

StartNet II

(June 2020–May 2023)

Final Evaluation Report

June 2023





Final Evaluation Report

StartNet II (June 2020–May 2023)

June 2023



PIN

POLO
UNIVERSITARIO
CITTÀ DI PRATO

SERVIZI DIDATTICI
E SCIENTIFICI
PER L'UNIVERSITÀ
DI FIRENZE



ARCO – Action Research for CO-development – is an action-research centre located in PIN S.c.r.l., a not-for-profit organisational unit located within, and providing educational and scientific services for, the University of Florence. ARCO staff have extensive experience in all aspects and phases of research conduct, from data collection to analysis and policy implications, as well as training facilitation and implementation of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems and impact evaluations.

The centre engages the expertise of experienced economists, commodity experts, statisticians, political scientists and sociologists, combining scientific rigour with applied knowledge to produce practical solutions.

ARCO c/o PIN S.c.r.l Servizi didattici e scientifici per l'Università di Firenze

Piazza Giovanni Ciardi, 25

59100 Prato (PO) Italy

Tel: + 39 0574 602561

Email:

Website: <https://www.arcolab.org>

LinkedIn: arco lab

Facebook: @ARCOcentre

Instagram: @arco_lab

AUTHORS

This document was developed by Giulia Dingacci, Tommaso Iannelli and Marta Magnani.

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies or official position of their organisation/s.

INDEX

| | |
|--|----|
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | 2 |
| OUTCOMES ACHIEVED ON BENEFICIARIES..... | 5 |
| 1. INTRODUCTION..... | 6 |
| 2. INTERVENTION DESCRIPTION..... | 7 |
| 2.1 INTERVENTION AREAS..... | 8 |
| 2.2. PROJECTS INVOLVING THE STARTNET NETWORK | 9 |
| 3. THEORY OF CHANGE | 11 |
| 4. EVALUATION FRAMEWORK | 13 |
| 4.1 PURPOSE AND SCOPE | 13 |
| 4.2 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY..... | 13 |
| 4.3 EVALUATION TOOLS | 14 |
| 5. EVALUATION FINDINGS | 16 |
| 5.1 OECD DAC CRITERIA ASSESSMENT..... | 16 |
| 5.1.1 Relevance..... | 16 |
| 5.1.2 Coherence..... | 19 |
| 5.1.3 Effectiveness..... | 21 |
| 5.1.4 Efficiency..... | 30 |
| 5.1.5 Impact..... | 32 |
| 5.1.6 Sustainability..... | 35 |
| 5.2 OUTCOMES ACHIEVED FOR BENEFICIARIES | 38 |
| 5.2.1 Building Futures | 38 |
| 5.2.2 StartNet Youth | 42 |
| 5.3 SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS..... | 45 |
| 5.3.1 Methodology..... | 45 |
| 5.3.2 Main results | 45 |
| 6. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES | 50 |
| 7. LESSONS LEARNT | 52 |
| 8. APPENDIX I – EVALUATION AGENDA..... | 54 |
| 9. APPENDIX II – PARTNERS INCLUDED IN STARTNET II NETWORK..... | 55 |

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

StartNet II

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| <p>FOCUS</p> <p>The main objective of StartNet II is to promote youth employment in areas with high youth unemployment rates. The project adopts a multilevel perspective, organising its actions at two levels: the regional level (within Italy) and the European level. At the regional level, project activities target educational institutions, local businesses, and production and third sector representatives in the Apulia and Basilicata regions of Italy. At the European level, the project promotes widespread networking and advocacy activities across Europe by facilitating training sessions and exchange of good practices among members of its European network. More specifically, StartNet’s specific objectives at each level are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the regional level, promote youth employment in southern Italy. • At the European level, create a network of local institutions and organisations to improve knowledge exchange related to school-to-work transition. <p>Within StartNet, an offshoot project referred to as StartNet Youth involves a group of 50 youths (14–26 years old) from different Italian regions who are actively involved in the youth community’s projects and activities. The aim of StartNet Youth is to reposition youths as change maker and co-creators rather than mere beneficiaries.</p> | <p>DURATIONS</p> <p>StartNet II (second phase of StartNet): 36 months (2020- 2023)</p> <p>StartNet I (first phase of StartNet):36 months (2017–2020)</p> <p>START DATE</p> <p>June 2020</p> <p>END DATES</p> <p>StartNet Italy: May 2023 StartNet Europe: May 2024</p> <p>FUNDED BY</p> <p>Stiftung Mercator</p> <p>DIRECT BENEFICIARIES OF STARTNET ITALY</p> <p>15,000 students (in Apulia and Basilicata) 600 teachers 1,200 families</p> <p>INTERVENTION AREAS</p> <p>StartNet Italy involves schools, institutions, enterprises, youth associations and third sector organisations in the Apulia and Basilicata regions of Italy.</p> <p>StartNet Europe involves initiatives and organisations from sectors that transition youths from education to employment in Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Northern Macedonia, Romania, Spain and Switzerland.</p> | <p>StartNet II (second phase of StartNet): 36 months (2020- 2023)</p> <p>StartNet I (first phase of StartNet):36 months (2017–2020)</p> <p>June 2020</p> <p>StartNet Italy: May 2023 StartNet Europe: May 2024</p> <p>Stiftung Mercator</p> <p>15,000 students (in Apulia and Basilicata) 600 teachers 1,200 families</p> <p>StartNet Italy involves schools, institutions, enterprises, youth associations and third sector organisations in the Apulia and Basilicata regions of Italy.</p> <p>StartNet Europe involves initiatives and organisations from sectors that transition youths from education to employment in Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Northern Macedonia, Romania, Spain and Switzerland.</p> |
| <p>EVALUATION FRAMEWORK</p> <p>The main purpose of this final evaluation is to assess if StartNet II effectively reached its targets and objectives, investigating in-depth the analysis of the project’s networks. The evaluation strategy proposed by the evaluating body (ARCO) aims at assessing the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • by measuring outcome and output indicators, the degree to which StartNet II objectives and expected results were met. • main outcomes for project beneficiaries in Apulia and Basilicata (as of April 2023). • project compliance with the five OECD DAC criteria for development evaluation (OECD, 2019): relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact. • the potential of the project to be modelled as good practice, emphasising lessons learnt and best practices that can inform decision-making, scale-up, replication, diffusion and continuation of actions initiated by StartNet. • intervention strengths and weaknesses, with which a set of lessons learnt can be elaborated to inform future phases or projects. <p>This evaluation appraises StartNet II (the second phase of StartNet), comprised of StartNet Europe and StartNet Italy Networks. The data used in the final evaluation were collected remotely, using web-based software for online survey administration and videoconferencing (in April 2023) and onsite during a field visit by the evaluators in Apulia (3–7 April 2023).</p> | <p>arco EVALUATOR</p> <p>EVALUATION TOOLS</p> | <p>ARCO Action Research for CO-Development di PIN S.c.r.l. Servizi Didattici e Scientifici per l’Università di Firenze</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysis of secondary data - N. 10 KI with project leader and relevant stakeholders - Youth evaluation survey questionnaire - Four focus group discussions with StartNet Italy beneficiaries - Survey questionnaire Social Network Analysis - Field visit in Apulia (one week) |

EVALUATION FINDINGS

RELEVANCE: *Is the intervention doing the right things?*

The Project aims to address youth unemployment and school-to-work transition by reducing inequalities between European member states through exchange of good practices and by creating common practices at the European level that can then be scaled up and implemented regionally.

StartNet II is highly relevant given that youth unemployment rates vary across Europe. In 2022, the lowest rate was observed in Germany (6%), while one of the highest rates was recorded in Italy (23.7%). Italy has one of the highest rates of youth unemployment in Europe and the highest number of youths not in education, employment or training (NEET).

At the regional level, StartNet fosters connections with and between schools and regions in Italy to support coordination and exchange between various regional bodies such as local institutions, schools and associations. At the European level, StartNet engages in debates and discussions on issues of youth inclusion and school guidance, to encourage open and bidirectional transfer of expertise, knowledge and good practices between both European and regional networks.

OVERALL PROJECT RELEVANCE

Various factors contributed to the design of highly relevant project activities and projects that aim to address the different context-based priorities and needs of StartNet's beneficiaries. Among these were a needs assessment (conducted in StartNet I), the inclusion of youth actors and deliberate consideration of their self-expressed needs, the diverse experience of partners across different sectors, multilevel networking and the flexibility and adaptability of project staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was confirmed by project partners and beneficiaries during the final evaluation process.

COHERENCE: *How well does the intervention fit?*

INTERNAL COHERENCE

StartNet II operates in continuity and coherence with long-established processes and partnerships. The original StartNet project was modelled on the footsteps of the "*Piazza Affari Tedesco* project, which was designed, implemented and funded by the Goethe Institut since 2013. The Project benefits from the Goethe Institut's longstanding experience in youth employment and school-to-work transition. From this point of view, it seems clear how the StartNet II project stands in continuity and coherence with a broader process that has been underway for a long time.

Despite complex structures and multilevel network operations, project activities at the regional and European levels **are mutually coherent and well-organised. Frequent exchanges of practices, perspectives, and actions among network members add value to the StartNet project.**

EXTERNAL COHERENCE

StartNet II is highly coherent with policies implemented in Italy and Europe to foster youth employment and school-to-work transition, thanks to its diverse network of stakeholders.

At the **regional level**, StartNet cooperates with the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research in Italy. In the regions of Apulia and Basilicata, it cooperates with the Department of Youth Policy and the Department of Education, Training and Labour, as well as regional administrative offices.

At the **European level**, StartNet is committed to Principle 4 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which actively supports youth employment, and the new European Skills Agenda, a five-year plan supporting individuals and businesses to develop, strengthen and innovate through upskilling. In addition, StartNet is an active member of the Alliance for Youth Apprenticeships and the European Coalition for Digital Skills and Jobs.

EFFECTIVENESS: *Is the intervention achieving its objectives?*

OVERALL PROJECT EFFECTIVENESS

The effectiveness of project interventions is assessed by measuring the degree of achievement of stated objectives and expected outcomes, according to the indicators defined in the Project's Logical Framework. This tool offers a comprehensive picture of achievements resulting from project actions within the 36-month duration of StartNet II. Output and outcome indicators were derived from monitoring data and then triangulated with qualitative data gathered during the final evaluation, thus returning a comprehensive picture of project achievements.

EFFICIENCY: *How well are resources being used?*

INTERNAL COORDINATION

Internal project coordination is facilitated through regular exchanges and weekly meetings involving members of the regional and European teams. The Project has increased in complexity and size since inception, and so a neutral entity comprised of two backbone offices located in Rome and Brussels (representing the regional and European networks, respectively) was created to manage network communication and coordinate its activities. The European-level backbone office in Brussels ensures that staff members of the regional backbone office in Rome are involved in strategic meetings held by European network members and vice versa. Although it is challenging to maintain efficient communication within such a heterogeneous network, most project partners and stakeholders expressed high satisfaction with several aspects of StartNet's communication system, according to data collected via surveys administered to project partners for a social network analysis (see Section 1.3).

HUMAN AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES

StartNet II receives grant funding from Stiftung Mercator. The majority of this funding was allocated to operational costs – primarily, to finance human resources for the two backbone offices – and to meetings and events. The number of international events requiring in-person attendance was limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in a surplus of funds for the European network. This made it possible to obtain a 12-month extension (without cost) from Stiftung Mercator. During this additional year the European network will have the opportunity to manage the new Erasmus+ projects and to realise some international events.

IMPACT: *What difference does the intervention make?*

To measure StartNet's impact on multidimensional well-being, the evaluator conducted semi-structured focus groups with project beneficiaries. This complies with the Evaluating Human Development (EHD) methodology (Biggeri and Ferrannini, 2014) that allows the evaluators to measure the degree of perceived change and/or benefit that beneficiaries attribute to StartNet Youth.

In the first part of the evaluation activity, participants were asked to identify the characteristics of an *ideal type* interested in joining the youth community (e.g. individual, social or regional characteristics). The evaluation activity, through a guided abstraction process, allows to compare, through the perceptions of the participants, the level of well-being of the identified *ideal type* both over time and in the case of participation or non-participation in the StartNet Youth community.

An initial comparison allowed **well-being subdimensions to be identified, defined and ordered** according to the degree of importance as perceived by participants:

- **Mental well-being** is the degree of self-confidence and self-esteem experienced in the absence of external pressures negatively influencing one's emotions.
- **Education and training** is both academic knowledge and technical competence (*hard skills*) and personal skills and personal competence (*soft skills*).
- **Political and social participation** is active participation in the political and social activities of the region.
- **Information** is defined as the degree of accessibility of information and updates.
- **Relational well-being** is the quality of interpersonal relationships, including satisfaction and fulfilment derived from those relationships.
- **Work** is having security and confidence in one's current and/or future job prospects.

Subsequently a discussion with participants allowed the evaluators to devise an analysis matrix to systematically collect responses shared during the semi-structured focus group discussions. The results show that in **all dimensions evaluated, the level of well-being of the ideal type included in StartNet Youth showed an increase compared to the actual initial situation and a hypothetical counterfactual situation**. More specifically, **relational well-being** is the subdimension with the greatest and most prevalent perceived effect (attributable to StartNet Youth).

SUSTAINABILITY: *Will the benefits last?*

PROJECT SUSTAINABILITY

Projects currently active in Italy, such as StartNet Youth, Building Futures and Or.Co., have already achieved a high degree of sustainability and independence, which ensures their continuation beyond StartNet II's completion. In addition, StartNet's European and regional networks obtained funding from the European Commission for four additional projects. As the duration of some of these projects will extend beyond May 2023, the projects will be managed by the Goethe Institut in the event that GINNlab ceases to exist.

NETWORK SUSTAINABILITY

The most critical issue affecting overall project sustainability is the sustainability of the regional and European networks. Heterogeneous networks such as these involve a plurality of actors and so require third-party coordination. Currently, the coordination of the regional backbone office in Rome is managed by GINNlab, **while the coordination of the European network is managed by the backbone office in Brussels**. However, neither can be guaranteed after the end of StartNet's funding period. **It is highly possible that various network partners will remain in contact and enter into bilateral or trilateral project agreements, but the systemic footprint of the networks will be lost without a coordinating body.**

OUTCOMES ACHIEVED ON BENEFICIARIES

The objective of the final evaluation is to identify which **competences** and **soft skills** are enhanced for beneficiaries as a result of their participation in project activities. Both project and evaluation staff agreed that the evaluation analysis should focus on two specific projects that engaged beneficiaries for a prolonged period of time in activities intended to enhance *soft skills*: training and learning-by-doing. The two projects evaluated are *Building Futures* and *StartNet Youth*.



Building Futures is a career-orientation education project targeting teachers and students in the Apulia region. It features the active support and participation of entrepreneurs and business and employment sector representatives.

The project is divided into two parts. **The first targets teachers, providing them with training to equip them with knowledge and tools to enhance their delivery of school-based career guidance. The second targets students and involves action-research, training them to respond to common challenges.**

TEACHERS (The sample includes five teachers who participated in Building Futures SY 2022/2023)

According to the teachers surveyed, Building Futures strengthened their soft skills by giving them new approaches to problem-solving and new tools for student orientation and to foster student aptitudes, desires and talents. It also improved their flexibility and ability to work in multidisciplinary teams, and they learned more about entrepreneurial activities in their region.

Overall, **Building Futures helped teachers to acquire new tools and methods for delivering school-based career orientation.**

The project training team was comprised of experts in the regional education and business sectors. This particularly benefited the teachers by increasing their teamwork skills and exposing them to entrepreneurial activities and opportunities in their region. This positive outcome resulted from the project team having deliberately cultivated close synergistic relationships with the business sector representatives who participated in the training.

STUDENTS (sample of 25 high school students involved in Building Futures SY 2022/2023)

The project delivered a positive result to student participants, who reported an improvement in all skills examined: self-esteem, communication skills, technical skills, cooperation and teamwork, autonomy in work management, and organisational skills. Despite this, not all the pupils have the same perceptions regarding the skills acquired; This can be explained by the fact that participants rated all competences proposed in the initial discussion phase, including those not directly proposed by them.

Specifically, the project was instrumental in helping students to acquire technical and teamwork skills. Technical skills relate to digital and IT skills, which students developed through the use of computers and digital platforms (e.g. learning to create PowerPoint presentations). Teamwork skills relates to collaborative skills (i.e. the ability to work together on a common project), which students developed by collaborating on assigned projects involving planning, implementation and delivery.

STARTNET YOUTH COMMUNITY (The evaluation sample includes 15 youths actively involved and participating in StartNet Youth community meetings and activities since October 2021)

A self-administered questionnaire was delivered to StartNet Youth community members, to collect data indicating how their competences and skills may have strengthened over time as a result of participating in StartNet Youth. The following *soft skills* were identified as likely to have been enhanced: networking, public speaking, mediation, team building, communication, problem and opportunity analysis, planning, exhibition, civic engagement and social responsibility, and self-reliance.

Results showed that each of the soft skills increased for at least one participant. The soft skill enhanced for most of the students was networking ability (86% of respondents).

Participation in the project gave youth community members the opportunity to join the StartNet network, which connects members with public and private bodies at regional, national and European levels, as well as with other youth organisations in Italy (e.g. ACLI, Europiamo, Lasagne Verdi, Ashoka and ESN).

The least-enhanced soft skill was **mediation** (7%; one respondent only). This may be because only some community members played the role of mediator at youth workshops or events co-organised by StartNet Youth.



StartNet Youth aims to create a community of young change-makers who are proactively involved in school-to-work transition. To achieve this, youth members are provided with opportunities to acquire and enhance skills for their own self-development, as well as to support other youths to generate change in their region (Apulia and Campania) and country.

