

What works to amplify the rights and voices of youth in education and employment?

Lessons from the meta-synthesis of United Nations evaluations
to advance the United Nations Youth Strategy



YOUTH2030
WORKING WITH AND FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



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Disclaimer on the use of AI

This report incorporates the use of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to enhance and support evaluation screening and selection, data coding and extraction, and the generation of summary narratives from evaluation reports. The AI tools used in this report adhere to UNFPA's AI Usage Clause, ensuring ethical and responsible use, transparency, validation of results and compliance with relevant internal regulations. For details on the specific AI methodologies and tools used and details regarding the validation of AI-generated results, refer to Annex 2.

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Foreword

Education and employment are fundamental in defining the future of youth. Still, young people across the globe, especially those from low-income or conflict-affected areas, face significant barriers to quality education and decent work. The global number of out-of-school children is estimated at 250 million.¹ The global unemployment of young people is also projected to be three times greater than that for adults.² This stark reality demands urgent action. From economic instability to changing labour markets to political unrest, youth today face a host of barriers to reaching their full potential. Although digital transformation, technological innovation and the evolving job market can offer new possibilities, these pose significant challenges as well, especially for young people who aren't fully equipped with the knowledge or tools to navigate these modern complexities.

This meta-synthesis exercise examines evaluations around the priority areas of the United Nations Youth Strategy; namely, youth and quality education, and youth and economic empowerment through decent work. This exercise draws on the varied interventions across United Nations agencies and countries to provide key insights into what has worked—and what has not—in addressing the challenges young people face in these critical areas. By analysing evaluations of United Nations interventions across diverse contexts, this report highlights enabling and hindering factors as well as key insights and lessons learned to better equip young people for the future of work and learning.

The recently adopted Pact for the Future signals a commitment to collaborate and support young people, recognizing their vital role in building a more sustainable and inclusive world. This meta-synthesis provides evidence-based insights to guide initiatives and interventions that empower young people to shape the future they will inherit. Investing in youth education and employment ultimately unlocks their full potential, empowering them to drive transformative change and become a powerful force for progress.

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¹ UNESCO. Global Education Monitoring Report. 2023.

² ILO. Global Employment Trends for Youth. 2023.

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The collaboration between these United Nations agencies and partners underscores the tremendous value of inter-agency cooperation in generating new knowledge that directly contributes to more effective programming. This exercise would not have been possible without the openness and willingness of everyone involved to embrace innovative approaches. The support and collaboration of these agencies were essential and without them this endeavour would not have come to fruition.

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Acronyms

AI	Artificial intelligence
CMO	Context, mechanisms, and outcomes
EYE	Egypt Youth Employment
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
GBV	Gender-based violence
HIV/AIDS	Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, and others
LN0B	Leave no one behind
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
M4P	Making markets work for the poor
MSMEs	Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises
NEET	Not in education, employment or training
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OSHE	Occupational safety and health
PPEA	Projet de Promotion de l'Entrepreneuriat Agricole
PWDs	Persons with disabilities
QIE	Quality Inclusive Education
RACCN	North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (Nicaragua)
SDG(s)	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
SRHR	Sexual and reproductive health and rights
SY@W	SafeYouth@Work
TVET	Technical and vocational education and training
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNYO	United Nations Youth Office
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
YAPASA	Youth Agricultural Productivity and Support Activity
YEF	Youth Entrepreneurship Facility
YG	Youth Guarantee



1 INTRODUCTION



The United Nations Youth Strategy

Launched in 2018, the United Nations Youth Strategy, Youth2030,³ established five priorities for the next 12 years to address young people's needs, advance their rights, and build their agency in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This umbrella framework guides the United Nations efforts with and for young people, ensuring coordinated, coherent and holistic actions.

Youth2030 also aims to build an evidence base of good practices and lessons learned; promote evidence-based interventions; establish accountability mechanisms; and strengthen partnerships among the United Nations, donors, and local and national partners. For this purpose, a series of meta-syntheses was conducted to identify lessons learned while implementing projects related to the five priorities of the United Nations Youth Strategy. The first meta-synthesis focused on Priority 1 (youth participation) and Priority 4 (youth and human rights) of the United Nations Youth Strategy.⁴ The second synthesis looked at Priority 5 (peace and resilience building).⁵ This current report is the third meta-synthesis, and it focuses on the priority areas of quality education and economic empowerment through decent work (Priorities 2 and 3).

Youth2030: The United Nations Youth Strategy

Priority 2: Informed and healthy foundations - Support young people's greater access to quality education and health services (NB: the focus in this assignment is on quality education and not on access to health services)

Priority 3: Economic empowerment through decent work - Support young people's greater access to decent work and productive employment

³ <https://www.unyouth2030.com/about>.

⁴ <https://www.unfpa.org/what-works-amplify-rights-and-voices-youth-meta-synthesis-lessons-learned-youth-evaluations-2015>.

⁵ <https://www.unfpa.org/what-works-amplify-rights-and-voices-youth-peace-and-resilience-building>.

Meta-synthesis of evaluation reports

A meta-synthesis is a methodology uniquely suited to support United Nations learning as it broadens the understanding of existing knowledge by integrating multiple, interrelated qualitative or evaluative studies. In this context, it can provide valuable insights into the current implementation of Youth2030, offering higher-level lessons that can inform the design of future interventions to advance the strategy and, more broadly, achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This meta-synthesis of evaluation reports aims to generate learning on what works and what does not (including for whom, under what circumstances, and why) in the implementation across agencies towards advancing Priorities 2 and 3 of the United Nations Youth Strategy.

The objectives of this exercise include the following:

1. Identify common themes, patterns, and variances by synthesizing key findings and recommendations from evaluation reports related to the implementation of the United Nations Youth Strategy in the priority areas of quality education and economic empowerment through decent work;
2. Draw insights across these evaluation reports around the effectiveness, enabling factors of, and barriers to, implementation across different contexts, settings and populations;
3. Generate lessons to advance the implementation of the United Nations Youth Strategy in these priority areas, with the view to effectively reach and benefit all young people, including young women, PWDs⁶, LGBTQI+⁷ individuals and other disadvantaged groups.

The temporal scope of the meta-synthesis will cover 2015 to date, accounting for the progress made thus far since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The exercise covers all regions in which interventions toward Priorities 2 and 3 have been implemented as recorded by the evaluation reports to be included in the review.

In this assignment, the work carried out by the United Nations in the areas of education and employment is seen as closely connected although both areas have their own distinct approaches, outcomes and lessons learned. In terms of main thematic areas, the synthesis will focus on youth interventions related to firstly, formal education; secondly, skills and employability training; and thirdly, employment and entrepreneurship.

Definitions

United Nations youth interventions specific for formal education concerns interventions related to general education, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and higher education programmes, usually under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and/or Ministry of Labour. It concerns education that is institutionalized, intentional and planned through public organizations and recognized private bodies and that, in their totality, make up the formal education system of a country. Formal education programmes are thus recognized as such by the relevant national educational authorities or equivalent, e.g. any other institution in cooperation with the national or sub-national educational authorities. Formal education consists mostly of initial education. Vocational education, special needs education and some parts of adult education are often recognized as being part of the formal education system.⁸

United Nations youth interventions specific for skills and employability training concerns interventions related to skills training offered or provided, usually by the Ministry of Labour, or labour market actors such as chambers of commerce, employers' associations, NGOs and companies. It concerns non-formal education and training, meaning education that is institutionalized, intentional

⁶ Persons with disabilities.

⁷ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual and others. The 'plus' sign refers to the many other self-identifications under the umbrella of 'sexuality' and/or 'gender'.

⁸ Definition of Formal Education: ISCED 2011: <https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced-2011-en.pdf>.

and planned by an education provider, and which constitutes an addition, alternative and/or a complement to formal education within the process of the lifelong learning of individuals. It is often provided to guarantee the right of access to education for all. It caters for people of all ages, but does not necessarily apply a continuous pathway structure; it may be short in duration and/or low intensity, and it is typically provided in the form of short courses, workshops or seminars. Non-formal education mostly leads to qualifications that are not recognized as formal qualifications by the relevant national educational authorities or to no qualifications at all. Non-formal education can cover programmes contributing to adult and youth literacy as well as education for out-of-school children. It can also include programmes on life skills, work skills and social or cultural development.⁹

United Nations youth interventions specific for decent employment and entrepreneurship concerns interventions related to decent job creation, wage or hiring subsidies, participation in public works, job-search assistance, supporting income generation of young people, incubator activities and stimulating self-employment (offering financial support and guidance), and supporting MSMEs of young people.¹⁰ Decent employment involves "opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for all, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men".¹¹

Synthesis questions

Synthesis questions were developed based on Priorities 2 and 3 of the United Nations Youth Strategy, in close consultation with the management group for this exercise. The synthesis questions served as a guiding framework to systematically review the evaluation reports and extract data where relevant. The following synthesis questions guide the analysis and help frame the lessons emerging from this exercise related to the priority areas (youth education, youth skills training and employment, and joint interventions on youth education and youth employment, including school to work transitions).

1. What interventions and approaches in these priority areas have worked well and what interventions and approaches have not? Have there been any innovative approaches?
2. What are the enabling factors of, and what are the barriers to, implementation in these priority areas?
3. What lessons have been learned around different United Nations interventions and approaches to advance the work in these priority areas?
4. What learning is there on the coordination and collaboration among agencies in these priority areas?

In addressing each of the above questions, consideration was given to young women, PWDs, LGBTQI+ individuals, and other disadvantaged youth (e.g. migrant youth). This involved examining how interventions, enabling factors, barriers, and lessons learned specifically relate to, and impact, these groups.

⁹ Definition of non-formal education: ISCED, 2011: <https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced-2011-en.pdf>.

¹⁰ ILO. The impact of active labour market programmes on youth. An updated systematic review and meta-analysis. 2022; and ILO/WB. Active Labor Market Programs Improve Employment and Earnings Of Young People. 2024.

¹¹ <https://www.ilo.org/topics/decent-work>.



2 METHODOLOGY

Overall approach: human-AI collaboration¹²

This methodology details the collaborative process between human experts and artificial intelligence (AI) in synthesizing evaluation reports on youth education and employment. It combines ethical AI¹³ use for high quality and credible analysis with human expertise to provide a more nuanced understanding. The approach aims to analyse evaluation reports efficiently and accurately while adhering to ethical standards, rigorous human oversight, data security, privacy and transparency. It also includes safeguards against potential AI risks such as hallucination¹⁴, biases and potential inaccuracies.¹⁵

This exercise served as a pilot for the use of AI in an interagency meta-synthesis exercise in the United Nations system. The potential risks to data reliability and quality, as well as ethical concerns, were addressed through robust human oversight and quality assurance from various experts, including data scientists, thematic experts, technical leads, and overall supervision of the meta-synthesis co-chairs. To ensure transparency, the methodology and AI usage were regularly communicated to the management group for review and discussion.

