

MINUTES

High-Level Steering Group Meeting

26 September 2024, 7:00 AM – 8:00 AM EST
633 Third Avenue, New York (Hybrid meeting)



1. Chair's welcome and introduction

The Chair, Rt Hon Gordon Brown, welcomed all members of the High-Level Steering Group (HLSG) attending in person in New York, as well as those joining online. He offered a special greeting to Annalise Dodds, the new UK Minister for Development, as well as to HE Awut Deng Acuil, South Sudan's Minister of Education, and HE Raïssa Malu, the Democratic Republic of Congo's Minister of State for National Education and New Citizenship.

The Chair began by emphasizing the current global education crisis, noting that approximately 500 million children have had their education disrupted by armed conflict and climate change. He stressed that this places significant responsibilities on the shoulders of the HLSG. The number of displaced and refugee children without access to education has tripled since Education Cannot Wait (ECW) was conceived eight years ago and the Chair therefore urged the HLSG to redouble their efforts so that ECW has the funding it needs to respond.

The Chair specified the objectives of the HLSG meeting, namely to address technical issues concerning the relationship between UNICEF, the HLSG, the Executive Committee (ExCom), and other topics currently under review particularly ECW's Hosting Arrangement with UNICEF and the Operational Manual¹. He emphasized that the HLSG meeting provides an opportunity for the HLSG to guide the direction on some outstanding matters.

2. Update from the ECW Director

The Chair introduced Yasmine Sherif, ECW Director, to present the **2023 Annual Results Report** titled **Results Against All Odds** and provide relevant updates.

She began by expressing her sincere gratitude to all attendees, emphasizing that the success of ECW's work is attributed to the collaborative efforts of donors, civil society and UN agencies. ECW is a catalyst, driven by the financial support of donor partners, the frontline efforts of civil society organizations and the leadership of UN agencies in programme implementation, all of which contribute to achieving ECW's strategic objectives. Credit belongs to the partners and supporters, and not to ECW itself.

She thanked the Chair for his continued support and critical role in ECW's overall success and underscored that financing is not just a resource but a form of energy, which, when directed effectively, can create transformative change. Maintaining a positive attitude, along with hard work and kindness, are key principles that have enabled ECW to consistently exceed expectations. She recalled the findings of the latest audit and evaluations of ECW, all of which have demonstrated ECW's high level of performance, accountability and due diligence. She expressed her appreciation for the exceptional work of ECW's Finance and Operations team, and emphasized that the organization adheres to robust business processes while adding a sense of compassion to its work, which contributes to positive outcomes in crisis-affected settings.

In presenting the 2023 Annual Results Report, she highlighted that the 2023-2026 goal was to reach 20 million children by 2026 - ECW has already reached 5.6 million children in the first year of the Strategic Plan and has thus surpassed expectations and is on track to meet its targets. With US\$900 million already mobilized, closing the remaining funding gap of \$600 million is critical to ensure the overall target is met. Over 90% of the Multi-Year Resilience Programmes which are measuring learning

¹ A summary of agreed actions are outlined in the HLSG Chair's note [here](#) (previously shared with the HLSG on 30 September 2024).

outcomes have demonstrated improvements in children and adolescents' academic, social and emotional skills.

ECW multi-year funding drives reforms at the humanitarian-development-peace nexus by investing in and focusing on stronger systems for joint programming, financing, data and localization. In particular, the localization agenda target of 25% has been exceeded, with 29% of funds reaching local actors. This achievement aligns with the principles of the Grand Bargain agreement and demonstrates ECW's commitment to local engagement and capacity building.

She concluded by emphasizing the importance of continued cooperation and coordination across UN agencies, civil society, and education ministries. She praised the collaborative spirit of all partners and noted that by maintaining a shared commitment to supporting children and adolescents, we can achieve extraordinary outcomes. She urged members to continue mobilizing additional resources to ensure that the ambitious targets are met, highlighting that the systems and partnerships are already in place to enable further success. She closed her remarks by thanking the group for their support and reaffirming ECW's commitment to achieving its goals.

