Situational Analysis on Youth in Turkmenistan
A UN Inter-Agency Initiative

October 2019
This analysis was developed as a result of a joint initiative of the UN, namely, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP in Turkmenistan in close cooperation with the Government of Turkmenistan. The UN Joint Group has taken all steps to verify and confirm the information contained in this publication.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than 1.8 billion adolescents and young people aged 10-24 are poised to assume leadership roles in families, workplaces and communities. Nearly 60 percent of them live in low-income and lower-middle-income countries, many of which struggle to provide basic services and opportunities. By 2030, there will be nearly 2 billion young people aged 10 to 24, and over 65 percent will be 15 to 24 y.o. This is an unprecedented and urgent demographic challenge. Many countries stand at the apex of the demographic dividend\(^1\) – a window of opportunity for reaping additional benefits from investing in children and young people that will shortly close. A world of mass connectivity, enhanced mobility and exceptional technological progress presents a unique opportunity to improve lives, nations and economies. This is the essence of the recently launched UN Youth Strategy at the 73\(^{rd}\) UN General Assembly and ‘Generation Unlimited’, a global partnership focused on education, training and the economic empowerment of young people.

Considering these global commitments including the SDG Agenda 2030, UNICEF led the UN inter-agency Situational Analysis on Youth (YSitAn, covering the 10-24 y.o. group), together with UNFPA and UNDP with a view to explore the national enabling environment for youth in Turkmenistan. The analysis offers a review of the current situation of young women and men across a number of areas critical to their development and provides increased evidence for further policy and programme investment that will support progress and empowerment among youth in Turkmenistan.

‘Creating favorable conditions for the full participation of young people in the socio-economic, political and cultural life of the state and society’ was elevated to the highest priority level by Presidential Decree\(^2\), approving the 2015-2020 Programme of the State Youth Policy of Turkmenistan. The Law on State Youth Policy itself, dating from 2013, is a comprehensive legal framework covering 15 areas of relevance to adolescents and youth aged 14 to 30 years old.

The youth situational analysis was articulated through a rapid, mostly qualitative analysis based on key informant interviews and focus group discussions with government counterparts, public and private organisations, youth and their families. Where possible, quantitative data was also collected and processed from the initial literature review. A great emphasis of the research has been on identifying and interpreting formulated and perceived aspirations, hopes, ambitions, as well as needs and concerns, of young people – with particular attention to youth-relevant priorities such as access to information, health, education and training, labour market transition and employment, gender equality, disability and participation.

With regards to access to multisectoral youth-relevant information (i.e. cutting across various information areas), consultations confirmed that there exist a number of channels serving public information delivery purposes, although they are not all necessarily gender- nor adolescent-responsive. With the right investments and expertise, it should be possible to continue building on such channels to maximise the delivery of youth-friendly information in critical domains such as mental health and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). For example, using peer-to-peer and mentorship methodologies for the provision of age- and gender-specific information during the season holiday of the children health camp could have a wide impact on adolescents, both in and outside camps. Other

\(^{1}\) The demographic dividend is the potential for economic growth, which may be due to a change in the age structure of the population, primarily the situation when the share of the working age population (from 15 to 64 years old) exceeds the share of the working age population, UNFPA, 2014.

\(^{2}\) As well as the following laws of Turkmenistan relating to adolescents and young people, including children, girls and women - “On state guarantees of the rights of the child” and “On state guarantees to ensure equal rights and equal opportunities for women and men”.

\v
suggested options include bringing together the Health Information Centre’s outreach taskforce and UNFPA-supported Y-PEER joint outreach taskforce (deployed locally with other public agencies) to share knowledge on SRHR; reactivating teen hotlines staffed with adolescent-trained psychologists; and harnessing the power of traditional mass media for the dissemination of youth-friendly information.

As far as **SRHR is concerned**, consultations revealed several positive steps taken to increase the accessibility of Adolescent Reproductive Health centres (ARH) for adolescents. Yet continuous and culturally-sensitive awareness-raising efforts are needed to ensure greater uptake of ARH services, thereby accelerating the realisation of **SDG 3** (especially SRHR target 3.7). Besides, it might be necessary to consider progressively moving to the integrated delivery of multiple adolescent-specific health services – for example, combining SRHR and psychosocial counselling – and to increase systematic referrals across health specialties. This could be piloted at the etrap level. Still, unlocking the capacity of ARH services to provide more holistic responses to adolescent and youth well-being would require targeted empowerment measures for the sector. In the separate area of **mental health**, the general approach taken could be made more comprehensive, for example by offering and scaling up of adolescent-responsive ‘talking therapies’ and accelerating existing plans to deploy more adolescent-trained counsellors and social workers down to the city/district level – with a focus on schools.

In the **education and training** space, targeted efforts to enhance the work readiness of secondary school students and strengthen the school-to-work transition are being pursued. Importantly, job shadowing and other mentoring schemes are vital measures put in place that could largely benefit from being systematised across the country. The Government of Turkmenistan (GoT) should also consider communicating broadly (using social media and creative industries) around quality improvements planned for the post-secondary national skills development system. This will help further promote Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) as a tangible, attractive choice for adolescents and young people – in turn supporting the achievement of **SDG 4** on Quality Education. Similarly, facilitating access to remedial/bridge education, as well as distant, remote and e-learning, would boost the effective implementation of existing national regulations around the provision of alternative specialised, vocational and tertiary education for all (including lifelong learning opportunities).

In the domain of **employment**, as per the requirements of **SDG 8** on decent jobs, the government is focusing its reflection on the matching of labour demand and labour supply among young people through a variety of measures envisaged in the National Youth Employment Action Plan. While some of these efforts may require deeper labour market structural reforms, immediate steps that could be taken include the systematisation of updated career guidance information delivery to secondary education students; harnessing the culture of school sports to reinforce core work qualities and soft skills among future young recruits; strengthening youth entrepreneurship as a viable option for all young people via youth-friendly entrepreneurship initiatives; introducing more active labour market policy programmes; and providing government incentives to public-private partnerships, so businesses are encouraged to shape a modern, competitive youth workforce that can fill in core business needs.

With regards to **women’s rights and gender equality**, concepts of gender-based abuse and violence are well understood among youth. But more complex norms influencing personal choices/opportunities, power relationships and gender-based expectations are less acknowledged. Young women still tackle most of the unpaid care and domestic work at home, with long term consequences on their future ability to access stable, high-skilled, high-paid jobs. Increased provisions of child-, elderly- and disability-care services, as well as limited measures of care work redistribution – such as paid paternity leaves – could go a long way in accelerating the realisation of **SDG 5** on gender equality in the country. In parallel, proactive, evidence-based initiatives to encourage young women (and their parents) to embrace careers in innovative, high-growth, and productive sectors of the knowledge-based economy need to be sustained.
As for the quality of the **disability-responsive environment** in Turkmenistan, a national regulatory and policy framework is in place for the inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in society. Schools and post-secondary education institutes should keep the momentum on mainstreaming disability throughout facilities, equipment, as well as educational and teacher curricula. The gradual rise of ICT-related sectors in the Turkmen economy and therefore, needs for ICT-literate people, further increases the potential for home-based, income-generating work opportunities for young people with disabilities. Such options may warrant immediate attention. Finally, in-depth collaboration with Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs) in sectors prioritised by the GoT – such as public transport and infrastructure accessibility, professional inclusion, and disability-friendly housing standards – needs to remain sustained.

In terms of **participation**, the Youth Organisation (counting over 900,000 members in the country aged 14-37 y.o.) shows a large potential for driving the interests of young people. It could harness the potential of greater adolescent participation in its work, for example, by appointing an ad-hoc advisory adolescent board to represent the 14-19 y.o. member segment. The Organisation is currently planning to be actively involved in the 2019 International Youth Forum, which presents a major opportunity for all stakeholders (including the UN, Ministry of Youth Policy and Sports and Women’s Union) to work closely together to ensure an even greater representation of young women’s and men’s interests at the event. The Women’s Union in Turkmenistan, whose membership base stands at about 700,000, also plays a critical participation role in many areas, not least education and employment. It might want to consider widening its membership base even further by reaching out to all girls and women – beyond female students and employees – and inviting adolescent girls and young women who are not in employment, education or training to officially join the organisation.

In September 2016, the GoT formally adopted a list of 17 SDGs, 148 targets and 175 indicators – 55 of them being child-related – to be implemented over the next 15 years. A governmental working group was established to follow up on the capture and institutionalisation of SDGs at national level, and monitor ongoing progress under the coordination of the Ministry of Finance and Economy (MoFE). As a **concluding policy remark**, within that structure, the relatively recent **Ministry of Youth Policy and Sports (MoYPS)** could take a transversal role and lead on: (i) articulating and sharing the list of priority adolescent and youth-relevant SDG targets and indicators for the country; (ii) providing government bodies in charge of operationalising youth SDG indicators with targeted support in data collection, disaggregation, processing and analysis (e.g. to establish baselines), in line with global definitions; (iii) mapping all youth-specific/related strategies, policies, programmes and plans – especially those approaching their updating phase – and putting forward propositions to mainstream selected priority adolescent- and youth-relevant indicators across them; and (iv) making recommendations for State financing of cross-ministerial youth initiatives and for multisectoral budgeting.

2019 will be a year of assessment of the 2015-2020 State Youth Policy Programme and its Action Plan. Therefore, this is a prime time for considering future iterations of the State Programme. Based on the findings of the youth situational analysis, it is recommended that the next programme introduces additional priority youth issues (with relevant targets and indicators) in its conceptual framework in order to monitor progress in interrelated policy areas; and mainstreams gender issues and girls’ and women’s lifecycle-based needs. Taking account of gender power relations in youth strategy can provide an effective and innovative way of moving towards the achievement of interconnected SDGs for girls and women in Turkmenistan.

As for the **roadmap** for future action on youth, stepping-up and sustaining national cooperation towards improved youth policy outcomes (as described above) will mainly depend on the enhancement of youth stakeholders’ capacity in a number of areas. These include: building a nation-wide, gender- and disability-responsive, adolescent and youth technical expertise; reinforcing youth-related statistical and SDG measurement systems; boosting the ‘research reflex’ and youth research arm; cultivating youth policy excellence; upskilling methods of communication, outreach and campaigning targeted at youth; and deepening the understanding and practice of public-private, shared-value partnerships for youth.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The situational analysis on youth is a UN inter-agency initiative led by UNICEF together with UNFPA and UNDP in close collaboration with the Government of Turkmenistan, the office of the UNRC, and with involvement from other UN agencies.

UNICEF, UNFPA and UNDP would like to sincerely thank the Government of Turkmenistan and key stakeholders for their cooperation in the development of this analysis, particularly the Ministry of Education; Ministry of Health and Medical Industry; Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Population; Ministry of Youth Policy and Sports; Mejlis (Parliament); the Youth Organization; the Women’s Union; Mashgala NGO; the Guardianship and Trusteeship Commission and Commission on Minors’ Affairs in the city of Mary; the Ombudsperson Office; and Orlan - private recruitment agency.

Our gratitude goes to all of the adolescent girls and boys, young women and men, as well as their parents for their unique contributions and powerful insights into shaping this analysis. We are also grateful to all organisations working on disability issues which participated in this exercise, Yenme NGO which facilitated discussions with young persons with disabilities and their families. We very much valued all detailed inputs and guidance received, which helped give to the present report its final shape.

This analysis further benefited from the initial interagency preparatory work performed by a UNICEF youth intern, Ms. Mayuri Dang. The SitAn on Youth is also a follow-up to the 2000 Country Paper on ‘The Youth of Turkmenistan in Transition Period: from risk to opportunities and participation’, by the National Institute of Statistics and Prognoses of Turkmenistan.

Finally, UN agencies involved in the development of the SitAn on Youth would like to extend sincere thanks to Mrs Léa Moubayed-Haidar, International Consultant, who was instrumental in designing the research tools, carrying consultations within UN agencies and all stakeholders, interpreting results, and reflecting findings and recommendations in the final report.
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<th>Acronym</th>
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<tr>
<td>(A)RH</td>
<td>(Adolescent) Reproductive Health</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEDAW</td>
<td>Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women</td>
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<td>CRC</td>
<td>Convention on the Rights of the Child</td>
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<td>CRPD</td>
<td>Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSO</td>
<td>Civil Society Organization</td>
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<td>C4D</td>
<td>Communication for Development</td>
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<td>DPO</td>
<td>Disabled People Organization</td>
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<td>FGD</td>
<td>Focus Group Discussion</td>
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<td>Gen-U</td>
<td>Generation Unlimited</td>
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<td>GoT</td>
<td>Government of Turkmenistan</td>
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<td>HBSC</td>
<td>Health Behaviour in School-aged Children</td>
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<td>HIV/AIDS</td>
<td>Human immunodeficiency virus infection and acquired immune deficiency syndrome</td>
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<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information Communication and Technology</td>
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<td>KII</td>
<td>Key Informant Interview</td>
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<td>M&amp;E</td>
<td>Monitoring and Evaluation</td>
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<td>MICS</td>
<td>Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys</td>
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<td>MFA</td>
<td>Ministry of Foreign Affairs</td>
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<td>MoE</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
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<td>Ministry of Finance and Economy</td>
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<td>MoJ</td>
<td>Ministry of Justice</td>
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<td>MoHMI</td>
<td>Ministry of Health and Medical Industry</td>
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<td>MoLSP</td>
<td>Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Population</td>
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<td>MoYPS</td>
<td>Ministry of Youth Policy and Sports</td>
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<td>MP</td>
<td>Member of Parliament</td>
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<tr>
<td>NEET</td>
<td>Not in Employment, Education or Training</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<td>PEA</td>
<td>Private Employment Agency</td>
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<td>PPP</td>
<td>Public-Private Partnership</td>
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<tr>
<td>PWD</td>
<td>Person With Disabilities</td>
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<td>SDG</td>
<td>Sustainable Development Goal</td>
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<td>(Y)SitAn</td>
<td>(Youth) Situational Analysis</td>
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<td>SRHR</td>
<td>Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights</td>
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<td>STEM</td>
<td>Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics</td>
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<td>STI</td>
<td>Sexually Transmitted Infection</td>
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<td>TOR</td>
<td>Terms of Reference</td>
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<td>TVET</td>
<td>Technical and Vocational Education and Training</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
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<td>UNFPA</td>
<td>United Nations Population Fund</td>
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<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children’s Fund</td>
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<td>UNPFD</td>
<td>United Nations Partnership Framework for Development</td>
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<td>VOT</td>
<td>Victim of Trafficking</td>
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SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1 - BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

1.1. Young People in Turkmenistan: A Brief Overview

The UN interagency youth situational analysis in Turkmenistan (covering young people aged 10-24 years) was commissioned by UNICEF, UNFPA and UNDP with a view to explore the national enabling environment for youth in Turkmenistan (laws, policies, strategies and programmes) in relation to the global commitments taken; take stock of the current situation across a number of youth priority issues; and provide increased evidence for policy developments that will support improvements and progress in the area of young people in Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan’s age pyramid shows the predominance of children in relation to the proportion of people aged 65 and over. National statistics on the country’s general demography vary; according to the UN estimates, population of Turkmenistan in 2016 was 5.439 million people and according to the World Bank, 5.8 million people in 2017, while the website ‘CIS Today’ indicates 6.2 million people (the period is not specified). With those numbers in mind, according to UN estimates, Turkmenistan is home to more than two million young people aged 10 to 29, which would make up nearly 40 percent of the country’s population.

