

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

Practical insights for youth development programmes

Lessons summary



Around 250 million children worldwide are out of school and global youth unemployment is projected to be three times higher than that of adults. Economic instability, shifting labour markets and political unrest create significant barriers to education and employment, preventing many young people from reaching their full potential. Despite these challenges, young people continue to show resilience, innovation and a strong desire to lead. When empowered, young people drive change: leading movements, shaping industries and strengthening democratic processes.

The evaluation offices of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) co-led an inter-agency meta-synthesis exercise to identify shared lessons learned across the United Nations system related to the priority areas of the United Nations Youth Strategy, Youth 2030. This exercise was conducted in collaboration with EvalYouth Global Network, Generation Unlimited, Global Partnership for Education Youth Leaders, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations Youth Office.

This United Nations system-wide exercise brings together a wealth of evidence and insights from across the United Nations diverse youth programming efforts, providing a thorough analysis of what works, what doesn't and why. Drawing on findings from 298 existing evaluations, this meta-synthesis identifies proven strategies and effective approaches, as well as common challenges across United Nations youth interventions in education, skills development and economic empowerment through decent work. The subsequent report serves as a valuable, evidence-backed resource to inform and strengthen youth programming worldwide.

This resource consolidates the key lessons learned from this exercise, offering practical insights for development professionals, including non-government organizations, governments and other stakeholders committed to empowering young people. Specifically, the lessons learned can be used to inform and enhance youth interventions in programme design and implementation, strategic budget allocation, advocacy, and data-driven decision-making.

Key lessons

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Tailoring initiatives to address the specific needs of disadvantaged groups ensures that interventions effectively address educational inequalities among diverse populations. This is particularly important for girls and young women, who face uneven and unique challenges in accessing education and employment. Gender-sensitive strategies recognize the context-specific challenges and cultural norms that may restrict women's involvement in development activities.

While the efforts in targeting girls and young women are notable, approaches for other disadvantaged youth groups, such as child labourers, young workers in hazardous occupations, ex-combatants and young prisoners, have not yet been widely replicated. Ensuring that development efforts are inclusive and equitable means addressing the unique needs of all young people, in all their diversity. This not only helps close social and economic gaps, but can also result in broader societal benefits, such as strengthening communities and enhancing their resilience.

Examples

Education for adolescent girls and young women in Afghanistan

The Final Evaluation of the UNESCO-UNFPA-UN Women Joint Programme on Empowering Adolescent Girls and Young Women through Education¹, noted that in some conflict-affected areas such as Afghanistan, establishing community-based schools dramatically increased girls' enrolment by reducing travel barriers and ensuring safer learning environments. These efforts not only improved educational access but also empowered girls to participate more fully in community life.

Contextualization to enhance young women's participation in economic activities

The evaluation² of UNDP's Egypt Network for Integrated Development (ENID) project in Upper Egypt highlighted strategies to overcome particular cultural barriers to women's involvement. The project included interventions such as literacy classes, skills training and income-generating activities specifically aimed at young women. By providing childcare and adapting programmes to the local context, it successfully enhanced young women's participation in economic activities, demonstrating how addressing cultural barriers through gender-sensitive strategies can promote empowerment and participation.

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

2 UNDP. 2021. Final Evaluation for ENID Project.



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 collaboration across 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. Research has shown that multisectoral approaches to youth employment can be highly effective, where integrating vocational training with health and social services resulted in improved employment outcomes in different regions, notably in East African countries.³

Expanding education beyond traditional subjects to include life skills and entrepreneurship is also vital for enhancing youth employability. In addition, in order 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. Such cross-sector collaboration and holistic approaches ensure that youth interventions address not only educational needs, but also health, economic and social challenges, creating a more comprehensive support system for young people.

Examples

Cross-sectoral supportive environments for girls' empowerment in Mali, Nepal and Tanzania

The Final Evaluation of the UNESCO-UNFPA-UN Women Joint Programme on Empowering Adolescent Girls and Young Women through Education⁴ notes how this intervention combined education, health and vocational training to foster supportive environments and empower adolescent girls in Mali, Nepal and Tanzania.

Cross-sectoral programmes for personal, professional and practical skills in India

Programmes like the UNICEF Life Skills Education in India⁵ 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.

