



Standards for Youth Initiatives: **A Guidance Note**



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for every child

Introduction

In 2021, UNICEF's West and Central Africa Regional Office (WCARO) and the UNDP Regional Service Centre for Africa (RSCA) joined forces to launch a Flagship Youth Initiative (See Annex A) designed to strengthen knowledge and practice in the areas of youth employability and entrepreneurship. The collaboration focused on 10 countries in the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and The Gambia) with the main objective of gaining a broad understanding of existing youth employment and entrepreneurship initiatives in the sub-region. Seventy-two ongoing initiatives were classified according to jointly developed criteria¹. This mapping highlighted gaps, opportunities and effective approaches, which in turn facilitated the development of the four standards for youth initiatives presented in this Guidance Note².

The Note also highlights lessons learned in relation to employability and entrepreneurship initiatives and poses questions to be considered by those supporting such initiatives. Together, these elements serve as a checklist for both youth networks engaged in partner initiatives and public and private partners responsible for (or interested in) designing or implementing youth initiatives. The Guidance Note concludes with recommended actions for the various actors engaged in youth initiatives.

¹ UNICEF and UNDP offices extend their gratitude to the team of Samuel Hall East Africa Inc., who conducted the mapping with the support of each agency's 10 country offices and relevant partners.

² The report did not evaluate the programmes studied, but rather to identified promising approaches and develop functional standards for this type of programming.



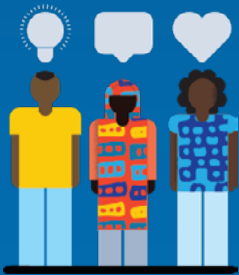
Sahel 72 eligible initiatives reviewed

a. Burkina Faso	8	f. Mauritania	8
b. Cameroon	9	g. Niger	10
c. Chad	6	h. Nigeria	4
d. Guinea	9	i. Senegal	7
e. Mali	6	j. The Gambia	4

This map is stylized and not to scale. It does not reflect a position by UNICEF and UNDP on the legal status of any country or area or the delimitation of any frontiers.

Key takeaways from the youth initiative mapping

1.



Despite initiatives being youth-focused, not everything done for youth was done with youth.

2.



Scalability is restrained by funding limitations and reduced engagement from local partners.

3.



Better means are needed to measure success and ensure follow-up with participating youth when an initiative ends.

4.



Initiatives had limited focus on the enabling environment that affects employability and entrepreneurship for young African women and men.

5.



Challenges persist in relation to equality, non-discrimination and inclusion in youth initiatives.

Applicable across topics and contexts:

If you are interested in supporting youth, these Standards are for you!

While the mapping focused on initiatives dealing with employability and entrepreneurship, the 'Standards for Youth' are applicable to any youth initiative.

The initiatives reviewed were based in the Sahel, but the 'Standards for Youth' are relevant across all of West and Central Africa.



Section I

Standards for Youth Initiatives³

Interested in supporting young people to develop skills to enter the workforce or become entrepreneurs? Consider the following standards and guiding questions when designing, implementing or monitoring an initiative.

On the surface, these standards may seem obvious for achieving successful, meaningful youth-led initiatives. Yet, the mapping of Sahel initiatives demonstrated that even these 'basic' steps and measures are not always taken.



Youth

The broader study upon which this Guidance Note is based refers to youth as those aged 15 to 35 years, in accordance with the African Union definition and national policies on youth.

For the UN, this definition encompasses the age group often referred to as *older adolescents*.

³ Hereafter referred to as S4Y.



S4Y 1.

Young people at the centre of initiative design and operation

A key principle of any youth initiative should be rooted in the concept that:

“Anything done for youth, without youth – is against youth.”



Standard 1 can best be met by using youth-led, participatory approaches to ensure active involvement and ownership by youth in programme design and governance.

In addition to participatory or human-centred design, approaches should consider the following questions to align with this Standard.

S4Y 1a.

How will young people be consulted on the initiative’s design?

- ✓ How will such consultations ensure that those intended to participate will be fully represented?
- ✓ What measures will the initiative take to address the barriers faced by some young people to participate in initiative design (such as young women, those living with disabilities and/or in hard-to-reach areas, younger versus older age groups, etc)?
- ✓ How will existing youth organizations/networks be involved and/or supported to engage in initiative design?

