

**Interreg  
Danube Region**



Co-funded by  
the European Union



**Back on Track**

# Output 2.3

**Pilot Mentoring Program tailored  
to the specific needs of rural  
NEETs**

# Disclaimer and Acknowledgement

This paper was supported as part of Back on Track, an Interreg Danube Region Programme project co-funded by the European Union.

## Project information

Grant agreement No.	DRP0200145
Acronym	Back on Track
Full title	Offering tailor-made integration support by setting up a pilot mentoring program to assist rural NEETs in establishing individual plan for integration into education, training or labour market
Output No.	Output 2.3
Output Title	Pilot Mentoring Program tailored to the specific needs of rural NEETs, offering personalized information and career guidance to ensure the smooth transition from NEET to EET
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# 1. Introduction - The Pilot Action in Practice

This document captures the practical core of the Back on Track project: the moment when the mentoring model moved from design to real-life testing across five pilot countries. It is not merely a summary of activities, but a validated knowledge base proving that the project's theoretical framework is operationally sound across five diverse socio-economic systems: Hungary, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, and Bulgaria. The purpose of this Output is to describe how the pilot mentoring programme was implemented in practice, how fieldwork was carried out, and how the model was tested under real rural conditions.

The mentoring programme did not emerge spontaneously. It builds on a structured preparation phase. First, a comprehensive guideline for setting up the mentoring programme was developed (D.2.2.1). This guideline defined the framework of cooperation between mentors and mentees, the frequency and format of meetings, the use of Individual Development Plans, and the monitoring tools necessary to track progress.

Second, territorially adapted outreach activities were implemented (D.2.2.2) to identify, engage and onboard rural NEETs who would participate in the pilot. These activities ensured that the programme reached young people who are not in employment, education or training and who often face multiple and overlapping barriers in rural areas. Only after this preparation phase could the actual pilot mentoring programme begin (D.2.2.3). Trained mentors, who had completed the mentoring training under Activity A.2.1, started working individually with rural NEETs in a structured four-month cycle of regular meetings. Together, mentors and mentees developed personalised Development Plans tailored to each young person's life circumstances, interests, skills and opportunities.

This Output therefore does not describe separate documents or isolated activities. It presents one integrated pilot action in which:

- the methodological framework was operationalised,
- rural NEETs were actively engaged through structured outreach and onboarding,
- individual mentoring relationships were established and maintained,
- and the mentoring model was tested across five different territorial and socio-economic contexts.

The following sections describe how this integrated process functioned in the field, how mentoring unfolded in practice, and what the pilot revealed about the conditions under which structured mentoring can effectively support rural NEETs on their pathway towards employment, education or training.

This document therefore presents not only implementation steps, but the tested functioning of a mentoring ecosystem under real rural conditions. It demonstrates how methodological preparation, targeted outreach and structured mentoring interacted in

practice, and what this interaction revealed about effective and transferable integration support for rural NEETs.

## 1. From Guideline to Operational Setup

To ensure that the transition from planning to real-life implementation was clear and structured, this phase focused on translating the mentoring framework into operational practice.

The Guideline for setting up the Back on Track mentoring programme (D.2.2.1) provided the common structure for all partners. However, its purpose was not to remain a reference document. It had to become a working system that could function consistently in five different rural contexts: Hungary, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania and Bulgaria.

This stage ensured that mentoring would be implemented as a structured and professional pilot action rather than an informal support initiative.

### 2.1 Translating the Framework into Practice

Before engaging the first participant, partners aligned on how the guideline would function in practice.

This included:

- confirming mentors who had completed the mentoring training under Activity A.2.1,
- agreeing on the operational timeline of the pilot phase,
- clarifying mentor responsibilities and reporting obligations,
- preparing documentation templates and development plan formats,
- establishing confidentiality and ethical standards.

This alignment phase was essential. It ensured that although implementation would take place in different territorial contexts, the mentoring structure would remain coherent and comparable across all five countries.

The pilot was therefore launched as one jointly structured model, not as five isolated initiatives.

### 2.2 Preparing Mentors for Implementation

Mentors were central to the success of the pilot. All mentors participating in the programme had completed the dedicated mentoring training under Activity A.2.1, ensuring a shared understanding of:

- mentoring principles,

- communication approaches,
- goal-setting techniques,
- working with vulnerable young people in rural settings.

In addition to training, mentors were introduced to the specific tools that would structure the pilot action:

- the Individual NEET Development Plan,
- baseline and follow-up questionnaires,
- session documentation templates,
- progress monitoring sheets.

This preparation ensured that mentors entered the field equipped not only with motivation, but with structured methods for guiding and documenting the integration process.

## 2.3 Structuring the Mentoring Rhythm

The guideline defined mentoring as a regular and goal-oriented process. During operational setup, this structure was clearly translated into practice.

The pilot mentoring cycle was defined as:

- approximately four months in duration,
- based on weekly (or in justified cases fortnightly) meetings,
- with sessions lasting around 60 minutes.

In rural contexts, where young people often experience instability or lack of routine, regular meetings provided continuity and predictability. This regular rhythm became one of the stabilising elements of the programme.

At the same time, flexibility was built into the format of meetings. Depending on accessibility and local conditions, sessions could take place:

- face-to-face,
- via phone,
- or through online platforms.

This combination of structure and flexibility allowed the mentoring model to function under diverse rural conditions.

## 2.4 The Individual Development Plan as the Core Working Tool

At the centre of the operational setup stood the Individual NEET Development Plan. Each participant co-created this plan with their mentor at the beginning of the mentoring process. The plan served as a personalised roadmap reflecting:

- the young person's current life situation,
- strengths and competences,

- barriers and challenges,
- educational and employment aspirations.

The plan included:

- clearly defined short-term and medium-term goals,
- agreed action steps,
- timelines,
- and space for regular reflection and revision.

Importantly, the development plan was not a static form. It was reviewed and adjusted throughout the mentoring cycle, ensuring that support remained relevant and responsive to changing circumstances.

The development plan therefore functioned as both a motivational instrument and a structured monitoring tool.

## 2.5 Integrating Monitoring and Evaluation Tools

To validate the pilot as a tested model rather than a one-time intervention, structured monitoring was embedded from the beginning. The monitoring approach combined two layers: a common evaluation design defined in the mentoring framework, and practical field-based monitoring carried out by mentors during implementation.

Before the mentoring cycle started, baseline assessments were planned to capture the participant's starting point, including:

- self-confidence,
- skills and competences,
- employment or education status.

During the mentoring cycle, the most consistent monitoring evidence documented across pilot practice came from ongoing session-level tracking. Mentors recorded:

- frequency and format of meetings,
- progress toward goals agreed in the Development Plan,
- emerging barriers,
- and adjustments introduced to keep the mentoring process realistic and continuous.

The monitoring framework also foresees post-programme assessment and a three-month follow-up stage to observe early sustainability beyond the four-month cycle. In the national pilot reports, however, monitoring is described primarily through implementation documentation and qualitative mentor observations rather than consolidated three-point questionnaire results.

Embedding monitoring tools at the operational stage ensured that the pilot generated structured evidence from the field, supported continuous refinement during

implementation, and provided a credible basis for assessing both strengths and limits of the mentoring model under real rural conditions.

## 2.6 Ready for Field Activation

By the end of this phase, the project had trained and aligned its mentors, defined the session structure, and prepared all necessary planning and monitoring tools. The pilot mentoring model was operationally ready to move into the field. The next essential step was to activate the target group through targeted outreach and onboarding, allowing the structured mentoring journey to begin.

## 2. Outreach and Onboarding as the Entry Phase of the Pilot

Once the mentoring framework had been operationally prepared and mentors were ready to begin their work, the pilot entered its first real field phase: outreach and onboarding.

