

Rapid Evidence Assessment of Youth Engagement in the United Nations Secretariat

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IED-2025-024



INSPECTION AND EVALUATION DIVISION

Function *“The Office shall evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the implementation of the programmes and legislative mandates of the Organization. It shall conduct programme evaluations with the purpose of establishing analytical and critical evaluations of the implementation of programmes and legislative mandates, examining whether changes therein require review of the methods of delivery, the continued relevance of administrative procedures and whether the activities correspond to the mandates as they may be reflected in the approved budgets and the medium-term plan of the Organization;”* ([General Assembly Resolution 48/218 B](#)).

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Contents

I. Introduction and objective	4
II. Methodology.....	4
III. Results of evidence mapping	6
IV. Challenges with obtaining evidence on youth engagement.....	9
V. Benchmarking	11
VI. Annex 1: Structured Assessment Tool and Instructions for Numerators	13

I. Introduction and objective

1. The Office of Internal Oversight Services, Inspection and Evaluation Division (OIOS-IED) conducted a rapid evidence assessment (REA) to systematically collect, catalogue and assess existing monitoring and evaluation evidence on youth engagement in the United Nations Secretariat.
2. The REA has four internal and external objectives to:
 - a. develop a structured protocol that documents the typology and quality of existing evidence on youth engagement in the Secretariat, which can be replicated by future rapid assessments across different cross-cutting topics of strategic relevance;
 - b. highlight possible areas for further assessment of youth engagement and inform the scope and design of the planned OIOS-IED evaluations, as well as possible self-evaluations;
 - c. inform the evaluability of youth engagement across different thematic pillars by assessing the availability, quality and relevance of existing evidence, and identifying key evidence gaps and areas requiring additional data collection;
 - d. serve as an informational and advocacy resource for the United Nations Youth Office and the Secretariat entities with a mandate on youth engagement by highlighting priority areas for strengthening data systems and evidence quality, thereby supporting improved programming on youth engagement.

II. Methodology

Scope

3. The REA focused on youth engagement (which includes youth inclusion, participation, and involvement) across United Nations Secretariat entities. Out of 60 United Nations entities that reported on the Youth Scorecard¹ during its first phase between 2018- 2024, 18 Secretariat entities were selected for this assessment based on having relevant policies, normative and/or programmatic activities for advancing youth engagement. The 18 entities were grouped into the four United Nations pillars, as seen in Table 1 below.

Development pillar	1. United Nations Youth Office (UNYO) ²
	2. Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) (Youth Unit)
	3. Development Coordination Office (DCO)
	4. Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)
	5. Economic Commission for Europe (ECE)
	6. Economic and Social Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)
	7. Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)

¹ A system-wide accountability framework developed to measure progress and strengthen accountability in how the United Nations supports and engages with young people.

² UNYO's mandate, as established by General Assembly resolution 76/306 (2022) and subsequent Security Council resolutions, spans all three UN pillars - Peace and Security, Sustainable Development, and Human Rights. Its system-wide coordination role, including on Youth, Peace and Security, extends beyond the Development pillar alone.

Table 1. United Nation Secretariat entities included in the REA

	8. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)
	9. United Nations Trade and Development (UNCTAD)
	10. United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
	11. United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)
	12. Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries (OHRLLS)
Peace and Security pillar	13. Department of Peace Operations (DPO)
	14. Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA)
	15. Office of Disarmament Affairs (ODA)
Human Rights pillar	16. Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
	17. Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children (SRSG-VAC)
Humanitarian pillar	18. Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

Methods

- The assessment was based on a desk review of available data sources published between 2020-2025³ as shown in Table 2 below. It also incorporated interviews with a non-random sample of staff from 8 of the above-mentioned 18 entities, who were purposefully selected based on their specific involvement in youth-related programmes or projects.
- Table 2 below groups the different data sources reviewed across the main pillars of the United Nations.

Table 2. Distribution of data sources per pillar

Pillars	Programme Plans	Monitoring and evaluation databases	Internal/self evaluations	OIOS evaluations	Total
Development	89	49	3	0	141
Peace and Security	18	8	22	1	49
Human Rights	12	22	1	0	35
Humanitarian	6	0	0	0	6
Grand Total	125	79	26	1	231

Analysis

- A structured assessment protocol was developed to manually scan and classify the identified evidence into categories reflecting the breadth, depth and quality of available evidence on youth engagement in the Secretariat. *Annex 1* provides a description of this protocol, including the definitions and examples used.

