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**Evaluation**

**Evaluation of UNDP support to youth  
economic empowerment**

**Executive summary**

**Contents**

I.	Background.....	2
II.	UNDP programme scope and scale for youth economic empowerment .....	2
III.	Key findings.....	3
IV.	Conclusions.....	9
V.	Recommendations.....	13



## **I. Background**

1. The Independent Evaluation Office of UNDP has carried out an evaluation of UNDP support to youth economic empowerment. This is the first comprehensive attempt to gather and analyse evidence about the UNDP contribution to youth economic empowerment, decent work and livelihood creation for youth in programme countries.
2. This evaluation aims to provide UNDP management, the Executive Board, and other stakeholders with an assessment of the results of UNDP support to youth economic empowerment and suggest avenues for improvement. It has a two-fold accountability and learning objective: (a) to assess the results of past UNDP work against its goals as stated in strategic and programmatic documents; and (b) to shape organizational learning and inform the strategic direction of UNDP work on youth economic empowerment in the Strategic Plan, 2022-2025.
3. Youth are more economically vulnerable than adults. Globally, one fifth of youth is not in employment, education or training (NEET). The situation is particularly concerning in least and less developed countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities.
4. Young women are twice as likely as young men to have NEET status. Gender norms around expected roles vis-à-vis domestic and care work, lack of infrastructure, and persistent violence against women further challenge their economic empowerment. This has ripple effects on their current and future well-being, economic empowerment, and livelihood perspectives, reinforcing inequality patterns.
5. Youth unemployment and lack of opportunities have significant social repercussions and can prevent young people from fully enjoying their rights. Beyond the individual level, it affects the prosperity, stability and equality within a society and a country's sustainable development.
6. The evaluation assesses UNDP support to youth economic empowerment at the global, regional and country level and the extent to which the UNDP three-pronged approach has contributed to enhancing youth psychological, behavioural and economic empowerment and to creating an enabling environment for poverty reduction and livelihood improvement.
7. The evaluation focuses on interventions implemented at country level from 2015 to mid-2021. It is framed around a modified version of the theory of change developed for the UNDP Youth Global Programme for Sustainable Development and Peace, 2016-2021, with the interpretation of the evaluation team based on broad stakeholders' consultations.
8. The evaluation is guided by eight key evaluation questions in combination with four internationally agreed standard evaluation criteria, namely: relevance, coherence, effectiveness, and sustainability, plus two additional pertinent criteria – inclusiveness and innovation.
9. The evaluation takes a mixed-methods approach inspired by contribution analysis, aiming to produce a plausible, evidence-based narrative to help explain how and why changes occurred. Data were collected and analysed through an iterative process and triangulated across different sources and methods, which included a broad multi-stakeholder consultation process. The evaluation adhered to the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) ethical guidelines for evaluation (2020) and underwent a detailed ethical review.

## **II. UNDP programme scope and scale for youth economic empowerment**

10. The UNDP approach to youth economic empowerment is anchored in its organizational mandate and its strategic plans operationalizing that mandate. The last two strategic plans – 2014-2017 and 2018-2021 – position youth economic empowerment as straddling the two UNDP focus areas of poverty reduction and good governance.
11. The Executive Group of UNDP adopted its first global youth strategy at the end of 2014, aligned with the UNDP Strategic Plan, 2014-2017. The strategy highlighted youth economic empowerment as one of the three outcome areas alongside participation and resilience-building. It focused on both the quantity and the quality of jobs, as well as access to social protection. In 2016, UNDP launched its first youth global programme, a multi-level, multi-dimensional programmatic offer to promote and support youth empowerment for sustainable development and

peace, as a response to the United Nations Youth Strategy, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the United Nations Security Council resolution 2250 on youth, peace and security.

12. Instead of launching a second youth strategy in 2017-2018, UNDP focused on developing the first United Nations Youth Strategy, known as Youth 2030, requested by the Executive Committee of the Secretary-General. The system-wide Youth 2030 brings all United Nations pillars together, has been greatly informed by the UNDP comprehensive approach to youth empowerment, and includes a pillar on youth economic empowerment under the thematic areas (launched in September 2018).

13. The UNDP investment in youth economic empowerment is estimated at around \$200-400 million per annum over the evaluation period. About one in three initiatives within the UNDP youth portfolio relate to youth economic empowerment.

14. The theory of change behind empowerment is based on the understanding that, to participate in the labour market, young people need to be able to articulate their needs and propose solutions to their world. They need to have the right capabilities, sufficient resources, and enabling environments to thrive. The latter requires interventions at the institutional level, through youth organizations and networks as well as work in support of policymakers, who can listen and respond to youth voices.

15. UNDP addresses youth economic empowerment through a three-pronged approach: (a) the demand side focuses on supporting entrepreneurship and social enterprises, and includes private and public sector youth employment schemes, and public employment schemes that foster economic reintegration of youth in recovery contexts; (b) the supply side includes fostering employability and addressing the skills mismatch through skills development, internships, volunteering placements, and job centres; and (c) the enabling environment side includes support for institutional and policy frameworks and national strategies that favour youth employment, especially for young women and vulnerable groups, and the promotion of investments in sectors with potential growth for youth employment, such as information and communication technologies.