This stage marked the transition from internal preparation to community-level implementation. While the previous phase focused on structure and tools, this phase focused on people specifically, identifying and engaging rural NEETs who would participate in the mentoring programme.

Outreach was not treated as a separate or optional activity. It was an integral part of the pilot action. Without successful outreach, the mentoring model could not be tested under real conditions.

### 3.1 Understanding the Challenge of Reaching Rural NEETs

Rural NEETs are often difficult to reach through standard institutional channels. Many are disconnected not only from employment and education, but also from formal support systems.

In rural areas, barriers may include:

- limited access to information,
- geographical distance from services,
- lack of transport,
- distrust toward institutions,
- low self-confidence after prolonged inactivity.

For this reason, outreach could not rely solely on formal announcements or digital promotion. It required local engagement, personal contact and cooperation with actors who already had access to young people in rural communities.

This understanding shaped the outreach strategy implemented under D.2.2.2.

## 3.2 Implementing the Outreach Strategy

Partners implemented territorially adapted outreach activities in each of the five pilot countries. Although formats differed according to local conditions, the overall objective remained the same: to recruit 50 rural NEETs into the mentoring programme.

Outreach methods included:

- cooperation with public employment services,
- collaboration with NGOs working with youth,
- contact with local schools and vocational institutions,
- information sessions in community centres,
- online communication through social media,
- word-of-mouth through local networks.

In several cases, recruitment depended heavily on personal recommendation and trust-based contact rather than formal advertising.

This phase required flexibility. In some regions, institutional cooperation played a stronger role. In others, informal community networks proved more effective.

Despite these differences, outreach across all countries aimed to identify young people who:

- were not in employment, education or training,
- lived in rural areas,
- and were willing to engage in a structured mentoring process.

By the end of this phase, 50 participants had been recruited across the five countries.

## 3.3 The Onboarding Process: Preparing for Mentoring

Recruitment alone did not automatically lead to mentoring.

Before the mentoring cycle began, each participant went through an onboarding phase.

This stage served as a bridge between outreach and structured mentoring.

During onboarding:

- the structure of the programme was explained,
- the duration and expectations were clarified,
- commitment to regular meetings was discussed,
- initial needs and goals were explored,
- mentor -mentee matching was finalised.

This conversation was important for building the foundation of trust. It allowed young people to understand that the programme was not a one-time consultation, but a four-month structured journey requiring active participation.

Onboarding also allowed mentors to assess:

- motivation levels,
- immediate barriers,
- preferred communication formats,
- practical constraints (such as availability or transport issues).

Through this process, the pilot ensured that mentoring relationships were based on informed participation rather than passive enrolment.

### 3.4 Matching Mentors and Mentees

An important operational step during onboarding was matching.

Where possible, mentor -mentee pairs were established based on:

- compatibility of communication style,
- geographical proximity,
- availability,
- and, when relevant, thematic interests (e.g., employment sectors).

This matching process contributed to the stability of mentoring relationships during the four-month cycle.

By consciously pairing mentors and mentees, the programme strengthened the likelihood of sustained engagement and trust.

### 3.5 From Engagement to Structured Mentoring

The final step of the outreach and onboarding phase was the formal start of mentoring sessions.

The first mentoring meetings typically focused on:

- establishing rapport,
- discussing the participant's current life situation,
- initiating baseline assessment tools,
- starting the Individual NEET Development Plan.

This moment marked the transition from activation to structured support.

Importantly, outreach and onboarding ensured continuity. Participants did not experience a sudden shift from recruitment to goal-setting. Instead, they moved gradually from initial contact, through clarification and trust-building, into a structured mentoring process.

This continuity was particularly significant in rural contexts, where abrupt transitions may reduce engagement.

### 3.6 Outreach as a Tested Component of the Pilot

The pilot action demonstrated that outreach is not separate from mentoring; it is the first stage of integration support. In rural contexts, where many NEETs are disconnected from institutions and services, recruitment is not only about “finding participants”. It is about creating the first conditions for engagement: trust, clarity and realistic expectations.

The effectiveness of the mentoring model depended directly on:

- the quality of recruitment,
- the clarity of onboarding,
- and the initial level of trust established.

By embedding outreach as a structural phase of the pilot, the project ensured that the mentoring programme started under realistic conditions rather than with “ideal” participants who are already motivated and easy to reach. This made the pilot more credible as a test of the model under real rural constraints.

At the same time, the outreach and onboarding phase generated an important practical insight for future replication: rural recruitment works best when it combines clear communication of programme expectations with trust-based local access points. In other words, outreach is most effective when it is not treated as promotion, but as a gradual engagement process that prepares participants for sustained participation in mentoring. With participants onboarded and mentoring pairs established, the pilot moved fully into its core implementation phase: the structured four-month mentoring cycle, where the model was tested in practice across five countries.

## 3. Implementation and Validation: Realities of Rural Mentoring

The transnational pilot of the Back on Track mentoring programme transitioned the theoretical framework into field reality across five culturally and economically diverse countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Serbia). By testing the methodology in varying environments, the project successfully validated its core approach while demonstrating the necessary flexibility to address specific local vulnerabilities.

### 4.1 Structural Consistency Across Contexts

To move beyond qualitative observations, the Back on Track pilot was closely monitored using quantitative completion metrics. The data gathered across all five piloting countries demonstrates the exceptional effectiveness of the tailored mentoring model, particularly in retaining participants from highly vulnerable backgrounds.

Out of the initially recruited group (51 young people), **50 rural NEETs officially started** the 16-session mentoring programme. The overall completion and retention data is as follows:

- **Total Participants Started:** 50
- **Total Participants Finished (16 sessions):** 46
- **Overall Retention Rate: 92%** (*An exceptionally high rate for this vulnerable target group, proving the "trust before tools" concept.*)

#### **Breakdown by Country / Partner:**

- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** 12 started / 12 finished (*100% retention*)
- **Romania:** 11 started / 11 finished (*100% retention*)
- **Hungary (HICS & Panov Novum):** 11 started / 11 finished (*100% retention*)
- **Serbia:** 10 started / 8 finished (*80% retention*)
- **Bulgaria:** 6 started / 4 finished (*66% retention*)

**Contextualizing the Drop-outs (The 8%):** The qualitative country reports reveal that the few drop-outs were generally not due to a failure of the mentoring methodology, but rather external life circumstances or deeply ingrained societal perceptions:

- *Unavoidable Life Events:* In Hungary and Bulgaria, drop-outs were caused by sudden family relocation to another region or severe physical accidents.
- *Expectation Management:* In Serbia, two participants withdrew due to unrealistic expectations of securing a "dream job" immediately, struggling with the realization that personal development requires long-term effort and resilience.
- *Positive Drop-outs:* In Bulgaria, one participant could not complete the full session plan because he successfully entered the labour market during the mentoring process.

**Immediate Transitions & Soft Milestones (EET and beyond):** Even before the 3-month follow-up evaluation, the monitoring data captured immediate, life-changing transitions triggered by the mentoring process. Actual examples from the participant logs and country reports include:

- **Employment & Entrepreneurship:** Direct job placements occurred in Bulgaria and Hungary (including public employment). In Romania, one participant successfully registered and opened his own small business (a barber shop) immediately at the end of the programme.
- **Administrative Activation:** In Bulgaria, mentors helped highly marginalized NEETs take the fundamental first steps—obtaining their official ID cards and registering with employment services.
- **Overcoming Daily Barriers:** In Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in Hungary (working with young mothers in segregated communities), mentors successfully kept participants engaged by flexibly adapting to their daily struggles, helping them set new, internally motivated goals such as obtaining a driver's license.

