

Scientific debate on young people in transition and its policies implications: to NEET or not to NEET?

Guido Cavalca
Dip. di Scienze Politiche, Sociali e della Comunicazione,
Università di Salerno
gcavalca@unisa.it

In the current debate on at risk youth great attention is dedicated to NEET, acronym for youngsters who are jobless and out of any form of education or training activity and therefore considered at risk of social exclusion. In UK, where this term was conceived at the end of the last century, there's a relevant literature and empirical research on that, whereas in Italy it started recently to be used by mass media and scientific community.

Italian and European institutions are nowadays using this concept as indicator of potential or actual social exclusion, legitimizing this analytic concept, which indeed is rather questionable. Furthermore, mass media recall this category, magnifying its relevance and therefore orienting the public debate on policies.

The persisting economic crisis hits strongly youth employment and transition from education system to labour market. It is particularly interesting that precisely in this dramatic phase of increasing youth unemployment the public attention is directed to Neets (Gros, Maselli 2012). It is suggested to shift the public interest from unemployment and inactivity to a more complex (and confusing) concept, which mixes up different categories as NEET and inactivity (Scarpetta, Sonnet 2012) or social exclusion. NEET in fact includes also young people looking for a job, who are by definition *in* the labour market and *active* even if at risk of being excluded, in particular in this period. NEET includes also well educated people who possibly wait, actively or not, for a good job, corresponding to their expectations and educational skills; risk of labour market and poverty in this case is rather doubtful.

The current disadvantage of European youth makes even more important a critical reflection on the NEET category, from a theoretical, empirical and policy point of view. UK literature have already tackled critically the definition and use of NEET (Yates S., Payne M. 2006; Furlong A. 2006), whereas in Italy an accurate scientific discussion is missing but necessary.

This paper aims at analysing critically the NEET indicator as empirical and policies-orienting tool, using statistical data, literature and policy material. The NEET condition will be framed in some national contexts, which diverge with regard to labour market and inequalities. Eurostat data will be used in order to describe youth in relation to the main axes of work and education/training and to underline the heterogeneity of NEETs, their differentiated conditions and needs. Relevant scientific literature will be analysed in order to underline limits and danger of this concept.

On the base of empirical evidence and literature analysis the usefulness of NEET will be criticised, in particular for its possible consequences on orienting policies toward useless or even wrong policy measures.

1. The NEET question: a brief literature analysis

The literature on the NEET issue will represent the starting point for the following discussion. In particular, the UK literature will be used, given that the term NEET was forged and discussed there. We will also criticize the use of this concept in the Italian mass media and scientific literature and try to precisely specify its limits also with empirical analysis. The British literature has the merit to be scientifically rigorous from the epistemological, methodological and empirical point of view. On the contrary, the Italian literature appears limited, quite ambiguous and is represented by research reports using uncritically this term and by media articles explicitly aiming at influencing public policies.

NEET was used for the first time in 1999, when the SEU (Social Exclusion Unit, consultancy agency of UK government) replaced the term *Status Zero* with NEET, even if not as acronym,

indicating young people, normally 16-18 years old, who are out of labour market and educational system "... those 16-18 year olds who neither participate in education or training nor have a job (for at least 6 months during this period)..." (SEU, 1999: 15).

Since the 90s the British government has been addressing the difficulties of transition between school and work experienced by teenagers, who at the end of the compulsory education neither keep on studying nor enter labour market. The Blair government – in office for ten years since 1997 – reformed policy measures for youth, introducing the new service ‘Connexions’, which provides consultancy and vocational and social guidance for young people in difficulty, reorganizing and systematizing the existing services, but keeping the customize approach, typical of liberal systems. British policies against youth exclusion have been dedicated a special attention to contrast early school leaving and under-education as well as household disadvantage and poverty, considered as main factors of social exclusion (SEU 1999: 24; 48). Another important political concern regards the supposed anti-labour youth subculture, defined as a lacking will to get involved in strenuous activities and to take on any kind of responsibilities (Popham 2003), which is also an influent element in the Japanese context (Inui 2005). Japan in fact imported from UK the term NEET at the beginning of this century in a period of social alarm for the increase of youth unemployment and used it in combination with ‘freeters’ (composition of free and *Arbeiter*) indicating youngsters who, according to the Japanese mass media which coined this term, prefer fixed-term and short jobs in order to keep their freedom and with *ikikomori*, indicating youngsters who decided to escape society and social relations. Not so much in the scientific literature as in mass media and in politics it has been reinforcing the opinion that ‘freeter’ or ‘NEET’ condition was freely chosen by young people¹ and that a disease was spreading in the Japanese society.

Then, the term NEET arose as policy target (Yates S., Payne M. 2006; Toivonen 2011) in order to address the risk of social exclusion and anti-social behaviours. This original feature of NEET in UK and Japan has to be borne in mind, as it is very influential on policies addressing youth social difficulties and behaviour, in particular the question of being (on purpose?) inactive.

Doubtless the main merit of this term is to call attention of public opinion and policy makers to youth problems thanks to its capacity to synthesize various forms of vulnerability (Furlong 2006: 554). This feature bears also limits of clearness and scientific rigor, if the use of the term does not take in consideration the different aspects of this phenomenon.

The UK literature in fact considers many problems related to this concept, as for example its scarce precision and strong heterogeneity, the danger of labelling these ‘neither-nor’ youngsters as an underclass involved in social deviance and criminality (House of Commons 2010: 1; 8) up to the individualisation and criminalisation of non-participants NEETs within the frame of the traditional pathologisation of class inequalities (Simmons 2008: 434).

The use of NEET instead of the traditional indicators of labour and educational difficulties tends to shift public opinion and action towards the consequences of social inequalities more than their causes. The effect on public policies is to tackle these problems, as it happens in UK with ‘Connexions’, with an individualized counselling instead of measures contrasting the unequal access to social and material resources also with prevention purpose (Yates S., Payne M. 2006: 341-2).

One of the main critics to the use of NEET, in particular in relation with policies, is to ignore one of the main causes of social risk among young people in particular in Italy: working instability and fragmented working career. Labour market deregulation (Esping-Andersen, Regini 2000) eased in part the labour market entry but also affected negatively the chances to achieve a stable job and a continuous working career. In Italy in particular, also because of lacking structural reforms of welfare system, this process increased social inequalities and risks of social exclusion (Barbieri,

1 The Japanese definition of NEET includes youngsters and young adults (15-34 years old), single, dependent from parents but does not include – this is the most relevant difference unemployed (searching for job) people (Inui 2005).

Scherer 2007, Cavalca 2010). To concentrate the debate on social risks of people neither working nor studying (or training) entails concretely the exclusion from public policies of a consistent part of young people working but anyway at risk of poverty; it has to be considered in fact that unstable workers can be entrapped in instability (precariousness) or can easily shift to unemployment. In Italy the NEET approach could reinforce the aptitude to consider primarily the employment of outsiders, omitting or underestimating ‘mid-siders’ problems (Madama, Jessoula, Graziano 2009), people with fixed-term jobs or with stable position in small and medium sized companies not supported by welfare measures in case of unemployment. Moreover, just from the empowerment point of view, which is at the base of the NEET approach, temporary jobs are lacking in terms of training contents, which instead are provided by other specific fixed term contracts, like apprenticeship, internship or by open-ended contracts (Quintini, Martin 2006: 15). Precisely this element, the accumulation of human capital, is considered a shared need for so differentiated NEETs and therefore a legitimizing factor of the use of this term as indicator and concept for policies purposes (Eurofound 2012a: 25). In the European context in addition to unstable workers can be considered in this discourse the over-educated stable employed, the *early school leavers*, and the *later school leavers*, typically all excluded from social support because in employment (Furlong 2006: 566), even if they do not acquire any competence or capability.