### III. Key findings

**Finding 1. Relevance of UNDP interventions in responding to most pressing youth economic empowerment challenges: UNDP has been highly aware of young people's most pressing challenges. However, its response fell short of fully addressing access to decent jobs and productive employment. UNDP youth economic empowerment interventions were skewed towards supply over demand and paid less attention to most structural challenges.**

16. Overall, the UNDP response overemphasized the supply side of employment creation. Most interventions focused on young people's low employability skills, rather than the structural factors underlying the skills gap. The vast majority of the UNDP response on skills for employability concentrated on vocational training and did not go further to address the social determinants for the skills gap and structural challenges, such as defective education systems or social norms.

17. UNDP support for initiatives to address the demand favoured entrepreneurship over structural job creation. Few interventions were designed to strengthen youth public employment schemes or build linkages with the private and public sectors with the specific purpose to promote job creation. Youth challenges related to informal employment and the enabling environment were least supported by UNDP. Instead, the UNDP response focused on promoting entrepreneurship mostly through training programmes and, in some cases, financial support to participants and facilitation of networking through organizing youth summits. Despite the growing UNDP focus on supporting social protection mechanisms, few direct links were drawn to the specific challenges facing youth in relation to informal employment and the enabling environment.

**Finding 2. Targeting most vulnerable and marginalized youth group in UNDP interventions: UNDP has made resolute efforts to integrate and mainstream the principles of leaving no one behind across regions into its youth economic empowerment portfolio.**

**Through its youth economic empowerment interventions, UNDP has reached multiple types of youth at risk and other vulnerable and marginalized youth groups, in particular youth living in rural areas. Digital exclusion of youth remains a challenge further heightened due to COVID-19.**

18. UNDP has integrated the principle of leaving no one behind at strategic and programmatic levels across regions. UNDP reached out to marginalized young people and ensured that they are the primary target of employment and livelihoods programmes.

19. UNDP has substantially targeted youth at risk through many of its interventions across regions. UNDP supported youth affected by armed conflict. Despite many urban-centred interventions, some UNDP interventions catered to hard-to-reach youth in rural areas with required support services, including those related to youth economic empowerment. The COVID-19 pandemic evidenced the challenges of access to technology, digital devices, and the Internet for some beneficiaries and the need to further focus on digitally excluded youth groups. Some UNDP offices allocated additional resources to improve target youth groups' access.

**Finding 3. Addressing gender equality and women's empowerment in the youth economic empowerment portfolio: While young women benefited from various types of downstream support and achieved results, the youth economic empowerment portfolio failed to address the differential needs of young women, nor did they sufficiently contribute to upstream changes, implementation, and enforcement of policies aimed at addressing social norms, cultural values, and the roots of gender inequalities and discrimination.**

20. The aspiration of the UNDP youth strategy on gender equality and women's empowerment is reflected in its youth economic empowerment programmatic approach. Of the 201 youth economic empowerment projects identified, 98 per cent were tagged as expected to contribute to gender equality; 16 per cent of youth economic empowerment interventions had gender equality as the main objective over the implementation period reviewed.

21. Yet, gender remains a challenge at the level of conceptualization and articulation of target groups in design and reporting. Across interventions 'youth and women' were often lumped into one category and with little disaggregation of subcategories. This conflation reduces the clarity on the target groups and impacts the effectiveness of interventions. While there were efforts to mainstream gender equality considerations, gender-specific development support within youth economic empowerment interventions is not yet systematic, partially because gender analysis was sometimes overlooked at the formulation stage. Scarce examples were found where youth economic empowerment interventions have addressed gender-inequitable norms and contributed to the economic and social exclusion of young women.

**Finding 4. Integration of youth economic empowerment in UNDP signature solutions: UNDP made efforts to adopt a cross-sectoral approach between youth economic empowerment, key thematic areas, and the signature solutions. This effort yielded some encouraging results that indicate the positive potential of the integrative approach, though notable variations were observed across the signature solutions.**

22. UNDP corporate policies and strategies have emphasized youth as agents of change across multiple facets of sustainable development and peace and prosperity. With the combined momentum of the youth agenda, UNDP gradually linked youth economic empowerment to key thematic areas across various regional and country-level interventions. Youth economic empowerment featured largely as a component in UNDP interventions, ranging from humanitarian support and resilience-strengthening to peacebuilding and climate and environmental action. The strongest synergies were found between youth economic empowerment and poverty reduction (signature solution 1), followed by governance (signature solution 2) and by resilience (signature solution 3), in addition to promising intersections with the environment and climate action (signature solution 4) and gender equality (signature solution 6).

**Finding 5. The UNDP response to the COVID-19 pandemic in support of youth economic empowerment: While youth consideration remained limited in the initial UNDP strategic response to COVID-19, UNDP has placed youth at the centre of its programmatic response to COVID-19 at country level. UNDP played a pivotal role in facilitating resource**

**mobilization from various streams to complement existing resources in support of youth economic empowerment interventions.**

23. Youth consideration remained limited in the UNDP strategic approach on the COVID-19 pandemic, especially at the early stage. Youth were given better attention in the second stage of the UNDP COVID-19 response. For instance, young people were considered in 62 per cent of a geographically balanced sample of 60 social and economic impact needs assessments and responses, and in 82 per cent of a sample of socioeconomic response plans. Overall, 52 countries aimed to reinforce youth employment policies and the regulatory environment through United Nations support under the third pillar of livelihood creation.

24. The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected the implementation of youth economic empowerment-related projects. Most ongoing youth economic empowerment interventions have rapidly shifted to digital delivery and incorporated the use of online sessions, while several were either reprogrammed or served as entry points for the COVID 19 response and recovery. Several youth economic empowerment projects successfully contributed to mitigating the adverse effect of the pandemic on young people.

