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Evaluating community-based
development interventions:

A SCOPING REVIEW

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Abstract—The field of (re)engagement interventions for young adults "Not in Education, Employment, or Training" (NEETs) is characterized by a scarcity of rigorous evaluations. Against this background, we employed a scoping review methodology to rapidly synthesize previous research and map the literature on community-based development interventions to inform the impact management framework of StayOn, a project financed by the EEA & Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment. GoogleScholar was searched for papers covering this domain. The reviewers assessed articles and data from 19 selected studies. This scoping review reveals that similar methods are used to evaluate the impact of community-based interventions in rural areas. The most common forms are surveys and questionnaires for the participants in the interventions. We highlight some of the shortcomings and challenges of these studies and provide recommendations for future impact evaluations.

Index Terms—*Scoping Review, Community-based Development, Impact Management, Rural Development, NEETs*

1. BACKGROUND

The project StayOn is managed by a consortium composed of eight partners. Its ultimate objective is to create conditions that enable young people, especially NEETs, to "stay on" rural areas by ensuring access to opportunities, benefits, services, and jobs. To do so, the project:

- Engages at least 1,100 participants that

will experience social inclusion by undertaking a path that begins with training and coaching, providing them with adequate skills for the rural labor market, such as digital literacy, managing environmental impacts, and personal development skills.

- Assists at least 10 rural communities across Greece, Ireland, Italy, Poland, and Portugal in adopting community-based development, a participatory approach fostering collective action in communities by putting them in control of innovation. The project partners will engage community shapers in "co-innovation labs" to create a service/product or valuable idea for society. Local companies will support NEETs in realizing this step, increasing their soft skills and improving their employability.
- Fosters increased transnational cooperation on labor market issues among the eight project partners, their networks, and other stakeholders by sharing information, knowledge, and experience to develop joint solutions to common challenges, guaranteeing a long-term impact well beyond the project's life.

StayOn also foresees developing a shared train-the-coaches program, implementing a relationship-building model within the consortium, conducting research resulting in a book on transnational cooperation, and creating the European Rural Youth Alliance. For these purposes, the project relies on a range of inputs, including a €1.3 M grant from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway through the EEA & Norway Grants Fund for

Youth Employment, the project partners' experience and expertise, their ability to cooperate on labor market issues, their capacity to leverage existing and new local networks, and the participants' engagement and ideas.

2. INTRODUCTION

A recent systematic review of (re)engagement interventions for NEETs (Mawn et al., 2017) is proof that the field is characterized by a scarcity of rigorous evaluations (Jonsson & Goicolea, 2020). This scoping review aims to synthesize previous research and map the literature on similar interventions to inform StayOn's impact management framework. Therefore, we screened the literature based on the following research questions: "What research evidence exists on evaluations of community-based development interventions?" and "How are community-based development interventions in rural areas empirically evaluated?". Although the search focused on published studies examining NEET employment projects in rural areas, we also included projects designed for various other purposes, such as village planning, and a parenting program for youths in rural areas, among others, to benefit from different perspectives on impact management.

3. METHODS

3.1 Search Strategy

To increase the solution options for impact measurement, we conducted a scoping review, following a specific protocol including several features. The exact number of reviewed sources is 19, which have been found by searching using the following key terms "community based-development evaluation," "rural development evaluation," "rural development assessment," "NEET training evaluation," and "rural community-based development evaluation," "NEETs employment in rural areas," "rural intervention for NEETs" in Google Scholar.

3.2 Selection Criteria and Data Extraction

We downloaded studies that describe the empirical evaluation or assessment of interventions involving community-based rural development. One of the reviewers extracted and categorized the primary information for each study according to the following characteristics:

- A. Title
- B. Authors
- C. Type of document and source
- D. Year of publication
- E. Keywords
- F. Objectives
- G. Research design
- H. Methods
- I. Indicators
- J. Population
- K. Location
- L. Intervention type
- M. Summary and critical statements
- N. Gaps and problems of evaluation

Appendix A summarizes some of the data extracted.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Characteristics of the Selected Studies

Year of Publication: We included studies published after 2010 onwards to promote the identification and analysis of up-to-date literature.

Type of Studies: 15 (79%) of the included studies are published in academic journals; one (5%) is a working paper, and three studies (16%) are other types of evaluations.

Objectives: The objectives of the selected studies are mainly in the field of systematic evaluation of intervention programs. Each study included in the scoping review aims to demonstrate the program's impact or summarize and analyze multiple evaluations.