Specifically as indicator for social policies it can entail the risk of ‘false positive’, giving support with active or passive measures to not-disadvantage people, who are able to enter labour market but are included in the NEET subgroup as they *choose* inactivity, even for some short periods (Yates S., Payne M. 2006).

Another critical point is directly linked with the aim of policies contrasting NEET diffusion, i.e. the numerical reduction of NEETs and their incidence on young population (NEET rate); this is part of the more general problem of the quantitative approach adopted by European Union, the ‘indicator politics’ (Leonardi 2009: 57), which tends to ignore the quality of the numerical results. In the case of NEET approach it means to underestimate the quality of employment and training activities ‘offered’ to young people. If the general goal of job and education/training is positive, it cannot be taken for granted the actual consequences of educational or working inclusion in terms of contrasting social exclusion.

A direct consequence of this approach could be a sly client selection by labour market services contrasting social exclusion: subjects with few disadvantages could be preferred to multi-disadvantaged persons, more employable preferred to less employable subjects (Yates, Payne 2006). Also the long-term sustainability is rather critical: public policies could be positively assessed just because the NEET rate decreases, even if the labour market or education participation is not long-lasting (ibidem): the supported received could not have addressed social inequalities factors and the transition from NEET to insider could be short.

In the British context NEET was applied to a rather limited age range – 13-19 or 16-18 – later extended to 24 in Europe: it clearly shows the intention to tackle a specific group of young people at risk of social exclusion because of lacking education and unable to get a qualified, long-lasting and well paid job. Even if this category includes actually heterogeneous personal and social conditions – social disadvantage, lack of cultural competences to go forth with education, difficulties to find a job, household care constraints – this tight limits of the definition make it easier to use the term. The extension of NEET age boundaries cannot have another effect than adding heterogeneity to the concept (Eurofound 2012a: 26), reducing its usefulness.

The international research centres examined in depth this issue with detailed theoretical and empirical works, which indeed are not convincing with respect to the legitimation of NEET as a concept and as an indicator.

Eurofound for example produced a rich report on Neets (2012a). Beyond all the interesting and detailed analysis, what is really interesting for this discussion is the definition used: “young people currently disengaged from the labour market and education...” (Eurofound 2012a: 22). It is well known that unemployment is not at all a form of disengagement from labour market, as unemployed

persons are defined as actively looking for a job; it can be defined as a form of participation at risk of exclusion or disengagement but not as disengagement *per se*. It is a difference in definition which is substantial and cannot be ignored.

Moreover, it is really interesting the fundamental logic used to legitimate the use of NEET in the scientific and policy discourse. The NEET indicator is illustrated, the difference between unemployment and NEET rate are showed and then it is suggested to use both in order to enrich the discussion about youth social risk (*ibidem*: 22-3; Scarpetta, Sonnet 2012: 5). This approach seems to forget other labour market indicators as activity and employment rate, which already permit to complete information given by unemployment rate. Therefore, it is not necessary a new indicator, not even for the education and training issue, which have already some validated indicators. The same objection can be addressed to experts promoting NEET as useful indicator for employment difficulties of labour market outsiders, the inactive subjects, because the inactivity rate includes persons in education (Quintini, Martin 2006: 11). Actually, even if this consideration is true, the accurate and simultaneous use of existing indicators and easy distinctions within the active group are enough to solve that problem; instead, the use of NEET indicator, as we will try to show later, seems to give more problems than solutions. In the next paragraph exactly we will compare traditional indicators and the new one.

The legitimization of NEET as indicator for social exclusion risk is contradicted even by its supporters themselves, for example, showing how the NEET condition is usually temporary. Many research in UK show that stable NEET are a small rate of the whole group² and analyses at European level seem to confirm the temporary feature of this condition. “The share of NEET youth in 1997 that spent the following five years in this status reached 30% in Italy, 20% in Greece and exceeded 10% in several European countries. This suggests the existence of a small group of disadvantaged youth difficult to mobilize into work, even in countries where the position of youth on the labour market has improved over the past decade and where prospects for this group as a whole are rather bright” (Quintini, Martin 2006: 8). The here promoted longitudinal methodology represents an improvement but cannot solve the basic contradiction of this indicator.

1.1 The NEET question Italy

NEET has been used since few years in Italy without the adequate methodological and conceptual reflection. In particular, many reports of the main national research centres use this terms and dedicate detailed empirical analysis to this issue.

Istat and Censis tackle this question using the official data on labour market “Indagine sulle Forze Lavoro” and a larger age range then the one used at European level, 15-29 years old. This approach has the advantage to include young adults still in transition to adulthood, considered as the complete autonomy from parents’ household, which in Italy is postponed in comparison with other European countries. On the one hand the choice to include all people under 30 years old intend to consider all forms of social exclusion risk (Italiavoro 2011a: 5), on the other hand it reduces the chances to compare Italy with some European countries, where young people leave early their families.

Istat produces every year a short report on NEET within the statistical bulletin ‘Noi Italia’ in order to monitor this phenomenon and that gives indirectly legitimation to the term and helps to spread the use of NEET in scientific and political discussions. Istat produces detailed figures on NEET rates differentiated by gender, educational level, Regions and province. The most relevant results indicates that young women and Southern Regions are ore disadvantaged: 2010 almost on out of five young women are out of labour market and educational system (14% within male youngsters and the NEET rate in Southern Italy (30,9%) is the double of Western and Eastern Italy (respectively 16% and 15%).

² Estimates on UK reach maximum 20%. I refer to the report by Italiavoro (2011: 107) reporting a research of the British *Department for Education and Employment* (DfEE) and Furlong (2006: 559-9) illustrates results of his own and other researches (ivi: 562-3).

CNEL (National Council of Economy and Labour) uses Istat data “Indagine sulle Forze Lavoro” 2012, giving particular importance to the distinction among unemployed, completely inactive (without job, not searching for and not intending to work) and potential labour force (without job and intending to work). The NEET heterogeneity and its consequent scarce precision as indicator is implicitly recognized by one of its supporter, when it tries to identify the part of young people ‘completely excluded by labour market and out of any training and educational path’ (*ivi*: 335). This subgroup, 38% of young people, represents an unexpressed potentiality, due to lacking employment supply and demand, inefficient demand-supply matching and inadequate vocational training. To this subgroup belong also discouraged people, who renounce to search for a job because of lacking chances to find one and the length of time required. The same conclusions on the causes come from a recent report on NEETs in the Southern Italian Regions: ‘(Isfol 2012): ‘[...] consequence not only of the economic crisis and of the decreasing labour demand, but also of training policies, services and social policies which did not promote human capital development and companies’ investments in young generations. In the absence of these policies it will be difficult to improve the NEET conditions’. This reports underlines also that NEET frequency increases because of the current economic crisis more in the Northern than in Southern Italy, where the phenomenon is more deep-rooted.

Also Banca d’Italia uses NEET in its reports on Italian social condition (Banca d’Italia 2011) as synthetic index of labour market difficulties for young people in the European context.

Data on exit dynamic in 12 months are very interesting: less than 3 out of 10 youngsters starts to work or study in Italy, 4 on 10 in the Northern Regions, 3 on 10 in the Central and 2 on 10 in the Southern Regions, with a small worsening from 2007 to 2009 in particular in the South.

