

# Summary of the lessons learned from EUTF-funded projects supporting youth across West Africa

This summary presents the findings of a comprehensive analysis and four case studies from the youth portfolio of the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), specifically from the Sahel and Lake Chad window<sup>1</sup>, conducted by Altai Consulting. It provides DG INTPA with an overview of the initiatives targeting youth. Additionally, by examining both the successes and challenges of selected interventions, the analysis offers insights and lessons learned to inform future programming targeting young people in West Africa.

The projects and programmes analysed include GrEEn UNCDF (Ghana), Bab Al Amal (Chad), SAFIRE OXFAM (Mauritania), and Erasmus+ (multiple West African countries). The studies rely on documentary review, field visits, a total of 102 key informant interviews and five focus groups.

## General insights from the mapping and analysis of the EUTF youth portfolio

### What worked well?

**Youth projects held importance within EUTF's portfolio.** Altai identified 51 projects specifically designed to support youth exclusively ('youth projects') and 39 projects partially targeting youth. Together, these projects represented 42% of the overall portfolio.

**All the projects in the sample demonstrated relevance to the actual needs of the young individuals in the targeted regions.** Nearly all projects carried out needs assessments, which helped implementing partners (IPs) gain contextual insights. Some projects took this a step further by conducting phased needs assessments, leading to adaptive programming. This approach helped teams identify ineffective practices and facilitated the replication of successful strategies more efficiently.

**Projects that effectively engaged local stakeholders, including the private sector, civil society, local government and communities, showed better sustainability and replicability prospects.** For instance, one project extensively involved a wide range of local, national and international stakeholders (ministries, chambers of commerce, local finance institutions) and adopted an endogenous approach, effectively expanding impact and beneficiary reach for sustainable outcomes.

### What can be improved?

**Many projects considered youth as a homogeneous group.** Youth is commonly perceived as a core demographic in Africa facing the continent's most pressing challenges. However, this generalised approach overlooked the specific needs of different youth subgroups. There were few exceptions, like a project that differentiated between urban and rural youth.

**The EUTF youth portfolio exhibited limited complementarity across thematic areas and between humanitarian and development.** Initiatives aimed at supporting youth often operated independently, within their specific areas of focus. Collaborations were sporadic and usually coincidental rather than planned, primarily due to a lack of emphasis in cooperation and complementarity in the initial design of the portfolio. Additionally, differing target areas and timelines further hindered opportunities for synergies. Such complementarities may be key to the humanitarian-development and to the security-development nexus. For example, no projects in the sample integrated preventing violent extremism with access to technical and vocational education and training or business support activities.

---

<sup>1</sup> The study covered 16 countries across West Africa, including the 12 countries from the EUTF SLC window (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and The Gambia) and four countries that benefitted from EUTF-funded programming (Benin, Cabo Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Togo).

**For many projects, there was a misalignment between ambitious targets and available resources.** Projects often aimed for broad regions and a large number of beneficiaries. Many informants expressed that, if given the opportunity to rethink these projects, they would choose to concentrate on a smaller area using an integrated territorial approach to achieve more effective results.

**Findings suggest that integrating more regional perspectives into programming may enhance relevance for projects targeting youth in migration areas.** Informants emphasised that regional representations of EUDs or more funds geared towards regional-level migration programming could have been valuable given the regional nature of migration flows and routes.

### What were key context factors?

**The relevance of projects can be jeopardised by contextual and structural constraints.** In fragile economic contexts with limited employment opportunities, skills training and job creation initiatives require comprehensive design with long-term implementation periods to adequately address structural factors influencing the abilities of beneficiaries to sustain outcome. In addition, deteriorating security and political contexts can significantly impact the relevance of certain approaches.

## Selected cross-cutting lessons from the four case studies

### Skills Development and Training

**Comprehensive support packages combining and sequencing skills training, financial access, and employment opportunities create more sustainable pathways for youth economic integration than standalone interventions.** The GrEEen project in Ghana demonstrated that linking cash-for-work schemes with financial literacy training and access to banking services enabled beneficiaries to save earnings and launch businesses. Similarly, Bab Al Amal in Chad and SAFIRE Oxfam in Mauritania highlighted that providing technical training alone is insufficient – youth need entrepreneurship modules, personal and professional skills development, access to finance, and material kits to successfully establish income-generating activities.