³ A few exceptions were made. Documentary evidence published as far as 2015 were included in the study if directly shared by the entity itself, and if the document, albeit time lag, contained valuable information.

7. Subsequently, and to test whether a rapid assessment could be automated, a CoPilot Agent (an Artificial Intelligence (AI) tool) was configured with detailed prompts. This also helped to assess the level of accuracy of the analysis.
8. Additionally, a benchmarking exercise was conducted to map the evidence on youth engagement against other monitoring and accountability frameworks used for cross-cutting issues such as gender and disability inclusion.

Limitations

9. This assessment is based on a non-random sample, and as such, the results of the assessment may not be generalized to reflect the full extent and quality of evidence on youth engagement across the entire Secretariat. In addition, the Microsoft Forms that were used to collect information from the entities limited the number of files uploaded by the entities to 10.

III. Results of evidence mapping

10. Results on the following three components of evidence are presented below and further defined in Annex 1:⁴

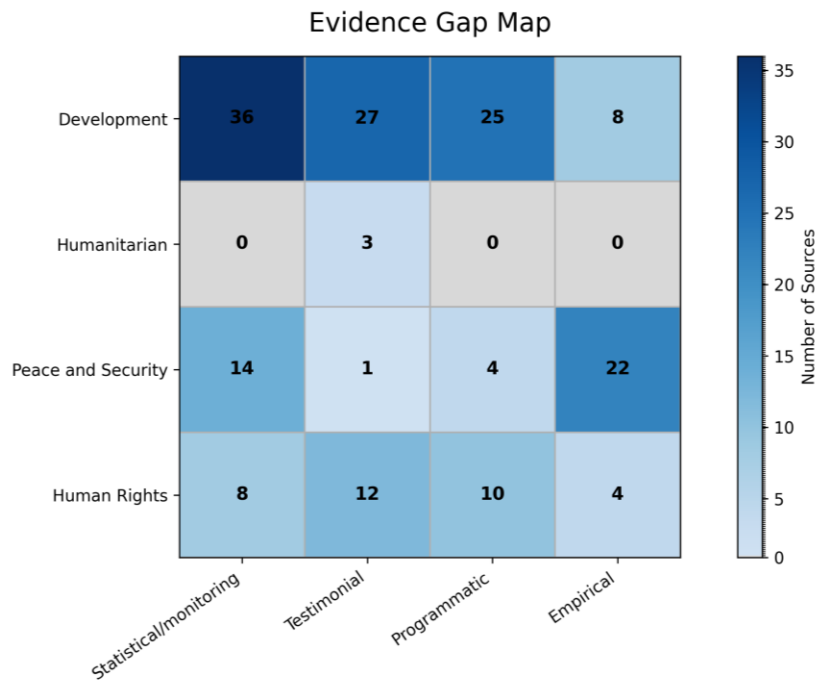
- **Type** of evidence: empirical, statistical/monitoring, programmatic, testimonial or no evidence;
- **Disaggregation** category of evidence: gender, disability, socio-economic status, age group, geography and marginalization status; and
- **Quality** of evidence: low, medium or high.

11. Results are presented using an evidence gap map that illustrates the distribution of the three components of evidence above across the four United Nations pillars. The map is structured as a matrix, where rows represent the pillars and columns represent the components of evidence identified above. Each cell displays the number of sources of evidence identified for a particular component (type, disaggregation or quality) under the corresponding pillar. Darker blue shading indicates a higher number of evidence sources, while lighter blue indicates fewer sources. Grey cells indicate no evidence. The color bar on the right shows the number of sources associated with each shading level.

⁴ All figures were created by the Artificial Intelligence. All data was initially entered and processed by the team. Evidence gap maps were created using OpenAI (GPT-5). The final images were reviewed and modified by the team.

Result 1: There were significant evidence gaps with very limited empirical evidence on youth engagement.