The most detailed analysis on NEET was conducted by Italialavoro (2011a), agency of the Italian Ministry of Labour, which focused both on the extension and features of exclusion from education, training and labour market and on Italian and European policies contrasting this phenomenon. The use of microdata adds many information. First of all, the higher NEET rate in Italy is considered as a consequence of discouragement and informal occupation; difficulties to find a job depends not only on the traditional low level of labour demand for young people (Reyneri 2005) but also on the low educational level and scarce professional skills and on the inefficiency of services of demand-supply matching. Moreover, the Italian NEETs are less educated than European ones but have the same share of graduated, showing how the educational level is not sufficient to protect from labour market risks. Early school leaving is also a decisive phenomenon in Italy, even in the more developed Regions where often the chance to find a job explains the decision to leave the education system (Ballarino *et al.* 2011). Among the NEETs who are inactive for family care reasons (mostly women) only a minority would intend to work in case of receiving support from work-life balance services, showing how strong is the free choice out of labour market (self-excluding).

This report as well all the most precise ones eventually are forced to produce some kind of typologies of young NEET (see among others Eurofound 2012a), proving how the concept heterogeneity invalidates the indicator’s and policies’ efficiency: it is exactly the paradox of NEET approach the necessity to go back to disaggregate the aggregated category in order to make it useful.

In the Italian scientific (academic) debate the term NEET is mainly use as simple empirical support for the relevance of the social problem, the risk of social exclusion for young people. It is indeed very effective to refer to a unique category in order to underline the diffusion of this social problem (Granaglia 2010; Livraghi 2010; Carrera 2012). The relevant problem is indeed that NEET has never been discussed, is considered a valid indicator and therefor automatically legitimated by Italian social scientist. This paper aims at analysing the use of this concept from an epistemological and methodological point of view and observing the consequence of its use in the public policies debate. The actual risk, in particular in Italy, is the uncritical acceptance of the whole group of NEET as the weakest part of society, at risk of being excluded from the ‘social pact’, without creating a correspondence between NEET subgroups and profiles of different risks (Carrera 2012:

114): ‘the *NEET* represent a moment of high weakness not only on a personal level but also and especially on a systemic level. They are a significant group of young citizens who risk to be out of that social contract which supports the balance of the democratic system. These young people, who are out of the educational system and do not manage to enter the job market, are the weakest part of our system which risk to be trapped in a border-line condition on a working level and on a social level too’.

On the base of the availability of many data collected by Istat there are many studies on school-work transition, which take into account also the NEET question, insert it in a complete dissertation, where it emerges the interesting contradiction between a pressure to the increase of skill and educational level and the Italian (but also the British one shows similar problems) labour market requiring mainly less qualified labour force and with a strong presence of high educated young people forced to over-qualification (Verziccho, Lo Conte 2012).

The necessity to differentiate NEET in subgroups emerges also from psychoanalytic studies on youth disadvantage (Zoja 2011). In order to avoid the risk of generalization and of labelling, the category has to be split into young people with socio-economic obstacles (exogenous NEETs) and the ones who, similar to the Japanese model, choose to other conditions even if they are able to study and work and who can show in some cases psychological problems (endogenous NEETs) with a overrepresentation of male youngsters (*ibidem*: 24). Household solidarity, which in Italy and in particular in the Southern Italy substitutes the lacking Welfare system and market, can represent a rich soil for the NEET increase (*ibidem*: 25), but it would be wrong to assert the idea of a generation pathology (*ibidem*: 25-27).

The Italian scientific literature on NEET is rather scarce, showing the lacking attention dedicated to scientific terms used to describe and tackle relevant social problems, In particular, the uncritical import of political strongly featured as NEET could depend on naivety, ignorance of the concept complexity or of the recent British experience, or even an hidden acceptance of the cultural approach, first of all the labelling of a social group and the support to workfare policies.

The frequent use of NEET in the mass-media communication is explicitly oriented to influence public policies on youth social issues and it shows how strong is the political feature of NEET. An interesting example of this scientific media literature is the already cited article by Gross and Maselli (2012). On one hand, it intend to drive youth policies towards the contrast of NEET instead of unemployment, inactivity and lacking education. On the other hand, this article is written on a trustworthy online journal by scientists working for the European Union, nevertheless it contains an evident and rough mistake, considering NEET as not including unemployment and therefore corresponding to inactivity in relation with both labour market and education: ‘where are the other youngsters? Little more than a half is at school or university. Another part, and it is the most silent and dangerous, is included in the NEET category: they do not work and are not in education/training. This category should worry more than others not only because they do not work, not only because they do not search for a job, but also because they do not accumulate human capital to be spent later when the negative phase of the economic cycle will end’ [emphasis-added] (Gross, Maselli 2012). Instead, it is well-known that in Europe³, as well as in Italy, NEET includes unemployed youngsters and besides it exactly represents a complication for the scientific and clear use of this category.

Some Italian and international media tend to simplify and change the complexity of NEET concept, also reporting research conclusions: they accentuate the seriousness of the social problems described by scientists and simplify the message, with the risk of labeling the disadvantaged young people. Emblematic examples are the NEETs description made by ‘Il Sole 24 ore’ (official

³ Eurostat defines NEETs: ‘they are not employed (i.e. unemployed or inactive according to the International Labour Organisation definition)’ and ‘they have not received any education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey’ (http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Glossary:Young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_and_training_%28NEET%29)

newspaper of the main employers' association), as 'immobile army of new labour illiterates' (Bassi 2011) and the more recent article on the Dutch newspaper 'Touw', which relates correctly some of the figures and conclusions of the Eurofound report, but nevertheless cannot avoid to generalize and stigmatize: 'He [the Eurofound researcher] studied young people who are neither working, nor following education or training (also called "Neets"). He looked at the background and the behaviour of these "couch potatoes" and what they are costing Europe. [...] Fourteen million young people sitting at home doing nothing in Europe'[emphasis-added] (de Werd 2012).

2. Youth condition in the European labour market: empirical comparison between NEET and traditional categories

The analysis of social risks linked with exclusion from labour market, training and education takes advantage of several tested indicators, which make it possible to monitor labour market dynamics and risk factors hitting specific social groups, young people, women, socially and economically disadvantaged people.

We now consider the traditional indicators on labour market and outline the risk profiles of young people in some European countries, also using the thematic literature. Then we will compare these indicators with the NEET one in order to verify which would be the original contribute that this new indicator is supposed to give to youth disadvantage studies.

2.1 Social exclusion risk for young people: European models

The indicator of early school leavers⁴ takes the education and training dimensions into consideration: figures show the dissimilarities within Europe (Tab.1). Spain and Italy have the highest shares of early school leavers, instead the highest participation can be found in the northern countries, in Austria and Holland. If we look at data referred to job, a strong gap of Southern countries and France emerges: here the share of employed ESL is under the European average. In Spain and Italy dissatisfied ESL, young people willing to work and unable to find one, are overrepresented. Also UK shows a relevant share of early leavers and some difficulties for them to enter labour market.