‘Creating favorable conditions for the full participation of young people in the socio-economic, political and cultural life of the state and society’ has therefore been elevated to the highest priority level by Presidential Decree, approving the 2015-2020 Programme of the State Youth Policy of Turkmenistan. The Law on State Youth Policy itself, dating from 2013, is a comprehensive framework covering 15 areas of relevance to adolescents and youth aged 14 to 30 y.o., namely: ‘participation; rights and freedoms; education; health; sport and healthy lifestyles; creative activity; vulnerable youth; young families; talented youth; physical and spiritual development; cultural entertainment; recreation; youth associations and international youth cooperation’. The Law, its Programme of implementation and accompanying Plan of Action 2015-2020, will therefore be drawn on regularly in what follows.

In parallel, on 20th September 2016, the Government of Turkmenistan formally adopted a list of 17 SDGs, 148 targets and 175 indicators – 55 of them being child-related. As such targets are to be reached over the next 12 years, discussions are being held in the country on further strengthening the administrative data systems for ensuring systematic monitoring of SDGs. Towards that purpose, the Government has instituted a working group made of 47 Government and public organization representatives, and the draft SDG measurement system of Turkmenistan already identifies responsible

33 Rapid Integrated Assessment for Turkmenistan – Contributions to Turkmenistan’s Roadmap to attain the Sustainable Development Goals, 2017.
7Realizing the Full Potential of Adolescents and Youth in Turkmenistan, UNFPA, 2017.
8 As per the Law on the State Youth Policy of Turkmenistan, August 29, 2013, No. 423-IV2013.
government entities for specific goals and indicators\textsuperscript{11}. For these reasons, SDGs and their specific targets/indicators will also be referenced in the below analysis as and when relevant.

1.2. Rationale for the Youth Situational Analysis

The analytical content generated by the youth situational analysis and its associated recommendations will ultimately feed back into the next iterations of the 2015-2020 State Youth Policy Programme in relation to major youth-related global development initiatives. The latter include the SDG Agenda 2030, UN Youth Strategy launched at the 73\textsuperscript{rd} UN General Assembly, and Generation-Unlimited – a world multistakeholder partnership focused on education, training and empowerment through employment of young people; the 2019 International Youth Forum; the next United Nations Partnership Framework for Development (2021-2025) and post-2020 individual country programmes of UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA; the upcoming Voluntary National Review of Turkmenistan on SDGs implementation; and the 2020 National Report to the UN Committee on Child Rights.

\textsuperscript{11} UNICEF Baseline Assessment for Child-related SDG indicators in Turkmenistan, March 2018, and UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
CHAPTER 2 - METHODOLOGY

2.1. Approach to the Analysis

From the outset, the youth situational analysis (YSitAn) has been formulated in terms of landscaping and mapping prioritised youth domains. While the focus is on capturing and assessing (where possible) any update, progress or prospect within those specific domains, the YSitAn has been genuinely intended as a non-judgmental, initial scoping exercise.

This approach was articulated through a rapid, mostly qualitative analysis, with quantitative data collected and processed from an initial literature review based on documentation submitted by UNICEF, UNFPA and UNDP-Turkmenistan.

A great emphasis of the analysis has been put on identifying and interpreting formulated and perceived aspirations, hopes, ambitions, as well as needs and concerns, of young people in various domains related to their overall development and transition to adulthood – with particular attention to the Leave No One Behind principle imperatives (e.g. gender, disability).

2.2. Process Development

Step-by-step methodological development

A joint UN Task Force coordinated by UNICEF-Turkmenistan was established to facilitate the analysis. Methodology and tool developments leading to the YSitAn included the following phases:

i. A desk-based review of the literature submitted by UNICEF, UNFPA and UNDP (which included, among other, joint studies, assessments and reports relevant to young people that helped inform the exercise);

ii. The formulation of a broad conceptual framework (research questions) for the YSitAn;

iii. An initial meeting with key UN and government stakeholders to seek agreement on the approach and methodology, introduce the inception report based on the desk review, and build consensus on the way forward;

iv. The development of methodological tools, specifically Key Informant Interview and Focus Group Discussion guides. Tools were rigorously reviewed through UNICEF’s Standard Operating Procedures for Quality Assurance and Ethical Standards. Interview frameworks were designed with a view to obtaining supplementary primary data and triangulate consultations findings with selected desk review data using individual insights and opinions and/or organizational inputs and perspectives;

v. Face-to-face, semi-structured and adaptive interviews with pre-identified informants in the cities of Ashgabat and Mary during January 14-25, 2019, in order to (i) clarify assumptions and/or evidence gaps from across the literature; and (ii) gather human insights into selected youth domains worthy of deeper exploration, considering major opportunities and challenges facing young people in Turkmenistan;

vi. An initial processing of the information obtained based on content to formulate preliminary conclusions;

vii. A follow-up/wrap-up meeting with all stakeholders to present general findings;

viii. The validation of the YSitAn report structure, outline and scope with UN partners;

ix. A first YSitAn draft, building on the detailed outcomes and analyses of the KII/FGDs;

x. A review of the first draft by participating UN agencies namely, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP, and the UNRC Office, and of the final draft by relevant government partners;

xi. A final YSitAn report integrating key edits and comments from the above review process, alongside policy recommendations and suggestions on the way forward (roadmap).

**Key informants**

KIIIs were conducted in the cities of Ashgabat and Mary with the following government and CSO stakeholders:

- **Ministry of Education** (Secondary School Education Department, Higher Educational Establishments and TVET Department);
- **Ministry of Health and Medical Industry** (Sanitary Epidemiological Services, State Sanitary Control Department in charge of nutrition; Treatment and Prevention Department with participation from the Department Head, Chief Paediatrician, Chief Obstetrician/Gynaecologist; Health Information Centre Director; Head of the Adolescent Reproductive Health Centre);
- **Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Population** (Division of Employment and Labour Resources, Division of Labour Conditions and Labour Relations, and Division of Methodology; Pension Fund; Mary Velayat’s Department of Labour and Employment);
- **Ministry of Youth Policy and Sports** (Department of Youth Policy and Mass Sports Events; Department of Sports Schools);
- **Parliament**: Committee on Education, Science, Culture and Youth Policy; and Committee on Social Policy;
- **Youth Organization** (Deputy Chairperson; Head of Mary Velayat’s Youth Organization branch; and Coordinator of the Youth Centre in Mary);
- **Women’s Union** (International Relations Department);
- **Mashgala NGO**, in Mary city;
- **Guardianship and Trusteeship Commission** of Mary city;
- **Commission on Minors’ Affairs** of Mary city;
- **Ombudsman Office**;
- **Orlan** (private employment agency in Ashgabat).

As for FGDs, the following work with DPO, parent and youth respondent groups (representing a balanced mix of gender, age, ability/disability, and location) was conducted:

- Two Focus Group Discussions with secondary school students of 7-9th and 10-11th grades (mix of girls and boys);
- A Focus Group Discussion with adolescent girls and young women (mix of girls and women, aged 18-30) at the Women’s Union;
- A Focus Group Discussion with the young women attending Mary’s Y-PEER Youth Centre;
- A Focus Group Discussion with students of 8-11th grades (mix of girls and boys) in a secondary school in Mary;
- A Focus Group Discussion with the parents of 7-11th grade students (mix of mothers and fathers) in a secondary school in Mary;
- A Focus Group Discussion with parents and families of young people with disabilities (mix of mothers and fathers) via Yenme NGO;
- A Focus Group Discussion with young people with disabilities aged 10-24 (mix of girls and boys) via Yenme NGO;
- A Focus Group Discussion with NGO and DPO staff working with young people with disabilities;
- A Focus Group Discussion with Y-PEER young people in Ashgabat (mix of girls and boys).
2.3. Conceptual Framework

Questions linked to priority youth domains

While the interconnectivity of youth issues is hardly debatable, the YSitAn TOR and their triangulation with findings from a preliminary overview of UN background documents carried out in the early phase of the consultancy allowed to flag priority youth ‘domains’ for exploration in Turkmenistan. Mapped priority areas have constituted a broad research framework for the present exercise, as follows:

- What are key opportunities and gaps for young people aged 10-24 y.o. in the area of access to youth-relevant, multisectoral (or cross-disciplinary) information, particularly through existing communication platforms?

- What are key opportunities and gaps for young people aged 10-24 y.o. related to (i) education quality (secondary, TVET and higher education); and (ii) formal and non-formal health (SRHR/mental health) services accessibility? How can we increase the adolescent- and youth-responsiveness of both sectors?

- What are key opportunities and gaps in the sphere of youth employability and employment mechanisms (focus on youth aged 14-15+), in particular with regards to: (i) access to practical work experience and economic opportunities, including in the private sector; (ii) access to entrepreneurship and other self-employment options; and (iii) active labour market policies systems (e.g. Public Employment Services)?

- What are key opportunities and gaps around the issue of social inclusion of vulnerable young people (aged 10-24 y.o.), especially regarding the educational and professional rehabilitation of young persons with disabilities?

- What are key opportunities and gaps in gender equality and female empowerment, in particular in areas linked to: (i) non-segregated learning, including at tertiary education level, and professional opportunities; (ii) unpaid work redistribution and the care economy; and (iii) female leadership?

- What are key opportunities and gaps in the area of adolescent and youth participation; in particular, what is the current state of youth representation in society? Where are entry points for adolescent and youth participation? And what are young people’s future prospects for participation?

Cross-cutting issues

In addition to the above key thematic youth domains, parallel dimensions were adopted and mainstreamed across relevant chapters as and when appropriate. These are the following: (i) key opportunities and gaps in the area of youth policy and programme formulation and implementation; (ii) rights protection (equality and non-discrimination), especially for vulnerable youth groups; (iii) gendered social norms and their impact across various domains; (iv) the role and influence of parenting in youth development prospects; and (v) existing, preferred and/or recommended stakeholders partnerships options on priority youth matters.

2.4. YSitAn Structure

The YSitAn is divided into four large Sections: (I) an Introduction setting the YSitAn general background, objectives and approach; (II) a Youth Profile covering all identified key youth domains and cross-cutting issues, with thematic findings and recommendations; (III) a Way Forward offering
final thoughts and advice on (1) the role of the new Ministry of Youth Policy and Sports and the implementation of the State Youth Policy Programme, and (2) a top-line roadmap for a multi-stakeholder call for action on youth in Turkmenistan.

### 2.5. Limitations and Mitigation Strategies

The following limitations were identified ahead of the analysis, and tackled accordingly throughout the assignment:

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<th>Methodological Limitations</th>
<th>Mitigation Strategies</th>
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| Complexity and diversity of areas covered may result in methodological and logistical/time challenges in capturing the full scope of the YSitAn. | - To clearly define key deliverables and acceptance process at the onset of the YSitAn development.  
- To prioritize domains/issues that will define the scope of the YSitAn as early as possible, with future adjustments as needed.  
- To provide regular updates to the joint UN Task Force on progress to ensure ongoing alignment with interagency expectations and priorities and quickly resolve any emerging challenges. |
| Interview guides could be casting the net too wide.                                                                 | - Draft questionnaires have been developed on the basis of (1) prioritised elements from the desk review documents (shared by UN partners) and (2) tentative youth priority themes listed in the YSitAn TOR.  
- Two levels of refinement of the draft questionnaires: (1) before the in-country mission; and/or (2) during the interagency meeting group, upon arrival of the consultant on the field. |
| Some stakeholders might feel they have already answered similar questions in the past (through earlier research and assessments). | - Two rounds of interagency reviews and quality assurance processes to ensure the removal of any inadequate questions or questions potentially fully covered in the past already. |
| Some officials/youth might not have so much time for interviews; there might be even less time due to interpretation requirements. | - Interviewing is adaptive and open to changing turns of conversations, as long as the process remains people-centred/adolescent-participatory and allows to capture information genuinely needed for the purpose of the YSitAn.  
- Draft questionnaires involving a large set of questions/variations to tap from, but questions actually raised during interviews to be selected from the set based on ministerial agendas/interests, youth’s perceived priorities/needs and other necessary considerations. |
| FGD questions are arranged along different age categories, mainstreaming gender and disability into all categories. Some questions, especially related to the use of SRHR services, might be problematic to raise in groups. | - Holding of age-specific group discussions and in some cases, single-sex consultations. |
SECTION II: YOUTH PROFILE

CHAPTER 1 – ACCESS TO INFORMATION

1.1. Youth and Access to Information: A Short Literature Review

National policy developments of interest and recent progress

The provision of age- and gender-specific, multidisciplinary information to adolescent girls and boys and young women and men in general is seen as essential to enable them to make informed, positive life choices. There are clear signs of increased ICT openness and access to youth-friendly and age-relevant information via different channels across Turkmenistan. While it is not possible to cover the full extent of information and channels provided to young people in the country, selected policy and programme developments in the areas of child rights literacy, adolescent healthy lifestyle awareness, career-related information, and youth’s means of communication are worth mentioning in this chapter.

Article 36 of the 2013 Law on State Youth Policy is clear about the provision of (multidisciplinary) ‘information services for young people through the establishment of information systems, information centers for youth, and cooperation with the media’\(^{13}\). The State Programme for the State Youth Policy of Turkmenistan 2015-2020 goes further through explicitly mentioning, among other, ‘support for public access by young people to the media and information resources of the Internet on legal, cultural and other educational issues’ and the ‘development and implementation of measures to enhance social, legal, psychological and educational information and advice to young citizens who remain in difficult circumstances’, especially with regards to their training and employment options\(^{14}\). In turn, the Plan of Action of the State Programme refers to specific information activities to be carried out in various sectors, such as the publication of ‘information manuals, guidelines (including Internet resources) in the field of strengthening the socio-political activity of the Turkmen youth’; familiarizing young people with ‘job vacancy information’; ‘training seminars in information centers on human rights’; and ‘strengthening the role of youth in conducting information events and seminars among the population on disease prevention’\(^{15}\).

The 2018-2020 State Programme For the Improvement of the Employment System for Young Professionals in Turkmenistan echoes the above. It emphasizes the provision of ‘informational, organizational and financial support to young professionals and media and internet-based information, so young people have access to legal, cultural and other types of knowledge related to their employment’\(^{16}\). It is worth noting that the President himself, in his 2019 annual address to the joint Parliament-Government session, reiterated the importance of ‘improving the legal culture and literacy of the population’, ‘clarify[ing] the content of the laws adopted by the Mejlis of Turkmenistan’ and ‘to this end, (…) us[ing] the capabilities of the media - newspapers and magazines, television and radio channels - to disseminate the provisions of legislative acts’\(^{17}\).