Conceptual framework¹⁶

The thematic experts developed a conceptual framework and coding structure for Priorities 2 and 3 of the United Nations Youth Strategy to systematically organize and analyse data. This framework was informed by a literature review of evaluation, policy, guidance and lessons learned reports from across the United Nations system. The framework facilitated cross-case analysis and comparison to identify effective interventions for specific priority areas. A realist evaluation approach, as outlined by Pawson and Tilley (1997), was applied to capture how different contexts influence intervention effectiveness and assess

¹² Detailed methodology can be found in Annex 2.

¹³ [GenAI-powered evaluation function at UNFPA Strategy for leveraging the benefits of responsible and ethical generative artificial intelligence while minimizing risks \(2024\)](#).

¹⁴ AI hallucinations occur when an AI model generates incorrect or fabricated information, often due to a lack of reliable context or source grounding. Mitigations involved human oversight, grounding responses in actual data, and training the AI model on youth education and employment.

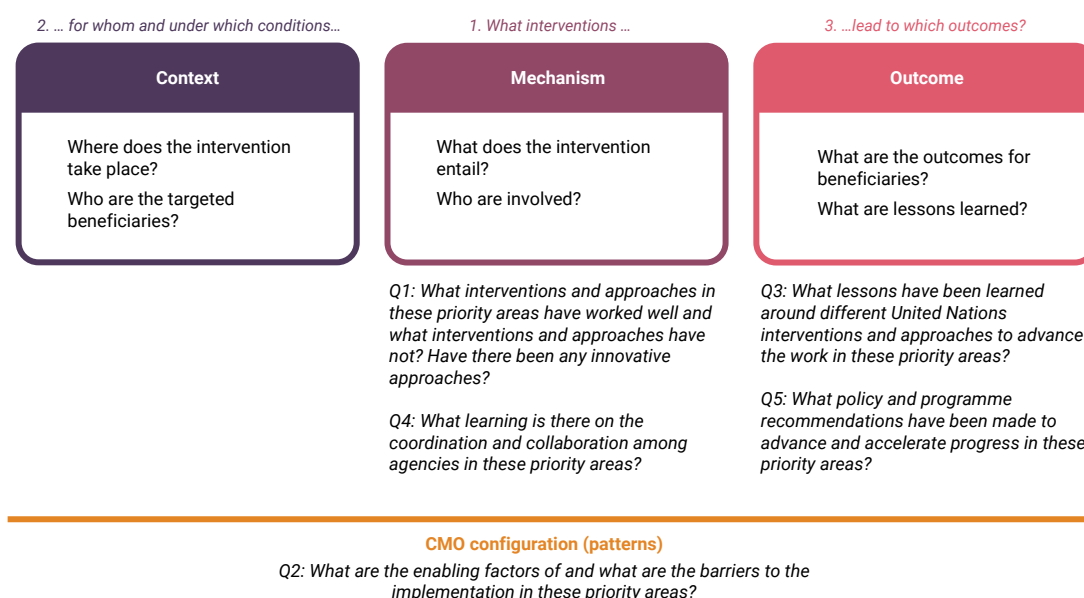
¹⁵ Measures to ensure the ethical and responsible use of AI found in Annex 2.

¹⁶ The conceptual framework can be found in Annex 3.

performance relative to these factors.¹⁷ The methodology focuses its analysis on context, mechanism, and outcomes (CMO) configurations:

- Context: The setting in which interventions are implemented;
- Mechanism: The design and implementation approaches that produce outcomes in a given context;
- Outcomes: The results and impacts of the interventions.

Figure 1: Overview CMO and key dimensions for coding evaluation reports



The CMO configuration analyses provided a theory-based framework guided by the synthesis report questions to develop an understanding of what works, for whom and under which conditions. The analyses presented a deeper dive into specific samples of evaluation reports showing similarities in terms of their context, mechanisms and outcomes. The thematic experts selected a sub-sample of CMO configurations for the analyses, using the following selection criteria: 1) the CMOs selected have to cover the three thematic areas; 2) they have to cover a variety of target groups; 3) they have to cover a variety of mechanisms; 4) they have to cover a variety of outcomes; 5) they have to represent different geographical areas; 6) they have to represent a sufficient number of evaluation reports.¹⁸ An initial list of AI-generated combinations of context, mechanisms and outcomes was identified using three indicators: one related to the context; one related to the mechanism; and one related to the outcome. See Annexes 4 and 5 for more details on the CMO configuration selection and analysis.

¹⁷ Pawson, Ray, Tilley, Nick, (1997), Realistic Evaluation; Tilley, N. (2000). Realistic Evaluation: An Overview. Presented at the Founding Conference of the Danish Evaluation Society. September 2000.

¹⁸ The thematic experts used a threshold 20 reports, representing a minimum of 7 per cent of the total sample of evaluations.

Evaluation screening and selection

The methodology for evaluation selection involved searching evaluation databases of United Nations agencies and economic commissions, using specific inclusion criteria (see table below) and a defined search strategy. A keyword search with filters for evaluation year and quality rating yielded 1,348 reports.

Inclusion criteria	Description
Evaluation year	Only evaluation reports published between 2015 and 2023 are included.
Focus	Only evaluation reports that have a strong focus ¹⁹ on either youth education or youth employment, and evaluate a project, programme, theme or strategy related to youth education or employment are included.
Geographic scope	Only evaluation reports at the global, regional, national, subnational are included.
Intervention timeframe	Only evaluation reports with more than half of the intervention or strategy being evaluated in the SDG period (after 2015), or which extend at least two years into SDG period, are included.
Evaluation type	Project/programme evaluations, country portfolio evaluations, regional evaluations, thematic evaluations, strategy/policy evaluations, impact evaluations and other evaluation types are included.
Implementing agencies	Evaluation reports from all United Nations agencies and economic commissions are included, though some produced no reports.
Language	Only evaluation reports written in English, French, Spanish, Arabic and Russian are included.
Quality	Only evaluation reports that score in the top three fifths of categories on the respective United Nations agency's quality assurance rating system are included (if the rating is available). E.g. on a 4-category scale (unsatisfactory, fair, good, very good), only good and very good are included. On a 5-category scale (unsatisfactory, fair, satisfactory, highly satisfactory, excellent), only satisfactory, highly satisfactory and excellent are included.

An AI tool conducted content analysis of each report to further filter out those that did not meet the inclusions criteria. Of the 1,348 reports, 253 reports were assessed by the AI tool to have met all the remaining inclusion criteria and were shortlisted for the meta-analysis. The 253 AI-shortlisted evaluations were shared with relevant United Nations agencies for their manual review and input. Eight out of the 253 reports were manually excluded by United Nations agencies, which meant that the AI tool achieved an accuracy of 97 per cent. An additional 53 reports that were not previously available in the publicly accessible databases were also manually included by United Nations agencies.²⁰ In total, 298 evaluation reports were shortlisted for this meta-synthesis.

¹⁹ The focus criteria are further explained in the section below.

²⁰ The full list of reports reviewed can be found in Annex 8.

Overview of the 298 reports shortlisted (percentages are reported out of 298 reports)

