

MINUTES

High-Level Steering Group Meeting



Wed 24 September 2025, 8:00 AM – 9:00 AM EDT, New York

I. Chair's welcome and Introduction

1. The meeting was opened by the HLSG Chair Sigrid Kaag. She welcomed participants and acknowledged the newly appointed Principals from Qatar and the Youth and Student-led Constituency attending for the first time.
2. The Chair recalled the June 2025 meeting, which encouraged open reflection on ECW's future. She emphasized that the goal remains access to sustained, quality education for children in crisis settings, and not institutional survival for its own sake.
3. She underlined that replenishment discussions must be linked to broader education sector reforms and multilateral change, cautioning against fragmented approaches. She highlighted the potential of innovative financing instruments, efficiency gains, and stronger partnerships, while acknowledging constrained resources.
4. Paying tribute to past and current leadership — Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown, Ms. Yasmine Sherif, and Mr. Abdullah Fadil — she thanked them for their commitment and welcomed Mr. Dan Toole as Interim Director to steer the transition until the new Director is recruited.
5. The Chair outlined the main agenda items for the meeting: (a) ECW's next replenishment and case for investment; (b) adoption of the Annual Results Report; and (c) approval of funding allocations for 2026.

II. Update from the ECW Director

Abdullah Fadil, Former Interim Director, ECW and Director, Partnership for Lead-free Future

6. The former interim Director presented an update on the Secretariat's restructuring, noting that it was successfully completed within the Executive Committee's 7% operational cost ceiling. He reported that ECW has reached 14 million children and adolescents to date, including 155,000 learners with disabilities, and that 39% of funds were directed to forgotten crises. He highlighted positive results in literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional learning. Looking ahead, he underscored the importance of strengthening localization—currently 29% of funds reach local partners—and announced a replenishment target of US\$600 million. He further confirmed that the ongoing hosting review will be finalized by the end of the year.

Dan Toole, Interim Director, ECW

7. The interim Director thanked his predecessor for steering ECW through a complex transition and paid tribute to the dedication of staff. Outlining his immediate priorities, he

emphasized: (a) timely and predictable grant delivery, particularly to local actors; (b) development of a flexible strategic plan and compelling investment case; (c) transparent finalization of the hosting review; and (d) careful implementation of the new structure with attention to staff welfare. He called on members to provide the financial, political, and moral support necessary for ECW to continue delivering at speed and scale in the most challenging contexts.

III. Summary of Interventions

Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees

8. The Commissioner commended ECW for amplifying refugee education within humanitarian agendas, emphasizing that sustainability must underpin every intervention. He noted that temporary projects risk eroding trust unless they strengthen government systems and capacity. Education, he stressed, is a cornerstone of refugee protection, offering hope, dignity, and future prospects. He warned, however, that the moment is dire, with humanitarian funding drying up and education budgets—including UNHCR's own—being cut back severely, erasing hard-won gains in refugee enrollment. He urged ECW to remain bold in fragile settings, framing education not only as a right but also as an essential investment in stability and long-term recovery

Dr. Ariane Hildebrandt, Director General 1 Global Health; Equality of Opportunity; Digital Technologies; Food Security, Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development

9. The Director General welcomed ECW's draft investment case, highlighting the need for a rights-based approach that ensures equity in fragile contexts. She urged a clearer articulation of ECW's comparative advantage relative to GPE, stressing that donors need confidence in complementary roles. She emphasized sequencing priorities, with a strong roadmap for the replenishment campaign. Germany, she noted, values ECW's agility but expects sharper thematic focus and transparent governance reforms. She reaffirmed Germany's commitment to supporting ECW's transition, underlining that clarity and alignment are essential to maintaining donor trust.

Jan Egeland, Secretary-General, Norwegian Refugee Council

10. The Secretary-General warned that education risks becoming a casualty of shrinking humanitarian budgets, as donors slash aid to historic lows. He recalled that displaced families consistently cite schooling as a top priority, even when food and shelter are scarce. Education, he argued, must not be treated as secondary to survival but as central to protection, resilience, and recovery. He urged ECW to amplify advocacy with urgency, unify members behind a bold replenishment narrative, and resist austerity pressures that undermine children's futures.

Ambassador Patricia Danzi, Director General, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

11. The Director General praised the Secretariat's resilience during restructuring and pledged Switzerland's strong support for ECW's transition to Geneva. She stressed that replenishment must be grounded in a robust strategic plan before investment is sought.

She urged greater private sector engagement, citing Swiss experience in bridging philanthropic and institutional resources. Switzerland, she noted, sees education as a transformative investment in peace and opportunity. She called for ECW to frame its value proposition clearly, positioning itself as a leader in agile, results-driven financing for children in crises.