Concrete programmatic illustrations of this information enabling framework exist too. For instance, under the UNPFID 2016-2020 for Turkmenistan (Strategic Area 5 on Governance, Outcome 8 on participatory monitoring in line with human rights commitments), 2,270 persons – including youth,

\(^{13}\) Law on the State Youth Policy of Turkmenistan, 2013.
\(^{14}\) State Programme of the State Youth Policy of Turkmenistan 2015-2020.
\(^{15}\) Plan of Action for the State Programme on the Youth Policy of Turkmenistan 2015-2020.
\(^{16}\) 2018-2020 State Programme for the improvement of the employment system for young professionals in Turkmenistan (local English translation quoted).
\(^{17}\) Presidential speech of 7 February 2019.
vulnerable women, migrants and victims of trafficking (VOTs) – increased their awareness of human, migration and VOT rights as a result of 84 informational activities conducted in 2017. In the specific, adolescent-critical field of SRHR, information-sharing is encouraged through websites such as “Yashlyk” – providing up-to-date resources packaged in a youth-friendly and gender-responsive way. The Yashlyk website topics themselves were selected based on youth volunteers’ proposals. Furthermore, three UNFPA-supported Y-PEER Education Youth Centres were launched under the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Youth Organisation in the cities of Ashgabat and Mary to promote healthy living among peers – including adolescent reproductive health and gender equality. It should be noted that, in addition to centre-based information dissemination activities, Youth Centre volunteer trainers have been regularly involved in seasonal summer camp sessions on SRHR and knowledge-sharing events organised by state institutions (such as the National HIV Center).

Areas for improvement relevant to young people

Despite many advancements, the global ‘ICT and digital divide’ affecting nations beyond Turkmenistan points at the unequal use (across genders and ages) of ICT in the country. Specifically, among young Turkmen women aged 15-24, 57.5 percent have access to computers, and 39.3 percent use the Internet. Exposure to mass media (newspapers, radio and TV) among women aged 15-49 also stands at 20.7 percent. This may not necessarily reflect the consumption of mass media among young people; however, in the latest HBSC survey, only 7.5 percent of adolescent respondents indicated using the TV/radio as a source of information on issues such as STIs and unwanted pregnancies; 5 percent pointed at newspapers and magazines; and 3 percent at the Internet. Questions about the extent of information available on youth- and gender-sensitive topics in mass and online media – as well as about information channels awareness and literacy among youth – are yet to be fully addressed. Nonetheless, increasing young people’s access to age-appropriate and gender-responsive information outside school – particularly through digital and other platforms or devices (traditional media, adolescent circles, reading/leisure clubs, hotlines, outreach teams etc.) – could be further strengthened. Preliminary steps have been taken in that direction and are further detailed below based on discussions with YSitAn stakeholders.

1.2. Youth & Access to Information: Findings & Recommendations from the Consultations

Consultations held in the country confirm there exist a number of channels serving public information delivery purposes, although they are not all necessarily gender- nor youth-responsive. With the relevant investments and expertise, it should be possible to continue building on such channels to maximise the delivery of youth-friendly information in critical areas such as mental health and SRHR. Specific impact evaluation work is also needed to assess the outreach, uptake and performance of various information channels depending on target groups and geographic locations.

Information outreach in holiday camps

Children's health centres are a great attraction for children and adolescents aged 6 to 14 years. These centres have the opportunity to receive in the summer and winter periods more than 45,000 children.

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19 2016 SRH Education Assessment, UNFPA, 2016.
20 2016 SRH Education Assessment, UNFPA, 2016.
21 2016 SRH Education Assessment, UNFPA, 2016.
22 MICS data, 2016.
24 UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
25 ME data.
including children with disabilities and orphans. The success of these activities could largely benefit adolescent-friendly, multidisciplinary information dissemination. For example, using peer-to-peer and mentorship methodology approaches for the provision of age- and gender-specific information during the camp season could potentially have a wide impact on adolescents, both in and outside camps (as those who attended the camps and received the information could, in turn, share it with siblings and friends once they return home). The exact, youth- and gender-responsive training approach to be used for that purpose could build on SRHR peer education seasonal sessions already conducted in summer camps and on the development of a trained cohort of trainers to support the sustainability of these approaches. This would therefore require further discussion with relevant UN agencies. In doing so, it should also be kept in mind that attending summer and winter camps is fee—based, which might constitute an entry barrier for less privileged families (At the same time, along with the entry fees for the camps, there is a system of subsidized preferential payment)\(^*\).

**School-based information-sharing initiatives**

In addition to a regularly updated healthy lifestyle programme, schools organise ad-hoc information sessions and child/youth-centred activities in various contexts. School girls’ clubs (from 8th grade) and individual school requests for presentations by SRHR and psychosocial specialists from the health sector were mentioned among regular initiatives carried out by education establishments. The relative independence of school management bodies in that respect is a strong asset for Turkmenistan and needs to remain cultivated. Girls’ and boys’ clubs can play instrumental roles in knowledge sharing by offering ‘safe spaces’ to adolescents and young people, where gender-sensitive topics are discussed in confidence and group support is provided. Such clubs may also be used to reinforce and deepen learning around essential life skills imparted via the national Basic Life Skills curriculum (focused on healthy lifestyles and depending on age, sexuality education – see next chapter). It would be beneficial to explore where girls’ clubs currently work best, and seek to replicate and mainstream the model across education institutes for both girls and boys at various education levels. School-related information delivery initiatives could also take advantage of increased integration and coordination with Y-PEER school-based activities on SRHR knowledge generation. For instance, in Mary, from November up until mid-December, Y-PEER conducts sensitisation sessions in several schools at the 8th–11th grade levels, as well as parental meetings.

**The Health Information Centre**

Health communication work among the population within the framework of the President’s State Health Program, coordinated by the MoHMI Information Centre, is carried out with the help of verbal, print and mixed communication interventions with the assistance of the media and public organizations\(^27\). In-country consultations further generated useful insights into promising mechanisms implemented by the Health & Lifestyle Department of the Health Information Centre. The latter uses an adaptive approach to multisectoral health information delivery: interagency outreach information teams are dispatched daily by the Department to visit children and youth (e.g. in schools, training centres and university, workplaces, military establishments…) and talk about a variety of health concerns, using age-appropriate content and campaigns. Feedback collected locally is then integrated into annually updated health communication plans. It would be highly beneficial to allow for additional flexibility (e.g. quarterly revisions/adjustments) and monitoring of such plans to further enhance the youth responsiveness of this proactive approach. Another area for consideration would be to bring together (merge) the Department’s outreach taskforce and Y-PEER joint outreach taskforce (deployed locally with other public agencies) in cases where SRHR information is disseminated. This would increase the legitimacy and outreach of Y-PEER work, while providing the Department with readily

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\(^26\) ME information.

\(^27\) MoHMI provided expanded information on the health information centre’s scope work.
available resources and additional expertise in this specific area. And in addition to the annually updated and approved health communication plan, there are short-term - monthly, weekly plans in conjunction with the concerned healthcare institutions and public organizations.

**Other mass media channels to communicate on health**

Other information channels on health and well-being related issues discussed during meetings with stakeholders include the following:

- **Public health radio messaging**, some of which could be devoted to growing/emerging adolescent and youth health issues (e.g. in consultation with Youth Organisation representatives, or based on schools’ feedback).
- **Month-focused thematic information and advocacy campaigns.** These are already used in the country for advocacy about road safety (September) and cancer prevention (March), for example. With the additional necessary information resources and referral systems for youth and their families, such a model could be replicated to earmark a ‘young people’s month’. The chosen month could be dedicated to raising awareness of adolescent-specific health and well-being issues (e.g. mental health disorders) with all children, young people and their parents.
- **“The health of the nation - the wealth of the state” (“Health”) TV show** (also acting as an interactive platform for people to raise their questions via phone and as an information resource on where to seek specialist help). Information outreach through traditional mass media makes sense where access to the Internet and social media remains more variable across the country. Both the awareness and appeal of the show among younger audiences could be further increased via expert advice on how to enhance the youth-responsiveness of the programme, e.g. by committing specific episodes to adolescents and young people’s issues, inviting young people to share experiences directly on the show, etc. This would also further strengthen the use of mass media for the dissemination of youth-friendly information.

**Teen information hotlines (upcoming)**

In-country consultations pointed at the possible reactivation of teen hotlines (currently under consideration by the MoHMI), based on positive feedback from the tobacco and drug use prevention hotlines. Reopening adolescent hotlines would also include staffing them with adolescent-trained psychologists and social workers, ensuring the youth-responsiveness of the information and advice provided. It is worth noting that this would reinforce the provisions of the State Programme for the State Youth Policy of Turkmenistan 2015-2020, calling for the ‘intensification of measures to provide social assistance and psycho-social services to young citizens who find themselves in difficult situations’.

**Areas for future research**

In general, while there is a number of channels throughout the country serving information delivery purposes, it would be useful to get a better understanding of the distribution of the use of such channels across the country together with their respective impact, disaggregated per age, gender and ability/disability.
It could also be beneficial to **build on the Parliament-commissioned rapid assessment of the population’s digital consumption** to find out about new technologies and youth social media platforms (such as IMO and others) whose utilisation could be maximised to reach out to young people with relevant age- and gender-specific information using behavioural change strategies. In turn, **findings could serve to update the 2014 online protection policy of the country with age-specific measures looking at the risk-aware use of the Internet and regulations against online abuses and cyber-bullying** (with due attention to more vulnerable user groups e.g. adolescent girls). It is worth noting that this particular area of research and associated policy developments have been **prioritised by the new UN-supported Generation Unlimited global partnership** and could accelerate the **national integration of SDG target 5.b on the enhanced use of enabling technology among women**.

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28 According to information gathered during meetings in Ashgabat in January 2019, the Parliament commissioned a rapid assessment as part of efforts to operationalize the new Digital Economy Concept approved by the President, at the end of 2018. The idea behind was to harness digital platforms used by the population to introduce new digital services and products.

29 Access to Wi-Fi, 3/4G and smartphones might still be highly variable across locations, as in the case of Mary city for example (based on FGDs held on 21-22 January 2019).


31 Generation Unlimited, UN, 2018 (brochure).

CHAPTER 2 - HEALTH SERVICES (SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS, AND MENTAL HEALTH)

2.1. Youth and Health: A Short Literature Review on SRHR and Mental Health

National policy developments of interest and recent progress

Major milestones were achieved by the GoT in the area of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), a critical focus of SDG 3 on Health and Well-Being. First, a Law On the Prevention of Diseases caused by HIV was passed in April 2016, and a 2017-2021 National Programme to fight the spread of HIV and Parenteral Virus Hepatitis in Turkmenistan was developed, and the Law of Turkmenistan “On the protection of the health of citizens”, which is the basic legal document in the field of health protection. Second, ‘Basics of Life Skills’ (BLS, or healthy lifestyle) was introduced in 2007 as a mandatory subject in secondary schools for grades 1 to 10. Sexuality education is also part of it for 7th-10th grades, i.e. targeted at adolescents aged 14-17. The UN has been supporting with institutional capacity development for secondary school teachers in this subject. In 2016, 51 percent of teachers (of them, 95 percent women, 5 percent men) in the country were certified in comprehensive gender-sensitive and age-appropriate reproductive health education (62 percent of certified teachers were from urban settlements and 38 percent from rural zones).

Furthermore, three UNFPA-supported Peer Education Youth Centres were launched under the MoE and Youth Organisation in the capital, Ashgabat, and Mary city. As explained earlier, these centres promote healthy living, including adolescent reproductive health and gender equality, among peers. Y-PEER education approach is typically called in to deal with traditionally more sensitive issues, such as HIV/STIs, unwanted pregnancy, contraceptives means, and gender-based violence. Using peer to peer method, the UN reached out to 26,000 people in 2016 and 6,000 in 2017 (55 percent boys, 45 percent girls) during awareness-raising campaigns on healthy lifestyle among adolescents. The latter greatly contributed to expanding education on, among other, HIV prevention in the country. Indeed, there is evidence that government-supported initiatives had a clear impact on Turkmen youth’s awareness of key issues: among 15- and 17-year-old respondents from the latest HBSC survey, 84 percent said they had been taught about the danger of HIV and STIs, and more than three fourths reported they had been informed about early pregnancy risks at school.

Mental health is another issue of critical importance to children and youth everywhere in the world, especially during the adolescence period characterised by major brain changes. On that front, the GoT adopted the National Programme on Mental Health of the Population in Turkmenistan for 2018-2022 and its Plan of Action. Although it is not youth-specific, the latter targets the detection, prevention, treatment and rehabilitation of a wide range of mental health illnesses comprehensively (including through psychologists and awareness raising), and calls for the adequate coordination, implementation and financing of such measures. Meanwhile, the State Programme for the State Youth Policy of

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34 2016 SRH Education Assessment, UNFPA, 2016.
35 2016 SRH Education Assessment, UNFPA, 2016.
37 Realizing the Full Potential of Adolescents and Youth in Turkmenistan, UNFPA, 2017.
38 2016 SRH Education Assessment, UNFPA, 2016.
40 Young People with Disabilities: Global Study on ending GBV and realising SRHR, UNFPA, July 2018.
Turkmenistan 2015-2020 envisages ‘the creation and development of a system of institutions of social services for the medical-psychological-pedagogical rehabilitation of youth’.

**Areas for improvement relevant to young people**

First, further updates of the national standards on SRHR education (endorsed by the Ministry of Education in 2014) are needed to add anaemia prevention as a tool for the improvement of reproductive health among adolescent girls. This would require close collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Medical Industry. Second, even in countries where comprehensive sexuality education exists, training of teachers and other providers need to be enhanced so that they are comfortable with the topics involved; supportive of young as well as older adolescents; able to provide accurate and full information; and equipped to refer young people to appropriate health and support services.

The percentage of teachers of the Basics of Life Health and Safety school subject in secondary schools who have undergone refresher courses on comprehensive teaching of reproductive health has increased from 51% (2017) to 68% (2018) in accordance with the age and sex of students.”. Despite this progress, rolling out the implementation of the standards in secondary schools requires further adjustments. In particular, BLS teachers’ curriculum needs further modernisation and the adequate adaptation of SRHR education methodologies and materials for pre-and in-service teacher training in line with international standards. Continuing education should also be further planned. National programmes and standards on Y-PEER also need translation into the Turkmen language.

These measures are all the more important as some SRHR-related knowledge and awareness gaps persist among adolescents, slowing progress achieved towards SDG 3 on Health and Well-Being. According to the latest HBSC survey, only about a quarter of youth respondents were able to give correct answers regarding HIV infection means (a similar proportion was reflected by the MICS survey among young women aged 15-24 y.o.). Adolescents also showed a lack of understanding about the symptoms of STI infections and the majority of respondents did not know where, if necessary, they could get adequate testing and counselling services. MICS data also pointed to a very low percentage of women aged 15 onwards who expressed accepting attitudes toward people living with HIV (1 percent). Another area for improvement is the age-specific fertility rate for 15-19 y.o. adolescent girls, currently at 28 births per 1,000 women (SDG indicator 3.7.2). While this number is not yet disaggregated per single age year and therefore does not give the full picture, notable differences by regions exist (e.g. 46 births per 1,000 women in Ahal velayat). In general, the adolescent birth rate remains 1.4 times higher in rural compared to urban areas.