Intervention Type: The studies selected present disparate intervention methods, including poor village investment program, village transfer evaluation, community-based development impact study, youth employment support, renewable energy-based rural development, parenting

program for youth, sexual health intervention, early marriage, and pregnancy intervention program. For an overview, we clustered our data as follows: six studies (31.6%) belong to the group of social-economic development interventions, two (10.5%) deal with health interventions, four studies (21%) evaluate the implementation of employment support with participants, five (26.3%) are youth development programs, one (5.3%) is a study assessing an environmental intervention, and one (5.3%) belongs the group of interventions for outsiders to support indigenous development processes.

Geographical Area: Eight of the studies selected (42%) evaluate interventions in Asia, four (21%) deal with interventions in Europe, and three (16%) in Africa. Of the remaining papers, one (5%) reports on an assessment conducted in the USA, one (5%) in Australia, and two studies (11%) are assessing interventions in multiple continents.

Research Design and Methods: Regarding the research design, three (16%) of the studies selected are reviews that use secondary data sources. The remaining papers are almost equally split across qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods designs. More specifically, six (32%) studies rely on quantitative designs, and five thereof employ surveys and questionnaires solely to collect data that is analyzed via statistical methods. One of them uses other methodologies more appropriate for energy potential evaluations instead. Five (26%) studies are qualitative and present data collected through surveys, interviews, focus groups and, in one study, photovoice. Finally, five (26%) papers employ mixed methods designs, where both qualitative and quantitative data are collected. Besides the methods mentioned above, this last group includes ethnography and observation studies.

5. DISCUSSION

Overall, the studies selected conducted

impact evaluations or assessments of different programs' effects and the extent to which their goals and objectives were attained. All the most critical gaps and problems encountered in the 19 studies selected are listed below:

- There is a lack of coordination among researchers, trainers, and other staff involved in the program;
- The survey is self-reported with no interference from parents, partners, or in-laws;
- The survey responses might be under-reported, mainly if the participants give socially desirable answers;
- The study does not have a solid baseline to compare its results;
- The evaluation lacks a comparison group, or the treatment group is significantly smaller than the comparison group;
- There is a lack of causality identification;
- Managing researcher's bias and maintaining confidentiality and anonymity is challenging;
- Facilitators and researchers need to be equipped to work with very disadvantaged young people with low language skills and a lack of motivation to engage;
- Some of the informants are unfamiliar with record-keeping and basic technological skills.

The literature shows that similar methods have been used to evaluate the impact of community-based interventions in rural areas. The most common are surveys and questionnaires filled by the programs' participants. Creating an environment where all the participants, facilitators, mentors, SMEs and other relevant stakeholders communicate openly will play an essential role in preventing some of the problems identified in previous literature. Additionally, many of the limitations highlighted by previous studies can occur due to participants' and researchers' behaviors. Social desirability bias can be addressed by ensuring anonymity of quantitative survey and making anonymity statements explicit and clear to the survey's participants. Finally, follow-up

qualitative research designs could be used to tackle the lack of control groups and the often-related inability to identify causality.

5. CONCLUSION

Impact evaluations have the potential to assess the programs' effects and the extent to which their goals and objectives were attained. From our findings, it is evident that there is no single method to conduct the assessments. Based on the chosen design methods, impact management frameworks should consider how to implement effective communication among the various stakeholders and how to address researchers' and participants' biases.

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APPENDIX A: SUMMARY OF SELECTED STUDIES