**Soft skills and life skills training significantly enhance technical training effectiveness and should be considered integral rather than optional.** Initially, Chad's integrated human development training faced resistance from beneficiaries who perceived it as less valuable than technical skills. However, participants ultimately acknowledged that it improved their planning abilities, professional behaviour, and household financial management. Employers also acknowledged the importance of these skills, often ranking them on par to technical skills.

**Dual training approaches require strong coordination between theoretical and practical components to deliver value.** The Bab Al Amal case study highlighted that dual training participants often carried out their usual tasks during practical sessions rather than applying newly acquired theoretical knowledge, undermining the model's effectiveness. Success requires ensuring that training centres and workplaces have compatible equipment, that employers understand their mentoring role, and that there are structured frameworks to guide skill application during practical phases.

**Short-term training durations must be balanced against depth of skill acquisition and employer expectations. A modular approach to training may provide a viable solution.** Employers often prefer candidates with more extensive training (12-24 months), and shorter programs (3-6 months) may not adequately prepare individuals for employability. This preference creates a budgetary trade-off between the thoroughness of longer training and the ability to train more people. Projects should differentiate between trades requiring extensive training and those amenable to shorter programmes, potentially offering modular approaches allowing progressive skill development.

### Economic and Financial Inclusion

**Engaging the private sector from the project design stage ensures training aligns with employer needs, ultimately improving employment outcomes for youth.** Engagement should continue

throughout implementation to ensure training relevance. Bab Al Amal's experience showed that insufficient private sector involvement led to mismatches between training content and employer expectations, with some trained youth unable to find work because employers preferred informally trained workers with practical experience. In contrast, GrEEen successfully partnered with financial institutions from inception, allowing them to develop and test youth-appropriate products. Future interventions should include private sector advisory mechanisms and co-design training curricula.

**Financial inclusion for vulnerable youth requires innovative alternatives to traditional credit products.** GrEEen's partnership with Grow for Me provided smallholder farmers with agricultural inputs through a produce-sharing model rather than cash loans, circumventing collateral requirements. SAFIRE Oxfam's Savings and Internal Lending Communities enabled collective resource pooling without formal banking. These alternatives should be prioritised over traditional loan products, which remain hardly accessible to youth lacking collateral, formal employment, or credit histories.

**Administrative barriers like identification requirements can exclude intended beneficiaries and must be addressed proactively.** GrEEen UNCDF found that documentation challenges affected various vulnerable groups, with the requirement of the Ghana Card for bank account opening excluding returnees and many rural youths lacking birth certificates. Interventions should map administrative requirements early on and either facilitate document acquisition for beneficiaries engaging with national authorities or work with service providers to develop alternative verification methods.

## Gender and Social Inclusion

**To increase female participation, training programmes must adopt a deliberate strategy, provide flexible support and propose context-sensitive approaches, beyond participation quotas.** Bab Al Amal's second component, lacking a specific gender strategy, achieved only 3.5% female participation. In contrast, its first component achieved 38% female participation through dedicated recruitment and traditionally female-friendly trades, yet experienced high dropout rates due to family obligations and social pressures. In SAFIRE Oxfam, some women participated in training for traditionally male-dominated trades, which led to social resistance. Effective approaches must address barriers faced by both beneficiaries (flexible training schedules, childcare, and safe transportation) and the labour market (employer sensitisation and challenging gender stereotypes in trade selection). More importantly, all projects should remain context-sensitive: challenging gender stereotypes is only effective when paired with adequate cultural and social sensitisation to ensure community acceptance. In more conservative settings, aligning training opportunities with socially accepted roles may be necessary to ensure participation and short-term impact, while laying the foundation for gradual longer-term change.

**Geographic barriers significantly impact participation and require deliberate strategies to ensure inclusion.** In Bab Al Amal, distance to training centres caused high dropout rates, particularly among women and rural youth, highlighting the need for proximity and transport support. Successful mitigation included providing bicycles. In contrast, the SAFIRE Oxfam project demonstrated that delivering training directly in remote areas significantly improved access and participation of underserved populations. Future projects should give careful attention to geographical coverage and assess accessibility during the planning phase to allocate adequate resources and adopt appropriate mitigation measures.

