

MINUTES

Executive Committee Meeting



Thursday, 21 August 2025, Virtual

1. Welcome and introduction

The Executive Committee (ExCom) Co-Chairs:

- 1.1 Welcomed all participants, with a special welcome to the new UNICEF Interim Director, Mr. Abdullah Fadil, and the new ExCom Co-Chair, Ambassador Dominik Stillhart of Switzerland.
- 1.2 Recalled that this extraordinary meeting was convened to address three critical agenda items: 1) the organizational restructuring of ECW; 2) the recruitment of a new ECW Director; and 3) an update on the Hosting Review.
- 1.3 Thanked the ExCom Working Group for their instrumental work over the past two months in the restructuring process.

2. Organizational Restructuring Proposal

The UNICEF Interim Director, Abdullah Fadil, supported by Chief of Finance and Operations, Michael Corlin, presented the revised final proposal for ECW's organizational restructuring.

Presentation by the UNICEF Interim Director and Chief of Finance and Operations:

- 2.1 Outlined the strategic rationale for a new structure that is "fit for purpose", focused on its core mandate, efficient, and responsive to the current difficult funding landscape.
- 2.2 Detailed the key features of the new structure:
 - a) A significantly reduced team of 26 staff by 2026, consolidating to 25 from 2027 onwards.
 - b) A management-to-staff ratio of no more than 20% (1 Director-level and 4 Section-head P5-level positions).
 - c) Geneva is confirmed as the headquarters and central hub.
 - d) Consolidation of functions into four sections: 1) Partnerships, Advocacy & RM; 2) Programme Delivery & Quality Management; 3) Finance, Risk & Operations; 4) Evidence, Results & Reporting.
 - e) The closure of the New York office. A decision on a potential second duty station was deferred pending the outcomes of the Hosting Review and the replenishment.
- 2.3 Confirmed the structure allows ECW to meet the 7% operational expenditure cap within a multiyear period.
- 2.4 Provided a financial overview:

- a) The standard staff cost for the new structure is projected at US\$6.4 million for 2026, reducing to US\$6.22 million for 2027.
- b) Separation and relocation costs are estimated at \$1.5 million.
- c) Expressed confidence that these costs can be absorbed within the existing 7% operational expenditure cap for the strategic period, utilizing savings from previous years (2023-2025).
- d) Mitigation strategies for financial risks include staggering recruitment and relocations.

2.5 Addressed staff transition: Of the 26 positions in the revised structure, 15 will be filled by existing staff, ensuring continuity and preserving institutional knowledge. The Interim Director emphasized the need to rebuild team morale and focus on ECW's strategic mission to serve children in crises.

In discussion, the ExCom:

2.6 Commented the Interim Director for his decisive leadership and the ECW Secretariat for their significant work and resilience throughout a stressful process.

2.7 Expressed broad satisfaction that the proposal finally adhered to the parameters set by the ExCom on 11 June 2025 (7% cap, closure of NY office, reduced management ration).

2.8 Requested clarity on the detailed timeline for staff abolishment and new recruitment to ensure business continuity and stability for the Secretariat. Asked about flexibility in the relocation plan to account for personal staff situation.

2.9 Requested clarification on where the strategy would be housed in the new structure and if a staff member moves to a regraded position, does their salary change immediately under UN rules, impacting cost savings?

2.10 Noted the decision to defer selecting a second duty station was prudent pending the Hosting Review and replenishment.

2.11 Welcomed the robust financial plan to absorb restructuring costs within the existing operational budget.

In response, the Secretariat:

2.12 Interim Director Abdullah Fadil:

- On timeliness and stability: Reiterated that out of the 25 new positions, 14 or 15 roles—more than 50%—will continue under the new structure. So, a significant portion of the staff will remain in place and won't be impacted. The focus is on securing the right structure first, with individual staff situations to be handled carefully afterward. Deferring the second duty station decision avoids unnecessary relocation until the future strategic direction is clear and helps with rebuilding the team with a new Director.
- On regrading and salaries: Confirmed that when a post is regraded (e.g., from P4 to P3), the current retained staff's salary is protected while encumbering the post. The savings may only be realized when the post becomes vacant and is rehired at the lower grade. This has been applied to only two positions in this proposal.

2.13 Chief of Finance and Operations, Michael Corlin: Reaffirmed that financial plan's robustness, explaining that savings from previous years and cost-sharing mechanisms for abolishment within the UN system make the absorption of the US\$1.5 million restructuring cost feasible within the agreed 7% ceiling for the 2023 – 2026 strategic period.

Decision on Organizational Restructuring and Next Steps

The Co-Chairs opened the floor for final comments on the proposed decisions language for the organizational restructuring before a formal vote.