AUTHOR/S	YEAR OF PUBLICATION	PUBLICATION TYPE	OBJECTIVES	INTERVENTION TYPE	AREA	RESEARCH DESIGN	METHODS
Baldwin et al.	2016	Other type of evaluation	To study the impact of community-based approaches in poor communities in a non-post-conflict setting	Social-economic development intervention	Ghana	Mixed methods research	Household surveys, community leader surveys, administrative data on local election returns and candidates, qualitative interviews and focus groups
Benedek et al.	2018	Journal article	To study the possibility of developing a complex and integrated evaluation methodology for renewable energy potential, locally developed and embedded energy projects	Environmental intervention	Romania	Quantitative	Mapping techniques, simulation software for wind farms, and the analytical tools offered by the Geographical Information System
Breitkreuz et al.	2017	Journal article	To study income and reduction of food insecurity in rural areas	Social-economic development intervention	India	Mixed methods research	Surveys, focus group, semi-structured interviews
Buheji	2019	Journal article	To study the different definitions, current categorizing of NEET and the type of efforts in gauging its influence on governments and communities' performance	Youth development program	Bahrain, Bosnia, Mauritania and Morocco	Review	Secondary research
Fox & Kaul	2018	Working paper	To provide a synthesis of the best available evidence on youth employment interventions in low and lower middle income countries	Evaluation of the employment support implementation	Sub-Saharan Africa, Kenya, South Asia, Uganda, Ethiopia and the Philippines	Review	Secondary research
Hahne & Spielhofer	2020	Other type of evaluation	To evaluate whether the main goal of the project "Community Networking for Integration of Young People in a NEET Situation" (developing an innovative model to identify and support youth who are NEET) has been achieved	Evaluation of the employment support implementation	Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain and the UK	Mixed methods research	Secondary research, surveys, qualitative interviews
Heslop et al.	2017	Journal article	To develop and validate a framework that is effective for planning, implementing, and evaluating multilevel community-based sexual health interventions for young people aged 16–24 years in the Australian rural setting	Health intervention	Australia	Participatory Action Research (qualitative)	Semi-structured one-on-one interviews, focus groups, community mapping and photovoice, review of Delphi studies

Ma et al.	2019	Journal article	To investigate the changes in psychosocial outcomes among Hong Kong Chinese adolescents after participating in a community-based positive youth development (PYD) program	Youth development program	China, Hong Kong Island, and New Territories	Quantitative	Questionnaire
Malgas et al.	2016	Other type of evaluation	To identify transformation and empowerment initiatives, including factors that contribute to the shortages of retail management skills and employment equity strategies that are in place regarding attracting women for permanent careers	Social-economic development intervention	South Africa	Qualitative	Survey, semi-structured interviews
Mehra et al.	2018	Journal article	To assess impact of a multi-pronged community-based intervention on early marriage, early pregnancy, and school retention among young people in two states of India	Youth development program	India	Mixed methods research	Survey, ethnography
Naficy et al.	26 March 2021	Journal article	To analyze various roles of development practitioners (called outsiders) in five different cases of community-based development (CBD) in rural Iran	Intervention for outsiders	Iran	Qualitative, case studies	Secondary research, semi-structured interviews
Njati et al.	2020	Journal article	To explore entrepreneurial skills for women business operators in Nyambene region in Kenya as the main enablers of rural development	Social-economic development intervention	Kenya	Mixed methods research	Questionnaires, interviews and observations
Nunes de Almeida & Simões	2020	Journal article	To explore how self-efficacy perceptions are associated with Perceived Barriers (PB) and Professional Expectations (PE) among rural, under-qualified youths Not in Employment, nor in Education or Training (NEET) and how the connections between these factors varied across gender and age groups	Youth development program	Portugal	Quantitative	Questionnaire
Park et al.	2020	Journal article	To examine the effectiveness of the Vision Plan Program, a youth employment support program in South Korea, particularly focused on the youth aged 20–24 years to empirically examine if the program had an effect in terms of two key outcomes: (1) increasing job seeking intention and (2) increasing exit from the NEET status	Youth development program	South Korea	Quantitative	Surveys
Park & Wang	2010	Journal article	To systematically evaluate China's flagship poverty alleviation program (it finances public investments in designated poor villages based on participatory village planning in rural areas)	Evaluation of the employment support implementation	China	Quantitative	Surveys

Petrescu et al.	2021	Journal article	To identify the main challenges and barriers that prevented the achievement of the results proposed by the Youth Guarantee in Romania	Evaluation of the employment support implementation	Romania	Review	Secondary research
Qian et al.	2020	Journal article	To examine factors linked to program participation within a community based ECD program in rural China, focusing specifically on the roles of social ties and geographic proximity	Social-economic development intervention	China	Quantitative	Surveys
Torres et al.	2017	Journal article	To identify lessons learned to share in the successful implementation of a community-based breast cancer screening intervention	Health intervention	USA	Qualitative	Interviews
Watts et al.	2019	Journal article	To explore how the Village Fund, an Intergovernmental Fiscal Transfer designed to finance development at the community level, could be used to provide financial support to communities for forest conservation and rehabilitation in Indonesia	Social-economic development intervention	Indonesia	Qualitative	Surveys, interviews