

# REFLECTIONS

## LESSONS FROM EVALUATIONS: UNDP SUPPORT TO YOUTH SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT

### INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a bold commitment to end poverty in all forms and dimensions by 2030. As a central actor in the United Nations Development System, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is playing an important role in helping people to get out and stay out of poverty.

To support the UNDP response to keeping people out of poverty, the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) has undertaken a review of lessons from past evaluations of UNDP's work. The purpose is to provide evidence-based advice to UNDP country offices on a few pertinent areas of UNDP work with regard to poverty eradication, focusing particularly on the needs of the most vulnerable.

This paper focuses on lessons from UNDP's past support to youth skills development for employment, including self-employment.

### METHODOLOGY

This is a rapid evidence assessment<sup>1</sup>, designed to provide a balanced synthesis of evaluative evidence posted to the UNDP [Evaluation Resource Centre](#) over the past decade. Country-level and thematic evaluations conducted by the IEO were an important source, given their independence and high credibility. Additionally, high-quality decentralized evaluations commissioned by country offices were considered. Within each review, the emphasis was on identifying consistent findings, conclusions and recommendations that capture relevant lessons for UNDP. The analysis seeks to offer practical and timely insights to support effective UNDP decision making. It is not a comprehensive study of the general and scientific literature.

The lessons draw broadly on 39 independent country programme evaluations and 72 decentralized evaluations of youth skills development, employment and entrepreneurship uploaded in the ERC, regardless of setting. Lessons from UNDP's

efforts to promote youth empowerment in other areas, such as political participation, peacebuilding and prevention of violent extremism, are not included, as this paper is part of the Reflections series focusing on the UNDP signature solution for keeping people out of poverty.

## CONTEXT

Youth unemployment is one of the most significant challenges our societies face today. The number of young people not in education, employment and training (NEET) continues to grow. COVID-19 lockdown measures have caused the closure of educational and vocational training facilities world-wide, affecting young people's access to education and skills development. The United Nations [Youth 2030 Strategy](#) (2018) requests engaging Member States and other partners to advocate for a balanced approach to stimulate the youth labour demand and prompt improvements in skills development systems, with the objective of easing the school-to-work transition and reducing the youth NEET rate.

UNDP promotes youth-focused and youth-led development and advances youth economic development. It is a partner of [Decent Jobs for Youth](#), a global initiative to scale up action and impact on youth employment. UNDP skills development for youth employment efforts range from strengthening Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)<sup>2</sup> systems, to building institutional capacity of public employment services to deliver skills development interventions. UNDP's skills development interventions are often part of larger youth employment or entrepreneurship programmes, which include enhancing the enabling environment for youth employment and entrepreneurship through support to policy development and access to financing.

## AT A GLANCE – LESSONS LEARNED

1	Effective youth skills development programmes use a combination of interventions to equip youth with different types of skills necessary for accessing the world of work.	2	Youth from disadvantaged groups require targeted interventions to address their skills needs and improve their integration in the labour market.	3	Policy reform, institutional strengthening and trainer networks help TVET systems effectively transfer skills to youth.
4	Engagement of employers and connection to market demands are key success factors for youth skills development programming.	5	Supporting the national and local-level government in implementing active labour market policies and measures is key to achieving and sustaining youth skills development outcome.	6	Partnership with other UN agencies can strengthen technical inputs to youth skills development programmes but requires close coordination around targeted value chain development.
7	Entrepreneurship is not a silver bullet for youth unemployment. It can contribute to filling the skills gap, but youth start-ups require long-term support and continuous financing to mature and scale up.	8	Monitoring and evaluation of youth skills development initiatives need systematic frameworks and follow-up activities to assess results beyond outreach.		

## LESSONS LEARNED

### **1** Effective youth skills development programmes use a combination of interventions to equip youth with different types of skills necessary for accessing the world of work.