1. INTRODUCTION

The main objective of the StartNet II project is to promote **youth employment** in areas with high youth unemployment rates. The project adopts a multilevel perspective to organise its actions at two levels: (i) the regional level (within Italy) and (ii) the European level. At the regional level, project activities target educational institutions, local businesses, representatives of the production sector and third sector in the Apulia and Basilicata regions of Italy. At the European level, the project promotes widespread networking activities and advocacy across Europe, by facilitating training sessions and exchange of good practices among members of its European Network (the complete list of network members is provided in APPENDIX II – PARTNERS INCLUDED IN STARTNET II NETWORK). Alongside these two networks, distinguished by geographical spread but closely interlinked, a further network was developed and fully included in the network, consisting of around 25 young people from Apulia and Campania, StartNet Youth.

The StartNet project is currently in its second round thanks to a second grant from Stiftung Mercator. This second round is referred to as StartNet II, in operation from June 2020 to May 2023. The project at European level received a non-burdensome extension and will end in May 2024, due to the availability of funds to cover another project year. This surplus of funds is due to the fact that during the pandemic the meetings and conferences were held online, lowering costs.

The grant funds provided by Stiftung Mercator were primarily invested in human resources dedicated to the support and coordination of project activities that promote youth employment and school-to-work orientation in targeted regions. A dedicated entity, the social enterprise GINNlab (StartNet Italian backbone in Rome), was created to implement StartNet II project **activities in Italy** in close cooperation with the Goethe-Institut. At the **European level**, StartNet II consolidated and expanded the activities implemented in the first round of the StartNet project, which involved establishing and consolidating a network in Europe, conducting capacity building processes for network members and promoting exchange of good practices among network members in order to fostering new projects among them.

To assess the results of the initiative, Stiftung Mercator commissioned ARCO to carry out the following:

- a **midterm evaluation**, to outline and evaluate StartNet II achievements for the period from between 2020 and September 2022, using the following criteria: relevance, coherence, efficiency and sustainability (OECD DAC, 2019).
- a **final evaluation**, to assess and define the project's achievements on conclusion (in May 2023), using the following criteria: relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability (OECD DAC, 2019). The evaluation analysis is based on data collected between April and May 2023, during which time ARCO carried out in-person and remote evaluation activities that involved beneficiaries, project staff and other relevant stakeholders.

This document summarises the main evaluation findings and is structured as follows: Section 2 describes the project, Section 3 shows the project Theory of Change, Section 4 introduces the evaluation framework (scope and objectives, methodology, tools and limitations), Section 5 summarises the evaluation findings divided in three sub-sections namely: i. OECD-DAC criteria, ii. Outcomes on beneficiaries and iii. Social Network analysis. Finally, Section 6 defines the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention; and Section 7 proposes recommendations and useful insights to guide the next stage of the project.

2. INTERVENTION DESCRIPTION

StartNet II is a three-year project (June 2020 -May 2023; extend to May 2024 for European Network) – that stands in continuity with StartNet intervention launched in 2017 – with the aim of **promoting youth employment and the inclusion of young people in the labour market and society**. More specifically, in accordance with the principles of its funders, Goethe-Institut and Stiftung Mercator¹, the project’s specific objectives are identified at two levels:

- At a regional level, promote youth employment in southern Italy.
- At a European level, create a network of local institutions and organisations to improve knowledge exchange related to school-to-work transition.

This **multilevel approach** aims to (i) link regional initiatives in different European countries; (ii) promote exchange of knowledge and skills to address socioeconomic phenomena such as youth unemployment; (iii) build bridges between education and employment sectors; and (iv) maintain and strengthen an open technical dialogue at the European level on the issue of school-to-work transition.

Within StartNet, an offshoot project referred to as StartNet Youth (SY), actively involves a group of 50 youths (14–26 years old) from different Italian regions, with the aim to reposition youths as actors of change and activity, co-creators rather than mere beneficiaries.

STARTNET II BENEFICIARIES

The intervention has a wide and heterogeneous range of **beneficiaries**, direct and indirect.




At the regional level, the project directly involves **teachers and youth** by successfully assisting them in school-to-work transition. It does this through actions of early orientation aimed at facilitating access to the labour market and by connecting them with local businesses. Regionally, StartNet projects are usually implemented in medium-small territories that share certain problems such as high youth unemployment, the presence of NEETs; widespread phenomena of school dropouts and educational poverty.

At the European level, the members of the European network benefit from **capacity building and knowledge exchange**.

The list of projects in which StartNet is involved with related descriptions is presented in the paragraph 2.2 “Project involving the StartNet network”.

STARTNET ITALY BENEFICIARIES

At regional level the project in the 36 months of implementation, in Apulia and Basilicata in the aggregate, managed to reach, either directly through projects or indirectly through project beneficiaries:

| | |
|--|-----------------|
|  | 15.000 Students |
|  | 600 Teachers |
|  | 1200 Families |

¹ Stiftung Mercator is a European foundation. It promotes understanding between people of different cultures, stands up for a united Europe and helps establish the social prerequisites for peaceful coexistence. More details at <https://www.stiftung-mercator.de>

2.1 INTERVENTION AREAS

StartNet operates on two distinct but interconnected levels:

- **StartNet Italy** involves schools, institutions, enterprises, youth aggregations and third sector organisations in the **Apulia** and **Basilicata** regions of Italy. The project team targeted the Apulia and Basilicata regions in southern Italy considering the capacity of regional administrative and political systems to be receptive and open to the resources investing and to applying innovative youth policies.
- **StartNet Europe** involves initiatives and organisations from sectors that transition youth from education to employment in Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Northern Macedonia, Romania, Spain and Switzerland.

A strength of StartNet is the inclusion of multiple states of the European Union and its neighbourhood. This allows members to learn from each other, exchange best practices and generate solutions for dealing with common problems. It also increases the project’s visibility and influence at the European level.

Figure 1. Member states of the StartNet II network

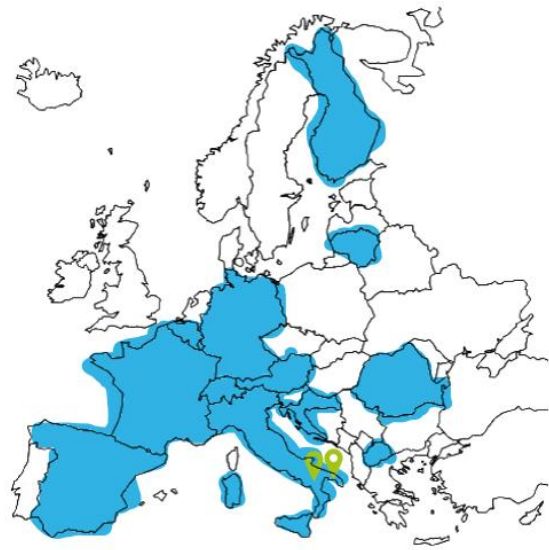


Table 1 Secondary Data on Unemployment rate and NEET Rate

| YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT RATE (aged 15–24), EUROSTAT 2022) ² | | | | | | | | | |
|---|-------|---------|-------|-------|-------|--------|------|------------|--------|
| EUROPE | 14.5% | GERMANY | 6.00% | ITALY | 23,7% | APULIA | 32 % | BASILICATA | 25,1 % |

| NEET RATE (aged 15–29) EUROSTAT, 2022) ³ | | | | | |
|---|-------|---------|------|-------|-------|
| EUROPE | 10.9% | GERMANY | 6.5% | ITALY | 24.4% |

² Youth unemployment data (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/yth_empl_110/default/table?lang=en)

³ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_08_20a/default/table?lang=en

2.2. PROJECTS INVOLVING THE STARTNET NETWORK

StartNet Network are involved in and promotes numerous projects both at European and regional level (in Italy) playing different roles.

As reported in Table 4 in in addition to the Goethe-Institut the main funders of StartNet projects are:

- **Impresa Sociale Con I Bambini**, a non-profit company that supports projects tackling educational poverty among children
- **Erasmus+ programme**, the EU programme that finances projects related to education, training, youth and sport in Europe
- **Regione Apulia** which has allocated resources from its budget and from the Puglia Regional Operational Programme (ROP) for StartNet II initiatives

Table 2 StartNet projects

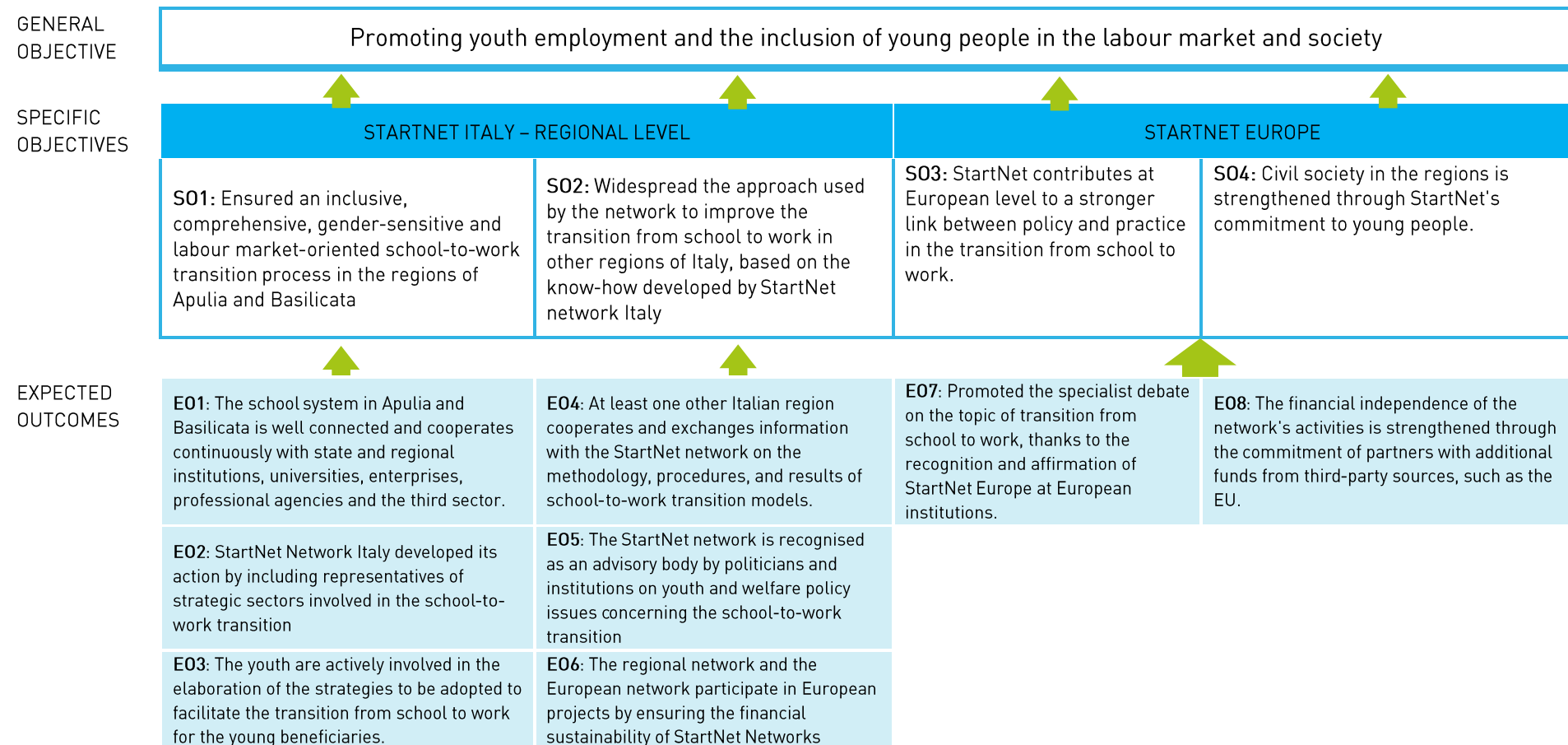
| PROJECT | DESCRIPTION | LOCATION OF INTERVENTION | FUNDER |
|---|---|--|---|
| Skills for life | The project aims to contribute to the preparedness of young people with the specific objective of training teachers, youth workers, guidance providers to impart Life Design Skills to young people. | Germany Italy Romania Belgium | Co-financed by the Erasmus+ programme and Goethe-Institut |
| Wake up your vocation | The project aims to reduce the gap between the education system and the current labour market by preparing young people in the development of their skills, employability, and career guidance. | Spain Italy Belgium Croazia | Co-financed by the Erasmus+ programme and Goethe-Institut |
| GO4 STEM | Go4STEM is a 15-stage laboratory in which students from lower and upper secondary schools solve technical and scientific questions, discovering their talents and interests and confronting innovative work and professional fields in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) subjects. | Apulia Basilicata | Goethe-Institut GOVET (German Office for International Cooperation in Vocational education and training) |
| BEFORE - un passo dal tuo futuro | The Project is an entirely online orientation project for students in the last year of secondary schools in Apulia. The project arose from the need to provide an orientation pathway during the closure of schools and distance | Apulia | Goethe-Institut Italien Regional Agency for Technology and Innovation ARTI |

| | | | |
|---|--|--|---|
| | learning, a period in which schools were unable to offer orientation didactics, nor to propose situations for approaching the world of work | | |
| Proactive training | Proactive Training is a project that promotes entrepreneurship education and creativeness at school, through a pathway of orientation, self-knowledge and aptitudes | Apulia | Apulia Regional Government Department of Education, Training and Labour |
| Or.co. Digitsys Orientamento consapevole e sistemico al tempo digitale | The project introduces empowerment processes, alongside schools, families, and the world of work, with a focus on young at risk of dropping out of school between the ages of 9 and 14, intervening in both school and out-of-school contexts | Apulia Basilicata | Social Enterprise Con i Bambini |
| Building Futures | Building futures is an ongoing orientation project in schools, created to guide teachers in the classroom, to help boys and girls build their future. The project operates combining teacher training, labour market analyses, surveys of student needs and the activation of regional teams specialised in orientation. | Apulia Basilicata | Stiftung Mercator Foundation Goethe-Institut Italien Apulia Regional Government |
| EduT- Educational training | The EduT project aims to prevent educational poverty and early school leaving. The project offers targeted and individual interventions for the prevention of early school leaving in schools in Trani and Bisceglie (Bari) | Apulia | Ministero per il Sud e la Coesione |
| PAFF- Parcours for Future | The European project aims to design, create and disseminate an orientation parcours in high schools for the skills of the future, both life design, digital and green | Italy Romania Macedonia Germany | Erasmus+ KA2 Strategic partnerships Cooperation in vocational education and training Co-funding by Goethe-Institut |
| Be2aty | The project aims to raise awareness among young people between 15 and 29 years of age on environmental issues, empowerment, orientation towards work, creating connections between them, youth participation in environmental issues | Egypt Italy | Erasmus+ KA2 Strategic partnerships Cooperation in vocational education and training |

3. THEORY OF CHANGE

Trough desk analysis of the project documentation, interviews with project managers and meeting, the evaluator has been able to reconstruct the StartNet II results chain during the midterm evaluation (see Figure below). This step has been fundamental to delve into project rationales, properly design the evaluation tools and finalize the evaluation strategy. The **results chain** is a tool which **summarises activities, expected results, specific objectives and general objectives** in a schematic way, in such a way to allow the identification of the activities which are expected to trigger positive changes. It describes what a given project does and how its intervention is supposed to **lead to the desired long-term changes**, by showcasing the single steps describing how each activity is expected to trigger short, medium and long-term changes.

Table 3 StartNet II Theory of Change



ACTIVITIES

| STARTNET ITALY – REGIONAL LEVEL | | STARTNET EUROPE | |
|--|---|---|---|
| Activities linked to Expected Outcomes 1 | Activities linked to Expected Outcomes 4 | Activities linked to Expected Outcomes 7 | Activities linked to Expected Outcomes 8 |
| <p>1.1 Exchange of good practice in cooperation with German-Italian cooperation on youth vocational training topics (BMBF/GOVET)</p> <p>1.2 Seminar/webinar for school and non-school staff (teachers, business tutors and facilitators) on the organisation and management of career guidance initiatives for students</p> <p>1.3 StartNet Camp-workshops for and with young people on career guidance in Apulia</p> <p>1.4 Participation and observation in work situations (exchange of good practices and job shadowing)</p> | <p>4.1 Implemented projects that have proved their worth so far are transformed into systemic measures that can be used to initiate further pilot projects elsewhere</p> | <p>7.1. Organization of workshops or field visits with members of the network for training and exchange of good practices.</p> <p>7.2. Consolidation of StartNet Europe Network</p> <p>7.3. Promotion and dissemination of the work carried out by the StartNet Europe network.</p> | <p>8.1. Implementation of a common Erasmus+ project or preparation of the application for further EU projects</p> <p>8.2. Constant monitoring, information, and advice on financing possibilities</p> |
| Activities linked to Expected Outcomes 2 | Activities linked to Expected Outcomes 5 | | |
| <p>2.1 Strategic extension of the StartNet network to: employment agencies, parents' representatives, the Regional Department of Tourism and Culture (Apulia), the Regional Department of Economic Development (Apulia) and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, the Department of Youth Policies, the National Agency for Young People.</p> <p>2.2. Specific training for the project team on network management, coordination and development</p> | <p>5.1 The partnership signed Memorandum of Understanding is consolidated into a sustainable structure (e.g. a foundation).</p> <p>5.2 The results of the network are the subject of thematic publications, guidelines and/or policy documents for use by national and European decision-making experts.</p> <p>5.3 Organisation of thematic conferences open to the network and the community.</p> | | |
| Activities linked to Expected Outcomes 3 | Activities linked to Expected Outcomes 6 | | |
| <p>3.1. Creation of a youth committee with its representation in the StartNet governance bodies</p> <p>3.2. Active involvement of youth committee in the co-design of strategies, actions, projects</p> <p>3.3. Elaboration of a Manifesto containing proactive proposals for the school-to-work transition drafted by young people themselves</p> | <p>6.1. StartNet Italy participates in an Erasmus+ project within the European network.</p> <p>6.2. Communication campaign aimed at disseminating StartNet's activities and results in the countries involved in the European network.</p> | | |

4. EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

4.1 PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The main purpose of the evaluation is to **assess how effectively the project StartNet II has reached its targets and objectives, investigating in depth the project network.**

The evaluation strategy proposed by ARCO aims at assessing:

- the degree of achievement of StartNet II **objectives and expected result** through the measurement of **Outcomes and Outputs indicators**.
- To identify the **main outcomes for beneficiaries of StartNet II** projects implemented in Apulia and Basilicata, as of April 2023.
- the project **compliance to the OECD-DAC criteria of development evaluation** (OECD, 2019), namely its relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, and impact.
- the potential of the project to be **modelled as good practice(s)**, highlighting the lessons learned and good practices as basis for decision making processes for scaling up, replication, diffusion and continuation of the actions supported through the project.
- To analyse the **strengths and weaknesses** of the intervention, elaborating a set of **lesson learned** to guide the continuation of the project.