S4Y 1b.

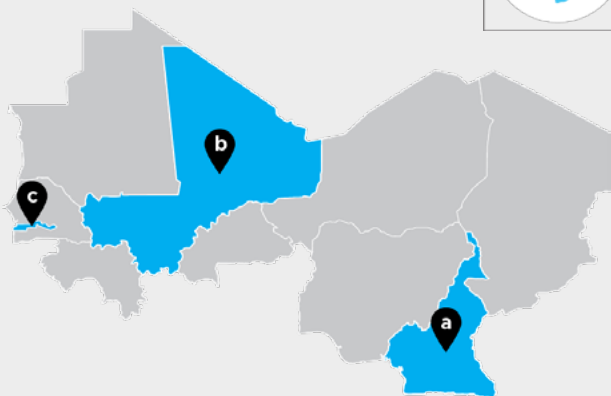
How will young people be engaged in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the initiative?

- ✓ How will a core group of youth leaders be identified to assume decision-making roles?

What measures need to be taken to ensure representativity and equality among youth engaged in implementation, monitoring and evaluation?

- ✓ How will the initiative leverage existing youth group experiences with monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of youth-led actions?
- ✓ How will the initiative ensure adequate capacity development for youth and other designers/ implementers to undertake monitoring of issues relevant to youth?

Want to see how others have addressed this Standard? Check out the initiatives listed below, included in the review of the 72 initiatives included in the mapping report.



Click the links to learn more

a **Cameroon**
[Vessels for Development Association](#)

b **Mali**
[Association Jeunesse Action](#)

c **The Gambia**
[Global Youth Innovation Network](#)

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What did the mapping reveal about Standard 1?

Figure 1

Youth involvement continuum⁴.

Initiatives were ranked according to three levels of youth involvement.

Unfortunately, the mapping found few initiatives that met the Standard; meaningful youth engagement and leadership were significantly underrepresented when compared to initiatives that merely consult youth.

The mapping also showed that when existing youth organizations serve as primary entry points and/or partners, buy-in from local authorities and youth tends to improve,⁵ which is key to sustainability.

⁴ Developed by Samuel Hall East Africa Ltd within the broader mapping report upon which this Note is based.

⁵ As long as adequate resources and technical support are available.

15%

of the initiatives targeted youth, but without involving them in governance.

69%

consulted youth but did not include them in decision-making.

Only 9%

were either initiated by youth or consulted youth and included them in decision-making.



S4Y 2.

Young peoples' different realities require specific attention

Involving young people is a basic first step.



In all countries 'young people' are a diverse group, facing differing realities and needs.

Some face higher burdens of exclusion and inequality than others. Intersectionality (addressing multiple forms of privilege and/or disadvantage) is a key strategy for recognizing diversity and addressing multi-faceted, cumulative disadvantage and exclusion to ensure that no young people intended to benefit from the initiative are left behind.

This Standard was designed to ensure that both engagement in the initiative and the definition of its target population proactively seek to identify and address the multi-faceted inequalities young West Africans face. Complement actions in S4Y 1 with the guidance questions raised here.

S4Y 2a.

What measures will be put in place to ensure equal opportunities to participate in the initiative, including the design, implementation and monitoring phases?

- ✓ How will diversity and existing inequalities play a role in defining the catchment area, participants and scope of the initiative?

How will hard-to-reach groups and those facing inequalities be meaningfully engaged in programme design, implementation and monitoring?

- ✓ Does the initiative consider socio-economic inequalities between different areas? Does it seek to include youth from poor or remote areas whose access to institutional and economic services may be limited?

S4Y 2b.

How will the initiative contribute to development goals around gender equality?

- ✓ Do efforts targeting young women and men seek to transform gender norms, both in terms of participation and promoting systemic changes?

- ✓ How will the initiative actively tackle gender inequalities and barriers, particularly for young women, young people living with disabilities, young migrants, internally displaced persons and/or other groups facing structural barriers participate and access social services?