In the world of work, different types of skills are at play: technical skills, employability skills<sup>3</sup> (or so-called soft skills), and job search skills. ‘Soft’ skills, such as communication skills and overall professional ethics, are often highlighted as a major missing link to youth employment. Interventions such as on-the-job training, mentoring and counselling complement classroom training to develop these skills. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, UNDP’s support to the establishment of local Youth Employment and Information Centres and their delivery of training on job searching skills, such as CV writing and interview skills, has shown encouraging results in employment after training.<sup>4</sup> In Cuba, UNDP supported the implementation of a career counselling system for higher education students, which not only assisted youth to obtain employment, but also helped them feel empowered, motivated and useful for society.<sup>5</sup>

On-the-job training, including internship, apprenticeship, and other work-based learning with the employers, can be an effective way for youth to strengthen specific vocational skills, obtain experience of practical work, and get exposure to the working environment so as to improve their employability (Sierra Leone, Albania, Kosovo). Some UNDP programmes established eligibility criteria to target on-the-job training to low-skilled young jobseekers, while internships were offered to university graduates to acquire work experience in their respective fields with public and private sector employers (Kosovo).<sup>6</sup> Providing incentives for employer engagement, such as employer subsidies, can motivate employers to continue to train young job seekers and keep them onboard post-training period (Sierra Leone, Albania, Kosovo).<sup>7</sup>

Successful UNDP initiatives used a combination of interventions to support the development of various types of skills (Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Albania). In Sierra Leone, an intervention mix combined internship programmes, business support services, career advisory and placement services (labour market and career development information, job search skills, IT training, career development workshops), which equipped participants with skills, enabled them to gain employment, and strengthened their self-confidence.<sup>8</sup> At the micro level, a good practice in Kosovo, in collaboration with vocational training institutions and the public employment service, was to develop personalized training plans for youth coupled with close monitoring and post-placement follow-up. To enhance beneficiaries’ commitment, young job seekers were informed of both their rights and responsibilities with regard to job searching.<sup>9</sup>

For young people without previous work experience, short-term training alone might not lead to employment (Somalia, Kosovo, Syria).<sup>10</sup> It is necessary for short-term skills development programmes to be linked to continued support to assist the youth in entering the job market. For the youth who were not offered employment after internships/on-the-job training, a good practice is to issue a certificate to acknowledge the competencies and skills they have gained to facilitate future job searches, as well as to refer them to public employment services and other employment and/or entrepreneurship services for follow-up support (Kosovo, Somalia).<sup>11</sup>

### **2** Youth from disadvantaged groups require targeted interventions to address their skills needs and improve their integration in the labour market.

Youth from disadvantaged groups are often excluded from economic opportunities and unaware of their right to work. To address the additional barrier they often face due to inadequate basic education, functional literacy training was provided to women and youth in Mauritania to improve their access to income-generating activities.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, disadvantaged youth often acquire skills in non-formal and informal settings, but lack a formal qualification that

recognizes their knowledge and skills. This in turn affects their employability and access to the formal education system. To help them overcome this barrier, in Azerbaijan, UNDP assisted the Government to identify international assessment protocols to acknowledge evidence of previous learning, including the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning.<sup>13</sup>

In some countries, UNDP developed criteria to identify youth from disadvantaged groups, such as geography (poor regions, rural areas), gender, ethnic minorities, length of unemployment or in informal employment, educational attainment and work experience, and proactively engage them in technical and vocational training, as well as targeted active labour market programmes (Kosovo, Kazakhstan, Albania, North Macedonia, Ethiopia).<sup>14</sup> In Albania, UNDP programme developed a practical guide for National Employment Service staff to address the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, which was considered a useful tool.<sup>15</sup> Outreach activities such as caseworker visits have increased the participation of disadvantaged young people in employment programme activities, including young Roma individuals living in settlements who were often unaware of their entitlements or available social and employment services (Serbia).<sup>16</sup>