Tab. 1 Early school leavers (18-24) by working status (2012)

	ESL	Employed among ESL	Jobless ESL	Dissatisfied among jobless ESL
EU27	12,8	42,2	7,4	70,3
EU15	13,8	42,0	7,9	73,4
Denmark	9,1	49,5	4,6	58,7
Germany	10,6	45,3	5,8	65,5
Greece	11,4	37,7	7,1	69,0
Spain	24,9	37,3	15,6	85,9
France	11,6	40,5	6,9	71,0
Italy	17,6	37,5	11,0	77,3
Netherlands	8,8	67,0	2,9	55,2
Austria	7,6	53,9	3,5	68,6
Sweden	7,5	50,7	3,7	62,2
UK	13,6	42,6	7,7	63,6

Source: Eurostat

⁴ This rate measures the percentage of young people (18-24) with low educational level (at most lower secondary school, ISCED 0-2 or 3c short) and out of any educative or training systems in the last four weeks.

In regard to labour market (Tab. 2) the Mediterranean countries, Italy, Greece and Spain, show a strong youth disadvantage according to each indicator: scarce labour market participation, high unemployment and long-term unemployment and strong discrimination as compared with adults. These data confirm the traditional unemployment models (Reyneri 2005: 104-8): the Southern countries are characterized by a strong labour market exclusion of young people and approached by France even if with a less serious young condition; the German model, including also Austria, Netherlands and Denmark with low young unemployment (under 10% excepted for Denmark), limited long term unemployment and without youth discrimination; the British model, to be extended to Sweden, featured by a strong age discrimination in spite of a decent youth employment level. These three groups show different degrees of labour market inclusion with regard to young people.

Tab. 2 Indicators of youth disadvantage on labour market (2012)

	Employment rate 15-24	Unemployment rate 15-24	Long-term unemployment rate 15-24	Age discrimination index (M)
EU15	32,9	22,8	32,4	1,2 (1,3)
EU27	35,5	22,2	31,5	1,1 (1,3)
Denmark	55,0	14,1	9,0	0,8 (0,9)
Germany	46,6	8,1	23,3	0,4 (0,5)
Greece	13,1	55,3	49,0	1,3 (1,8)
Spain	18,2	53,2	35,6	1,1 (1,4)
France	28,8	23,8	28,4	1,4 (1,6)
Italy	18,6	35,3	49,7	2,3 (3,1)
Netherlands	63,3	9,5	13,8	0,8 (0,8)
Austria	54,6	8,7	14,6	1,0 (1,1)
Sweden	40,2	23,6	7,1	1,9 (2,1)
UK	46,9	21,0	27,4	1,6 (1,7)

Source: Eurostat. Age discrimination index: difference between 15-24 and 15-64 unemployment rate divided by the latter; the male index in brackets isolates age from gender discrimination.

These indicators seem to describe young condition with enough precision. We now shift to NEET indicator and verify what it can add in terms of information.

2.2 Heterogeneity of indicator: NEET measurement and internal diversification

In order to evaluate advantages and problems of NEET, we will measure its diffusion and composition and compare these data with the traditional indicators in the same European countries. Starting from Furlong's observation (Furlong 2006) on the limits of this category, we will verify whether NEET composition among countries and its dynamics during the last decade support our argument on the scarce utility of this supposed synthetic indicator of phenomena, which are actually diversified through time and space.

First of all, we look at the general composition of NEET to identify a picture of youth condition with respect to the dimensions of work and education. In 2012 almost one out of seven European youngsters can be considered NEET: 13% of people in the age range 15-24 neither work nor study considering both EU 27 and EU 15. Figures change radically among countries: in the Southern countries around one fifth of young people can be considered NEET (only Bulgaria has higher NEET rate in EU 27), in UK they represent one seventh of the total (14%), instead the other countries have a NEET rate under the European average and in the majority under 8%. It shows that the social alarm about NEET can be justified only in the Mediterranean countries, which furthermore have the worst labour market condition not only for young people, and in UK, where,

not by chance, the concept and the relative discussion stem.

Youth employment as exclusive activity involves on average almost one out of five young person works. Higher participation can be found in UK and Austria with one out of four youngsters; youth employment is particularly low in Greece, Spain and Denmark, where however the whole employment participation (total employment in the table) is very high. Around two on three young persons are involved in education/training activities with or without working (total Edu-Training in the table), Denmark, Netherland, Germany and Sweden show the highest shares, above 70% since they have more students in employment than the other countries.

A limited share of NEETs depends of course on an inclusive labour market, but especially on the role of education and training system, which strongly diversify youth condition in Europe. Systems of coexistence of education/training and employment make the difference more than the educational system only. In Austria, Denmark and Netherlands at least half of young population works and a relevant part of them continues studying or participate in training activities. In Denmark and Netherlands the EETs represent the major subgroup and prevail over students (ET), around one out of four youngsters, and that helps to reach the highest level of labour market participation (around 55-60%) in Europe, most of these young people are part-time workers going on with education⁵. In Germany and Austria, instead, part-time employment is limited (around 25% - Eurostat 2012) and even under the European average, and the outstanding EET share – lower than in Denmark and Netherlands, but definitely above the European average – is produced by the well-known dual system, which provides an internship combining education and on-the-job training. Also in UK the share of employed young people is rather high, definitely above the European average and similar to Germany, it is especially due to work as exclusive activity. A NEET share above European average is due to the low participation in education, which is a traditional feature of British social system. That is an important point to think over: in comparative terms it seems more decisive in UK to reduce the early school leaving than a further push towards employment. In the Southern countries we found a scarce labour market inclusion (less than one out of five young people works), but also a feeble combination of job training and education. In this case the relevant problem is the low capacity to create job opportunities in particular for young people, limiting also their chances of job training. The French case can be considered typical of Europe: a ‘neither nor’ share on the average but lower than in the Mediterranean countries thanks to a good labour market participation (both as only employment and EET) and to a relevant share of young people in education.

⁵ In Denmark part-time young people (15-24) represent 62,40% of the whole youngsters in employment and in Netherlands they almost reach 75%, both with a higher share among women (Eurostat 2012). In Denmark the main reason for part-time employment is to go forth with education, whereas it is the second one in Netherlands; in both countries the involuntary part-time is extremely low (under 10%).

Tab. 3 NEET (15-24) composition⁶ by employment and education/training status (2012)

	EET	ET	Total Edu-Training	Only Employment	NEET	Total Employment
EU27*	13,6	53,8	67,4	19,3	13,2	32,9
EU15*	15,9	51,5	67,4	19,6	13,1	35,5
Denmark	41,9	38,4	80,3	13,1	6,6	55,0
Germany*	25,4	46,2	71,6	21,2	7,7	46,6
Greece	2,2	66,6	68,8	10,9	20,3	13,1
Spain	5,4	63,0	68,4	12,7	18,8	18,1
France	9,9	58,9	68,8	18,9	12,2	28,8
Italy	2,8	60,4	63,2	15,8	21,1	18,6
Netherlands*	46,0	32,4	78,4	17,3	4,3	63,3
Austria	27,3	38,9	66,2	27,3	6,5	54,6
Sweden ⁷	19,5	52,0	71,5	20,7	7,8	40,2
UK	20,0	38,6	58,6	26,8	14,0	46,8

Source: Eurostat; * provisional

The selection of age range limits is a critical question in the NEET discussion. We now look at different age ranges, not only at the most used 15-24, normally considered in the European statistics on young people, but also at the two subgroups 15-19 and 20-24 and moreover at the macro-range 15-29, used by ISTAT and its relative subgroup 25-29.