The evaluation covers both Network: StartNet Europe and StartNet Italy. The **data** used in the final evaluation are **collected remotely**, using web-based software for online survey administration and web-conferencing (in April 2023) and **on field** during a visit of the evaluators in Apulia (3-7 April 2023).

4.2 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The methodology features three main strands of analysis designed to measure the following:

- Compliance of StartNet II with OECD DAC criteria** (OECD, 2019), by country and at the aggregate level, according to the following criteria:
 - **RELEVANCE**: the extent to which the project design and objectives **responded to the needs of the beneficiary target groups, considering** the priorities of regional and European partners and institutions, and whether they were still able to do so given the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - **COHERENCE**: the extent to which **StartNet II activities were coherent with one another** and with those of the first funding phase of the project (*internal coherence*) and the extent to which **the project complemented and coordinated**
 - **EFFECTIVENESS**: the extent to which the intervention achieved its objectives and its results, including any differential results across groups
 - **EFFICENCY** the extent to which the project delivered or is likely to deliver results in an **economic and timely manner** and by optimising the financial and human resources available.
 - **SUSTAINABILITY**: the extent to which the net benefits of the project continue or are likely to continue long term after conclusion. This involves evaluating efforts made to **produce learning outputs through project activities** (academic publications, reports, communication materials, policy recommendations, etc.).
 - **IMPACT**: The extent to which the intervention has generated or is expected to generate significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, higher-level effects
- The impact of StartNet II efforts to strengthen and consolidate the stakeholder network** involving education, employment, and third sector actors at both the regional and European levels by means of a **Social Network Analysis**. Through this method, ARCO will also assess the creation of a relevant and

fruitful dialogue between the experts of the regional education networks, and the ability of StartNet Europe to act as a learning platform on the topic of school-to-work transition.

- C. The potential of StartNet II activities to be **modelled as good practices** that are scalable and/or replicable in other contexts or projects. StartNet Youth is presented as a potential model for youth participation in school-to-work transition replicable in Italy and Europe.

4.3 EVALUATION TOOLS

The evaluator, ARCO, applied a **mixed method approach** to design reliable indicators for assessment. The data collection tools that were used included *structured tools* for standardised application and *unstructured tools* based on participant observation and in-depth analysis of multiple perspectives.

Table 4: Evaluation Tools

| METHOD | TOOL |
|--|---|
| ANALYSIS OF SECONDARY DATA | <p>Desk review of project’s documentation, reports and other relevant M&E data produced during StartNet II (and its previous funding phase StartNet I).</p> <p>Desk research of relevant national and regional statistics and literature to improve the understanding of the project background and contexts of intervention. (Main topics of interest: education, youth employment, social inclusion)</p> <p>STRANDS OF ANALYSIS: A. Compliance the OECD-DAC criteria (relevance, coherence, efficiency); C. Identification of good practices.</p> |
| <p>10 KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KII) WITH RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS</p> <p>(Conducted online and on field)</p> | <p>n. 9 KII with project leader, managing team, and key stakeholders from StartNet Europe & StartNet Italy</p> <p>STRANDS OF ANALYSIS: A. Compliance the OECD-DAC criteria (relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact, sustainability); B. Social Network Analysis; C. Identification of good practices.</p> <p>n. 2 individual KII with members of StartNet Youth to evaluate in a participatory way the model of youth activism that has been promoted and its potential for scalability.</p> <p>STRANDS OF ANALYSIS: A. Compliance the OECD-DAC criteria (relevance, coherence, effectiveness, sustainability); C. Identification of good practices.</p> |
| <p>YOUTH EVALUATION SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE</p> <p>(StartNet Italy)</p> | <p>Web-Based Survey Questionnaire (CAWI) addressed to StartNet Youth’s active members to investigate the impact of StartNet Youth on the skills acquired and enhanced through the network pathway</p> <p>The survey will be submitted to Beneficiaries of StartNet Youth which have participated to all the core activities of the community since October 2021.</p> <p>STRANDS OF ANALYSIS: A. Compliance the OECD-DAC criteria (relevance, effectiveness, impact, sustainability); C. Identification of good practices.</p> |
| <p>4 Focus Group Discussion</p> <p>(Conducted on field in Apulia)</p> | <p>N4 Structured focus group discussions with beneficiaries of StartNet Italy project, to take into consideration the perceptions of beneficiaries (students and teachers) of the changes produced by StartNet Italy. The focus group is also intended to actively involve beneficiaries in the evaluation process, ensuring that their perspective is central to the analysis and allowing greater ownership of its results.</p> <p>We carried out 4 FG with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - N. 1 with 10-12 beneficiaries of StartNet Youth - N. 2 with 10-12 beneficiaries of Building Futures (students) - N. 1 with 10-12 beneficiaries of Building Futures (teachers) |

| METHOD | TOOL |
|---|---|
| | <p>In the Focus Group with the beneficiaries of StartNet Youth the evaluators applied the already tested EHD methodology⁴ (Biggeri and Ferrannini, 2014) to investigate the stakeholders’ perceptions of the changes triggered by the project on the dimensions of interest. By creating a “perceived counterfactual”, it will be possible to compare their situation “before” and “after” the intervention of StartNet II.</p> <p>STRANDS OF ANALYSIS: A. Compliance the OECD-DAC criteria (relevance, effectiveness, impact, sustainability); C. Identification of good practices.</p> |
| <p>1 SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE- SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS</p> | <p>Web-Based Survey Questionnaire (CAWI), administered to all project partner and to key project stakeholders, to assess the impact of the project on the network of stakeholders of the education/work sector, at regional and European level, available in English and Italian.</p> <p>The Social Network Analysis will assess the expansion and strengthening of the connections between these actors, as well as the creation of a relevant and fruitful dialogue between their experts, and the ability of StartNet Europe to act as a learning platform on the topic of school-to-work transition.</p> <p>STRANDS OF ANALYSIS: A. Compliance the OECD-DAC criteria (impact, sustainability); B. Social Network Analysis; C. Identification of good practices.</p> |

⁴ This innovative participatory method allows recreating a “perceived counterfactual” starting from the perceptions of the very respondents. It aims at measuring the impact of the project on the dimensions of interest, by considering the degree of change that *they* ascribe to the project intervention. By means of a specific structured focus group method, the participants will be asked to **compare their current situation with what they believe would have happened had they never received the support of the project**. The qualitative output of such method will effectively integrate the quantitative analysis of the survey data. What is more, this method allows participants to propose **additional dimensions they deem relevant to the project’s approach**, based on their own experience and needs. This flexibility will help the evaluator identifying the emerging themes (expected and unexpected), which are to be explored in more depth.

5. EVALUATION FINDINGS

This section presents the main results of the final evaluation, obtained from the **triangulation** of data collected through (i) **individual interviews** with project staff and relevant stakeholders, (ii) **self-administered questionnaires** presented to students and teachers, (iii) **participatory evaluation activities** involving beneficiaries and (iii) **desk and secondary data analysis**.

The evaluation results are divided into three sections:

- I. The first illustrates the main findings of the final evaluation for each **OECD DAC criteria**: relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact.
- II. The second presents the **outcomes of two StartNet projects, Building Futures and StartNet Youth**, on their respective **beneficiaries**.
- III. The third presents the results of the **social network analysis**.

5.1 OECD DAC CRITERIA ASSESSMENT

5.1.1 Relevance

The following section discusses StartNet’s relevance, defined as ‘*the extent to which project activities have responded to needs relevant to the context, the target groups and the territory*’ (OECD DAC, 2019).

PROJECT RELEVANCE

The StartNet project aims to reduce **inequalities between European countries** by promoting exchange of good practices and by creating common practices at the European level that can be scaled-up at the regional level. **Youth unemployment and youth inactivity rates vary across Europe** and reflect macroeconomic situations within member states, as well as the structural organisation of **school-to-work transition** within each. In 2022, the lowest rate was observed in Germany (6%), while one of the highest rates was recorded in Italy (23.7%).

At the **regional level, Italy** has one of the **highest youth unemployment rates in Europe**, with the highest number of inactive youths neither in education, employment or training (NEET). In 2022, one in four youths (aged 15–29) was classified as NEET, totalling more than three million inactive youths (ISTAT, 2022⁵).

Moreover, StartNet **targets southern Italy**, where the problem of youth unemployment is particularly severe – the overall youth unemployment rate in Italy is 23.7%, whereas the rate in the southern Italy is 37% (ISTAT, 2022⁶) – and the mismatch between labour supply and demand persists due to communication barriers between schools and local enterprises⁷, which reduces opportunities for school leavers to be employed in their home region.

To address these challenges, StartNet II aims to achieve the following:

- at **regional level, promote connections between schools and regional actors**, to support coordination and exchange between various regional entities such as local institutions, schools and associations.

⁵ http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCCV_TAXDISOCCU1

⁶ http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCCV_TAXDISOCCU1

⁷ Source: semi-structured interviews with StartNet staff, USR Basilicata and Confindustria Bari referent.

- at **European level, engage in debates** and discussions on issues of youth inclusion and school-based career guidance, to establish a bidirectional channel for the exchange and transfer of knowledge and **good practices between the European and regional levels.**

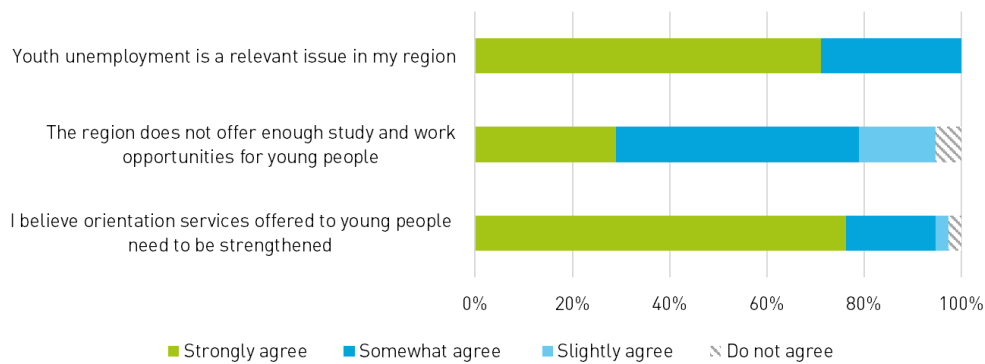
“ [StartNet]... addresses the need for networking between the business, ETS [and] education sectors, to improve and ensure educational success, school and work orientation and the futures of young people. ”

USR Basilicata, final evaluation key informant interview

INTERVENTION RELEVANCE FOR THE BENEFICIARIES OF STARTNET ITALY

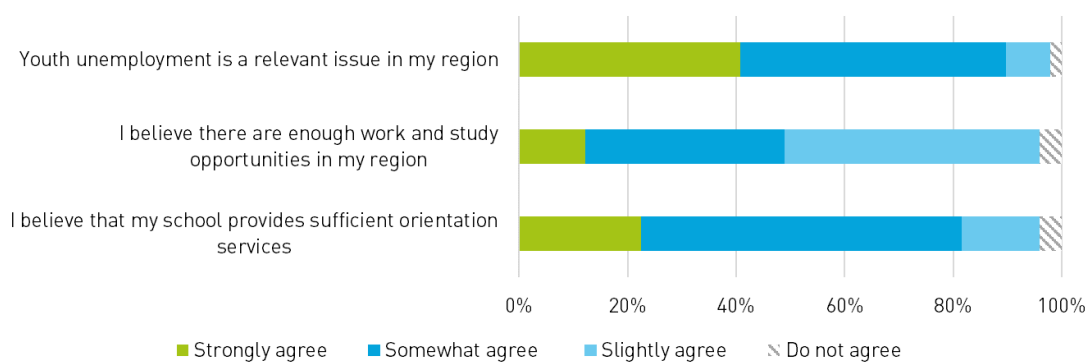
During the mid-term evaluation, to further investigate whether beneficiaries consider StartNet relevant to their context, a **questionnaire was administered** to two types of respondents: (i) students who participated in the Proactive Training programme in the 2021—2022 academic year and (ii) teachers who participated in the Building Futures training programme during the 2021—2022 academic year. The questionnaire responses showed that project objectives were considered **relevant by the majority of the surveyed beneficiaries.**

Figure 2. Issues identified by students who participated in Proactive Training (School Year 2021-2022)



Source: questionnaire administered to student beneficiaries (n=49) during the mid-term evaluation

Figure 3. Issues identified by teachers who participated in Building Futures (School Year 2021-2022)



Source: questionnaire administered to teacher beneficiaries (n=38) during the mid-term evaluation

During the **final evaluation**, two additional needs were identified as requiring further attention:

- i) **Promote youth leadership and participation:** StartNet responded to StartNet Youth community members' need to be heard and to feel included, giving them tools to become proactive change-makers and including them in the network's decision-making processes at both the regional and European levels. Those members responded in turn to the shared need of others in the youth population to feel included and proactive, by organising and leading events and workshops, in a peer-to-peer informal education model.
- ii) **Promote interventions that benefit youth NEETs and reduce student attrition:** StartNet II originally intended to include youth NEETs among the direct beneficiaries of its outreach activities. However, due to the volatility of the target group and the expertise required to implement such activities, this target population was not reached prior to the mid-term evaluation. Since June 2022, however, the network has presented three projects targeting NEETs and aimed at reducing student attrition, one of which is already financed by the *Ministero per il Sud*.

Various factors contributed to the design of highly relevant projects that addressed the different context-based priorities and primary needs of StartNet beneficiaries. Among these were a needs assessment (conducted in StartNet I), the inclusion of youth actors and deliberate consideration of their self-expressed needs, the diverse experience of partners across different sectors, multilevel networking and the flexibility and adaptability of project staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was confirmed by project partners and beneficiaries in the final evaluation process.

IN-DEEP BOX: STARTNET DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The StartNet II project launched in June 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite lockdowns and public health measures introduced by European authorities in response to the pandemic, StartNet project staff were able to **redesign and adapt project activities** to meet the existing and emerging needs of regional and European partners, stakeholders and beneficiaries, **so that no project activities were cancelled**.

At the regional level, parents and caregivers struggled to manage the simultaneous demands of remote working, parenting and support provision during DAD [Didattica a Distanza]. This generated significant psychological and emotional strain on families. In response, StartNet II established a **free virtual listening desk**, to provide families with access to family psychologists and therapists. The need for such action was anticipated and accounted for in StartNet's initial framework, which was then remodelled and promptly launched in response to the overwhelming need for support expressed by families.

At the European level, StartNet II conducted training courses online that focused on how best to respond to challenges arising from the pandemic, such as an increase in youth unemployment and NEET rates, and how to improve social inclusion. In the early stages of the pandemic, special attention was given during network meetings to maintaining contact between network partners serving the most vulnerable groups and how to promote the digitisation of activities and services.

5.1.2 Coherence

This section presents the coherence of project actions, defined as *'the extent to which project activities fit coherently with other interventions carried out by the same organization (internal coherence) or by other organizations and institutions (external coherence)'* (OECD DAC, 2019).

INTERNAL COHERENCE

StartNet was created in the footsteps of the "Piazza Affari Tedesco" project, designed, implemented, and funded by the **Goethe-Institut** since 2013. The project is targeted at high school students with the goal of introducing youths to the employment sector, by establishing cooperative relationships and mutual partnerships between schools and local enterprises. The project benefits from the **well-established experience of the Goethe Institut**, and in particular the Rome and Brussels office, in promoting youth employment and facilitating transition from educational systems to labour markets. It is apparent that **StartNet II operates in continuity and coherence with a broader process long underway.**

Despite complex structures and multilevel network division, **StartNet activities at the regional and European levels are mutually coherent and well-organised**, with frequent exchanges of practices, perspectives and actions among network members adding value to the project. The Project adopted a **collective impact approach** to help facilitate a multidirectional model of relationship connecting its network members and stakeholders across and between regional and European levels. This approach improves collaboration among the various partners, enhancing their ability to address the complex social issues of youth unemployment and school-to-work transition in Europe.

The StartNet networks operating in Italy and Europe function in accordance with these **five principles of collective impact**:

1. All stakeholders are engaged in a shared agenda.
2. There is regular coordination and communication between partners.
3. There is agreement on monitoring methods and outcome indicators.
4. There is mutual and reciprocal support offered between partners for their activities, including between network levels.
5. An independent entity is assigned to coordinate network communication and actions. This independent entity is comprised of two operational teams (referred to as backbone offices), located in the Goethe Institut offices in Brussels and Rome, whose role is to coordinate, organise and implement the activities of network partners.