## Programme Design and Targeting

**Targeting the most vulnerable youth requires balancing inclusion goals with participants' readiness to benefit from interventions.** SAFIRE Oxfam in Mauritania highlighted that extremely vulnerable beneficiaries can struggle to capitalise on vocational training, either because their immediate needs take precedence over skills development, or because they lack the minimum level of stability or foundational skills to leverage available support. In contrast, youth with some basic stability showed better outcomes in transforming support into lasting change. Future projects should consider graduated approaches, potentially providing basic stabilisation support before intensive skills training, or developing differentiated pathways based on vulnerability levels while maintaining inclusion objectives.

**Lottery-based selection systems ensure transparency but may overlook the most motivated beneficiaries.** GrEEen UNCDF project in Ghana used random selection to ensure fairness and enable impact evaluation. However, local authorities noted this method sometimes excluded highly motivated youth while including less committed participants. Future projects might consider hybrid approaches combining criteria-based selection with random selection for transparency purposes.

**Engaging youth in programme design enhances the chances of providing them with relevant contents and materials.** There were several instances where youth were not sufficiently consulted during design phases, which led to misaligned training content or inadequate self-employment kits. Conversely, GrEEen's incorporation of youth feedback through focus groups during needs assessment resulted in well-targeted interventions. Future projects should systematically seek youth representation in design and pilot activities and include feedback loops from youth before scaling up.

**Building on existing successful models while adapting to local contexts yields better results than designing from scratch.** GrEEen UNCDF successfully adapted UNCDF's Local Climate Adaptive Living Facility model tested in other countries to Ghana's context. Similarly, Bab Al Amal built upon previous dual training experiments. This approach reduces design risks while ensuring local relevance through careful adaptation during implementation.

**Integrating sustainability criteria during selection processes fosters interventions' long-term impact.** GrEEen UNCDF's competitive selection process for financial service providers, requiring clear, actionable sustainability plans, led to innovations like Fidelity Bank's Interactive Voice Response system for financial literacy. By framing beneficiaries as long-term users rather than aid recipients, the project created strong incentives for continued service delivery beyond its lifecycle.

**Student mobility programmes require comprehensive and pre-departure support to ensure inclusion.** Erasmus+ experiences showed that while scholarships are valuable, students face significant barriers including upfront costs, visa issues, and uneven, often insufficient institutional and consular support. Beyond the scholarships amount – often considered insufficient – the requirement for students to advance travel, visa and initial living expenses, due to grants being disbursed only upon arrival in the host country, represents a major limitation to the inclusion of students from all backgrounds. Future mobility initiatives should provide more flexible and timely financial and logistic support to avoid excluding those without upfront resources. Students who received coordinated assistance with documentation, housing, and cultural integration upon arrival reported better experiences.

## Implementation and Coordination

**Local presence through community-based offices and coordinators can significantly enhance outreach to vulnerable youth but requires substantial resources.** Both Bab Al Amal's training and employment offices and SAFIRE Oxfam's proximity approach through local structures successfully reached disadvantaged youth in remote areas. However, this model requires sustained national support and resources to ensure continuity or scalability. Future projects could explore hybrid models combining physical presence in key locations with mobile outreach teams and digital platforms where appropriate.

**Coordination between multiple implementing partners requires explicit obligations and joint monitoring systems.** Projects implemented by consortiums (SAFIRE Oxfam) or joint projects (GrEEen's UNCDF and SNV components) struggled with coordination despite memorandums of understanding. Effective collaboration requires shared targets, common tools, synchronised timelines, formal handover protocols for beneficiaries moving between components, and joint review mechanisms.

**Multi-stakeholder platforms require clear incentive structures beyond voluntary participation to maintain engagement.** While Bab Al Amal established formal coordination platforms bringing together training providers, government, and private sector, these struggled to maintain momentum without tangible benefits for participants. Successful platforms need concrete deliverables for each stakeholder group – such as improved access to skilled workers for businesses or streamlined programme coordination for government agencies.