Figure 2: Evaluations by year

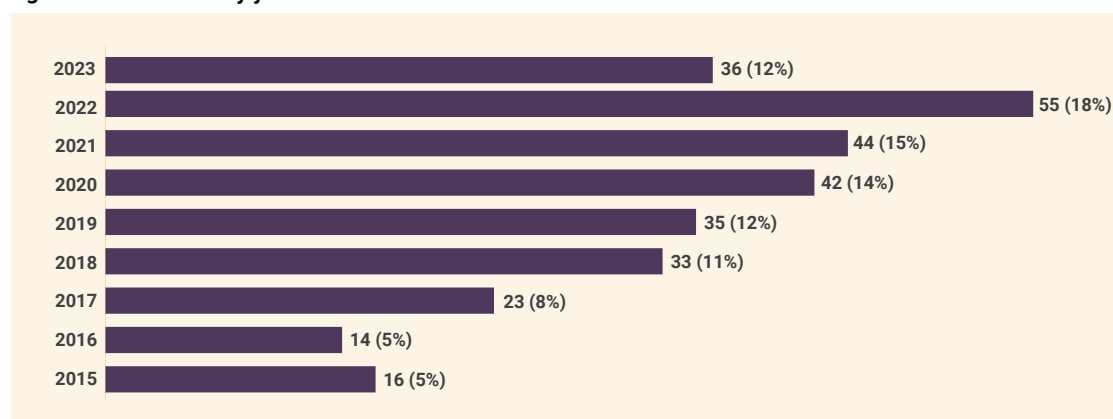


Figure 3: Evaluations by agency

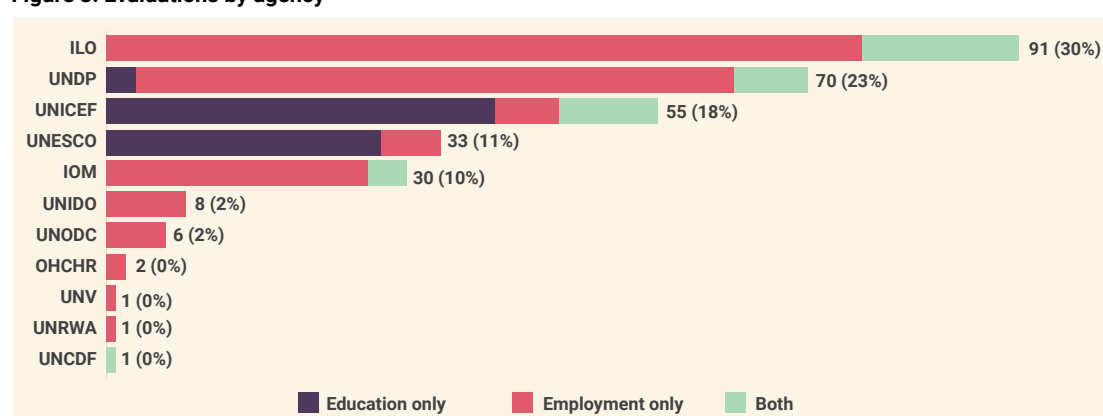


Figure 4: Evaluations by thematic area

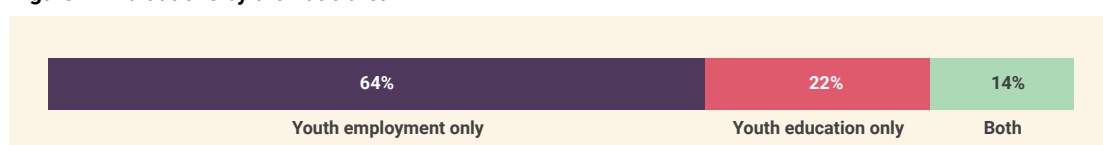
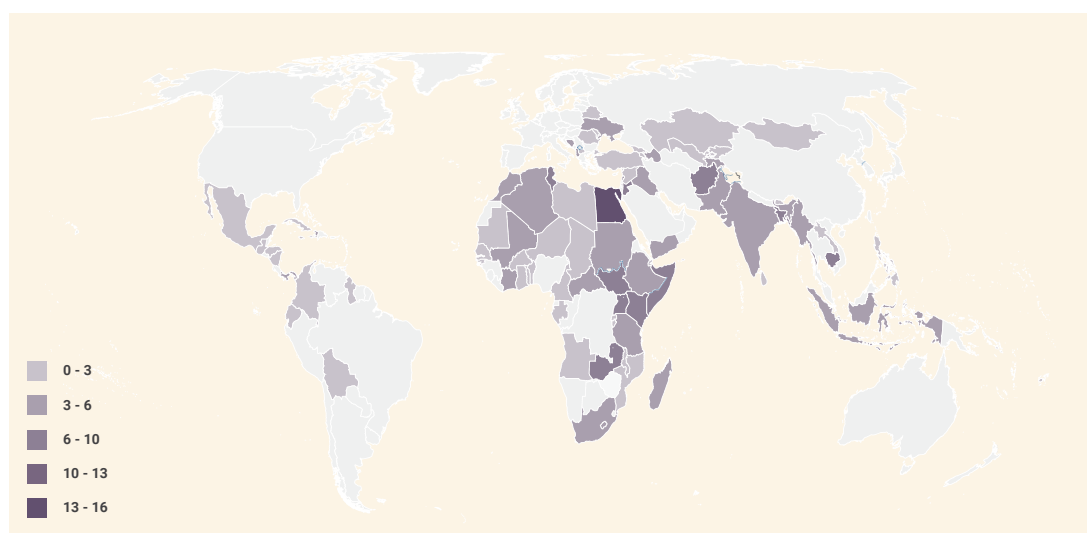


Figure 5: Evaluations by country



The designations employed and the presentation of material on the map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNFPA concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

Pilot testing

A pilot tested the AI tool's application of the conceptual framework by analysing 5 per cent of the total sample. The pilot involved three testing rounds with internal validity checks complemented by manual quality assessments of the AI-generated outputs by the co-chairs and thematic experts.

The pilot demonstrated that, while the conceptual framework and coding structure were generally effective, they required refinement. The AI tool achieved 92 per cent accuracy in coding, but 10 out of 125 codes needed revision due to false positives and conceptual inaccuracies. Following updates to the framework and coding structure by thematic experts, the AI's performance on these 10 codes improved. Subsequent testing affirmed the AI tool's effectiveness to manage a diversity of evaluation reports.

Data coding, extraction and synthesis

Guided by the revised conceptual framework and coding structure, the AI tool coded and extracted data on the full sample of evaluation reports. This iterative process involved close collaboration between the data scientist, thematic experts and the AI tool, with experts reviewing and revising the AI-generated data.

The data was organized into a database aligned with the conceptual framework, with evidence categorized and tagged for content analysis. Thematic experts then reviewed the CMO configurations, enabling/hindering factors, and key learnings identified by AI, shortlisting the most relevant for further examination. By combining and analysing these insights collectively, the experts then drew key lessons learned²¹ from the meta-synthesis.

Limitations

Consistent with the experience from previous meta-syntheses of lessons learned for Priorities 1, 4, and 5, this exercise was constrained by the data provided in evaluation reports, which varied in content and quality across United Nations entities. To mitigate this risk, the meta-synthesis team collected a wide sample of evaluation reports for review. As such, the key findings and lessons learned presented in this report are drawn from a limited sample and, as such, cannot be considered generalizable or representative of the wider body of projects or evaluations.

One of the challenges encountered in extracting data consistently against the conceptual framework using an AI tool was the varying quality and coverage of the reports. The meta-synthesis team addressed this by conducting a pilot (whereby the consultants manually checked the generated coding by AI) to optimize the methodology and ensure that the AI tool was effectively instructed to apply the conceptual framework to the evaluation reports.

As much as possible, the report provides a diverse set of examples from interventions in the thematic areas of formal education, skills and employability training, and employment and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the report tries to do justice to the wide range of different types of interventions, target groups and outcomes (hence the combinations of context, mechanisms and outcomes). However, due to the concise nature of this synthesis, only selected combinations of codes are reported, and not all potential patterns and nuances are explored.

21 Lesson learned: a generalization based on evaluation experiences with projects, programmes, or policies that abstract from the specific circumstances to broader situations. Frequently, lessons highlight strengths or weaknesses in preparation, design, and implementation that affect performance, outcome, and impact. From OECD Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results-Based Management, 2002.

Other limitations of the synthesis exercise include the potential bias introduced by the AI tool itself and the inability to fully capture the depth and subtleties of qualitative data. To mitigate these risks, human oversight over the processes and AI-generated results served to reduce bias and ensure the ethical and responsible use of AI. Moreover, the AI model was tested and recalibrated throughout the exercise, and the AI-generated results were triangulated and validated by the thematic experts, the management group, and results from relevant exercises and reports.²²

²² Measures to ensure the ethical and responsible use of AI found in Annex 2.



3

OVERVIEW OF EVALUATION REPORTS

This section provides a characterization of the interventions examined in the evaluation reports by highlighting predominant CMO configurations, key enabling and hindering factors, and key findings that surfaced across the evaluations.

Mapping of evaluation reports: context, mechanisms and outcomes

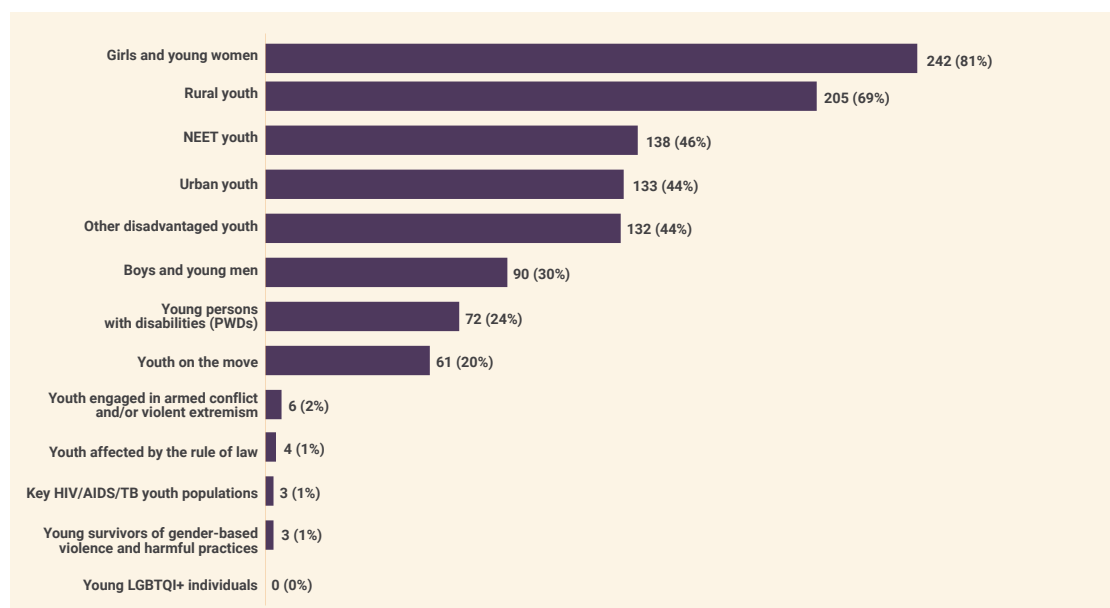
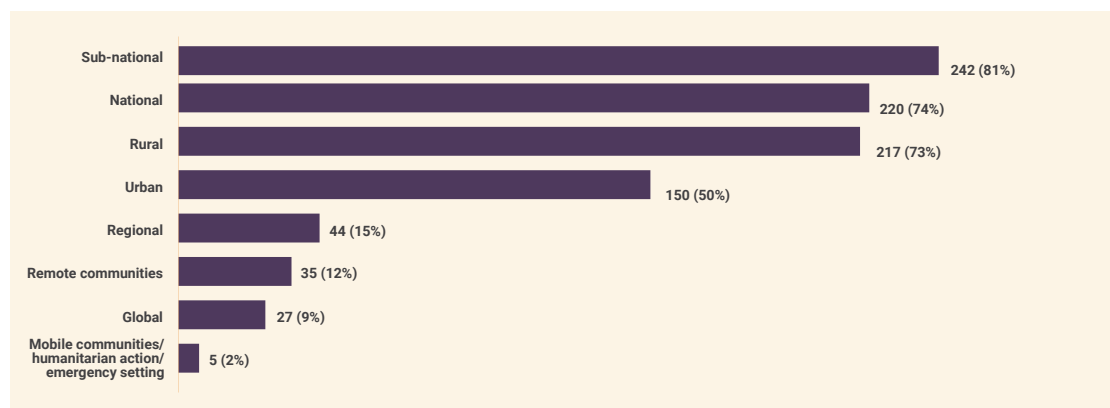
As operationalized in the conceptual framework, the meta-synthesis looked at combinations of context factors (e.g. target groups, geographical coverage), mechanisms (e.g. objectives, types of interventions, approaches) and outcomes (e.g. results of interventions, lessons learned) to identify lessons learned about what works, for whom, and under which conditions. While it is most important to describe qualitatively how the United Nations Youth interventions helped specific target groups to progress, the section below provides a concise quantitative overview of the scope and diversity of evaluated United Nations interventions.

Context

In terms of characteristics related to the context of the interventions covered by the evaluation reports (see Figure 6), most interventions were targeted explicitly at girls and young women (242), rural youth (205), NEET (not in education, employment or training) youth (138), and urban youth (133). However, young persons with disabilities (PWDs) (72) and youth on the move (61) are also well covered by the evaluation reports. In contrast, evaluations paid limited attention to some Leave no one behind (LNOB) youth groups such as LGBTQI+ (0), key HIV/AIDS young populations (3), young gender-based violence (GBV) survivors (3), prisoners (4) and young ex-combatants (6). When it comes to the geographical scope (see Figure 7), the majority of evaluations covered interventions implemented at sub-national level²³ (242), national level (220) and rural level²⁴ (217). Remote communities (35), global level and mobile communities/humanitarian action/emergency settings (5) were less covered. This reveals that priority groups (like girls and NEETs) do receive additional attention, but that the United Nations organizations still have difficulties in developing interventions that target those that are the most difficult to reach, as these are less covered in the selected evaluation reports.

²³ Sub-national level relates to particular regions within a territory.

²⁴ Rural level relates to communities with low population density per square kilometre.

Figure 6: Number and percentage of evaluations reporting relevant populations of target, by target groups (N=298)**Figure 7: Number and percentage of evaluations reporting relevant geographic target areas and populations, by target groups (N=298)**

Mechanisms

As presented in Figure 8, skills and employability training for youth is the most prominent thematic area covered (202), followed by decent employment and entrepreneurship (118). Formal education is the least covered thematic area (94). However, many of the evaluated interventions combine thematic areas and support youth in securing their livelihood (skills, employability, entrepreneurship) by working closely with the formal education systems.