This data clearly validates that the Back on Track mentoring model is not just a theoretical framework, but a highly effective activation tool.

## 4.2 Universal Patterns: What Worked Across Borders

Instead of presenting five isolated national reports, the pilot evaluation revealed striking transnational similarities. Regardless of the specific country, mentors reported that the success of the intervention relied on three universal principles. These patterns validate the core design of the Back on Track model:

**1. Trust Comes Before Tools (Relational Continuity)** Across all regions, mentors emphasized that the provided tools (SWOT analyses, development plans) were entirely ineffective until a solid personal relationship was established. For many rural NEETs, previous interactions with formal institutions had been characterized by failure or rejection. Mentors often spent the first 3 to 4 sessions solely on building rapport and establishing a "safe space." The mentor acted less as an instructor and more as a stabilising anchor.

**2. The Power of Structured Rhythm** Many participants lacked any form of structured daily or weekly routine. The commitment to a regular, scheduled mentoring session provided a rare and vital point of stability. This weekly rhythm gradually rebuilt the participants' capacity for time management, responsibility, and sustained engagement, which are critical prerequisites for the labour market.

**3. Behavioural Activation through Micro-Achievements** Setting large, abstract goals (e.g., "finding a full-time career") often overwhelmed participants, leading to drops in motivation. The pilot confirmed that the most effective strategy was breaking down the Individual Development Plan (IDP) into immediate, highly achievable micro-steps. Success

in small tasks—such as writing a single paragraph of a CV or making a phone call—created a "success momentum" that motivated mentees to tackle larger challenges.

### 4.3 Adapting to Diverse Vulnerabilities: Field Evidence and Case Studies

While the structured 16-session framework provided the backbone of the programme, the true strength of the pilot lay in its adaptability. The monitoring reports revealed that "rural NEETs" are not a homogeneous group. Mentors successfully adapted the methodology to address deeply specific vulnerabilities, yielding profound personal transformations.

Below are key operational contexts and real-world case studies demonstrating the model's impact:

#### 4.3.1 Administrative Invisibility and Extreme Marginalisation (Bulgaria & Hungary)

In several rural areas, mentors worked with youth from segregated communities or extreme poverty. These participants often lacked basic formal education, and some were literally "invisible" to the system, lacking official identification documents. For these individuals, the mentoring process was not initially about soft skills, but about fundamental administrative activation and survival.

**CASE STUDY: From "Invisible" to Employed (Bulgaria)** **The Challenge:** Mentors in Bulgaria engaged with highly marginalized NEETs who were completely disconnected from state support, lacking even basic identification documents necessary to apply for a job or social services. **The Intervention:** The mentor shifted the immediate focus of the Development Plan to basic civic activation. The mentor guided and accompanied the participant through the bureaucratic process of obtaining an ID card and subsequently registering with the official employment services. **The Result:** Equipped with valid documents and newfound confidence, the participant successfully entered the labour market and started working before the 16-session programme even concluded.

#### 4.3.2 Nurturing Hidden Entrepreneurial Drive (Romania)

In regions where traditional employment opportunities are scarce, some NEETs possessed strong informal skills and entrepreneurial ambitions but lacked the structural

knowledge to monetize them. Mentors adapted the programme to function as an entry-level business incubator.

**CASE STUDY: The Barber Shop (Romania) The Challenge:** A participant joined the programme with a clear practical talent and a vision for a personal business, but lacked the strategic planning and confidence to execute it in a formal market. **The Intervention:** The mentor utilized the NEET Development Plan to structure a realistic business roadmap. Sessions focused on market analysis, setting up a business framework, and translating informal skills into a professional service offering. **The Result:** Immediately upon completing the mentoring programme, the participant (Laris Andrei) successfully registered and opened his own small business—a local barber shop—demonstrating direct transition into self-employment.

### 4.3.3 Overcoming Generational Stagnation and Segregation (Hungary)

Partners in Hungary (HICS & Pannon Novum) worked extensively in small rural settlements, often with young mothers living in Roma segregated communities. In these environments, unemployment is often reproduced across generations, and early school leaving is common.

**CASE STUDY: The Driving License as a Catalyst (Hungary) The Challenge:** With virtually no local job opportunities and severe mobility constraints (lack of public transport), standard job-seeking advice was ineffective. Furthermore, participants faced the challenge of balancing childcare with personal development. **The Intervention:** Mentors focused on building intrinsic motivation and expanding the participants' physical and mental boundaries. Instead of pushing for immediate employment, the mentor helped a participant identify a highly motivating, achievable goal: obtaining a driving license. **The Result:** Achieving this goal not only solved the physical mobility barrier but radically boosted the participant's self-esteem. Combined with the mentoring support, participants in this group successfully secured placements in public employment, breaking the cycle of total inactivity.

### 4.3.4 Managing Expectations and Digital Barriers (Serbia & Bosnia and Herzegovina)

A specific sub-group of NEETs exhibited a different challenge: they possessed basic education but held highly unrealistic expectations of the labour market, expecting immediate "dream jobs" without continuous effort. Additionally, balancing the programme's digital learning components with daily life responsibilities proved challenging.

**CASE STUDY: The Reality Check and Resilience Building (Serbia)** **The Challenge:** Several mentees joined the programme expecting quick fixes, believing that employment relies on external connections rather than personal competence. When rapid results did not materialize, motivation plummeted. **The Intervention:** Mentors had to actively manage expectations, shifting the focus of the sessions from "immediate employment" to "long-term resilience and continuous self-development." They used the sessions to realistically map local labour market demands against the mentees' current skill sets. **The Result:** While a few dropped out due to a lack of immediate gratification, the majority adapted their mindset. They learned to value the process of acquiring new competencies and completing the programme, understanding that meaningful change is a gradual, sustained effort.

## 4.4 Adapting to Diverse Vulnerabilities: How the Model Responded to Different Rural Realities

Although the mentoring programme followed a shared structure in all five countries, the realities in which it was implemented differed significantly.

The pilot did not operate in a uniform environment. Instead, it unfolded across very different types of rural vulnerability. This diversity became a crucial testing ground for the mentoring model: could one structured framework remain effective in contexts shaped by ethnic marginalisation, early motherhood, administrative exclusion, digital gaps or unstable motivation?

The following examples illustrate how the model responded to these varied realities.

### **Ethnic Marginalisation and Generational Poverty**

#### **Hungary - PANOV (segregated Roma rural community)**

In the PANOV pilot, mentoring took place in a segregated Roma settlement marked by long-term unemployment and generational poverty.

For many participants, limited exposure to stable employment or successful educational pathways shaped their expectations. Institutional distrust and low self-confidence were recurring themes.

In this environment, mentors could not begin directly with labour market planning. Initial sessions focused on:

- building trust,
- reframing self-perception,
- identifying existing strengths through SWOT reflection,
- defining very small and realistic first steps.

Here, the development plan often began with stabilisation rather than ambition. This context showed that when working in environments of structural marginalisation, mentoring must first rebuild belief in personal agency before discussing integration into education or employment. The model allowed this adjustment without losing structure.

## **Early Parenthood and Social Isolation**

### **Hungary - HICS (rural young mothers in remote villages)**

The HICS pilot worked primarily with young mothers living in remote villages. The vulnerability here was different. It was not primarily ethnic marginalisation, but limited mobility, childcare responsibilities and social isolation. Sessions had to be scheduled flexibly around family routines. For several participants, the weekly mentoring meeting became the only structured, dedicated time for personal reflection and planning. Unlike in some other contexts, completion rates were high. The structured rhythm appeared to provide stability and continuity in daily lives shaped by childcare and domestic responsibilities. This context demonstrated that mentoring can serve not only as career guidance, but as structured personal support that strengthens long-term engagement.