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43 Towards realizing the full potential of Adolescents and Youth: UNFPA Strategy on Adolescents and Youth, 2012.
44 2016 SRH Education Assessment, UNFPA, 2016.
45 2016 SRH Education Assessment, UNFPA, 2016.
47 2016 SRH Education Assessment, UNFPA, 2016.
49 MICS data, 2016.
51 MICS data, 2016.
52 MICS data, 2016.
Although far less research is available on the specific issue of adolescent mental health in the country, complexities can be pointed at here too. While the National Programme on Mental Health of the Population in Turkmenistan for 2018-2022 and its Plan of Action are a progressive first step taken by the country to further the psychological well-being of the general population, the Plan could benefit younger, vulnerable categories. To do so, more evidence-based adolescent- and youth-responsive action is needed. As shown in the HBSC survey, complaints on change of mood were reported by about 30 percent of adolescent respondents, with one in four suffering from irritation and/or nervousness. Similarly, complaints about insomnia were reported by nearly 15 percent of children (13 y.o. adolescents being the most concerned). Furthermore, 18 percent of interviewed adolescents stated that over the previous year, they had periods of dramatically depressed mood. With age, this indicator was steadily increasing, and girls experienced this twice more often. Although direct correlation could only be established through proper research, such data may also be important to look at in the context of suicide deaths in Turkmenistan – numbered by the WHO at 136 in 2014 (539 in 2017), 43 of which affected the 15-24 y.o. group.

2.2. Youth and Health: Findings and Recommendations from the Consultations

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Consultations revealed several positive steps taken to increase the accessibility of SRHR services for adolescents. Adolescent age department was opened for to adolescent girls aged 10-19. Consultations also confirmed the planned expansion of adolescent-specific services for 15-19 y.o., which will be offered by pre-existing female Reproductive Health units at etrap level (including via phone consultations). This means over a hundred SRHR rooms throughout the country made available for use by adolescents, in addition to six operating adolescent-specific RH centres in the capital and each velayat. All of them will be able to deliver free contraceptives, without requiring parental consent. Currently, Sexual and Reproductive Health services at the central and velayat levels have limited capacity to address adolescent somatic health problems

In general, youth FGDs indicated a good level of trust in adolescent-friendly services (i.e. in terms of respecting principles of anonymity, confidentiality and professionalism). But whether adolescents – girls, especially – feel safe and confident using such services from their own initiative remains to be time-tested. Clear signs of community behavioural change were reported; yet, to encourage this trend, continuous and culturally-sensitive awareness-raising efforts are needed. Wider acceptance at family and society level indeed can foster a more enabling environment for the upholding of adolescents and youth’s sexual and reproductive health rights, thereby accelerating the realisation of SDG 3, target 3.7 on SRHR, in Turkmenistan.

It is also worth noting that, through the rolling out of adolescent-responsive RH services, there may be a considerable opportunity to maximise the delivery of age- and gender-specific health information and treatment beyond SRHR. Discussions held at Ashgabat’s RH centre with adolescent services staff showed the latter faces issues outside the scope of SRHR on a daily basis. Such concerns usually connect to holistic adolescent health and well-being counselling needs, e.g. on healthy diets, eating disorders and body management issues. At this point in time, ARH services at central and velayat levels may have limited capacity to address peripheral adolescent health concerns, and mostly do so on an ad-

58 https://www.who.int/mental_health/suicide-prevention/country-profiles/TKM.pdf
hoc basis (for example, by calling in specialised colleagues to help adolescent girls ‘on the spot’). In
the same vein, they may be able to collaborate on a punctual basis with counsellors and NGOs in
Ashgabat for raising awareness of specific issues that come to their attention.

Still, the benefits of consolidating, systemising and upscaling similar cooperation and referral
interventions across various adolescent-specific health services (including psychosocial support),
starting at the etrap level, could be much wider. This could include better targeting of general health
information provisions, and better treatment outreach. In turn, increased cooperation and adolescent-
responsive referral could reinforce the prevention and early detection of a range of well-being issues
among youth, and alleviate the workload of traditional local interagency committees looking at complex
medico-social cases at etrap level. However, unlocking the case management capacity of all ARH
services would require targeted empowerment measures for the sector. Only then could the sector
adequately respond to interrelated youth’s health concerns, and diagnostic and referral needs. This
approach therefore requires further consultations with relevant UN agencies, whose work on youth-
responsive health services (especially youth-friendly SRHR services) has been prioritised in the
recent UN Youth Strategy59.

Mental Health

Adolescent girls met in Mary city detailed some of the stress and anxiety symptoms they regularly
display (i.e. from once a month to every other day, depending on respondents): sleeping issues (sleeping
too little or too much), anger (e.g. throwing objects, shouting), cries, loss of motivation and appetite,
isolation, or diversion strategies such as compulsive shopping or cleaning. They also indicated that on
(rare) occasions, worrying and sadness would slip out of control and last for quite a long time, with
such episodes happening once to three times a year on average. While no generalisation can be done on
that basis, this anecdotal evidence corroborates mental health findings from the latest HBSC survey.
When asked about who they turn to for support in such cases, girls mentioned first their mothers,
followed by other relatives and friends – before any reference to health or counselling services.

Interestingly, discussions repeatedly pointed at the country’s evidence-based reliance on sports to
prevent and address general well-being -including mental health- issues among young people. However,
the above observations suggest the general approach to tackling mental health issues could be made
more holistic through the addition and scaling up of adolescent-responsive ‘talking therapies’ (as
is currently envisaged by the country). As elsewhere, not all adults or parents necessarily feel well-
equipped to respond to adolescent concerns, hence the need for school- and health house-based
psychologists (as emphasised in local-level consultations). Consequently, accelerating existing plans
to deploy more adolescent-trained counsellors and social workers down to the city/district level,
with a focus on education institutions (e.g. including mental health assessments in students’ yearly
medical checks), could achieve scalable, cost-effective impacts on prevention and detection. In the
same vein, anonymous and confidential ‘teen hotlines’ with adolescent/youth-specific trained
psychologists would add to the list of ‘safe spaces’ available to young people to open up and receive
professional counselling on emerging mental health concerns. It is worth highlighting that coordinated
measures with the UN in that space would contribute to the acceleration of the realisation of the State
Youth Policy Programme 2015-2020 (which calls for ‘social services for consultation, psychological,
pedagogical issues, as well as on the family, sex education, healthy life style’) as well as of the new
UN Youth Strategy, which prioritizes youth-friendly mental health services60.

59 UN Youth Strategy – ‘Youth 2030’.
60 UN Youth Strategy – ‘Youth 2030’.
Areas for future research

Going forward, the GoT and relevant UN agencies could discuss the feasibility of carrying a joint assessment of the possible linkages between mental health and the emphasis put on education and professional achievements among school and higher education students, including those with disabilities, in Turkmenistan. One way to do that would be through testing the hypothesis in the next HBSC study. While this type of research could deliver greater insight into ways to accelerate the realisation of SDG 3 on Health and Well-Being by 2030, practical feasibility issues as well as ethical research challenges (e.g. where suicidal thoughts might be involved) require further consideration.
CHAPTER 3 - EDUCATION AND TRAINING

3.1. Youth, Education and Training: a Short Literature Review

National policy developments of interest and recent progress

Overall, Turkmenistan shows strong and healthy education records. The Law on Education guarantees free, mandatory education for children and adolescents aged 6 to 17\textsuperscript{61}, and the country recently moved from an 11- to a 12-year compulsory education scheme\textsuperscript{62}. The transition rate to secondary school is 99.8 percent and the percentage of children of secondary school age currently attending secondary school or higher is 98.4\textsuperscript{63}. Technical/professional education is also available, and in 2016, 35,500 children were enrolled in 129 primary vocational schools in Turkmenistan, and 21,457 in 42 secondary vocational schools\textsuperscript{64}.

In line with the targets of SDG 4, the GoT approved in June of 2016 a policy document on quality education based on international child-friendly standards, which set the overall approach to ensuring gender-sensitive, inclusive, safe, protective and child-centred standards and benchmarks across pre-school, primary and secondary education\textsuperscript{65}. For all school disciplines, and pre-school institutions, mandatory state educational standards have been developed. Optional classes also exist in several subjects\textsuperscript{66}. It is worth noting that the Regional Large-Scale Central Asian Programme for Student Assessment (CAPSA) conducted in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan in 2014 showed good results in maths and reading among Turkmenistan pupils (SDG indicator 4.6.1), who also mostly outperformed students in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan\textsuperscript{67}.

After completing secondary school, youth may continue their education at one of the specialized/TVET institutes and higher education establishments.\textsuperscript{68} Admittance into higher education institutions is competitive: at age 18 y.o., only 18.6 percent of young men and 20.2 percent of young women are still attending some form of education\textsuperscript{69}. Completion of a course of study in higher institutions may take from five to six years – after which PhDs and doctorates can be obtained through supervised research\textsuperscript{70}.

In order to deepen and accelerate educational reforms in the country, meet growing educational needs, deepen knowledge, provide lifelong education and training, improve lifelong learning for all, including children and young people, the following state documents were adopted: the Socio-economic Development of the country for 2019-2025 \textsuperscript{"}, approved by the Presidential Decree\textsuperscript{67}; Concept of the development of the digital education system in Turkmenistan and "Concept of enhancement of teaching foreign languages."

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{61} UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
  \item \textsuperscript{62} UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
  \item \textsuperscript{63} MICS data, 2016.
  \item \textsuperscript{64} UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
  \item \textsuperscript{65} The GoT and UNPFD 2016-2020 – Progress Report 2016/2017.
  \item \textsuperscript{66} UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
  \item \textsuperscript{67} Julia Levin & Mira Mykyeva, Kyrgyz Academy of Education, Development of a Regional Large-Scale Student Assessment Central Asian Programme for Student Assessment (CAPSA), 2016, in UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
  \item \textsuperscript{68} UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
  \item \textsuperscript{69} MICS data, 2015-2016.
  \item \textsuperscript{70} UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
\end{itemize}
Areas for improvement relevant to young people

Like in other countries, areas for improvement remain in the field of education which may be of particular importance to adolescents and young people. Public spending on education as a share of gross domestic product decreased from 4.9 percent in 2014 to 3.3 percent in 2016\(^7\), calling for the need to ensure sustained financing for the education sector\(^7\) in line with the spending target benchmarks of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (4% to 6% of GDP allocated to education; and/or 15% to 20% of public expenditure\(^7\)). Within these funding parameters, priority given to young people could be further emphasized.

Despite increases in the number of young people studying at post-secondary level, the demand for higher education still cannot be fully met and therefore, many students pursue tertiary studies in other countries\(^7\). The GoT could also consider formally adopting a system of continuing education and lifelong learning by lifting current legal restrictions to it (e.g. age limits for education). This would help provide opportunities for youth and others to deepen knowledge and upgrade skills throughout their life, thereby maintaining and strengthening their employability potential over the lifecycle\(^5\). While articles 11 and 13 of the Law of Turkmenistan on Education on correspondence, evening and distance learning have not yet been fully articulated in practice\(^6\), they could effectively support increased access to vocational education among youth.

In that regard, it is worth noting that the new UN Youth Strategy and recently launched Generation Unlimited partnership – dedicated to enhancing secondary education learning, employability skills and economic empowerment among all youth, especially the most vulnerable ones\(^7\) – constitute major resources to draw on in the context of Turkmenistan’s continued efforts to deliver Agenda 2030.

3.2. Youth, Education and Training: Findings and Recommendations from the Consultations

‘Work readiness’ in secondary education

Targeted efforts to enhance the work readiness of secondary school students and improve the school-to-work transition were quoted in meetings with stakeholders. At the meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers of Turkmenistan held in January 2019, issues were discussed comprehensively - from updating school curricula (with a focus on strengthening vocational learning) to understanding the needs for high-level technical specialists in different sectors.

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\(^7\) UNICEF estimate based on the State Statistics Committee of Turkmenistan, Statistical Yearbook of Turkmenistan 2017, in UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.

\(^7\) Also emphasised by the President in his 2019 annual address to the joint Parliament-Government session, during which he called for ‘appropriate educational system reforms’ and ‘changes in legislations providing for the financing, management and structuring of this system’.


\(^7\) The State Statistical Committee of Turkmenistan, Statistical Yearbook of Turkmenistan, 2017, in UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018. This was also featured in The World We Want – Post-2015 National Consultations in Turkmenistan, 2013.

\(^7\) Rapid Integrated Assessment for Turkmenistan – Contributions to Turkmenistan’s Roadmap to attain the Sustainable Development Goals, 2017.

\(^6\) Rapid Integrated Assessment for Turkmenistan – Contributions to Turkmenistan’s Roadmap to attain the Sustainable Development Goals, 2017. This was also featured in The World We Want – Post-2015 National Consultations in Turkmenistan, 2013.

\(^7\) Generation Unlimited, UN, 2018 (brochure).
Turkmenistan has a 12-year system of general secondary education. In Crafts and shop classes, students acquire technical skills, such as minor repairs, carpentry and metalworking skills, and others. In connection with the needs of modern society, new academic disciplines have been introduced into the curricula of secondary schools (ecology, basic economics, culture of behaviour, cultural heritage of Turkmenistan, world culture, information and communication and innovative technologies, modelling and graphics, a number of new foreign languages: French, English, German, Arabic, Japanese ...), modern technologies and interactive teaching methods are being introduced into the educational process. Studying the subject “Basics of Economics” (grades 10-11) allows teenagers for the first time to understand financial and business concepts. Olympiads, competitions and exhibitions for schoolchildren are also organized regularly to support the development of entrepreneurial and innovative thinking of young people. Industrial training is being introduced through the organization of visits of schoolchildren to production (for example, plants, factories and farms), observation of the work of specialists and conversations with them about their professions.

**Importantly, job shadowing and other mentoring schemes specifically have been recognised as a ‘promising solution’ by the new UN-supported Generation Unlimited global partnership**\(^78\) and could largely benefit from being **systematised across the country**. The possibility of using this type of industrial training as state-subsidized “summer internships” could be explored (a placement in the company for 1-3 months) for young people from 15 years and older. **Strategies to be used in that regard might be developed closely with the UN, whose recent Youth Strategy stresses the importance of school-to-work transition approaches**\(^79\). From initial interactions with students, it seemed the short internship concept generated particular curiosity and interest among youth (and, from a longer-term perspective, could also increase students’ appeal for specific economic sectors).

**Access to and perceptions about post-secondary and tertiary education and training**

Particularly a widespread culture of ‘high achiever’, both academically and professionally, may generate heartfelt pressure to do well among adolescents.

Despite ongoing efforts to revitalise technical and vocational education and training, the limited availability of affordable, quality TVET options means secondary school students’ continue to actively seek university admission, both nationally and abroad (e.g. in Russia, Byelorussia, China). University, as opposed to TVET, remains perceived as the most prestigious form of education. On the other hand, **the youth employability benefits of market-relevant technical education (offered by several ministries, e.g. MoE, Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Railway...) remain to be better understood**. This is all the more critical as the country requires less empirical economists and more technical specialists across various sectors, in line with the gradual transformation of the economy.