Evaluations found some examples of effective interventions where special attention has been paid to the skills needs of women and girls. In Jordan and Tajikistan, vocational training and on-the-job training helped women secure and retain employment in the garment industries in their areas of residence or from home.<sup>17</sup> In Bahrain, UNDP was able to broker a partnership with Microsoft and its private certified training provider, a government agency, and the University of Bahrain, to deliver the 'Forsati for her' programme specifically targeting women students for digital literacy and coding backed by Microsoft certifications.<sup>18</sup> However, women's participation in innovation competitions for start-up funding (Cameroon<sup>19</sup>) and subsequent success in creating enterprises were low (Tunisia<sup>20</sup>). Illiteracy and prevalent cultural norms hindered women's participation in entrepreneurship development activities (Ethiopia).<sup>21</sup>

### 3

#### **Policy reform, institutional strengthening and trainer networks help TVET systems effectively transfer skills to youth.**

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and skills development systems are instrumental tools for equipping youth with skills to access the world of work. UNDP has experience supporting modernization and strengthening of national TVET systems and building capacities of TVET institutions and universities (Albania, Nepal, Kenya, Tajikistan).<sup>22</sup> At the policy level, UNDP assisted national governments in developing integrated TVET policy and its implementation. For instance, in Nepal, UNDP supported the Government in reforming the TVET policy, which was incorporated in Nepal's national planning with a commitment to develop a TVET master plan, formulate a TVET Act and establish an integrated TVET fund. These activities helped create an enabling environment for TVET enhancement. The UNDP-supported TVET information management system in Nepal centralized data of TVET trainings and trainees and provided the basis for setting the national targets of SDG 4.4.<sup>23 24</sup>

For institutional capacity development, UNDP interventions strengthened TVET curriculum development based on market needs assessment, developed the capacity of trainers, improved accreditation and quality assurance processes, and supported the implementation of career counselling and on-the-job training. UNDP's support to the modernization of TVET facilities, including upgrading infrastructure and equipment, contributed to changing the generally low social image of TVET and improving its attractiveness to students (Tajikistan).<sup>25</sup> UNDP has played the broker role for partnerships to introduce internationally recognized certification and accreditation to public and private educational and training institutes (Azerbaijan, Bahrain)<sup>26</sup>, which facilitated the recognition of skills by the employers.

Training of trainers contributed to developing a network of (master) trainers to efficiently deliver and cascade skills trainings to youth (Algeria).<sup>27</sup> To ensure training outcome, a good practice is to shadow a training delivered by the newly trained trainers 'on the job', and conduct refresher training over time.<sup>28</sup> UNDP's collaboration with UN Volunteers and

national volunteer mechanisms mobilized national and international volunteers to serve as trainers to youth. The volunteers contributed their knowledge of the field and their proximity to the targeted youth population and thus improved the teaching capacity and bridged the gap in youth's access to education (Mali, Congo).<sup>29</sup>

## **4 Engagement of employers and connection to market demands are key success factors for youth skills development programming.**

Skills mismatch between educational programmes and market demands commonly creates barriers for school-to-work transition. Some past evaluations have shown that UNDP skills development interventions lacked employer engagement in programme design and knowledge on job-growing sectors linked to both public and private employers (Somalia, Algeria).<sup>30</sup> To address skills mismatch, UNDP piloted coordination with private companies to identify training needs and search for qualified workers in North Macedonia. The programme improved youth access to labour market information and employers through the creation of youth information clubs, where students could meet with company representatives and explore internships, volunteer and entrepreneurial opportunities.<sup>31</sup>

Conducting skills mapping to identify the skills demand and supply is a good practice that emerged from effective skills development programmes to improve the employability of trainees (Nepal, Azerbaijan, Kosovo).<sup>32</sup> In Jordan, based on the learning of previous interventions' mismatch with labour market needs, UNDP adopted a demand-driven approach in vocational training and employment for youth, where labour market needs were identified beforehand, resulting in a much higher percentage of participants who landed full-time jobs after the programme, in comparison to the result of previous interventions.<sup>33</sup> In Nepal, skills mapping was conducted at the province level to support TVET system reform and provided much needed-data to policymakers on the fragmented TVET sector.<sup>34</sup>

