

# MINUTES

## High-Level Steering Group Meeting

Tue 29 April 2025, Virtual Meeting



### I. Meeting Overview and Agenda

1. The High-Level Steering Group (HLSG) meeting of Education Cannot Wait (ECW) was convened virtually on 29 April 2025 under the leadership of the newly appointed Chair, Ms. Sigrid Kaag, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process. The meeting brought together HLSG Principals to provide strategic guidance and political support to ECW at a time of multiple humanitarian crises and a constrained funding environment.
2. The agenda covered three main items for discussion:
  - Resource mobilization for major humanitarian crises affecting the education of children and young people
  - Update from the ECW Secretariat on current funding challenges and plans for ECW's funding replenishment in 2026
  - Approval of the Operational Manual and Hosting Arrangement *and* update on the Hosting Review

### II. Chair's welcome, introduction and strategic way forward

3. The Chair opened the meeting by welcoming all participants, particularly those attending in their personal capacity for the first time. She extended her appreciation to former HLSG Chair Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown for his vision and dedication, describing ECW as one of his enduring legacies. She commended the ECW Secretariat, led by ECW Director Yasmine Sherif, for their strong delivery and commitment.
4. Reflecting on the current era of volatility, the Chair stressed the importance of reassessing how ECW delivers on its mandate and how to adapt in times of global unpredictability. She emphasized that while ECW's mission remains relevant and urgent, success will depend on embracing innovation, assessing risks, and leveraging partnerships with governments, UN agencies, foundations, and grassroots organizations. She highlighted the importance of ensuring ECW's interventions continue to deliver value for money, particularly for children and youth in crisis-affected areas.
5. The Chair also acknowledged the critical role of multilateral reform, effective technology use, and maximizing existing tools and instruments. She encouraged the HLSG to move forward collectively and reaffirmed her commitment to serving the ECW community with efficiency, political leadership, and transparency.

### **III. Update from the ECW Secretariat on current funding challenges and plans for ECW's funding replenishment in 2026**

6. The ECW Director reported that ECW achieved record levels of investment in 2024, notably supporting the Sudanese refugee crisis alongside UNHCR. However, she flagged that few donors provided top-up contributions to match ECW's initial investments.
7. The Director thanked the ECW Executive Committee (ExCom) for its support amid continued adaptation, including the revision of the Operational Manual, and expressed appreciation for strong collaboration with partners such as WFP, UNESCO, GPE, and civil society.
8. Despite ECW's lean structure, the Director reported that austerity measures are now in effect, including staffing cuts and relocation of personnel to lower-cost duty stations. ECW is engaging closely with donors like Norway and the UK to pursue private sector partnerships and innovative financing, but she stressed that humanitarian funding will remain essential, even from development actors, given the magnitude of current crises.
9. The Director reaffirmed ECW's core identity as a humanitarian fund delivering development results—specifically education—in the midst of crisis. She emphasized that ECW does not duplicate others' work but instead operates as a responsive, non-bureaucratic funding model that enables UN agencies, CSOs, and governments to act quickly and effectively.
10. The Director shared that ECW currently has no financial reserves and, without additional donor support, could face closure. She reiterated that ECW maintains the lowest operational costs in the sector, describing the Secretariat as a small team focused on resource mobilization and quality assurance.
11. Concluding her update, the Director announced a realistic replenishment target of US\$600 million for the 2027-2030 period, underscoring that US\$200 can educate one child. She invited all members to support the upcoming campaign and affirmed that ECW is a proven, cost-effective, and fast-moving model aligned with UN reform.

### **IV. Summary of Interventions on resource mobilization for major humanitarian crises and ECW's funding challenges**

#### **Baroness Jenny Chapman, Minister for Development, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), United Kingdom**

12. Baroness Chapman commended ECW's legacy under Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown and welcomed the new Chair. Reflecting on a recent field visit to Jordan, she noted the growing difficulty of delivering full-day education in refugee settings. She emphasized the importance of lean operations and value for money, given the UK's tough aid spending choices. She called for ECW to focus on rapid emergency responses, maximize impact for the most marginalized, and avoid duplication. She warned against abrupt aid withdrawals and

underscored the need for responsible exit strategies. She welcomed a bilateral meeting with the Chair to continue the conversation.

**Catherine Russell, Executive Director, UNICEF**

13. The Executive Director praised ECW's performance in 2024 and recognized the strong partnership between ECW and UNICEF. She acknowledged that the funding environment is "grim" across all UN agencies and stated that UNICEF would also undergo contraction. She stressed that humanitarian needs in Gaza and Sudan remain severe and reiterated that, while advocacy is important, concrete resource mobilization must follow. She affirmed UNICEF's continued commitment to collaborating with ECW and called for joined-up efforts across agencies to meet rising needs for education in emergencies.