However, **the transparency, visibility and accountability of StartNet would be enhanced by streamlining structures and clearly defining members' tasks, responsibilities and competences.** A theory of change was formalised and validated in cooperation with network partners during the mid-term evaluation, to refine the project structure to make it clear, transparent and communicable to outside parties.

In accordance with Principle 3 of Collective Impact, to increase transparency and valorise the project's achievements for the next phase or a new project, it is necessary to develop an internal monitoring and evaluation system capable of valorising systemic impact. To this end, monitoring responsibilities could either be assigned to specific team members, or a separate role could be created for this purpose.

COHERENCE OF PROJECT ACTIONS

Despite the two levels of action, the project actions are coherent and interlinked.

The common thread is the **continuous exchange of knowledge** and **good practices** between the European and regional networks, which collaborate to address the complex yet homogenous challenges related to youth unemployment.

StartNet capitalises on the plurality of expertise, experiences and cultural and regional differences that its diverse network of stakeholders brings and that makes it possible to understand, analyse and collaborate to address youth unemployment.

Theoretical knowledge gained at the European level is used to inform practices and activities enacted at the regional level. Subsequently, the knowledge gained from practical application and experience is shared in turn at the European level. This creates a continuous flow of information-sharing that disseminates knowledge and invigorates debate on youth inclusion in Europe more broadly.

“ [StartNet] is policy and practice. It is knowledge and impact. It is the knowing and the doing. ”

Jan Wilker, project manager, Europe

EXTERNAL COHERENCE WITH INSTITUTIONS AND OTHER ORGANISATIONS

StartNet is based on a cooperative agreement between two European member states: **Germany and Italy**. The collaboration began in 2012 with the signing of a **memorandum on apprenticeships** aimed at developing and monitoring the implementation of concrete projects that foster youth employment.

At the **regional level**, StartNet cooperates with the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research in Italy. In Apulia and Basilicata, it cooperates with the Department of Youth Policy and the Department of Education, Training and Labour, as well as regional administrative offices (see Appendix 2 for a complete list of partners). Collaboration enables partners to respond more effectively to the real needs of students and school leavers, and it provides access to necessary funding that guarantees continuity for project activities currently underway in both regions. In addition, close cooperation with established enterprises mitigates incongruities between the education and employment sectors. Finally, the involvement of local third sector organisations and social service providers is crucial to implementing an effective strategy to address student attrition and the NEET phenomenon.⁸

At the European level, StartNet is committed to Principle 4 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which supports youth employment, and to the new European Skills Agenda, a five-year plan that supports individuals and businesses to develop, strengthen and innovate through upskilling. In addition, StartNet is an active member of the Alliance for Youth Apprenticeships and the European Coalition for Digital Skills and Jobs.

⁸ Source: StartNet II project manager in Italy.

IN-DEEP BOX: STARTNET ITALY AND PNRR OPPORTUNITIES

In 2021, the European Commission endorsed the Italian government’s strategy for economic recovery and resilience, Italia Domani – the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), as part of Next Generation EU, a European economic recovery project. The PNRR features targeted interventions across six policy areas, with substantial investment and reforms intended to trigger robust, sustainable and inclusive economic growth for Italy’s future.

The PNRR includes interventions impacting education:

- **11 lines of investment** targeting digital technology and infrastructure, digital training and distance learning systems, to increase the accessibility and efficiency of schools and the education system.
- **Six strategic reforms** that impact education through targeted reorganisation of the education system, staff training, recruitment procedures, **career-guidance and orientation**, and reorganisation of technical and professional institutes and higher technical institutes. The aim is to reposition education at the centre of the country’s growth, **fully integrating it in line with European standards**.

The objectives of the PNRR align with those of StartNet in many ways. Issues relating to career guidance and training are central to regional projects, and the European network links these projects to other European or regional education bodies involved in StartNet II. To seize this opportunity for funding and outreach, StartNet Italy contacted 650 schools in Apulia and Basilicata to offer ad hoc packages proposing possible projects and collaboration in fund management. Despite strong interest in the proposals devised by USR Basilicata (less so in Apulia), no agreements have been signed.

The final evaluation revealed potential factors for this lack of result: e-mail may have been an ineffective tool for communication with schools, and the timing and lack of clarity of the call made it difficult for schools to act swiftly or devise timely funding plans.

5.1.3 Effectiveness

This section addresses the effectiveness of project actions, defined as ‘*The extent to which the intervention achieved its objectives and its results, including any differential results across groups (OECD DAC, 2019)*’.

The analysis of the effectiveness of StartNet is guided by an assessment of the **degree of achievement of objectives and expected outcomes**, measured through a set of indicators defined in the Logical Framework. This tool returns a comprehensive picture of achievements attained throughout the 36-month project duration.

As a result of the mid-term evaluation, which led to a revision of the theory of change, **output and outcome indicators of achievement were redefined by StartNet staff and the evaluators**. In agreement with StartNet’s primary funder, Stiftung Mercator, no precise targets were set for the indicators during StartNet’s inception phase. By the time the mid-term evaluation was conducted, project activities had commenced and were too far advanced to set estimated targets. **Therefore, the tables below present targets reached for each outcome and output indicator for every expected result.**

These output and outcome indicators were derived from the **monitoring data and then triangulated with qualitative data** gathered from the final evaluation, returning a comprehensive picture of StartNet’s achievements.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES 1. Relevant at the regional level (StartNet Italy)

The school system in Apulia and Basilicata is well connected and cooperates continuously with state and regional institutions, universities, enterprises, professional agencies and the third sector.

StartNet II served as a bridge between education, employment and third sector entities. It implemented a systemic approach to bolstering the education system and encouraged dialogue and cooperation between various sector representatives and actors, to better facilitate school-to-work transitions in these regions.

StartNet network partnerships are based on the Memorandum of Understanding and co-design agreements and require signed partnership agreements for specific projects. In the second phase of StartNet II, local authorities and associations, especially those closely involved in youth representation, approached project representatives regarding collaboration on events, workshops and potential projects, thus forming an informal network with the potential for expansion or formalisation in StartNet’s third phase.

During the final evaluation, some project stakeholders **highlighted some critical issues and made suggestions for possible developments for the network**, while recognising the positive changes already triggered by StartNet. For example, in Apulia, dialogue with schools proved complicated, with many schools remaining unresponsive or unreceptive to StartNet projects. Conversely, the regional school office of Basilicata, the only regional institution in the network, is highly active: approximately 50 of 115 schools participate in at least one StartNet project. However, regional institutions and third sector entities remain unengaged.

Notably, StartNet stakeholders emphasised in the final evaluation that network membership offers **public and private sector members** the following: (i) exposure to innovative practices arising from exchanges with a plurality of heterogeneous actors working on similar issues, (ii) updated knowledge and project opportunities relating to youth orientation and inclusion and (iii) increased capacity to manage national and European projects.

Table 5. Outcomes and outputs indicators related to Expected Outcome 1

| Task | Specific activity | Level of result | Indicator | Achieved result |
|------|---|-----------------|---|-----------------|
| EO 1 | The school system in Apulia and Basilicata is well connected and cooperates continuously with state and regional institutions, universities, enterprises, professional agencies and the third sector. | Outcome | N. of organisations cooperating continuously with the regional network (state and regional institutions, universities, companies, professional agencies and the third sector) | 52 |
| | | Outcome | % of local schools involved in the StartNet ⁹ | 10% |
| 1.1 | Exchange of good practices in cooperation with German-Italian cooperation on youth vocational training topics (BMBF/GOVET) | Output | N. Events (workshops, meetings) for the exchange of good German-Italian practices | 4 |
| | | Output | N. Focus groups in which the Italian and German network was involved | 2 |
| | | Output | N. Study trips of Stakeholders realised | 2 |
| | | Output | N. Publication on good practices in German-Italian cooperation in the field of youth vocational training | 1 |
| 1.2 | Seminar/webinar for school and non-school staff (teachers, business tutors and facilitators) about the organisation and management of career guidance initiatives for students | Output | N. Seminars/workshops for teachers on career guidance | 5 |
| | | Output | N. Training hours addressed to teachers on school-work orientation | 62 |
| | | Output | N. Teachers directly involved in the StartNet project | 600 |

⁹ % calculated on the total number of schools in Apulia and Basilicata.

| Task | Specific activity | Level of result | Indicator | Achieved result |
|------|--|-----------------|--|-----------------|
| 1.3 | StartNet Camp- workshops on career guidance in Apulia organised for and with young people | Output | N. StartNet presides over vocational training fairs in Italy, (Didacta in Florence, Orientamenti in Genoa, Job Orienta in Verona and the Fiera del Levante in Bari). | 4 |
| | | Output | N. StartNet Camps realised | 1 |
| | | Output | N. Beneficiaries participating in StartNet Camp | 136 |
| 1.4 | Participation and observations on job situations (exchange of good practices and Alternanza DAY school-business) | Output | N. Students involved in school-business alternance day activities | 50 |
| | | Output | N. PCTO activated Uni Foggia, Chamber of Commerce Foggia and StartNet Youth | 1 |

EXPECTED OUTCOMES 2. Relevant at the regional level (StartNet Italy)

The StartNet network developed and strengthened by including representatives of strategic sectors involved in the school-to-work transition.

Despite its intention and focus on school-to-work transition, StartNet does **not yet include employment agencies** or representatives from the emerging environmental and sustainable economy sectors. Therefore, there is potential for the network to grow through regional expansion and by involving new network partners with different expertise.

Table 6. Outcomes and outputs indicators related to Expected Outcome 2

| Task | Specific activity | Level of result | Indicator | Achieved result |
|------|---|-----------------|---|-----------------|
| EO 2 | The StartNet network developed and strengthened by including representatives of strategic sectors involved in the school-to-work transition | Outcome | Type of sectors/areas involved in the network in order to create a network with transversal competences | 3 |
| | | Outcome | Projects proposed by the network that include the collaboration of organisations operating in up to three different sectors | 6 |
| 2.1 | Strategic extension of the StartNet network ¹⁰ | Output | N. Employment agencies included in the StartNet network | 0 |
| | | Output | N of new collaborations and partnerships outside the Memorandum of Understanding | 6 |
| 2.2 | Specific training for the project team on network management, coordination and development | Output | Training cycles in favour of team members. | 11 |
| | | Outcome | Completed training cycles | 9 |

EXPECTED OUTCOMES 3. Relevant at the regional level (StartNet Italy)

Youth in the area are actively involved in the development of strategies to foster the transition of school-to-work.

¹⁰ Strategic extension to: employment agencies, parents' representatives, the Regional Department of Tourism and Culture (Apulia), the Regional Department of Economic Development (Apulia) and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Department of Youth Policy, National Youth Agency.

The StartNet Youth committee group includes **50 youths aged 15—29 from two regions in southern Italy: Apulia and Campania**. The youth community espouses actively listening to youths and encourages their proactive engagement in youth issues, repositioning them as change-makers rather than mere beneficiaries.

StartNet Youth acts with and for beneficiaries in the region of southern Italy, to build knowledge and expertise that can contribute to the creation of education, training and employment opportunities. A network that connects youths with public and private bodies and institutions fosters the civic commitment and responsibility necessary for the realisation of positive social action. Youth community members are actively involved in projects as mediators or facilitators, with more experienced members sharing their knowledge with peers.

“ Results definitely achieved! All the work done for StartNet Youth led to this. It was a complicated process that took place more in the second phase (during StartNet II) and was triggered because it was strongly desired. The youth network structured itself well and is considered a positive experience at national level also.

Gianpietro Losapio, NOVA consortium partner member”

Table 7. Outcomes and outputs indicators related to Expected Outcome 3

| Task | Specific activity | Level of result | Indicator | Achieved result |
|------|---|-----------------|---|-----------------|
| EO 3 | Youth in the area are actively involved in the development of strategies to foster the transition of school-to-work | Outcome | N. of institutional and non-institutional meetings/meetings attended by youth committee representatives | 30 |
| | | Outcome | % of StartNet Youth participants who actively participated in strategy and policy development | 80% |
| 3.1 | Establishment of a youth committee with its own representation in the StartNet governance bodies | Output | N. youth committee created | 1 |
| | | Output | N.. members form the youth committee | 50 |
| | | Output | % of total StartNet open meetings attended by the committee or its representative | 100% |
| | | Output | N. of transformative camps implemented | 3 |
| | | Output | N of young people participating in Transformative Camps (divided between the two camps realised) | 72 |
| 3.2 | Active involvement in the co-design of strategies, actions, projects of youth committee | Output | N of projects co-designed with the youth committee | 10 |
| | | Output | N of StartNet projects in which the youth committee has an active role (transfer of expertise and experience) | 5 |
| | | Output | N of other youth organisations/associations that got in touch with the StartNet Youth network | 40 |
| 3.3 | Elaboration of a Manifesto with proactive proposals for the school-to-work transition drafted by youth committee | Output | N. manifesto on school-to-work transition elaborated | 1 |
| | | Output | N. of manifesto dissemination events realised | 11 |
| | | Output | N of meetings realised among StartNet Youth to formulated the proposals to be included in the manifesto | 5 |

EXPECTED OUTCOMES 4. Relevant at the regional level (StartNet Italy)

At least one other Italian region cooperates and exchanges information with the StartNet network on the objectives, methodology, procedures, and results of school-to-work transition measures.

StartNet II initially planned to expand its network to other regions during its second phase. **Although this expansion has not been formalised, the regional network actively cooperates with the following regions in Italy:** Campania, which is interested in launching projects on school-to-work transition and replicating the StartNet Youth community; Emilia-Romagna, which is considering collaboration with StartNet; and Liguria, which has recently concluded a European project, Skills for Life, and is now actively collaborating with StartNet.

Evidently, StartNet II and its offshoot youth community have attracted the interest of potential partners from other regions, but regional expansion of the network is still in its infancy.

StartNet is currently drafting toolkits containing best practices and measures that were adopted by its successful projects, to allow for scalability and inspire new applicants in other regions, thus helping to ensure the sustainability of active StartNet projects. These tools were implemented by StartNet in cooperation with other entities for the following projects: Skills for Life, Or.Co., Proactive Training, Alternanza Day, Go4Stem, and Start a Youth Community (StartNet Youth).

Table 8. Outcomes and outputs indicators related to Expected Outcome 4

| Task | Specific activity | Level of result | Indicator | Achieved result |
|------|--|-----------------|---|-----------------|
| EO 4 | At least one other Italian region cooperates and exchanges information with the StartNet network on the objectives, methodology, procedures and results of school-to-work transition measures. | Outcome | N. of other Italian regions that have had exchanges or started collaborations with the StartNet network | 3 |
| 4.1 | A4.1 Projects that have proved their effectiveness to date will be transformed into systemic measures and further pilot projects will be developed | Output | N of projects transformed into systemic-good practice measures | 6 |

EXPECTED OUTCOMES 5. Relevant at the regional level (StartNet Italy)

The network is recognised and involved by politicians, institutions and experts as an advisory body for policies concerning school-to-work transition.

StartNet created a network of expertise with the potential to **serve as an advisory body to influence policymaking on school-to-work transition**. Although StartNet II has participated in 10 technical tables and/or strategy meetings involving politicians and relevant institutions and experts, **its advisory potential at regional level is not yet fully exploited**. If this is to be pursued in future phases, StartNet should co-create an action strategy with the Scientific Technical Committee, for support and guidance. To generate effective systemic change in respect to school-to-work transition, it is necessary to maintain the network's appeal and communicate its relevance and influence to the general public, reserving enough resources for advocacy activities.

Table 9. Outcomes and outputs indicators related to Expected Outcome 5

| Task | Specific activity | Level of result | Indicator | Achieved result |
|------|---|-----------------|---|-----------------|
| EO 5 | The network is recognised and involved by politicians, institutions and experts as an advisory body for policies concerning school-to-work transition | Outcome | N of technical committees or strategy meetings involving StartNet network by politicians, institutions, experts or other networks | 10 |
| | | Outcome | N of calls and consortia where the StartNet network was involved as a provider of expertise and know-how | 7 |
| 5.1 | The partnership signed Memorandum of Understanding is consolidated into a sustainable structure (e.g. a foundation). | Output | N of institutions included in the network | 52 |
| | | Output | N of institutions having frequent collaborations with the StartNet network | 26 |
| | | Output | Opening of a regional office in Bari | 1 |
| | | Output | No. of potential new funding bodies contacted | 30 |
| 5.2 | The results of the network are the subject of thematic publications, guidelines and/or policy documents for use by national and European decision-making experts. | Output | No. of monthly meetings involving the regional network | 30 |
| | | Output | N of thematic publications, guidelines, policy documents realised | 4 |
| | | Output | N of events to present StartNet Italy's achievements | 8 |
| 5.3 | Organisation of thematic conferences open to the network and the community. | Output | N of thematic conferences organised | 2 |
| | | Output | N of participants in thematic conferences (average participation) | 95 |

EXPECTED OUTCOMES 6. Relevant at the regional level (StartNet Italy)

The regional network and the European network access other (European and national) funds, consolidating the financial condition.

In the second phase of StartNet II (June 2022—May 2023), **the network succeeded in presenting and obtaining funding for three new European projects.** This enables it to (i) continue to realise project activities even after the cessation of funding from Stiftung Mercator, (ii) strengthen support to network members involved in project activities and (iii) expand the range of activities for beneficiaries and regional partners.

In combination with other institutional and regional funding, this equated to an additional 4.2 million euros sourced during StartNet II's 36-month duration, more than doubling StartNet's initial budget of 3.5 million euros provided by Stiftung Mercator. Despite this considerable achievement, the financial resources available for StartNet's network are insufficient to cover the human resources of the two backbones moving forward.