Looking at the types of interventions covered by the evaluation reports (Figure 9), nearly all have elements of capacity building (274) and support the delivery of education and skills training to young people (225). In addition, a large number also focused on supporting job placement and job creation. This indicates a tendency of United Nations interventions to direct attention to the target groups directly and support stakeholders that work with young people at the expense of more up-stream support such as multi-stakeholder convening (90), technical support (68), support to knowledge, data, research, monitoring and evaluation (54), advocacy and communication (48), financing youth education and work (33) and United Nations internal operations (4). This is also illustrated by the level at which support is targeted (Figure 10). Here as well the focus on United Nations evaluated interventions is on individuals, households or communities (282) and service providers (e.g. training providers, support services for young people) (182).

National institutions and systems are covered by half of the evaluation reports (141). Global institutions and systems (14) and United Nations internal operations (3) receive only limited coverage.

Figure 8: Number and percentage of evaluations reporting thematic areas of focus, by thematic areas (N=298)

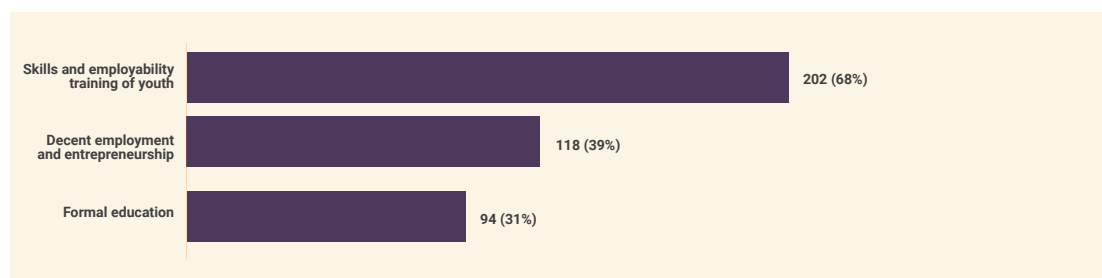


Figure 9: Number and percentage of evaluations reporting specific intervention mechanisms, by type of interventions (N=298)

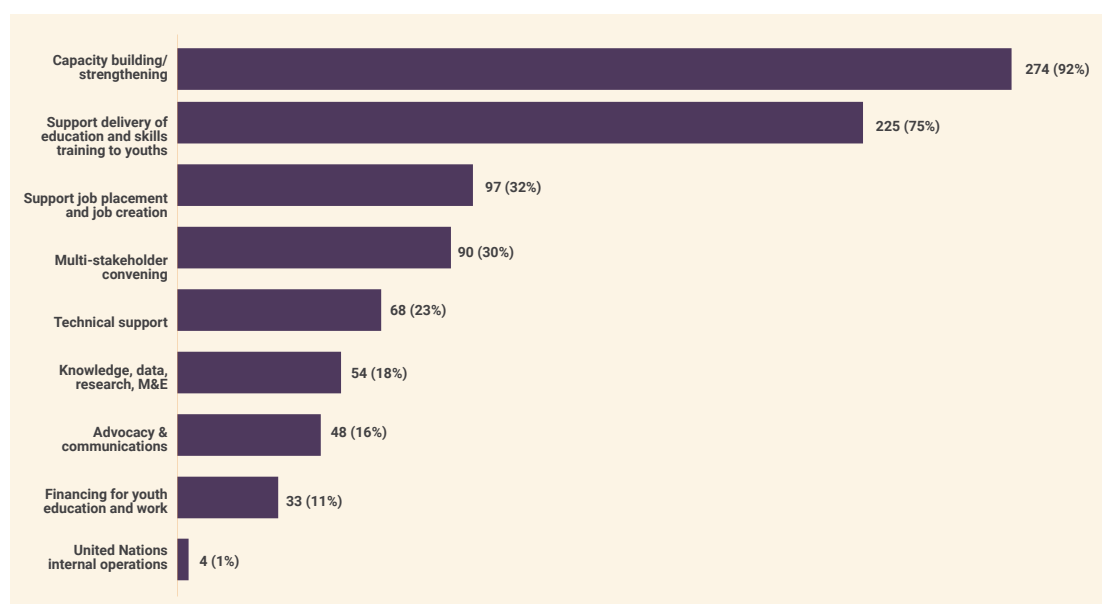
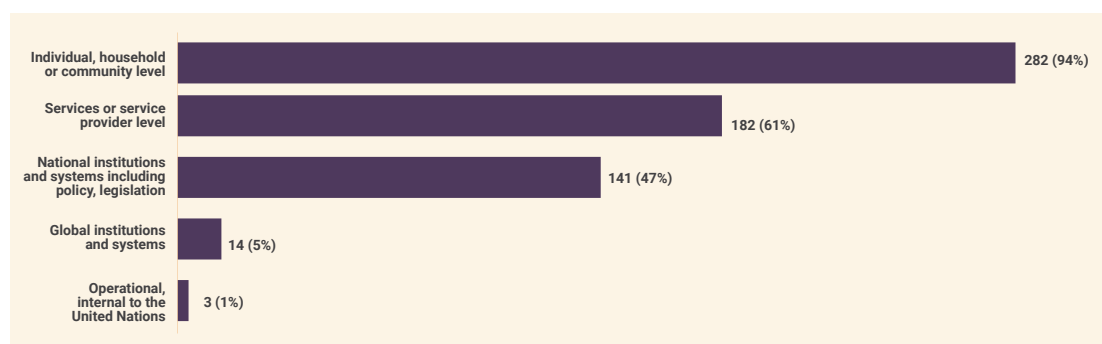


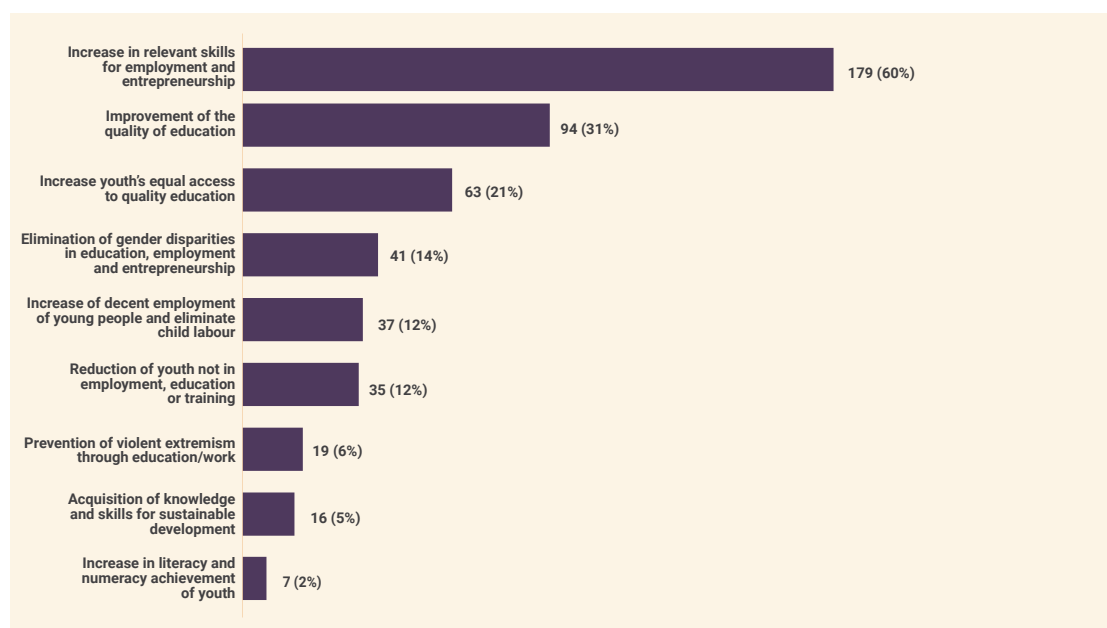
Figure 10: Number and percentage of evaluations reporting specific levels of action, by level of beneficiaries (N=298)



Outcomes

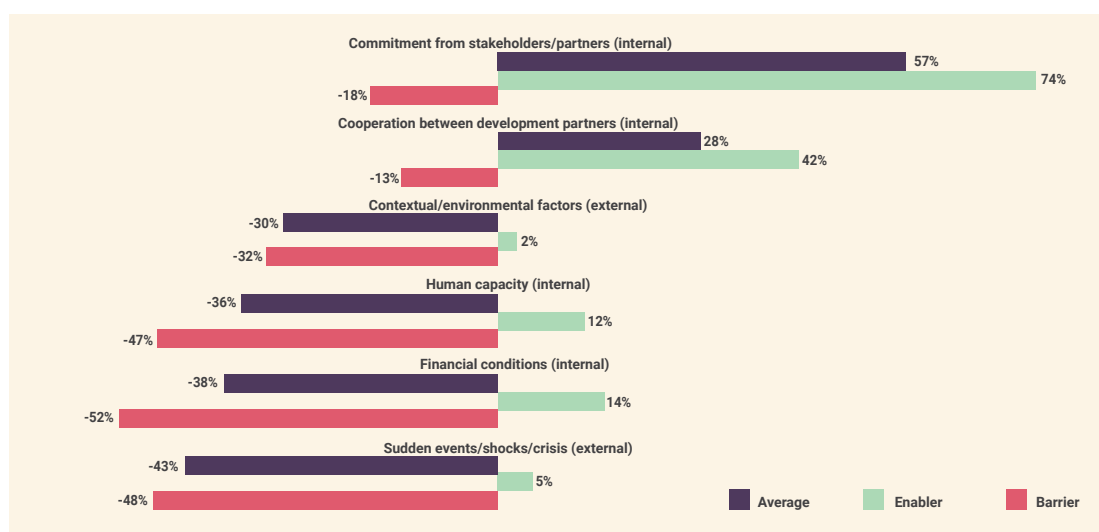
Looking at the outcomes of the evaluated interventions (as reported in the evaluation reports), the focus on employability seems to be paying off; a large share of achieved outcomes relate to the increase in relevant skills for employment and entrepreneurship (179). Also, the focus on education is resulting in improvements in the quality of education in general (94), an increase in youth's access to quality education (63), and the elimination of gender disparities in education, employment and entrepreneurship (41). Employment-related outcomes were modest compared to their significance, such as the increase in decent youth employment and elimination of child labour (37) and reduction in the numbers of NEET youth (35). Outcomes that are least reported concern prevention of violent extremism through education and work (19), the acquisition of knowledge and skills for sustainable development (16) and the increase in literacy and numeracy achievement of youth (7).

Figure 11: Number and percentage of evaluations reporting specific outcomes, by outcomes (N=298)



Enabling and hindering factors

The following figure provides an overview of the distribution of enablers and barriers across the interventions. From this, it can be seen that commitment from stakeholders and partners is a key enabler, together with the cooperation between development partners. Other factors, including sudden events and shocks (such as the COVID-19 pandemic), financial constraints, and human capacity are identified as main barriers.