**Finding 6. Skills development and empowerment chain: Skills development interventions contributed greatly to psychological and behavioural empowerment with fewer results on economic benefits. UNDP support to improve employability primarily adopted a downstream approach with limited scope for more upstream structural responses.**

25. Overall, the UNDP response from the supply side heavily relied on skills development activities with far less effort invested in transition to work and access to the job market. In most interventions, skills development activities were highly effective in empowering participants psychologically. Skills development trainings yielded varying results in terms of economic benefits.

26. UNDP support adopted a downstream approach that attends to the problem of low employability skills of individual participants. There was less evidence of a UNDP upstream approach that could prevent the skills gap and offer systemic solutions that effectively upgrade and adapt the education system to market needs.

**Finding 7. Job creation, work opportunities and entrepreneurship: UNDP made significant contributions promoting downstream youth self-employment and entrepreneurship. UNDP support to upstream structural job creation mechanisms and quality of employment for youth was less visible and was affected by the specificities of the contexts.**

27. The self-employment model was dominant among the classical livelihood support type of interventions reviewed. These interventions supported the full cycle of skills training, business establishment, and financing through business starter kits. Support for social enterprises was found among the more recent type of support for social innovation and entrepreneurship.

28. UNDP support for upstream job creation and transition to work in the form of employment schemes and incentives through partnerships with private and public sectors was successful in some regions more than others. In other less favourable contexts, such as the lack of appetite by national governments to promote youth economic empowerment or the breakdown of institutions due to conflict, possibilities for upstream job creation were scarce.

29. UNDP adoption of a holistic and integrated approach to youth economic empowerment through structural responses that foster job creation through partnerships with the private and public sectors and enhanced access to finance and markets was less visible.

**Finding 8. Enabling environment for youth economic empowerment – UNDP support for the promotion of a more conducive enabling environment were effective in contexts that were favourable to youth economic empowerment policymaking but insufficient where the severity of the structural challenges at national level were more significant.**

30. UNDP played an important role in supporting the development and implementation of institutional and policy frameworks conducive to youth employment and entrepreneurship in contexts that benefited from a positive national policy climate and the appetite of governments to

promote youth policies. However, in contexts where governments adopted a negative stance around youth empowerment, including youth economic empowerment, fewer youth-focused responses were found. The UNDP role in youth economic empowerment advocacy in those cases is not supported by strong evidence. Overall, the majority of policy support for the development of national strategies that prioritize the generation of youth employment did not adopt a systems approach except for the interventions in Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

**Finding 9. Sustainability of results: There is evidence of sustainable results linked to UNDP initiatives in strengthening psychological empowerment and promoting skills development but less for concrete economic benefits from employment or self-employment. Key factors affecting sustainability were identified as the stability of the policy environment and the political will of national actors, the link between financial sustainability and replicability and scalability, as well as the type of engagement with youth before, during and after interventions. Lack of follow-up mechanisms and data on beneficiaries upon completion of activities was also a serious hindrance to assessing sustainability.**

31. Sustainability of employability through the development of youth capabilities, such as relevant skills sets, and psychological empowerment, such as motivation and behaviour, was evident. Sustainability of economic benefits through market access and retention of employment or self-employment/entrepreneurship was less evident due to lack of data on the survival rate of businesses. Evidence from reviewed interventions indicates that there was the lack of a clear, actionable exit strategy.

32. Ownership and partnerships were two crucial factors in strengthening sustainability. UNDP interventions were more successful and sustainable in contexts that had functioning public institutions or where national governments considered youth as a positive driving force and took a proactive positive stance towards youth empowerment, including youth economic empowerment. Moreover, clear linkages were found between sustainability and the prior integration of initiatives within national structures.

33. Engagement with youth was a crucial and underutilized asset to sustainability across various interventions. Youth engagement proved highly useful, especially in contexts of conflict and peacebuilding.

**Finding 10. Strategic relevance: At global level, UNDP championed youth economic empowerment through a clear vision anchored in a human rights-based approach and aligned with the United Nations system-wide strategy for youth. Youth economic empowerment in regional and country levels is yet to be fully mainstreamed.**

34. UNDP support for youth economic empowerment was crucial to the United Nations system-wide broader engagement in what can be dubbed as ‘the decade of youth’. Following the designation of the International Year of Youth (2010-2011), UNDP played a key role in the Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development (which UNDP co-chaired in 2015-2016) and has actively participated in the Economic and Social Council Youth Forum since 2012, co-convening it since 2013. UNDP championed youth empowerment, including youth economic empowerment, by drafting its youth strategy as the first youth-dedicated strategic document in the organization, in line with the Strategic Plan, 2014-2017. UNDP launched its first youth global programme in 2016 and joined in drafting and organizing the launch of the United Nations Youth 2030 strategy with other United Nations organizations in 2018 and, in doing so, did not renew its own youth strategy, 2014-2017.

35. At the regional level, the scope and quality of the strategies’ alignment with UNDP and the United Nations system-wide global strategy on youth were mixed, ranging from full integration to hybrid models. There is the absence of a comprehensive youth economic empowerment strategy that accounts for both decent jobs and livelihoods creation at the regional level. Overall, explicit youth economic empowerment strategies were mostly absent at country level and, where available, they did not reflect the central global UNDP vision of decent jobs and livelihood creation and tended to focus on the supply side of skills-building for employment and entrepreneurship.