Table 10. Outcomes and outputs indicators related to Expected Outcome 6

| Task | Specific activity | Level of result | Indicator | Achieved result |
|------|--|-----------------|--|-----------------|
| EO 6 | The regional network and the European network access other | Outcome | N of European projects in which StartNet Italy is involved | 3 |

| | | | | |
|-----|--|---------|--|------|
| | (European and national) funds, consolidating the financial condition. | Outcome | Additional % of funds received post-Mercator funding from other institutions on the initial budget | 120% |
| | | Outcome | N of projects financed by regional institutions | 4 |
| 6.1 | StartNet Italia is involved in an Erasmus+ project within the European network. | Output | N of Erasmus + projects submitted in partnership with the network | 3 |
| | | Output | N of meetings/exchanges with other European network members for new Erasmus + projects | 20 |
| | | Output | N of StartNet projects funded by Erasmus + active in the Italian territory | 2 |
| 6.2 | Communication campaign aimed at disseminating StartNet's activities and achievements in the countries involved in the European network | Output | N of dissemination events realised | 30 |
| | | Output | N of communication posts disseminated in Italy and abroad | 1100 |
| | | Output | N of European meetings attended by a representative of the regional network | 7 |
| | | Output | No. of countries involved in the dissemination of communication campaigns | 16 |

EXPECTED OUTCOMES 7. Relevant at the European level (StartNet Europe)

Promoted the specialist debate on the topic of transition from school to work, thanks to the recognition and affirmation of StartNet Europe at European institutions.

At the European level, the network primarily advocates on youth unemployment and youth leadership issues. Both topics are considered extremely relevant within the European youth policies framework, and so StartNet aims to influence policy-making and political decisions in Brussels.

Over the years, **StartNet has succeeded in promoting specialist debate on issues of youth inclusion.** It participated in the European Alliance of Apprenticeships, European Youth Forum, European Social Summit and European Year of Skills as an event partner or thematic expert. Additionally, **network meetings held in Brussels are attended by members of the European Commission**, which is testament to **StartNet's institutional relevance at the European level.**

“ At the top level, for example the European Commission, there is awareness, support, and recognition about us [StartNet], as well as at the European organisation level.. We have achieved a certain standing as one of the few key stakeholders that are advocating for young people's transition to the labour market and youth employment.



Jan Wilker, Project Manager, StartNet Europe

It is likely that these results would have been more pronounced had limitations arising from the COVID-19 pandemic did not impede the organisation of additional meetings and events in Brussels or in other network member states during recent years.

Table 11. Outcomes and outputs indicators related to Expected Outcome 7

| Task | Specific activity | Level of result | Indicator | Achieved result |
|------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------|-----------------|
|------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------|-----------------|

| | | | | |
|------|---|---------|---|-----------------|
| EO 7 | Promoted the specialist debate on the topic of transition from school to work, thanks to the recognition and affirmation of StartNet Europe at European institutions. | Outcome | N. of organization participate in StartNet Europe activities on a regular basis | 18 |
| | | Outcome | N of regions involved from geographically balanced countries in Europe (Centre, North, West, South & East) in StartNet through regional organizations | 5 ¹¹ |
| 7.1 | Organization of European workshops or field visits with members of the network for training and exchange of good practices; | Output | N of workshops or field visits with members of the network for training and exchange of good practices | 9 |
| | | Output | N of short thematic conferences | 9 |
| | | Output | N online workshop with members of the network | 7 |
| | | Output | N Cycle of webinars | 7 |
| 7.2 | Consolidation of StartNet Europe Network | Output | Elaboration of a common Mission Statement and agreement for a Learning Agenda between the project partners | 1 |
| | | Output | N of new organization joined StartNet Network (period 2020-2022) | 4 |
| 7.3 | Promotion and dissemination of the work carried out by the StartNet Europe network | Output | N of joint publications, including with partners. | 2 |
| | | Output | N of policy briefs redacted. | 5 |
| | | Output | N realization of a toolkit including good practices for the school-work transition | 3 |
| | | Output | N of other European networks and alliances as well as thematically relevant events in which StartNet Europe is involved | 3 |

EXPECTED OUTCOMES 8. Relevant mainly at the European level (StartNet Europe)

The financial independence of the network's activities is strengthened through the commitment of partners with additional funds from third-party sources, such as the EU.

Within the StartNet European network, as already mentioned in Expected Outcome 6, **opportunities for new projects have been identified** within StartNet's European network **thanks to funding from European bodies (e.g. Erasmus+)**. However, external factors impact the involvement of StartNet partners in initiatives, such as a lack of time, resources and availability for new projects, as well as institutional limitations preventing access to European funding.

All four projects designed by the network obtained Erasmus+ funding, which complements the initial funding provided by Stiftung Mercator. With respect to the first European project realised, Skills for Life, which was led by the backbone office in Brussels, the new projects involve StartNet as a partner implicated in the European dissemination and communication of the obtained results and good practices, in order to be able to provide policy recommendations.

¹¹ All areas of Europe are covered.

Table 12. Outcomes and outputs indicators related to Expected Outcome 8

| Task | Specific activity | Level of result | Indicator | Achieved result |
|------|---|-----------------|---|-----------------|
| EO 8 | The financial independence of the network's activities is strengthened through the commitment of partners with additional funds from third-party sources, such as the EU. | Outcome | N of European projects in which the StartNet regional network participates | 4 ¹² |
| | | Outcome | % Financial diversification via EU funding | 195% |
| 8.1 | Implementation of a common Erasmus+ project or preparation of the application for further EU projects training and exchange of good practices; | Output | N of applications to European projects by StartNet Europe | 4 |
| | | Output | No. of network members or partners involved in the application process. | 15 |
| 8.2 | Constant monitoring, information and advice on financing possibilities. | Output | No. of communication regarding financing opportunities (mails, calls, and bilateral messages) | 15 |

¹² 4 Erasmus projects funded overall, in 3 of which GINNlab is also a partner (outcome indicator 6)

5.1.4 Efficiency

This section presents an assessment of StartNet’s **efficiency**, defined as ‘*the extent to which the project delivered, or is likely to deliver, results in an economic and timely way, by making optimal use of the available financial and human resources* (OCSE DAC, 2019)’.

EFFICIENT USE OF FINANCIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES

StartNet receives grant funding from Stiftung Mercator. Most of this funding is allocated to operational costs – primarily, human resources for the two backbone offices – and to facilitate meetings and events. The number of international events requiring in-person attendance was limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in a surplus of funds for the European network. This made it possible to obtain a 12-month extension (without cost) from Stiftung Mercator, during which time the European network will have the opportunity both to follow the new Erasmus+ projects and to realise some international events.

At the regional level, the backbone office in Rome (overseen by GINNlab) is comprised of four specialists responsible for project management, communication and administrative management. During StartNet II’s first phase, GINNlab strategically decided to dedicate at least one staff member **to the coordination of project activities in the Apulia and Basilicata regions**, so that regional partners and stakeholders could access a project representative as a liaison between regional representatives and GINNlab. It also hired **external consultants** to manage communication and social networks: one communication specialist and one programme manager, who is mainly involved in StartNet Youth. This reflects the growing importance of communication management within the backbone office in Rome and the importance of StartNet Youth and its activities.

StartNet II does not have a designated staff member for internal project management. This is strongly recommended for StartNet’s next phase because responsibility for project monitoring is increasingly being given to local project managers, which complicates the evaluation of StartNet as a whole.

At the European level, the backbone office in Brussels is comprised of three specialists: one full-time and two part-time staff members responsible for project management, fundraising and facilitating training programmes and meetings (online and offline). Since the implementation of the Erasmus projects, the European backbone has been understaffed, and so one of the part-time positions will be made full-time next year.

Overall, StartNet – specifically, its two backbone offices – was **successful in obtaining additional national and international funding, from public and private sources**, to develop and implement new projects. This produced a **multiplier effect**, tripling financial resources from the initial funding received at StartNet’s commencement (see Section 5.4., Expected Outcomes 6 and 8).¹³

INTERNAL COORDINATION

Internal coordination between the regional and European networks occurs through regular exchanges and weekly meetings held between members of the two networks. In addition, the European backbone office ensures that the regional backbone office is involved in strategic meetings held by members of the European network and vice versa.

At regional level, the governance structure includes the following:

- i) a **steering committee** that meets thrice per year. This committee drives the structural and strategic development of StartNet II by providing operational guidance for the development of concrete initiatives in different fields.

¹³ Source: project managers of StartNet II.

- ii) a **technical-scientific committee** that meets twice per year acting as a consultant role.
- iii) the **backbone office** in Rome - GINNlab, whose operational team coordinates the network, ensures efficient internal and external network communication and promotes and monitors project activities.

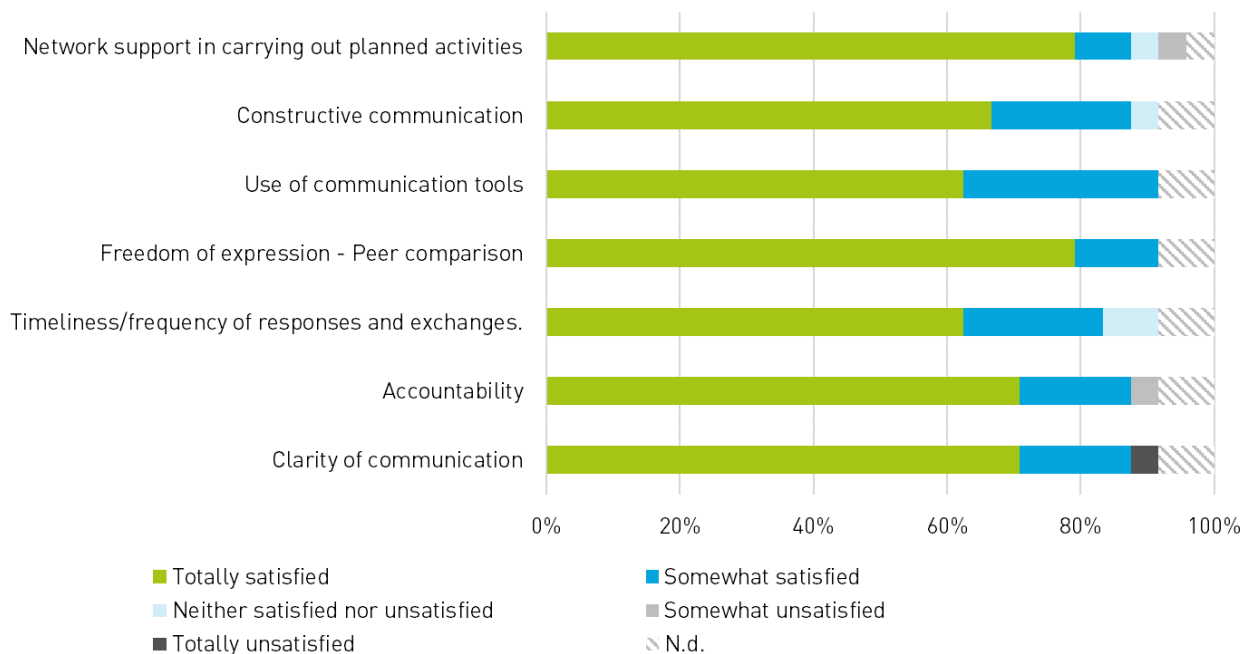
The **coordination of regional networks in Apulia and Basilicata** is ensured through regular meetings between GINNlab and StartNet’s partners. Initially, network coordination meetings involved the operating, signatory and institutional partners simultaneously. However, project staff reorganised processes for StartNet II so that network coordination is now managed by two distinct parties:

- a primary body comprised of **signatory and institutional partners** who oversee strategic steering and decision-making functions.
- a secondary body comprised of **operational partners**, including partner organisations and stakeholders, who gather information to help gauge regional needs and to ensure that project activities involve local actors who actively promote youth employment.

This organisational model adheres to the collective impact approach that informs StartNet’s foundational approach (see Section 5.1.2 Coherence).

From a coordination perspective, the **increasing complexity and size of the project model necessitates external coordination by a neutral entity**. This role has so far been filled by the two backbone offices. Although it is challenging to maintain communication between members of such a heterogeneous network, most of StartNet’s partners expressed high satisfaction with several aspects of network communication, according to data collected via surveys administered to partners for the purpose of social network analysis (see Figure 4 (below)).

Figure 4. Evaluation of satisfaction related to several aspects of network communication.



Source: survey administered to all StartNet II partners (n=23)

5.1.5 Impact

This section presents StartNet's **impact**, defined as '*The extent to which the intervention has generated or is expected to generate significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, higher-level effects*' (OECD DAC, 2019).

The impact analysis focused on the multidimensional well-being of StartNet Youth participants. The evaluation question that guided data collection for the impact analysis is: *What kind of intended or unintended changes has the project been able to trigger with respect to its target beneficiaries?*

NOTE: the term 'impact' refers to **long-term and potentially transformative effects attributable to StartNet**. Typically, impact is measured through experimental or quasi-experimental methods that allow an effect on certain outcomes to be compared with a counterfactual representing outcomes that would likely have resulted in the absence of the project. As there was no pre-intervention data available and no data collected on a counterfactual group, the evaluator **estimated the impact of StartNet Youth on the well-being of its community** members through the non-experimental Evaluating Human Development (EHD) method inspired by Amartya Sen's capabilities approach (Biggeri and Ferrannini, 2014).

EHD is a participatory approach that enables '**perceived counterfactuals**' to be devised using a guided reconstruction process involving project beneficiaries, who were asked to determine a hypothetical outcome: that is, they were asked to hypothesise what they believe their state/situation would be if StartNet Youth did not exist. EHD methodology allows the dimensions of well-being most relevant to beneficiaries to be identified and analysed, and determines which of these StartNet significantly affected, according to the beneficiaries themselves. By basing the comparison of actual and hypothetical effects on the perception of project participants, this analytical approach uses an attribution process to assess the extent and degree of the changes triggered by StartNet. Qualitative evaluations are expressed in numerical format (from 0 to 10), facilitating interpretation and abstraction by the beneficiaries.

What impact has StartNet Youth had on the multidimensional well-being of its youth beneficiaries?

The evaluator employed EHD methodology (Biggeri and Ferrannini, 2014) and conducted semi-structured focus groups. The aim was to measure StartNet's impact on well-being dimensions of interest to beneficiaries, to assess the degree of change effected on them by StartNet Youth.

The **semi-structured focus groups** involved 10 participants (aged 16–25; males and females), all of whom are members of StartNet Youth in Apulia and Campania. Participants were selected by the youth community coordinator, who identified the members of the network who have been part of it for the longest time, and kept the group composition equal in terms of gender, age and region. **Although results showed a satisfactory level of internal validity, this cannot be generalised for the entire StartNet Youth community.**

In the first part of the evaluation activity, participants were asked to identify the characteristics of an *ideal type* interested in joining the youth community (e.g. individual, social or regional characteristics). The use of *ideal types* is functional, allowing evaluators to obtain a partial abstraction on the part of the structured focus group participants, thus avoiding self-referential answers based solely on personal experience.

An initial comparison allowed well-being sub-dimensions to be identified, defined and ordered according to degree of importance expressed by participants:

- **Mental well-being** is the degree of self-confidence and self-esteem experienced in the absence of external pressures negatively influencing one's emotions.
- **Education and training** is both academic knowledge and technical competence (*hard skills*) and personal skills and personal competence (*soft skills*).
- **Political and social participation** is active participation in the political and social activities of the region.
- **Information** is defined as the degree of accessibility of information and updates.

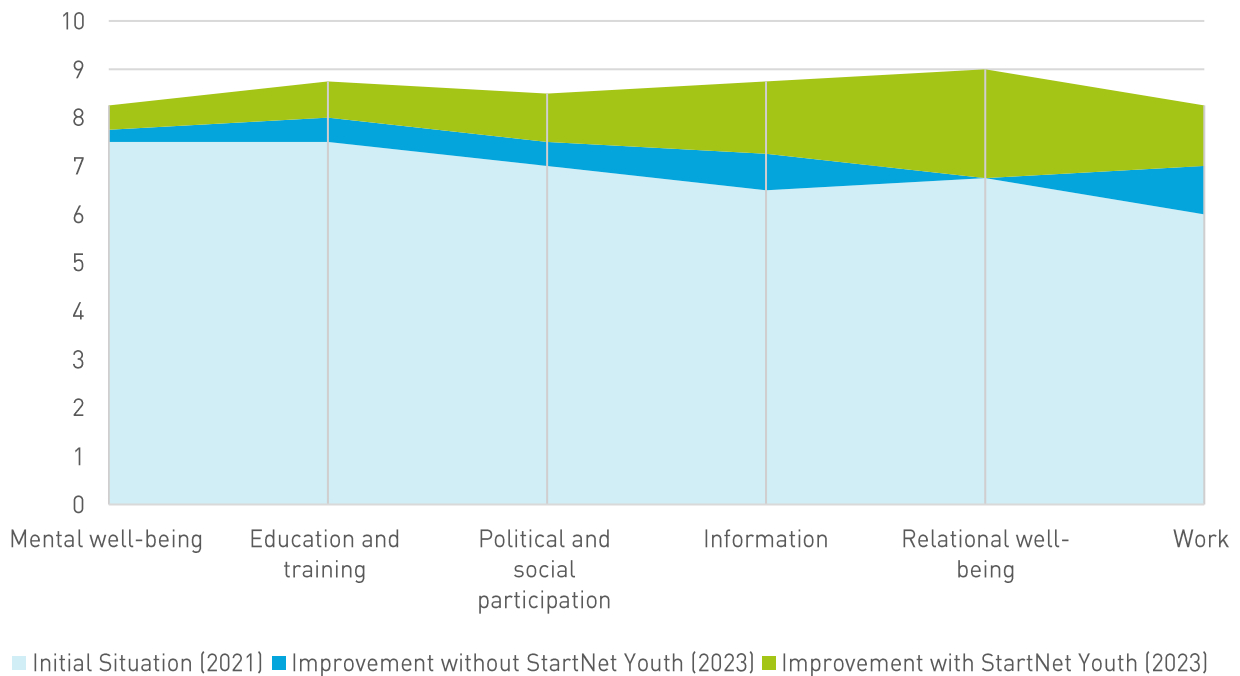
- **Relational well-being** is the quality of interpersonal relationships, including satisfaction and fulfilment derived from those relationships.
- **Work** is having security and confidence in one’s current and/or future job prospects.