**Education quality and the role of multi-stakeholder cooperation**

In general, the deepening of reforms related to TVET could be explored in close partnership with relevant agencies from the UN, whose recently adopted **Youth Strategy emphasizes the improvement of skills development systems globally**\(^80\).

Government plans to further strengthen TVET, including suggested options to support greater numbers of specialised and higher education trained professors (e.g. using partner universities abroad, visiting professors, etc.), are therefore very timely. The noted inter-ministerial cooperation in this area and in higher education (e.g. among the MoE, MoLSP and MFA) is welcome. Indeed, as is the case in other

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\(^{78}\) Generation Unlimited, UN, 2018 (brochure).

\(^{79}\) UN Youth Strategy – ‘Youth 2030’.

\(^{80}\) UN Youth Strategy – ‘Youth 2030’.
countries, improving the quality of learning and skills training systems often go hand in hand with strengthening the business enabling environment and nurturing private sector development.

Precisely, one area for discussion could be in terms of public-private partnerships for employers to get involved in the practical delivery of TVET and higher education curricula. Carefully designed incentives for businesses and a focus on the win-win outcomes of such partnerships could go a long way in increasing the pool of accredited teachers, trainers and professors available to serve in the country. It is also worth noting that an apprenticeship-style training model that would maximise time spent by trainees directly in (preferably innovative, knowledge-based) companies resonated very strongly with secondary school students. As a matter of fact, such approaches have been recognised as ‘promising solutions’ by the recently launched Generation Unlimited global partnership81.

If not planned already, a solid mapping of post-secondary TVET provisions existing across the country and offered by various state entities might also be used to identify other opportunities and challenges linked to further TVET strengthening. Where necessary, systemic-level measures, such as revisions to the national qualifications framework in line with labour demand and the simplification of TVET institutes’ own certification requirements, might need to be explored too, in cooperation with relevant UN agencies.

In addition to the useful ‘open door’ annual events organised by specialised and TVET institutes for secondary school students, the GoT should consider communicating broadly (using social media and creative industries) around quality improvements brought to the national skills development system. This may help further promote the positive image of TVET nationwide, making it an increasingly tangible, attractive and informed choice for adolescents and young people, thereby supporting the achievement of SDG 4, target 4.4 (skills building for employment and entrepreneurship).

**Education and training inclusion**

In-country discussions pointed at the planned increase in the digitalization of resources, materials and teaching methods across the education system. Recently, the President of Turkmenistan called for more ‘work to improve relevant legislations’ in the area of digital education, a concept officially adopted by the government82. Interestingly, digitalisation could also serve larger education inclusion purposes; and a high-level reform focus on digital learning offers an opportunity to link up requested legal revisions and amendments with education inclusiveness objectives.

For example, by facilitating access to distant, remote and e-learning, the GoT would boost the effective implementation of existing national regulations around the provision of alternative specialised, vocational and tertiary education for all (including lifelong learning opportunities). This in turn would likely benefit most vulnerable youth groups (e.g. young women combining care responsibilities with their studies; students with physical disabilities; or students located in remote geographical areas). In fact, online and long-distance learning for young people in hard-to-reach communities has been recognised as a ‘promising solution’ by Generation Unlimited83. Moving forward, implementation practicalities would benefit from joint planning with UN stakeholders, whose Youth Strategy shares a similar focus on quality education, including lifelong learning opportunities.

81 Generation Unlimited, UN, 2018 (brochure).
82 Presidential speech of 7 February 2019.
83 Generation Unlimited, UN, 2018 (brochure).
Other initiatives such as bridge courses learning institutes for young people aged 18+ to complete their secondary education (one of them being in Mary city) further testify of the GoT’s commitment to Leaving No One Behind in the area of education and training. Securing education and skills expertise to scale up the development of such institutes and guarantee the continuous quality and relevance of training in light of modern market needs is paramount. Indeed, strong remedial education methods could provide considerable advantages to large numbers of underprivileged youth across the country, further accelerating the realisation of SDG target 4.4 on (technical and vocational) skills building through alternative learning pathways 84.

Importantly, all of the above would be in full accordance with the 2013 Law on State Youth Policy – which includes a provision on the ‘development of various forms of educational work in special educational institutions, in institutions for out-of-school education, in adolescent and youth centers at the place of residence’ 85 – as well as its Plan of Action 86 which seeks to ‘organize training activities, professional training, retraining and upgrading’ to ‘increase the competitiveness of young people on the labour market’.

Areas for future research

It would be interesting to better understand the profile and background of current TVET and university students in Turkmenistan to get a more accurate image of higher education inclusiveness and undertake appropriate action accordingly.

Besides, some instances of secondary school drop-out came up in discussions at the local level – with causes ranging from teenage pregnancy to financial difficulties of families, forcing children to drop education to bring in additional income. Currently, these cases appear to be addressed on a needs-basis (e.g. through the provision of work to unemployed parents), as and when they arise 87. This issue requires further research in line with Turkmen national regulations, particular attention should be paid to youth with disabilities, from remote areas, and from other particularly vulnerable backgrounds (e.g. orphans).

85 Article 21, Law on the State Youth Policy of Turkmenistan, August 29, 2013 No. 423-IV.
86 Plan of actions to be implemented under the framework of the State Programme on Youth Policy of Turkmenistan for 2015-2020.
87 Also confirmed in an untitled Social Protection document shared by UNICEF.
CHAPTER 4 - TRANSITION TO WORK AND YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

4.1. Youth and the World of Work: A Short Literature Review

National policy developments of interest and recent progress

With a view to diversifying the economy and increasing employment opportunities in the context of SDG 8 implementation (particularly target 8.5 on full and productive employment for all), a series of important measures took place in 2016-2017, including policy reforms. A new Law on Employment was adopted in 2016, which spells out the population’s rights both in case of employment and unemployment (i.e. access to social protection)\(^88\). A Presidential Programme on Socio-Economic Development of the Country for 2018-2024 was also launched with support from the UN, which further proposed options to integrate relevant SDGs, targets and indicators into it\(^89\). The Programme currently plans to maintain annual GDP growth rate at 6.2% -8.2% during the period 2019-2025 and to boost macroeconomic regulations and indicators while pursuing the modernization of the financial and banking sector\(^90\). Several related initiatives have been recently approved in that sense; they include government plans for the development of the digital economy 2019-2025, the preparation of a plan of action to introduce digital banking, and the review of investment policies to support the private sector’s role in expanding economic opportunities in a range of sectors\(^91\).

On that front, the number of newly created jobs is expected to increase from 10,897 (2015) to 92,984 by 2020, according to the MoLSP\(^92\), and so did already the number of registered individuals seeking jobs (78,200 people in 2014, and 80,300 in 2015\(^93\)). Young people aged 18-29 y.o. represented 49.4 percent of the total number of registered applicants in 2015\(^94\), and most candidates (58.2 percent) had basic education levels (secondary or incomplete secondary education, with no vocational education or training qualifications\(^95\)).

In that context, the GoT has taken targeted action to prioritise access to work for young men and women, as reflected in the 2013 Law on State Youth Policy (and its implementing 2015-2020 State Programme). The Law stresses the ‘economic independence of young citizens and the realization of their labour rights’ through active ‘support to youth employment centres and services, youth student groups’, ‘youth associations implementing programs in the field of employment and professional orientation of young people’ and ‘activities for the promotion of employment, vocational guidance, training, re-training and advanced training of young citizens’\(^96\). The Law (and accompanying Programme) further mentions the ‘development of measures to stimulate employers to create workplaces for young people’\(^97\). The 2018-2020 State Programme for the Improvement of the Employment System for Young Professionals in

\(^90\) Rapid Integrated Assessment for Turkmenistan – Contributions to Turkmenistan’s Roadmap to attain the Sustainable Development Goals, 2017.
\(^91\) GoT and UNPFD 2016-2020, Progress Report 2016-2017. Also re-emphasised by the President of Turkmenistan in his annual address to the joint session of the parliament and the government, on 7 February 2019.
\(^94\) Rapid Integrated Assessment for Turkmenistan – Contributions to Turkmenistan’s Roadmap to attain the Sustainable Development Goals, 2017.
\(^95\) Rapid Integrated Assessment for Turkmenistan – Contributions to Turkmenistan’s Roadmap to attain the Sustainable Development Goals, 2017.
\(^96\) Law on the State Youth Policy of Turkmenistan, August 29, 2013, No. 423-IV2013.
\(^97\) Law on the State Youth Policy of Turkmenistan, August 29, 2013, No. 423-IV2013.
Turkmenistan contains a similar focus, reflecting SDG 8 and particularly target 8.5 on full and productive employment for all including youth. The Programme notably stresses linkages between ‘improving the system of training of young professionals’ and ‘coordinated economic development of the country’, justifying the ‘growing demand for specialists, teachers, engineers and doctors with higher education’. Thus, the emphasis is on ‘creating equal conditions for young citizens to obtain education’, and ‘supporting young people to find their way in various sectors of economy, creating opportunities and more favorable conditions for their labour’. Key activities envisaged include the ‘analysis of the status of young professionals in the labour market’ and ‘improvement of the job referral system for the graduates of institutions of secondary and higher education’ to ‘bridge the gap between demand and supply of labour’ and ‘increase youth employment rates’. Activities are further detailed in a related Action Plan, which calls for access to credit (bank loans), retraining options, labour market information dissemination and job fairs for young people. Some of these initiatives have been directly discussed with study stakeholders.

Areas for improvement relevant to young people

Despite anticipated increases in the number of job opportunities available, high economic growth in Turkmenistan has not yet translated into equally high rates of job creation and acceleration in labour market participation. One factor is the still relatively modest involvement of the private sector (to date) in sustainable economic and employment growth. While corrective measures are being explored to that effect (as highlighted above), national strategies to improve the business environment, facilitate bank financial intermediation, and enhance the country’s positioning within global value chains through better connectivity and trade integration will require continuous development and monitoring. As and when new investments and incentives flow to diversified sectors of the economy – a high level objective of the GoT – strengthening sector-specific knowledge and skills through appropriate training systems and stepping up other forms of active labour market policies will become essential. Such measures are key to enhancing young people’s transition to work, especially among young women, and ensuring that they can readily engage with new opportunities provided (in turn generating multiplier effects for the economy). The practical operationalization of some of these changes has been discussed with YSitAn stakeholders, as shown below.

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98 2018-2020 State Programme for the improvement of the employment system for young professionals in Turkmenistan (local English translation quoted).
99 2018-2020 State Programme for the improvement of the employment system for young professionals in Turkmenistan (local English translation quoted).
100 2018-2020 State Programme for the improvement of the employment system for young professionals in Turkmenistan (local English translation quoted).
101 Action Plan for the implementation of the 2018-2020 State Programme for the improvement of the employment system for young professionals in Turkmenistan.
4.2. Youth and the World of Work: Findings and Recommendations from the Consultations

In-country consultations confirmed a significant governmental emphasis on the (youth) employment question, often in the context of inter-ministerial joint thinking and planning (e.g. MoLSP, MoE, MoJ). As anticipated from the literature review, several key (ongoing and foreseen) initiatives mentioned by YSiTAn stakeholders are geared towards the acceleration of the matching between labour demand and labour supply, especially for young people, e.g. reviewing legislation to support access to work for the most vulnerable, analysing the demand for skills, improving the TVET system, supporting skills recognition and validation for students trained abroad, facilitating access to business loans, etc. The above is also an important focus of the new UN Youth Strategy – aimed at supporting Member States to create youth-enabling employment and self-employment ecosystems and improve the quantity and quality of jobs for young people.

Youth transition to the labour market

Targeted efforts to enhance the work readiness of secondary school students and improve the school-to-work transition were detailed in the earlier chapter on Education and Training. In general, however, it appears adolescents do not plan to use a structured, orderly way to ‘look’ for a job after school – nor do they feel the need to figure out in advance how to smoothly transition to the world of work. Instead, respondents conveyed a sense that, for someone to land a job, it would be enough to rely on his/her own (academic) merits and government support (or employment agencies). In a few cases, personnel and/or professional networks were mentioned.

Additionally, some young people met with talked about their interest in information sessions punctually carried out by Youth Organisation representatives on career guidance issues. When asked about it, they said they would find regular, organised interaction with alumni groups/associations and vocational mentoring very helpful in terms of accompaniment. In general, it might be useful to consider ways to systematise the delivery of updated career guidance information to secondary education students, for example via Youth Organisation ‘career clubs’ based on professional interests and the adolescent-friendly dissemination of labour market information. These measures – fully aligning with the spirit of the 2015-2020 State Programme for the State Youth Policy of Turkmenistan – would enable adolescents and young people to build a clearer picture of modern workplaces and new/emerging sectors of activity; manage job expectations; and anticipate on opportunities and challenges linked to navigating an ever-changing world of work (e.g. finding a first role in an ICT-related field, launching a social enterprise start-up, etc.), as per SDG 8 – specifically target 8.5 on full and productive employment for all including youth.

Employability skills and the sports culture

KIIIs casted a light on the many opportunities linked to the well-developed, highly valued culture of sports in the country (embodied in the creation of a new dedicated ministerial entity, the MoYPS). Sports culture could be further harnessed to cultivate core work qualities among young future recruits often sought by prospective employers (and largely emphasised by both the UN Youth Strategy and Generation Unlimited). Desirable competencies in today’s labour market include leadership, teamwork, negotiation, problem solving, conflict-resolution, time management and other workplace-relevant soft skills, which adolescent girls and boys may naturally develop through the practice of various sports disciplines. If properly nurtured and assessed through the practice of sports in mainstream schools and beyond, these qualities may therefore become a real asset for young job seekers in competitive labour markets. The connection between the two has already been well

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106 UN Youth Strategy – ‘Youth 2030’.
107 UN Youth Strategy – ‘Youth 2030’ and Generation Unlimited, UN, 2018 (brochure).
understood in the country: as KIIs revealed, it is not uncommon for higher education establishments and agencies to compete to attract the most talented national sports players.

**Youth entrepreneurship: a barrier against unemployment and irregular labour migration**

It is worth noting that the majority of students in FGDs (about two thirds) indicated their preference for stable, pension-guaranteed, state employment positions (as opposed to taking risks by launching their own business). The potential consequences for long term job creation and innovation in a growing knowledge-based economy might require careful rethinking. However, up to a third of youth respondents (girls as much as boys) demonstrated a good degree of openness and enthusiasm towards starting their own businesses – e.g. social enterprises, language teaching centres, restaurants. The level of understanding among aspiring entrepreneurs of ‘what it would take’ to open a business nonetheless seemed to vary significantly; in general, those whose parents are entrepreneurs themselves appeared more knowledgeable about doing business. Youth appetite for entrepreneurship could therefore not be generalised from our small FGD sample. For example, a girl with severe mobility-related disabilities seemed to feel there would be insurmountable barriers to growing her home-based, income generating activities (selling cosmetic products from her place) – including finding a guarantor, getting a business licence, managing her cash flow (due to many clients paying late) and being able to repay her debt on the long term.