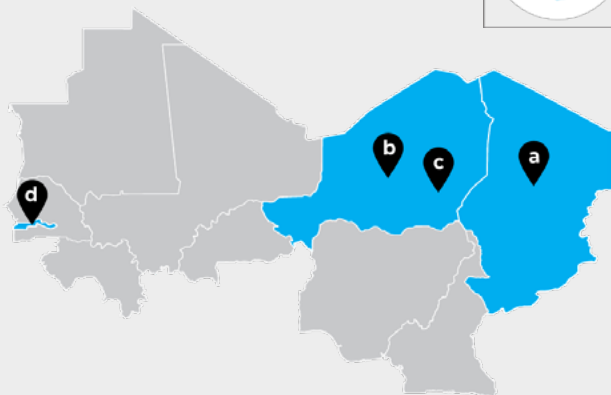
What strategies will be applied to ensure that different groups can participate in initiative activities (in particular, young mothers, youth living with disabilities, youth with lower levels of digital literacy or lacking connectivity, linguistic diversity, etc)?

- ✓ How will capacity (staff training, infrastructure, materials and funding) for the initiative be strengthened and maintained to address specific needs and challenges faced by the different groups of young people in the area where the initiative will be implemented?

- ✓ What measures will be applied to support young women to effectively participate in both in initiative design and outcomes?

Does the initiative ensure that young women can participate equally and in security governance and activities? Note that this can include flexibility in eligibility criteria, ensuring GBV mitigation, prevention and response strategies, providing child-care and/or adopting flexible hours, among others.

Want to see how others have addressed this Standard? Check out the initiatives listed below, included in the review of the 72 initiatives included in the mapping report.



[Click the links to learn more](#)

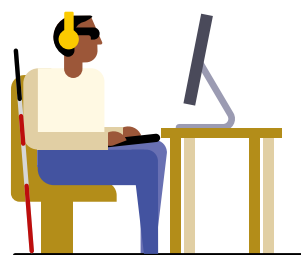
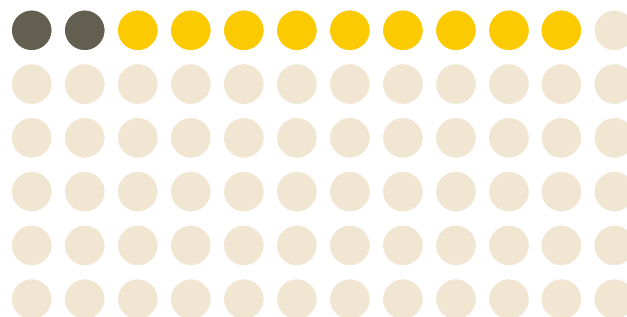
- a** **Chad**
[Women Success](#)
- b** **Niger**
[Youth Employment and Work in Niger/JEEN](#)
- c** **Niger**
[Skills Development for Growth](#)
- d** **The Gambia**
[National Enterprise Development Initiative](#)

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What did the mapping reveal about Standard 2?

The mapping revealed that most of the initiatives reviewed sought to include vulnerable and hard-to-reach youth but provided few details or clarity on approaches to address and promote inclusion, equality and non-discrimination.

For example, few initiatives intentionally addressed the barriers faced by youth living with a disability. Just 15 per cent (11 of 72 initiatives) targeted youth living with disabilities, and only two included activities explicitly aimed at meeting their needs.



Only 11 of 72
initiatives addressed inclusion
with 2 targetting youth
with disabilities



Regarding opportunities for young women who seek to boost their employability skills and/or to become entrepreneurs but are hindered by gender norms, the mapping noted:

- ✓ Some entrepreneurship initiatives supported young women by providing training, loans, grants, production centres or workspaces; others by building skills in traditionally male-dominated fields.
- ✓ Several initiatives sought to influence social norms and attitudes towards women in communities or to build capacity on gender issues within local institutions to transform the overall environment and address power inequities.
- ✓ Many addressed gender inequalities by using quota systems for programme participation, while some extended the age for women's participation to improve access to employment and credit/finance for female entrepreneurs.

S4Y 3

Context matters

For any initiative to have impact, the broader context must be considered. The same holds true for youth initiatives.



The third Standard examines the extent to which an initiative considers young people's social, economic and political realities.

A youth initiative separated from the context in which young women and men live will have little impact.

When an initiative ignores the context, it is very likely that S4Y 1 and 2 were equally forgotten. If youth, reflective of their diversity, are not well engaged and the initiative does not address local realities, the initiative's impact will be limited. Consider the following questions to keep initiatives grounded and locally relevant.