**Finding 11. Youth role: UNDP conceptualization of the role of youth has evolved in the last decade in UNDP. This change has started to reshape UNDP partnerships with youth and the focus of its interventions. UNDP has been instrumental in amplifying the voices of youth at the global level. The youth potential and its contribution to sustainable human development did not receive the same attention at the country level.**

36. The 2014 UNDP youth strategy recognized that young people are not merely beneficiaries of development interventions, and that they have the potential to be positive agents of transformational change. At the global level, UNDP has meaningfully contributed to expand youth participation in global platforms and intergovernmental forums. UNDP has also convened innovative platforms and opened up new channels for youth participation.

37. While the UNDP youth strategy emphasized the need to establish youth-sensitive organizational mechanisms within UNDP, there are some examples at the regional and country levels that ensure youth inclusivity in organizational planning processes. Generally, the UNDP approach has been pragmatic and regularly involved youth consultations for evidence-based design at the design stage of global and regional interventions and to a lesser extent in country interventions. Beyond those youth consultations, there is limited evidence of youth engagement in the formulation of UNDP strategies or youth economic empowerment-related project design. At the implementation level, there is evidence that the perspectives of youth have been considered.

**Finding 12. External and internal coherence: UNDP demonstrated high external coherence by playing an active role in agenda-setting and coordination in international networks and mechanisms on youth. UNDP has positioned itself to provide strategic leadership in youth engagement for youth empowerment in global platforms. Internal coherence was less evident as youth mainstreaming has not yet been consistent and varies substantially across strategic documents at the regional and country levels. Youth is often lumped with woman or included within the broader category of ‘vulnerable groups’.**

38. UNDP had a unique advantage in promoting youth empowerment and has leveraged its strengths and drawn on its multidisciplinary approach to position itself globally in this area. According to partner interviews and surveys, UNDP strength for youth empowerment lies in its widespread presence in countries, its broad mandate and all-encompassing constituency, its strong operational capacity, and its convening power and integrator role, in combination with its ability to source in-kind and financial resources.

39. UNDP plays an active role in agenda-setting and coordination in international networks and mechanisms on youth. This includes significant contribution to the drafting of the United Nations system-wide Youth 2030 strategy and its accountability framework. UNDP leadership and convenor role are visible in most regions, where UNDP strategic positioning is contextualized by regional needs and priorities.

40. Regarding internal coherence, youth mainstreaming has yet to be fully integrated across regional and country strategic documents. All regional programme documents considered youth in their situational analysis with varying degree of comprehensiveness. Most of the 60 sampled country programme documents took young people into consideration, although youth was essentially included as part of a broader category of ‘vulnerable groups’.

**Finding 13. Staff and resources: UNDP has set up a dedicated institutional architecture to support youth empowerment. The effectiveness of the structure is affected by the lack of dedicated human resources for economic empowerment in the youth portfolio to facilitate cross-fertilization, the limited institutionalization of youth focal points at country level, the ‘upon request approach’ nature of support provided by the regional structure, and the absence of clear financial mechanisms in support of the youth global team.**

41. UNDP created its global youth team in 2014, located within the Bureau for Policy and Programme Support governance team. Since its creation, the global youth team has remained small at headquarters. In terms of functions, the global youth team’s role has become increasingly central and strategic. It is important to note that the UNDP youth strategy did not establish a responsibility matrix across thematic clusters; nor has one been developed since. Coordination and youth mainstreaming were affected by the absence of dedicated focal points and expertise on

youth across thematic clusters. Overall, internal and external interviewees at headquarters and regions expressed their high level of satisfaction with the support provided the headquarters global youth team.

42. The global youth team has further expanded, establishing regional youth focal points. In 2021, each region, with the exception of Latin America and the Caribbean, has a regional focal point. More than 100 country offices (over 75 per cent) declared having a youth focal point. While the focal points have the overall responsibility for youth mainstreaming in country offices, the role and responsibilities are often not reflected in their job descriptions. In general, the capacity to address youth economic empowerment challenges tends to vary at country level.

43. The UNDP youth strategy did not establish financial benchmarks for its core activities in promoting youth empowerment or youth economic empowerment. The overall financial situation to support youth creates a lack of predictability and is forcing the global youth team to dedicate substantial efforts to resource mobilization, which remains a major challenge to advance the youth economic empowerment agenda.

**Finding 14. Innovation and approach to innovation: Growing UNDP expertise in leveraging social innovation in youth entrepreneurship is an added value of UNDP work in youth economic empowerment. Efforts so far have not improved inclusiveness of innovation-driven initiatives for hard-to-reach youth and to enhance systematic organizational learning from innovation initiatives.**

44. UNDP has provided support for innovation and digital skills development, introduction of technology, and technical and financial assistance for incubating and translating social innovation ideas to create youth start-ups in countries. Promoting social innovation in youth entrepreneurship has enabled UNDP youth economic empowerment programming to go beyond the somewhat traditional livelihood interventions targeting labour intensive areas to support youth agency for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The technical expertise in innovation methods and tools is emerging as an added value of UNDP in partnerships for youth economic empowerment, responding to the increasing demand from stakeholders for innovation capacity-building.

45. Within the context of youth economic empowerment, the establishment of UNDP accelerator labs has created the potential for UNDP to ‘modernize’ its support to youth. UNDP has increasingly used innovation challenges and digitally enhanced platforms, such as hackathons and gamification, to solicit local development solutions and promote youth start-ups. UNDP has also explored alternative finance mechanisms and achieved mixed results. Flagship regional programmes for youth-led innovation and social entrepreneurship have shown a good level of replication and expansion.