**Cindy McCain, Executive Director, UN WFP**

14. The Executive Director warned of a concerning rise in global hunger, with 343 million people acutely food insecure—half of them children. She stressed that hunger is blocking access to education and noted WFP's 40% budget reduction for 2025. She proposed integrated, cross-sectoral programming linking health, nutrition, and education, such as school meals. She advocated for deeper collaboration with civil society, especially in hard-hit areas like Sudan and Gaza. She reaffirmed WFP's readiness to support education efforts in humanitarian crises and urged stronger joint financing models to help children return to school as soon as possible.

**Dr. David Edwards, General Secretary, Education International, Teachers' Constituency**

15. Representing 33 million educators across 170 countries, the General Secretary praised ECW's outreach to teachers and emphasized their roles not only as service providers but also as advocates and fundraisers. He urged support for paying teachers during crises—highlighting Education International's stipends for Gaza teachers unpaid for over a year. He called for greater inclusion of educators in funding decisions and national systems and emphasized the importance of trauma-informed pedagogy. Teachers, he noted, can help mobilize public support and ensure that investments reach the most marginalized children.

**H.E. Dr. Tariq Al Gurg, CEO, Dubai Cares**

16. The CEO shared that Dubai Cares raised US\$5.7 million in Gaza with Anera, delivering over one million meals and thousands of food baskets. He also highlighted a US\$10.5 million response in Lebanon with Save the Children, focused on WASH, child protection, MHPSS, and psychosocial education support. The campaign engaged 6,000 UAE-based volunteers to assemble 450 tons of critical aid packages. While education remains central to Dubai Cares, he emphasized that in humanitarian crises, dignity, survival, and hope must be prioritized through comprehensive emergency response.

**Refat Sabbah, General Secretary, Arab Campaign for Education**

17. The General Secretary delivered a powerful statement condemning neutrality in the face of mass atrocities, citing 12,000 student deaths and near-total destruction of Gaza's education infrastructure. He demanded that marginalized groups—youth, girls, refugees, and persons with disabilities—be meaningfully included in educational strategy development. He called

for civil society to be recognized as vital governance actors and for humanitarian aid to prioritize education. He condemned the global rise in military spending and called for long-term, rights-based financing grounded in justice, anti-austerity, and dismantling colonial legacies.

**Laura Frigenti, CEO, Global Partnership for Education**

18. The CEO affirmed GPE's close coordination with ECW. She emphasized complementarity between the two funds, highlighting joint country work and alignment of business models. She proposed using their upcoming replenishments to maintain sustained global attention on education. She reported that she and the ECW Director had begun discussions on synchronized messaging and campaign timing to avoid overlap and maximize impact. She reaffirmed GPE's commitment to working with ECW to reinforce effectiveness and donor trust in both institutions.

**Michael Gaffey, Director General, Development Cooperation and Africa Division, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Ireland**

19. The Director-General reaffirmed Ireland's strong and sustained commitment to ECW. He praised ECW's origins in Syria and urged continued action to prevent a lost generation in Sudan and Gaza. He called for immediate education interventions in Gaza and warned that waiting for post-conflict reconstruction would come too late. He highlighted Ireland's €20 million support to UNRWA and encouraged ECW to explore innovative methods to reach children now. He stressed Ireland's commitment to increasing ODA and maintaining a strong focus on education, particularly for girls.

**Stine Håheim, State Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway**

20. The State Secretary acknowledged ECW's early support for UNRWA amid attacks on the agency's credibility. She underscored the importance of safeguarding UNRWA's legitimacy and encouraged other donors to support its work. She called for deeper coordination between ECW and GPE—both in-country and at global funding events—to eliminate duplication and ensure synergy. Given the drop in ODA, she emphasized that financing must be as effective as possible and that recent ECW governance reforms would support this.

**Mutesi Hadijah, Youth and Student-led Constituency Representative**

21. The Youth and Student-led Constituency Representative thanked the Chair for recognizing the importance of youth participation. She urged ECW to fund youth-led initiatives, provide capacity-building, and formally include youth in programme design and implementation. The Representative emphasized that young people, especially those on the ground in crisis settings, are well-positioned to mobilize support and amplify ECW's mandate. She concluded by reaffirming the youth constituency's commitment to achieving ECW's mission.