In discussion, the ExCom

- 2.14** Strongly advocated for the P5 position to be open to both internal and external candidates, emphasizing that ECW is a global public good and its leadership should reflect the diversity of the entire education in emergencies sector, including civil society. This was seen as critical for rebuilding.
- 2.15** Requested clarification on why an exemption to open recruitment was secured for the Director (D-level) position but was more challenging for the P5 role.
- 2.16** Proposed adding a request to the decision text for the Secretariat to conduct a risk assessment focused on staff well-being, fair transition measures, and implications for program delivery during the restructuring. Following discussion, this was refined to a request for regular monthly reporting on the transition process to keep the ExCom informed.
- 2.17** Suggested that the point of closing the New York office could be removed as was already decided at the 11 June meeting. The Co-Chairs clarified that its inclusion was to confirm that all parameters from June had been met.
- 2.18** Requested that the recruitment process for senior positions demonstrate openness and reflect the diversity of the wider education sector, even within existing UN rules.

In response, the Secretariat:

2.19 Interim Director Abdullah Fadil:

- On P5 recruitment: Acknowledged the ExCom's strong preference and agreed to consult with UNICEF Division of People and Culture to see possibility to open the P5 position to external candidates, despite internal ring-fencing policies, recognizing the unique nature of ECW.
- On D vs. P5 recruitment: Explained that the exemption for the Director was explicitly granted in the Hosting Agreement, which establishes a joint governance recruitment process. For other positions, the UNICEF regulatory framework including the ongoing global ring-fencing exercise apply, though he committed to advocating for flexibility.
- On transition reporting: Agreed to provide regular, concise monthly reports to the ExCom on the implementation of the transition. Including staff movement and well-being, rather than a standalone risk assessment.

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- On sector diversity: Agreed in principle with the need for a recruitment process that is perceived as open and reflective of the sector and committed to exploring creative solutions within the legal framework to achieve this.

The following decision language was discussed and subsequently finalized at the end of the session:

Decisions

The ExCom:

A1. Approved the final organizational restructuring proposal as presented.

A2. Requested the Secretariat to

- a) Absorb all restructuring costs within the 7% operational expenditure cap for the 2003 - 2026 strategic period, with a fallback option to spread any unforeseen excess costs over the coming strategic period.
- b) Provide an overview of possibilities for remote work to avoid double relocation for affected staff by the end of September 2025.
- c) Provide monthly reports to the ExCom on the status of the transition implementation process.
- d) Open all senior positions (D and P5 level) to both internal and external candidates for recruitment, recognizing ECW's role as part of the wider education architecture and as a multilateral actor.
- e) Ensure openness in ECW's recruitment processes to reflect the diversity of the wider education sector.

3. Recruitment of the New Director

The Co-Chairs and the UNICEF Interim Director provided an update on the recruitment process for the new ECW Director.

Presentation by the Co-Chairs and Interim Director

- 3.1** Announced that the vacancy has been published at the D1 level with an application deadline of 20 September 2025 to attract a wide and robust pool of candidates.
- 3.2** Explained that while advertised at D1 for the smaller structure, the level could be reconsidered to D2 if it proves difficult to attract exceptionally qualified candidates for a D1 position.
- 3.3** Outlined the selection process per the Operational Manual and Hosting Agreement: a panel comprising representatives from HLSG, the ExCom, and UNICEF.
- 3.4** Detailed plans to advertise the position widely, including in The Economist, LinkedIn and through UN channels.

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3.5 The Co-Chairs expressed deep regret over the circumstances leading to the former Director's departure and acknowledged her significant contributions to ECW. It was agreed that the Co-Chairs would send an official letter of thanks.

In discussion, the ExCom:

3.6 Comment on the swift launch of the recruitment process but expressed a concern: advertising at a D1 level might limit the ability to attract a top-tier leader capable of rebuilding trust, leading high-level advocacy for the replenishment, and managing the complex transition. Noted that previous recruitment took nine months and urged against a similar delay.

3.7 Stressed the importance of the selection panel being involved in the sifting/shortlisting process to ensure a fair and comprehensive review of all candidates.

3.8 Urge all members to actively disseminate the vacancy announcement within their network to attract the strongest possible candidate.

3.9 Requested that if a strong pool of D2-level candidates is identified, the level of the post be reconsidered to attract the necessary leadership.

3.10 Emphasized that the recruitment process must be expedited to avoid a prolonged leadership gap.

In response, the Secretariat and the Co-Chairs

3.11 Interim Director Abdullah Fadi:

- Agreed on the need for a strong leader and confirmed the process is agile. The grade can be adjusted to D2 if it proves difficult to attract exceptionally qualified candidates (the D1 process will be cancelled accordingly).
- Assured that the selection panel, as outlined in the Hosting Agreement, would be involved in the shortlisting process and have visibility on a long list of candidates.

3.12 ExCom Co-Chair Dr. Heike Kuhn:

- Acknowledged the difficult compromise of advertising at D1, reflecting the views of a majority of ExCom members for a structure-appropriate level, but reiterated the flexibility to upgrade for the right candidate.