Further discussions suggested that mostly district and village-level youth were interested in self-employment and entrepreneurial livelihood options – starting with getting land and a business loan. This is overall quite consistent with global evidence showing that, in many countries, formal wage employment opportunities are more common in urban centres. One respondent proposed that rural, low-educated youth should be prioritised in future youth policy developments through the provision of targeted measures to support youth entrepreneurship in villages. Separate discussions with national and UN sources further suggested that low-skilled, unemployed rural youth (usually males) were the most likely to migrate for work in dangerous conditions and therefore, become victims of labour trafficking in neighbouring countries. This renders the implementation of the Law on Combating Human Trafficking (passed in October 2016) and work carried out on nationally on unsafe migration prevention all the more necessary. To the extent possible, such efforts should not only target school students but any area where at-risk youth are known to live. This would also contribute to furthering the implementation of the State Programme for the State Youth Policy of Turkmenistan 2015-2020, calling for ‘measures to prevent young people in difficult life situations from becoming victims of trafficking’.

Importantly, strengthening youth entrepreneurship as a viable option for all young people could accelerate the realisation of key national objectives linked to employment targets, job creation, innovation and knowledge generation, and the prevention of irregular migration among vulnerable youth. The 2013 State Youth Policy Law (and its accompanying Programme) specifically stresses ‘the formation and implementation of a system of state measures for the material, technical and financial support of the activities of youth enterprises’ and the ‘development of a system of incentives for attracting young people into business activity’.

Youth-friendly entrepreneurship measures that could be further promoted, with support from the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, include the following: developing opportunities in modern rural sectors, such as agribusiness and climate-smart agriculture; creating village youth savings groups linked to growing city value chains; ensuring the provision of microcredit and/or affordable interest rates, flexible collateral and guarantor requirements, and basic financial/bank literacy trainings by financial institutions; simplifying business registration and licencing procedures;

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and raising awareness of entrepreneurship as a credible livelihood opportunity for Turkmen youth, including via successful role models. It is worth noting that youth access to productive assets in particular has been flagged as a key global priority area under the new UN Youth Strategy and Generation Unlimited¹⁰⁹.

**The role of employment services centres (labour exchanges)**

KII presented public employment services (‘labour exchanges’, modernised since 2018) as institutions primarily devoted to the registration of job seekers and vacancies across the board. Job fairs (organised twice a year at velayat level to facilitate direct work placements) and (re)training referrals of unemployed youth can also fall under the mandate of public employment services centres. The employment impact of such institutions could be multiplied via the increased adoption of more active labour market policy approaches. In line with SDG 8, introducing new employment centre-based initiatives could benefit both young people’s work readiness and youth employment policy development. Such initiatives could include job search coaching and core work skills trainings for young employment candidates, as well as more strategic planning measures such as the systematic analysis of skills requirements and skills supply collected at agency/local level for the purpose of skills and labour demand forecasting.

**Public-private partnerships for youth employment**

Going further, the GoT could explore possibilities for employers – especially from the expanding private sector – to increase their contribution to the realisation of the country’s global and national commitments to decent work (as already suggested by the literature review). In view of current government plans to expand the offer of skills trainings at regional level, as reported in KII, businesses could partner with higher education institutes to deliver demand-driven training as well as modern equipment and resources. In doing so, employers would participate in national efforts to upgrade skills curricula and shape a modern, competitive youth workforce through enhanced alignment of young people’s competencies with core business needs and future jobs of a diversified economy.

From the conversations held, such collaborative processes appeared to have started already. There have been limited cases where companies reported a specific skill gap for their sector and therefore, required from the government the opportunity to (re)train potential employees. While constituting a very positive development, this trend could be further encouraged, and ultimately institutionalised to boost national youth employment outcomes.

According to a Private Employment Agency (PEA) source, there is definitely enough capacity and interest among the private sector to do so, although good will could be further incentivised. Government incentivization strategies used elsewhere in the context of healthy private sector growth have included, among other: making tax exemptions provided to private corporations (as is the case in Turkmenistan’s Free Economic Zones) conditional to enforcing specific youth employees’ quotas; offering preferential public procurement for companies which demonstrate a commitment to providing young job seekers with quality jobs; and subsiding young workers’ social security contributions. The possibility to replicate or amplify similar incentive models specifically for trainers and employers of young men and women aged 14 to 30 y.o. – as per the youth definition set by the State Youth Policy Law – could be fruitfully explored. Relevant amendments could be built into reforms and new legal developments requested by the President of Turkmenistan in his 2019 annual address to the joint Parliament-Government session, in which

he called for a ‘Law on public-private partnerships’ and more ‘work on improving the legislation on labour relations of citizens and their social protection’110.

In general, the widespread charity culture practised by employers and enterprises in the country (i.e. businesses’ provision of regular financial and in-kind support to local associations and vulnerable people) can provide a promising entry point into the development of more shared-value partnerships with the business world. Innovative partnership models can be encouraged to contribute to inclusive, job-rich growth at scale, thus accelerating the realisation of the Decent Work Global Goal in the country by 2030.

**Areas for future research**

Considering the potential of entrepreneurship development in the country (e.g. in terms of employment creation), it would be interesting to survey young people to find out about their entrepreneurial mindset, capacities and appetite, while also conducting a general assessment of the youth-responsiveness of the business environment (jointly with the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs). New measures to support youth start-ups, but also creativity and innovation, could be effectively developed on the back of it.

It would also be worth investing resources in understanding the characteristics of the informal economy in the country (as per some of the latest research proposed by UNDP), and into the monitoring and evaluation of UNDP’s economic inclusion project on ‘Strengthening Community Resilience and Regional Cooperation for the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Central Asia’ (in partnership with the MoLSP and Youth Organisation). The project (focusing on 1,000 marginalised youth, such as the unemployed and former prisoners, and on the quality of employment services among other) may provide precious insights into policy and programmatic options available to boost young people’s employment outcomes in Turkmenistan (e.g. labour market assessments, training for the purpose of wage- and self-employment, youth entrepreneurship challenge, mentorship, public employment services, strengthened Youth Centres, etc.)111.

110 Presidential speech dated from 7 February 2019.
CHAPTER 5 – GENDER EQUALITY

5.1. Youth and Gender Equality: A Short Literature Review

National policy developments of interest and recent progress

In 1996, Turkmenistan joined the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and in 2009 ratified its Optional Protocol. Since the adoption of the Programme of the Beijing Platform for Action, the GoT has taken active steps to legislate on girls’ and women’s rights and gender equality. In January 2015, the Government endorsed the National Action Plan on Gender Equality 2015-2020 and its implementation Roadmap, followed by a law On State Guarantees on the provision of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Women and Men in August 2015. Equal access to education is protected by law in Turkmenistan, and the country achieved gender parity in primary and secondary school enrolment rates. In accordance with the Family Code of Turkmenistan (2012), the age of marriage is set at eighteen years. In exceptional cases, if there are valid reasons, the guardianship and custody bodies may, at the request of persons wishing to enter marriage, lower the age of marriage, but by no more than one year. Child marriage among 15-17 y.o. adolescent girls is at a low 0.2 percent. Turkmenistan also demonstrates its willingness to tackle some of the toughest SDG 5 global challenges in gender equality. For example, the Mejlis is currently taking steps towards the drafting of a Law On the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence (SDG indicator 5.2.1); indeed, evidence shows that 35 percent of girls and women aged 15-49 in the country believe a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife under specific circumstances.

Areas for improvement relevant to adolescent girls and young women

Like for other State parties to the CEDAW, some gaps remain which will be particularly important to address to improve the situation of adolescent girls and young women in the country. While opportunities and challenges related to girls and women are discussed throughout the report, selected examples will be emphasised in this section.

First, in its 2015 Concluding Observations, the CRC Committee notes that gender roles become more entrenched as adolescents reach 12-14 and 15-17 years of age; in particular, the gender disparity between boys and girls for household chores becomes clear after age 12 and increases for adolescents aged over 15 y.o. As a matter of fact, SDG target 5.4 (recognition and value of unpaid care work and domestic work) has not yet been reflected in national laws and regulations.

114 MICS data, 2016 and UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
116 MICS data, 2016. Circumstances described are: ‘(1) she goes out without telling him, (2) she neglects the children, (3) she argues with him, (4) she refuses sex with him, (5) she burns the food, (6) she does not respect her husband’s parents.’
117 Also raised in the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women’s Concluding Observations on the fifth periodic report of Turkmenistan, July 2018.
118 UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
119 Rapid Integrated Assessment for Turkmenistan – Contributions to Turkmenistan’s Roadmap to attain the Sustainable Development Goals, 2017.
There is also some level of variation in official rates of child marriage or early union (before 15 or 18 y.o.). In some velayat such as Lebap, nearly 10 percent of women aged 20-49 were married before 18 and in general, there are higher rates of girls aged 15-19 years (8 per cent) currently married or in a union in rural parts of the country.\(^{120}\)

Besides, girls tend to enroll less than boys in post-secondary education (or even upper secondary and specialized secondary education)\(^{121}\). As MICS data shows, by age 19 y.o., only 6.7 percent of young women are still attending some form of training, versus 21.6 percent of young men of the same age. Young women from rural areas are more likely to have dropped out of education by then (13.7 percent of 18 y.o. and 2.4. percent of 19 y.o. are still in learning institutions, down from 98.4 percent of rural girls at the end of secondary education), compared to young women from urban zones (31.3 percent at 18 y.o. and 15.7 percent at 19 y.o. are still in learning institutions, down from 97.5 percent of urban girls at the end of secondary education)\(^{122}\). Besides, while young men seem to be pursuing careers in traditionally male dominated fields (e.g. transport and communications, construction, and agriculture), young women can be found in conventional industries such as education and healthcare (often market-saturated areas in many countries)\(^{123}\). It is commendable that the National Action Plan on Gender Equality recognizes this limitation, considering that female students remain less represented in STEM nowadays, especially at higher education level\(^{124}\).

Finally, throughout Central Asia, gender disparities in terms of the youth transition to employment were flagged as a general regional concern.\(^{125}\) Overall, there is a noticeable difference in labour force participation rates among both sexes in Turkmenistan – 88.9 percent for men vs. 72.3 women in 2017 – and it is not uncommon for economically active Turkmen women to be un- or under-employed.\(^{126}\) As suggested the above, the fact that economic activity of women is lesser than men is mainly linked to the absorption of women by the (unpaid) care economy (i.e. women’s role in child, elderly and sick care and overall policies supporting caregivers)\(^{127}\). Like elsewhere in the world, women with disabilities also face additional obstacles, and anecdotal evidence suggests that they are still less likely to be employed than men with disabilities.\(^{128}\)

\(^{120}\) UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
\(^{122}\) MICS data 2015-2016.
\(^{125}\) Burnet Institute, Girls Count: A Review of Gender Inequality and Its Impact on Children and Adolescents in Asia and the Pacific, 2018, in UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
\(^{127}\) A Roadmap for Acceleration, and Policy Support to Achieving Sustainable Development Goals, Summary Report, UN, 2018. Note that the definition of care, care work and care economy differs within ‘economists’ streams of thought and ranges from unpaid/paid care work, social provisioning, and caring labour to personal service’ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309637792_International_Feminist_Perspectives_on_Care_Economy
5.2. Youth and Gender Equality: Findings and Recommendations from the Consultations

On positive gender relationships

Adolescents and young people have unanimously defined a ‘positive relationship’ between both sexes as built on mutual respect, friendship/love, support, honesty, trust, and good intentions. Most of them were also able to identify (and condemned) the most obvious forms of violence against girls and women, including domestic violence. Some were conscious of the fact that any behaviour leading to the restriction of girls’ and women’s rights, actions and freedom constitutes a type of gender-based violence. But while concepts of abuse and coercion were in general well apprehended, more complex norms influencing personal choices/opportunities, power relationships and gender-based expectations were less often acknowledged and remain to be better understood among both youth and adults groups – irrespective of background and education levels.

Gendered social perceptions across the lifecycle

In general, FGDs revealed a high degree of awareness among young women met with (18 y.o.+) about family-related and care expectations placed on them – and of opportunities and challenges linked to that (i.e. combining productive work and care work as they grow older; fitting career around family requirements).

For practically all respondents, the first source of information and observation are their own mothers, who they see juggling competing priorities. One girl explained how she endeavours to support her busy mother – away from home every day from 6 am to 8 pm – by cooking her dinner meals so she can take a rest at night. Understandably, young women approach this sort of future with a mix of anxiety and excitement; in general, they do want children, but also tend to naturally worry about how this might impact their own personal development and professional advancement.

Some are already thinking about mitigation strategies such as looking for flexible, free-lancing work, as opposed to stable, high-skilled high-paid jobs. Girls also indicated lower salary expectations than boys. The meaning of this in terms of possible under-employment of women, national wealth creation and female future pensions might need to be looked at more closely.

Younger adolescent girls may feel less immediately concerned with or exposed to care considerations, since families support them to prioritise studying through secondary education and pursuing their aspirations (as explained in previous chapters, due to the high focus on meeting university entrance requirements). Yet, even adolescent girls already express the growing ‘productive vs. reproductive’ dilemma in their own words. On the one hand, they want to be academically and professionally successful, and feel the need to contribute financially to the household and support their husband. On the other hand, they fully acknowledge (with a few exceptions located in Ashgabat) that family considerations will probably have to come first.

Members of society in general, especially female public servants and parents of children with disabilities, were fully supportive of existing public services available to support girls’ and women’s care work, and eager to see increased provisions of child-, elderly- and disability-care services129. Besides, the progressive views of some male government stakeholders with regards to the introduction of currently inexistent measures of care work redistribution – such as paid paternity leaves of two weeks or more – should be acknowledged and celebrated as fully in line with the gender equality spirit of the Turkmen Constitution.