## **Administrative Barriers and Institutional Exclusion**

### **Bulgaria**

In Bulgaria, several participants faced practical obstacles that preceded any discussion about employment or education. Missing documentation, lack of registration, and bureaucratic barriers prevented immediate labour market engagement. Mentoring therefore began with resolving administrative issues step by step. Development plans included:

- obtaining identification documents,
- registering with employment services,
- clarifying legal status.

Breaking these tasks into small SMART steps allowed participants to experience progress even before entering training or employment pathways. This revealed that in some rural contexts, integration begins with institutional inclusion.

## **Digital Literacy Gaps**

### **Bosnia and Herzegovina**

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, digital exclusion emerged as a stronger barrier than initially anticipated.

While the mentoring model included digital learning components, some participants required additional support in navigating online platforms and completing digital modules.

Mentors therefore had to combine digital instruction with personal explanation and follow-up. Without this relational reinforcement, digital engagement would likely have declined.

This confirmed an important finding:

Digital tools are effective only when embedded within consistent human mentoring.

Building on this experience, the pilot also suggests that digital components should be accompanied by appropriate guidance and support mechanisms. Future scaling of the model should therefore move beyond providing digital access toward assisted digital engagement. This includes:

- **Embedded Basic Digital Skills Training:** Integrating short, practical digital tasks into the early sessions of the mentoring cycle (e.g., creating an email, navigating a job portal).
- **Guided Platform Navigation:** Ensuring mentors provide hands-on support during the first use of any digital tools to build the participant's confidence.
- **Inclusivity through Assistance:** Recognizing that for many rural NEETs, digital tools are a source of anxiety. Assisted access ensures that those with lower literacy are not excluded, but rather empowered through the mentoring relationship.

By strengthening the digital component with direct guidance, the program can ensure that technology acts as a bridge to opportunities rather than an additional barrier to entry.

## Fluctuating Motivation and Economic Pressure

### **Romania and Serbia**

In Romania and Serbia, mentors encountered participants with varying levels of motivation.

Some participants engaged actively from the beginning. Others experienced fluctuations linked to:

- seasonal work,
- migration considerations,
- urgent financial needs,
- family influence.

Retention depended strongly on early clarification of expectations and visible short-term achievements.

In cases where participants left the programme, reasons were linked primarily to external pressures rather than dissatisfaction with mentoring itself.

This demonstrated that rural mentoring programmes must anticipate economic volatility and integrate motivational stabilisation strategies.

## What the Pilot Revealed Across Contexts

Looking across all five countries, several patterns became visible:

- Trust-building is a prerequisite for structured goal-setting.
- Small, achievable steps strengthen long-term commitment.
- Regular mentoring rhythm provides psychological stability.
- Flexibility in format increases accessibility.
- External family and economic factors influence retention significantly.

Most importantly, the mentoring model did not collapse under diversity. Instead, it adapted within a stable structure.

This balance between consistency and contextual flexibility is one of the strongest outcomes of the pilot implementation phase.

## 4.5 Retention, Dropouts and Structural Limits of the Model

The pilot did not take place in controlled laboratory conditions. It unfolded in real rural environments where economic instability, family pressure and social vulnerability directly influenced participation. Across the five countries, retention patterns revealed important structural insights.

Where participants completed the programme (e.g. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary – HICS), several common factors were present:

- early establishment of trust
- clear expectation-setting during onboarding,
- stable weekly rhythm,
- visible short-term achievements,
- manageable socio-economic pressure.

Where participants discontinued participation (e.g. Hungary – PANOV; selected cases in Romania, Serbia and Bulgaria), the reasons were consistent across contexts:

- urgent need for income,
- family pressure or discouragement,
- migration or relocation
- fluctuating motivation,
- structural instability beyond the programme's control.

Importantly, no national report identified dissatisfaction with mentoring methodology as a primary cause of dropout. Instead, discontinuation was linked to external life pressures. This distinction is crucial for validating the model.

The pilot thus clarifies that retention in rural mentoring is not primarily a methodological issue, but a socio-economic one. Future scaling should therefore consider embedding mentoring within broader local support ecosystems, where possible, so that mentoring is reinforced by institutional cooperation and practical accessibility measures.

The mentoring framework itself did not fail. It was challenged by socio-economic volatility. This reveals an important boundary condition: the mentoring model is structurally sound, but its effectiveness depends on minimal stability in participants' external environment.

In addition to relational and motivational factors, the pilot also highlighted that practical constraints can significantly affect participation. In several rural contexts, participants faced everyday barriers such as limited transport options, lack of childcare, or restricted access to digital tools and online services. These constraints do not necessarily reflect a lack of motivation, but rather structural limitations that make regular participation more difficult. Addressing such practical barriers can therefore play an important role in supporting retention and enabling participants to fully benefit from the mentoring process.

From this, several preventive strategies emerge for future scaling:

- stronger family involvement where possible
- early clarification of time commitment,
- intensified support during motivation fluctuations,
- stronger integration with local employment institutions, community organisations and local employers who influence young people's opportunities and motivation in rural areas
- contingency planning for seasonal work interruptions.
- complementary practical support measures addressing participation barriers (e.g. transport support, childcare solutions or improved access to digital tools and connectivity)

The pilot therefore provided not only implementation results, but also a clearer understanding of the structural conditions under which rural mentoring is most effective.

## 4.6 What the Pilot Confirmed and What It Changed

Beyond implementation, The pilot generated validated knowledge about rural NEET integration.

Across five countries, despite very different socio-economic realities, several patterns repeated consistently.

### 1. Trust is the entry point to integration

In Hungary - PANOV(segregated Roma community), mentoring could not begin with labour market goals. It had to begin with rebuilding self-belief.

In Bulgaria, early sessions focused on stabilisation before any employment discussion.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, consistent weekly contact reinforced accountability.

The repeated pattern is clear:

Without relational trust, structured tools remain ineffective.

The pilot confirms that mentoring must begin with relationship-building, not target-setting.

## **2. Structured rhythm reduces psychological instability**

Across all countries, the weekly mentoring rhythm emerged as one of the most stabilising elements of the programme.

For rural young mothers in Hungary - HICS, the mentoring session often became the only structured personal development time.

In Romania and Serbia, predictable scheduling increased commitment.

The lesson:

Regularity creates psychological anchoring in otherwise unstable environments.

This insight strengthens the argument for maintaining weekly structure in future replication.

## **3. Micro-achievements rebuild agency**

In Bulgaria, resolving administrative issues (e.g. documentation) through SMART steps restored confidence. In Romania, clear SMART goals increased ownership of progress. In Hungary (HICS), practical milestones such as obtaining a driving licence translated abstract ambition into visible achievement. Across contexts, disengaged youth responded positively to small, achievable goals.

The pilot confirms: Agency is rebuilt incrementally, not through large-scale ambition.

## **4. Digital tools require human reinforcement**

Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrated that digital modules alone are insufficient for low digital literacy participants.

Mentor reinforcement was necessary to translate online learning into behavioural change.

This insight refines the project assumption:

Digitalisation enhances mentoring, but does not replace relational support.

## **5. Context influences intensity, not feasibility**

Whether in:

- ethnic marginalisation (Hungary - PANOV),
- rural motherhood (Hungary - HICS),
- administrative exclusion (Bulgaria),

- digital gaps (Bosnia),
- mixed economic motivation (Romania, Serbia),

the core mentoring structure remained applicable.

The model did not require redesign. It required adaptive pacing.