**Finding 15. Partnerships: UNDP youth economic empowerment initiatives have benefited from partnerships with other United Nations organizations, youth organizations and the private sector. However, inter-agency cooperation has not yet been fully translated into technical-level operationalization in countries; and there is room to further leverage private sector inputs beyond financial assets. Partnership with youth organizations has mostly focused on programme implementation, but over recent years UNDP has been engaging more in participation and co-creation.**

46. UNDP has been an active member of global networks for youth empowerment, such as the Decent Jobs for Youth global initiative, Youth 2030, the United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development, and the Global Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security. UNDP has established bilateral partnership frameworks with other United Nations organizations, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNFPA and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), to reconfirm its commitment for collaboration in priority areas, including youth economic empowerment. More systematic operationalization of the inter-agency cooperation frameworks requires a better understanding and coordination at technical and programming levels in regions and countries, in addition to leadership-level commitment.

47. UNDP collaborated with youth-led or youth-based organizations for youth economic empowerment interventions mostly in skills development programme/projects, followed by entrepreneurship and youth employment. While more than half of the youth organizations that



responded to the survey have been participants of UNDP events and about 45 per cent have been UNDP project/programme implementation partners, only 13 per cent have been members of the project/programme board or steering committee and about a third have been consulted in programme/project design.

48. Partnerships with the private sector have provided important contributions to UNDP skills development and entrepreneurship-support initiatives in some countries and have enabled the creation and operation of some key youth economic empowerment initiatives. UNDP has explored innovative partnerships with the private sector for youth advocacy and empowerment.

**Finding 16. Monitoring and evaluation systems: Despite significant progress in developing the youth tracker and the Youth 2030 scorecard, there are still important measurement gaps on results achieved in UNDP support to youth economic empowerment. Tools and monitoring and evaluation systems in place are inapt to adequately capture the UNDP contribution to youth economic empowerment at corporate, regional and country levels.**

49. UNDP does not have a corporate results framework fit to demonstrate its contribution to or metrics to capture youth economic empowerment. While some countries make good use of their country programme results frameworks to cascade up project results, in general there are limited examples of performance indicators that specifically measure the extent to which UNDP programming has facilitated youth economic empowerment. And among the 201 youth economic empowerment interventions between 2015-2021, only 19 per cent have conducted decentralized evaluations.

50. An important landmark was achieved in 2016 with the roll out of the corporate leaving no one behind youth marker as a way to improve the monitoring and data systems to better track expenditure related to youth.

51. Recently, UNDP supported the Envoy on Youth of the Office of the Secretary-General in developing the Youth 2030 scorecard<sup>1</sup> to better understand United Nations country team performance on priority areas described in the Youth 2030 strategy. Currently, UNDP is coordinating with the Envoy on Youth to develop an additional corporate scorecard for United Nations entities. This represents an opportunity for UNDP to develop a comprehensive framework that could serve not only its commitments within the United Nations Youth 2030 strategy but also its own need to robustly report on youth empowerment and youth economic empowerment in particular.

## IV. Conclusions

**Conclusion 1: UNDP has positioned itself as a key player in youth economic empowerment and played an important role within the United Nations system in global agenda settings.**

52. UNDP created an organizational momentum for youth mainstreaming with the launch of its youth strategy in 2014, the first youth-dedicated strategy in the organization with a vision anchored in a human rights-based approach to youth empowerment. The strategy was an important step that boosted the unique global positioning of UNDP on youth economic empowerment. Subsequently, UNDP actively collaborated in shaping the United Nations system-wide vision on youth through the Youth 2030 strategy, and co-convened and joined various youth economic empowerment-related inter-agency platforms.

53. The UNDP strength in youth economic empowerment lies in its widespread presence in countries, its broad mandate and all-encompassing constituency, its convening power and capacity to integrate youth economic empowerment to other areas, in combination with its ability to source in-kind and financial resources. Benefiting from well-established partnerships, the organization has been successfully exerting its convening power to maintain high visibility of the youth agenda and promote youth engagement in global dialogues. The broad nature of the UNDP youth strategy has allowed UNDP to explore different approaches to youth economic empowerment in search of its niche and value proposition. While its value addition on youth

<sup>1</sup> [Youth 2030 scorecard for United Nations country teams.](#)

economic empowerment is not equally well leveraged across all regions, it lies in the organization's capacity to apply a cross-sectoral approach to youth economic empowerment in support to signature solutions, its holistic programmatic approach by combining several types of youth economic empowerment support (combining supply, demand, and enabling environment support), and its recognized innovative approaches, particularly in promoting social entrepreneurship.

54. Key for this progress has been the fact that UNDP has built institutional structures and tools to support youth mainstreaming. This has been instrumental in advancing the youth agenda in the organization and ultimately helped in strengthening youth economic empowerment results. The UNDP youth strategy was catalytic in establishing a dedicated internal infrastructure and in developing key instruments and guidance materials to support youth mainstreaming (for example, the youth global team, regional youth focal points, among others). The UNDP youth global team and the regional youth focal points have energetically championed the youth agenda within and outside the organization.

**Conclusion 2: The UNDP youth economic empowerment global vision has yet to be mainstreamed across the organization. The recent and uneven implementation across global, regional and national levels diminishes the unique UNDP role in youth economic empowerment.**

55. There were recognized and valuable efforts to support youth economic empowerment across various thematic areas, but UNDP has not adopted a cross-sectoral approach at regional and national levels, as the global vision was not sufficiently mainstreamed. At the regional level, beyond the necessary contextual adaptations, there were discrepancies in the extent to which a proactive youth economic empowerment agenda was adopted. Overall, explicit youth economic empowerment strategies were mostly absent at the regional and country levels and, where strategies were in place, they did not reflect the central global UNDP vision or tried to define the UNDP niche and unique contribution.