The most part of NEETs is concentrated after 20 years old. In Europe the NEET share passes from 7% among 15-19 youngsters to 19% in the range 20-24 and to 20% among young adults. Among teenagers, in fact, NEETs are more than 10% only in Italy and Spain; NEET share increases in the consecutive section 20-24 in all European countries and reaches the highest levels in Spain (26%), Italy (30%), Greece (31%), a relevant level in UK (19%). NEETs increase among young adults in the age 25-29 and dramatically among women. In the matter of gender inequalities, up to 24 years old they hit males and only in the virtuous countries, except for Germany; from 25 up to 29 years old the usual gender inequalities against women start to come in play, excluding them from labour market during the motherhood phase.

According to the NEET approach the risk of exclusion stem from an early exit from educational system and from the difficult transition to labour market due to scarce job skills; the strong increase of NEETs among youngsters after 20 years old and young adults show also more general difficulties of labour market to absorb youth labour supply, not related to the first approach to work. In this sense the NEET indicator reveals the deficiency to mix up different phenomena.

⁶ EET: in Employment and Education-training; ET: in Education-training; Edu-Training and total Employment are respectively sum of young people involved in educational and working activities as exclusive or coexistent activities.

⁷ All data reported on Sweden are considered provisional by Eurostat.

Tab. 4 NEET by age and gender (2012)

	15-19		20-24		25-29		15-24		15-29	
	M+F	F								
EU27*	7,0	6,5	18,6	19,6	20,6	25,4	13,2	13,5	15,9	17,8
EU15*	7,2	6,6	18,4	19,2	19,9	24,1	13,1	13,3	15,5	17,2
Denmark	3,8	3,7	9,5	9,5	11,6	12,0	6,6	6,7	8,2	8,4
Germany*	4,2	4,3	10,6	11,9	13,2	17,6	7,7	8,4	9,6	11,7
Greece	9,9	9,9	31,0	33,5	37,6	43,7	20,3	21,6	27,1	29,9
Spain	10,5	9,3	26,1	25,4	28,7	28,9	18,8	17,8	22,6	22,2
France	6,3	5,4	17,9	18,1	20,2	24,7	12,2	12,0	15,0	16,3
Italy	11,9	10,9	29,5	30,2	28,9	35,0	21,1	21,0	23,9	26,1
Netherlands*	2,0	2,0	6,4	7,1	9,9	11,8	4,3	4,7	6,2	7,1
Austria	4,2	4,0	8,6	9,2	10,1	13,5	6,5	6,7	7,8	9,1
Sweden	4,1	3,8	11,2	11,3	9,4	11,2	7,8	7,8	8,4	8,9
UK	7,8	7,2	19,4	21,8	17,7	24,5	14,0	15,1	15,4	18,5

Source: Eurostat. *provisional

We now move to NEET dynamics⁸, observing how it has been changed since the beginning of this century. If measured in terms of percentage points NEETs seem to be quite stable, as the variation is limited to 2-3 points with the exception of Spain (6 points). If we properly calculate an index of variation (Tab. 5) a strong and internally diversified change emerges.

In the 27 European countries taken together relevant changes occurred only among the youngest (15-19) with a decrease of NEETs, who instead increased among the EU15 countries in particular from 20 years old. NEETs grew very strongly in Spain and Denmark, but also in Greece, Sweden and UK, associating in this sense very different labour markets and social systems. In some countries, Denmark, Germany, France and Sweden the NEET's increase is concentrated within teenagers, instead in Spain, Greece, Italy and UK NEETs grew stronger in the range 20-24 or among young adults (25-29). Italy shows an overall but limited increase of NEETs in particular within 20-24. Germany, Netherlands and Austria, characterized by inclusive labour markets, show very differentiated trends: NEETs increased among the youngest in Germany and decreased in the other ranges; in Austria they decreased along all age segments; in Netherlands the NEET share decreased rather strongly among teenagers, increased in the range 20-24 and is rather stable beyond 24 years old. The dynamic among young adults is normally coherent with the one observed in the preceding age section.

It is interesting that NEETs are rising most strongly in Denmark, one of the country, together with Germany and Austria, adopting an active approach to labour market policies and a strong apprenticeship model in the vocational system. Of course the NEET share remains low (7%), but this increasing dynamic becomes alarming, also because Denmark has been implementing specific ALMP for young people during the last years⁹.

It seems to emerge an extremely diversified picture: among the inclusive countries NEETs decreased in Austria and Germany, whereas they increased dramatically in Denmark and moderately in Netherlands; the situation is worsening also in those countries where young people suffer strong discriminations on labour market with a strong increase in Greece, Spain and partially in Italy.

⁸ Eurostat measures NEETs in two different ways with regards to education/training. A first method includes who is out of formal educational or training system and is adopted by Istat, the second one, instead, considers also informal education and training, not organized by schools, universities or officially recognized training agencies. We adopted the first definition, because data collected with this method are available since 2000 and because it follows the standard European definition, adopted also by Eurostat, which anyway measures both indicators.

⁹ <http://www.social-europe.eu/2012/06/neets-in-the-nordic-countries/>

A further differentiation is represented by gender: the NEET dynamic among female youngsters is relatively comforting. In Austria and Germany the NEET decrease is stronger than among male youngsters; in Netherlands, but also in Greece and Italy NEETs decreased, inverting the trend among males; in Sweden, Denmark and Spain the NEETs increase is mitigated even if still considerable.

The NEET dynamic shows how heterogeneous is the phenomenon which this indicator attempt to represent and how many social factors related to youth social risks can influence it; therefore these data support the critics to the methodological weakness of NEET.

Tab. 5 NEET (15-24): index of percentage variation 2012-2000

	T 15-19	T 20-24	T 25-29	F 15-19	F 20-24	F 25-29
EU27*	-10,3	1,1	3,0	-20,7	-7,5	-8,6
EU15*	4,3	17,2	9,9	-10,8	2,7	-5,9
Denmark	52,0	43,9	41,5	42,3	28,4	9,1
Germany*	50,0	-19,1	-13,7	38,7	-21,7	-22,1
Greece	10,0	23,5	34,3	-10,8	6,7	4,8
Spain	20,7	75,2	36,7	1,1	40,3	-4,0
France	23,5	13,3	5,2	3,8	0,0	-6,8
Italy	-1,7	17,5	11,2	-20,4	4,9	-1,7
Netherlands*	-9,1	16,4	4,2	-16,7	-12,3	-23,4
Austria	-34,4	-9,5	-18,5	-46,7	-4,2	-27,4
Sweden	36,7	23,1	20,5	-28,3	18,9	9,8
UK	4,0	34,7	16,4	-6,5	16,0	13,4

Source: Eurostat. *provisional

As often recalled in this paper, NEETs include also unemployed young people, an active part of population on labour market. In Europe they represent more than the half of the whole NEET group, whereas in Greece, France and Spain they reach the 60%. It shows how improper and misleading is to consider NEETs as inactive and marginal. Interestingly Germany, Netherlands and Denmark, three of the four most inclusive labour markets show, nearby Italy, the highest share of inactive population among NEETs (around 60%); in Austria, the other inclusive country, inactive NEETs equal active ones. From this point of view, in the countries where young people run a strong social exclusion risk (admitting that NEET is able to measure it), they are less inclined to enter labour market than in the other countries.

Moreover, even unemployed people are internally strongly diversified, since for example the long-term unemployment represents an actual risk of social exclusion, whereas unemployment and NEETs can be even temporary conditions. It is also evident that unemployment in Greece, Spain and Italy, for example, is generally more risky than in the other countries, as shown in table 2.