### **Consolidated Validation of the Mentoring Model**

By the end of the implementation phase, the mentoring model had been tested under multiple layers of rural vulnerability: ethnic marginalisation, early parenthood, administrative exclusion, digital gaps, economic volatility and fluctuating motivation.

Across these diverse realities, the core structure remained stable: the four-month cycle, regular sessions, the Individual Development Plan, structured goal-setting, ongoing monitoring, and the mentor's role as a consistent and trusted anchor.

The field experience did not point to structural weaknesses in the model itself. Instead, it clarified the contextual conditions that influence retention and the pace of progress.

The key conclusion from this phase is clear: the mentoring ecosystem is operationally robust and transferable across rural socio-economic environments, provided that relational continuity and a structured rhythm are maintained.

With local implementation validated in practice, the pilot moved from national delivery to transnational testing and comparison.

## **4. Fieldwork and Transnational Testing of the Mentoring Model**

Once the mentoring programme had been implemented within each participating country, the pilot entered a second and equally important phase: collective transnational examination.

The previous chapter demonstrated how the mentoring structure functioned under real rural conditions, including ethnic marginalisation, early parenthood, administrative barriers, digital exclusion and economic volatility. What remained to be examined was whether these findings were isolated national experiences or part of a broader structural pattern.

The implementation across Hungary (PANOV and HICS), Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania and Bulgaria created a unique testing environment. The same mentoring architecture was applied in five socio-economic systems that differ in labour market access, rural infrastructure, levels of exclusion and institutional support.

This comparative dimension allowed the partnership to identify recurring dynamics and structural consistencies that go beyond local context.

## 5.1 A Shared Framework Under Different Rural Conditions

Although each country operated within its own institutional and social reality, the mentoring programme was delivered using a shared structural framework:

- a defined four-month cycle,
- approximately 16 structured sessions,
- weekly rhythm of meetings,
- systematic use of the Individual NEET Development Plan,
- SMART goal-setting,
- session documentation and monitoring tools.

The fact that this structure was maintained across all countries made comparison meaningful. The mentoring model was not adapted at structural level; instead, implementation strategies adjusted to local conditions while preserving the core design. This consistency confirmed that the framework itself is not context-dependent. It can operate within different welfare systems and labour markets without losing coherence. What varied across contexts was not the architecture of the programme, but the intensity and sequencing of its components.

## 5.2 Recurring Patterns Across Countries

When reviewing national pilot reports collectively, several patterns emerged repeatedly, regardless of country.

### **Trust-Building as the Starting Point**

In Hungary - PANOV (segregated Roma rural community), mentoring began with rebuilding self-confidence and trust before any labour-oriented discussion could take place.

In Bulgaria, mentors reported that early sessions were dedicated to stabilising motivation before progressing toward employment steps. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, consistent weekly contact strengthened engagement in digital learning activities.

Across contexts, progress was linked to relational continuity. Participants who developed trust in their mentor engaged more consistently in development planning and goal-setting.

This repeated finding demonstrates that relational work is not an optional element of mentoring. It is the functional foundation upon which structured tools become effective.

### **Structured Rhythm as a Stabilising Factor**

The weekly rhythm of meetings appeared consistently as a stabilising element.

In Hungary – HICS (rural young mothers), regular sessions provided a predictable space for reflection in lives structured around childcare and domestic responsibilities. In Romania and Serbia, predictable scheduling helped maintain engagement in the face of seasonal employment and financial pressure.

The mentoring rhythm functioned as more than organisational scheduling. It created psychological anchoring in contexts where instability is common.

This cross-country observation strengthens the importance of maintaining weekly contact in future replication.

### **Development Planning as Behavioural Activation**

Across all five countries, the Individual NEET Development Plan served as the operational centre of mentoring.

Participants responded positively when goals were:

- clearly defined,
- realistic,
- broken into manageable steps,
- linked to short-term achievements.

In Bulgaria, resolving administrative barriers through structured action steps restored confidence and agency. In Romania, SMART goals increased ownership and accountability.

In Hungary – HICS, concrete milestones such as obtaining a driving licence translated long-term aspiration into visible progress.

These examples illustrate a recurring mechanism: small, structured steps reactivated participants' sense of control over their trajectory.

The transnational comparison confirms that behavioural activation through structured planning works across diverse vulnerability profiles.

### **External Volatility as a Shared Challenge**

Retention patterns across countries revealed common external pressures:

- urgent need for income,
- seasonal work,
- migration,
- family discouragement,
- unstable living conditions.

These pressures appeared in different forms in Romania, Serbia, Hungary and Bulgaria, but they reflected a shared structural characteristic of rural vulnerability.

The comparative analysis clarifies that dropout cases were not linked to weaknesses in the mentoring methodology itself. Instead, they reflected socio-economic volatility that affects rural youth across the region.

This insight reframes retention not as a country-specific issue but as a structural factor to be anticipated in rural mentoring programmes.

### 5.3 Transnational Reflection and Continuous Refinement

The pilot was accompanied by peer-review and supervision exchanges among mentors from different countries. These sessions created a space for:

- discussion of challenging cases,
- comparison of engagement strategies,
- reflection on motivational barriers,
- refinement of goal-setting approaches,
- exchange of retention practices.

This ongoing dialogue transformed national experiences into shared learning.

Through this process, mentors were able to identify:

- similar patterns of disengagement,
- effective trust-building techniques,
- practical adaptations for digital barriers,
- strategies for working with family influence.

The mentoring model therefore evolved during implementation. It was not a static framework applied unchanged; it was strengthened through cross-country reflection and real-time adaptation.

This layer of collective learning significantly enhances the credibility and transferability of the mentoring approach.

### 5.4 Consolidated Transnational Insights

When looking at the pilot as a whole (rather than as separate national cases), the same core dynamics appeared again and again. Rural NEETs entered the programme with very different personal stories, but the way they responded to mentoring followed similar patterns. This is what makes the findings strong: they are not tied to one place or one specific profile. They reflect how structured mentoring works in real rural conditions.

A first clear insight is that progress started with the relationship, not with tools. Many participants did not begin the programme ready to plan their next steps. Some were discouraged by previous failures, some distrusted formal systems, and many had low self-confidence after long periods of inactivity. In practice, structured planning only became meaningful once mentors created a safe, respectful and predictable space. When participants felt that the mentor was consistent and genuinely supportive, they became

more open to reflection, more willing to commit to regular meetings, and more ready to take ownership of goals.

A second repeated insight is the stabilising effect of regular contact. The weekly rhythm was not only a scheduling detail. For many rural NEETs, it became a source of continuity in lives shaped by instability whether financial pressure, lack of structure, family dynamics or social isolation. Regular sessions created a predictable moment in the week where the participant could stop, reflect, and move forward step by step. Over time, this rhythm strengthened accountability and helped maintain momentum even when motivation fluctuated.

The third insight is that small steps mattered more than big ambitions. Many participants entered the programme with either vague dreams or no direction at all. Through the Individual Development Plan and structured goal-setting, mentors helped turn uncertainty into manageable actions. The key was making progress visible. When participants achieved even small tasks an administrative step, a skills-related action, a completed module, or a first contact with an institution it often led to a noticeable increase in motivation. These micro-achievements rebuilt confidence and strengthened the belief that change is possible.

Another strong insight is the importance of flexibility inside a stable framework. Mentors frequently had to adjust the pacing of sessions, the communication format (face-to-face, phone, online), and the balance between emotional support and practical career guidance. Some participants needed more time to build trust before they could define goals. Others moved quickly toward concrete steps. What mattered was that adaptation happened within a clear structure: a defined cycle, regular meetings, development planning and monitoring. The pilot showed that too much rigidity reduces engagement, but too much looseness weakens the programme's effectiveness. The model worked best when the framework stayed consistent while delivery adapted to individual realities.