S4Y 3a.

How will the local context be reflected in programme design?

- ✓ How do the goals and objectives match local priorities and/or challenges for young women and men?
- ✓ How will young women and men from the implementation areas be involved in defining goals, objectives, implementation zones and the number of young people to reach?

What sources of information will inform programme initiative design? Have local analyses (such as or formal and informal markets) and/or interviews taken place?

Are the goals realistic for the context? What mitigation strategies should be put in place?

How will broader structural issues—such as social cohesion, influencing discriminatory attitudes and practices or contributing to the development of mixed skill sets—be addressed? Are there local youth organizations working on these issues with whom your initiative could partner to combine forces around these macro issues?

- ✓ To what extent has the initiative considered the specific needs and challenges of the targeted area, including local realities and constraints to implementation (e.g. What relevant actions have been included to address such an analysis and how have young people and other local partners informed of these actions?)?

S4Y 3b.

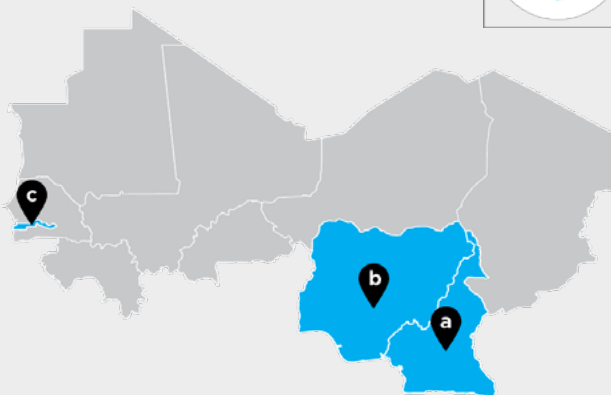
How will the initiative promote safe youth participation and engagement?

- ✓ How will the initiative address political, social and conflict dynamics present in the implementation zones? Has a risk analysis around safety and security been carried out and have mitigation strategies been developed?

- ✓ What measures were included to promote youth leadership, employability and entrepreneurship among actors who are not supportive or do not value youth contributions? How will the initiative bring them on board?
- ✓ What measures are in place to prevent and respond to GBV, bullying and sexual harassment of young women and men engaged in the initiative?

What alliances are in place with local service providers to respond to GBV incidents?

Want to see how others have addressed this Standard? Check out the initiatives below, included in the review of the 72 initiatives included in the mapping report.



[Click the links to learn more](#)

a **Cameroon**
[KumLab](#)

b **Nigeria**
[Edo Jobs](#)

c **The Gambia**
[Youth Empowerment Project](#)

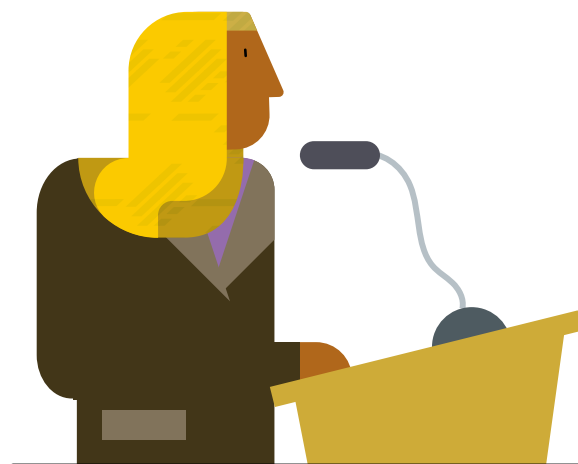
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What did the mapping reveal about Standard 3?

While some initiatives demonstrated a solid understanding of the intervention area, others were not tailored to the local landscape. To achieve results rooted in local knowledge, initiatives that used a preliminary needs assessment to design activities or were based on needs expressed by local actors (e.g., municipalities and youth organizations) appeared to be more successful than others.



Only **20%**
of the initiatives **sought to empower youth as political actors or community leaders**



Notable efforts to address context were made by applying a 'triple nexus' approach in some initiatives, by linking youth employment with peace, social cohesion and participation in local development. Others created space for dialogue with youth through community forums and awareness-raising beyond the main goal of the initiative in question.