Supportive ecosystems for marketplace skills development in Gambia

The success of initiatives like the UNDP Gambia Songhai Initiative⁶ underscores the importance of creating a supportive ecosystem that helps young people apply their new skills effectively in the marketplace.



3 World Bank Study on Multi-Sectoral Approaches to Youth Employment: World Bank. (n.d.). Multi-sectoral approaches to youth employment: Integrating vocational training with health and social services in East Africa.

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

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

6 UNDP. 2017. Songhai Terminal Evaluation.

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.

Interventions that adapt to local contexts, especially in remote and rural areas, are more successful in improving access to educational and employment opportunities. A one-size-fits-all approach overlooks the unique needs of diverse communities, so adapting interventions to local realities ensures that the interventions are both relevant and impactful.

The United Nations has long emphasized the importance of context-specific approaches in education, acknowledging that countries are at different stages in their educational development, each facing distinct challenges and opportunities. Consequently, it is essential for nations to adopt tailored strategies that align with their unique sociocultural, economic and geographical contexts.⁷

Adaptability and flexibility in programme design are critical for culturally relevant solutions. This is particularly important in remote areas, where engaging with communities, listening to their needs and co-designing interventions that reflect local realities can ensure solutions are not only relevant and effective but also sustainable in the long term.

Examples

Contextualizing community-based models for youth education in rural Ethiopia

The evaluation⁸ of a UNICEF community-based education model in Ethiopia demonstrated how customizing youth interventions in remote areas can lead to positive, lasting outcomes. The intervention targeted children in pastoralist regions where traditional educational models often fall short. To address this, the programme built alternative basic education centres (ABECs) and adapted the curriculum to fit the pastoralist lifestyle. It involved tailoring educational programmes to meet the specific needs and lifestyles of these 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. The evaluation found that this tailored approach not only increased enrolment rates, but also extended the benefits beyond just access to education. It helped improve cognitive development among the youth, showing that when education is aligned with local needs and cultural practices it has a far greater impact.

7 UNESCO. 2024. Towards SDG 4: Report of a global survey on country actions to transform education.

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



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, equally important are upstream efforts to ensure the long-term success of interventions. This involves supporting policy advocacy and institutional strengthening for sustainability. By supporting the establishment of a solid policy foundation along with strong, effective institutions, development interventions can not only produce short-term results but also lead to lasting change that addresses the root causes of issues like child labour and inadequate work conditions. Additionally, advocacy and community information campaigns on working conditions, employment contracts, social protection benefits and employer obligations are crucial for sustainable and scalable results.

Alongside these efforts, strengthening value chains and market systems and collaborative efforts with government bodies and private sector partners can further create and nurture the supportive ecosystems that can drive lasting change. This integrated approach can help to embed successful interventions into national systems to foster economic resilience and enable young people to thrive in both the short and the long term.

Examples

Policy reforms to address youth employment challenges

An ILO report on youth employment policies discusses the role of policy reforms in addressing youth employment challenges. It underscores the significance of upstream strategies in creating sustainable employment opportunities for young people.⁹

Advocacy for comprehensive skills and decent employment in Cambodia

An evaluation of the Decent Employment for Youth in Cambodia programme highlighted the critical importance of advocacy and institutional engagement to ensure that the benefits of its intervention were sustained and scaled. Beyond providing demand-driven skills, including soft, life, green and digital skills, the programme also advocated for the integration of community-based enterprise development as a standard entrepreneurship curriculum within the technical and vocational education and training system. Additionally, it focused on educating participants about working conditions, employment contracts, social protection benefits and employer obligations. In doing so the intervention helped to create a more comprehensive approach to youth employment that was able to sustain and scale positive outcomes.¹⁰

9 Youth Employment Policies (ILO): International Labour Organization. 2023. Youth employment policies: Policy reforms for sustainable employment. International Labour Organization. <https://www.ilo.org/media/515581/download>.

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





The road ahead

As work progresses towards implementing the vision of the Pact for the Future, it is important to pause and reflect on these lessons learned. How can these lessons be applied to future development interventions? How can the next generation become the architects of their own futures? How can young people be empowered to lead, innovate and shape the course of their lives and their communities?