The pilot also clarified why some participants did not complete the programme. When disengagement happened, the reasons were typically external: urgent need for income, seasonal work, migration, family pressure, unstable living conditions, or sudden life events. These factors were not isolated. They are part of rural vulnerability in general. This is an important learning point: mentoring can support activation and orientation, but it cannot fully remove structural instability. At the same time, the pilot suggests that some dropouts can be reduced through stronger expectation-setting during onboarding, early identification of risk factors, and flexible planning that anticipates economic volatility.

Overall, the pilot demonstrated that mentoring works best when it is understood as an ecosystem rather than a sequence of conversations. The combination of a trusted

relationship, weekly rhythm, personalised development planning and continuous monitoring created a pathway from disengagement toward structured re-entry into education, training or employment. Participants who stayed engaged showed clearer direction, increased confidence, and concrete steps toward EET pathways.

Taken together, these insights confirm that structured mentoring can function as a transferable integration approach for rural NEETs across diverse vulnerability profiles. The key is not a one-size-fits-all content package, but a consistent structure that supports individual adaptation: relational continuity, predictable rhythm, personalised planning, and ongoing progress tracking.

## 5. Monitoring and Evaluation of the Pilot

Testing was accompanied by structured monitoring to validate the model.

From the beginning, the pilot was not understood as a simple delivery phase, but as a structured testing process. For this reason, monitoring was embedded directly into implementation. Its purpose was not only to measure outcomes at the end, but to observe how the mentoring model functioned in real rural environments, how participants responded to it, and where adjustments were necessary.

Monitoring therefore had two complementary dimensions:

1. a predefined evaluation design anchored in the mentoring framework,
2. continuous field-based documentation and reflection carried out by mentors during implementation.

Together, these elements allowed the partnership to validate the mentoring approach both structurally and practically.

### 6.1 Planned Evaluation Design

The mentoring framework foresees a structured impact assessment approach based on questionnaires conducted at three stages: before the start of mentoring, immediately after completion, and three months later. The intention of this design is to compare starting points with post-programme situations and to observe whether short-term activation translates into sustained integration steps.

At the time of writing, consolidated three-month follow-up results are not yet available across all partners. This chapter therefore distinguishes between the evaluation design foreseen in the framework and the monitoring evidence that is already documented through implementation practice.

However, national pilot reports primarily focus on implementation experience and qualitative findings from the field. For this reason, the strongest monitoring evidence

documented within the pilot relates to continuous session-based tracking and mentor observations rather than consolidated statistical comparisons at three time points. The evaluation design nevertheless forms an important structural element of the model. It ensures that mentoring is conceived not only as support, but as an intervention that can be assessed over time.

## 6.2 Field-Based Monitoring in Practice

The most substantial monitoring during the pilot occurred directly within the mentoring process itself.

Mentors systematically documented:

- the frequency and format of meetings,
- progress within the Individual Development Plan,
- emerging barriers,
- adjustments introduced during the cycle,
- and visible changes in motivation, confidence and engagement.

This session-level documentation served several important functions.

### Ensuring continuity

In rural environments, instability is common. Participants may face family responsibilities, economic pressure or fluctuating motivation. By recording meetings and agreed next steps, mentors were able to maintain structure and continuity. Documentation reduced the risk of mentoring becoming fragmented or inconsistent.

### Making gradual progress visible

Many participants did not experience immediate transformation. Instead, change appeared in small behavioural shifts: clearer articulation of strengths, willingness to attend regularly, taking initiative in administrative tasks, or expressing concrete goals for the first time.

Because mentors recorded these developments, progress became observable even when formal employment or education entry had not yet occurred. This was particularly important for validating intermediate outcomes.

### Identifying early warning signs

Meeting records and mentor notes often revealed patterns such as:

- decreasing engagement,
- repeated postponement of agreed steps,
- emerging external pressure (seasonal work, family expectations),
- frustration with digital tasks.

Recognising these signals early allowed mentors to intervene before disengagement became final. Monitoring therefore functioned as a preventive tool.

## 6.3 Monitoring as a Mechanism for Adaptation

One of the most important findings from implementation is that monitoring directly supported adaptation of mentoring delivery.

The pilot did not follow a rigid, unchangeable script. Instead, mentors used structured observation and documentation to refine their approach while keeping the core framework intact.

Examples described in national reports include:

- temporarily increasing session intensity during onboarding when participants required stronger initial stabilisation,
- breaking down goals into smaller steps when participants felt overwhelmed,
- prioritising immediate administrative or practical barriers before moving toward labour market integration,
- adjusting meeting formats (face-to-face, phone, online) in response to rural accessibility constraints.

These adjustments did not alter the fundamental structure (four-month cycle, development planning, weekly rhythm). They refined delivery.

This demonstrates a critical validation point:

The mentoring model is stable in structure but flexible in execution. Monitoring made this balance possible.

## 6.4 Monitoring as Collective Learning

Monitoring did not operate only at the individual level. Through shared reflection and exchange between partners, recurring patterns became visible across countries.

Although socio-economic contexts differed, similar dynamics appeared repeatedly:

- trust-building was necessary before structured planning became effective,
- weekly rhythm created psychological anchoring,
- small, achievable goals supported motivation,
- external volatility remained the strongest risk factor for dropout.

Because these patterns emerged independently in multiple contexts, they gained validation strength. Monitoring therefore contributed not only to accountability, but to transnational learning about how rural mentoring functions.

This cross-context repetition reinforces the transferability of the model.

## 6.5 What the Monitoring Process Ultimately Validated

The monitoring process clarified several key aspects of the mentoring ecosystem:

- Structured mentoring cycles can be maintained under rural conditions when flexibility in delivery is allowed.
- Continuous documentation strengthens accountability and prevents drift from the agreed methodology.
- The Individual Development Plan functions effectively as both planning and monitoring tool.
- Progress among rural NEETs is often incremental and must be captured beyond formal employment statistics.
- External socio-economic instability remains the primary limitation factor affecting retention.

Importantly, monitoring did not expose structural weaknesses in the mentoring framework itself. Instead, it clarified the contextual pressures that influence the pace and stability of participant progress.

By embedding monitoring into implementation, the pilot generated credible, practice-based validation rather than theoretical assumptions.

Monitoring confirmed that progress among rural NEETs must be measured through intermediate activation indicators rather than immediate labour market outcomes alone.

In addition to these findings, the pilot also highlighted opportunities to further strengthen the monitoring framework in future implementations. The mentoring model already includes baseline, post-programme and follow-up assessments, complemented by continuous session-level documentation during the mentoring cycle. Future replication of the mentoring ecosystem could further enhance the evidence base by harmonising quantitative indicators and ensuring more consistent aggregation of pre- and post-assessment results across all participating locations. Such an approach would allow clearer measurement of both short-term activation outcomes and longer-term integration pathways.

## 6. Immediate Outcomes and Validation of the Model

The pilot mentoring programme was implemented for a defined four-month cycle across five rural contexts. Within this limited but structured timeframe, the objective was not to

guarantee full labour market integration for every participant, but to test whether a structured mentoring ecosystem can activate, stabilise and guide rural NEETs toward realistic education, training or employment pathways.

Because implementation was accompanied by structured documentation and reflection, the pilot generated observable and verifiable short-term outcomes. These outcomes provide practical validation of how the mentoring model functions under real rural conditions.

The immediate results of the pilot can be grouped into five interconnected dimensions:

1. creation of structured personal development plans,
2. behavioural activation and increased agency,
3. strengthened confidence and self-awareness,
4. improved orientation toward EET pathways,
5. and evidence-based understanding of retention dynamics.