Public-private partnerships (PPP) have emerged in Albania as a good practice for youth skills development and employment, especially for disadvantaged youth groups. The International Labour Organization (ILO)/UNDP joint programme created PPPs that successfully engaged a variety of partners, including the National Employment Service and its local branches, employers' organizations, chambers of commerce, trade unions, vocational training institutions, and representatives of youth organizations and youth networks. Through the PPP, the private sector brought in a larger number of vacancies available to job seekers and improved the profiling of labour market demands, while the public institutions continued to identify unemployed people available for employment to be supported through employment promotion programmes and public employment services. The PPP successfully placed disadvantaged youth (e.g. unemployed, those in informal employment and from marginalized groups) on work-training programmes; established a revolving database of existing vacancies in the private sector; and placed Albanian students/recent graduates from abroad in internship schemes.<sup>35</sup>

## **5 Supporting the national and local-level government in implementing active labour market policies and measures is key to achieving and sustaining youth skills development outcome.**

Existing evaluations point to the fact that the scope and scale of UNDP interventions in youth skills development for decent work and livelihood are often limited.<sup>36</sup> Although innovative pilots may flourish in tested locations and anecdotal success stories exist, challenges often remain in replicating and scaling up the initiatives when they are not embedded in a larger strategy. For example, in Timor Leste, although the UNDP-supported Kuna project has emerged as a flagship activity using a platform approach to link research, upstream policy development and downstream service delivery, the pilot faced major challenges of scaling up due to lack of national funding commitment.<sup>37</sup>

Skills development is less effective and not sustainable when it is not combined with other active labour market measures. Government plays a critical role in improving and sustaining the enabling environment for youth employment and entrepreneurship, in ensuring favourable policy conditions, providing public employment and business services, facilitating access to finance and the market, and safeguarding workers' rights. Some examples from previous evaluations documented successful UNDP upstream support to governments in creating or updating national policies and strategies for promoting youth skills development and employment (Albania, Jordan, Nepal, Somalia, Togo).<sup>38</sup> UNDP interventions are most effective when they combine upstream and downstream support (Albania, Jordan, Sierra Leone).<sup>39</sup> In Albania, UNDP contributed significantly to piloting and subsequent adoption of new active labour market measures that proved to be an effective mechanism for assuring high training completion rate, employment rate and rate of retention of those employed, all over 90 percent. UNDP support included technical assistance to upstream standard setting by the National Employment Service and downstream capacity building of local employment offices on active labour market measures. Local-level interventions provided insights and feedback for central-level policymaking, informing issues of social inclusion of vulnerable groups, access to educational and vocational training and the labour market.<sup>40</sup>

UNDP has a comparative advantage in building the capacity of regional and local-level institutions, such as public employment services and business service support centres to deliver services at the local level, thus increasing access of youth to skills development activities and other support (Argentina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cameroon, Kenya, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Jordan).<sup>41</sup> UNDP interventions have supported the establishment of these local institutions, strengthened coordination mechanisms between central and regional/local-level government services, and provided technical assistance and close accompaniment including through regionally/locally based UNDP staff. The partnership with the responsible department for local development within line ministries has proven to be key to the success of various UNDP local community drives in Jordan.<sup>42</sup>

Establishing a management implementation unit within UNDP responsible for multiple projects on youth, gender, TVETs and employment creates synergy to work with the complexity of youth skills issues more comprehensively and coherently, within UNDP projects and among UNDP's partnerships with different line ministries. The establishment of these units also allowed UNDP to benefit from economies of scale and save project management costs.<sup>43</sup>

## **6 Partnership with other UN agencies can strengthen technical inputs to youth skills development programmes but requires close coordination around targeted value chain development.**

