

StartNet Manual

How to build a regional Collective Impact
network and European dialogue
for young people's #TransitionToWork



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SEBASTIANO LEO

Regional Minister for Labour and Education of the Apulia Region (Italy)

The Apulia Region is firmly convinced of the importance of career guidance for its young people to build a life path. We need to continue investing in training for their future transition to work. In 2017, the Region signed the Memorandum of Understanding launching the StartNet network in Apulia, with the goal of promoting innovative school-to-work processes, combatting youth unemployment and preventing the exodus of young talents to other regions and countries.

Working with a multi-stakeholder network makes it possible to share targeted innovative projects with qualified partners, not only on the institutional level, but also in the world of work, of companies, of the third sector, of schools and students. The network's initiatives aim to close the gap between the school and training system and the labour market. They support fair access for young people to working life, and are tailored both on the regional level and in a European perspective. The project promotes an innovative approach that can also be applied to other regional contexts.

PETRA KAMMEREVERT

Member of the European Parliament

I learned about StartNet in October 2018, during a visit of the European Parliament's Culture and Education Committee to the Goethe-Institut in Rome. Ever since, I have wholeheartedly supported the work of this project, which empowers young people for their transition from education to work. I was therefore delighted to host an MEP-Breakfast for StartNet in November 2019, presenting its approach and activities to my distinguished colleagues from the European Commission and Parliament.

With youth unemployment and school drop-out rising quickly during the COVID-19 crisis, I believe that StartNet's Collective Impact approach can serve as a role model for other projects tackling similarly urgent and complex societal challenges. I wish this project to continue to grow, inspire and contribute to sustainable changes and better opportunities for all young people in Europe.

Foreword





Far too many young people in Europe drop out of school, do not find a suitable educational or career pathway and end up unemployed. Both the financial and economic crises in the early 2010s, as well as the more recent economic recession due to the global Covid-19 pandemic, have shown how very vulnerable young people are. Youth unemployment is a major challenge not only for Europe's youth, but also for the European economy and society as a whole. In order to rise to this challenge, many stakeholders must be mobilised and find innovative ways to cooperate with each other. If the educational, cultural and business sectors, if policymakers, experts and practitioners from the regional to the European level work together, they can collectively achieve an impact.

Therefore, several years ago, the Goethe-Institut began supporting young people's vocational education and transition to work as a complement to their language learning. Since then, and building on this experience, the institutes in Southwest Europe, in particular in Italy, have acquired a growing expertise in supporting young people's transition into work, not only by helping them learn a foreign language, but above all by organising internships, guidance and training in cooperation with public and private sector organisations.

In 2017, the StartNet project was initiated jointly by the Goethe-Institut and Stiftung Mercator, to build on the encouraging results of previous initiatives such as "Mit Deutsch in den Beruf" (German at work). In Southern Italy, young people often do not see any opportunities in their home region. StartNet Italy thus is supporting a vast regional multi-sector and multi-stakeholder network to implement specific projects for these young people's transition to work. In addition, StartNet Europe and its network empowers and connects similar initiatives across Europe, thereby fostering exchanges of good practice and EU-wide partnerships.

Through this manual, the Goethe-Institut is pleased to share its practices and knowledge gained from the first three years of the StartNet project. It aims to inspire others to join forces, to learn from each other, and, as a contribution to its vital civil society, to ensure sustainable employment opportunities for all young people in Europe.

Dr. Elke Kaschl Mohni

Director of Goethe-Institut Brüssel and Southwest Europe

Dr. Joachim Bernauer

Director of Goethe-Institut Italien

This Manual is about how to build bridges with Collective Impact

This manual is meant to inspire practitioners and policy-makers in the field of youth, education and employment.

Regardless of whether you are working with young people at local, regional or European level, this publication will provide you with useful information and experiences on how to empower young people for their transition to work. The focus is on multi-stakeholder and cross-sectoral collaborations, using the **Collective Impact** Method.

The content of this manual is based on lessons learned from the first phase of the **StartNet project** (2017-2020), during which we created a regional network in Southern Italy, supplemented by a European dialogue for youth transitions from education to employment. The lessons we learned can be transferred to any region in Europe where young people need to be supported to transition into work. Furthermore, the approach can also be applied to various other social challenges and collective responses through regional or European networks, such as health, fighting poverty or discrimination... The different chapters are structured to answer concrete questions and are summarised through short recommendations. This will help you to quickly access the most relevant information for your purposes.

Through this Manual, we intend to:

- ▶ inspire and empower your work,
- ▶ help you reach out to other sectors and stakeholders,
- ▶ enable you to jointly increase your impact,
- ▶ and ultimately generate more and even better opportunities for young people.

Youth employment and transitions in Europe

Unemployment rates have decreased across the EU since a peak in 2013. However, with the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 epidemic, the rates very quickly rose again, especially among young people: **youth unemployment** is more than twice as high as general unemployment¹ and young people are much more affected by economic downturns than other age groups.²

While the youth unemployment rate is lower in economically stronger Member States, it reaches over 30% in several southern European countries – and this only includes young people that are actively looking for a job: all those who are under-employed, short-term employed or precariously employed are excluded from this figure, as are all the young people who have given up and are not even actively looking for work anymore.³

Paradoxically, businesses in many sectors and countries are faced with a growing shortage of young qualified workers. Both the structurally high youth unemployment and **skills mismatches** underline the persistent difficulties and strategic importance of young people's transition to work in Europe.⁴

Moreover, rapid technological change, digitalisation and automation raise fundamental questions about the **future of work** and how to prepare the younger generations for the jobs of tomorrow. The recent COVID-19 crisis has again highlighted the importance of equal access to **digital tools and skills** for learning and for the labour market.

Cooperation between education and business sectors is essential to close the innovation gap. However, it is also important to **empower youth** as active citizens, so as