**Dr. Ariane Hildebrandt, Director-General for Global Health, Equality of Opportunity, Digital Technologies and Food Security, Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany**

22. The Director-General expressed Germany's strong support as current ExCom co-chair. She thanked ECW for its swift adaptation and supported the shift toward deeper impact in fewer countries. However, she urged careful consideration of the balance between First Emergency Response (FER) and Multi-Year Resilience Programme (MYRP) funding, emphasizing that MYRPs are central to ECW's added value and to some donor commitments. She highlighted the need for continued engagement in Syria, alongside Sudan and Gaza. Looking ahead to the replenishment, she stressed the importance of value for money, stronger governance structures, and inclusive processes to enhance transparency and accountability.

**Maher Hassanieah, Senior Advisor for Strategic Initiatives, Lebanon**

23. The Senior Adviser thanked ECW for its US\$2.5 million emergency support in September 2024, which enabled schools to stay open amid immense challenges. He emphasized the importance of continued MYRP funding, with only US\$12 million received of the planned US\$50 million. Lebanon is undergoing structural education reforms and shifting from crisis response to long-term resilience. He urged sustained investment aligned with national leadership and emphasized that effective, inclusive mechanisms are already in place and should be reinforced—not bypassed.

**Min Jeong Kim, Director, Education 2030 Division, UNESCO**

24. The Director cited Sudan's Transitional Education Plan as an example of effective coordination among 34 actors and urged ECW members to support its financing and rollout. They noted a remaining US\$300 million funding gap. For Gaza, they highlighted the destruction of 100+ higher education buildings and the disruption faced by 90,000 university students. The speaker urged donors not to overlook tertiary education, including TVET, in the recovery and emphasized its importance for long-term reconstruction.

**H.E. Kuyok Abol Kuyok, Minister of General Education and Instruction, South Sudan**

25. The Minister reported that over 1 million Sudanese refugees have crossed the border, with 24% being school-aged children. The influx is overwhelming schools in northern South Sudan. He also cited displacement due to climate-related flooding affecting 1.8 million people. He thanked ECW and UNICEF for their continued support but emphasized that additional resources are needed to keep displaced children in school and maintain education services in overstretched regions.

**Martin Syechell, Deputy Director-General, European Commission**

26. Speaking on behalf of Commissioner for International Partnerships Jozef Sikela, the Deputy Director-General highlighted its €1.4 billion investment in education, 71% of which is in fragile settings. He emphasized education's long-term value and noted that each additional year of schooling increases earnings potential by 10%. Amid a 7.1% drop in ODA, he called for bold, innovative solutions and emphasized the importance of forging new partnerships with the private sector to unlock untapped resources and ensure system resilience.

**Faiza Hassan, Director, Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies**

27. The Director called for sector-wide reform and warned that donor grants alone will not meet current or future needs. She described the current moment as an inflection point requiring collective transformation. She encouraged ECW to embrace its catalytic role and to work with partners across the ecosystem to co-create new models that are inclusive, sustainable, and future-facing.

**Tom Dannatt, CEO & Founder, Street Child, International CSO Constituency**

28. The CEO emphasized that successful replenishment will depend on trust in ECW's governance and independence. He underscored the critical role of CSOs as results-driven delivery partners, advocacy champions, and credibility multipliers. He called for inclusive governance structures and replenishment planning that positions civil society as a central actor, not a peripheral stakeholder.

**IV. Approval of Operational Manual and Hosting Arrangement, and Update on the Hosting Review**

29. The HLSG approved ECW's updated Operational Manual by non-objection.

30. On the Hosting Arrangement, the Chair explained that recent updates were shared shortly before the meeting and requested time to conduct a thorough review. She committed to providing feedback and sign-off shortly and emphasized the need to avoid delays, given the urgency of finalizing ECW's institutional setup.

31. The ECW Director confirmed that a light desk-based Hosting Review is currently being commissioned and will be inclusive of all stakeholders. The process is being carried out in consultation with UNICEF and all findings will be transparently shared with HLSG members.

**Amrita Paul, Director, Global Affairs Canada**

32. The Director voiced strong support for the revised Operational Manual and acknowledged the leadership of the Operational Manual Advisory Group, particularly the contributions of FCDO. The updates were welcomed as essential to strengthening ECW's governance, strategic guidance, and transparency—particularly in crisis settings. She also noted that the revised Manual will support ECW's transition into its next strategic phase and further position the fund for institutional effectiveness.

**Elsebeth Søndergaard Krone, Secretary of State for Development Policy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark**

33. The Director confirmed Denmark's approval of both the Operational Manual and the Hosting Arrangement. She praised the Secretariat and ExCom for their work and called for bold institutional steps to close the humanitarian-development divide. She emphasized that ECW should lead a humanitarian reset, promote localization, and embrace innovative financing models. Denmark, as a top donor, reaffirmed its confidence in ECW's leadership and

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reiterated the importance of a fit-for-purpose institutional setup that allows ECW to maintain agility and deliver results in emergencies.