Partnering with sister agencies that have technical and normative mandates, such as the ILO, UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), has brought in technical expertise in TVET systems strengthening, value chain development, labour market information and skills matching, among other relevant areas (Albania, Togo, Somalia), and in some cases helped UNDP to become a key player in the field of youth development (Albania).<sup>44</sup> The joint interventions in the fish value chain development in Somalia successfully brought in three UN agencies (UNDP, ILO and FAO) to contribute its respective expertise for a common goal. Specifically, ILO delivered an apprenticeship programme that led to employment of youth by the fishing companies. UNDP constructed fish processing units, provided business start-up funds and conducted business and entrepreneurial skills training. FAO equipped the processing units and trained the groups in the technical aspects – fishing, cutting and processing fish. At the time of evaluation, 10 centres had been established.<sup>45</sup>

However, effective collaboration requires coherence and coordination. In Syria, the lack of synergy among the UN joint programme agencies (FAO, UNESCO and UNDP) resulted in fragmented and partial implementation and under delivery.<sup>46</sup> In Somalia, despite the UN joint programme originally envisaging interventions anchored around sector value chains, the standard value chain procedures – value chain analysis and market analysis – were not followed through; training was



sometimes not market-relevant or linked to any of the targeted value chains and of short duration – thus insufficient to impart meaningful skills.<sup>47</sup>

## **7 Entrepreneurship is not a silver bullet for youth unemployment. It can contribute to filling the skills gap, but youth start-ups require long-term support and continuous financing to mature and scale up.**

Innovation can be an important lever for the creation of economic opportunities for young people. UNDP promoted an innovation incubation model for youth entrepreneurship in several countries. It supported the establishment of one-stop innovation and entrepreneurship hubs, laboratories and business incubators at regional and local levels to deliver training to youth on skills for innovation, technology, business management, advocacy, leadership and other relevant skills (Burkina Faso, Azerbaijan, Timor Leste, Somalia).<sup>48</sup> Project implementation scale has been limited so far, as upscaling will depend on access to financing, marketability of innovation products/services, and investment and strategic support from the Government. UNDP has experience supporting skills development of young agriculture entrepreneurs including through the replication of the Songhai model – the green incubation approach first developed in Benin – in other countries (Uganda, Sierra Leone).<sup>49</sup> Small business grant competitions for young entrepreneurs can help to concentrate limited resources to ensure support to more promising business ideas and provide incentives for innovation (Cameroon, Tunisia, Cambodia).<sup>50</sup>

Entrepreneurship support should not be delivered ‘quick and dirty’. Youth, especially those from less privileged backgrounds, need time and experience to develop an entrepreneurial mindset and act accordingly. Locally based institutions can serve as a one-stop-shop for youth entrepreneurship support to improve synergy, coherence and efficiency. Institutions such as public employment and business services offices, TVETs and training institutions, youth associations, and employer and business membership organizations can assume this role, with the latter also promoting closer connection between the private sector and the young entrepreneurs (Sierra Leone, Cameroon).<sup>51</sup> These one-stop-shops can continue to provide long-term follow up support to ensure programme exit strategies are duly implemented.

A commonly faced challenge for youth start-ups is the lack of sustainability and scale-up opportunity, often due to inadequate and unsustainable access to finance beyond the initial seed funding received from the entrepreneurship programmes (Kenya).<sup>52</sup> Young entrepreneurs have difficulty accessing commercial banks’ financing, as they normally have little or no collateral (Ethiopia).<sup>53</sup> UNDP contributed to young entrepreneurs’ access to finance by supporting the link between entrepreneurs and financial institutions and expansion of microfinancing to young entrepreneurs, including via grouping of isolated or unitary microfinancing institutions to create microfinancing cooperatives (Togo, Zimbabwe)<sup>54</sup>, and establishing microcredit funds and programmes (Tajikistan, Kazakhstan).<sup>55</sup>

Capacity development of youth cooperatives could complement interventions targeting youth individually. UNDP interventions in Rwanda trained youth cooperative members in cooperative principles, sustainable environment management and agro-forestry nursery development, and supported youth to open bank accounts in the Youth Savings and Credit Cooperative Society. This has increased the youth’s access to financial services in the Kamonyi district.<sup>56</sup>

## **8 Monitoring and evaluation of youth skills development initiatives need systematic frameworks and follow-up activities to assess results beyond outreach.**