2.1 Remarks from ECW Partner Countries

In line with the Executive Director's Update, representatives from ECW partner countries – DRC and South Sudan – were invited to share their country's experience.

HE Raïssa Malu, Minister of State, Minister of National Education and New Citizenship, DRC thanked ECW for its ongoing support in the DRC, with investments of over \$35 million, which have improved access to education for over 100,000 displaced children. A new Multi-Year Resilience Programme of \$20 million is under development. Despite these efforts, challenges remain due to ongoing conflict and instability, with 6.4 million displaced people in the DRC—over 80% of whom are conflict-related, making it the country with the largest displaced population in Africa. The Minister called on donors to fully fund educational initiatives to support children in crisis zones.

HE Awut Deng Acuil, Minister of General Education and Instruction, South Sudan thanked the Chair and ECW Director for their comprehensive update and expressed gratitude to all attendees for their support of education in South Sudan. She highlighted the positive impact of ECW's Multi-Year Resilience programme and initial emergency investments. The Minister praised ECW's swift programme development and flexibility in adapting to changing circumstances. She noted the significant pressure on the education system due to around 800,000 people fleeing from Sudan to South Sudan since April last year. Additionally, she commended ECW for including a crisis modifier in its programme and concluded by expressing profound thanks to the ECW Director and the HLSCG Chair for their strong and steadfast leadership.

3. Funding Allocations for 2025

The Chair presented that the budget for the upcoming year is \$235 million and noted that it had been shared with members prior to the meeting. He then opened the floor for questions on the budget and mentioned that the ECW Director or Chief of Finance and Operations Michael Corlin would be available to address any questions. There were no questions nor objections.

The HLSCG approved the funding allocation for 2025.

4. Draft Hosting Arrangement with UNICEF

The Chair began by reaffirming that ECW is hosted by UNICEF, a decision made at the inception of the fund during the World Humanitarian Summit. He emphasized that this decision was based on the collective agreement of many countries that recognized the importance of education in challenging contexts. He then explained that discussions have been ongoing with UNICEF regarding a new Hosting Arrangement, which will establish a new framework to support ECW's future growth. The Chair noted

that these discussions have focused on three key issues. He clarified that UNICEF is the employer of all ECW staff, as ECW is hosted under UNICEF's policies on staffing and related issues. This situation has given rise to several challenges, leading to the development of a new draft Hosting Arrangement that has also been reviewed by the ExCom.

The first issue relates to **staff rotation**. The Chair explained that while UNICEF has a policy requiring staff rotation, this is not suitable for many ECW staff who are specialized personnel. UNICEF has agreed to conduct an assessment in the same way as for any other UNICEF position which will take about two to three months. While UNICEF cannot agree to a general exemption for all staff based on their employment in the ECW Secretariat alone, there will be no rotation at all within the next two years (unless a staff member voluntarily joins the mobility process) and staff will not be subject to mobility until they complete their full tour of duty. He expressed appreciation for UNICEF's flexibility on this matter and emphasized that the primary goal is to ensure the stability of ECW and to avoid unnecessary staff movements that could disrupt ongoing work.

The second issue pertains to the **decision-making role of the various governing bodies**, specifically the relationship between UNICEF, the HLSG, and the ExCom. The Chair mentioned that this relationship is detailed in Section 2.2 of the draft Hosting Arrangement to ensure clarity and effective governance.

The Chair then introduced the third issue on **the hosting review**. While expressing satisfaction with the current arrangement with UNICEF, he acknowledged that, as the largest hosted fund, ECW may have outgrown this hosting model. The ECW Secretariat will commence a hosting review to identify options for where ECW be hosted in the UN system (or another international body). The results of this review should be presented no later than April 2025 to the HLSG for a decision. If viable options are available in advance, an interim meeting to take a decision on hosting could be held.