56. Efforts to intersect youth economic empowerment with the six signature solutions were mostly noted in the areas of governance, peacebuilding, and resilience, with promising efforts in environment and climate action and innovation. However, in most cases, disconnected efforts to address various youth economic empowerment issues did not follow a comprehensive long-term youth economic empowerment national strategy, which would allow the organization to have a more significant impact in the area.

**Conclusion 3: UNDP achieved mixed results in supporting youth economic empowerment. While economic empowerment and skills development were noted at individual level, UNDP did not make a significant contribution towards youth access to decent jobs and productive employment of youth at a larger scale.**

57. UNDP contributions towards youth access to decent jobs and productive employment prioritized supply over demand and insufficiently adopted a holistic approach needed to address structural challenges. While positive results were observed regarding the psychological and behavioural empowerment of youth participating in UNDP programmes, these did not always lead to concrete results in advancing youth's economic benefits. UNDP focused on supporting supply mostly through skills development, with a downstream approach that did not address structural responses. UNDP support for boosting demand for youth workers focused on youth self-employment, entrepreneurship, and social enterprise. This focus hindered more holistic and integrated approaches to sustainability, as it largely ignored the multiple challenges surrounding structural job creation by governmental or private sectors. Moreover, little attention was dedicated to the enabling environment with very few tangible results. This was due to UNDP favouring the agency and responsibility of individuals over the creation of a conducive enabling environment and the dominant absence of a systems' approach. UNDP also faced significant limitations to address structural challenges such as the severity of the structural challenges (weak institutions, adverse stance toward youth, economics vulnerability, fragile and conflict-affected contexts, among others), lack of interest, weak political will of national actors, and resource limitations.

**Conclusion 4: While UNDP mainstreamed leaving no one behind principles in youth economic empowerment interventions and was successful in reaching and benefiting many disadvantage individuals, contributions to upstream changes in social norms and roots causes of inequalities and discrimination were very limited, specifically with regard to gender.**

58. UNDP interventions across regions prioritized and targeted vulnerable youth groups and delivered benefits to them. In its programming, women and youth are often categorized, without differentiation, under the umbrella of vulnerable groups. Their respective needs are not specified, and thus often not attended to. While UNDP made significant efforts in mainstreaming gender equality and women's empowerment in youth economic empowerment activities, most of the interventions so far have been focused on ensuring parity of participation between men and women. UNDP has not yet succeeded in addressing the differential needs of young women, nor contributed to upstream changes in social norms, cultural values and root causes of gender inequalities and discrimination. UNDP missed important opportunities to include young woman more systematically by conducting robust gender analysis at the formulation stage of interventions.

**Conclusion 5: UNDP has not yet leveraged its strategic partnerships behind a clear youth economic empowerment strategy. Despite its long-standing, unique positioning as an agenda-setter and partnerships leader, UNDP convening power was not optimized to rally governments and private sector around a strong youth economic empowerment agenda and further collaborate with other United Nations organizations at country level.**

59. UNDP youth economic empowerment programming was often and, in many countries, disproportionately subject to the lack of interest and political will of national governments to prioritize youth economic empowerment. The UNDP role as an advocate for youth economic rights was particularly compromised as it had little influence on the uptake of youth-focused economic empowerment policy, which largely depended on national governments' favourable or adverse position toward youth or on donors' geopolitical funding priorities.

60. The cross-sectoral approach was envisioned in the youth strategy and reinforced in the United Nations Youth 2030 strategy and essentially implemented in the area of youth, peace and security. By contrast, UNDP has not sufficiently followed this approach to youth economic empowerment. A cross-sectoral approach requires that UNDP better integrate its partnerships behind a clear and comprehensive youth strategy with a medium to long-term framework.

61. UNDP has established bilateral partnerships strategies with other United Nations organizations (such as ILO, UNICEF, UNFPA) to promote youth economic empowerment among other areas, including youth engagement and advocacy, and youth, peace and security. The partnerships benefitted from their thematic expertise, and the opportunities to leverage joint network and resources. Global-level inter-agency cooperation strategies have not yet fully translated into technical-level operationalization in countries.

62. Despite having shared interest in youth economic empowerment, international financial institutions and the private sector have not been sufficiently engaged in UNDP youth economic empowerment activities. Although attempts were made to collaborate, engagements often appeared fragmented, opportunistic, not oriented to support a well-conceived youth economic empowerment strategy. Similarly, despite the clear recognition of their role in development, UNDP has developed limited partnerships with youth organizations at the country level, which could have helped to lobby governments and civil society for more engagement. UNDP has not established youth-sensitive organizational mechanisms to go beyond activity implementation toward ensuring youth participation in programming and co-creation to support its youth economic empowerment ambitions.

**Conclusion 6: The UNDP results framework and monitoring systems are not currently able to adequately measure and demonstrate its results in youth economic empowerment.**

63. The impact of the youth organizational architecture and dedicated tools have been limited by its uneven implementation between regions, its insufficient institutionalization at country level, and the limitation of some tools, such as the youth marker. Youth mainstreaming is still mostly

driven by a few champions and not sufficiently integrated in the rest of the organization. The absence of a responsibility matrix and reporting lines across thematic clusters and country offices have contributed to this phenomenon.

