

EVALUATION BRIEFS

IN-DEPTH EVALUATION

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT FOR IMPACT: STRENGTHENING RESILIENCE AMONG YOUTH IN THE MENA REGION AGAINST CRIME, VIOLENCE AND DRUGS ("YOUTH4IMPACT")

Region: Middle East and North Africa.

Duration: The project, initially spanning 26 months from November 2021 to December 2023, was extended by nine months to September 2024.

Donors: The German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ),

Evaluation team: lead evaluator (Nina Retzlaff), substantive evaluation expert (Nadia Saad), young emerging evaluator (Meray Maddah)

Full report URL:

https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/evaluation/reports_year_2024.html

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Youth in the MENA region face heightened vulnerability to drugs, crime, and violence due to political instability, weak governance, corruption, and socio-economic challenges. High youth unemployment, poor education access, and limited social participation drive risky behaviours, worsened by COVID-19 and global economic instability. The region is a hub for drug trafficking and affected by conflicts, environmental challenges, gender inequality, and terrorism that further exacerbate youth struggles.

The Y4I project was UNODC's first initiative to implement its 2021 youth strategy. Running from November 2021 to September 2024 with EUR 3 million funding, it operated in six countries (Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, and Sudan) through ROMENA and UNODC headquarters. Y4I aimed to enhance legal frameworks, strengthen sectoral responses, and empower youth against crime, violence, and drug use.

MAIN FINDINGS

Y4I was highly relevant, addressing country contexts and stakeholder needs in a results-oriented way. Minimal youth consultation and some misalignment with specific national priorities were noted, but the project effectively targeted building youth resilience against drugs, crime, and violence. Efficiency was challenged by budget constraints, inflation, administrative inefficiencies, and staffing shortages, leading to delays in procurement and implementation. Despite this, the team applied cost-effective measures, completing most planned activities and achieving strong coherence by aligning with UNODC strategies and international frameworks through a multi-sector approach. Effectiveness was marked by significant achievements, particularly regarding institutional capacity building and providing youth's access to prevention programmes. However, monitoring limitations hindered a full quantitative analysis of beneficiaries. Sustainability is at risk due to discontinuation of donor funding, with institutional capacity-building ensuring some continuity, albeit uneven across countries. Gender equality and human rights were emphasized, but disability inclusion and gender-transformative approaches were limited. Overall, the project showed potential for long-term impact but requires sustained resources, operational guidance, and



Photo: "Youth Participant under Youth4Impact"

Source: UNODC Project Team

systematic evidence generation to address remaining gaps and ensure quality standards.

LESSONS LEARNED

Regional strategies for preventing drugs, crime, and violence must address shared needs while considering MENA's cultural diversity. Participatory needs assessments and co-design processes enhance project relevance and effectiveness, leveraging UNODC's expertise. However, slow policy processes often exceed two-year timelines, requiring consistent engagement with decision-makers. Youth-focused projects need specialized staff to engage with young people effectively, alongside safeguards to mitigate risks for youth involved in prevention initiatives. Capacity building is vital to empower youth to participate meaningfully in policymaking and ensure their voices are heard. Youth-led initiatives demand extra staff support and resource planning for successful implementation. Adequate resources and extended grassroots project timelines supported by local entities are essential for sustainability. Proactive risk management helps tackle challenges arising in the MENA region.

GOOD PRACTICES

Y4I collaborated with non-traditional partners, enhancing outreach to target communities. Youth were engaged as role models and agents of change, and a training-of-trainers approach built national partners' capacity to sustain learning beyond the project. Innovative strategies included establishing a regional youth network and launching the Participate4Impact campaign to support youth-led grassroots initiatives. In Lebanon, Y4I used co-creation with youth to develop materials reflecting their experiences, increasing relevance. Y4I continuously advocated for prevention approaches and meaningful youth participation. National-level steering committees with key sectoral partners effectively kept stakeholders informed and engaged throughout implementation, ensuring broader alignment and sustained impact.

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation assessed relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness, impact, sustainability, human rights, gender, and leaving no one behind, using an evaluation matrix with structured questions, indicators, and data sources. Mixed methods, with a focus on qualitative data, adhered to UN standards and included gender-sensitive and inclusive practices. Youth participation was fostered through a youth evaluation reference group and involvement in data



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collection. Data collection comprised desk review of 90+ documents, 76 key informant interviews, 17 focus group discussions. Of the 198 stakeholders consulted, 38% (76) were male and 62% (122) female. An online survey with 171 responses (34% response rate) complemented qualitative data collection. Triangulation validated the findings, which were refined through a participatory workshop to finalize recommendations and lessons for future initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 – OPERATIONAL GUIDANCE AND SAFEGUARDS: UNODC ROMENA should collaborate with HQ and the Youth Advisor to create operational guidance for youth-focused work and developing safeguarding measures.

2 – TAILORED APPROACHES: Conduct needs assessments with counterparts and youth leaders to tailor approaches and further adapt programmes to local contexts.

3 – LOGICAL FRAMEWORK: Refine the project's logical framework for a next phase with SMART indicators, clear definitions, baselines, and realistic targets, and ensuring measurable results.

4 – MONITORING SYSTEM: Develop a robust monitoring system with dedicated staff and tools to track programme effects.

5 – EVIDENCE GENERATION: Prioritize evidence generation to support statistics, assessments, and gender-inclusive analysis.

6 – COUNTRY OFFICE CAPACITIES: Strengthen project team capacities through internal assessments of country office resources and ensure adequate support for youth-focused initiatives.

7 – PARTNERSHIPS: Diversify partnerships by engaging non-traditional actors and fostering synergies with other UN initiatives and programmes.

RECOMMENDATION 8 – GENDER AND INCLUSION: Adopt a gender-transformative strategy, improve disability inclusion, and integrate a gender and inclusion specialist in future.

RECOMMENDATION 9 – SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY: Develop a sustainability strategy emphasizing trainer development, youth network support, and exit planning.