If we consider the intention to work within NEETs, the potential work supply exceeds the unemployment rate; it reveals an even stronger difficulty of national labour market to include youngsters and the young people's distrust to find a job, since a relevant part of them desist from searching for an occupation. In Italy, as proved by specific researches (Istat 2012b) discouragement is very strong (10% of all inactive people in 2010¹⁰). According to CNEL (2012) 12% of NEETs in 2011 are discouraged youngsters, who stopped to look for a job; to them it has to be added also more than a third of unemployed people and a fourth of inactive people who are not active on the labour market because of care tasks, illness and other factors, limiting the actual 'marginally attached' youngsters to one fourth of the whole NEETs.

Differences among European countries are relevant but softened by the fact that in each of them the

¹⁰ http://www3.istat.it/dati/catalogo/20110523_00/grafici/3_5.html

majority of NEETs would like to work; moreover the highest share of NEETs unwilling to work can be found in Germany, Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden (around one out of three NEETs), countries with a low quote of NEETs. Following the NEET logic, this part of ‘neither-nor’ (one fourth of the group in Europe) should be considered as problematic as unproductive human capital or as subjects without social ties and motivations. Actually, it cannot be excluded that NEETs unwilling to work, at least some of them, are evaluating working opportunities, are involved in some voluntary work, which, besides, offer training opportunities, or moreover benefit favourable social conditions and therefore choose to remain out of labour market and education/training without any kind of social risk.

Tab. 6 NEET (15-24) composition by job search and will to work (2012)

	NEET	Unemployed	Inactive	Willing to work	Unwilling to work
EU27*	13,1	6,9	6,2	9,6	3,5
EU15*	13,0	6,9	6,0	9,6	3,4
Denmark	6,6	2,5	4,1	4,2	2,4
Germany*	7,1	3,0	4,2	4,5	2,6
Greece	20,3	13,9	6,4	15,0	5,3
Spain	18,8	13,3	5,4	15,6	3,2
France	12,2	7,5	4,7	9,2	3,0
Italy	21,1	8,9	12,2	16,3	4,7
Netherlands*	4,3	1,6	2,7	2,7	1,6
Austria	6,5	3,3	3,2	5,2	1,3
Sweden	7,8	4,0	3,8	5,3	2,6
UK	14,0	7,4	6,6	9,9	4,1

Source: Eurostat. *provisional. All percentages are calculated on the whole young population between 15 and 24 years.

Going to conclusion of this critical analysis of NEET, we want to emphasize that many internal differences are hidden just by the heterogeneity of a so broad category. Data analysed so far show how many inner differences exist and how many other elements could be found with detailed analyses.

Also the educational level, particularly influential on labour market opportunities, goes in the same direction. In Europe NEETs can be equally divided by low (Isced 0-2, compulsory education) and middle-high level (secondary school and university). Within the 20-24 range the share of highly educated increases as well as the quote of ‘neither-nor’ on the whole age class. Different profiles can be identified from this point of view, too: in Spain and Germany less educated NEETs prevail, whereas in Greece and Sweden the ‘neither-nor’ status is more concentrated among graduated young people. In other countries – France, Italy, Austria, Netherlands and Denmark – a substantial balance can be observed between the two subgroups among the whole young people (15-24), whereas the more educated youngsters represent the major part of 20-24 category.

These figures show how important is the role of policies addressing under-education but at the same time how diversified are national conditions.

Tab. 7 NEET by educational level (2012)

	15-24			20-24		
	All	Isced 0-2	Isced 3-6	All	Isced 0-2	Isced 3-6
EU27*	13,1	6,0	7,0	18,6	7,6	11,0
EU15*	13,0	6,4	6,5	18,4	8,1	10,2
Denmark	6,6	3,6	2,9	9,5	4,4	4,9
Germany*	7,1	4,2	3,0	10,6	5,7	4,9
Greece	20,3	5,5	14,8	31,0	7,8	23,2
Spain	18,8	12,8	6,0	26,1	16,3	9,8
France	12,2	5,5	6,7	17,9	6,8	11,1
Italy	21,1	9,5	11,5	29,5	11,1	18,4
Netherlands*	4,3	2,2	1,8	6,4	3,0	3,0
Austria	6,5	3,4	3,0	8,6	3,8	4,7
Sweden	7,8	2,9	4,8	11,2	3,5	7,4
UK	14,0	6,0	7,7	19,3	8,0	10,9

Source: Eurostat. *provisional

In conclusion it can be argued that the NEET category is not able to give new or original information in comparison to what comes from the traditional indicators illustrated in paragraph 2.1. Moreover, the use of this indicator tends to conceal peculiar features and dynamics which often diverge among countries.

It is still alive the question of NEET as policy target.

3. It is a question of policies

In the last part of the paper it will be illustrated the connection among UK policies, EU guidelines and Italian possible measures to favour young people's participation in the labour market. The objective is neither to evaluate these policies nor to criticize the activation approach in general, but to emphasize what kind of radical transformations are entailed in the reforms which adopt the NEET approach. It is important to discuss seriously and immediately about this approach in order to be careful with expansive reform of labour market policies with possible ineffective or even negative consequences on social inequalities.

3.1 The UK experience and the European guidelines

UK policies addressing the NEET question can be considered as a pattern for the mainstream approach in Europe.

The specific measures adopted in UK starting from the report *Bridging the Gap* and through the following projects are part of a set of active labour market policies for young people, which received considerable economic resources, mostly used for the *Connexions* service (OECD 2008). The main elements of this policy addressing to 13-19 years old people represent the model for other European countries: detailed monitoring of the target population through a partition in subgroups aimed at a precise knowledge of its features; customized orientation and support aimed at acquiring the necessary competences and skills for a successful labour market inclusion; supply of a broad spectrum of training courses (Italialavoro 2011: 107-112). Apprenticeship plays a decisive role in the labour market inclusion, differentiated in three qualification levels and various professional types, provided by a public national agency or private entities. Main features are activation, empowerment, beneficiaries identification among a large target population, customization of training path and collaboration between public and private agencies.

The European Union inserts the youth issue in the more general goal of a growth strategy based on a smart (education and research), sustainable and inclusive economy (Europe 2020 strategy).

Among others, important specific objectives are the reduction of early school leaving, the increase of educational level, aimed in particular to university graduation, the reduction of poverty and social exclusion. From this point of view a stronger social inclusion is not identified with NEET reduction, which in fact is not included among the ‘headlines targets’ unlike the traditional indicators on labour market participation and education¹¹. On the contrary, the NEET rate can be found among the specific key indicators against youth unemployment, together with some traditional indicators, like unemployment rate and ratio¹².

European policies addressing NEET can be placed into the *Flagship Initiative* ‘Youth on the move’, aiming at increasing training and education possibilities as condition to find or create good job, and also into the ‘Agenda for new skills and new jobs’, dedicated to labour market participation.

The European strategy oriented to the reduction of early school leaving, to a good transition education-labour market and to improve young people employment chances are based on subject’s activation, in particular through ALMP, training, service customization, following the British pattern (Pemberton 2008), flexible educational and labour market insertion paths combined with social assistance services (flexicurity), cooperation among public, private and third sector.

With regard to NEET reduction the European Commission encourages to monitor its dynamics and to identify NEETs’ subgroups, which to address specific measures and services to. For the ones who stay longer in the NEET condition the European recommendations ask for intensive and prolonged measures (Italiavoro 2011: 113-4).