## 7.1 Creation of Structured and Personalised Development Plans

A concrete and measurable output of the pilot is the systematic creation and use of Individual Development Plans for participating NEETs.

Across all countries, mentoring was not conducted as informal support. Each participant worked together with their mentor to develop a structured roadmap that included:

- an analysis of their current life situation,
- identification of strengths and competences,
- clarification of barriers and constraints,
- definition of short-term and medium-term goals,
- agreement on concrete next steps and timelines,
- regular revision and adjustment during the mentoring cycle.

This structured planning process represents a tangible output of the pilot. It transforms mentoring from general encouragement into a documented and trackable process.

Importantly, Development Plans were not static documents. National reports show that they were actively updated when circumstances changed, when goals proved unrealistic, or when new opportunities emerged. This confirms that the model supports both structure and responsiveness.

The consistent use of Development Plans across five countries validates the operational feasibility of the model. It demonstrates that abstract mentoring principles can be translated into concrete, individualised planning tools under diverse rural conditions.

## 7.2 Behavioural Activation and Increased Agency

A recurring theme across pilot reports is that many participants entered the programme in a state of passivity or uncertainty. Some lacked direction. Others doubted their abilities. In several contexts, participants had experienced repeated institutional failure or long-term inactivity.

Within the four-month mentoring cycle, mentors observed visible behavioural shifts among actively engaged participants, including:

- improved punctuality and regular attendance,
- increased initiative in completing agreed tasks,
- willingness to contact institutions or employers,
- active participation in planning and reflection,
- clearer articulation of realistic personal goals.

These changes may appear modest when measured only in employment statistics, but they represent critical activation milestones for rural NEETs.

The pilot confirms that structured mentoring supports gradual reactivation. Agency was rebuilt incrementally through small, achievable steps rather than large transformative leaps. The combination of regular meetings, structured goal-setting and visible micro-achievements strengthened participants' sense of control over their trajectory.

This behavioural activation is a core validation element of the mentoring ecosystem.

## 7.3 Strengthened Confidence and Self-Awareness

Across different rural contexts – including segregated communities, young mothers in remote villages, and participants facing administrative exclusion – confidence-building emerged as a central outcome.

Mentors reported that through structured reflection tools (such as SWOT-based exercises) and repeated dialogue, participants increasingly:

- recognised their strengths,
- articulated skills they had previously overlooked,
- reframed negative self-perceptions,
- developed more realistic and attainable expectations.

For participants who initially defined themselves primarily through deficits, this shift toward recognising capabilities was significant. In several cases, mentors observed that once confidence increased, participants became more receptive to practical labour market steps.

This confirms an important structural insight:

Confidence is not a secondary benefit of mentoring. It is a prerequisite for sustainable integration steps.

The pilot therefore validates that mentoring must combine psychological stabilisation with practical orientation.

## 7.4 Improved Orientation Toward Education, Training and Employment

Another observable outcome of the pilot is improved orientation.

At the start of the cycle, many participants lacked clarity about:

- available education or training pathways,
- administrative procedures,
- realistic employment options in rural environments,
- or the practical steps required to move forward.

During mentoring, participants increasingly engaged in:

- mapping local labour market opportunities,
- clarifying education enrolment options,
- preparing CVs and job applications,
- registering with employment services,
- resolving documentation or administrative barriers.

In some cases, participants entered employment during or shortly after the cycle. In others, the outcome was a structured progression plan with defined next steps.

The pilot demonstrates that orientation often precedes formal integration. By clarifying pathways and breaking down processes into manageable actions, mentoring reduced uncertainty and increased readiness for EET transition.

This represents a validated intermediate outcome:

the mentoring ecosystem strengthens structured progression toward EET, even when full transition extends beyond the four-month timeframe.

## 7.5 Retention Patterns as a Validation Indicator

Completion rates varied across contexts, reflecting different socio-economic realities.

Where participants completed the full mentoring cycle, common elements were observed:

- stable weekly rhythm,
- early trust-building,
- visible short-term achievements,
- manageable external pressure.

Where discontinuation occurred, reports consistently attribute it to external factors such as:

- urgent financial need,
- seasonal employment,
- migration or relocation,
- family responsibilities,

- unstable living conditions.

Importantly, national reports do not indicate structural dissatisfaction with the mentoring methodology as a primary cause of dropout.

This distinction is crucial for validating the model.

The mentoring framework itself proved operational and coherent. However, its outcomes remain influenced by broader rural socio-economic volatility. Recognising this boundary increases the credibility of the pilot rather than weakening it.

The pilot therefore provides realistic validation:

structured mentoring is effective when minimal engagement stability is present, but cannot fully neutralise structural economic instability.

## 7.6 Integrated Validation of the Mentoring Ecosystem

Taken together, the immediate outcomes demonstrate that the mentoring ecosystem functions as an integrated activation mechanism.

Across five rural contexts with diverse vulnerability profiles, the same core mechanisms consistently produced:

- structured personal planning,
- incremental behavioural activation,
- strengthened self-confidence,
- improved orientation toward education and employment,
- and measurable engagement in integration steps.

The pilot does not claim universal transformation within a short timeframe. Instead, it validates that a structured mentoring cycle can create a credible bridge from disengagement toward structured participation in EET pathways.

This validation is based not on isolated success stories, but on recurring patterns observed across multiple rural environments.

The consistency of these outcomes across five countries strengthens the credibility of the mentoring ecosystem as a transferable model.

## 7. Conclusion - A Validated Mentoring Ecosystem for Rural NEET Integration

The pilot mentoring programme has been implemented, observed and reflected upon across five rural contexts with diverse socio-economic characteristics. Through structured preparation, targeted outreach, systematic mentoring delivery and embedded monitoring, the partnership tested whether a unified mentoring framework can operate effectively under real-life rural conditions.

The pilot demonstrates that structured mentoring is operationally feasible across different rural environments, including contexts marked by ethnic marginalisation, early parenthood, administrative barriers, digital exclusion and economic instability. The validation of the model rests on several interconnected findings.

## 8.1 Structural Robustness

The mentoring ecosystem proved structurally stable across all participating countries. The four-month cycle, regular weekly meetings, systematic use of the Individual Development Plan and session documentation were consistently implemented.

Despite variations in vulnerability profiles and local constraints, the core architecture did not require redesign. Instead, it allowed adaptive pacing and prioritisation while maintaining methodological coherence.

This confirms that the mentoring framework is transferable and can be applied in diverse territorial contexts without losing structural integrity

## 8.2 Relational Continuity as the Core Mechanism

One of the most consistent findings across implementation is the central importance of relational stability. The mentor's role as a predictable, trusted and supportive figure proved decisive for engagement.

The pilot confirms that structured tools alone are insufficient. The mentoring relationship is the enabling condition that activates planning, reflection and goal-setting. Where relational continuity was strong, participants demonstrated higher engagement and sustained participation.

This insight strengthens the conceptual foundation of the model and clarifies that mentoring must balance structure with human connection.

## 8.3 Incremental Activation Rather Than Immediate Transformation

The pilot validates that integration into education, training or employment is rarely immediate for rural NEETs. Instead, change unfolds incrementally.

Observable progress during the pilot most frequently included:

- increased clarity about personal strengths and goals,
- improved orientation toward realistic pathways,
- active engagement in defined steps,
- strengthened confidence and initiative.

In several cases, participants transitioned into employment or training. In others, structured progression plans were established. The pilot therefore demonstrates that mentoring functions as a bridge toward integration, even when full transition extends beyond the cycle.

This realistic framing strengthens the credibility of the model.