64. Most importantly, tools and processes for monitoring and evaluation have not been sufficiently developed and applied to youth economic empowerment. UNDP does not have a corporate results framework for youth or youth economic empowerment. There are deficiencies in reporting practices and indicator selection and the corporate youth marker presents reliability and usefulness issues. Evaluation coverage on youth economic empowerment issues is well below the corporate average. This has affected the ability of UNDP to capture and measure its contribution to youth economic empowerment and impacted learning opportunities on youth economic empowerment mechanics to improve future interventions and support resources mobilization efforts.

**Conclusion 7: UNDP is emerging as a global leader in promoting youth social innovation. Inclusion of hard-to-reach youth and low-tech value chains remains challenging.**

65. UNDP has made increasing investments to build innovation capacity both internally and externally to support youth innovation and social entrepreneurship. Accelerator labs and regional innovation teams have been key in modernizing the UNDP approach. The growing UNDP expertise in youth social innovation is being recognized by stakeholders and has stimulated new partnerships.

66. Challenges remain in channelling these good practices and innovation techniques towards engaging and addressing the needs of hard-to-reach youth. UNDP programming in innovation lacked a targeting strategy that lays out how youth women, youth without formal education, persons with disabilities, migrants, ethnic minorities and others would be reached and included. Furthermore, UNDP support for innovative ideas and solutions to tackle global social challenges and to provide incubation, mentoring and start-up funding for winning ideas have been timely initiatives for contexts with a thriving private sector. However, their prospects for upscaling may be weaker in less developed countries with an emerging private sector. From a pro-poor perspective, the design of UNDP innovation activities seems more of add-on, without linkages to large-scale programmes and poverty reduction efforts at the country level with adequate focus on youth.

**Conclusion 8: The major challenge of resource mobilization for youth economic empowerment work was not addressed in a systematic manner by the organization. Despite occasional resource mobilization successes, UNDP still lacks a clearly defined and structured funding strategy rooted on its youth economic empowerment comparative advantage.**

67. The lack of interest by many Governments and donors, the absence of a clearly defined youth economic empowerment mobilization strategy, but also the inability of UNDP to demonstrate its value proposition, are key hindering factors. While UNDP has highlighted youth economic empowerment at the corporate level, the resources it has allocated to programming and staff by the organization have been limited and volatile. It creates a contradiction between UNDP ambitions on youth economic empowerment and the institutional commitment to it.

**Conclusion 9: UNDP has placed youth at the centre of its COVID-19 response, demonstrating importance of youth economic empowerment and UNDP engagement in recovery efforts.**

68. UNDP quickly recognized the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 on youth. UNDP repurposed funds and programmes to address challenges faced by youth during the pandemic. It has also played a pivotal role in facilitating resource mobilization from various streams to complement existing resources in support of youth economic empowerment interventions.

69. Most importantly, while the UNDP strategic response to COVID-19 did not initially consider youth, UNDP has placed youth at the centre of its programmatic response to COVID-19 at country level. This is a sure sign of UNDP commitment for youth economic empowerment in recovery

efforts and the relevance of this area in the implementation of the new UNDP Strategic Plan, 2022-2025.

## V. Recommendations

**Recommendation 1: UNDP should prioritize interconnections and synergies between employability, job creation and enabling environment interventions, instead of standalone interventions focusing on capacity development or entrepreneurship.**

70. Further emphasis is needed on the deficit of labour demand and on creating a conducive enabling environment and self-employment ecosystems that facilitate both the quantity and the quality of jobs for young people. UNDP has therefore to further incorporate youth economic empowerment support within wider sectoral strategies and upstream programmes, including social protection programming. UNDP should prioritize long-term interventions seeking to remove structural barriers for marginalized youth, bolster social protections and address youth challenges in the informal sector. In this vein, more attention is needed to support duty-bearers and ensure youth have access to decent work.

71. UNDP should further leverage its favourable position to influence national agendas in favour of youth/youth economic empowerment and deploy efforts to create national awareness and consensus towards making youth economic empowerment a priority on the national development agendas.

**Recommendation 2: UNDP should detail its programmatic approach toward youth economic empowerment by developing a guidance document that clarifies the UNDP ambition in various contexts and provides practical guidance for strategic positioning, coherence and programme design and implementation.**

72. This instrument should adopt a cross sectoral approach to youth economic empowerment and further accelerate its transition from smaller scale youth economic empowerment interventions to integrated policy advisory support. The guidance should focus on the most effective interventions for each type of programmatic context.

73. As a step towards implementing this recommendation, UNDP needs to clearly conceptualize youth economic empowerment and develop an integral theory of change on youth economic empowerment, or more holistically on youth empowerment, across the six signature solutions. This should serve as the basis for formulating an integral response while defining the UNDP value proposition and role, including within the wider United Nations Youth 2030 strategy. UNDP may wish to include in its guidance other components of youth empowerment, beyond youth economic empowerment, to facilitate its cross-sectoral approach.

74. To ensure internal coherence, this guidance should cascade into the next generation of regional programme documents so that they give greater attention to youth economic empowerment.

**Recommendation 3: UNDP should take measures to ensure organization-wide coherence in its institutional architecture for youth across regions.**

75. UNDP should ensure that regional youth focal points are in place and functional in all regions to effectively support country offices. Regional youth focal points should have the resources and systems in place to allow them to extend support and guidance on best practices to country offices in a proactive manner.

76. It will be key for UNDP to create a clear responsibility matrix across the organization to facilitate the mainstreaming and coordination of youth employment issues across thematic clusters. UNDP should promote accountability, synergies and cross-fertilization across different teams and clusters at the country, regional and global levels for effective mainstreaming of youth economic empowerment.