Existing monitoring data of youth skills development interventions mostly focuses on the outputs, i.e. the number of youth trained, placed in internship/on-the-job training, and number of young entrepreneurs supported. The percentage

of youth participants in skills development activities who were able to secure internships, employment, start-ups, is assessed in some cases (Somalia, Jordan).<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, either due to lack of a monitoring framework or post-activity follow-up, monitoring of results at the outcome level, in terms of interventions' contribution to decent job creation and improvement in job conditions is seldomly conducted, making it hard to assess UNDP's impact in the areas of youth skills development and youth employment (El Salvador, Mauritania, Samoa, Uzbekistan, Togo, Sierra Leone).<sup>58</sup>

In some countries, such as Azerbaijan, where UNDP is implementing a suite of projects for youth skills development and employment, the lack of a coherent monitoring and evaluation system to reconcile data from various project reports created barriers to assess overall results.<sup>59</sup> In Sierra Leone, despite a comprehensive design and successful delivery of the youth employment and entrepreneurship programme, UNDP was not able to assess the cost-effectiveness of the programme nor its impact at the individual level, since follow-up monitoring was not conducted with programme participants to collect data on income and business earnings.<sup>60</sup> For emerging areas of engagement such as digital economy, continued monitoring is particularly needed to assess the results of the pilots for learning from experience so as to develop a more coherent programmatic approach (Somalia).<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rapid evidence assessment (REA) is a process of bringing together information and knowledge from a range of sources to inform debates and urgent policy decisions on specific issues. Like better-known systematic reviews, REAs synthesize the findings of single studies following a standard protocol but do not analyse the full literature on a topic: REAs make concessions in relation to the breadth, depth and comprehensiveness of the search to produce a quicker result.

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<sup>3</sup> ILO, 'Core employability skills', [https://www.ilo.org/skills/areas/skills-for-youth-employment/WCMS\\_672179/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/skills/areas/skills-for-youth-employment/WCMS_672179/lang-en/index.htm), Consulted on 25 March 2021.

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<sup>5</sup> UNDP Independent Evaluation Office, 'Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Cuba', UNDP 2018, <http://web.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/adr/cuba.shtml>.

<sup>6</sup> UNDP Kosovo, 'Impact Evaluation of the Active Labour Market Programme for Youth', UNDP 2012, <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/detail/6368>.

<sup>7</sup> UNDP Independent Evaluation Office, 'Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Sierra Leone', UNDP 2018, [http://web.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/adr/sierra\\_leone.shtml](http://web.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/adr/sierra_leone.shtml); UNDP Albania, 'Youth Employment and Migration Joint Programme', UNDP 2012, <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/detail/6001>; UNDP Kosovo, 'Impact Evaluation of the Active Labour Market Programme for Youth', UNDP 2012, <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/detail/6368>.

<sup>8</sup> UNDP Sierra Leone, 'UNDP SL Contribution to Youth Employment and Empowerment', UNDP 2015, <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/detail/6426>.

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<sup>10</sup> UNDP Somalia, 'End of Project Evaluation – Joint Programme on Youth Employment', UNDP 2018, <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/detail/9365>; UNDP Kosovo, 'Impact Evaluation of the Active Labour Market Programme for Youth', UNDP 2012, <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/detail/6368>; UNDP Syria, 'Outcome 1 Evaluation (Sustainable Livelihood Opportunities, Including Economic Recovery and Social Inclusion)', UNDP 2019, <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/detail/9484>.



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#### **ABOUT THE INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OFFICE**

By generating objective evidence, the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) supports UNDP to achieve greater accountability and facilitates improved learning from experience. The IEO enhances UNDP's development effectiveness through its programmatic and thematic evaluations and contributes to organizational transparency.

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The IEO's *Reflections* series looks into past evaluations and captures lessons learned from UNDP's work across its programmes. It mobilizes evaluative knowledge to provide valuable insights for improved decision-making and better development results. This edition highlights lessons from evaluations of UNDP response towards keeping people out of poverty.