Catherine Russell, Executive Director, UNICEF

12. The Executive Director commended ECW for its lean and effective model and reaffirmed UNICEF's commitment to partnership despite budget contractions across the UN. She stressed the urgency of addressing the millions of out-of-school children in Gaza, Sudan, and other crises. Innovation, she noted, including AI-based tools, could support overstretched teachers and improve access. She cautioned, however, that systemic solutions—not isolated projects—are needed for sustainability. She welcomed ECW's restructuring and urged members to support the replenishment with tangible contributions, not only with advocacy.

Beth Arthy, Director, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, United Kingdom

13. The Director reported on a donor-led study reviewing the education in emergencies architecture, which identified overlapping mandates and fragmentation. She welcomed ECW's acute emergency focus and noted progress on localization and climate resilience as positive steps. She urged ECW to continue sharpening its niche and avoid duplication with partners. The UK, she emphasized, values ECW's agility and ability to deliver rapid impact for marginalized children. She called for clear evidence of value-for-money to sustain donor confidence amid increasingly constrained budgets.

Dr. Kuyok Abol Kuyok, Minister of General Education and Instruction, South Sudan

14. The Minister praised ECW's significant contributions to education in South Sudan, where the country continues to face displacement and resource scarcity. He affirmed his government's commitment to co-finance education initiatives, stressing national ownership as key to sustainability. He called for partners to redouble efforts so that no child is left behind in contexts of crisis and fragility. He urged ECW to maintain a strong presence in South Sudan and continue supporting systems that can integrate displaced children into formal education.

H.E. Fahad Al-Sulaiti, Director General, Qatar Fund for Development

15. The Director General reaffirmed Qatar's commitment to supporting education in emergencies through ECW. He observed that many funding requests received by the Qatar Fund for Development focus on areas such as infrastructure or budget support, with education often underrepresented. He stressed that education must be given greater priority, particularly for refugees and displaced children, and urged closer coordination with governments to align investments with national education plans. He called on all partners to strengthen their commitments so that education remains central in crisis response.

Amrita Paul, Director, Education and Ending Violence, Global Affairs Canada

16. The Director reaffirmed Canada's commitment to ECW, emphasizing the importance of demonstrating scale and impact in order to sustain political support. She stressed that ECW must strengthen coherence and efficiency across its operations, ensuring resources are maximized in fragile contexts. She underlined the need to improve learning outcomes alongside access, noting that results must be both measurable and meaningful. Canada called for a compelling narrative that clearly showcases results and value-for-money, arguing that this will be essential for replenishment and for maintaining donor confidence in the fund.

Tom Dannatt, CEO and Founder, Street Child (International NGO Constituency)

17. The International NGO Representative emphasized the comparative value of ECW as a fast, responsive fund with a clear identity focused on the most marginalized. He highlighted the INGO constituency's position paper, which underscores ECW's speed of delivery and ability to reach children others often miss. He urged scaling up support to local partners and advancing localization, noting that only 29% of funding currently flows to national actors. He stressed that INGOs can play a guaranteeing role, ensuring accountability, results, and credibility in replenishment.

Stefania Giannini, Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO

18. The Assistant Director-General commended the leadership of Gordon Brown and Yasmine Sherif in making ECW a vital asset for international education cooperation. She stressed that the Secretariat must have sufficient capacity to manage more complex and innovative financing functions. She added that restructuring should be part of wider efforts to strengthen the global education architecture. She called for greater clarity on ECW's partnership with GPE to ensure complementarity, and suggested exploring consolidated governance of education financing.

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

19. The State Secretary reaffirmed Denmark's commitment to the 0.7% GNI target, stressing that education remains a strong priority. She noted Denmark's close partnership with both GPE and ECW, and welcomed ECW's flexible, swift, and responsive approach, particularly in reaching marginalized groups. She expressed support for an ambitious yet realistic replenishment target of US\$600 million, endorsed innovative financing and greater localization, and underlined the importance of avoiding mandate overlap.

Emmanuel Kofi Abotsi, Global Student Forum (Youth and Student-led Constituency)

20. The Youth Representative stressed that young people are not only beneficiaries but also first responders and innovators in crises. He urged ECW to establish dedicated youth financing within its investment case, ensuring resources flow directly to youth-led organizations. He highlighted that youth participation in programme design and governance improves impact and accountability. He called on ECW to position youth as

strategic partners in replenishment, arguing that the next generation is indispensable in shaping inclusive, resilient education system.

Sarah Hunt, Director, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Ireland

21. The Director reaffirmed Ireland's strong partnership with ECW and thanked the Secretariat for its leadership during transition. She praised ECW's proven ability to deliver education in crises and reiterated Ireland's commitment to reaching the furthest behind. She emphasized the importance of strengthening the results narrative, particularly through reliable and independently validated learning outcome data, to build a compelling case for replenishment. On innovative finance, she welcomed co-financing opportunities but cautioned that safeguards are essential to prevent delays or exclusion of capable partners.