Figure 12: Enablers and barriers of United Nations youth interventions in education and employment (N=298)**Key enabler: commitment from stakeholders/partners (internal)*****Mentioned as an enabler in 222 out of the 298 evaluations (74 per cent of the total)***

The commitment from diverse stakeholders – including community leaders, private sector partners, and international organizations – was a key enabler in the success of United Nations interventions in education and employment.

Commitment from community leaders and local NGOs played a pivotal role in the success of several United Nations interventions. For instance, the evaluation of the Prevention and Reintegration for Adolescents and Youth in Conflict with the Law in the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (RACCN) of Nicaragua project reported that the International Organization for Migration (IOM) partnered with local NGOs such as Casa Alianza Nicaragua, Nidia White Women's Movement, and Marijn Foundation.²⁵ These partnerships were crucial in improving social and economic inclusion for at-risk youth through psychosocial support, skills training and economic reintegration initiatives. The strong local buy-in, exemplified by the engagement of community leaders like Wihtas, ensured the successful identification and involvement of youth in project activities.

Engagement with private sector partners also emerged as a critical factor in enhancing the effectiveness of education and employment interventions. The evaluation of UNDP's Youth Empowerment Programme (YEP) in Pakistan showed that it partnered with over 60 private sector companies to achieve high job placement rates.²⁶ The private sector's involvement in providing resources and opportunities significantly contributed to the programme's achievements, including supporting the Prime Minister's Youth Programme and facilitating job placements for over 75,000 youth.

Key enabler: cooperation between development partners (internal)***Mentioned as an enabler in 124 out of the 298 evaluations (42 per cent of the total)***

Cooperation between development partners emerged as a key enabler in the successful implementation of various education and employment projects across different regions.

25 IOM. Prevention and Reintegration for Adolescents and Youth in Conflict with the Law in the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (RACCN) of Nicaragua: Pilot Project Final Evaluation Report. 2017.

26 UNDP. Mid-Term Portfolio Evaluation on Thematic Area of Youth Covering Youth Employment Project and Youth and Social Cohesion Project. 2021.

Joint project implementation was a prevalent mode of partnership where multiple United Nations agencies collaborate to achieve shared goals. An example of this is found in the evaluation of ILO's partnership with UNICEF and FAO to improve TVET for both Lebanese citizens and Syrian refugees.²⁷ The partnership allowed each agency to leverage its strengths, such as UNICEF's focus on youth and FAO's expertise in agricultural training, resulting in comprehensive support for the targeted populations.

Capacity building and technical support were essential components of successful partnerships. The evaluation of OHCHR's Youth and Human Rights Project showed that it focused on establishing youth officer positions to promote and protect the rights of young people.²⁸ This approach increased OHCHR's capacity to address youth rights, mainstreaming youth issues within the broader United Nations system and creating important platforms for youth participation and advocacy.

Key barrier: sudden events/shocks/crises (external)

Mentioned as a barrier in 143 out of the 298 evaluations (48 per cent of the total)

The sudden onset of crises and shocks posed significant barriers to the implementation of education and employment programmes across various United Nations interventions. These barriers manifested through challenges in funding, disruptions in programme implementation, logistical hurdles, and shifting focus from planned activities to emergency responses.

Crises often led to abrupt changes in funding priorities and allocation, impacting long-term programme sustainability. For example, in the evaluation of UNICEF's Emergency Education Response for Syrian Refugee Children and Host Communities in Jordan, the programme faced challenges due to short-term funding cycles that hindered sustainable solutions.²⁹ This constant state of flux in funding priorities hampered the ability to plan and implement long-term educational infrastructure improvements and support systems for both refugee and host community children.

Sudden crises frequently caused significant disruptions in programme implementation, necessitating rapid adaptations and often resulting in delays. The evaluation of ILO's project to reduce child labour in Myanmar and the Philippines showed that it faced severe challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the military coup in Myanmar.³⁰ The political upheaval, in Myanmar particularly, led to civil unrest and the breakdown of government structures, which were crucial for the project's implementation. Similarly, COVID-19 lockdowns in the Philippines delayed field assessments and in-person training, highlighting how sudden events can impede the timely execution of programme activities.

The logistical challenges brought about by crises often limited the ability of United Nations agencies to conduct field activities and provide direct support. The evaluation of UNICEF's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Gabon illustrated how movement restrictions and health crisis protocols hampered the ability of staff to conduct field monitoring visits.³¹ The rapid need to adapt logistical frameworks also diverted resources and attention from planned educational and health programmes to immediate crisis response.

On the other hand, some evaluation reports mention a sudden shock as an enabler. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, is referred to as creating momentum for developing distance education (for instance in Chad³² and Guinea-Bissau³³) and for prioritizing teacher development.³⁴

27 ILO. Independent Final Cluster Evaluation 'Improved and Market-based Provision of Vocational Training for Lebanese and Refugees'. 2018.

28 OHCHR. Interim Evaluation of the OHCHR Youth and Human Rights Project. 2021.

29 UNICEF. Evaluation of UNICEF's Emergency Education Response for Syrian Refugee Children and Host Communities in Jordan. 2015.

30 ILO. Building a Generation of Safe and Healthy Workers: Safe and Healthy Youth - Midterm Evaluation. 2018.

31 UNICEF. Evaluation en Temps Reel (RTE) de la Réponse de l'UNICEF à la COVID-19 au Gabon. 2021.

32 UNICEF. Evaluation sommative du projet d'appui à une éducation d'urgence, à travers l'enseignement à distance dans le contexte de la COVID-19 au Tchad en 2021. 2022.

33 UNICEF. Evaluation report summative evaluation of the Guinea-Bissau COVID-19 education sector response project, 2020-2022. 2023.

34 UNESCO. Evaluation of UNESCO's work on Teacher Development. 2023.

Key barrier: financial conditions (internal)*Mentioned as a barrier in 156 out of the 298 evaluations (52 per cent of the total)*

Financial conditions emerged as a key barrier across various United Nations education and employment programmes, impacting different aspects such as the amount of funding, the sustainability of initiatives, and the diversity of activities that could be implemented.

The amount of available funding significantly influenced the scope and success of several programmes. For instance, in the evaluation of the Uganda Green Growth Incubation Project, inadequate funding led to incomplete infrastructure and limited value-addition facilities.³⁵ Financial shortfalls hindered the project's full implementation, necessitating an extension of the pilot phase to achieve the intended outcomes.

Financial sustainability was another critical issue, with many programmes struggling to maintain their achievements post-intervention. In the evaluation of the OHCHR Indigenous and Minority Fellowship Programmes, funding constraints limited the ability to expand or provide comprehensive follow-up support to fellows, thereby curtailing the programmes' long-term impact.³⁶ More secure and increased funding was identified as necessary to reach the full potential of these initiatives.

Financial constraints also frequently led to delays in implementation, affecting the momentum and continuity of various projects. The evaluation of the Zambian Girls 2030 programme showed that funding disbursement delays in its second and third years temporarily halted some activities.³⁷ Although the programme adapted by decentralizing career camps to district levels to reduce costs, the delays still impacted the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the initiative.

Key barrier: human capacity (internal)*Mentioned as a barrier in 141 out of the 298 evaluations (47 per cent of the total)*

Several dimensions of staff capacity – turnover, insufficient staffing, inadequate expertise, and recruitment challenges – emerged as significant impediments to achieving desired outcomes in various projects across different regions.

A major aspect of staff capacity that influenced programme effectiveness was the high turnover of key personnel. For example, the evaluation of the ILO's Building a Generation of Safe and Healthy Workers - SafeYouth@Work (SY@W) project showed that it experienced frequent changes in national project coordinators, particularly in Vietnam, and long vacancies in Myanmar.³⁸ This turnover led to the loss of institutional knowledge and implementation delays, ultimately impeding the project's ability to sustain improvements in occupational safety and health (OSH) for young workers.

Insufficient staffing was another critical issue, as highlighted in multiple evaluations. In the evaluation of the ILO's Youth Guarantee (YG) project in the western Balkans, there were concerns about the capacity of public employment services to manage the influx of youth registering for the scheme.³⁹ Unfortunately, the limited number of specialized caseworkers hindered effective implementation. This shortfall in staff numbers meant that the practical application at the ground level was constrained, affecting the project's ability to support young people's labour market integration.

A lack of sufficient expertise within project teams presented significant challenges. For instance, the evaluation of IOM's MIDA FINNSOM Health and Education Project in Somalia showed that it faced difficulties due to the lack of qualified local staff in hospitals, universities, and ministries.⁴⁰ This gap in expertise hampered the project's goal of improving access to healthcare and education services.

35 UNDP. Terminal Evaluation of Uganda Green Growth Incubation Centre Project – Songhai Integrated Model Pilot. 2022.

36 OHCHR. Evaluation of the OHCHR Indigenous Fellowship Programme and Minority Fellowship Programme Final Evaluation Report. 2022.

37 UNICEF. Zambian Girls 2030 Phase I End-line Evaluation. 2021.

38 ILO. Building a Generation of Safe and Healthy Workers: Safe & Healthy Youth - Midterm Evaluation. 2018.

39 ILO. Provide Technical Assistance to Western Balkan Countries for the Implementation of the Youth Guarantee - Final Evaluation. 2023.

40 IOM. Final Report - Mid Term Evaluation MIDA Finnsom Health and Education Project Somalia. 2018.

Recruitment challenges were particularly pronounced in remote or underserved areas. The evaluation of the UNICEF-supported Accelerated Learning Programme (ALP) in Pakistan showed that it struggled to find qualified facilitators, especially female facilitators, in hard-to-reach regions like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.⁴¹ This shortage of qualified staff in remote locations limited the reach and effectiveness of the programme, which aimed to provide educational opportunities to out-of-school children.

Key barrier: contextual/environmental factors (external)

Mentioned as a barrier in 96 out of the 298 evaluations (32 per cent of the total)

Local context was a pivotal factor in the success or failure of United Nations education and employment interventions.

Political and administrative barriers were significant impediments to the successful implementation of education and employment projects. In East Jerusalem, the evaluation of UNDP's Support to Education project showed that it faced severe obstacles due to the restrictive policies imposed by Israeli authorities.⁴² These included restrictions on Palestinian access and movement, bureaucratic obstacles for construction projects, and the closure of the Jerusalem Directorate of Education offices.

Security and conflict-related barriers significantly affected the implementation and sustainability of United Nations interventions. In the Central African Republic, the evaluation of UNDP's Joint Programme for Strengthening the Resilience of Adolescents and Youth was illustrative.⁴³ It encountered ongoing security issues in many target areas. These security challenges restricted access for project activities, complicating the delivery of inputs and monitoring efforts, and impacting the overall effectiveness and sustainability of the intervention.

Environmental factors also impacted the outcomes of projects. In Zambia, the evaluation of the ILO's Youth Agricultural Productivity and Support Activity (YAPASA) project was illustrative.⁴⁴ Its aim of addressing youth unemployment and food insecurity faced challenges caused by climate variability. Farmers in certain areas experienced a lack of rainfall, which adversely impacted crop production and, consequently, the project's outcomes.