3.2 Italian policies: implicit and explicit consequences of NEET use.

In Italy specific policies contrasting NEET do not exist, neither as project nor as actual measure. Instead, measures addressing early school leaving, inactivity and unemployment have been implemented during the last years.

Among active policies the internship proved effective to improve the labour market participation, even because this measure is economically very favourable for employers (neither wage nor social insurance are compulsory), but needs accurate controls on training and orienting contents (Rizzoli 2010). The apprenticeship, the main policy measure in UK and in the European guidelines, turns out to be underused in Italy (Italiavoro 2011: 129).

In the light of UK experience and European Commission guidelines strategies against NEET phenomenon are essentially based on the reinforcement of policies contrasting early school leaving and three forms of apprenticeship, following the British model.

According to Italiavoro (2011: 115-35), in particular, two groups need urgent measures for labour market inclusion and training: inactive young people with low employability (18% of the whole NEETs, 369.000 persons) and the ones with improbable employability and those who actively look for job (34%, 700.000). The second group does not need new measures, apart from the inactive young people, instead the first one, composed mainly by young people living in the Southern regions, requires a radical policy innovation. What is concretely suggested is the implementation of the British model in Italy, introducing a deep knowledge of the target population, the capacity to intercept, to take care of and to activate them with personalized path towards labour market, using on-the-job training and apprenticeship (Bianchi, Bosco 2012). To create and to put them in operation these measures, the authority and role of Italian Regions have to be clarified, private and public partner have to be involved, training supply has to be enriched and differentiated. Many economic resources and time would be necessary, considering the traditional and current shortage of Italian labour market policies, in particular the active ones¹³.

¹¹ http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/europe_2020_indicators/headline_indicators

¹² http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/themes/17_youth_unemployment.pdf

¹³ Eurostat data illustrate clearly the scarce funding of labour market policies in Italy compared with the most generous countries like Denmark, Austria and Germany but also with Spain and UK (with regard to labour services). Moreover public funding are decreasing in the last decade (http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=lmp_ind_exp&lang=en)

The most negative element in the Italian welfare is the asymmetry of policies answer (Italiavora 2011: 108; Bianchi, Bosco 2012), which consist in a smaller and insufficient capacity to implement effective measures exactly where, the Southern regions, social problems are stronger and more frequent. The recent federalist reforms worsened the traditional public policy fragmentation, which in the South of Italy consist in a serious inefficiency to contrast social exclusion (Ascoli 2011).

Any active labour market policy to be effective in Italy need a radical transformation of the existing job centres, the reorganization of these services and a staff training (Gualmini, Rizza 2011).

Since the Italian welfare is so deficient and in want of profound reforms, incidentally during this strong and long-lasting economic crisis and public budget cut, it is even more decisive a serious discussion on the possible changes of education and labour market policies. In particular, for what concerns this paper, a scientific debate should regard also the knowledge tools and consequent policy objectives.

Conclusions

With regard to the UK experience, briefly illustrated but largely consulted in this paper, it becomes even clearer the necessity to critically discuss NEET before deciding to introduce it among the Italian policies' objectives. The problem is not the general aim of the NEET approach, the reduction of young people inactivity and risk of social exclusion, but the fact that the uncritical adoption of this target policy, which proved to be so ambiguous, could be dangerous just in the current difficult situation of the Italian welfare system.

The definition of NEET is not convincing not only because of the heterogeneity of social features and risk factors of the included young people, but also because it is approximate about the actual realm of social disadvantage.

It is not persuasive to introduce this new policy indicator, which does not add any kind of information and has the only merit to summarize different information and to communicate it effectively, but at the expense of precision. Of course it would be dangerous if this indicator were used as information source and policy target.

Moreover, it can be contested the usefulness of a unique indicator which need to subdivided to be effective. The basic logic of NEET approach appears fruitlessly complex. We try to explain it. This social policy approach defines a target population on the base of symptoms instead of social inequalities (common feature of all activation approach), putting together different social condition (inactivity and unemployment; free will and constraint joblessness); it requires specific statistical analysis to monitor its dynamics and to define subgroups based on the same social features and inequalities factors already ignored in the first phase and used for addressing specific policy measures; these measures need to be customized by the delivering social services. It can be questioned whether this complex logic can give effective and efficient results, especially if compared with simpler (at least logically) policies tackling social inequalities, which actually provoke the NEET phenomenon.

The recent British experience suggests some doubts about the adoption of policies contrasting NEET, especially if uncritically as it is happening in Italy. The numeric reduction of NEET, adopted in UK and European policies, could have perverse effects, exactly because of the heterogeneity of this group. The beneficiaries selection in favour of less disadvantaged and more employable young people within the NEET group is a concrete risk in Italy because of resource scarcity, service inefficiency, discretionary beneficiaries selection, fragmentation of regional welfare systems. It could be occur also a scarce sustainability of young people labour market and educational participation, considering the structural and contingent difficulty to create jobs in Italy. The short-term effects of a training course or a temporary contract could entail the return to the NEET group without an actual reduction of social inequalities and social exclusion risks.

The identification of youth social problems with the NEET category is misleading because, even if so wide, it ends up with excluding labour market participant (not at all insiders) but suffering young people: temporary workers. They not only experience economic problems, so far partly absorbed by

their parents in the Italian case, but risk mid-terms difficulties to complete the transition to adulthood and long-terms social exclusion.

The NEET policies press young people towards educational, training and working activities according to the empowerment and human capital approach. To this end, the job quality and educational/training courses effectiveness should be a key question: the adoption of NEET policies needs control activities which in Italy are not part of the system and cannot be given for granted.

The adaptation of Italian labour market policies to activation approach, which is also in the NEET nature, requires an overall service reform, which is not occurring so far in spite of many discourses on that issue and which should be carefully planned in order to avoid to worsen the traditional problems instead of reducing social inequalities.

The main reason for the recent strong visibility of NEET issue on the public debate through mass media, which limit themselves to uncritically recall the question or even mangle the term (scientists are at fault for that) can be attributed to an, explicit or not, informed or not, adoption of *workfare* approach, which entails the individualization of social risks and therefore of public policies. The strong feature of NEET approach based on activation and empowerment, aiming at enlarging personal capacity to find a job but at the expense of contrasting the overall social inequalities, is particularly risky in Italy. Here, in fact, activation policies would be inserted in a fragmented welfare system with lacking measures against new (outsiders) and traditional (poverty) inequalities; a radical shift towards activation policies at least would require a general reform of welfare system, in particular with regard to unemployment protection and universal social assistance.

Finally, the pressure to adopt the NEET approach is strongly questionable for many reasons. In particular, from the scientific point of view it is not admissible and dangerous the scarce, if not null, debate on the concept and its operationalization, not just for a question of precision per se but for the possible negative consequences on public policies.

The main objective of the paper was to contrast the uncritical adoption of NEET as indicator and policy target; it will be achieved not necessarily by convincing scholars of the uselessness of NEET but just by opening a debate.

