



## Euromf-EZA Seminar – Comprehensive Report

### NEET Youths amongst Euro-orphans and Unaccompanied Minor Refugees

#### Approach and Prevention

#### Warsaw 3 & 4 October 2019

Organisation: Euromf vzw  
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Following our 2015 seminar on migration flows and their social and economic impact on both host countries and countries of origin, our 2017 seminar focused on living and working conditions of workers migrating within Europe and their families. It soon became apparent that the consequences for families were considerable, and particularly for the children left behind. In addition to having to cope with psychosocial problems, these minors are affected by a negative impact on their education and schooling.

That is why the 3 & 4 October 2019 seminar in Warsaw focused on these left behind minors (the Euro-orphans) and, by extension, on underage and unaccompanied refugees. What they have in common is a heightened risk of ending up in circumstances in which they lack training, education, schooling or work. More than often, these NEET youths (*Not in Education, Employment or Training*) stay under the radar, but they are subject to a substantially increased risk of structural vulnerability, particularly on the labour market.

#### Thursday 3 October

**Jerzy Wielgus** (member of the National Commission of Solidarność) welcomed the participants to the seminar and specified the steps taken by Solidarność to improve access to the labour market for NEET youths. Youth unemployment is a major issue in Poland too. One of the things Solidarność wants to achieve is maximum accessibility to the Polish educational system for all. Its financial resources should be increased as well. Furthermore some general demands of Solidarność were mentioned: raising the minimum wages, restricting commerce on Sundays and increasing funds.

At the start of the seminar, during a **plenary workshop**, the participants were asked about their expectations concerning the topics NEET youths, Euro-orphans and unaccompanied minor refugees. This survey showed that the participants' expectations were threefold: they were looking for knowledge about these topics, for tangible practices and for policy recommendations. As to the NEET youths, the participants wanted to know more about the approach in the different European countries, which subgroups can be found, why youngsters become NEET, what is the state of their mental health and how they can be activated in our society. Concerning unaccompanied minor refugees the

participants were curious, amongst other things, about the facilities in the different countries that prevent them from falling into the wrong hands. For the benefit of the Euro-orphans the attendees want to create a European network for family reunification, to organise an exchange concerning formats of support and guidance, to find out how to counteract these youngsters' school dropout rate and to identify the effects on mental health.

**Veerle Miranda** (senior economist, OESO) presented an overview of the situation of NEET youths in the OESO countries. In order to provide a proper comparison between the countries, she provided some statistics. During the past ten years youth unemployment rose in 25 of the 32 European countries. One in seven young people in Europe is not in training or at work. There are significant regional differences, Southern European countries often being worse-off.

Being a NEET youth also strongly influences the living conditions. We can tell, for instance, that 34% of them live in poverty, as opposed to 16.5% of the youths who are in training or at work. Also according to OESO half of the youths in Europe at some point end up in a NEET situation. This parameter is much more interesting because it exposes more than just the fact whether or not the youth is at work. An important remark is that there are several types of NEET youths who each need a different approach, f.i. young mothers or young people who deliberately take a sabbatical. Particularly the long-term NEET youths deserve special attention.

The bottom line is that a policy that only aims at activation is highly inadequate. **A sound policy develops strategies to prevent early school leaving, to improve professional trainings, to provide sufficient space for practical training and internship, to give proper information on training, to pursue a protective labour market policy that is suited for young people.**

**Evelien Maris** (Education Worker Arktos) mentors and counsels NEET youths in the Missing Link Project: difficult to reach youngsters receive an extensive guidance towards a job or a meaningful pastime. Not a few youngsters have problems in various life domains. Consequently, young people in a multi-problem situation (homelessness, addiction, limited language skills, no network, etc.) and receiving a living-wage are part of the target group. The method consists of five major guidelines: (1) all the time the youth is the owner of his or her trajectory, (2) the education worker is a companion instead of a supervisor, (3) the various life domains of the youths are examined, (4) the approach is local and coordinated and (5) the steps taken by the youth are visually mapped.

The candidates go through three phases. During the FIND phase the social worker and the youth approach Arktos together. The process can also be outreaching in the sense that Arktos itself goes looking for clients (*outreach method or strategy*). In the course of the BIND phase a bond is built by going through a process together. The MIND phase finalises the guidance process and guarantees a 'warm handover'.

At a second **plenary workshop** internationally composed groups replied to the question 'How can we facilitate the integration of NEET youths in the labour market?' The following answers were given:

- Deal with skipping school – a more active role for the *Centrum voor Leerlingenbegeleiding* (Pupil Guidance Centre: a bridge between school, pupil and parents: takes care of medical monitoring, learning difficulties, study selection, psychological and social problems) – proactive elementary school.
- Dual learning (learning in a company + learning at school) – greater emphasis on building on talents.
- More inclusion and a positive spirit in training and education.
- Optimise relations and atmosphere between youths and citizens.