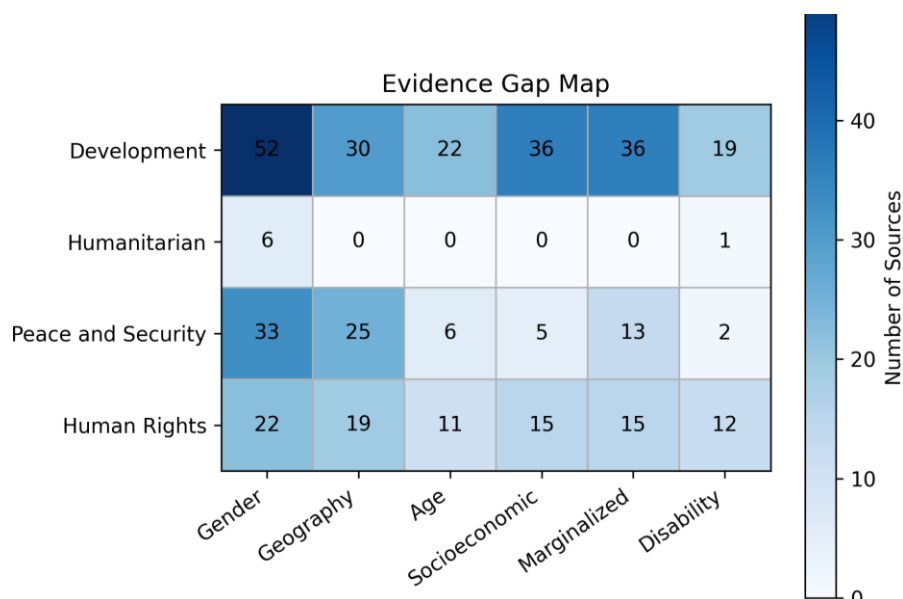
Figure 1. Evidence Gap Map by TYPE of evidence



12. Significant evidence gaps were observed across all data sources and entities. There was little if any empirical performance evidence of youth engagement across the four pillars. Many data sources referred to mandates, planned activities, or conceptual commitments, but lacked concrete evidence of implementation of youth engagement activities or contributions to outcomes. Beyond the numbers reflected in Figure 1, a number of sources reviewed did not contain any of the defined evidence types. This was most common in the Development pillar, with 45 sources, followed by Peace and Security with 8 sources, Humanitarian with 3 sources, and Human Rights with 1 source. Overall, there were very few evaluations conducted specifically on youth engagement, and most of these were from Peacebuilding Fund projects. Evaluation evidence was more concentrated when it was collected for a specific youth-related mandate, such as Youth, Peace and Security. Where evaluations existed, they were mostly donor-driven, ad-hoc, and limited in scope. Half of the data sources either made no specific references to youth or youth engagement or contained only basic statistical or monitoring data (such as youth participation statistics or demographics).

Result 2: Existing data on youth engagement was predominantly disaggregated by gender, with limited disaggregation across other cross-cutting dimensions.