Key findings

This section highlights key findings across the evaluation reports reviewed in this exercise. The findings focus on three thematic areas of United Nations youth interventions: formal education, skills and employability training, and decent employment and entrepreneurship. These findings were derived through a combination of AI-generated content, which synthesized information from all evaluation reports, and an in-depth analysis conducted by thematic experts.

United Nations youth interventions specific for formal education

1. Aligning interventions with national education policies and systems enhances sustainability and impact

To maximize the effectiveness and sustainability of educational interventions, it is crucial to align them with national education policies and systems. This alignment ensures that interventions are integrated into the broader educational framework, particularly in formal education settings, increasing their relevance and potential for lasting impact. However, attention must also be given to addressing broader systemic issues, such as teacher support and resource allocation, as well as strengthening skills relating to the future of work (digital and green jobs) to fully realize the benefits of the intervention.

41 UNICEF. Formative Evaluation of ALP Models and Centres, 2022.

42 UNDP. Support to Education in East Jerusalem. 2020.

43 UNDP. Strengthening Community Resilience and Regional Cooperation for Prevention of Violent Extremism in Central Asia. 2021.

44 ILO. Decent Jobs for Youth and Improved Food Security Through the Development of Sustainable Rural Enterprises - Mid Term Evaluation. 2017.

For example, the evaluation of UNICEF's Quality Inclusive Education (QIE) initiative in Romania demonstrated this principle effectively.⁴⁵ By focusing on improving access to, and quality of education for, vulnerable children through enhanced school management practices, strengthened family and community partnerships, and improved children's non-cognitive skills, QIE's alignment with national priorities significantly enhanced its relevance and potential for long-term impact. However, the evaluation also highlighted how other systemic issues like teacher training and remuneration affected sustainability, emphasizing the need to address broader system issues.

2. Need for comprehensive capacity building at multiple levels of education system

For educational interventions to be effective, continuous and holistic capacity building is crucial. This is particularly relevant for the formal education sector, which involves a complex network of actors from ministry officials to school-level staff. This includes not just providing resources, but also ensuring ongoing, in-depth training and support, especially in emerging methodologies and technologies relating to skills in the digital and green sectors. Ensuring that all levels of the education system are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge is key to achieving effective and sustained outcomes.

The evaluation of UNESCO's Preparing Teachers for Global Citizenship Education project illustrated this point.⁴⁶ While the project successfully produced valuable resources and fostered global citizenship education (GCED) integration into national education systems across multiple countries, the evaluation found that one-off workshops were insufficient for deep competency development. It emphasized the need for more sustained capacity building to ensure effective implementation of GCED across the curriculum.

3. Equity and inclusion are essential for effective formal education interventions

Formal education systems often struggle to reach and adequately serve marginalized populations. To achieve effective and equitable outcomes in such settings, it is crucial to address both the immediate needs of marginalized populations as well as the broader systemic issues. Financial support, such as cash transfers, can be beneficial, but it must be complemented by holistic strategies that tackle the broader issues of discrimination and exclusion while fostering social cohesion and integration to ensure that all students, especially those from marginalized groups, receive the support they need to succeed.

The evaluation of UNICEF's Conditional Cash Transfer Programme for Education of Refugee Children in Turkey provided an insightful example.⁴⁷ The programme aimed to increase school enrolment and improve regular attendance among refugee children by providing cash transfers to families. The evaluation found that adapting existing national systems to provide services to Syrian families and other refugees was beneficial. Moreover, providing the same assistance to Turkish and Syrian families reinforced equity and social cohesion. However, the evaluation also highlighted that Syrian children and families still struggled with issues that cash transfers alone couldn't address, such as discrimination at school, emphasizing the need for comprehensive approaches to equity and inclusion.

United Nations youth interventions specific for skills and employability training

1. Skills training alone is insufficient for improving youth employment outcomes; private sector engagement is crucial

To effectively enhance youth employment outcomes, skills training must be part of a broader, market-driven approaches that involves partnerships with the private sector. Aligning skill development with labour market demands and opportunities is essential. Engaging key industry stakeholders can create viable employment pathways and significantly improve employment outcomes for youth, especially in relation to digital and green jobs. For example, the mid-term evaluation of UNDP's Jobs, Skills and Finance (JSF) for Women and Youth programme revealed that while it provided decentralized local government financing, skills training,

45 UNICEF. Summative Evaluation of the Quality Inclusive Education Component of the 'Social Inclusion through the Provision of Integrated Social Services at Community Level' Modelling Project, 2014-2018. 2021.

46 UNESCO. Evaluation of Preparing Teachers for Global Citizenship Education Project. 2019.

47 UNICEF. Programme Evaluation of the Conditional Cash Transfer Programme for Education of Refugee Children in Turkey. 2020.

and financial inclusion support, more emphasis was needed on securing private sector involvement to focus on companies, localities and sectors with the strongest potential for viability.⁴⁸

2. Government ownership and institutional capacity building are essential for sustainable youth employment improvements

Achieving lasting systemic change in youth employment and skills development is dependent on the active engagement and leadership of government institutions. Sustainable, large-scale improvements in youth employment require not only effective skills training programmes, but also strong government ownership and institutional capacity building, including promoting the digital and green sectors. Ensuring that there is a well-defined plan for transitioning responsibilities and ongoing institutional support are necessary for institutionalizing changes and maintaining progress over the long term. For example, the evaluation of the ILO's Skills 21 project in Bangladesh found that government ownership and commitment were essential for sustainability, but had been insufficient.⁴⁹ The project, which aimed to improve the quality of the TVET system and enable better governance, learned that stronger government buy-in and a clear exit strategy were needed to institutionalize changes and ensure sustainability of the improved skills development system.

3. Post-training support is crucial for sustaining skills and employability outcomes

To ensure the long-term success of skills and employability training programmes, it is vital to provide ongoing post-training support. Effective transition support and connecting trainees to market opportunities are essential for maximizing the impact of training initiatives and ensuring the continued success of trainees. This relies on expanding M&E systems beyond outreach-focused outputs. For example, UNDP's evaluation of a Vocational and Business Skills Training and Support Project in Yemen found that follow-up support and linking participants to markets was crucial for the sustainability of new businesses.⁵⁰ The evaluation noted that providing close guidance and follow-up support to participants after training improved business success rates, particularly for rural youth and women who received technical and business training along with in-kind grants.

United Nations youth interventions specific for decent employment and entrepreneurship

1. Comprehensive, multi-faceted support enhances youth entrepreneurship success

Young entrepreneurs often face a range of obstacles such as inadequate business knowledge, insufficient funding, and challenges in accessing essential tools and mentorship, especially in the context of skills relating to emerging technologies in the digital and green sectors. This underscores the importance of a holistic, multifaceted approach to effectively support young entrepreneurs. Providing young entrepreneurs with access to necessary resources, including funding, technology and business networks, is crucial. Moreover, mentorships or personalized coaching can assist in developing critical business skills and navigating the entrepreneurial landscape.

For example, the Egypt Youth Employment (EYE): Economic Empowerment under FORSA Programme (EYE/FORSA) demonstrated the effectiveness of providing targeted support, especially in enhancing wage employment.⁵¹ The programme successfully connected 39 per cent of youth in the governorates of Asyut and Sharkia to wage employment opportunities, with 73 out of 188 participants in Asyut gaining access to jobs. By incorporating skills training, job fairs and partnerships with local institutions, the intervention helped young people develop critical employability and entrepreneurial skills, directly contributing to both self-employment and wage employment growth in these underserved regions.

48 UNDP. Mid-term Evaluation of the Jobs, Skills and Finance (JSF) for Women and Youth in The Gambia Programme. 2021.

49 ILO. Skills 21 – Empowering Citizens for Inclusive and Sustainable Growth - Midterm Evaluation. 2020.

50 UNDP. Vocational and Business Skills Training and Support Project Final Evaluation. 2022.

51 ILO. Egypt Youth Employment (EYE): Economic Empowerment under FORSA Programme (EYE/FORSA) - Midterm Evaluation. 2023.

2. Early engagement with the private sector in programme design is crucial for optimizing job creation and placement outcomes

Involving private sector partners early on ensures that skills development is aligned with current market demands, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of job creation initiatives. This is particularly relevant for digital and green jobs, where the private sector tends to be at the forefront of innovation and experimentation in these fields. This strategy not only improves the relevance and impact of employment programmes, but also builds sustainable partnerships, paving the way for more durable job opportunities.

For example, the evaluation of UNDP's Joint Youth Programme in Rwanda, implemented from 2019 to 2022, illustrated this. It aimed to increase youth access to decent jobs through interventions like entrepreneurship training and seed funding for youth innovations.⁵² While successful in creating employment opportunities, a mid-term evaluation revealed that earlier and more extensive private sector involvement could have further increased job opportunities for youth. This underscores the need for youth employment initiatives to forge strong partnerships with potential employers from the outset.

3. A comprehensive value chain approach significantly contributes to the creation of sustainable economic opportunities by building a resilient ecosystem for youth entrepreneurship

Interventions that integrate value chain development into their strategies – such as training, mentoring, resource provision, financing and market linkages – promote a holistic approach that supports long-term economic sustainability for youth. The evaluation of the ILO's Decent Employment for Tunisian Youth project in Tunisia from 2014 to 2017 illustrated this.⁵³ It employed an innovative value chain development approach, particularly in agri-food products, resulting in the creation of over 1,300 jobs. The final evaluation highlighted that this integrated approach – combining training, mentoring, tools provision, value chain development, and financing – was particularly effective in promoting youth employment and entrepreneurship. This lesson emphasizes the need for future interventions to consider and strengthen entire value chains.

Key summary narratives applicable to all interventions across thematic areas

1. Effective coordination and clear division of roles among United Nations agencies were essential for the success of youth education and employment initiatives

This was significant because it ensured that each agency played to its strengths, leading to more efficient and impactful outcomes. For instance, the evaluation of the Inclusive Economic Recovery through Sustainable Enterprises in the Informal Economies of Fiji, Palau, Tonga, and Vanuatu programme showed that the ILO, UNDP, UNESCO, and IFAD collaborated while retaining their distinct roles.⁵⁴ UNDP focused on institutional capacity building and policy influence, UNESCO facilitated implementation through local consultants, IFAD contributed its expertise in agricultural sector development, and the ILO coordinated the overall project, emphasizing business development services and organizing informal workers. This requires effective M&E systems that are harmonized and shared effectively across agencies.

2. Leveraging the comparative advantages of different United Nations agencies enhanced the effectiveness of youth-focused interventions

This was relevant because it allowed each agency to contribute its specialized knowledge, addressing various dimensions of youth development comprehensively. For example, in the evaluation of UNDP's Community Security and Stabilization Programme (C2SP), UNDP provided livelihood support and vocational training, UN Women ensured gender inclusion, and OHCHR delivered human rights training.⁵⁵ This multifaceted approach resulted in significant improvements in both economic opportunities and

⁵² UNDP. Mid-Term Evaluation of Youth Employment Project. 2022.