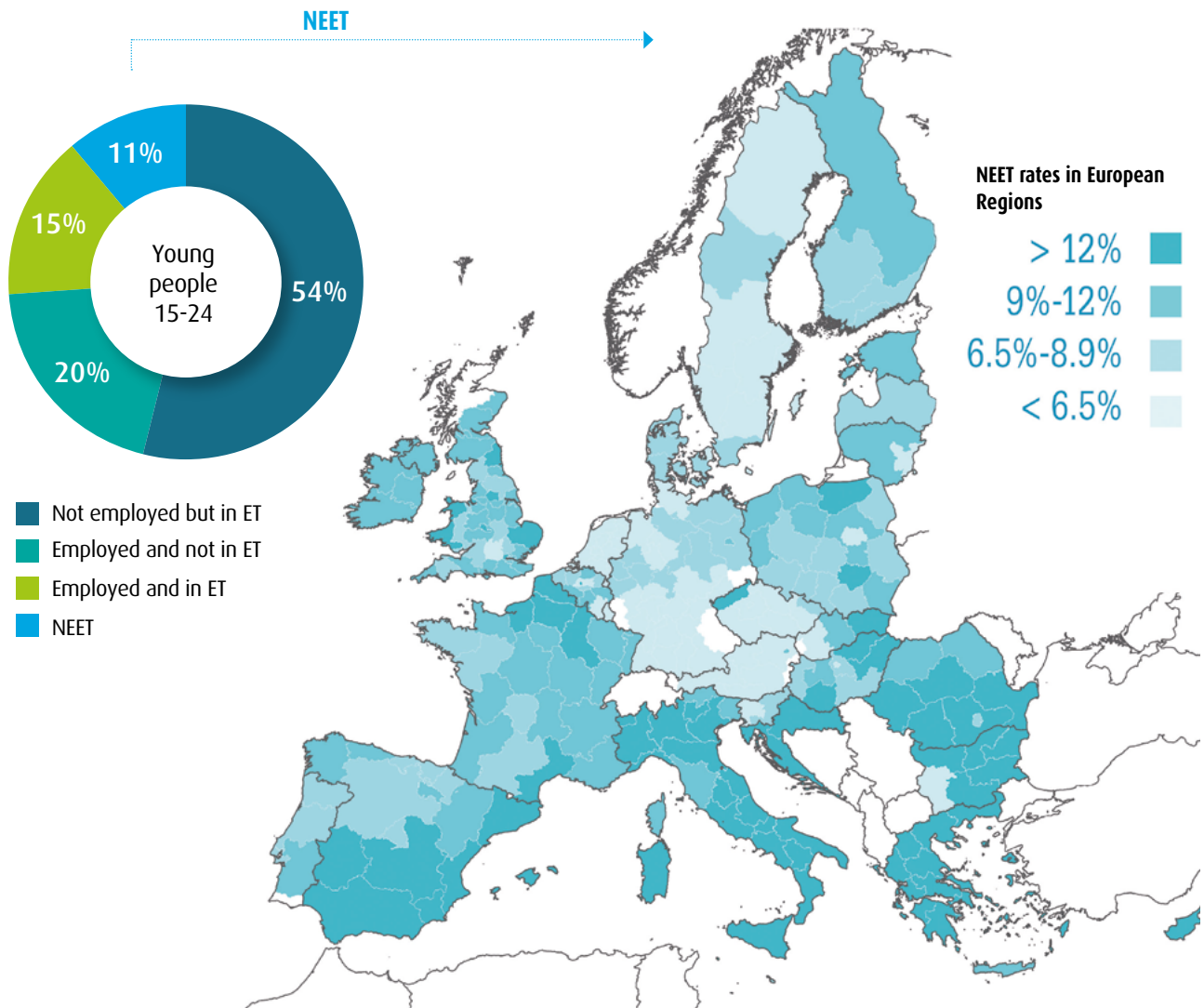
1 Eurostat unemployment rates EU-28 in December 2019: 14.2% of 15-24 year olds vs. 6.2% 15-74 year olds.

2 https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/multimedia/video/institutional-videos/WCMS_741948/lang-en/index.htm

3 <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/blog/long-term-unemployed-youth-the-legacy-of-the-crisis>

4 For further information on transitions from a global perspective, please consult UNICEF technical note on Transitions from school to work: <https://www.unicef.org/reports/transitions-from-school-to-work-2019>

Young people 15-24 years old not in education, employment or training in 2018



Sources : Eurostat & European Parliament Research Service.

to increase their **resilience** to continuous changes and transitions. **Guidance** and **lifelong learning** are becoming increasingly important, and should start from an early age – during compulsory education – continuing throughout working life. These interventions should be supplemented by specific **social inclusion** approaches that focus on disadvantaged young people, preventing drop-out or early school-leaving, disengagement and extremism.

While the EU Youth Guarantee⁵ has led to innovations and new approaches in many Member States, less than half of adolescent NEET⁶ have been reached so far – and good practices and experiences are not being shared or scaled up.

The StartNet project responds to this need for more European dialogue and cooperation in the field of youth transition to work.

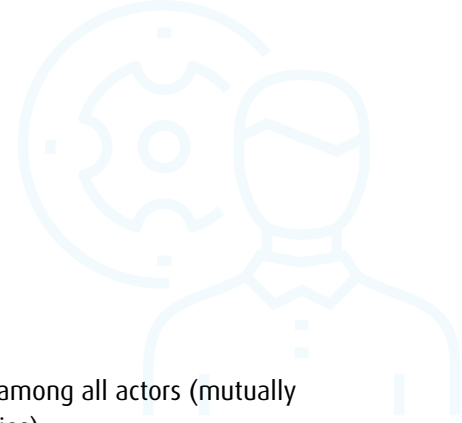
⁵ The Youth Guarantee is an EU scheme offering young people under the age of 25 years an employment, education, apprenticeship or traineeship within a period of 4 months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education.

⁶ Not in Education, Employment or Training



Collective Impact





What is “Collective Impact”?

Collective Impact is a methodological approach that is especially successful to tackle complex social problems for which no *ad hoc* solutions appear to exist. Complex problems⁷ are characterised by the fact that they are multi-layered, that they are caused by several factors and actors, that their effects are difficult to predict and that there are no simple solutions.

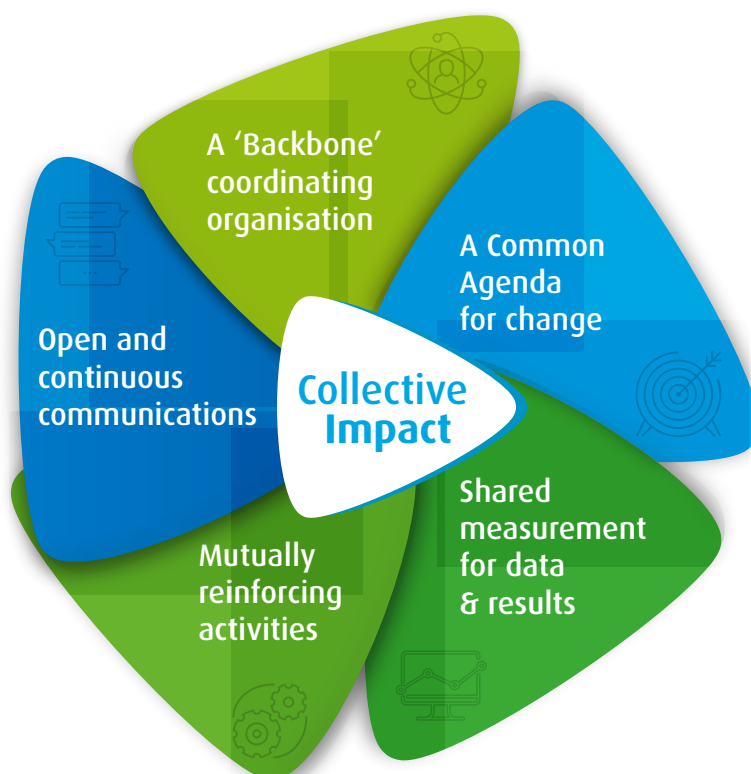
The Collective Impact Method, which originated in the United States and was first defined in detail in 2011 by John Kania and Mark Kramer in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, is based on five principles:⁸

- ▶ a commitment of all participating actors from politics, institutions, associations, informal groups, etc. to a **common agenda**,
- ▶ a consensus on the **method for performance and impact monitoring** (shared measurement) and on the indicators of success,

- ▶ **mutual support** among all actors (mutually reinforcing activities),
- ▶ **continuous communication** between the actors,
- ▶ an **independent backbone office**, which is dedicated exclusively to coordinating the network.

The solution-oriented approach of the Collective Impact Method makes it possible to combine civil society commitments and political priorities into a common agenda.

Collective Impact requires not only adequate financial and human resources, but also general awareness of the problem, existing networks, reliable cooperation and the commitment of key stakeholders⁹



⁷ *Acting together. The path to effective cooperation.* Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.), 2nd edition, 2016, p. 5 (hereafter ‘Acting together’).

⁸ See also the short introduction video of the FSG: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=7&v=8CT41uUw8Fc&feature=emb_logo
Further information from FSG on Collective Impact: <https://www.fsg.org/areas-of-focus/collective-impact>.

⁹ *Acting together*, p. 10.

How to make Collective Impact work?

Be persistent

Essentially, establishing a functioning network along the lines of the Collective Impact Method takes a lot of patience. First, the actors must be identified and brought together using measures that create trust among them. They must create an organisational structure and define their common **field(s) of action**. This first step often takes several years.