An initial discussion with participants allowed the evaluators to devise an analysis matrix to systematically collect responses shared during the semi-structured focus group discussions. The results of the semi-structured focus group discussions are summarised and depicted in the Figure below: the rows correspond to the well-being sub-dimensions under analysis, while the columns refer to evaluations of *the ideal tipe*’s level of well-being at time t_0 (2021) and t_1 (2023), both actual and hypothetical (i.e. with and without StartNet Youth).

The light blue area represents beneficiaries’ initial level of well-being (in 2021). The dark blue area represents the perceived counterfactual: the hypothetical level of well-being in StartNet Youth’s absence (in 2023). The green area shows the final level of well-being reported by beneficiaries after participating in StartNet Youth (in 2023).

The graph shows that in all well-being sub-dimensions under analysis, the level of *the ideal tipe* effected by StartNet Youth is higher than both the actual initial situation and the hypothetical counterfactual situation.

Figure 5. Well-being sub-dimension scores, gathered from semi-structured focus groups with beneficiaries of StartNet Youth.



Source: authors’ elaboration based on data collected during semi-structured focus groups.
 Note: the graph presents the average rating for each sub-dimension of well-being as per results obtained by comparing participant responses.

More specifically, *relational well-being* is the sub-dimension with the greatest and most prevalent effect, which participants attributed to StartNet Youth.

'[In StartNet Youth] ... you meet people with the same perspectives as you, who are able to grasp and generate new stimuli'¹⁴... The community responded to my need for relationship and the loneliness that I felt; it allowed me to find support in other young people'¹⁵.

The StartNet Youth network impacts the lived realities of its youth members by involving diverse actors in a range of roles. It constitutes an accessible channel and source of information on topics relevant to the youth community, such as school-to-work transition, training and innovative teaching methods, environmental sustainability and European-wide opportunities for youths (e.g. mobility projects and how to understand and apply the UN Agenda 2030 objectives). This is a distinguishing feature of StartNet Youth compared to other associations that focus mainly on a single theme.

Furthermore, *work* is **one of the** three most positively influenced well-being sub-dimensions for StartNet Youth beneficiaries. This result is influenced by three factors: (i) youth community members acquire and enhance *soft skills* (e.g. communication, interpersonal, organisational, leadership and teamwork skills), which are highly sought-after and transferable within labour markets; (ii) the involvement of business-sector representatives in the StartNet network exposes youth community members to the employment sector and increases their knowledge of employment opportunities and (iii) youth community members gain a better understanding of what constitutes a sought-after job profile within labour markets.

There are also external factors contributing to the personal and professional growth of youths and impacting their well-being: e.g. personal and professional training, involvement in other associations, voluntary work and the flow of time. In **Figure 5, the light blue area of the matrix depicts improvement in well-being dimensions attributable to external factors (other than StartNet Youth) on all dimensions except one: relational well-being.** The StartNet Youth beneficiaries who participated in this evaluation believe that their relational well-being would not have changed in two years without StartNet Youth. In semi-structured focus group discussions, participants revealed that satisfaction of relational needs becomes increasingly difficult over time, which negatively affects relational well-being. This explains the positive impact that the youth community has on relational well-being.

¹⁴ StartNet Youth beneficiary, 20 years old.

¹⁵ StartNet Youth beneficiary, 21 years old.

5.1.6 Sustainability

This section presents an analysis of the sustainability of project actions, defined as ‘*the extent to which the net benefits of the project continue, or are likely to continue, in the long term after the project’s completion*’ (OECD DAC, 2019).

PROJECT SUSTAINABILITY

StartNet II projects currently active in Italy, such as StartNet Youth, Building Futures and Or.Co.¹⁶, have already achieved a high degree of sustainability and independence, which could ensure their continuation after StartNet II. The important relationships established in the Apulia region between StartNet and the GET network, Regione Puglia, NOVA, Confindustria Bari and other local actors show that StartNet successfully established an efficient support network for activities with medium-term sustainability.

StartNet staff have identified projects funded by the European Commission (and related agencies) as key to their strategy to maintain and finance the two backbone structures. Currently, StartNet’s regional and European networks have successfully obtained funding from the European Commission for **four** additional projects. However, these additional funds are insufficient to cover the cost of human resources in the backbone offices. Currently active projects extending beyond May 2023 will be managed by the Goethe Institut in the event that GINNlab ceases to exist.

NETWORK SUSTAINABILITY

Since 2016, when StartNet I was first launched, StartNet’s networks have included public and private partners from the education, business and third sectors. During the final evaluation, it emerged that **relationships between partners have strengthened** over the years in terms of frequency and quality of correspondence, so opportunities to exchange **good practices and lessons learned** on youth inclusion issues have increased, as well as novel projects involving network members.

Nevertheless, the sustainability of the StartNet network, at both regional and European levels, is the most critical issue for the sustainability of StartNet, as external coordination is required for such a heterogeneous network comprised of diverse actors. The coordination of the regional network (by GINNlab) or the European network (by the Brussels backbone) is not guaranteed once the current funding period ends. It is possible that network partners will remain in contact and enter into bilateral or trilateral project agreements despite this, but the systemic footprint will be lost in the absence of a coordinating body.

Since May 2022, network sustainability has been a recurring issue raised in meetings. It would have been beneficial to address this issue during an earlier phase, so that a joint sustainability strategy could have been devised. This may have involved rotating coordination responsibilities between partners, increasing participation in events with public or private financiers interested in youth employment issue, or selling the network’s services.

As already mentioned, part of the proposed strategy to safeguard the network and ensure its sustainability involves identifying and securing new projects, partnerships and funding opportunities. However, this would still be insufficient to cover the cost of human resources for the two backbone offices. The desirable but challenging solution is to attract external funding from public and/or private actors who may be interested in further financing StartNet, given its results and impact on youth employment and school-to-work transition. With this in mind, project staff contacted 30 potential financiers (see Output Indicator 5.1., Expected Outcome 5).

¹⁶ The Or.Co. project, promoted by StartNet Italy, introduced empowerment programmes to schools, families and businesses. It targeted youths at risk of leaving school prematurely (i.e. aged 9–14) by implementing interventions in both school and out-of-school contexts.

SUSTAINABILITY OF PROJECT RESULTS

StartNet II project activities are not designed to be self-sustaining and so will likely cease at the end of the funding period. However, StartNet has generated impact and triggered change that may continue beyond StartNet II.

The following table presents a summary of individual sustainability measures – technical, institutional and political, social and cultural, and economic and financial – including results and benefits produced through project activities. These were devised during the project implementation phase and will likely continue after the project and its funding cease.

| MEASURES | ASSESSMENT OF SUSTAINABILITY |
|-----------------------------|--|
| TECHNICAL | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strengthen capacity and develop soft skills of beneficiaries (teachers and students) and stakeholders of StartNet II. - Strengthen the network for school-to-work transition by involving a wide range of stakeholders. - Present outputs, policy papers, manuals and toolkits to partners, to inform their project and advocacy activities. |
| INSTITUTIONAL AND POLITICAL | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consolidate existing partnerships with local, regional and national institutions. - Sign the Memorandum of Understanding. - Design and disseminate policy papers, recommendations and briefs, to inform policymaking on school-to-work transition and early career orientation at regional and European levels. - Promote, fund and internalise StartNet II projects in the Apulia region. - Increase awareness and knowledge of local realities nationally. |
| SOCIAL AND CULTURAL | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - StartNet II beneficiaries acquire and develop soft skills through project activities. - Increase multidimensional well-being dimensions for beneficiaries of StartNet Youth. - Create a network of youth associations from different regions in Italy (StartNet Youth). - Increase awareness of school-to-work transition by collaborating with different actors (organisations, institutions, trade unions, enterprises, banks, etc.) to discuss needs and support measures. |
| ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identify well-established regional and international partners who will continue project activities after StartNet ends, thus hopefully attracting new funds. - Submit grant proposals and obtain funding for Erasmus+ projects (one of which will run until 2025). |

IN-DEEP BOX: THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE YOUTH NETWORK

StartNet Youth is a youth community that has been consolidated over the last two years. It acquired autonomy in its internal management, operations and activities. The professional support of StartNet project coordinators was fundamental in training and empowering the most active members of the community. The coordinators will continue their actions on a voluntary basis, mainly in the form of community management.

The establishment of the body, which is now in progress, is the first step towards the consolidation of the community, for a continuous and concrete commitment towards mobilising a proactive and effective youth presence in the region.

NETWORK INDEPENDENCE

StartNet Youth members benefited from affiliation with StartNet II's international network, as it gave them the opportunity to liaise with different partners and to acquire, develop and consolidate personal and professional knowledge and skills. Through StartNet Youth, members gained experience in project development, writing and implementation, and contributed their skills and enthusiasm towards concrete activities to realise youth development and employment. By participating in long-term projects driven by StartNet, youth community members were successful in winning a PNRR-related proposal call that they would otherwise not have achieved.

StartNet Youth enables its members to become autonomous and skilled change-makers. Their collaboration with StartNet partners will continue, at both regional and European levels, in the form of shared projects, events or initiatives. Among these is the potential to create internship opportunities within StartNet. A trial of this internship project will commence in the summer of 2023, with one or two youth community members undertaking an internship at the StartNet Europe backbone office in Brussels.

MITIGATION STRATEGIES

The community members explored numerous funding options and avenues to resource StartNet Youth activities and ensure the sustainability of the youth community:

- participation in EU-funded projects
- sponsorship(s)
- new partnerships
- direct collaboration with schools to integrate StartNet activities into educational pathways
- creation of an academy
- provision of consultancy and training services for community building
- fundraising
- implementation of a membership fee

Initial financial support was provided directly via StartNet, with further funding made available to StartNet Youth at the completion of StartNet's second phase in May 2023.

5.2 OUTCOMES ACHIEVED FOR BENEFICIARIES

This section presents the outcomes achieved for beneficiaries as a result of their participation in StartNet II activities. It considers the relevance of activities and outcomes for beneficiaries from their perspective. This participant-led approach is fundamental to the final project evaluation.

Here, the evaluation objective is to identify what competences and skills (hereafter *soft skills*) were enhanced. Both project and evaluation staff agreed to focus the evaluation analysis on two specific projects that engaged beneficiaries for a prolonged period of time in activities intended to enhance soft skills: training and learning-by-doing. The two projects evaluated are *Building Futures* and *StartNet Youth*.

Participatory evaluation activities were carried out by ARCO in Apulia in early April 2023. The first project to be evaluated involved beneficiaries of the previous Building Futures (SY 2022—2023) project: (i) teachers who participated in career orientation training days facilitated by Building Futures and (ii) students who were involved in a special project designed by Building Futures but implemented through schools. The second project to be evaluated involved the most active members of the StartNet Youth community who have been part of it for a longer time period with respect to the others.

5.2.1 Building Futures

Participatory evaluation activities were conducted from 3rd—4th of April 2023, in Bari and Mottola (Apulia), with teachers and high school students who were beneficiaries of the most recent Building Futures project (offered April 2022—March 2023). The evaluation results are presented below. The first paragraph presents the evaluation results relating to teachers. The second paragraph presents the evaluation results relating to students.

TEACHERS

The evaluation activity featured a semi-structured focus group carried out by ARCO in Apulia. The sample included five high school teachers from Bari who participated in the Building Futures training days during the 2022—2023 school year. Though the results presented below encapsulate the interesting perceptions and evaluations of the participants, they cannot be generalised for all teachers involved in the project, given the small sample size. However, they can be used to inform the design and delivery of future Building Futures projects.

The objective of the evaluation activity was to assess project outcomes by considering which soft skills were perceived by the participants to have been strengthened thanks to the training offered through Building Futures.

IN-DEEP BOX: The Building Futures project in brief

Building Futures is a career orientation education project targeting teachers and students in the Apulia region of Italy. It relies on the active support of representatives from business and education sectors in the region.

The project is divided into two parts. The first targets schoolteachers through training programmes designed to equip them with tools and knowledge to enhance their understanding and delivery of school-based career guidance. The aim is to help teachers better identify and respond to student expectations, and to assist students to recognise their talents and identify how and where their needs and aspirations may overlap with the social and production needs and opportunities of their region.

The trained teachers, in turn, pass on their newly acquired knowledge to other teaching staff. This project is scalable and replicable.

The second part targets high school students by directly involving them in action research projects implemented in local schools. The school projects require students to collaborate and respond to a common challenge and were designed according to a participatory teaching model. These projects also involve entrepreneurs and business sector representatives.

To this end, participants were asked the following question: **‘What are the main competences/skills that you feel you have acquired or enhanced thanks to the Building Futures project which are useful for you in orientation?’**. To facilitate and structure responses, nine soft skills were selected by the evaluator based on a desk analysis of project documents and information gathered from project leaders.

The following soft skills were identified by the evaluator as likely to have been enhanced by Building Futures:

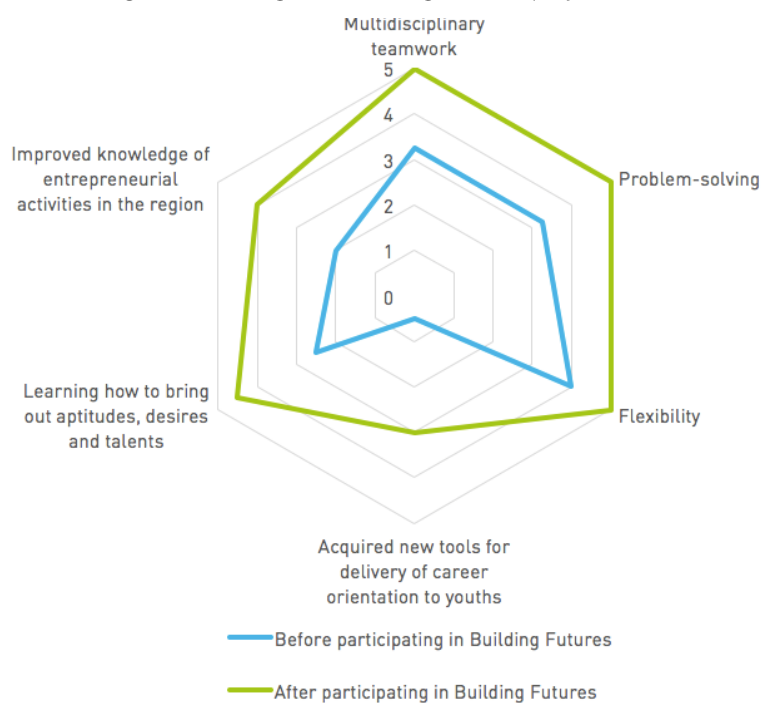
- acquire new tools to deliver career orientation to youths
- learn how to foster student aptitudes, desires and talents
- problem-solving
- multidisciplinary teamwork
- flexibility
- gain knowledge of what constitutes a desirable professional profile in the labour markets
- gain knowledge of entrepreneurial realities in the region
- gain knowledge of organisations involved in job placement in the region
- ability to encourage student motivation and entrepreneurship

After an initial plenary discussion, participants were asked to identify which of the competences presented were most relevant to them. Then, they were asked to reflect on and compare their competence levels pre- and post-project (in 2022 and in 2023, respectively) and to score these levels on a scale of 1 to 5. By specifically relating the evaluation question to the Building Futures project, the evaluators are able to measure the degree of change attributable to project participation alone.

Figure 6 (below) presents the results of the focus group discussion as a radar graph depicting the six most experienced effects: i.e. the soft skills most enhanced as a result of participation in the Building Futures project.

It emerged that by participating in Building Futures, the participants strengthened each soft skill considered. An increase in competence is represented by the distance between the scored level of competence before participation in the project (light blue line) and after participation in the project (green line) for each soft skill.

Figure 6. Teachers’ soft skills strengthened through the Building Futures project



Source: final evaluation focus group discussion (n=5)

First, the teachers who participated in Building Futures acquired new tools and methods of delivering career orientation. Not only did the project offer specific training on strategies for delivering career orientation, it also provided opportunity for participants to connect and interact with other teachers and to share their experiences and knowledge, as well as with the education and business sector representatives present at the training days. The evaluation results show that focus group participants increased their knowledge and skills relating to career orientation delivery by approximately +3 points. They also gained tools to help them identify and encourage students’ aptitudes, desires and talents and to guide students in making better choices for their educational and/or professional futures.

Second, the participants who participated in the final evaluation activities believe that their ability to help students develop soft skills was enhanced also. This is closely linked to the provision of innovative orientation tools through Building Futures.

Third, the training helped participants to strengthen their flexibility and problem-solving skills, albeit to a lesser degree than the other soft skills listed, possibly because these skills are exercised by teachers on a daily basis in their work.

Fourth, the participants improved their teamwork skills as a result of working in teams during the trainings. Furthermore, in the second phase of Building Futures involving pupils, in some action research projects implemented in local schools, the relationship between the school and the business world has been strengthened and transformed into collaboration and support for the students' project idea.

Finally, the participants benefited from the expertise of the education and business sector representatives involved in the training. The inclusion of relevant experts is facilitated by close synergistic relationships established by project staff with partners, who are invited to participate in and contribute to training days (see Confindustria Puglia). This also provides opportunity for participants to learn about entrepreneurial and business realities in their region. From the rich discussion during the evaluation, the main strengths and possible improvements for the desirable new Building Futures year emerged.