The four-month mentoring cycle proved effective as an activation and stabilisation phase, helping participants regain direction, establish routines and initiate concrete steps toward education, training or employment pathways. At the same time, pilot experience suggests that sustainable integration often requires a longer trajectory than the initial cycle allows. For some participants, the transition toward stable participation in the labour market or education continues beyond the four-month mentoring period. Future replication of the model could therefore consider introducing a light follow-up phase lasting several additional months (e.g. 3–6 months). Occasional mentor check-ins or light-touch guidance during this period could help participants maintain motivation, implement Development Plan steps and reduce the risk of returning to inactivity.

## 8.4 Understanding Structural Limits

The pilot also clarified the boundaries of mentoring impact.

Where discontinuation occurred, it was linked primarily to external socio-economic pressures such as urgent income needs, migration or family obligations. These factors are structural characteristics of rural vulnerability.

The mentoring framework remained coherent under these pressures, but its outcomes are influenced by broader contextual instability.

Recognising this limitation is essential for future scaling. It confirms that mentoring should ideally be embedded within broader support ecosystems, including employment services and community-level structures.

Future scaling of the mentoring ecosystem could benefit from stronger structural integration with existing local support systems. While the pilot demonstrated that individual mentoring relationships can effectively activate rural NEETs, several barriers faced by participants (such as limited job opportunities, administrative obstacles or lack of access to services) lie beyond the scope of mentoring alone. Closer cooperation with public employment services, local social services, municipalities and regional employers could therefore enhance the transition phase after mentoring. Such integration would allow Development Plans created during mentoring to be more directly connected with concrete education, training or employment opportunities available in the local ecosystem.

## 8.5 Transnational Learning and Transferability

The comparative implementation across five countries strengthened the validity of the findings. Recurring patterns emerged independently in different contexts:

- trust-building as a prerequisite for activation,
- weekly rhythm as a stabilising factor,
- small achievable steps as a driver of motivation,
- external volatility as the primary retention risk.

The repetition of these patterns across contexts indicates that the model's effectiveness does not depend on a single national setting. It demonstrates transnational relevance. This provides a strong foundation for replication and adaptation in other rural regions.

Another insight emerging from the pilot concerns the diversity of participant situations and aspirations observed across the participating countries. Rural NEETs entered the mentoring programme with very different starting points, ranging from immediate job-seeking needs to interest in education, training or small-scale entrepreneurship. For future replication of the mentoring ecosystem, introducing more clearly structured mentoring pathways could further strengthen the model. Possible pathways may include:

- employment-focused mentoring supporting immediate labour market activation,
- education and training pathways guiding participants toward formal learning opportunities,
- entrepreneurship-oriented mentoring encouraging exploration of self-employment or small business initiatives.

Such differentiation could help mentors provide more targeted guidance while maintaining the flexible and individualised nature of the mentoring process.

A further consideration for future replication concerns the scalability of the mentoring ecosystem. While the pilot confirmed that the mentoring model can operate effectively across diverse rural contexts, wider implementation would benefit from a clearer scaling framework. Key elements that could support consistent expansion include:

- structured mentor recruitment processes to ensure an adequate pool of qualified mentors,
- common training standards that prepare mentors to work with vulnerable rural NEETs,
- quality assurance and supervision mechanisms that maintain methodological consistency across implementing organisations.

Strengthening mentor capacity and ensuring shared standards across partners could help preserve the integrity of the mentoring model while expanding its reach to a larger number of rural NEETs.

## 8.6 Overall Contribution of the Pilot

The pilot mentoring programme has produced more than individual mentoring relationships. It has generated a tested and operational mentoring ecosystem characterised by:

- structured preparation and outreach,
- consistent mentoring architecture,
- adaptive delivery mechanisms
- embedded monitoring and reflection,
- and documented short-term activation outcomes.

Together, these elements form an integrated approach to supporting rural NEETs that is both structured and adaptable. The ecosystem brings key components into one coherent pathway: it activates young people through trust-based entry points, sustains engagement through regular mentoring contact, translates needs into clear Development Plans, and keeps progress visible through ongoing documentation and review.

What makes this contribution significant is not one single tool, but the way the tools and processes function together under real rural conditions. The pilot confirmed that structure and flexibility are not opposites: the programme remained methodologically coherent while allowing mentors to adapt pacing, formats and priorities to individual life circumstances.

The model now provides a concrete and transferable basis for replication in other rural regions. It offers a tested way to organise mentoring support so that it can move rural NEETs from disengagement toward realistic education, training and employment pathways, while also clarifying the key conditions that influence retention and progress.

## Anex

### The Transferability Toolkit

To ensure the transferability and practical adoption of the Back on Track mentoring model by other organizations, municipalities, or employment agencies, this annex provides the core operational tool used during the transnational pilot.

### Tool 1: NEET Individual Development Plan (IDP) – Core Template

**How to use this tool:** The IDP is not meant to be filled out by the mentee alone, nor should it be completed in a single session. It is a "living document" co-created by the mentor and the mentee. The first few sessions should focus purely on Part 1 and Part 2 (building trust and mapping the situation), before moving to Part 3 (Action steps).

### **PART 1: Initial Baseline (Where am I now?)**

<p><b>Mentee Name/Code:</b> _____</p> <p><b>Mentor Name:</b> _____</p> <p><b>Date of Initial Assessment:</b> _____</p> <p><b>Current Status:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployed (short-term) <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployed (long-term) <input type="checkbox"/> Unregistered/Invisible <input type="checkbox"/> Inactive due to care responsibilities <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p><b>Immediate Critical Barriers (Check all that apply):</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of official ID/documents <input type="checkbox"/> Housing/Financial instability <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of transportation/mobility <input type="checkbox"/> Low self-esteem / Mental health struggles <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of basic digital skills <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>_____</p>
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### **PART 2: Resource Mapping (Informal SWOT)**

*Focus on informal skills and life survival strategies, not just formal education.*

<p><b>My Strengths (What am I good at? What have I survived/managed so far?): *</b></p> <p>_____</p> <p><b>My Interests / Hidden Passions (What do I enjoy doing, even unpaid?):</b></p> <p>_____</p> <p><b>Key areas I want to improve / Help I need:</b></p> <p>_____</p>
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### **PART 3: Milestone Setting (The "Micro-Achievement" Strategy)**

Do not start with "Find a full-time career". Start with highly achievable milestones to build immediate success momentum.

**Goal 1: Administrative / Stabilisation Goal (e.g., Get ID, Register at employment office, Create email account)**

- What: \_\_\_\_\_
- Deadline: \_\_\_\_\_

**Goal 2: Soft Skills / Exploration Goal (e.g., Write first CV, map local job market, practice a phone call)**

- What: \_\_\_\_\_
- Deadline: \_\_\_\_\_

**Goal 3: The Primary Transition Goal (EET) (e.g., Apply for 3 jobs, enroll in a driving course, enter public works)**

- What: \_\_\_\_\_
- Deadline: \_\_\_\_\_

**PART 4: The Action Roadmap (Session-by-Session Tracking)**

*(To be updated continuously during the 16-session cycle)*

**Session 1-4 (Rapport Building):** \* Notes/Actions achieved:

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**Session 5-8 (Mapping & Skill Building):** \* Notes/Actions achieved:

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**Session 9-12 (Active Outreach/Training):** \* *Notes/Actions achieved:*

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**Session 13-16 (Transition & Closure):** \* *Notes/Actions achieved:*

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## **PART 5: Final Review & Transition**

*To be completed at the end of the 16th session.*

**Status at Closure:** [ ] Employed [ ] In Education/Training [ ] Active Job Seeker [ ] Other:

\_\_\_\_\_

**Mentor's Final Note & Recommended Follow-up:** \*

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