Collective Impact is not a method that produces quick results. All partners have to be highly committed over the long term, and sound financial resources are required to maintain the backbone office, to finance joint projects and often, to raise additional project funds. It has the great advantage, however, that it can bring about **sustainable and systemic change** by enabling a wide range of actors to cooperatively develop solutions that draw on each actor's specific knowledge and skills.

Create a common basis

From the very beginning, it is important to create a **shared understanding**¹⁰ of the subject area by organising joint workshops, inviting experts and undertaking study trips.

It also makes sense that all network participants get to know the other participating organisations, so that they all understand each other's positions. This is particularly important when the network brings together partners from very different sectors: public institutions follow a different logic from private companies or third sector organisations. They communicate in different ways and often have different decision-making and evaluation processes. What some participants regard as a necessary step in their own organisation's procedures, may be considered unnecessary or «bureaucratic» by others.

Separate the operational from the institutional level

The representatives of the partner organisations in the network are usually very committed and often involve themselves personally. This is very positive and gets the network going quickly. It is important to ensure, however, that the **institutions behind the individual persons also support this commitment**. Failure to do so could cause the organisations to gradually withdraw from the network because they no longer feel sufficiently represented at the institutional level. This can



«A good share of the success of the network depends on the persons who compose it. When establishing a network, it is important to work on linking the interests of the persons participating in it and of their organisations. Without a cohesive group, it's not possible to achieve much.»

Cesare De Palma – Confindustria Puglia

¹⁰ Acting together, p. 30.



be prevented by assigning different roles to the operational and institutional levels, with activities being developed and implemented at the operational level, but at the same time being approved and supported at the institutional level.

Strengthen communication

Networks involve communication work. This applies primarily to communication between the partners and communication with the backbone office. Participants should pass on information within the network in a **timely** manner to bring all other actors up to speed and to prevent unnecessary speculation or double communication. External communication about the work of the network should in any event be **coordinated**: this role should ideally be taken over by the backbone office.

Balance the size of the network

In terms of the number of partners, experience shows that a certain degree of automatic «self-selection» takes place, as working in networks requires a high degree of commitment and conviction on the part of the partners. In addition to the founding partners, it is possible to bring in other partners later on. These could, for example, initially be involved as consultants for certain projects, and then, if it has been shown that their participation in the network is appropriate, they could be offered partner status.

Networks that work according to the Collective Impact Method tend to be **relatively small**, because they are

created to tackle local or regional problems: their participants come from a specific geographical region.

The implementation of StartNet in Southern Italy is no exception (see p. 13), however we have gone one step further, by setting up a platform at European level to enable exchanges between different European networks and initiatives that have promising results (see p. 21).

Whether the network is local or European, much depends on the coordination and commitment of the partners: **physical proximity is thus not essential**, as long as all partners give top priority to the objectives and to the expected positive results.

Maintain a strong methodology

When networks operate on a local level, there is sometimes a risk that participants will be suspicious of new approaches (“not invented here” syndrome). In addition, **expectations** for the network that are not clearly formulated from the outset can lead to misunderstandings and unresolved conflicts among the partners, which could ultimately jeopardise the network’s efforts. The backbone office should be aware that such challenges may arise, but it should nevertheless strongly adhere to the methodology. Step by step, the positive results will also convince the critics.

Ensure the independence of the backbone office

The **financial and operational independence** of the backbone office is of utmost importance in order to

Keep in mind

- ✓ *It can take several years to identify partners, bring them together and build up mutual trust to define common goals and a suitable structure.*
- ✓ *A shared understanding promotes constructive cooperation among all participants. Sufficient time should therefore be devoted to knowledge building.*
- ✓ *Both operational and institutional levels should be represented in the network, if possible, albeit with different tasks.*
- ✓ *The quality of communication determines the efficiency of the cooperation.*
- ✓ *It is not the size of the network that is decisive for its success, but rather the commitment of the partner organisations.*
- ✓ *Adhering to the Collective Impact Method is especially necessary when expectations are unclear or there are conflicts between the partners.*
- ✓ *The independence of the backbone office must be ensured.*
- ✓ *The participants in a well-functioning network that produces positive results need to think about financial and organisational sustainability from the very beginning.*

reduce the risk that some network partners may try to seize the backbone office for their own interests or entrust it with tasks that go beyond its original function. Since the backbone office is the only agent within the network that acts **neutrally**, it is crucial to decide how it is financed. When the network is set up, this aspect must be clarified in sufficient detail and fully supported by all partners.¹¹

Consolidate the network

Collective Impact networks often start out as projects that receive financing for a certain period of time, which ensures the staffing of the backbone office and initial funding for joint activities. As soon as the first positive results become evident and the partners signal that they want to continue the cooperation, it is advisable to think about the **future sustainability** of the network. What form could the network take? Who will finance the activities in the future? Who will assume the coordination function and fund the staff?

«Having always worked on career guidance from the point of view of the school, the experience with StartNet allowed me to also understand transition to work from the perspective of businesses – this was very important. »

Rosa Scarcia – GET Schools Network

¹¹ *Acting together*, p. 20.



How to establish a regional network for the school to work transition?

The example of StartNet in
Southern Italy



Setting up

StartNet - Network Transizione Scuola-Lavoro, Italy	
Where	Southern Italy (Apulia and Basilicata)
Sector	youth unemployment
Established in	2017
Objective	to improve the transition from school to work
Target group	pupils from primary school until placement
Network	public/state/regional institutions, schools, companies, third sector
Number of pupils reached as of 2020	approx. 12,000

What is the baseline situation?

In spite of the Youth Guarantee programme and the efforts made in recent years, the situation of young people in Italy – particularly Southern Italy – is on average much more precarious than in most other European countries. In early 2020, before the COVID-19 crisis, the unemployment rate of young people aged 15-24 already stood at over 50%, while almost 30% of 25 to 34-year-olds were without a job. Although the region has used up almost all of the available Youth Guarantee

funds to 2020, the share of NEET in Apulia remains significantly higher than the national average and young, qualified people continue to emigrate in increasing numbers to the north of Italy or abroad.¹²

On the other hand, the region has recently been experiencing an economic recovery: the private sector is having difficulties attracting well-trained and suitably skilled workers. This hampers innovation and thus the growth of local businesses. There is a lack of continuous vocational orientation, support for disadvantaged young people and a functioning public placement system to overcome this mismatch. StartNet has made it its goal to improve the transition from school to work.

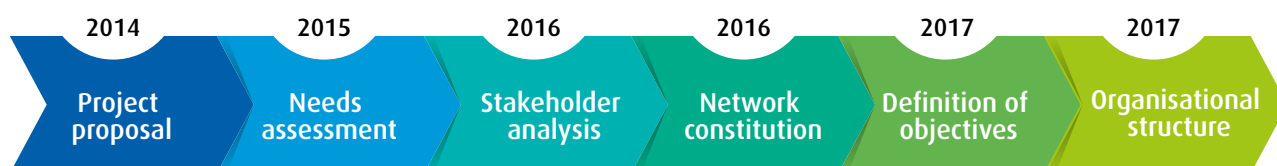
To this end, the Goethe-Institut in Rome, thanks to funding from the Stiftung Mercator, has established a network of partners and stakeholders who jointly signed a Memorandum of Understanding in Bari in September 2017.

What steps were taken?

Building a regional network takes time: the development process shown in Chart 1 took three years.