Table 13. Strengths and areas for improvement for Building Futures

| STRENGTHS | AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT |
|---|--|
| <p>Connects schools of different levels and grades in Apulia.</p> <p>Delivers effective career orientation training workshops.</p> <p>Establishes close connections between local representatives of education and business sectors.</p> <p>Strongly anchors the project within the local area.</p> <p>Produces a replicable and scalable model for possible implementation in other schools.</p> | <p>Align the project offering with the academic calendar, for easier delivery to schools and to avoid project activities being spread out over multiple school years.</p> <p>Involve students’ families, to strengthen the school community.</p> <p>Structure and formalise processes for the teachers who attended training to transmit their newly acquired skills within the school more broadly, rather than between individuals or the board.</p> <p>Compensate or reimburse teachers for expenses incurred for external professional development activities.</p> <p>Allocate budget towards students’ project ideas.</p> |

STUDENTS

The final evaluation activity involved 25 students (males and females) who participated in the Building Futures Challenge offered through their local high schools in Apulia. The students were divided into two focus groups:

- 15 students from the technical high school, M. Lentini - A. Einstein in Mottola
- 10 students from the Marco Polo high school in Bari

The evaluation activity aimed to identify which competences and skills were enhanced as a result of the students' participation in the Building Futures project. The students were asked the following evaluation question: **What skills did you acquire or enhance thanks to the Building Futures project?**

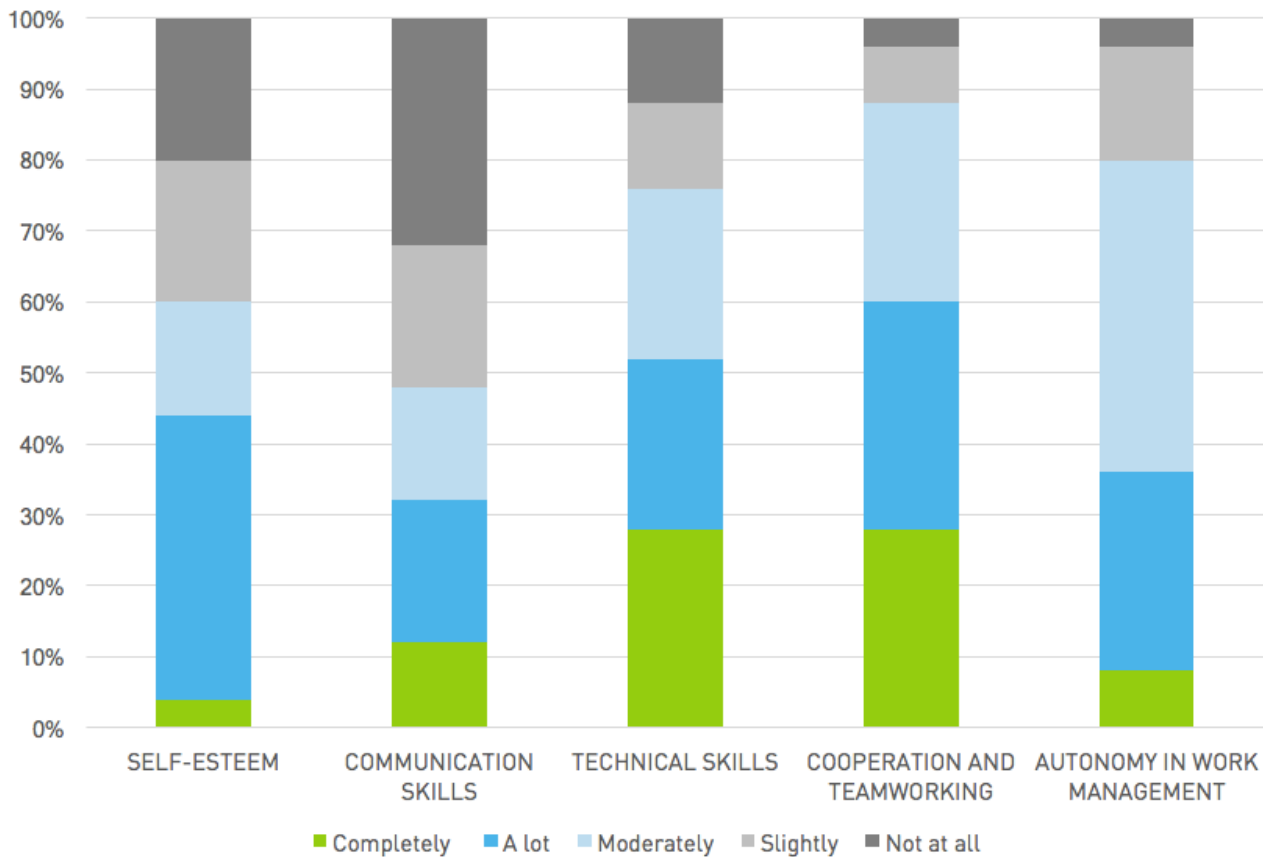
The students' written responses were then collected and classified by the evaluator into macro-skills. **Notably, the two groups identified the same skills despite participating in separate activities. This made it possible to analyse the data collectively.**

The five skills identified were self-esteem, communication skills, technical skills (digital, computer and theatre), cooperation and teamwork, and autonomy in work management (an organisation skill).

The students individually rated each skill according to the degree to which the project helped or did not help them to enhance each skill, on a scale of 'Not at all' to 'Completely'.

The results are presented in the graph below.

Figure 7. Student responses to the evaluation question: What skills did you acquire or enhance thanks to the Building Future project?



Source: final evaluation focus group discussion (n=25)

Figure 7 shows that the project **positively influenced the increase or acquisition of all skills examined** (see the green, the light blue and dark blue sections of the graph), but there are differences in how students perceived skills acquisition (see the light grey and dark grey sections on the graph). This can be explained by the fact that participants rated all competences proposed in the initial discussion phase, including those not directly proposed by them.

Specifically, the project was instrumental in helping students to acquire and enhance technical and teamwork skills (by more than 50%). Technical skills relate to digital and IT skills, which the students developed by using

computers and digital software (e.g. to create PowerPoint presentations). Teamwork skills relates to the ability to collaborate and cooperate towards a common goal, which the students developed by meeting together after school to discuss, plan and implement their projects. Notably, the focus group discussions revealed the importance of socialising and working together in-person, especially following the mandatory quarantine periods effected during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another important soft skill that was strengthened was **self-esteem**. It is essential that students develop this skill and build the confidence necessary to meet challenges and face difficult situations arising at work and in education. Nearly half of participants (44%) stated that project activities helped them to develop this particular soft skill, with 11 students reporting that the project helped them to build self-esteem ('a lot' or 'completely'). However, this was not the case for many students (40%).

The majority of students stated that Building Futures helped them to become more autonomous in managing their workloads. They expressed that the project assignment required organisation and task management, and to meet the challenge demanded more commitment and ingenuity from them than they had previously shown. Finally, **communication skills** were enhanced almost exclusively by those whose role in the project required them to speak in public or in front of a camera. This explains the lower impact score registered for this skill (see Figure 7).

5.2.2 StartNet Youth

StartNet Youth aimed to create a community of youth change-makers who are actively engaged in school-to-work transition. To this end, beneficiaries are provided opportunities to acquire and enhance personal and professional skills, not only for their own self-development but also for the benefit and support of other youths. The intention is that they will then be able to generate change locally (Italy) and nationally.

To gauge the effect of project activities on StartNet Youth beneficiaries' competences and skills, a self-administered questionnaire was delivered to 15 youth community members who are closely connected to the network and have played an active role since October 2021 by participating in meetings, events and project activities. Fourteen complete surveys were returned to the evaluators (93% response rate). Those survey results were analysed to measure the capacity of StartNet Youth to induce change by developing and enhancing beneficiaries' *soft skills*.

Evaluators conducted a desk analysis of various network materials to identify the *soft skills* most likely to have been enhanced. These materials included video interviews, the StartNet Youth manifesto, monitoring documents, reports and presentations. The soft skills identified were networking, public speaking, mediation, team building, communication, problem and opportunity analysis, planning, exhibition, civic engagement and social responsibility, and self-reliance.

The participants were then asked to identify which of these *soft skills* they believed were enhanced as a result of their participation in StartNet Youth, and then to score their level of competence for each skill (on a scale of 1 to 5), both pre-project (2021) and current (in 2023, having been an active member of StartNet Youth for two years).

The respondents were also asked to indicate the degree to which they believe that any change in their skill levels might be attributable to StartNet Youth. The data gathered in response to this question was used to measure the positive impact of project activities.

In terms of methodology, high attribution suggests a close causal relationship between an increase in *soft skills* and the beneficiaries' participation in StartNet Youth. Conversely, low attribution indicates a limited causal relationship between perceived changes and beneficiaries' participation in StartNet Youth.

Figure 8 presents the results for the five most enhanced *soft skills* for the majority of the participants: networking, public speaking, problem and opportunity analysis, communication and self-confidence.

It emerged that at least one participant experienced an increase in **all of the identified *soft skills***.

The *soft skill* enhanced for the greatest number of participants was networking ability (86%). StartNet Youth gives members access to its network, which connects public and private actors, organisations and institutions at regional, national and European levels. It also connects its members with other youth associations in Italy (e.g. ACLI, Europiamo, Lasagne Verdi, Ashoka and ESN).

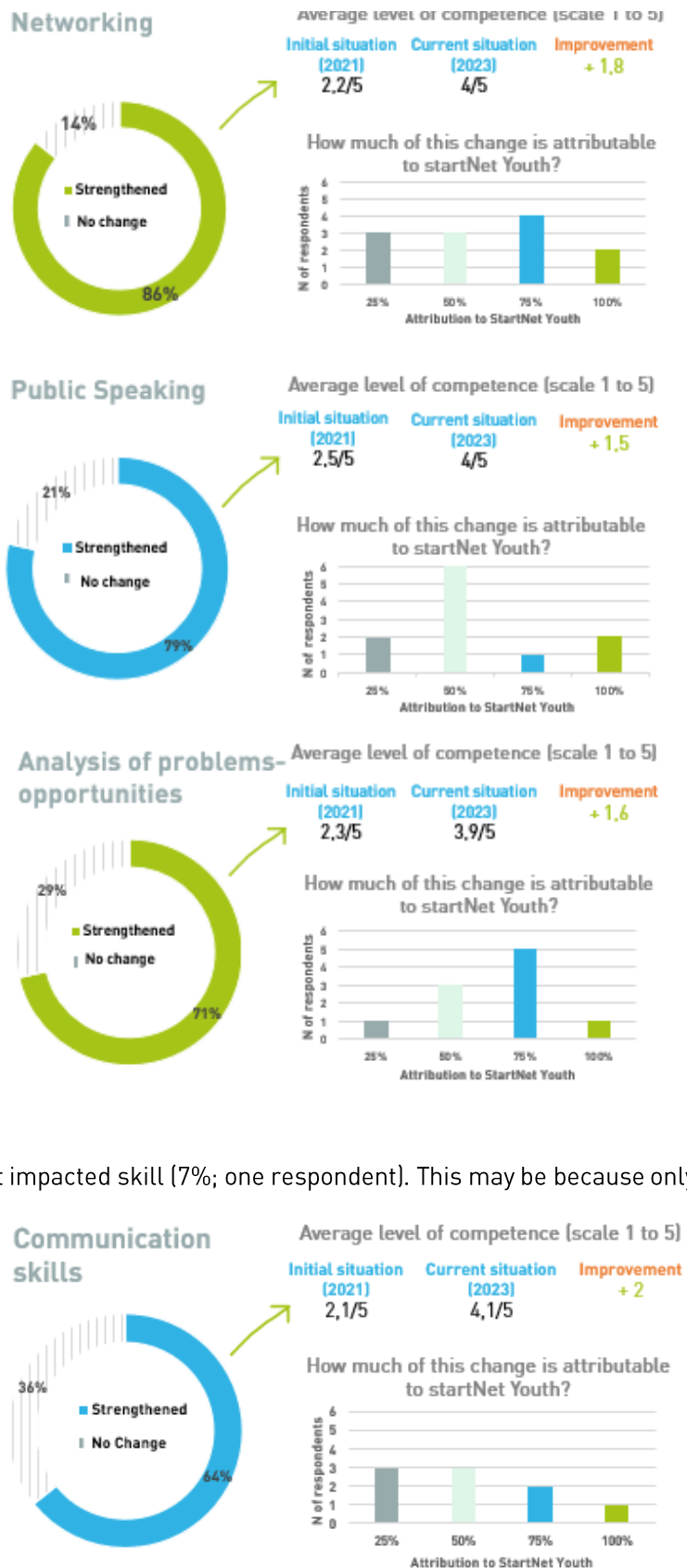
The importance of networking in effective changemaking is clearly apparent to the members of the youth community, as demonstrated by the letter of intent signed by different youth organisations in Italy and the number of co-facilitated events held.

Conversely, **mediation capacity** was the least impacted skill (7%; one respondent). This may be because only a small portion of the youth community served in a mediator role at workshops or events co-organised by StartNet Youth.

On average, the respondents experienced an increase of +1.8 points for the five selected skills over two years. A greater improvement of 2 points was experienced for self-confidence and communication skills.

It is necessary to refine the analysis to gauge how much improvement in *soft skills*

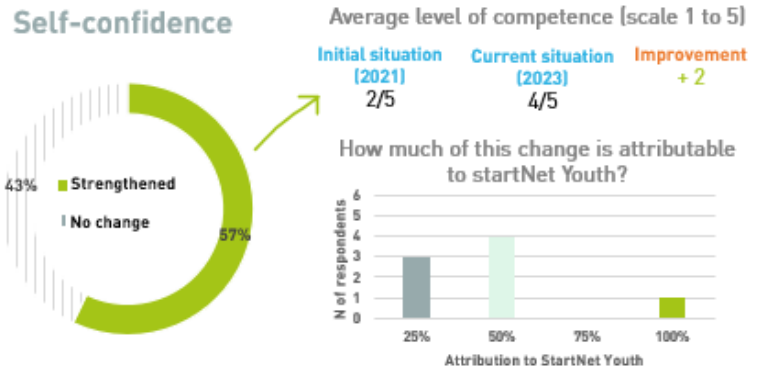
Figure 8. Increase in soft skills over time and attribution of change to StartNet Youth



is attributable to StartNet Youth, with consideration given to other influencing factors such as the ages of StartNet Youth beneficiaries and corresponding personal and professional development, as well as external factors such as university, work, other associations and volunteer experiences.

Shifting focus to whether and how skill enhancement can be attributed to StartNet Youth, it must be emphasised **that all participants acknowledged that StartNet Youth strongly influenced their skill enhancement.** Approximately 75% of the respondents attributed at least half (>50%) of the credit for the increase in their skill level to StartNet Youth. Thus, the project activities in which beneficiaries are involved have a positive impact in stimulating or helping to increase the level of *soft skills* for youth community members. Among the most significant activities cited as catalysts were the transformative weekend, drafting and presenting the youth community manifesto, training programmes and other events and workshops organised by StartNet Youth.

Notably, approximately 20% of the respondents who experienced increased levels of competence in public speaking and networking skills fully attributed this to StartNet Youth. This positive result can be attributed to StartNet Youth members organising public and private events with StartNet network members or other youth organisations over the past year. At these events, the youth community members presented their draft manifesto and the StartNet Youth format and led meetings, which enhanced their public speaking and networking skills.



Source: self-administered questionnaire given to active members of the StartNet Youth network (n=14).

Note: the information regarding the level of competence and the attribution of this to StartNet Youth refers to the subsample that experienced a change in skill level.

5.3 SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS

This section presents the results of a social network analysis conducted to provide a more in-depth understanding of the quality of the relationships established within and by the StartNet II network at regional level (i.e. StartNet Italy) and at European level (StartNet Europe).

The evaluator, ARCO, used a social network analysis methodology to assess (i) whether the interactions between the partners of the regional network was beneficial and constructive and (ii) whether the StartNet Europe network is effective as a learning platform to advance and address issues relating to school-to-work transition.

To define the social network analysis, a definition of social network is given as follows:

A subject's social network can be defined as the set of exchanges of relationships between actors who know each other.

The purpose of a social network analysis is to study, measure and represent the interactions occurring between individuals or groups of individuals. In this case, individuals refer to case associations, educational institutions, organisations, third sector actors, entrepreneurs and business sector actors, etc.

In particular, the social network analysis provides further information on three of the eight project outcomes presented in Section 5.1.3:

E01: The school system in Apulia and Basilicata is well connected and cooperates continuously with state and regional institutions, universities, enterprises, professional agencies and the third sector.

E03: The youth are actively involved in the elaboration of the strategies to be adopted to facilitate the transition from school to work for the young beneficiaries.

E07: Promoted the specialist debate on the topic of transition from school to work, thanks to the recognition and affirmation of StartNet Europe at European institutions.

5.3.1 Methodology

To gather data for the social network analysis, 25 self-administered online questionnaires were delivered to StartNet II partner organisations in April 2023. Of the 25 questionnaires sent, 23 responses were returned (a high response rate of over 92%), which allowed for a robust analysis.

The evaluators decided to administer the survey towards the end of the project, to measure the network partners' perceptions of the network communication and relationships once the project was nearing conclusion. This would produce a data set indicating the degree of sustainability of the relationships established during the project's duration.

One respondent per organisation (a 'node') was asked to score the degree of interaction they experienced with each member of both the regional and European networks during StartNet II. The degree of interaction between the different entities was defined as follows:

- (1) This entity is us.
- (2) FREQUENT communication (occurring at least once every three months).
- (3) SPORADIC communication (occurring at least twice in the last three years).
- (4) We have NOT communicated during the period indicated (not occurring at all in the last three years).