3.13 ExCom unanimously endorsed Faiza Hassan (INEE) as its representative on the recruitment panel. The task of identifying a representative from the HLSG was delegated to the HLSG Chair.

4. Hosting Review

The Co-Chairs introduced the final agenda item, providing an update on the planned independent review of ECW's hosting arrangements.

Presentation by Maarten Barends, Chief of Humanitarian Liaison & External Relations:

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- 4.1 Announced the recruitment of Dr. Timothy Nielander as the senior expert to lead the hosting review, noting his extensive experience with the ADB, Gavi, GPE, WFP, and many others.
- 4.2 Outlined the two-phased approach for the review:
 - Phase 1 (to be completed by mid-October): Develop and build consensus around a set of criteria against which potential hosts will be assessed and produce a longlist and shortlist of potential host organizations. The intention is to cast the net widely and the consultant will also look at options outside the UN system.
 - Phase 2 (to be completed by end of December): Liaise with the shortlisted potential hosts about their offers and weigh the pros and cons of each of them through a comparative assessment, culminating in clear recommendations for the ExCom and the HLSG.
- 4.3 Introduced the ExCom advisory group overseeing the process: Annica Floren from the EU, Frank McManus from Irish Aid, and Tyler Arnot representing the INGOs.
- 4.4 Committed to keeping the wider ExCom informed through written updates and regular calls, with the draft Phase 1 report expected for ExCom feedback by mid-October.

Presentation by Dr. Timothy Nielander, Senior Expert:

- 4.5 Stated he comes with no preconceived notions and will base his assessment on ECW's strategic objectives, its constituencies, focusing on the institutional arrangement that best facilitates its mission.
- 4.6 Framed the review not as a search for problems with the current host (UNICEF), but as a forward-looking exercise to identify the optimal model for delivering on ECW's future strategy.
- 4.7 Noted that the review would be informed by parallel studies on the multilateral education architecture.
- 4.8 Sought guidance on the methodology, proposing to cluster meetings with constituencies that have connected interests, with the possibility of bilateral discussions if needed.

In discussion, the ExCom:

- 4.9 Emphasized the need for the review to be future-oriented, assessing hosts against ECW's future nimble structure and strategic direction from 2027 onwards, not its past configuration. Noted the challenge of aligning with the restructuring timelines of potential host organizations and requested clarity on the methodology for moving from a longlist to a shortlist.
- 4.10 Expressed full confidence in Dr. Nielander and the advisory group. Advised that individual bilateral interviews might initially yield more candid feedback than clustered meetings. Delegated oversight to the advisory group, suggesting the next formal update for the full ExCom could be scheduled in November.
- 4.11 Requested clarity on UNICEF's role in the process, suggesting a clear separation between its role as the current host and its role as an ExCom member.
- 4.12 Supported the two-phase approach and echoed the need for interim updates to allow members to report to their capitals and constituencies.

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4.13 Clarified that the Terms of Reference commit to presenting the Phase 1 report to the whole ExCom for approval around mid-October, ensuring a formal decision point.

4.14 Asked for clarification on whether UNICEF is willing to be considered as a future host, referencing previous internal communications that suggested otherwise.

In response, the Secretariat and UNICEF:

4.15 Interim Director Abdullah Fadil: Clarified that UNICEF has not made a final decision and that it remains fully committed to supporting ECW's mission. He characterized the hosting as a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" responsibility due to perceived conflicts of interest but affirmed UNICEF's commitment to doing what is best for crisis-affected children, whether as host or not; For now, UNICEF wants the hosting review to be undertaken and receive the results and proposals.

4.16 Nazim Khizar (UNICEF/DFAM ExCom Member): Reaffirmed that there have been no internal UNICEF discussions about discontinuing the hosting arrangement. UNICEF will actively support the review process and accept ExCom's ultimate decision, focusing on the best way to deliver for children.

4.17 Dr. Timothy Nielander (Senior Expert):

- On the longlist to shortlist methodology: Explained that the longlist would be a "thoughtful" and "shortish" list of organizations with clear potential and intent to provide ECW with professional hosting services, not a scattergun approach. It will focus on entities that can and will ensure operational and governance efficiency.
- On the future focus: Confirmed that the review will be forward-looking with ECW's forthcoming 2027-2030 Strategic Plan as a key reference point. The recommendations will be tested against ECW's future strategic goals.

5. AOB and Close

5.1 Civil Society ExCom Representative: Under "Any other business", raised that the recent challenges highlight the need for a concurrent review of ECW's governance structures, not just the Secretariat. He urged the ExCom to revisit governance discussions led previously by FCDO to ensure it is fit for purpose for the future.

5.2 The Co-Chairs thanked the Secretariat, ExCom Advisory Group, and all members for their engagement. They confirmed that the formal decision on the restructuring would be communicated via email to the Secretariat and the HLSG Chair immediately.

5.3 The meeting was closed.