- Buddy system – personal and integrated guidance – make use of talents in a positive trajectory.
- Multi-problem situation – approach the different life domains.
- Focus on the climate – voluntary service – what role can these youngsters play.
- Connect work and education – cooperations with youths.
- A grant for labour unions and authorities to offer jobs to youths.
- Bring together employers and the education sector to remove the discrepancy between education and labour market.
- Motivation is a key element – youths have to be convinced that they are needed in this society.
- Education should be more flexible – it should follow social changes.

**Janne Bemelmans** (UAntwerpen) did research on the situation of children of labour migrants left behind in the Philippines, where labour migration is generally accepted and actively promoted by the government. In the course of the past 20 years approximately 2.3 million labour migrants left the country. Financial transfers to the home country amount to around 9 percent of the GDP. For the children left behind labour migration has both positive and negative consequences. On the plus side there is the increased household budget which is an incentive for children of higher educated parents to extend their own schooling as well. On the down side we find family disruption and the fact that children of low-skilled parents abort their studies at an earlier moment.

Particularly the effects according to age and gender of the child and gender of the parent were researched. Children under 13 seem to be subjected to mainly adverse effects, while the impact on children older than 13 is rather favourable. A link can be made between age and gender as well. Boys younger than 13 suffer more negative consequences than girls of the same age group because it's the boys who miss the authority and the guidance of their parents the most. Conversely, girls above the age of 13 are likely to be negatively affected more than boys in this age group because they tend to give up school more often to take care of the household. In general the effects on labour migrants' children are more detrimental when the mother emigrates compared to the father leaving. There are both similarities and differences when we compare the Philippine to the Eastern and Central European situation. The number of migrants and the migration policy differ significantly. In the Philippines labour migration is politically encouraged, whereas in Eastern Europe it is a spontaneous process that is not monitored by the authorities. Similar in both regions is that the number of female labour migrants is rising.

Labourer's organisations can play a role too in these issues, **such as advocating more research into the problem and more attention to the situation. They can also participate in giving shape to or in supporting bottom-up projects.**

Professor **Beata Nowak** (Warsaw University of Life Sciences) conducted research into psychosocial implications for children of labour migrants in Poland. Migration is a population movement, for a short or a long term, aimed at improving life quality. Since Poland joined the EU about 2.5 million Polish citizens emigrated. Along the way the situation on the Polish labour market has improved. The profile of labour migrants is as follows: they are male, young and have a low level of education. Most of them are commuting migrants: they live abroad for a while and then return to Poland. However, a new trend is emerging: Polish citizens permanently settle abroad, and moreover, the proportion of women is rising. Children of commuting migrants often stay behind in Poland and consequently the family structure is temporarily incomplete. It is of the highest importance to reappraise the quality of family life.

The concept of Euro-orphans is being too widely applied and is stigmatising. Therefore it is better to speak of 'children of labour migrants'. Children who are frequently left behind find themselves in a

very difficult situation. Often they have a de facto guardian who however has not the same rights as the parents. Therefore, the guardian cannot make binding decisions. **According to the professor legal guardianship should be mandatory.**

The psychological and social implications for these children cannot be underestimated. Even a temporary separation from someone close disrupts the child. It feels lost, it is unable to cope with new challenges, its motivation declines. Children who are left behind have a lower school attendance rate, their figures are worse, etc. They want to escape this situation and thus come into contact with alcohol, drugs and violence. High-risk behaviour increases. Psychosomatic complaints can also occur. Parents too are affected by the separation from their child. Prolonged separation has an emotionally severe influence on both children and parents. According to the professor the improved economic situation doesn't outweigh the social costs. The Polish government introduced a '500 plus programme' in order to mitigate this problem. For each child the families get 500 zloty (about € 125) a month. This is a positive step, but at the same time it carries the risk of facilitating dependence on the authorities. Most schools offer general psychosocial support, but not specifically aimed at children of labour migrants.

Does the Polish government take the research of professor Nowak serious? There are contacts with the authorities, but no genuine cooperation. NGOs are more open to cooperation, but they are highly dependent on funding. In Ukraine, a country that is facing the same problems, there is some cooperation, but equally too sporadic in nature. **A better cooperation on the European level to do research should be organised. However, in the Schengen area we have free movement of persons.** This complicates doing research, because relocations are not registered.

## Friday 4 October

Professor **Haeghe Nore** (Oslo Metropolitan University) explained that in 2015 Norway counted 593 unaccompanied underage refugees on a total population of 5,000,000. Professor Nore took part in the launch of two projects that aim at facilitating the integration of unaccompanied minor refugees by guiding them towards training and jobs and in addition provide them with a meaningful network and a swift integration. The RefuNEET project is a collaboration of five European and two Turkish partner organisations. Analysis showed that in the countries of all partners training is being looked at in a very rigid and formal way. 'What formal trainings did you take?' 'What certificates do you keep?' This approach completely fails to take account of actual competences the underage refugee already has acquired, earlier, at home or in a refugee camp.

Hence RefuNEET gauges at non-formal skills (*key competences*), apart from formal trainings, and tries to map these. Then the questions become: 'What did you already learn up to now?' 'What skills have you got?' This information allows the career mentor or guiding coach to look for a meaningful additional training or a job. However, linking non-formal key competences to skills wanted in the workplace remains difficult. A company's search for employees is based on formal trainings or practical work experiences and rarely if ever on informal competences somebody has acquired. In fact, most of the time these competences are not included in vacancies.

