to be effective, they need to adopt a youth-centered approach that adjusts program design and implementation to the labor market and

⁶² See for example Qirezi, Nika, Xhemajli, 2018; GIZ, 2019.

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ANNEX 1: List of people interviewed

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Visar Haxhifazliu, IPSIA/THY

Blerina Ramaj, Open Data Kosovo (ODK)

Valbona Makovci, Peer Educators Network (PEN)