Initially, a working group established at the Goethe-Institut in Rome developed the project and prepared the funding applications that had to be submitted to the Stiftung Mercator. After preparatory talks with the Italian Ministry of Education – with which a cooperative relation built on trust had already been established – Apulia

Chart 1: Steps taken to build the StartNet network



¹² We recommend the Policy Paper “Activation policies for NEETs”, co-written with demographer Alessandro Rosina (in Italian) as a source of information on NEET young people in Italy. <https://www.start-net.org/en/portfolio/policy-paper-activation-policies-neets>

and Basilicata were selected as target regions for the pilot project in Southern Italy. This choice was made not only because of the obvious need for action, but also because the two regions had a proven organisational capacity, which increased the chances for success.

Once the target regions had been selected, the Stiftung Mercator financed a needs assessment, which allowed us to better define the project's scope. At the same time, exploratory talks were held with key players from both regions: Ministries responsible for education, training and/or employment, Chambers of Commerce, schools, the educational authorities and representatives from the non-profit sector. What follows is a description of StartNet in Apulia.

Who are the players of StartNet Italy and what is the structure of the network?

In September 2017, the following partners signed a Memorandum of Understanding, which lies at the basis of StartNet's activities in Apulia:

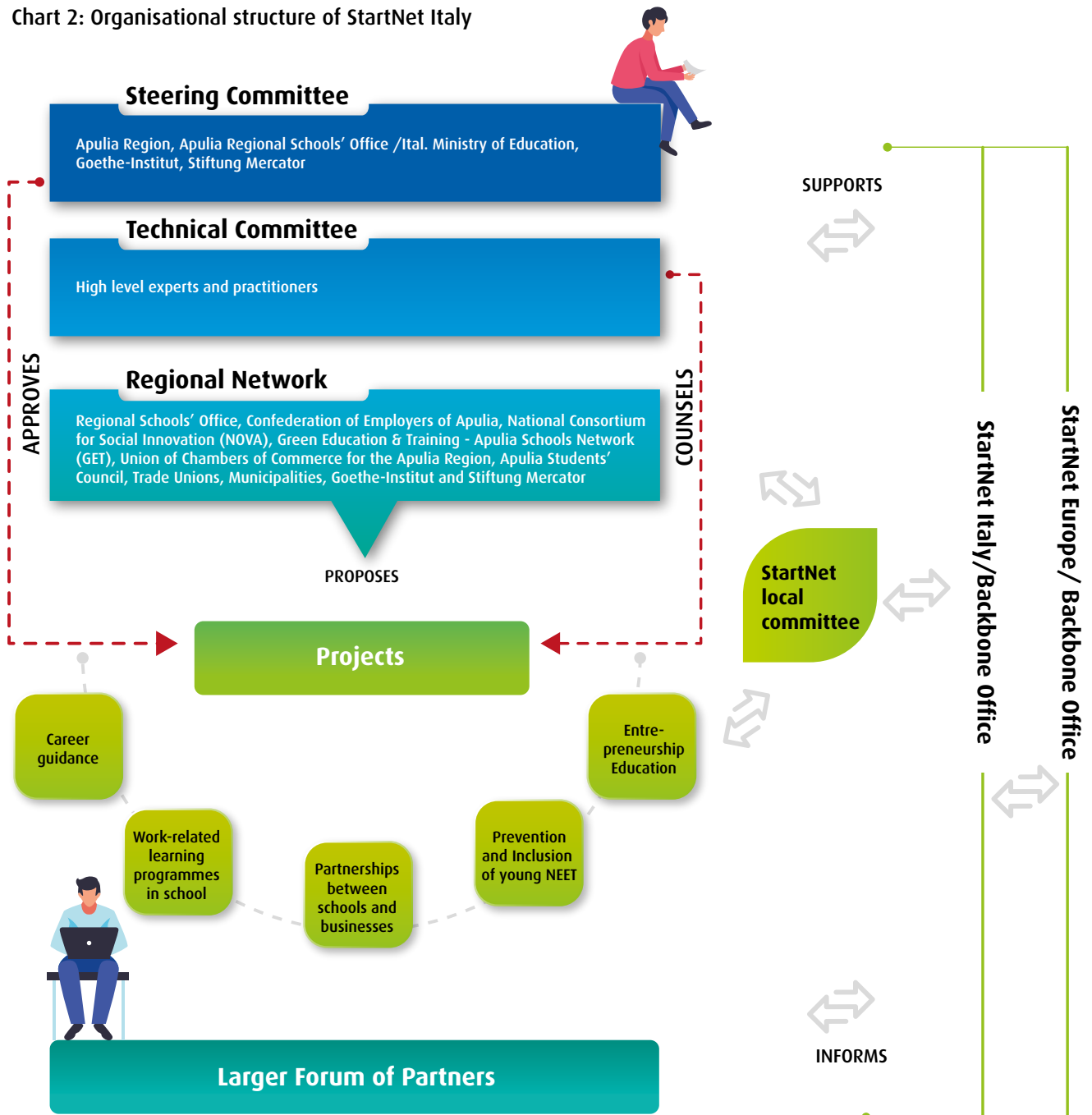
Subsequently, the members of the network's governance, advisory and representative structures were chosen and the staff for the backbone office was selected. The organisational structure of StartNet Italy is as follows:

- ▶ **Network:** All cooperating parties that have signed the Memorandum of Understanding.
- ▶ **Academic Advisory Board:** comprised of representatives from academia and experts from Italy and Germany. The Advisory Board meets twice a year and advises on project proposals and strategic orientation.
- ▶ **Steering Committee:** composed of representatives of the Italian Ministry of Education; the Minister of Education, Vocational Training and Labour of the Apulia Region; the Goethe-Institut Rome and Stiftung Mercator.
The Steering Committee decides on the strategic direction of the project and the use of project funds. It meets 4 times a year.
- ▶ **Partner Forum:** this is where all institutions interested in the topic come together at least once a year for a joint event.

Funders	Education	Institutions (State/Region)	Business	Third Sector
Stiftung Mercator	Apulia Regional Schools' Office	Italian Ministry of Education, Higher Education and Research (MIUR)	Confederation of Employers of Apulia (Confindustria Puglia)	National Consortium for Social Innovation (NOVA)
Goethe-Institut e.V.	Green Education & Training - Apulia Schools Network (GET); Apulia Students' Council	Apulia Region with the Regional Ministry of Education, Training and Employment	Union of Chambers of Commerce for the Apulia Region (Unioncamere Puglia)	

«If we want to retain talented young people in Southern Italy, we must first create synergies between stakeholders who are not connected. A network such as StartNet brings them together with schools and young people to work towards a common goal.»

Chart 2: Organisational structure of StartNet Italy



The **backbone office** is responsible for organising meetings, communication, transferring knowledge within and outside the network, and monitoring all activities. It also manages financial resources. In StartNet Italy, the backbone office comprises three and a half full-time positions dedicated to coordination,

communication and event management, administration and monitoring.

The backbone office has drawn up a **monitoring concept** in coordination with the network, according to which all project activities are recorded and evaluated.



«The idea of having students sitting at the same table as entrepreneurs, teachers and school principals is a success. Young people must be put on the same level for their needs to be heard. »

Teacher at StartNet Camp

A joint programme and shared responsibility

By the beginning of 2018, the network had developed a joint programme and agreed on five areas of action that accurately reflected the region's needs and for which concrete projects were to be implemented:

1. Comprehensive career guidance from primary school to job placement
2. Optimisation of internships and work-related learning programmes in schools
3. Partnerships between schools and businesses
4. Inclusion and further training of young NEET, prevention of drop-out
5. Promoting entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial education and the creation of start-ups

StartNet Italy target groups

- Parents
- Teachers
- Primary school pupils (ages 6-10)
- Secondary Level I pupils (ages 11-13)
- Secondary Level II pupils (ages 14-16 or 14-18)
- NEET

Note: The age groups are indicative and include students who have changed trajectory or repeated certain school years.

For each area of action, a partner was designated as the responsible entity.