The project tries to close this loophole by building a talent database containing the concrete competences of the refugees. The RefuSKILLS project explicitly looks for the refugees' skills, not for what companies think they need. A lot of attention goes into the simplified definition of these competences, in easily comprehensible language that can be linked to a specific experience (f.i. 'I can welcome customers', 'I can advise customers'). The RefuApp allows for a comprehensible definition of these competences and saves them into the database. This will avoid refugees having to answer the same questions over and over again (police, asylum centre, training, etc.) because these authorities

can consult the data. This also makes it possible to follow up the refugee and his parameters. The tool maps the refugees' competences and finds words and levels to describe them. If necessary refugees can upload pictures and movies to demonstrate their skills. All of which makes it a language and a tool to describe competences. The RefuApp is freely available and in accordance with the GDPR legislation.

**Omran Barikzai** (KAJ de Mug and Minor Ndako), who arrived in Europe 11 years ago as an unaccompanied minor refugee, is an experience expert. His family originally comes from Afghanistan. Initially they fled to Pakistan. There, however, their income was too low to make ends meet, so they moved on to Iran. Again life wasn't easy because the children were not allowed to go to school. So they returned to Pakistan. The father left for the United Kingdom. Indirectly, via Afghanistan, the family eventually arrived in Belgium in 2008. There Omran signed up for OKAN classes (a one-year, focused study of the Dutch language through an intense training for foreign students of the 4 key language skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing). Next he studied electricity and after that Latin language and human sciences. To date he is a law student. His story demonstrates that things often are made unnecessarily difficult for refugees by public authorities. In the course of his education Omran's family continuously received orders to leave the country. In 2016 his school started a campaign to denounce this: it is inhumane to evict people after 8 years. During this period the family also had to move 6 times. Meanwhile 3 of 5 family members, including Omran, have been granted refugee status in Belgium. **It is very important not only to talk about the target groups, but also to talk with the target groups themselves.**

**Melanie Zonderman** (Platform Children on the Run) explained the condition of unaccompanied minor refugees in Belgium. The objective of Platform Children on the Run is doing justice to underage refugees. It aims at both unaccompanied minor refugees and children from families in a precarious situation. To this end 5 pillars are used: (1) coordination by the platform, (2) raising public awareness of the problem, (3) influencing policy, (4) doing research and (5) offer training to field workers. Melanie exposed a number of sore spots in the policy. A lot of youngsters disappear, access to psychological counselling is too limited, the procedures are too complicated and aid is often stopped when youths reach the age of 18 years. Apart from that, the competences of youths are often not acknowledged.

The documentary 'Waiting for August' tells the story of a Romanian family of which the mother went to work in Italy. The father too is out of the picture. The 15 year old daughter Georgiana assumes the role of head of the family. The movie properly clarifies what the absence of the parents means to the children. After the screening the participants had a chance to ask questions to the director, **Teodora Mihai**, herself of Romanian origin:

- Q: Has the film been able to open the public debate in Romania?  
A: Unfortunately feedback has only been given by family circles. There was hardly any reaction at all from the political environment. It is difficult to measure, but the movie has been watched, probably also by people who might be able to change things, but up to now we haven't noticed much yet.
- Q: Parents leave to work abroad, which obviously causes problems. What should be changed?  
A: Good question. Teodora Mihai is and wants to remain a moviemaker. It is not clear to her what may happen. The inequality and the lack of possibilities (a red thread in her work) are the causes of the fact that this problem is as big as it is. These things should be addressed but she has no ready answer. When she were to be invited, she would be glad to contribute.
- Q: Are there any care organizations to place these children?  
A: They exist, but they rarely intervene. In the documentary the woman next door vouched for the children. In reality however, the children took care of the neighbour, so there was a clear gap between law and reality.

- Q: Has a social service provided assistance?  
A: The children take care of themselves. In the opinion of the social service the woman next door is the legal guardian, so there is no problem. A number of persons offered a helping hand, but that is unrelated to organisations which should be set up to this end.
- Q: How do they feel about the parents of those families in Romania?  
A: Opinions are divided. People realise that for a lot of families it is a necessity to work abroad.
- Q: Does the mother's salary suffice for the family or does it need additional earnings?  
A: Thanks to the income of the mother they can survive. Apart from that they received a small grant, some child benefit, but not a lot at all. When the mother lost her job they had to fight for a while to make ends meet.

During the seminar's final **plenary workshop** the participants were asked the following question: 'What should policy makers do to solve the problems brought to the fore at this seminar?' Some replies:

- More pliancy in recognising undocumented competences,
- A smoother access to work, also during the asylum procedure,
- Establish a career centre to put youngsters in touch with employers,
- Offer language and culture classes so youngsters can acquire a broader basis to find a job,
- Select people based on competences, talent and interest in government jobs and not just based on diploma and nationality,
- Involve labour unions, NGOs and social organisations in the integration of unaccompanied underage refugees.