Literature

- Ascoli U. (2011) *Il Welfare in Italia*, il Mulino, Bologna (a cura di).
- Banca d'Italia (2011) *Economie regionali. L'economia delle regioni italiane. Dinamiche recenti e aspetti strutturali*, n. 23
- Ballarino G., Bison I., Schadee H. (2011) *Abbandoni scolastici e stratificazione sociale nell'Italia contemporanea*, Stato e mercato, 3, pp. 479-518.
- Barbieri P., Scherer S. (2007) 'Vite svendute. Uno sguardo analitico sulla costruzione sociale delle prossime generazioni di esclusi', Polis, XXI, 3, dicembre, pp. 431-459.
- Bassi G. (2011) "La generazione Neet", Il Sole24ore 20 aprile, <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/economia/2011-04-20/generazione-neet-064231.shtml?uuid=AaBrISQD>
- Bianchi L., Bosco R. (2012) "I giovani e la crisi: processi formativi e accesso al lavoro, una transizione sempre più difficile, soprattutto nelle regioni del Mezzogiorno", Quaderni di Economia del Lavoro, n. 97, pp. 109-145.
- Bynner, J. and Parsons, S. (2002) 'Social Exclusion and the Transition from School to Work: The Case of Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training', *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 60(2): 289-309.
- Carrera L. (2012) "The Neet. The lost bet", *Italian Sociological Review*, 2, 2, pp.106-115
- Cavalca G. (2010) "Transizione post-industriale e cambiamento delle disuguaglianze sociali nelle principali aree urbane d'Italia", *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, a. LI, n. 3/10, pp. 367-398.
- Cecchi, D. (1997), *L'efficacia del sistema scolastico italiano in prospettiva storica*, in N. Rossi (a cura di), *L'istruzione in Italia: solo un pezzo di carta?*, Bologna: Il Mulino, pp. 67-128.
- CNEL (2012) *Rapporto sul mercato del lavoro 2011 – 2012*, 18 settembre.
- de Werd F. (2012) "Generazione Neet", Trouw, 28 novembre, Amsterdam <http://www.presseurop.eu/it/content/article/3089051-generazione-neet>
- Esping-Andersen G., Regini M. (2000) *Why Deregulate Labour Markets?*, Oxford University Press (ed. by).

- Eurofound (2012a), NEETs – Young people not in employment, education or training: Characteristics, costs and policy responses in Europe, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- Eurofound (2012b) Recent policy developments related to those not in employment, education and training (NEETs), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- Furlong A. (2006) “Not a very NEET solution: representing problematic labour market transitions among early school-leavers”, *Work, employment and society* Volume 20 (3): 553–569.
- Granaglia E. (2010) Contro la povertà, *il Mulino*, 6, pp. 913-921.
- Gross D., Maselli I. (2012) “Giovani disoccupati italiani tra mito e realtà”, *lavoce.info*, <http://archivio.lavoce.info/articoli/pagina1003129-351.html>
- Gualmini E., Rizza R. (2011), Attivazione, occupabilità e nuovi orientamenti nelle politiche del lavoro: il caso italiano e tedesco a confronto, *Stato e mercato*, 2, pp. 195-222.
- House of Commons, Children, Schools and Families Committee (2010) *Young People not in education, employment or training. Eight Report of Session 2009-2010*, House of Commons, The Stationary Office Limited, London.
- Inui A. (2005) Why Freeter and NEET are Misunderstood: Recognizing the New Precarious Conditions of Japanese Youth, *Social Work and Society*, vol. 2. No. 2.
- Isfol (2012) “Prospettive per il mezzogiorno tra riforme del mercato del lavoro e dinamiche economiche. Un Outlook sulle regioni dell’obiettivo convergenza”, Benevento.
- Istat (2012a) Noi Italia 2012 http://noi-italia.istat.it/fileadmin/user_upload/allegati/32.pdf
- Istat (2012b) *Rapporto annuale 2012. La situazione del Paese*, Roma.
- Italiavoro (2011a) Neet: i giovani che non studiano, non frequentano corsi di formazione e non lavorano Caratteristiche e cause del fenomeno e analisi delle politiche per contenerlo e ridurlo, Area servizi per il lavoro – Progetto governance nazionale.
- Italiavoro (2011b) “I giovani Neet (not in education, employment or training) in Italia: un’analisi territoriale”, *Il Monitor*, n. 25, marzo.
- Leonardi L. (2009) Capacitazioni, lavoro e welfare. La ricerca di nuovi equilibri tra stato e mercato: ripartire dall’Europa?, *Stato e mercato*, 1, pp. 31-62.
- Livraghi R. (2010) “Il progetto *Europlacement* e la problematica del lavoro giovanile in Italia”, *Quaderni di economia del lavoro*, n. 92, pp. 123-130.
- Maguire S., Thompson J. (2007) “Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) – Where is Government policy taking us now?” Centre for Education and Industry, University of Warwick.
- Madama I., Jessoula M., Graziano P. (2009) Flessibilità e sicurezza, per chi? *Sviluppi di policy e conseguenze nel mercato del lavoro italiano*, *Stato e mercato*, 3, pp. 387-420, doi: 10.1425/30842
- OECD (2008) *Jobs for youth: United Kingdom 2008*, OECD Publishing.
- Pappadà G. (2009) Le performance dei giovani europei nel mercato del lavoro con uno sguardo alla crisi, *Quaderni di economia del lavoro*, n. 90
- Pastore F. (2012) “Le difficili transizioni scuola-lavoro in Italia. Una chiave di interpretazione”, *Economia dei Servizi*, n. 1, pp. 109-128.
- Pemberton S. (2008) “Tackling the NEET generation and the ability of policy to generate a ‘NEET’ solution evidence from the UK” - *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 2008, volume 26, pages 243 -259.
- Popham, I. (2003) *Tackling NEETs: Research on Action and Other Factors that Can Contribute to a Reduction in the Numbers of Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)*, DfES Publications: Nottingham.
- Quintini G., Martin S. (2006) “Starting Well or Losing their Way? The Position of Youth in the Labour Market in OECD Countries”, *Oecd Social, Employment And Migration Working Papers*, 39, Paris.
- Reyneri E. (2005) *Sociologia del mercato del lavoro*, I vol., *il Mulino*, Bologna.
- Rizzoli S. (2010) “I tirocini in Italia: da strumento per l’occupazione a dispositivo per la formazione”, *Quaderni di economia del lavoro*, n. 92, pp. 131-140.
- Ruffino M. (2010) Individualizzazione della disegualianza sociale e politiche delle capacitazioni, *Sociologia del Lavoro*, fascicolo 120, pp. 137-56.
- Scarpetta, S., Sonnet A. and Manfredi T. (2010), “Rising Youth Unemployment During The Crisis: How to Prevent Negative Long-term Consequences on a Generation?”, *OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*, No. 106, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5kmh79zb2mmv-en>
- Scarpetta S., Sonnet A. (2012) *Challenges Facing European Labour Markets: Is a Skill Upgrade the*

Appropriate Instrument?, *Intereconomics* 2012

- Simmons R. (2008) "Raising the Age of Compulsory Education in England: A Neet Solution?" *British Journal of Educational Studies* , Vol. 56, No. 4 (Dec., 2008), pp. 420-439
- Sue Maguire & Jo Rennison (2005): "Two Years On: The Destinations of Young People who are Not in Education, Employment or Training at 16", *Journal of Youth Studies*, 8:2, 187-201
- Toivonen T. (2011) "'Don't let your child become a NEET!' The strategic foundations of a Japanese youth scare", *Japan Forum*, Volume 23, Number 3, 1 September 2011 , pp. 407-429(23)
- Yates S, Payne M. (2006): Not so NEET? A Critique of the Use of 'NEET' in Setting Targets for Interventions with Young People, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 9:3, 329-344.
- Verzicchio L., Lo Conte M. (2012) "La transizione istruzione-lavoro: evidenze statistiche dalle indagini ISTAT", *Economia dei Servizi*, n. 1, pp. 91-108.