In order to derive maximum benefit from the guiding principle of "joint action", it was agreed that all activities developed by the network must involve **at least three partners from different sectors**: this sine qua non has proven to be very advantageous.

Implementation: What are the success factors?

Internal communication

- Continuous **communication between the partners** is crucial. In the first year, moderated network meetings took place almost on a **monthly basis**: this was necessary to ensure the rapid development of the joint agenda and of the Memorandum of Understanding.
- Starting from the **second year**, the rhythm was adjusted so that the network now only meets **every two months**.

- To make the process as efficient as possible, **project-related physical and online meetings** with the involved partners are held in between the network meetings.

Capacity-building, knowledge transfer and participatory processes

- In order to ensure that all project partners have a common understanding and similar knowledge base, StartNet organised several **study trips and expert meetings** in Belgium and Germany to familiarise all partners with the whole range of issues related to the transition from school to work.
- Together with the partners, an **interactive conference format** known as “StartNet Camps” was developed, which takes place every year and offers the opportunity to convey knowledge to a large number of

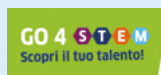
participants, especially young people, and at the same time develop solutions together in moderated workshops.

- The **topics were based on the needs** of the partners, who were involved along with local and international experts, institutions, schools and students.

Commitment and synergy effects

The **commitment** and mutual support of the stakeholders are absolutely essential. **Political support** is also very important: the regional government in Apulia regards StartNet as an advisory body and provides structural support, such as a permanent contact person, an office and rooms for the regular network meetings. The support of the Italian Ministry of Education is a further plus when it comes to establishing networks on a political level.

StartNet Italy Flagship Projects



BEFORE provides a set of online-based career guidance tools, created as a quick response to the lack of physical career guidance during the lockdown. Pupils in their final year benefit from: a web-based self-evaluation tool, 1-hour online career consulting with experts, tutorial videos.

Building Futures strengthens and supports school-based career guidance. The project provides 30 hours of enhanced training for teachers of lower and upper secondary school, based on StartNet's research on future perspectives of the labour market and on the assessment of career counselling that has been provided. It also establishes coordinating teams on a regional level.

GO4STEM Lab offers a parkours where secondary school students have to solve technical and scientific problems, testing their talents in STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) and discovering new jobs and career opportunities.

The **Or.Co.** project will run for four years, until 2023, and involves the gradual establishment of local educational communities to support children from primary school, during secondary and until the entrance to upper secondary school. Monitoring, individual guidance and a career orientation app (“APPOrienta”) are

provided with a particular focus on children and young people who are in vulnerable socio-economic contexts and at risk of becoming NEET.

Proactive Training is a project promoting entrepreneurship education, teamwork, and creativity among young people through a process of career guidance, self-awareness and personal skills recognition in schools. The project includes two initiatives: ‘Simula-Impresa’ (business simulation), for lower secondary school students and teachers (mainly Year 3), and ‘Impresa in Classe’ (business in the classroom) for upper secondary school students.

More information on the various StartNet Italy projects and activities can be found here:

<https://www.start-net.org/en/portfolio>



StartNet also received recognition as a good practice in the context of the **German-Italian cooperation** agreement on vocational training between the Ministries of Education and Labour.¹³

What has StartNet achieved in Italy during its first three years?

First year: After the foundation of the network, the emphasis was on establishing the structure, developing the areas of action, capacity-building and project development.

Second year: Acquisition of third-party funding for projects, project development and implementation of the first project activities.

Third year: StartNet launched a set of orientation tools for its target groups, i.e. pupils from primary to upper secondary school, families, teachers, businesses and employment agencies.

Our projects address all of our target groups:

- ▶ **For teachers of secondary levels I and II:** a 40-hour in-service training course on providing career orientation to students;
- ▶ **For teachers, parents and pupils:** an easily accessible guide that provides an overview of the regional labour market and its expected development over the coming years;
- ▶ **For secondary level II pupils:** an app that enables them to discover their own interests and talents on an individual basis and that provides them with suggestions for a professional career;

- ▶ **For pupils and parents of primary school and secondary level I:** early systemic orientation from primary school onwards and individualised support for those children and young people who are at risk of school failure or dropping out of school;
- ▶ **For pupils of secondary levels I and II:** a touring lab that promotes a playful approach to STEM subjects via 15 experimental stations;
- ▶ **For pupils of secondary level II:** career days in selected companies;
- ▶ **For pupils of secondary levels I and II:** project-related work on entrepreneurship in cooperation with local companies.

Sustainability

How does StartNet work on a systemic level?

While previously the various partners only communicated bilaterally and to a limited extent, working in networks has led to completely new forms of cooperation, which can also be seen outside the actual activities of StartNet:

- ▶ Partner organisations consult each other before launching new projects or initiatives.
- ▶ Both politicians and the administration recognise the expertise of StartNet, which is thus given funding for the implementation of pilot projects.
- ▶ Partners from at least three different sectors must cooperate in the implementation of projects.

¹³ <https://www.bibb.de/govet/de/2358.php/project/detail/454>

And what about funding?

StartNet has almost doubled the original budget of €1.7 million provided by Stiftung Mercator by raising third-party funds.

StartNet's setup as a network and its strong synergy effects have helped to attract additional funding. The Italian fund against educational poverty "Con i Bambini" of the *Fondazione Con il Sud* granted €1.4 million for the Or.Co.-project, a major school and career orientation project aimed at a very young age range (from 9 to 13 years), designed to prevent school drop-outs during the delicate transition processes from primary to secondary school level I, and then to secondary level II. Moreover, two Erasmus projects have been established between partners at European level, for a total amount of 455,000€.

More than 2/3 of the funding available for StartNet Italy is spent on projects and activities whereas less than a third covers the costs of the backbone office.

What challenges remain?

Getting young people involved

The goal of StartNet was not only to address young people as a target group but also to give them the opportunity to participate in the work of StartNet itself. The implementation of this idea turned out to be not so easy: often, young people feel that institutions don't represent them. They use different communication channels, may speak a "different language" and have different expectations.

StartNet has therefore decided to invest more in future youth work by organising activities for and with young people and trying out new, and also informal ways of youth participation.

Resilience facing new challenges

The Covid-19 crisis has worsened the already precarious employment situation of young people in Apulia and in Basilicata, especially for young NEET. As a response, StartNet recently issued a policy paper on how to better engage NEET in the labour market, using strategic networking mechanisms (such as StartNet) more effectively, together with funding from the EU Youth Guarantee programme.

StartNet also immediately developed an online career guidance project for the classes graduating in June 2020, which helps young people to discover and test their strengths, resilience and proactiveness. This project also offers young people individual career counselling with experts, which previously didn't exist.

In the future, StartNet will consider focusing on new employment areas, such as digital skills, participation, innovation and the green economy.

The network itself very quickly developed highly effective distance and on-line working methods, which will positively influence our future cooperative working methodologies.

What will be the future of the network?