⁵³ ILO. Decent Jobs for Tunisia's Young People: Tackling the Challenge Together - Final Evaluation. 2018.

⁵⁴ ILO. Inclusive Economic Recovery through Sustainable Enterprises in the Informal Economies of Fiji, Palau, Tonga, and Vanuatu - Final Joint Evaluation. 2022.

⁵⁵ UNDP. Community Security and Stabilization Programme (C2sP). 2021.

social cohesion for the youth involved. Adapted M&E systems are necessary to effectively account for the multiple dimensions of youth development.

3. Addressing cultural barriers through gender-sensitive approaches was crucial for enabling women's participation and empowerment

Gender-sensitive strategies recognize the context-specific challenges and cultural norms that may restrict women's involvement in development activities. The evaluation of UNDP's Egypt Network for Integrated Development (ENID) project in Upper Egypt was illustrative.⁵⁶ It focused on addressing cultural barriers to women's participation by implementing interventions such as literacy classes, skills training and income-generating activities specifically targeted at women. By providing childcare and tailoring programmes to the local context, the project successfully enabled women's participation in economic activities, highlighting how addressing cultural barriers through gender-sensitive strategies can enhance women's empowerment and participation.

4. Engaging directly with youth-led organizations promoted greater project relevance and ownership

This fosters a sense of ownership and ensures the project's effectiveness and sustainability. The evaluation of the Youth Entrepreneurship Facility (YEF) implemented by the ILO in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda was illustrative.⁵⁷ It actively engaged youth organizations through the Youth-to-Youth Fund, which provided grants and capacity-building support, enhancing the project's relevance and ownership among the youth.

5. Need for clear, differentiated objectives and precise targeting of disadvantaged groups

This ensures that interventions effectively address educational inequalities among diverse populations. UNICEF's evaluation of education interventions aimed at achieving SDG 4 Target 5 showed that many system-level interventions lacked specific objectives and measures for equity beyond universal access and gender parity. For example, the mid-term evaluation of UNICEF's child-friendly schools project in Angola highlighted the necessity of better targeting the most disadvantaged schools and students, especially in rural areas.⁵⁸ Disaggregated M&E systems are necessary for effective targeting of LNOB youth.

6. Inclusive and participatory approaches were key

These ensure that interventions are needs-based, supported by the community, and more sustainable. Engaging the community and target groups in decision-making empowers them and enhances intervention effectiveness. The evaluation of IOM's project Enhancing Resilience and Protection of Marginalized Communities in Kenya was illustrative.⁵⁹ It targeted displaced populations, migrants and other disadvantaged groups. By involving these communities in planning and implementation, the project achieved outcomes such as enhanced self-reliance, social cohesion and strategic partnerships, which supported state capacity to respond to displacement.

56 UNDP. Final Evaluation for ENID Project. 2021.

57 ILO. Africa Commission: Youth Entrepreneurship Facility (YEF and YEN): ILO Component - Final Evaluation. 2015.

58 UNICEF. Mid-Term Evaluation of the CFS Project in Bie and Moxico. 2019.

59 IOM. Enhancing Resilience and Protection of Marginalized Communities Affected by Protracted Conflicts and Effects of Adverse Climatic Conditions in Kenya. 2016.



4

LESSONS LEARNED

This section presents the lessons learned from the evaluation reports sampled in this exercise. The lessons learned were developed by human expert analysis along with AI-supported analyses, specifically focusing on context, mechanism and outcome (CMO) clusters.⁶⁰ This included systematically coding the data, identifying key enabling and hindering factors,⁶¹ and synthesizing summary narratives.⁶² The analysis was guided by the conceptual framework as well as the synthesis questions. By integrating human expertise and interpretation with AI-driven analyses, the resulting lessons offer a thorough and nuanced reflection of the evaluation reports reviewed.

Lesson 1 Targeted interventions for specific disadvantaged groups, such as girls and young women, effectively reduce gender disparities in education and employment by addressing the specific barriers hindering their access to learning. For broader impact, similar tailored approaches should be applied to other at-risk youth groups, addressing their unique challenges and needs.

A focused approach, particularly when addressing specific disadvantaged groups like girls and young women, proves essential in eliminating gender disparities in education, employment and entrepreneurship. Interventions that directly tackle barriers such as cultural norms, safety and accessibility, as seen in evaluations covering intervention in Afghanistan⁶³ and Egypt⁶⁴, show that addressing the unique challenges faced by these groups can lead to meaningful improvements in their educational and economic outcomes. These interventions succeeded in situating interventions within young people's individual and communal ecosystems and tailored them to their corresponding needs and aspirations. Creating an enabling environment with education curriculum that offered life skills and areas for empowerment, such as knowledge of human rights, communication skills, or livelihood skills directly affecting girls and young women, were key enabling factors.

⁶⁰ Analysis of CMO configurations can be found in Annex 5.

⁶¹ Detailed information on enabling and hindering factors can be found in Annex 6.

⁶² Detailed summary narratives can be found in Annex 7.

⁶³ UNESCO, UNFPA, and UN Women. Final Evaluation of the UNESCO-UNFPA-UN Women Joint Programme on Empowering Adolescent Girls and Young Women through Education. 2022.

⁶⁴ UNDP. Final Evaluation for ENID Project. 2021.

This includes, for instance, adding topics on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for adolescents and young people, on fostering their decision making and participation in social and economic life, and on challenging dominant social norms such as child marriage and child labour. It also includes targeting cultural norms that restrict women's involvement in development activities, providing skills training, income-generating activities and childcare.

This focused approach has yet to be systematically replicated for other disadvantaged youth groups at risk of being left behind, such as child labourers, young workers in hazardous occupations, ex-combatants and young prisoners. Data on the context of interventions covered by the evaluation reports reveals that the majority of interventions explicitly targeted girls and young women (81 per cent), rural youth (69 per cent), NEET youth (46 per cent) and urban youth (45 per cent). Additionally, young persons with disabilities (PWDs) (24 per cent) and youth on the move (21 per cent) are also well represented in the evaluation reports. In contrast, evaluations showed limited attention to certain LNOB youth groups such as LGBTQI+ (0 per cent), key HIV/AIDS young populations (1 per cent), young GBV survivors (1 per cent), prisoners (1 per cent), and young ex-combatants (2 per cent).

Lesson 2 Successful interventions rely on cross-sector collaboration and holistic approaches that integrate education, health, and initiatives combining life skills and vocational training with comprehensive support systems to enhance youth employability and personal development.

The success of many interventions hinges on the collaboration between sectors like education, health, and labour. Programmes that adopt a holistic approach – integrating vocational training, life skills education and health awareness – demonstrate a higher impact. This approach ensures that participants are not only educated but are also empowered to overcome societal and economic barriers. The evaluation of the UNESCO-UNFPA-UN Women Joint Programme on Empowering Adolescent Girls and Young Women through Education in Mali, Nepal, and Tanzania exemplified this approach.⁶⁵ Implemented from 2016 to 2021, the programme aimed to break the cycle of exclusion and vulnerability of adolescent girls by addressing education, health and labour market access. Its holistic approach included improving education quality, providing life skills and vocational training, raising awareness on sexual and reproductive health, and advocating for supportive policies. This holistic, multi-sectoral approach effectively empowered adolescent girls and young women by addressing their needs in education, health and labour, while also fostering an enabling environments.

Expanding education beyond traditional subjects to include life skills and entrepreneurship is also vital for enhancing youth employability. Programmes like UNICEF's Life Skills Education in India have shown that integrating topics like reproductive health, decision-making and communication into the curriculum not only enriches the educational experience, but also equips students with the practical skills necessary for personal and professional development.⁶⁶

This also requires interventions that are comprehensive and able to support young people all the way from, for instance, skills training to linking them with potential employers or providing financial support to start their own businesses. To maximize the impact of skills and employability training, interventions must provide multifaceted support, including mechanisms that bridge the gap between job supply and demand or foster access to finance and alignment with market needs. The success of initiatives like the Gambia Songhai Initiative underscores the importance of creating a supportive ecosystem that helps young people apply their new skills effectively in the marketplace.⁶⁷ Stimulating entrepreneurship, increasing decent employment for young people, and advocating for legal protection to eliminate child labour, are factors consistently observed across successful initiatives.⁶⁸

65 UNESCO, UNFPA, and UN Women. Final Evaluation of the UNESCO-UNFPA-UN Women Joint Programme on Empowering Adolescent Girls and Young Women through Education. 2022.

66 UNICEF. Evaluation of Adolescent Life Skills Education Programme in Maharashtra. 2018.

67 UNDP. Songhai Terminal Evaluation. 2017.

68 Analysis of CMO configurations, Annex 5.

Lesson 3 Tailoring educational programmes to local contexts, especially in remote areas, significantly improves access, enrolment, and learning outcomes for youth, particularly girls, by aligning with cultural and geographical realities.

Programmes tailored to local contexts, especially in remote and rural areas, show greater success in increasing educational access and employment opportunities. For example, some evaluation reports include community-based education models in Afghanistan and Ethiopia, which align educational delivery with the community's cultural and geographical realities to significantly improve enrolment and completion rates, particularly for girls. In Afghanistan, UNICEF's Increasing Access to Basic Education and Gender Equality programme, implemented from 2015 to 2018, established community-based schools (CBS) and accelerated learning centres (ALCs) in 13 priority provinces.⁶⁹ UNICEF's Alternative Basic Education (ABE) programme in Ethiopia, which ran from 2011 to 2016, targeted children in pastoralist regions by constructing Alternative Basic Education Centres (ABECs) and tailored the curriculum to pastoralist lifestyles.⁷⁰

This adaptability not only increased enrolment rates, but also improved cognitive development among youth. It involved tailoring educational programmes to meet the specific needs and lifestyles of remote communities, which required a multifaceted approach including community mobilization, awareness-raising, life skills education, vocational training, peer support networks, and collaboration with religious and community leaders. These strategies were crucial for reaching underserved populations in geographically isolated areas as well as communities in humanitarian or emergency settings (although these were not examined as much in the evaluation reports). This highlights a persistent challenge for United Nations organizations in designing effective interventions for those who are most difficult to reach, particularly in contexts where access is limited due to geography or emergency/crisis situations.

Lesson 4 Long-term success requires a balanced approach that combines both direct youth support and upstream strategies, including robust policy advocacy, institutional strengthening, legal protections for young people, and child labour restrictions. These elements are critical to sustain and scale interventions, particularly for eliminating child labour and promoting decent work.