### V. Any Other Business (AOB) and Closing Reflections by the HLSG Chair

34. No items were raised under AOB.
35. The Chair informed the group that the *2024 Programmatic Portfolio and Financial Allocations Report* is now available and will be circulated online by the ECW Secretariat.
36. The Chair recalled that preparations for the June discussion on ECW's strategic planning and future resource mobilization are already underway and emphasized the importance of member contributions to those processes.
37. To improve the quality of discussions, the Chair proposed reviewing the format of future HLSG meetings to allow for deeper, topic-specific engagement. She proposed continuing bilateral calls with HLSG members to allow more time for introductions or reconnection.
38. The Chair then formally closed the meeting. She thanked participants for their strategic, action-oriented interventions.

### Annex A: Remarks from the Government of Switzerland

We deeply appreciate the critical work ECW continues to do in mobilizing resources for Education in Emergencies and its leadership in ensuring education remains a priority in humanitarian crises.

Looking ahead to the 2026 replenishment, Switzerland sees two elements as particularly important.

First, ensuring a strong and unified voice for Education in Emergencies. We welcome the early planning and the proposed timing in late 2026 for the replenishment, and encourage coordination with GPE to align efforts in mobilizing resources. Building on the network of the Geneva Global Hub for Education in Emergencies – as in the last replenishment – could help amplify this unified advocacy.

Second, we must intensify efforts to engage the private sector. In a rapidly evolving funding landscape, innovative funding mechanisms are key. Initiatives like the Education Initiative of the Swiss Cantonal Banks show how ECW can bridge private capital with public goods. By co-creating such solutions, we can help counter the impact of ODA funding cuts to some extent.

Switzerland is eager to work with all of you on these priorities—especially in its upcoming leadership role in ECW's ExCom.

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Annex B

# PARTICIPANTS

High-Level Steering Group Meeting



29 April 2025, 8:00 AM – 9:00 EDT, Virtual

1. **Sigrid Kaag**, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (HLSG Chair)
2. **Yasmine Sherif**, Executive Director, Education Cannot Wait (UNICEF-hosted global fund)
3. **Catherine Russell**, Executive Director, UNICEF
4. **Cindy McCain**, Executive Director, UN WFP
5. **Filippo Grandi**, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR
6. **Baroness Chapman**, Minister for Development, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, United Kingdom
7. **H.E. Dr. Kuyok Abol Kuyok**, Minister of General Education and Instruction, South Sudan
8. **Maher Hassanieh**, Senior Advisor for Strategic Initiatives, Lebanon
9. **Stine Håheim**, State Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway
10. **Elsebeth Søndergaard Krone**, Secretary of State for Development Policy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark
11. **Dr. Ariane Hildebrandt**, Director-General for Global Health, Equality of Opportunity, Digital Technologies and Food Security, Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany
12. **Martin Syechell**, Deputy Director-General, European Commission
13. **Dominik Stillhart**, SDC Deputy Director General and Head of Humanitarian Aid, Switzerland
14. **Michael Gaffey**, Director General, Development Cooperation and Africa Division, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Ireland
15. **H.E. Fahad Al-Sulaiti**, Director General, Qatar Fund for Development
16. **Amrita Paul**, Director, Global Affairs Canada
17. **H.E. Dr. Tariq Al Gurg**, Chief Executive Officer, Dubai Cares
18. **Lauratuulia Lehtinen**, Deputy Director General of the Department for Development Policy, Finland
19. **Tarek Alami**, VP of International Programmes, LEGO Foundation
20. **Dr. David Edwards**, General Secretary, Education International, Teachers' Constituency
21. **Clara Govier**, Managing Director, People's Postcode Lottery
22. **Dr. Rob Doble**, Sector Director, Building Future Generations, Porticus
23. **Laura Frigenti**, CEO, Global Partnership for Education
24. **Mutesi Hadijah**, Youth and Student-led Constituency Representative
25. **Dr. Luis Benveniste**, Global Director for Education, The World Bank Group
26. **Faiza Hassan**, Director, Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies
27. **Tom Dannatt**, CEO & Founder, Street Child, International CSO Constituency
28. **Refat Sabbah**, General Secretary, Arab Campaign for Education
29. **Min Jeong Kim**, Director, Education 2030 Division, UNESCO

*Not in attendance:* France, NRC, UN OCHA, USA