Faiza Hassan, Director, Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)

22. The Director introduced a set of ten principles for financing education in emergencies, developed in consultation with civil society and student groups. She urged ECW and its partners to use these as an anchor for replenishment, ensuring financing is inclusive, sustainable, and principled. She emphasized the need for systemic transformation, stressing that donor grants alone will not meet growing needs. She called on ECW to embrace its catalytic role by driving innovation and co-creating new models with diverse partners.

Ms. Tine Mørch Smith, Director General, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway

23. The Director General commended the Secretariat for managing restructuring effectively against a challenging multilateral backdrop. She stressed the need to look forward with bold and radical reforms, particularly in governance and hosting arrangements. Locating the new host closer to implementation areas would, she argued, strengthen credibility and impact. She underlined the importance of appointing a Director with clear ownership of ECW's mission and of clarifying ECW's distinct role within the multilateral landscape to avoid duplication. Norway reaffirmed its support to the important work of ECW.

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

24. The General Secretary emphasized the importance of safeguarding staff rights and workers' conditions, welcoming that these concerns are being addressed. He highlighted the plight of teachers in crisis settings: 1,700 lost in Gaza, those in South Sudan forced to close schools due to heat and attacks, teachers in Lebanon unpaid for nine months, and colleagues in Syria still awaiting funding. He recalled the hopeful "Teachers Cannot Wait" strategy and urged it not be sidelined in replenishment. Echoing UNICEF's point on innovation, he stressed that while AI can support learning, only teachers can shield children in crises.

Chiara Adamo, Deputy to the Director, European Commission

25. The Deputy concluded on a positive note by encouraging emerging and new donors to join ECW's replenishment efforts. She recalled that the EU and its member states remain the largest donor bloc to education, across both humanitarian and basic

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education frameworks, reinforced through the Global Gateway investment strategy. Turning to the draft investment case, she described it as a solid basis for engagement but stressed the need for a clearer, sharper, and more compelling structure, especially in the absence of a finalized strategic plan. She urged alignment with sector-wide reviews and a stronger narrative on innovative financing.

IV. Adoption of the ECW Annual Results Report 2024

26. The Chair confirmed that the Annual Results Report 2024 was adopted by the HLSG, noting no objections were raised following its prior circulation to ExCom.

V. Approval of the Funding Allocation for 2026

27. The Chair confirmed approval of the 2026 funding allocations (US\$152.9 million) by non-objection.

VI. AOB and Close

28. No items were raised under AOB.
29. The Chair closed the meeting by reaffirming that while reforms and strategy development are essential, urgent delivery cannot wait. She stressed that every day children are denied education in crises, underscoring the need for bold, unified action to secure replenishment and sustain ECW's mission

PARTICIPANTS

High-Level Steering Group Meeting



HLSG Chair: Sigrid Kaag

1. Amrita Paul, Director, Education and Ending Violence, Global Affairs Canada, **Canada**
2. Elsebeth Søndergaard Krone, Secretary of State for Development Policy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, **Denmark**
3. Mada Alsuwaidi, Director of Programs, **Dubai Cares**
4. Dan Toole, Interim Director, **Education Cannot Wait**
5. Chiara Adamo, Deputy to the Director "Human Development, Migration, Governance and Peace", **European Commission**
6. Maria Suokko, Director, Unit for UN Development Issues, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, **Finland**
7. Dr. Ariane Hildebrandt, Director General 1 Global Health; Equality of Opportunity; Digital Technologies; Food Security, Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, **Germany**
8. Laura Frigenti, CEO, **Global Partnership for Education**
9. Tom Dannatt, Founder & CEO, Street Child, **International NGO Constituency**
10. Faiza Hassan, Director, **Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies**
11. Sarah Hunt, Director, Development Cooperation and Africa Division, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, **Ireland**
12. Tarek Alami, VP of International Programmes, **LEGO Foundation**
13. Tine Mørch Smith, Director General of the Global Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, **Norway**
14. Jan Egeland, Secretary General, **Norwegian Refugee Council**
15. Christina Kirby, Lead - Children on the Margins, **Porticus**
16. H.E. Fahad Al-Sulaiti, Director General, **Qatar Fund for Development**
17. Dr. Kuyok Abol Kuyok, Minister of General Education and Instruction, **South Sudan**
18. Patricia Danzi, Ambassador, Director General, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, **Switzerland**
19. Dr. David Edwards, General Secretary, Education International, **Teachers' Constituency**
20. Carmen Burbano, Director, School Meals and Social Protection Service, **UN WFP**
21. Stefania Giannini, Assistant Director-General for Education, **UNESCO**
22. Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, **UNHCR**
23. Abdullah Fadil, Director, Partnership for a Lead-free Future, **UNICEF**
24. Catherine Russell, Executive Director, **UNICEF**
25. Beth Arthy, Director Education and Gender Equality, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, **United Kingdom**
26. Dr. Luis Benveniste, Global Director for Education, **The World Bank Group**
27. Emmanuel Kofi Abotsi, High-Level Steering Committee Member, Global Student Forum, **Youth and Student-led Constituency**