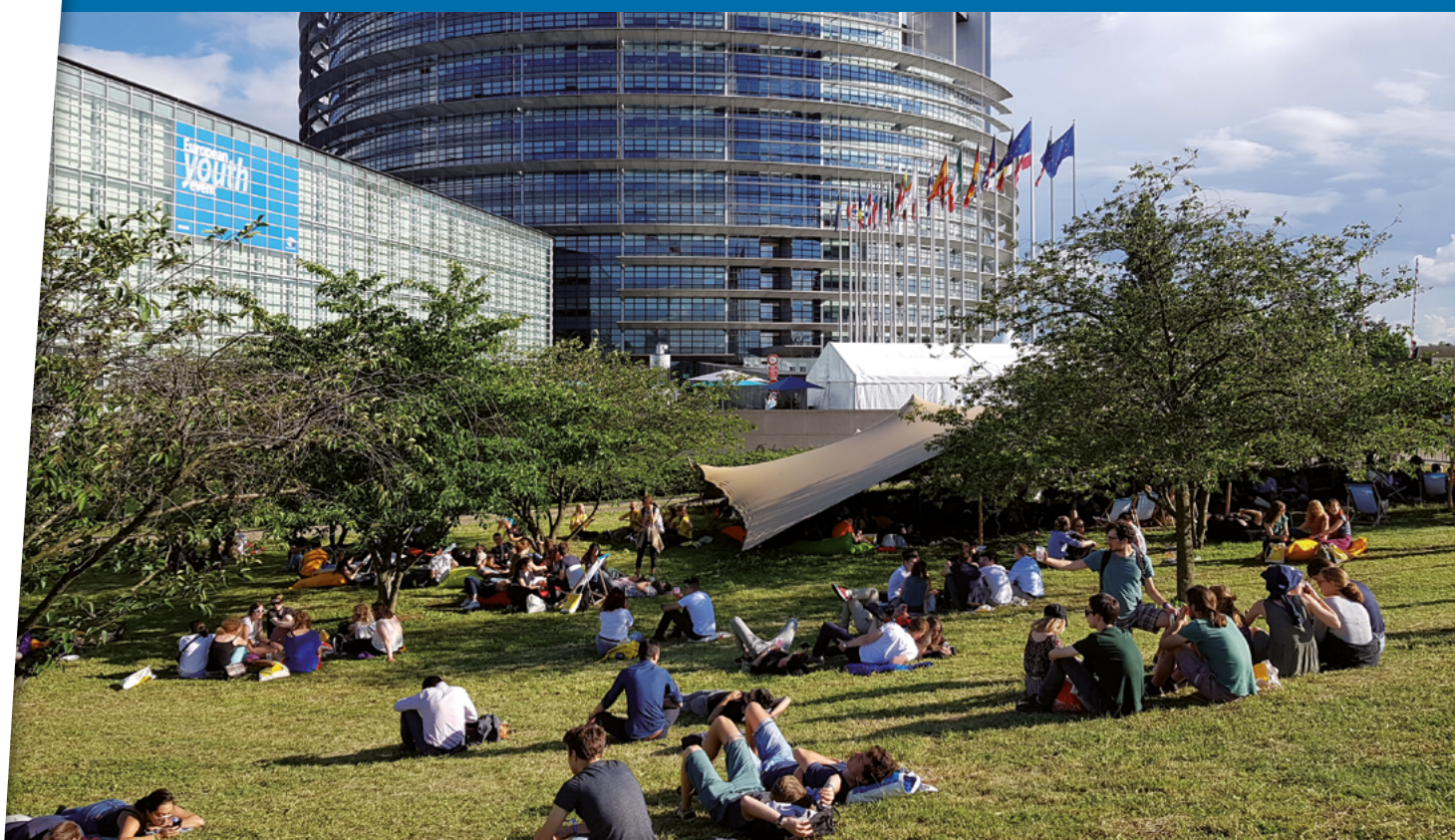
After an initial funding phase, StartNet can count on additional funding from Stiftung Mercator for another three years. During these three years the network will institutionalise itself in a new form, aiming to secure its organisational and financial sustainability.

Keep in mind

- ✓ *Successful cooperation in networks has a positive effect on fundraising.*
- ✓ *Sufficient financial resources must be allocated to management, coordination, monitoring and communication.*
- ✓ *Challenges can best be solved if partners from at least three different sectors plan and implement activities together.*
- ✓ *Planning and implementing joint projects leads to symbioses that extend even beyond the actual work in the network.*
- ✓ *The continuation of the network must be wanted and supported by all partners.*



How to create a European network on young people's transition to work





Setting up

StartNet Europe		
Where	AT, BE, DE, CH, ES, FI, FR, HR, IT, LT, MK, RO, SK (18 partners from 13 countries)	
Sector	Youth, education and employment	
Established in	2017	
Objective	Exchange of good practices, project partnerships, advocacy	
Target group	European initiatives for youth transition	
Network	Local or regional authorities, public agencies, foundations, NGOs	
Participants in public events by 2020	5,000	
Member of	European Alliance of Apprenticeships; European Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition	

Why create a European good practice exchange?

A vast amount of good practices and innovative projects exist, across Europe, to promote young people's **transition from education to employment**. Although realities differ a lot between countries, challenges and solutions are often similar: there is a high potential to learn from each other, even across borders. Unfortunately, spaces for international exchanges are limited and a lot of expertise that could be useful in other contexts remains isolated. Too often, **good practices** cannot spread sufficiently, scale-up and contribute to systemic change in Europe.

The StartNet project was established with the intention of identifying and connecting good practices around Europe, facilitating cooperation among partners, and supporting them, their visibility and advocacy to improve transition policies and practices not only in Southern Italy, but across Europe as well.

How to set up a European network of partners?

European **partnerships** are essential to overcome isolation. They enable mutual learning, innovation and systemic improvement. But how can one find the right partners to set up such a network?

From the experience of the StartNet Europe network, this requires firstly, to carefully define the scope of the network and the nature of targeted partners, and secondly, to identify and engage these partners.

Alice Barbieri & Francesco Isetta
#Progettiamocilfuturo

«Through StartNet we increased our experiences, skills and knowledge. Exchanges with the other partners also helped us expand the activities and offers of our own project.»

What is the scope of the network?

Already from the very beginning, it is important to identify the duration and **finality** of the network: does it have a specific, time-delimited objective, or should it be a continuous, self-sustaining process? Although goals can be adjusted, it is useful to know throughout the network activities what should ultimately be achieved and in which timeframe. These questions are fundamental and will affect the nature of your partnership. So firstly, it is important to clearly define the **scope, goals and objectives** of your network.

What kind of partners to include?

Determine the profile of your ideal partners: which characteristics, values and activities would best contribute to the objectives of the network and benefit from European cooperation?

One criterion can be the **regional dimension**: partners active at regional level can allow you to include initiatives that are both close to the operational work on the ground, but that also have strategic impact at a broader level. Being active at this level also allows you to take a variety of realities into account: educational landscapes and labour market situations can differ significantly from region to region, even within a country. National schemes sometimes fail to address the circumstances