Figure 2. Evidence Gap Map by DISAGGREGATION category ⁵

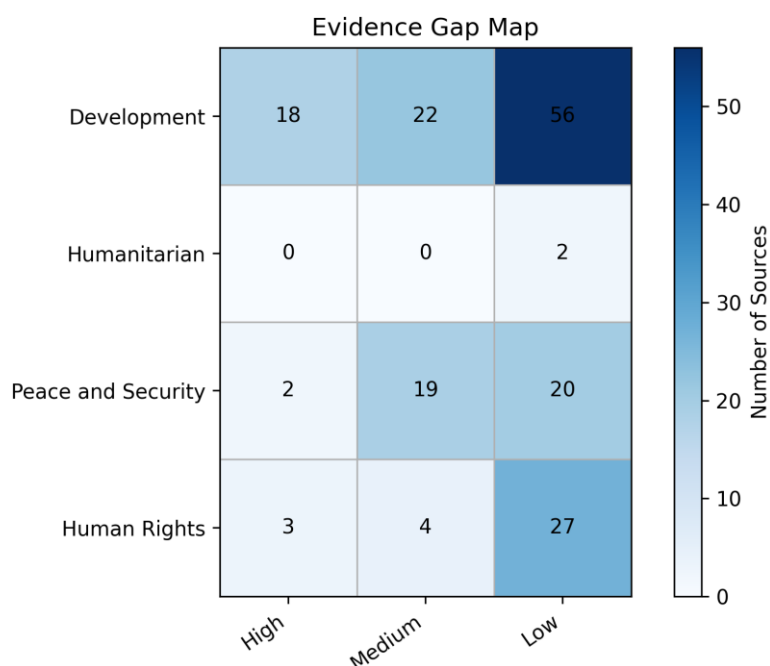


13. Where evidence on youth engagement existed, it was most commonly disaggregated by gender. Disaggregation by disability status, marginalization status (such as ethnicity, religion, refugee or migrant background) and socioeconomic status was lacking. Youth engagement was often addressed indirectly through gender-related initiatives (such as the empowerment of women and girls), but with few explicit indicators or results specific to youth.
14. Very little evidence was available to examine young people’s experiences through an *intersectional* lens – that is, how additional vulnerabilities (such as gender, disability, rural location, indigenous identity, or displacement) can overlap with youth and thus create further disadvantages for those respective populations. Only a small number of documents showed how these factors can interact and compound one another such.

⁵ Each cell displays the number of sources in which evidence was disaggregated according to the respective category.

Result 3: Most existing evidence was of low quality.

Figure 3. Evidence Gap Map by QUALITY ⁶



15. The majority of the existing evidence on youth engagement was of low quality. The quality of evidence varied by the type of document providing the evidence. Policy briefs and programme plans were mostly theoretical and often lacking more in-depth evidence on outcomes and performance. Organizational flagship reports, such as the World Youth Report, provided detailed secondary data and narrative, but were not performance-focused, leaving a gap between planned activities and measurable results. Entity self/internal evaluations were infrequent and most likely to be descriptive, focused more on outputs than outcomes.

16. Within the development pillar, the regional economic commissions provided high quality data on youth engagement. ESCAP provided detailed and meaningful descriptive data on youth unemployment and financial inclusion, while ECA performance on youth engagement was relatively well-documented with some impact surveys. ECLAC had strong statistical infrastructure on youth-related indicators and comprehensive youth-focused publications but had limited triangulation of their statistical/monitoring data with other data sources or methods to assess their own performance on youth engagement.

IV. Challenges with obtaining evidence on youth engagement

17. Representatives from the eight (8) Secretariat entities interviewed agreed that the Secretariat was not sufficiently capacitated to generate coherent, comparable and meaningful data on youth engagement. They attributed this to several factors presented in Table 3 below.

⁶ Each cell shows the number of sources falling within the corresponding quality category for that pillar.

Table 3. Challenges with obtaining evidence on youth engagement

Challenge	Description
Lack of a common definition of youth engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth engagement lacked a formal definition and was referenced through general participation mentions rather than structured activities or measurable indicators. Entities used different age ranges for youth (15–24, 15–29, and 18–35), creating difficulties in comparing data across entities aggregating data across the Secretariat.
Lack of prioritization of youth engagement at the entity level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth was not a priority for some entities, resulting in limited data on youth engagement. Evidence on youth engagement was fragmented and collected on an ad hoc basis, with relevant data scattered across separate projects, spreadsheets, surveys, or local files. Monitoring focused primarily on counting the presence of youth in activities, without assessing the impact of those activities on youth or their contributions to the activities. There was no systematic tracking of how youth influenced decisions, whether their contributions were integrated into programmes, or how youth benefited from their engagement.
Lack of dedicated resources or attention to manage youth data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dedicated resources and attention for managing youth data were lacking, with budget cuts and short-term funding further limiting the possibility of collecting longitudinal data. In some entities, the entire youth portfolio — including data collection — depended on a single individual, either personally motivated to advance the agenda or formally designated as a focal point.
Difficulties working with youth organizations	Challenges existed in working with youth organizations that held relevant data, as these voluntary networks often struggled with reporting requirements and meeting deadlines.
Issues with coordination mechanisms for youth engagement	UNYO indicated that existing inter-agency and intra-Secretariat coordination mechanisms for youth engagement may contain structural redundancies and unclear accountabilities, which they viewed as contributing to fragmentation and challenges in generating coherent youth-related evidence.

18. Despite these challenges, a **few best evidence practices emerged**. ODA’s Youth4Disarmament initiative provided some of the most robust evidence of youth engagement, including measurable outputs (i.e., e-learning courses, youth champions, participation metrics). Similarly, UNEP’s Tide Turners Plastic Challenge – a programme to build young people’s capacities, awareness and engagement to tackle plastic pollution – exceeded youth engagement targets and collected detailed disaggregation (gender, disability, rural/indigenous youth) and inclusivity metrics.