Ensure that interventions are contextually flexible. Programmes should be adaptable to the specific needs, challenges and opportunities of diverse groups of young people. This requires a deeper understanding of the social, economic, cultural and environmental local realities that shape the lives of young people. Incorporating local knowledge and customizing interventions to fit specific cultural and geographical contexts greatly enhances the relevance and effectiveness of youth development programmes.¹¹

Youth leaders, and youth-led groups and organizations, must be meaningfully engaged in the design and implementation of programmes. Their insights, expectations and lived experiences are invaluable in ensuring that interventions resonate and have lasting impact. However, it is not enough to simply provide support to those who are easiest to reach. United Nations efforts should be more intentional to ensure that all young people, in all their diversity, have access to the resources and opportunities they need to thrive. This requires targeted, inclusive interventions that systemically address the unique factors of exclusion and discrimination in order to ensure that no young person is left behind.

Develop more holistic, multisectoral interventions and strategic partnerships. Collaboration with, and the cooperation of, multiple partners such as governments, the private sector, civil society and, most importantly, young people, are necessary to meet the various interrelated needs of young people. Government partners create the enabling environments for youth to thrive, however, strong institutions with supportive policy frameworks must be in place. Policies that support entrepreneurship, employment and education set the conditions where youth interventions can be sustainable over the long term and can contribute to a broader development effort of equality, social inclusion and economic resilience.

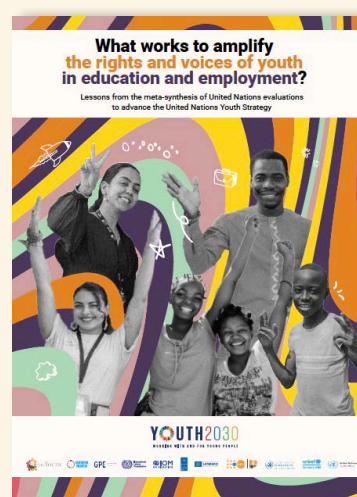
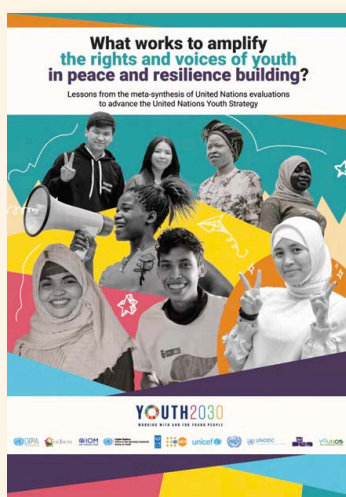
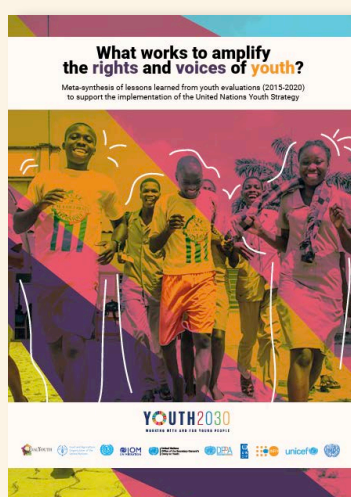
Youth development must be youth-led, with young people actively participating in programme design and implementation. Such interventions become more relevant, inclusive and impactful. And this is precisely why the lessons learned merit reflection and consideration in future interventions. The road ahead may present challenges, but equipped with the lessons from the past, and a collective effort, the path toward a more inclusive, equal and sustainable world can be realized.

¹¹ UNDP. 2022. Youth Empowerment and Engagement: Knowledge Project. United Nations Development Programme. "Incorporating local knowledge and tailoring interventions to specific cultural and geographical contexts significantly increases the relevance and impact of youth development programs." https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-11/yep_project_brief_aug_2022.docx.

Further information

Comprehensive exploration of these lessons and insights are available in the [full report](#). Detailed information regarding the meta-synthesis methodology, including the ethical application of artificial intelligence (AI) in the exercise, is available within the annexes.

This report represents the third instalment within a four-part series that examines various priorities of the United Nations Youth Strategy, Youth2030. For additional insights on youth programming, refer to the following resources.




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