77. UNDP should also strengthen the country focal points system, ensuring that it has adequate resources and capabilities to be fully operational. The focal points' responsibility should be part

of the staff terms of reference. A guidance note and onboarding material are needed to ensure clear understanding of the role and its effective implementation.

78. UNDP should increase the overall capacity of staff to understand and address youth needs. UNDP should integrate capacity-building components on youth programming into existing training programmes. That should include developing a guidance note and toolkit on how to integrate youth in various areas of UNDP programming and operations beyond youth, peace and security.

**Recommendation 4: UNDP should systematically recognize the different needs of young women and how they intersect with age, ability, ethnicity/indigeneity, locality (rural/urban) and other markers. The organization should prioritize support that aspires to contribute to changes in social norms and that addresses the root causes of inequality, exclusion and discrimination.**

79. UNDP should go beyond setting up ratios for female participations to youth economic empowerment interventions and aim to address the differentiated needs of young women and men for their economic empowerment. Additionally, engaging youth, families, peers, and communities as agents of gender transformation is key to shifting adverse social norms and drivers of gender inequalities and discrimination. To improve the effectiveness of gender equality and women's empowerment interventions in its youth economic empowerment portfolio, UNDP should strengthen its needs assessments and front-end analyses respectively in local contexts. Moreover, UNDP should build mechanisms to involve young women of different abilities and backgrounds from the onset to develop interventions tailored to their needs and specific challenges.

**Recommendation 5: The renewed UNDP vision of youth economic empowerment needs to further leverage strategic partnerships to foster youth agency, considering youth as agents of change and partners for development in their own right, and not merely as beneficiaries.**

80. In developing its comprehensive youth economic empowerment vision, UNDP should consider mapping stakeholders against its theory of change to identify the different type of partnerships it needs to nurture to sustainably achieve youth economic empowerment goals. This requires UNDP to take stock of its positioning, comparative advantages and value proposition within the development youth economic empowerment eco-system as well as the trajectory it intends to take. It should design its partnership strategy accordingly to ensure synergies and to mobilize necessary expertise or resources. Instead of one-off project-based partnerships, UNDP should identify areas of synergy for regular and sustainable collaboration and explore the possibility of developing joint strategies and resource mobilization plans with other United Nations organizations, civil society, the private sector and international financial institutions, in addition to scaling and adapting existing successful partnerships in other regions and/or countries.

81. Building on pilot experiences, UNDP needs to create mechanisms to channel youth input and feedback to UNDP work at country level, treating youth as partners and not just beneficiaries. It should also develop pilot interventions that explore new youth roles in area such as research, planning, implementation, or even monitoring and evaluation. UNDP should put in place measures to meaningfully engage targeted youth more effectively and meaningfully from the early stages of project design. It needs to include social innovation tailored to reach disadvantaged youth, using technology accessible and sustainable for them. This approach should ensure the programme is designed to fit the needs of the youth being served and foster youth agency in voicing economic and social issues.

**Recommendation 6: UNDP needs to strengthen its results framework and its monitoring and evaluation practices for adequate tracking of youth economic empowerment results and expenditures.**

82. UNDP needs to better conceptualize what success in youth economic empowerment constitutes and translate it into a corporate results framework as part of the guidance document, which will allow the organization to coherently measure, monitor, report and learn from its results and contribution to youth economic empowerment, including Goals 4.4, 8.5 and 8.6. This will be a vehicle to contribute to reporting on the broader agenda of youth empowerment and, in particular, UNDP commitments within the United Nations Youth 2030 strategy.

83. The updated results-based management system should go beyond indicators restricted to the number of participants in activities and focus on results. UNDP should consider conducting detailed baseline surveys of the target population before, during and after programme implementation to be able to examine its impact. Moreover, UNDP should follow up on progress after project completion, especially for key interventions and innovative approaches, to ascertain longer-term economic empowerment of participants, thereby building its knowledge of long-term youth economic empowerment results, sustainability and constraints. This could be achieved by increasing the coverage of youth economic empowerment interventions through decentralized evaluations.

84. Finally, UNDP should take steps to improve the youth marker, building on its own experience with other markers and capitalizing on experiences from other United Nations organizations, using similar markers. For the effectiveness of the tool, UNDP should ensure that it is consistently applied within the organization and be subjected to random quality assurance. By becoming a reliable system to track progress, these metrics could support UNDP efforts in resource mobilization, accountability and youth-informed management decision-making at the global, regional and country levels.

**Recommendation 7: The renewed UNDP vision of youth economic empowerment should be accompanied by a clearly structured resource mobilization strategy.**

85. UNDP needs to formulate a resource mobilization strategy for youth empowerment or dedicated to youth economic empowerment. It should be framed as a viability plan to cover the means to support the UNDP ambition for youth economic empowerment in a realistic way and to identify diversified sources of funding to adequacy and predictably finance its portfolio. This exercise should be an opportunity for UNDP to reassess its scope and ambition and engage in a cost-opportunity analysis of its footprint in areas of youth economic empowerment. To support its mobilization efforts, UNDP could consider commissioning an advocacy study showing the cost of not addressing youth economic empowerment.

86. At the same time, given the limitations and unpredictability of donor funding, UNDP should engage in a discussion on the opportunity to leverage existing resources and receive extra core resources for this area. As youth is recognized as a priority of the organization, UNDP could uphold and demonstrate institutional commitment to youth with more adequate core operating funding.