Proposed responses to the CEDAW Committee’s observations on female economic empowerment

While upholding the principle of gender equality as it currently is, the GoT could accelerate the achievement of female economic empowerment by considering a number of additional measures in reaction to the last CEDAW Committee’s Concluding Observations (July 2018). Observations emphasised ‘occupational segregation’ and ‘factors preventing women from taking full advantage of the free education system to acquire necessary skills, and from choosing non-traditional career paths to gain access to formal employment, including in higher paying, male-dominated sectors’\(^\text{130}\). The below proposed actions, building on Turkmenistan’s existing strengths in this area, could constitute a first line of response:

i. **Encouraging young women (and their parents) to embrace female careers in higher-skilled, higher-paid sectors of the economy – an approach labelled as ‘promising solution’ by Generation Unlimited\(^\text{131}\) – through:**
   - Supporting greater internal labour mobility of women towards high growth sectors and geographic areas in need of skilled workforce, using gender-responsive regulations and incentives;
   - Further sensitising employers to the benefits of recruiting more young women into senior, unconventional roles, using the media and creative industries to disseminate positive images of women successfully engaged in non-traditional positions or sectors;
   - Promoting female role models working in male-dominated fields, building on initiatives such as those from the Women Scientists Centre which raises girls’ awareness of STEM- and ICT-related vocations;
   - Exploring the model of partnership between the Women’s Union, the Women Business Centre of the WU and the Union of Entrepreneurs and Industrialists and replicating the partnership model to develop a joint strategy on promoting young women’s enterprise development in innovative, niche and knowledge-based economic sectors.

ii. **Expanding the scope, range and professionalization of child-, elderly- and disability-care public services available to women** (including paramedical specialties, psychologists as opposed to psychiatrists, and social workers). Social protection mechanisms based on the increased and gender-responsive capacity of social services to cater for a wider range of beneficiaries would contribute to reduce female unpaid care work load at home. This, in turn, would enhance young women’s potential to (re)join the workforce in productive occupations and ability to progress quicker towards positions of power in public organisations and private companies.

iii. **Considering the introduction of paid, father-specific paternity leave.** On the one hand, this could support fathers’ early sharing of parental care responsibilities with mothers, as only 14.8 per cent of young children have fathers who support them with early learning activities\(^\text{132}\). On the other hand, this could boost young mothers’ return to work and retention within their workplaces, in turn facilitating smoother career progression paths. The currently considered adoption of increased paid leaves available to working parents of children with disabilities (raised by families of PWDs in FGDs) is also a welcome move by the government. Its quick materialisation (if possible, through the provision of both mother- and father-specific

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\(^{130}\) Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women’s Concluding Observations on the fifth periodic report of Turkmenistan, July 2018.

\(^{131}\) Generation Unlimited, UN, 2018 (brochure).

\(^{132}\) MICS data, 2016 and UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
iv. **additional paid leaves** would provide extra relief to families combining intensive care work with professional responsibilities.

**Areas for future research**

It would be useful to **commission research on the linkages between (1) the management of the care economy** (e.g. measures such as the 3 year parental leave and other mechanisms through which women participate in the care economy); (2) **women’s reproductive role at home** (using national time use surveys as a possible data source for calculation of the proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work – SDG indicator 5.4.1\textsuperscript{133}); (3) female access, retention and progress into highly-skilled, highly-paid jobs (inclusive economy); and (4) GDP growth/national wealth creation. **Mitigation strategies** would need to be proposed too.

It would also be informative to **take stock of the work currently conducted by the Business Women Centre of the WU, explore lessons learnt** (e.g. through profiles and case studies of female entrepreneurs) and **suggest ways to consolidate the Centre’s demand-driven approach**. A focus on further strengthening the market-relevance, quality and gender-responsiveness of training delivered to young unemployed women could help address other Concluding Observations from the CEDAW Committee.

\textsuperscript{133} UNICEF Baseline Assessment for Child-related SDG indicators in Turkmenistan, March 2018.
CHAPTER 6 - DISABILITY

6.1. Youth and Disability: A Short Literature Review

National policy developments of interest and recent progress

Turkmenistan has been notably active in the field of disability rights, starting with the ratification of both the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2008) and its Optional Protocol (2010). These global instruments have now been mainstreamed into national laws and state programmes. For example, according to the Law of Turkmenistan On State Guarantees of the Rights of the Child, children with disabilities - which number may be higher than those recorded by the MoLSP as receiving the child disability benefit (18,496 in July 2017) - are entitled to a decent life and active participation in the community. Health legislations in Turkmenistan also guarantee access to a wide range of free, disability-related healthcare, support and rehabilitation services – such as physiotherapy, prosthetics, orthotics, wheelchairs and walking aids.

Besides, the Education Law reform of 2013 introduced new provisions on inclusive education, with further revisions in June 2018 specifically targeting greater inclusivity in vocational colleges. Article 12 of the Employment Act also provides additional employment guarantees for people of working age who ‘cannot compete on equal terms in the labour market’ – among which young people, parents with large families raising minor children or children with disabilities, and persons with disabilities. In line with this regulation, the Programme for the Improvement of the Employment provision System and the Creation of the new Workplaces in Turkmenistan for 2015-2020 seeks to expand wage- and self-employment opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), and a Plan of Activities for the provision of Full Realization of the Labour and Employment Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Turkmenistan was approved for 2017-2020.

Concrete illustrations of the GoT’s commitment in that area over the recent years include the revision of the 10-month vocational course of the Textile College to integrate persons with disabilities into the teaching process; and the holding of a multistakeholder forum on employment opportunities for women with disabilities. The latter resulted in actionable recommendations to develop a flexible approach to professional education, apply quotas, better coordinate and develop public-private partnerships, and invite women with disabilities to job needs assessments. It is also worth noting that the country is engaged in a significant regional initiative – the Central Asian Disabled Women’s Network. While not covered by the YSitAn, the movement seeks to promote the rights of young persons with disabilities (including SRHR and the right to live free from violence) as well as disabled women’s empowerment, through peer support and information sharing.

134 MoLSP data.
135 UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
136 UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
137 UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
138 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities’ Concluding observations on the initial report of Turkmenistan, May 2015.
139 Turkmenistan’s 2011 Initial Report of States Parties to the CRPD.
141 UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
145 Young People with Disabilities: Global Study on ending GBV and realising SRHR, UNFPA, July 2018.
Areas for improvement relevant to young people with disabilities

Like in the case of other State parties to the CRPD, some limitations of particular relevance to young people with disabilities persist today. While the CRPD has been ratified, more demonstrations of Disabled People Organizations (DPOs)’ involvement in its the implementation are needed. Access to information for some PWD categories is constrained by existing formats, as the use of Braille, sign language and other forms of disability-friendly communication has not yet been generalised across society. Placement of children and adolescent with disabilities in regular schools and their allocation to technical training schemes tend to be made by medical and educational assessment commissions; they could be made more on the basis of the existence/provision of accessible conditions in teaching facilities and students’ personal vocational choices. Also, references to PWDs are not yet common across all existing programmes for socioeconomic development and other national strategies and programmes for economic, political and cultural development. This is in turn explains the need for additional measures to support young people with disabilities to start an independent adulthood, particularly community-based services offered by trained therapists, social workers and other relevant specialists. Likewise, the classification of any type of PWD as “unemployable” should be avoided to combat negative stereotypes and promote socio-professional insertion. Finally, in view of their enhanced vulnerability, prevention and protection measures against violence, especially towards children and adolescents with disabilities (and more so, girls), could be further boosted. Some of these aspects naturally arose in discussions with stakeholders, as follows.

6.2. Youth and Disability: Findings and Recommendations from the Consultations

The legal and policy landscape

As suggested above, there is a national regulatory and policy framework in place for the inclusion of PWDs in society. When asked about young people with disabilities, stakeholders particularly stressed the following national provisions:

- Special housing provisions (with the recent construction of 48 apartment blocks for PWDs and other vulnerable families across the country);
- Provisions on education (both basic and specialized) at different levels and in different conditions. For example, for children who, due to their state of health, cannot attend general

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147 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities’ Concluding observations on the initial report of Turkmenistan, May 2015. This was also featured in The World We Want – Post-2015 National Consultations in Turkmenistan, 2013.
149 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities’ Concluding observations on the initial report of Turkmenistan, May 2015.
151 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities’ Concluding observations on the initial report of Turkmenistan, May 2015.
152 Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities’ Concluding observations on the initial report of Turkmenistan, May 2015.
educational institutions, special educational institutions are created for them to receive education on the basis of special pedagogical approaches, correction of developmental disorders and social adaptation.

- A mandatory 2-5% employment quota for vulnerable groups including PWDs (closely monitored by the GoT);
- Disability-responsive transport and public infrastructures plans (e.g. accessibility of roads, ‘social taxis’ project);
- Financial and in-kind benefits (e.g. disability-related allowances and free/subsidised access to basic medical and rehabilitation devices and services);
- And governmental linkages with (primarily public) DPOs.

**Socioeconomic insertion**

In line with national legislations and commitments taken under the CRPD, Turkmenistan’s mainstream schools and higher education institutes are meant to remain accessible; in practice, respondents pointed that they mostly are for young people with more manageable disabilities (e.g. with physical disabilities or with conditions such as diabetes)\(^{154}\). Parents of young people with disabilities push their children to attend such schools to maximise chances of future insertion. **Schools and post-secondary institutes should therefore keep the momentum on mainstreaming disability throughout facilities, equipment, as well as educational and teacher curricula**, so that regular education and training could become a realistic choice for wider categories of PWDs and their families\(^{155}\). Terms of reference for the present research did not include any assessment of such institutions, nor of accommodations provided for young PWDs.

Like in other countries, the prospects for professional insertion of youth affected by severe disabilities once they reach the age of 18 – and usually leave rehabilitation centres to head back home – are limited. **One idea mentioned by disability organisations was to carry out job fairs specifically targeted at unemployed youth with disabilities** (as organised in the past by the GoT with UNDP). Besides, the gradual rise of ICT-related sectors in the Turkmen economy and therefore, needs for ICT-literate people, could generate home-based income-generating opportunities for young people with disabilities (e.g. in web-designing) – a ‘promising solution’ according to Generation Unlimited\(^{156}\). While such opportunities will still require the monitoring of **socialisation needs and working conditions among youth with disabilities**, the modernisation of the economy shows a tangible potential to increase livelihoods opportunities for those with severe disabilities. This, in turn, could further promote positive and inclusive social norms around disability, and **accelerate the realisation of the State Programme for the State Youth Policy of Turkmenistan 2015-2020**, calling ‘employers to create jobs for young people in the first place especially experiencing the need for social support, e.g. children with disabilities’.

It should be noted that the enforced medical model of disability in the country nonetheless raises a number of obstacles to PWDs’ socioeconomic integration and the upholding of their rights to education and employment. **Undertaking a national review of relevant legislations in order to move towards a social and human rights-based approach to defining disability** would be helpful to overcome some of the initial challenges and provide a more enabling, inclusive environment to young people with disabilities.

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\(^{154}\) Also discussed in UNICEF Social Services Assessment – Final Report, 2015.

\(^{155}\) Also discussed in UNICEF Social Services Assessment – Final Report, 2015.

\(^{156}\) Generation Unlimited, UN, 2018 (brochure).
On the use of disability expertise

Like in other societies facing disability inclusion concerns, the human factor remains at play. For many across the wider community, learning to look at persons with disabilities from the point of view of their capability, productivity and assets, requires continued knowledge and awareness-raising about PWDs. Advocacy can be supported by a broad range of DPOs, and the GoT already engages with disability-focused public organisations in various events and initiatives. It could now consider widening even further the base of its disability partners to maximise outreach and tap into the richness of disability expertise available in the country. Indeed, disability organisations, including independent ones, have the capacity to offer holistic disability-mainstreaming technical expertise on a systemic basis. They all expressed a keen interest in giving continued support to national quality assurance efforts and policy and programme sustainability in the area of disability at the highest level. Areas of collaboration could focus on sectors prioritised by the GoT, such as public transport and physical infrastructure accessibility, professional inclusion and disability-friendly housing standards (the latter having been identified by families of PWDs as the main priority). Nurturing and embedding such expertise from the start in influential policy and programme matters would greatly add to the ongoing implementation of disability-related national regulations and plans, and to the realisation of the Leave No One Behind Agenda in Turkmenistan by 2030.

Areas for future research

Prospective employers of PWDs might need further clarity and guidance on the physical and other adjustments needed for young workers with disabilities, as well as reassurance in terms of expected costs and resources available for compliance. Evidence-based research into the real costs of disability accommodations in the world of work, and on how the government can help, could be commissioned to further strengthen and monitor the implementation of the 2-5% mandatory employment quota for vulnerable groups.

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CHAPTER 7 - PARTICIPATION

7.1. Youth and Participation: A Short Literature Review

National policy developments of interest and recent progress

The current national development agenda presents a major opportunity for adolescent and youth participation in the implementation and monitoring of SDG targets and indicators under the 2030 Agenda\(^{158}\).

The National Plan of Action for Children for 2018-2022, adopted by Presidential decree in June 2018, seeks to engage directly children in creating positive change (specifically through Goal 6)\(^{159}\). Turkmenistan has also been a keen promoter of children’s and adolescents’ rights to recreation, leisure and participation in sports, with diverse sports facilities constructed and sports clubs supported throughout the country\(^{160}\).

In the same vein, the 2013 State Youth Policy Law and State Programme for Youth Policy 2015-2020 aim at strengthening the enabling environment for young people’s full participation in the socioeconomic, political and cultural life of the country\(^{161}\). In particular, the Law calls for ‘promoting the participation of young people in public consultative and advisory structures under the bodies of state power and management and bodies of local executive power and local self-government’\(^{162}\).

Finally, it is worth noting that in terms of representation of women in politics, Turkmenistan’s rate is higher than elsewhere in the Central Asian region\(^{163}\). In fact, the percentage of women in Parliament (Mejlis – also headed by a woman) increased steadily from 18% in 1994-1999 to 26.4% in 2013-2016, and 27.4% in 2017\(^{164}\).

Areas for improvement relevant to adolescent and youth

In 2017, consultations held by UNICEF showed that adolescents aged 12-16 y.o. knew about their right to express freely their opinions, which in itself is a significant achievement. However, adolescents still need to be supported in acquiring the necessary skills to claim such rights confidently, irrespective of views held by others\(^{165}\). Adolescents are also less aware of the fact that children’s opinions matter and should be given due consideration, even though this is clearly stated in the 2018-2022 National Plan of Action for the Realization of Children’s Rights in Turkmenistan\(^{166}\). In-school organizations are intended to support students’ participation, which in turns contributes to shaping responsible and engaged citizens. Still, as happens in other countries, adolescents are not fully familiar with participatory processes, nor regularly consulted in the home and school environments about all aspects of their

\(^{158}\) UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
\(^{160}\) UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
\(^{162}\) Law on the State Youth Policy of Turkmenistan, August 29, 2013, No. 423-IV2013.
\(^{163}\) UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
\(^{164}\) Rapid Integrated Assessment for Turkmenistan – Contributions to Turkmenistan’s Roadmap to attain the Sustainable Development Goals, 2017.
\(^{165}\) UNICEF, Report on international consultancy services in support of the promotion of child rights awareness and knowledge among young people (focus on child participation in Turkmenistan), in UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
\(^{166}\) UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
lives\textsuperscript{167}. While it is important to note that many duty bearers are quite skilled at communicating with children, they need further training to become adequately prepared and ready to consult with them \textsuperscript{168}. This is all the more critical as consultations have been recognised as an effective entry point into (or first degree of) adolescent participation \textsuperscript{169}. Presently, there are no national definitions of participation nor operational mechanisms for child, adolescent and youth participation in legal and regulatory frameworks\textsuperscript{170}; more systematised approaches to consultations could therefore help close the gap and progressively build a national policy for the meaningful engagement of younger generations\textsuperscript{171}, in line with Agenda 2030.