In addition to downstream interventions, the CMO-configurations also show the need for more upstream support and embedding of interventions to be successful. This involves supporting policy advocacy and institutional strengthening for sustainability. Achieving long-term success in eliminating child labour and promoting decent work requires robust policy frameworks and strong institutional support. One evaluation, assessing the intervention of the Decent Employment for Youth in Cambodia programme, highlighted the necessity of advocacy and institutional engagement to ensure that the benefits of these programmes are sustained and scaled.⁷¹ In addition to providing demand-driven skills including soft, life, green and digital skills, it advocated for the adoption of the community-based enterprise development tool as a standard entrepreneurship curriculum in the TVET system and educated participants on working conditions, employment contracts, social protection benefits and employer obligations.

Strong collaborations with government bodies and other stakeholders are crucial for enhancing regulatory frameworks and enforcement mechanisms as reflected in the evaluation on Achieving Reduction of Child Labour in Support of Education project in Myanmar and the Philippines, by the ILO, which focused on reducing the worst forms of child labour in agricultural communities.⁷² Partnerships with the private sector, particularly in the thematic areas of skills, decent employment and entrepreneurship, effectively fostered enabling economic environments through strengthening financing mechanisms that enable youth to overcome the high barriers to financial access by youth. One example is the ILO's Egypt Youth Employment (EYE): Jobs and Private Sector Development in Rural Egypt project, which leveraged private

69 UNICEF. Mid-Term Evaluation of Increasing Access to Basic Education and Gender Equality (CBE) Programme. 2019.

70 UNICEF. An Impact Evaluation of Alternative Basic Education in Ethiopia. 2017.

71 ILO, UNESCO, UNICEF, and UNIDO. Final Evaluation: Promoting Decent Youth Employment in Cambodia. 2022.

72 ILO. Achieving Reduction of Child Labour in Support of Education: Programme to Reduce the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Agriculture - Midterm Self-Evaluation. 2022.

sector investment to enhance entrepreneurship and skills development, particularly in the dairy sector, resulting in improved economic opportunities and working conditions in rural areas.⁷³

Another crucial success factor is boosting value chains for particular sectors and adopting a market systems development (MSD) approach that focuses on creating sustainable market environments through strong market understanding and partnerships. One example is the YAPASA project in Zambia which promoted sustainable micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the soybean and aquaculture value chains, using the Making Markets Work for the Poor (M4P) methodology, leading to improved production yields and higher incomes for young farmers.⁷⁴

Additionally, directly engaging with youth-led organizations is vital to ensure the relevance and ownership of interventions. Clear, differentiated objectives and precise targeting of disadvantaged groups are necessary to support the United Nations LNOB priority, as generic approaches are insufficient for addressing the needs of the most marginalized. A successful example is the evaluation of Youth Entrepreneurship Facility (YEF) implemented by the ILO in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda which actively engaged youth organizations through the Youth-to-Youth Fund, and provided grants and capacity-building support, enhancing the project's relevance and ownership among the youth.

73 ILO. Egypt Youth Employment (EYE): Jobs and Private Sector Development in Rural Egypt - Midterm Evaluation. 2020.

74 ILO. Decent Jobs for Youth and Improved Food Security through the Development of Sustainable Rural Enterprises - Final Evaluation. 2019.



5 LOOKING AHEAD

Priority areas 2 and 3 of the United Nations Youth Strategy seek to address young people's needs and aspirations in the context of the vulnerability of their educational and economic futures. Together, these priority areas aim to strengthen the continuum of a solid educational foundation, school to work transition, and decent work.⁷⁵ They focus on equipping youth with greater access to quality education and supporting their greater access to decent work and productive employment, especially for girls, young women, disadvantaged youth groups and those in fragile situations.

The challenges faced by youth include inadequate education systems and curricula, scarce outlets for skills development, global economic crises, low standards of decent employment, rapid digital transformation in market economies, and the threats of climate change. Yet, youth are leading on educational and economic innovation. They capitalize on digital technology to access non-formal learning, engage in the digital economy at local and global levels, and experiment with sustainable and green solutions across industries. In this exercise, only eight evaluation reports explicitly refer to working on greening and green jobs while just seven evaluation reports explicitly refer to digital skills and jobs. This could be due to the scarcity of existing interventions that target digital/green jobs, or to the need for foundational literacy skills among youth that would lead to more digital skills and jobs. It may also reflect the lack of M&E data, especially evaluations, on related existing interventions.

The report has captured an array of efforts by United Nations entities, including approaches, strategies, methodologies and partnerships to develop youth's literacy and skills, and support their economic empowerment through decent work. Given that the continuum through these dimensions is vital, United Nations agencies need to collaborate closely to develop and implement comprehensive solutions - approaches, strategies, and standards - that integrate the multiple dimensions of the issues at hand. From the outset, these solutions need to connect the various levels of programming – individual, provider, policy, and enabling ecosystems – within interventions. This is closely linked to forging simultaneous partnerships with the public and private sectors, as well as civil society, communities, and, most importantly, youth-led groups. This also entails engaging with youth as key stakeholders, capitalizing on young people's potential to innovate and harness digital technology for education and decent work in ways that work for their needs, constraints, and aspirations.

⁷⁵ The sub-priority areas identified in the Youth Strategy 2030 are: Support quality formal and non-formal education; ease school-to-work transition; improve skills development systems; uphold global commitment to decent work; guide and support cross-sector policies and strategies that improve the quality and quantity of jobs for youth; advocate for a balanced approach in youth labour demand; create youth-enabling employment and self-employment ecosystems; promote access to integrated and adequate services and productive assets, finance, and digital and technology related resources; and foster a just transition to a low-carbon and green economy.

The meta-synthesis has also identified gaps in our understanding and serving of particular youth groups. Almost half of the evaluations reviewed targeted ‘disadvantaged youth’ without any disaggregation, which has serious implications on targeted programming for LNOB youth.⁷⁶ The United Nations system needs to exert systemic efforts to adapt the LNOB indicators to the youth target group by factoring in invisible sub-groups such as homeless youth, child labourers, and youth in hazardous occupations. It also entails improving effective disaggregation and targeting of different youth sub-groups at design level, accompanied by impact assessments. These efforts require that United Nations agencies invest in robust monitoring and evaluation systems with unified youth-specific LNOB indicators. These systems need to be effectively harmonized across agencies with adequate data and lesson sharing features.

Further, when looking at specific interventions, the review found that there are specific combinations of types of interventions, geographical areas, objectives, target groups and outcomes covered by the evaluation reports. The presented CMOs illustrate that the sample of evaluations explored tailor their support to specific target groups and geographical areas, have different objectives and reach a variety of outcomes. Within all those illustrations, a variety of types of interventions is presented, ranging from providing training, supporting incubators, and capacity building to technical support and advocacy. The overall analysis of these combinations reveals that often the evaluated interventions address a broad range of target groups and present a generic set of interventions. This results in outcomes that are also generic and have a limited relevance to the challenges of specific target groups.

While the analysis of evaluation reports in terms of context, mechanisms and outcomes shows that the United Nations is targeting manifold target groups, objectives and areas through various types of interventions that achieve a wide spectrum of outcomes, there are areas on which the United Nations lacks a strong focus. The least reported outcomes concern prevention of violent extremism through education and work (19 evaluations, 6 per cent), the acquisition of knowledge and skills for sustainable development (16 evaluations, 5 per cent) and the increase in literacy and numeracy achievement of youth (7 evaluations, 2 per cent). That these outcomes are less covered might be a signal that further action is required on work-related outcomes, as well as violent extremism and sustainable development. Despite being widely recognized as important topics, these do not seem to get sufficient attention in United Nations interventions. That literacy and numeracy do not feature prominently in terms of outcomes could be a sign of the progress in universal primary education, ensuring global access to complete primary education for all children. However, evidence from literature indicates that there is still much to do. In many contexts (especially for LNOB youth groups, e.g. youth on the move, child workers, low income rural and urban settings), primary education is either inaccessible or inadequate to equip youth with literacy and numeracy skills.

The lessons in this review also provide insights into advancing the United Nations Global Youth Strategy and normative and policy reports on youth education and economic empowerment through decent work. These include nine relevant SDG priority areas on education and decent work (Annex 1). Evidence from sampled evaluations reveals that most interventions were closely aligned with SDG priorities on education and skills development. Conversely, programming did not sufficiently address the priorities of increasing decent employment of young people (with equal pay). The areas of eliminating child labour and the green and just economic transition were not visible in the sample. At an intersectional level, interventions were closely aligned with the strong mandate that the United Nations has for gender equality in both education and employment at the level of enhancing equal access, although transformative approaches were a minority among the sample. The SDG priority related to the prevention of violent extremism through education and work was mostly overlooked.

⁷⁶ Less than 2 per cent of evaluations focused on young survivors of gender-based violence and harmful practices, those at risk of violent extremism, prisoners, ex-combatants, LGBTQI+ groups, and key HIV/TB young populations. Only 20–35 per cent of evaluations focused on other disadvantaged groups such as youth on the move and displaced youth, PWDs, and boys and young men.

The lessons of this review are also aligned with several normative and policy reports by various United Nations agencies, notably the ILO's Thematic Plans of the Global Initiative for Action on Decent Jobs for Youth,⁷⁷ especially in relation to adopting integrative approaches, bridging the gap of mismatch in skills and employment, the transition to the formal economy, and digital and green jobs. Lessons also aligned with those of UNDP's Reflections series on UNDP support to youth skills development for employment,⁷⁸ particularly in relation to the effectiveness of integrated approaches to policy reform and service provision, strong partnerships with public and private sector stakeholders, targeted interventions for disadvantaged youth, longer-term programming for entrepreneurship, and systematic M&E frameworks and follow-up activities to assess results beyond outreach.

Finally, the lessons of the review echo those of the synthesis of UNESCO evaluations,⁷⁹ highlighting, for instance, that the quality of monitoring data needs to be strengthened and that the focus on priority groups could also be made more robust. The overarching lessons also resonate with thematic normative and policy reports, pointing to the need for targeted, cross-thematic, and context-specific interventions, strengthening institutional capacities and United Nations organizations that build on each other's strengths (United Nations: Delivering as One).⁸⁰

The recently adopted Pact for the Future⁸¹ places significant emphasis on key issues such as young people's equitable access to quality education, technical and vocational training, and decent work and livelihoods; issues that are central to unlocking the full potential of youth in a rapidly changing world. While the lessons in this report are not generalizable or representative of all United Nations youth interventions, they offer valuable insights to inform the development of more effective education and employment programming that addresses the unique challenges faced by youth. Thus, the lessons, as well as the in-depth analysis of the CMO configurations,⁸² presented in this report warrant further examination and action by the United Nations to ensure that youth-focused interventions are not only more responsive to the realities of today, but also sustainable in addressing the challenges of tomorrow.

77 ILO. Thematic Plans of the Global Initiative on [Decent Jobs for Youth](#) series.

78 UNDP and Xiaoling Zhang. Reflections: Lessons from Evaluations: UNDP Support to Youth Skills Development for Employment. Undated.

79 UNESCO. 2023 Synthesis of UNESCO evaluations. 2023.

80 Such as: The United Nations. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. 2019; The United Nations. United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF). 2021; Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General.

81 <https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future>.

82 Analysis of CMO configurations, Annex 5.



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