Finally, to address youth needs and interests in a comprehensive manner, some initiatives linked employment/entrepreneurship with environmental protection and sustainable development while others helped employers to make jobs more attractive to youth. Only 20 per cent of the initiatives reviewed sought to empower youth as political actors or community leaders, enhance their participation in local development and decision-making processes and promote peace and social cohesion. Even when the focus is on employability and entrepreneurship, incorporating broader youth leadership skills should be considered vital.

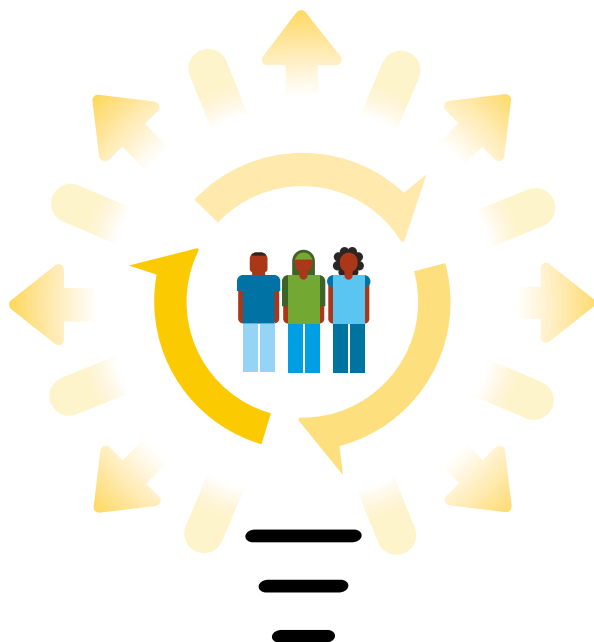
S4Y 4

Aim for impact beyond the duration of the initiative

As the challenges facing youth require long-term solutions, sustainability is critical and should be factored in from the very beginning and incorporated within S4Y 1 and 2. Addressing local contexts (S4Y 3), engaging local actors and ensuring alignment with broader, national goals are key elements to get right from the beginning.

Use the following guiding questions to shape youth initiatives that will:

1. *serve more than the first cohorts of participants;*
2. *contribute to national youth, and development goals and,*
3. *provide lessons for continuity and expansion from the original area of focus.*



Keep the first three Standards in mind when referring to the S4Y 4 questions.

S4Y 4a.

How will local capacity be strengthened to ensure continuity when external implementing partners leave?

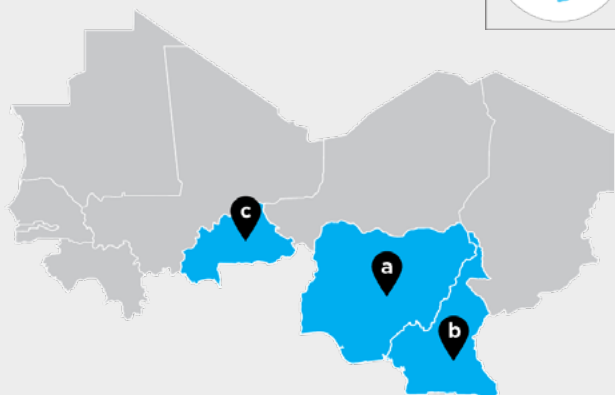
- ✓ How will local actors (government, youth networks, CSOs, private sector, actors in the informal economy, national development partners, etc.) be engaged and equipped to ensure continuity?
- ✓ Which local actors are the best suited and have relevant responsibilities around youth development to be engaged in the initiative?
 - How will external partners complement local actors?
- ✓ To what national or local goals will the initiative contribute?
- ✓ Is the initiative time-bound? How does the timeline of the initiative coincide with timelines of local development or action plans related to youth empowerment?

S4Y 4b.

What will happen after the initial phases of implementation?

- ✓ Is there a viable M&E system in place to assess the initiative's impact and make needed adjustments in subsequent implementation cycles?
- ✓ How will the initiative generate learning to ensure adaptability to meet evolving needs or changing contexts?
- ✓ How will participating youth be engaged in subsequent phases of the initiative?

Want to see how others have addressed this Standard? Check out the initiatives below, included in the review of the 72 initiatives included in the mapping report.