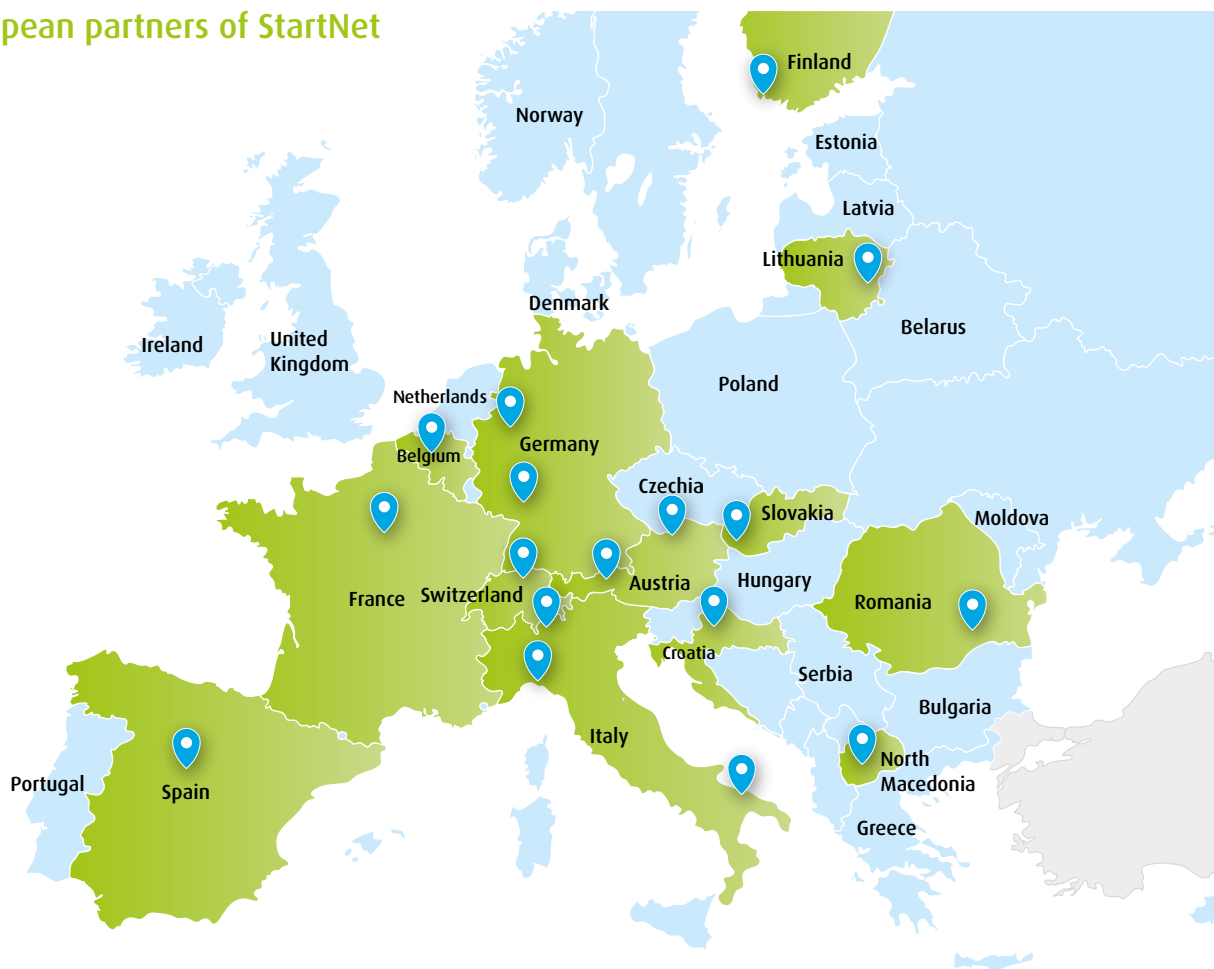
of specific regions; likewise, European networks whose main partners operate at national level can find it difficult to address regional diversity and innovation.

Another key question is how **homogeneous or heterogeneous** network partners can or should be, and the criteria to use when selecting partners. In the case of StartNet Europe, because the focus was on a Collective Impact approach, we sought to **engage a variety of sectors** to build bridges between the worlds of education and employment. However, it was also important to leave open the scope of the partners' specific activities, in order to have a diversity of partners with different approaches that can inspire each other.

The StartNet experience shows that a certain level of heterogeneity is very fruitful for exchanges on the broader topic of young people's transition to work. Engaging with stakeholders from different sectors or with varying backgrounds can lead to unexpected solutions and new working approaches. However, this heterogeneity must be balanced against a certain homogeneity of interests, otherwise it can be difficult to find enough common ground among the partners. Organisations may vary in size, experience, legal status or scope, but if their **challenges, goals and interests align**, a network can generate effective solutions for all its partners.



European partners of StartNet



Who?	Where?	What?
Apprentis d'Auteuil	France	Social inclusion of disadvantaged young people
ARNO	North Macedonia	Organization for Social Innovation (social and green entrepreneurship)
Check your Chance	Switzerland	Private-public umbrella organisation to combat youth unemployment
Cometa Formazione	Como, Italy	Laboratory of innovation and social inclusion
EPIC Slovakia	Slovakia	Non-profit for employment and inclusion of disadvantaged or marginalised people
Fundación Secretariado Gitano	Spain	Educational and employment programmes for Roma inclusion
Jugendnetzwerke Oberösterreich	Upper Austria	Youth network of the chamber of labour for school to work transitions
Jump naar werk	Brussels, Belgium	Career training for pupils
KOST Tirol	Tyrol, Austria	Regional coordination of apprenticeships & school to work transition
Lanzaderas de Empleo	Spain	Launching pads for employment and entrepreneurship
Vilniaus kolegija/UAS department «Simulith» and Association «LIBA»	Lithuania	Lithuanian Practice Enterprise Network
City of Mannheim – Education Department	Mannheim, Germany	Education, vocational education & school to work transition
#Progettiamocilfuturo	Liguria, Italy	Life Design: Orientation & vocational guidance for students, teachers and parents
RuhrFutur	Ruhr region, Germany	Collective impact non-profit for educational cooperation
Școala de Valori	Romania	NGO for young people's value-based education & training
City of Turku – Education Division	Turku, Finland	Early childhood to upper secondary school & vocational education
StartNet – Transizione Scuola-Lavoro	Apulia, Italy	Regional network for school to work transition
Znanje na djelu / Wissen am Werk	Croatia	Foundation Knowledge at Work for school to work transition

How to find relevant partners in the field of young people's transition across Europe?

The location of the StartNet Europe team in **Brussels** turned out to be a major advantage, because many European umbrella organisations and platforms have their offices in that city and they are often aware of good practices within their membership. The **European Institutions, databases** on Erasmus+ and European Social Fund projects are also rich sources of information.¹⁴

Moreover, recommendations from partners are very valuable: national organisations and stakeholders are often helpful in identifying regional initiatives, allowing us to find partners with innovative activities that are less connected at the European level. StartNet was also able to build on a preparatory study commissioned by the Stiftung Mercator, which already identified several suitable initiatives.

¹⁴ Erasmus+ project results: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects_en; <https://ec.europa.eu/esf/main.jsp?catId=46&langId=en>.

Implementation

How to engage partners in a network?

Engage people and build trust

Although generally speaking, members of networks are usually organisations, they are always represented by **people**. Therefore, it is ideal to engage with people who are passionate about their work. If the intrinsic **motivation to cooperate** in a thematic network is too weak, partners might disengage or the effort required to keep them engaged might become too large. This

is especially important if the objective is not to build a one-off cooperation, but a lasting partnership.

In order to facilitate the communication process, it is also advisable to have a specific contact person within each partner organisation who will act as a **multiplier**. This will help to establish a relation of trust and will ease communication. These contact persons should ideally be high enough in their organisational **hierarchy** to make decisions concerning the partners' participation: if they constantly need to seek approvals, cooperation will be slower and more limited. This should be balanced against the need for the contact persons to be aware of the practical work in the field, as well as of the strategic direction, needs and interests of their organisation.

Transparency and trust are key when it comes to building an international network and meaningful good practice exchanges. Therefore, the objectives of the network, the interests and expectations should be made clear from the beginning. It is essential to reach a common understanding of what the network aims to achieve and what each partner will contribute.

Although it is not common practice, sharing and learning from each other's failures is often more instructive than promoting seemingly smooth best practices. Of course, this requires a high degree of mutual trust. Such an attitude of partnership rather than competition needs to be built over time.

Focus on added value

When deciding whether to engage in international network activities, partners will assess the potential benefits, but will also evaluate the time and resources that they will need to invest. For this reason, the **added value** for partners needs to be obvious and clearly communicated. The lesser the time and resources required to participate in the network, the higher the attractiveness of the network and hence the readiness to participate. However, unrealistic **expectations** should be avoided. As a rule of thumb, it should be clear that the more someone invests into a network, the more one can benefit from it in return. Generally speaking, international exchanges do benefit participants, either in the form of new cooperation opportunities or new approaches to address their challenges.