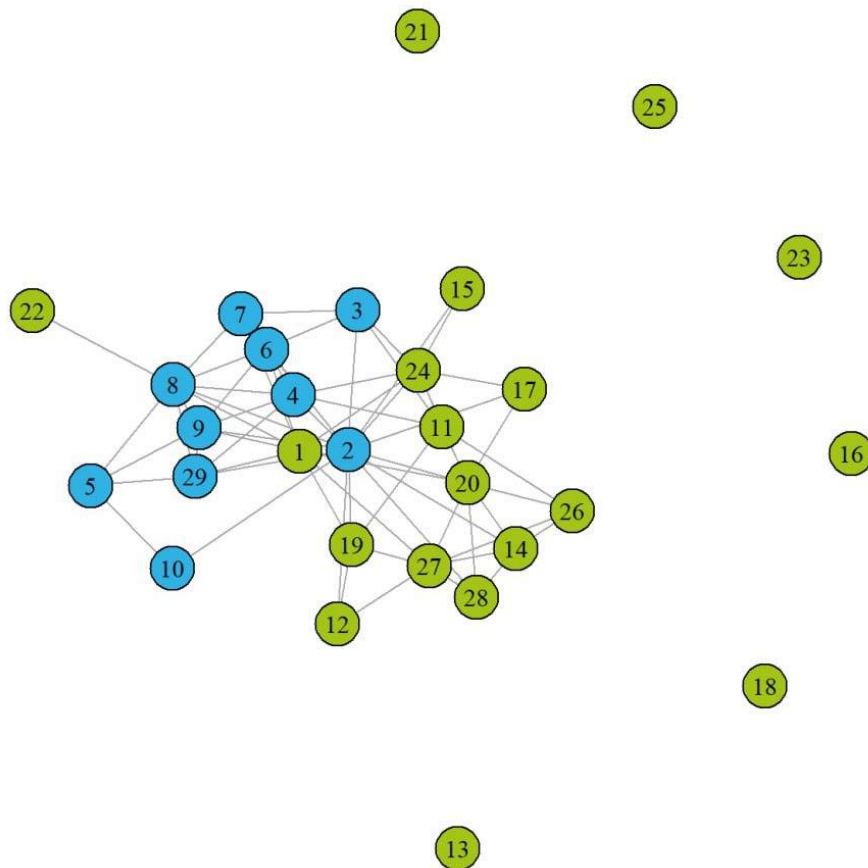
5.3.2 Main results

This section presents the results of the social network analysis. As mentioned, the data were collected via self-administered questionnaire sent to StartNet II's 25 network partners. Of these, 24 responses were received (92% response rate).

The number of connections between the 29 nodes (StartNet II network organisations) was 88 (corresponding to the number of connections in the graph). Only connections defined as FREQUENT (occurring at least once every three months) were considered in the analysis. This choice was made for two reasons:

- i. In line with expected outcomes E01, E03 and E07, frequent communication is required for network members to connect and effectively collaborate. Frequent communication is also necessary both to devise new projects and strategies including and for youth beneficiaries and to inform debate on school-to-work transition at the European level.
- ii. The relationships involving frequent communication are those most likely to continue once the funding period funding has ended. Those relationships have a greater degree of sustainability.

Figure 9. Social network analysis of StartNet II



| StartNet Italy Network | |
|------------------------|---|
| N | Organisation Name |
| 2 | GiNNlab - Goethe Institut innovation lab |
| 3 | MIUR – Ministero dell’Istruzione, dell’Università e della Ricerca |
| 4 | Regione Puglia – Assessorato all’Istruzione, Formazione e Lavoro |
| 5 | Confindustria Puglia |
| 6 | Green Education Training |
| 7 | Ufficio Scolastico Regionale Basilicata |
| 8 | NOVA Onlus – Consorzio Nazionale per l’Innovazione Sociale |
| 9 | Fondazione Vincenzo Casillo |
| 10 | Camera di Commercio Industria, Artigianato, Agricoltura di Foggia |
| 29 | StartNet Youth |

| StartNet Europe Network | |
|-------------------------|---|
| N | Organisation Name |
| 1 | Goethe Institut |
| 11 | Associazione Cometa |
| 12 | #Progettiamociilfuturo |
| 13 | STAYnet |
| 14 | Viko – Vilniaus Koleguia University of Applied Sciences |
| 15 | RuhrFutur |
| 16 | CYC – Check Your Change |
| 17 | Stadt Mannheim |
| 18 | Organization for social innovation |
| 19 | Fundación Santa María la Real |
| 20 | Şcoala de Valori |
| 21 | Turku Finland |
| 22 | Fundación Secretariado Gitano |
| 23 | KOST Tirol |
| 24 | Jump naar Werk |
| 25 | Arbeiterkammer Oberösterreich |
| 26 | Apprentis d’Auteuil |
| 27 | Zaklada Znanje na djelu – Stiftung Wissen am Werk |
| 28 | ARNO |

Source: authors' elaboration

The central actors in the StartNet network are the two backbone offices: the European backbone in Brussels (Goethe Institut; node 1) and the regional backbone in Rome (GINNlab; node 2). The backbone offices hold the central positions in the network and act as intermediaries in most of the network's communications, so they have the greatest number of connections compared to all other partners.

Although this role is justifiable, as the two backbone offices handle most of the network communication and coordination activities, this poses a risk to the sustainability of the network. As explained in Section 5.1.6, the partnerships cultivated within a heterogeneous network such as this are unlikely to be sustained without a central coordinating body, which is likely to happen upon project completion.

Within the European network, seven partner organisations indicated that they did not communicate regularly. There were STAYnet, Check Your Change, Organisation for Social Innovation, Turku Finland, KOST Tirol and Arbeiterkammer Oberösterreich. Some of these organisations indicated that they had no relations with other network members, whereas some had become less active within the network in recent years and so did not maintain frequent communication with other members. The evaluators excluded these actors from the analysis, reducing the number of network members included for analysis to 26 (i.e. 26 nodes).

Below are the summary indicators used to assess the StartNet II network:

- **Diameter** (=4) is the maximum number of nodes that must be passed to connect one network partner with another. For example, Confindustria Puglia (node 5) and MIUR (node 3) are at extreme ends of the network, so they are 4 degrees apart. This indicator suggests that the network is compact, as the majority of nodes are centrally grouped with many connections between them.
- **Average distance** (=1.9) is the average number of nodes to be crossed to reach another node. This indicator suggests that the network is efficient, as there are many direct connections between nodes.
- **Density of interactions** (=0.162) is the degree of social integration within a group. The density of a network is calculated as the ratio between the observed number of ties and the number of all possible ties between nodes, given the number of nodes. This indicator suggests that the frequency of interactions between network members could be improved and there is potential for new relationships to be developed between nodes.

STARTNET ITALY NETWORK

An in-depth analysis of the StartNet Italy network is presented in Figure 10. The longest-established StartNet partners in Apulia and Basilicata are included. The majority of the partners are based in Apulia, with the exception of the school office in Basilicata.

Figure 10. Social network analysis of StartNet Italy



Source: author’s elaboration

Figure 10 shows that the central actors in the network are **GINNlab** and **NOVA Onlus**, which play a key role in facilitating communications between StartNet Italy partners. This suggests that Nova Onlus could potentially play a more prominent role in maintaining the network once the current funding period ends, by maintaining communication channels as well as promoting cooperation and collaboration among network partners.

Furthermore, we can also see that (i) **no node is disconnected from the network**, making it compact, and (ii) the central connecting role between the Business World and School System is played by GINNlab (node 2) NOVA Onlus (node 8); Vincenzo Casillo Foundation (node 9) and StartNet Youth (node 29).

There are 28 connections between the 10 nodes (see Figure 10). As with the social network analysis of StartNet II, only those communications defined as FREQUENT (occurring at least once every three months) were considered in the analysis, for the same reasons.

Below are the summary indicators used to assess the StartNet Italy network:

- **Diameter** (=3) shows that the longest path between any two nodes within the social network consists of three steps at most.
- **Average distance** (=1.48) shows that the average distance between any pair of nodes is approximately 1.5 steps, which means that the social network is highly connected.
- The **density of interactions** (=0.53) indicates a good level of interaction between the nodes in the network.

Overall, these data suggest that the regional network is efficient in disseminating information and that nodes tend to be well connected. However, network connectivity could still be improved.

6. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

STRENGTHS

- **The Project created a proactive and engaged youth community network.** StartNet created a solid and cohesive youth community whose members actively participate in network meetings and project activities. Despite the potential volatility of the target group, the degree of community membership was more than satisfactory, and the motivation of the youths involved is promising for the sustainability of the youth network itself. The community of StartNet Youth, initially created as an offshoot of StartNet Italy, is now transforming into a third-sector entity so as to continue its activities independently.
- **The Project serves as a knowledge and expertise incubator.** For six years, StartNet has involved and trained various local and regional stakeholders (public and private) in and through its projects, promoting exchange of knowledge and practices between individuals, organisations and sectors in different regions and countries. Those stakeholders thus acquired new knowledge on issues of school-to-work transition and youth inclusion, making them indirect beneficiaries of StartNet. This was especially so for those network partners who developed expertise in project writing and project management through collaboration with StartNet.
- **Project network design allows for bidirectional transfer of knowledge:** open discussions at the European level on issues of school-to-work transition and youth inclusion informed concrete project offerings at the regional level. In turn, the practical experience arising from the realisation of concrete projects further enriched discussion at the European level, promoting exchange of new practices and regional experiences. The project networks enable exchange of good practices and create synergistic interactions between stakeholders.
- **The project network is effectively coordinated.** The StartNet II network is a heterogeneous one, requiring management by a neutral coordinating body in the form of two backbone offices whose actions were guided by the project objectives. Thus, they were able to connect and capitalise on the knowledge, skills and opportunities provided by the network members across three sectors (business, education and third sector) without losing focus. This coordination was facilitated by collective impact methodology.
- **Ability to attract external funding:** the StartNet II project, together with a number of Network partners at both the Italian and European levels, participated in and won multiple calls for proposals at the European level. These funds, as well as those received for other projects (such as Or.Co. financed by Con i Bambini or ProActive Training financed by the Region of Puglia) made it possible to obtain additional funds of a certain volume to finance the various activities promoted by StartNet II. StartNet II has thus acted as a *multiplier project* in these terms.
- **Project staff are flexible and adaptable to global health crises.** StartNet II staff responded promptly to the COVID-19 pandemic by adapting in-person meetings to online platforms and by adjusting activities to meet participant needs, to maximize participation and effectiveness. During the pandemic, staff facilitated productive exchanges between partners and network members by designing appropriate online activities, then resumed in-person meetings whenever possible and practical to do so, to maximise the quality of participant involvement and exchange.

WEAKNESSES

- **In accordance with Stiftung Mercator, a full set of impact, outcome and output indicators, with the relative targets, was not established since the beginning of the project.** This resulted in a limited capacity to share monitoring information with intervention partners and a lower level of shared ownership. It also impeded the promotion of a common and inclusive project vision for stakeholders.
- **The project experienced some issues with internal communication,** especially at the regional level. Countermeasures were taken (see Section 5.1.4 Efficiency) that resulted in management and decision-making processes being effectively safeguarded, but at the cost of reduced participants inclusion. Initially, the network coordination meetings involved the operating, signatory and institutional partners simultaneously. However, project staff reorganised processes for the remaining months, so that network coordination was managed by two distinct parties: (i) signatory and institutional partners and (ii) operational partners.
- **The StartNet project is complex and difficult to elaborate both internally and externally,** resulting in some confusion regarding the role and responsibilities of StartNet in various projects implemented at regional level.
- **There was difficulty in obtaining new funding to finance StartNet's operational structures** (the two backbone offices), which could jeopardise the sustainability of its networks.
- **The decision to prioritise strengthening existing partnerships limited the network's expansion.** In recent years, StartNet focused on strengthening relationships between existing network partners rather than recruiting new members. This limited its growth in terms of numbers, composition and sourcing input from new and emerging sectors (e.g. the environmental sector). This growth potential could be advantageous and should be considered in the third project phase.

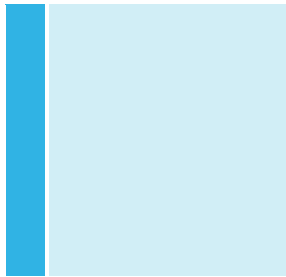
7. LESSONS LEARNT

The Project aimed to increase its regional and European **networks’ capacity** to promote youth employment and youth inclusion in labour markets and society.

StartNet II is the second phase of StartNet, which has operated for more than six years. Numerous lessons have been learnt by project staff, partners and stakeholders during these years of activity.

The final evaluation produced the following primary points for discussion, **to be considered for follow-up, scale-up or replicability of project activities.**

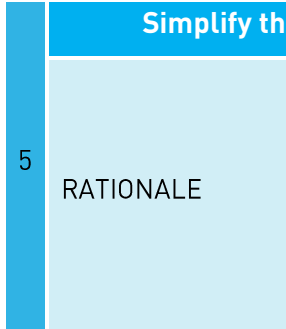
| | |
|---|--|
| Foster youth involvement and youth leadership to promote youth inclusion and empowerment | |
| 1 | <p>RATIONALE</p> <p>The primary beneficiaries of StartNet II are youths in southern Italy, who are supported in school-to-school or school-to-work transition. During the implementation phase, the active involvement of youths, especially the members of the StartNet Youth community, positively transformed this target group by turning beneficiaries into real change-makers who are involved in decision-making, meetings, events, projects, workshops and peer education.</p> |
| Expand and strengthen the network to further enrich it with new expertise | |
| 2 | <p>RATIONALE</p> <p>StartNet II recognised the importance of involving public and private actors from different sectors connected within its network. It adopted a collective impact approach to unite different specialists and representatives with diverse expertise towards a common purpose. The development potential of the network is yet untapped. Despite some efforts, potential key stakeholders such as the Basilicata region employment centres and the environment sector are still not formally included in the network.</p> |
| Continue the systematisation of individual projects by creating toolkits to promote project scalability in other regions | |
| 3 | <p>RATIONALE</p> <p>StartNet launched several pilot projects that have been implemented within schools using funding from Apulia Region (e.g. ProActive Training, Building Futures). These replicable projects have been systematised into toolkits for dissemination in other schools. The same was done for the European project, Skills For Life, and in the Youth Community Creation Guide.</p> <p>The importance of systematising project activities and actions is recognised as a means of successfully replicating best practices for youth orientation. Improving systemic dissemination of successful initiatives could considerably increase project implementation elsewhere.</p> |
| Create an internal project monitoring system to track progress and achievements and to facilitate external communication | |
| 4 | <p>RATIONALE</p> <p>An internal monitoring system should be established to track projects from implementation through to execution phases. This will help to measure the progress of StartNet II’s various project, event and workshop activities, and to valorise the effects and impacts on beneficiaries. An internal monitoring and evaluation strategy would crystallise the project vision by defining medium and</p> |



long-term objectives, measurable targets and pathways for action. The lack of central monitoring for StartNet II disadvantaged the internal monitoring of individual projects.

The final evaluation process revealed that greater resources should be allocated in the next phase towards implementing internal monitoring systems, to enable staff to identify potential bottlenecks in the implementation process and to improve efficiency in project delivery.

Simplify the project to facilitate communication within and outside the network



5

RATIONALE

The multi-actor, multilevel StartNet II project is not easily communicated or understood, internally or externally. The Project's theory of change was refined during the mid-term evaluation, to refine organisational structure, objectives and expected results, activities and related output indicators. This clarified the role and responsibilities of project stakeholders and strengthened their contribution.

Periodic meetings with between project staff and stakeholders are recommended, to ensure internal alignment and to avoid deviation from stated project objectives.

8. APPENDIX I – EVALUATION AGENDA

| DATE | ACTIVITY | STAKEHOLDER |
|--|----------------------------|---|
| Monday 3 rd April 9.00-11.00 | Focus Group Discussion | StartNet Youth |
| Monday 3 rd April 11.30-13.00 | Focus Group Discussion | Building Futures Teachers |
| Monday 3 rd April 11.30-13.00 | Focus Group Discussion | Building Futures Teachers |
| Monday 3 rd April 15.30-17.00 | Individual Interview (KII) | Simona Ferrante |
| Monday 3 rd April 15.30-17.00 | Individual Interview (KII) | Giulia Romagnolo - StartNet Youth |
| Tuesday 4 th April 11.00-13.00 | Focus Group Discussion | Building Futures Students |
| Wednesday 5 th April 9.00- 10.00 | Individual Interview (KII) | Perla Zanini - StartNet Italy |
| Wednesday 5 th April 10.30- 11.00 | Individual Interview (KII) | Gesa Spätling - StartNet Europe |
| Thursday 6 th April 9.30-10.30 | Individual Interview (KII) | Shemsedin Iljaz - StartNet Europe |
| Thursday 6 th April 11.00-12.00 | Individual Interview (KII) | Jan Wilker - StartNet Europe |
| Thursday 6 th April 15.30-16.30 | Individual Interview (KII) | Angelika Bartolomäi - StartNet Italy |
| Friday 7 th April 10.00-11.00 | Individual Interview (KII) | Claudia Datena & Debora Enfante- StartNet Italy |
| Wednesday 12 April 14.30-15.30 | Individual Interview (KII) | Gianpietro Losalpio - StartNet Italy |
| Thursday 13 April 9.30-10.30 | Individual Interview (KII) | Emanuele Renna - StartNet Youth |

9. APPENDIX II – PARTNERS INCLUDED IN STARTNET II NETWORK

STARTNET II PARTNER NETWORK



ITALIAN NETWORK



EUROPEAN NETWORK



arco

ACTION RESEARCH FOR
CO-DEVELOPMENT

www.arcolab.org