Click the links to learn more

a **Burkina Faso**
[Job Booster](#)

b **Cameroon**
[Osez Innover](#)

c **Nigeria**
[Youth Employment in Agriculture](#)

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What the mapping revealed about Standard 4

Of the 72 assessed initiatives, the mapping found that few called for involvement by local actors. Those that engaged with municipalities appeared to be better placed to ensure sustainable impact. Most lacked a component aimed at building local capacity and most of the M&E systems in use were rudimentary, often limited to counting the number of participants that found a job or started a business. While most did not seek to ensure sustainable financing or continuity when the initiative was complete, some mentioned the need for programme flexibility to adapt to changing needs or contexts. Others mentioned learning as part of their strategy for improving programmes. Some of the ways that reviewed initiatives attempted to ensure sustainability are listed below.

Some initiatives engaged with governments to influence national youth and employment policies or to raise awareness within public institutions about young people's needs and aspirations.

Involving municipalities was seen by some as a powerful way to build community ownership. Local institutions can leverage their understanding of communities to identify and prioritize problems and propose contextually relevant solutions tailored to young people's needs and local realities.

With respect to financial sustainability, the mapping noted the presence of

three funding models:



External funding
(complete reliance)



Hybrid funding
(own funds plus some donor or governmental funding)



Secured funding
(either from the government or an external source)



While initiatives were not assessed based on their financial sustainability, it can be assumed that the **latter two models were more likely to ensure continuity.**

Section II

Lessons learned for employability and entrepreneurship initiatives

Further to the lessons learned throughout the four S4Y, the mapping identified several successful strategies used by initiatives on youth employability and entrepreneurship. Consider building on these practices and adapting them for use in other areas.

Conduct a preliminary mapping of local businesses and other potential employers.

- ✓ Create linkages and partnerships between TVET institutions and commercial enterprises (either for internships or job placement).
- ✓ Provide employability training to equip youth with communication skills needed to successfully promote themselves with potential employers.
- ✓ Facilitate access to financial capital for youth seeking to become entrepreneurs.
- ✓ Create and mentor networks of young entrepreneurs during the process of starting a business.
- ✓ Provide post-creation support and coaching to support sustainability.
- ✓ Apply gender analysis when designing and implementing initiatives to ensure that all barriers for equitable access to opportunities are removed.



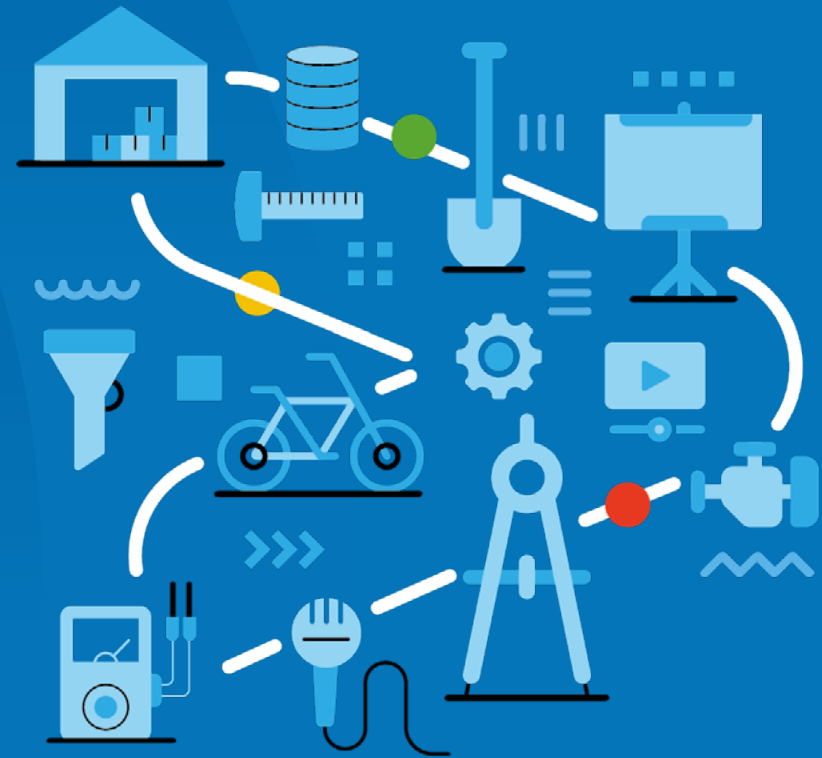
Section III

How to use this Guidance Note?