Keep in mind

- ✓ *A European network can open new horizons, foster cooperation and innovation.*
- ✓ *Clearly define the objective/s and finality of the network from the outset.*
- ✓ *Identify matching partners in terms of thematic focus, approaches, values, size and experience.*
- ✓ *A certain degree of heterogeneity can inspire new approaches, but this needs to be balanced with a commonality of purpose.*
- ✓ *Focusing on the regional scale ensures alignment with regional circumstances and increases impact.*
- ✓ *European umbrella organisations, institutions and programme databases are a rich source of inspiration for partner research.*
- ✓ *Connect to people and seek out further recommendations or referrals to find new regional partners.*

Balanced leadership and empowerment

Another question is how much **direction and leadership** should come from the network initiator, and how flexibly the network should adapt to the partners' proposals and suggestions. On the one hand, proposing a clear direction and purpose is important to attract and engage partners. It assures efficiency and presents the network in a more structured way towards external stakeholders. However, it is equally important that partners be able to actively participate, to co-create and jointly design the network's agenda, so that it responds as much as possible to their needs and interests. This balancing act between leadership and partner-engagement and empowerment requires adjustments and continuous internal communication.

At the beginning, it might be useful to not impose too much on the partners or to expect an immediate long-term commitment; rather, to let them get acquainted and participate more informally at first. Once the trust and interest are confirmed, the network can become formalised with an increased commitment from the partners.

How to run a thematic network?

Once partners are found, the question remains how to run a thematic network. This concerns the different topics and formats as well as internal and external communication.

Mutual understanding and common ground

At the beginning, the network needs to facilitate a deeper mutual **understanding** of each partner's work. This will help throughout the duration of the project to better identify potential bilateral exchanges, thematic focuses and joint projects.

Surveying all partners' good practices, specific learning interests and future development plans will help to identify the common ground, find synergies and match them for specific partnerships. This can also serve as a basis for the development of a learning agenda that serves a maximum of partners. Cooperation can be deepened through EU-projects, bilateral exchanges, visits, external conferences and joint advocacy actions.

Vincent Verrydt – Jump naar Werk

«StartNet allows us to strategically connect with relevant EU stakeholders and educational organisations so we improve our work together, and at the same time, get inspired for new projects for our own organisation.»





Keep in mind

- ✓ *Your contact person should be genuinely interested and needs to be able to play a multiplier role in the partner organisation.*
- ✓ *Trust-building is a prerequisite for meaningful exchanges; this includes learning from failures.*
- ✓ *Networks need to focus on a clear added value for partners, who have limited time and resources.*
- ✓ *Networks can be more or less hierarchical, but space needs to be given to partners to grow in their responsibility and ownership, moving towards a co-creational approach.*

Various formats of exchange and cooperation

Regarding the **formats**, the StartNet Europe experience has shown that physical **network meetings** are essential to build trust and effective relationships, especially at the beginning of the network formation. This concerns both the relationships between partners as well as the connection between the partners and the coordinating structure. At a later stage, **online exchanges**, **webinars** etc. can increasingly replace physical meetings.

A combination of general plenary formats and *à la carte* activities or thematic sub-groups has proven to be the best formula to offer sufficiently varied yet comprehensive input to a rather heterogeneous group of stakeholders.

Field visits are an excellent format to combine a practical, on-the-ground learning experience with the opportunity to further strengthen the network through capacity-building.

« This field visit was a very important and interesting experience, because we got to know two of our partners in depth and the great work they are doing. We can take a lot of what we learned back to our projects and countries. »

Laureen de Palma – Cometa

Partners tend to prefer a dense programme of meetings, expert inputs and field visits, combined with opportunities for informal mutual exchanges: this provides a maximum of value in a minimum of time. Two to two-and-a-half days have proven to be the best duration, justifying the travelling while avoiding too long absences from the office.

In order to strengthen the sense of belonging to a network, it is advisable to physically meet at least twice a year. StartNet usually invites 1-2 people per organisation to networking meetings: this assures a good balance between concentration of information and diversification, while keeping the meetings at a manageable and effective size. If the representatives of the partners change too often, it is more difficult to ensure continuation and cohesion.

Communication

Internal communication between networking meetings can be challenging as the network activities come on top of the partners' regular workload. A combination of channels has proven to be effective, including group emails, a LinkedIn group as well as regular online- or phone calls or even personal meetings with partners who are close by. When physical meetings are not possible, as during the COVID-19 crisis, it is important to maintain the contact and to provide alternative online formats. In fact, the forced cessation of offline activities allowed us to jointly reflect and exchange on online solutions, strategic reorientation and working on joint projects.

External communication of a large and diverse network can be rather slow especially when content first needs to be coordinated internally, but a lot can be entrusted to the backbone office. A clearly and jointly defined roadmap and communication strategy help to run the external communication more effectively; it also reinforces each partner's communication work.

Creating a momentum around joint publications and dissemination activities is also very useful for external communication. For example, good practice compilations or joint events can bring together the expertise of all partners and multiply their visibility.

Sustainability

How to fund a European learning network and assure sustainability?

The funding of an international network also affects its structural set-up. It can either be a looser cooperation without central coordination, where all partners fund their own participation and host activities on a rotating basis. The Union of the Baltic Cities T2W (transition to work) network is an example of such a structure.

Alternatively, there can be central coordination through a dedicated backbone office that is co-financed by membership fees and external funding, which is the case of the European Association of Regional & Local Authorities for lifelong learning (EARLALL). A backbone office usually acts as a coordinator and mediator within the network, assuring its effectiveness, taking care of day-to-day management and neutrally mediating possible disagreements between partners.

In the case of StartNet, dedicated funding from the Stiftung Mercator and from the hosting partner Goethe-Institut allows a backbone office to operate and implement the different activities. Partners mainly contribute with their time and expertise. However, the objective is to diversify sources of funding in order to secure the sustainability of the network. One possibility to diversify the funding is to apply for European funds for specific projects. Programmes such as Erasmus+, but also

Network Exchange Formats:

- ▶ Field visits to partner organisations
- ▶ Plenary meetings
- ▶ Thematic workshops with expert input
- ▶ Round tables with political decision-makers
- ▶ Sub-group meetings or teamwork in world café style
- ▶ Online meetings
- ▶ Webinars



Keep in mind

- ✓ *A clear attribution of roles and responsibilities from the beginning is key to successful cooperation.*
- ✓ *Offering a mixture of specific formats such as workshops, field visits, informal exchanges or webinars retains the interest of the partners.*
- ✓ *Internal communication relies firstly on regular physical network meetings and can be complemented by online exchanges (teleconferences, email-chats, webinars etc.).*
- ✓ *Networks have a great potential to build on and reinforce external communication. Joint campaigns, content production or events can multiply the visibility and impact of the partners and of the network.*
- ✓ *Funding often defines the nature of the network. Central coordination is costly, but also significantly increases network's effectiveness.*

the ESF can be valuable sources. Partners from different countries can jointly apply for project grants, which may assure further collaboration for several years, even beyond the lifetime of the formal network.

Advocacy for future policy and programmes/positive change

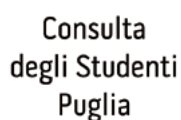
A European learning network embodies a unique compilation of expertise on a specific topic from different countries and regions, which is of great added value at political level. Indeed, the experiences and inputs from the field can much more easily be collected, analysed, streamlined and provided to policymakers, who otherwise would have difficulties acquiring this valuable information. European learning networks can thus have a considerable impact on shaping relevant policies in their field, and also facilitate the development of close links to European policymakers and to other stakeholders or networks active on this level.

«The clear communication, coordination and project management that the project team of the Goethe-Institut provides are key to success.»

We thank our partners:



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