V. Benchmarking

19. The Youth Scorecard, which is managed by UNYO, created a new accountability framework for the Secretariat in monitoring and reporting on how well or not the Secretariat engages youth in its programmes. A comparison of the Youth Scorecard to other two structured reporting and system-wide accountability frameworks in the United Nations- the United Nations system-wide accountability framework for gender quality and women empowerment (UNSWAP) and the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS) - identified some commonalities and gaps in the Youth Scorecard. Table 4 below summarizes the main features of these three frameworks.

Features	UN-SWAP	UNDIS	Youth Scorecard
Launch	2012	2019	2023
Performance measures	17 performance indicators on organizational structure, process, and impact	15 performance indicators on organizational system and programmatic inclusion	18 performance indicators focusing primarily on institutionalization and participation mechanisms
Institutional level of reporting	Headquarters, regional and country level reporting for all entities across the United Nations system.	Entity and country level reporting for all entities across the United Nations system.	Entity level reporting for 60 entities so far across the United Nations system. ⁷
Focal Points	Established entity-level gender focal point system	Established entity-level disability inclusion focal point system	Designated entity-level youth focal points (where applicable)
Periodicity	Annual	Annual	Annual
Guidance	Comprehensive technical guidance note and UN-Women help desk support	Technical guidance notes for each indicator and implementation support materials	Publicly available online guidance note and performance dashboard

20. As shown above in Table 4, the Youth 2030 Scorecard is the newest framework which – with the first phase completed in 2018-2024 – is aimed at standardizing youth engagement reporting across United Nations entities. Compared to other frameworks, however, the Scorecard has a comparatively limited institutional framework; most entities lack dedicated youth focal points, budget, or staffing. The UNYO noted that the Youth Scorecard represents the first system-wide accountability framework dedicated to youth engagement and was developed under relatively limited resources, as opposed to longer-standing frameworks for gender and disability inclusion.

21. Participation in the Scorecard reporting is voluntary and there was no established benchmark for what constituted adequate participation at this early stage. Participation also did not imply systematic or complete reporting. For example, at the end of this first phase, 60 United Nations

⁷ There are two Youth2030 scorecards: one for UN Country Teams and one for UN Entities. <https://www.un.org/youthaffairs/en/youth2030/scorecards>.

entities and 132 United Nations Country Teams were participating in the implementation of the Youth2030 Strategy and the Youth Scorecard. In the 2023 reporting cycle, only 40 entities submitted information that could be aggregated and presented.

22. In addition, the Youth Scorecard is predominantly focused on tracking processes rather than measuring outcomes, which limits its ability to assess progress towards concrete results. In this regard, the UNYO indicated that the Scorecard is – intentionally – an early, process-oriented phase intended to establish a system-wide baseline and reporting standard; as such, it does not aim to assess programmatic implementation or outcomes at this stage.
23. Representatives from several entities interviewed identified these additional limitations to the Scorecard:
 - Many entities did not have relevant data on the Scorecard indicators;
 - Some indicators were marked “does not apply,” often because entities considered them irrelevant to their specific work programmes;
 - Certain indicators were interpreted differently across entities, leading to inconsistencies in reporting;
 - Overall data quality varied due to reliance on self-reporting.
24. The UNYO stated that the Scorecard was undergoing iterative refinement, including work on guidance and indicator clarity, and therefore viewed some of the identified limitations in this report as part of an expected early developmental phase.

VI. Annex 1: Structured Assessment Tool and Instructions for Numerators

Pillar	Entity	Data sources	Year	Type of evidence	Periodicity	Disaggregated by type of youth	Evidence quality	Definition of youth engagement (copy/paste)	Remarks
Human Rights	OHCR			Drop down list: Observational; statistical; programmatic etc. (see the explanation below)	Drop down list: Ad hoc; annual; biennial; continuous	Drop down list: Gender Disability Geography Socio-Economic Marginalization status Age group	Drop down list: Low Medium High	Qualitative	Qualitative
Etc.	Etc.								

For each source: Read at least the title, executive summary, or introduction, and any sections on youth, participation, engagement, inclusion, rights, civic action, or programme results. To find relevant sections in each report, use the "Find" function and insert "young, youth, young people, future generations" (English) or "jeunes, jeunesse, jeunes filles, participation des jeunes, adolescents" (French).