Having reviewed these four Standards for Youth, the next step is to use them in efforts to ensure that youth initiatives are designed and carried out to achieve their intended impact. As noted earlier, the S4Y constitute basic building blocks that appear to have been ignored by many initiatives.

Let UNDP and UNICEF know if the Standards for Youth have been helpful!

The Standards will be updated as part of the two agencies' ongoing engagement with young people and technical/financial partners working with youth in West and Central Africa. Feedback on how the S4Y have been applied and/or adapted is welcome and will contribute to updated versions and tools to improve our collective work with and for young people.





For youth networks...

Use these Standards to guide your engagement with technical and financial partners.

- ✓ Tailor the Standards to your context by adding additional questions, key population groups and/or topics, as needed.
- ✓ Work with partners to unpack local solutions for each of the Standards and guiding questions.



For those working in an institution or organization that runs youth-led initiatives...

Use the S4Y as a checklist starting in the design through to the evaluation phase. If an M&E framework is not incorporated in the initiative, **refer to S4Y 4!**

- ✓ Be purposeful about ensuring that these basic building blocks are in place, and don't forget to monitor progress and have regular check-ins with both youth participants and those who are part of the overall management of the initiative.
- ✓ Add standards that may be core to your organization/institution to ensure transparency when engaging youth and other partners. Promote youth-led approaches in the communication strategy, including their involvement in content development and dissemination.



For those working in an agency or organization that funds youth initiatives...

Apply the Standards during the strategic planning process.

- ✓ Embed the S4Y in partnership agreements, financial allocation decisions and spot-checks.
- ✓ Promote the S4Y among peers to support results that are truly with and for young people.
- ✓ If the funding process is already underway, include the S4Y in a mid- or end-of-initiative reviews to enhance subsequent cycles.
- ✓ Use the S4Y to strengthen the capacity of initiative implementers and other partners.
- ✓ Promote youth-led approaches in communication strategies, including their involvement in content development and dissemination.

Annex A

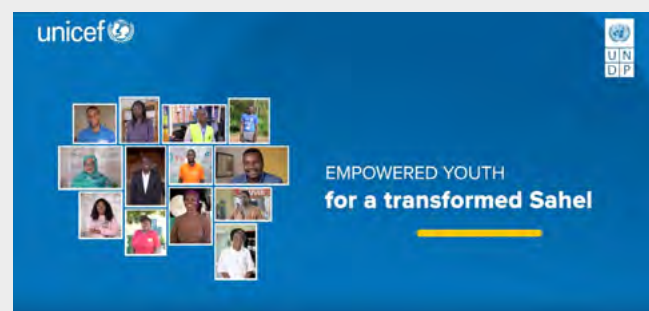
Flagship Youth Initiative Mapping Overview

In 2021, UNICEF's Regional Office for West and Central Africa and UNDP's Regional Service Centre for Africa developed a flagship initiative entitled 'Enhancing Youth Entrepreneurship for Productive Transitions'. Built upon two pillars – entrepreneurship and employability. The initiative sought to support the seamless transition of young people in 10 Sahelian countries into an economically viable adulthood.

A mapping of youth initiatives and programmes promoting youth socio-economic empowerment was conducted across 10 countries: Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, The Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal. Seventy-two initiatives were assessed across the 10 countries using key indicators identified to promote the socio-economic empowerment of young people. These indicators served as the basis for the development of the Standards presented in this Guidance Note.

The project was carried out in three phases:

- 1. Inception:** A rapid landscape analysis of programmes and initiatives focused on youth socio-economic empowerment across the 10 countries led to the identification of 165 initiatives. The preliminary mapping and literature review provided contextual information on the region's socio-political, economic and cultural context and informed the development of indicators to facilitate classifying the initiatives.
- 2. Data collection:** The original list was reduced to 72 viable initiatives based on available, on-line information. Data was then collected, including interviews with UNICEF and UNDP officials, 10 youth representatives (one per country), and government officials in two countries. An on-line survey was shared with initiative implementers and partners to highlight internal capacity issues.
- 3. Analysis and reporting:** Data was triangulated from the desk review, key informant interviews, and the online survey to map initiatives and finalize indicators.



An additional output of the collaboration was a video series produced to amplify youth voices around employability and entrepreneurship across the Sahel.

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