7.2. Youth and Participation: Findings and Recommendations from the Consultations

\textbf{On adolescent and youth participation}

The Youth Organisation counts over 900,000 members in the country aged 14-37 y.o. and works closely with the Cabinet of Ministers. Consultations showed it largely has the potential to drive the interests of young people across the country. The Youth Organisation has a central Council and is represented in a gender-equitable way at all levels of governance, up until the smallest (village). It is commendable that (based on information collected from KIIs) the Organisation’s central-level Council staff themselves are youth aged 20 to 32 y.o., with equal proportions of both sexes. Going further, the Organisation could harness the potential of greater adolescent participation in its work, for example, by appointing an ad-hoc advisory adolescent board representative of the 14-19 y.o. member segment. This, in turn, could motivate increased numbers of adolescents to join the organisation – making the Organisation an even wider, more inclusive and representative body, by opening up spaces for participation of the youngest. In the same vein, the Council could consider promoting youth with disabilities among its staff members in the future, to lead by example on the issue of disability mainstreaming and illustrate the country’s high-level commitments to the Leave No One Behind Agenda.

Other youth mechanisms include the youth committees of State organisations, and young members of Parliament (aged under 40), who are well represented. Indeed, regulations require that at least a minimum of 30 percent MPs are under 40, among which a minimum of a fourth would be women (out of a total of 125 MPs). Several examples of young women and men’s participation in policy formulation in the country were discussed in meetings. For instance, Youth Organisation representatives were included in legislative and policy developments leading to the 2013 State Youth Policy Law and the 2015-2020 State Youth Policy Programme; in the establishment of the Young Scientists Council (an idea which originated from youth themselves); and in the post-2015 SDG consultations. Currently, the Youth Organisation is also planning to be actively involved in the 2019 International Youth Forum, for which an agenda is being shaped. This moment presents a major opportunity for all stakeholders (including the UN, MoYPS and Women’s Union) to work closely together to ensure an even greater representation of young women’s and men’s interests at the event, in turn positioning the country as a lead in youth-related regional and global influencing. This approach would also successfully feed back into future iterations of the State Youth Policy Programme and the national implementation of the global UN Youth Strategy\textsuperscript{172}.

\textsuperscript{167} UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018. This was also featured in The World We Want – Post-2015 National Consultations in Turkmenistan, 2013.

\textsuperscript{168} UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.

\textsuperscript{169} UNICEF Conceptual Framework for Measuring Outcomes of Adolescent Participation, March 2018; UNICEF’s Adolescent and Youth Engagement Strategic Framework.

\textsuperscript{170} UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.

\textsuperscript{171} UNICEF’S Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.

\textsuperscript{172} UN Youth Strategy – ‘Youth 2030’.
On that note, it is worth stressing that the President of Turkmenistan himself, in his 2019 annual address to the joint Parliament-Government session, called for continued improvements in legislations supporting ‘the upbringing of the younger generation’ and ‘full participation of young people in society, as well as in the socio-economic, political and cultural life of the state’, ‘taking into account international experience’ and ‘new approaches’. Manifestations of clear political will at the highest level illustrate the GoT’s commitment to working not only for, but with young people, by involving them in decision-making processes on issues of importance to them. Building on such experiences and demonstrated will, as well as on the upcoming International Youth Forum, the GoT could consider consolidating ongoing good practices to further institutionalise its approach to youth engagement e.g. through youth advisory boards at Parliament, allowing for youth representatives’ sustained participation in critical policy areas.

**On women participation**

The Women’s Union in Turkmenistan, whose membership base stands at about 700,000, plays a critical role in many areas, not least education and employment. It might therefore want to consider widening its membership base even further by reaching out to all girls and women, beyond female students and employees. Specifically, inviting all adolescent girls and young women who are not in employment, education or training (school drop-outs, long term unemployed, etc.) to join the organisation and add their voice to the work of the Union – beyond vocational activities offered by the Women Business Centre – would constitute a further demonstration of the country’s commitment to Leaving No One Behind (especially under SDGs 5 and 8).

In that regard, it is commendable that the Parliament is led by a woman chairperson in Turkmenistan. Considering global evidence on the double burden faced by young women around the world, measures to support more young female MPs to join could also be explored. This could provide impactful ideas towards the formulation of new, evidence-based propositions to support female economic empowerment and labour market participation among adolescent girls and young women in the country.

**Areas for future research**

It would be useful to better understand the mandate and activities of existing student councils based in TVET and higher education institutes, and explore ways to replicate elements of such governance at secondary education level too. The current YSitAn scope did not allow to identify forms of student organisation (e.g. clubs/circles, school delegates, associations… etc.) representing adolescent boys and girls in secondary schools. However, when asked about that, adolescents expressed a genuine curiosity for representation mechanisms that could promote the agenda, work, well-being and interests of their class.

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174 Based on the Guiding Principles for supporting young people as critical agents of change, developed by the Inter-Agency Working Group on Youth & SDGs.
175 UNICEF’s Situational Analysis on Children’s and Women’s Rights, December 2018.
SECTION III: THE WAY FORWARD

CHAPTER 1 - CONCLUDING POLICY REMARKS (FOCUS ON THE MINISTRY OF YOUTH POLICY AND SPORTS AND ON THE STATE YOUTH POLICY)

1.1. On the General Role of the MoYPS: Increasing National Youth Strategy Coherency and Coordination

In September 2016, the GoT formally adopted a list of 17 SDGs, 148 targets and 175 indicators (55 of them being child-related) to be implemented over the next 15 years. A governmental working group was established to follow up on the capture and institutionalisation of SDGs at national level, and monitor ongoing progress under the coordination of the MoFE. Within that structure, the Ministry of Youth Policy and Sports (MoYPS) – with support from the Mejlis, Youth and Women Unions, the UN and other relevant public organisations and private actors, as appropriate – could take a transversal role and lead on:

i. Articulating and sharing the list of priority adolescent and youth-relevant SDG targets and indicators for the country (based on the list of 148 SDG targets d 175 indicators adopted by the GoT; the list of 55 established child-relevant SDG indicators in Turkmenistan; the YSitAn findings; and where relevant, further research);

ii. Providing government bodies in charge of operationalising selected youth SDG indicators with targeted support in data collection, disaggregation, processing and analysis (e.g. to establish baselines), in line with global definitions;

iii. In parallel, mapping all youth-specific/related strategies, policies, programmes and plans – especially those approaching their updating phase – and putting forward propositions to mainstream selected priority adolescent- and youth-relevant indicators across them. This should be done with a view to strengthening policy linkages between the MoYPS and other ministries (shared implementation tools including targets and indicators could indeed result in increased policy and programme multiplier effect for youth – provided good inter-ministerial coordination/resource management are ensured, and programmatic redundancy can be avoided);

179 It is worth noting that out of 55 child-related SDG indicators adapted or adopted by Turkmenistan, there is currently some level of (more or less disaggregated) data for 40 indicators – although for 7 of them, data is anticipated to be poor or limited (UNICEF Baseline Assessment for Child-related SDG indicators in Turkmenistan, March 2018).
iv. On that basis, making recommendations for State financing of cross-ministerial youth initiatives and for multisectoral budgeting.

On the longer term, the above approach could lead to the gradual emergence of a higher-level strategy M&E framework on youth (or theory of change), with potential impact on future revisions of the 2013 Law on State Youth Policy. If and when the time comes, then, the MoYPS could be in the driving seat for conducting necessary Law reforms, with full support from the UN system in Turkmenistan.


It is commendable that existing child- and youth-related policy documents such as the 2018-2022 National Plan of Action for the Realization of Children’s Rights in Turkmenistan demonstrate great political will, technical comprehensiveness, and attention to the Leave No One Behind Agenda. In particular, the 2015-2020 State Youth Policy Programme embraces nearly all critical areas of youth development covered by this YSitAn (access to information, health, education, employment, participation) as well as others. Besides, it contains a number of rights-based references to young people with disabilities (and therefore the most vulnerable groups), which clearly illustrates policy makers’ disability-mainstreaming attempts. All in all, the existence of a solid regulatory and policy enabling environment for youth rights, development and empowerment in the country puts it in a good place to play an active role in global initiatives linked to young people, such as the UN Youth Strategy and Generation Unlimited.

But 2019 will also be a year of revision and update of 2015-2020 State Youth Policy Programme and its Action Plan. In line with the above proposed mandate for the MoYPS, and as a concrete illustration of points i), ii) and iii), future iterations of the State Programme could consider:

- **Introducing additional priority youth issues (with associated targets and indicators) in the programme conceptual framework to deepen the understanding of, and monitor progress in, interrelated knowledge and policy gap areas.** For instance, based on the YSitAn findings, stronger insights into the characteristics, situation and needs of young people who are not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET, SDG indicator 8.6.1) in the country might be relevant to the purpose of improved youth training, employment and migration policy targeting and formulation in the context of the 2015-2020 State Youth Policy Programme; but it could also be the case for the 2018-2020 State Programme For the Improvement of the Employment System for Young Professionals in Turkmenistan. Advocating for the prioritization and inclusion of indicator 8.6.1 in the revised State Youth Policy Programme and linking the latter to the Young Professionals’ Employment System State Programme could both increase youth policy coherency and impact, and enhance integration and coordinated action towards the achievement of the Leave No One Behind Agenda by 2030 (specifically Goal 8 on Decent Work, with particular attention to the most vulnerable such as young women and youth with disabilities).

- **Mainstreaming gender and strengthening gender-responsiveness, with a lifecycle perspective in mind.** As an example, inspired from the YSitAn findings, this could be done (in part) through the national prioritisation, reflection and dissemination of SDG indicators 5.2.1 on domestic violence and 5.4.1 on unpaid domestic and care work - both already considered

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183 Rapid Integrated Assessment for Turkmenistan – Contributions to Turkmenistan’s Roadmap to attain the Sustainable Development Goals, 2017.
184 This was confirmed in several KIIs with government counterparts during the YSitaAn field mission to Turkmenistan. UNFPA is expected to take the lead on it.
child-related – in the next versions of the State Youth Policy Programme/Action Plan and National Action Plan on Gender Equality/Roadmap. In addition to creating greater alignment between the two frameworks – thereby enhancing the overall quality of the youth rights enabling environment – such developments would be beneficial to the acceleration of the realisation of Agenda 2030 in Turkmenistan and the Leave No One Behind imperatives. This is mainly because SDG 5 targets behind such indicators seek to address more invisible gendered social norms influencing girls’ and women’s outcomes throughout the lifecycle anywhere in the world. Factoring in gender power relations in youth strategy design could therefore be a hugely effective and innovative way of moving towards the achievement of many interrelated SDGs for adolescent girls and young women in Turkmenistan – effectively putting the country in a leader position in the area of female empowerment across Central Asia (and potentially beyond).

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CHAPTER 2 - ROADMAP FOR FUTURE ACTION ON YOUTH

Based on findings from the YSitAn, this last section provides pointers for action in response to the question about ‘How to effectively take forward the UN-GoT collaboration in the youth space and implement the YSitAn recommendations?’.

Building and sustaining national cooperation towards improved youth policy outcomes will mainly depend on the enhancement of youth stakeholders’ capacity, e.g. UN partners, the GoT, MoYPS, Youth Organisation, Women’s Union, Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, Public Organisations, and private sector. The following (non-exhaustive) areas may be considered for capacity-strengthening action:

i. **Building a nation-wide, gender- and disability-responsive, adolescent and youth technical expertise:** Following an initial baseline capacity assessment, opportunities need to be created for stakeholders to familiarise themselves with the continuum between the first and second decades of children’s life and youth participatory/centred approaches (e.g. UNICEF’s ADAP Kit on Adolescent Expression and Innovation) – such as innovative design thinking methodologies, peer-to-peer support, psychosocial counselling, digital learning and communication platforms. Simultaneously, the national capacity in terms of gender analysis (e.g. gendered adolescent issues and rights) and disability-mainstreaming also requires boosting. Various means – including knowledge-sharing, technical guidance, training, standardised tools – should be provided towards building an understanding of and practices around gender transformation and disability-inclusive development in Turkmenistan.

ii. **Reinforcing youth-related statistical and SDG measurement systems:** In line with ongoing efforts under the current 2016-2020 UNPFD, relevant UN agencies should continue providing technical advice across government bodies on where and how to define/introduce collection methods for adolescent- and youth-relevant indicator data, before analysing it. Good starting points would be to: enrich the MICS, HBSC, household/labour force surveys and other surveys (so they can contribute to closing knowledge gaps in key youth areas highlighted by the YSitAn); strengthen administrative data sources; and jointly conduct the planned 2022 population census. It can be anticipated that sustained support will be needed to put in place and coordinate necessary measurement, monitoring and processing systems for prioritised, disaggregated adolescent- and youth-related indicators; as well as to reinforce core data skills and capacities among relevant UN and governmental staff.

iii. **Boosting the ‘research reflex’ and youth research arm:** Investing in exploring, mapping and assessing – and eventually, replicating and scaling up – international good practices in various key youth domains (e.g. on remedial education, the school-to-work transition…), and establishing research partnerships with local and global specialist organisations (e.g. for research on mental health, the care economy, or information channels in the country), can exponentially increase the availability of quality, evidence-based materials for youth strategy improvement and programming. A concrete and useful follow-up to the YSitAn could be to develop youth-centric, theme-based ‘resource kits’ and best practices compendiums.

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iv. **targeted at decision-makers**, including policy briefs, global good practices, and regional programmatic models on issues of relevance to youth policy-making.

v. **Cultivating youth policy excellence: Policy analysis, planning, coordination, advocacy and budgeting capacities**\(^{191}\) require significant investments for the purpose of integrated youth strategy design and implementation in Turkmenistan. The convening power of the UN system will be essential to support and influence the formulation and financing of policies and other strategic frameworks – including youth development plans at various governance levels and across sectors\(^{192}\). As suggested in the earlier chapter, a **multisectoral approach to youth policy and programmes** should indeed be prioritized wherever it adds value or efficiencies\(^{193}\).

vi. **Upskilling methods of communication, outreach and campaigning targeted at youth:** The use of youth-friendly, age-appropriate C4D strategies for behavioural change around issues of health, technical education or labour migration in Turkmenistan could greatly support youth programming impact. Using innovation and technology in advocacy (e.g. social media channels, such as UNICEF’s U-Report tool and other digital communication platforms) provides an opportunity for increased engagement by and with adolescents and youth, including those who may be hardest to reach\(^ {194}\). However, in the context of Turkmenistan (and as described in earlier chapters), this needs to go hand in hand with ongoing efforts to consolidate the ICT infrastructure enabling environment and improve access to and the quality of the Internet (including via digital and smart devices).

vii. **Deepening the understanding and practice of public-private, shared-value partnerships for youth:** As the YSitAn findings emphasised, leveraging multiple resources – including businesses’ innovation, **power and core assets**\(^{195}\) – through PPPs is critical to the success of youth policies and programmes, e.g. for youth economic empowerment. In Turkmenistan like in other countries, intensive resource mobilization is also a reflection of the ambition of the 2030 Agenda and of the growing demand from host Governments to collaborate on interventions at scale that can deliver the transformative change envisioned in the SDGs\(^ {196}\).

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191 Rapid Integrated Assessment for Turkmenistan – Contributions to Turkmenistan’s Roadmap to attain the Sustainable Development Goals, 2017.