- Highlight the extracts/segments you have identified for ease of reference and cross-validation later if needed.
- Copy/paste any explicit definition of youth engagement only if it appears in the document or file. Add remarks if something is unclear, incomplete, or notable.
- Refrain from making inferences and focus on only what is written or documented.
- Do not leave any columns blank.

Key/definitions:

All drop-down lists and categories are provided. Select the appropriate pillar, entity and year of the publication or (if not available) period the document/file covers.

- 1. Type of Evidence:** As this is the most important entry that will lead to the construction of an evidence gap map, please use the following definitions to the best of your ability:

Type of evidence	Description
Empirical Evidence	Evidence obtained through direct observation or primary research, e.g. surveys, interviews, focus groups, case studies, or other field studies.

Type of evidence	Description
Statistical/Monitoring Evidence	Quantitative data from routine monitoring or records (e.g. participation counts, demographic stats, survey datasets, trend data).
Documentary Evidence	Written documentation of policies, plans, strategies or program records that provide evidence of youth engagement (or intentions toward it).
Testimonial Evidence	First-hand accounts, narratives or opinions from individuals (e.g. stakeholder testimonies (interviews), personal stories, informal observations).
No Evidence / Not Supported	No concrete evidence provided (the document only offers general discussion or mentions of youth without data).

- When a document contains multiple forms of evidence about youth (e.g., anecdotal comments, stakeholder observations, administrative/budget records, survey data, evaluation findings), you must use the strongest/most rigorous evidence available to code the youth-related fields.
- 2. Periodicity:** Select the frequency with which the data or evidence is produced. Ad-hoc is one-off. Annual is once every year. Biennial is once every two years. Continuous is ongoing data collection or monitoring. If you are unclear, choose ad-hoc.

3. Disaggregation:

- Check whether youth data/evidence is provided.
- Identify whether it is disaggregated into any category, using the examples below. If numbers are missing, look for any narrative, descriptive, or observational evidence related to youth, such as: Statements from government, UN agencies, or community leaders; policy acknowledgments of youth vulnerabilities or barriers; findings from interviews, focus groups, or consultations; descriptions of disadvantages experienced by specific youth groups (e.g., girls, rural youth, youth with disabilities).
- Note any intersectional disaggregation (e.g., rural Indigenous girls, youth with disabilities by gender). This is high-quality.
- If no youth data appears, mark “0” for the field.

Category of disaggregation	Examples
Gender	Youth indicators broken down by female and male. Example: Upper-secondary completion among youth (15–24): Female: 78% and Male: 71%. OR “Several key informants noted that young girls are more likely to drop out of secondary school.”
Geography:	Youth data categorized by specific regions, states, countries or subnational locations. Example (internet access): Youth with internet access, by Africa region: 38% and Europe: 86%. OR “Youth in remote mountainous regions reportedly face significant barriers to reaching secondary schools due to long travel distance.”

Category of disaggregation	Examples
Age-Group	Standard UN adolescent/youth groupings such as 10–14, 15–19, 20–24, 25–29. Youth not in education, employment, or training (NEET): Ages 15–19: 13% and Ages 20–24: 29%. OR “Service providers indicated that younger adolescents (10–14) are particularly underserved in mental health services.”
Socio-Economic Status	Data broken down by poverty status, wealth quintile, or income group. Example: Youth with internet access, by wealth quintile: Poorest 20%: 22%; Richest 20%: 92%. OR “Young people from poorer households are described by community organizations as being ‘systematically disadvantaged.’”
Marginalization Status	Youth data broken down by relevant inclusion groups such as indigenous, rural/urban, refugee/asylum-seeking, or other context-specific categories. School enrolment among youth (15–24): Refugee youth: 32% and Host-community youth: 78%. OR “Indigenous youth are consistently reported by local leaders to have fewer opportunities for vocational training.”
Disability Status	Youth data comparing persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities; sometimes specifying type of disability. Youth employment rate (15–29): With disabilities: 28%; Without disabilities: 56%. OR “The government acknowledged that youth with disabilities face significant obstacles to formal employment.”

4. Evidence quality: Use these simple rules:

- High quality: Evidence is well-documented with a description of the methodology employed and the sample used.
- Medium quality: Some evidence is present, but it seems incomplete with unclear methodology.
- Low Quality: Limited evidence, very unclear methods and mostly anecdotal evidence or opinion-based statement.