The Chair thanked all members for their attention and reiterated the importance of this discussion in shaping the future of ECW. He then opened the floor for comments from HLSG members.

Tom Dannatt, CEO, Street Child, International CSO Constituency commended the ECW team for their dedication and hard work and highlighted that many UNGA events have praised the work and impact of ECW. The Hosting Arrangement, has been discussed extensively within the CSO constituency and it is their collective view that maintaining ECW's independence is critical for leveraging the success of all actors involved. Whatever hosting arrangements are pursued, this independence must remain a key consideration.

Thomas Poulsen, Assistant Director and Chief of Education, Higher Education, and Research, Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) thanked the Chair and UNICEF for adapting the Hosting Arrangement to ECW's needs. He acknowledged ECW's uniqueness compared to other hosted funds within UNICEF. He stressed the urgency of finalizing the arrangement soon and emphasized the importance of the upcoming hosting review. He noted that the review requires adequate time to address its complexities. Finally, he highlighted the need to consider the most suitable hosting arrangement due to ECW's size and mandate.

Rt Hon Anneliese Dodds, MP, Minister for Development at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and Minister for Women and Equalities at the Department for Education, UK thanked ECW for its efforts in providing education to children in crisis-affected contexts. She emphasized the importance of collaboration and evidence-based decision-making to achieve maximum impact and guide funding. Highlighting the need for a stable environment, she noted that this supports ECW's independence and long-term expertise. She praised ECW's operational model as fitting for its mission and stressed the importance of including diverse voices in decision-making. The Minister expressed satisfaction with the inclusivity demonstrated at the current meeting.

Dr Ariane Hildebrandt, Director General for Global Health, Equality of Opportunity, Digital Technologies, and Food Security, German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) thanked the Chair for productive discussions with UNICEF on the draft Hosting Arrangement, noting its importance for all stakeholders. She proposed that the arrangement should reference the Operational Manual to clarify governance structures and processes. Additionally, she suggested a rotation exemption for all ECW staff to prevent brain drain and conflicts of interest. She emphasized the need for these points to be included in the final version before the HLSG adopts the arrangement. The Director General affirmed Germany's support for proceeding with the independent hosting review as scheduled. The Chair reassured her that Germany's requirements would be included in the Operational Manual.

Patricia Danzi, Director General, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation thanked the ECW Director for her work and the Chair for his willingness to extend his mandate until the operational issues are resolved, emphasizing the importance of his leadership during this transition. She echoed the call for a rotation exemption for ECW staff to acknowledge their unique expertise. While supporting the proposed hosting arrangement, she remained open to alternatives. She welcomed the suggested hosting review and expressed support for the proposed budget.

Lotte Machon, State Secretary for Development Policy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark agreed on the importance of ECW's independence and specialized role, and supported the call for ECW staff to be excluded from rotation to retain expertise. She welcomed the review of the Hosting Arrangement, hoping it would offer transparent options for moving forward.

The Chair thanked the State Secretary for her comments and acknowledged the importance of preserving ECW's specialized role. He then addressed the issue of staff rotation, and expressed a preference for all ECW staff to be exempt from rotation. He clarified that UNICEF policy allows for specialized staff to be exempted and he expressed hope that this would therefore cover all ECW's personnel. The Chair acknowledged that if this proves unsatisfactory, it will be revisited as part of the hosting review.

Catherine Russell, Executive Director, UNICEF thanked the Chair for facilitating the discussions and recognized the complexity of the issue. She explained that staff rotation is a key priority for UNICEF, as it enhances personnel's field experience and effectiveness. While some specialized roles do not rotate, UNICEF is open to refraining from rotating ECW staff for the next two years while evaluating which roles should remain specialized. She emphasized that rotation is not arbitrary but aims to improve staff capabilities by exposing them to diverse situations.

The Chair thanked the Executive Director for her willingness to find a compromise on the matter related to staff rotation. He reiterated the importance of maintaining ECW's independence while recognizing the critical role that UNICEF plays in supporting the fund.

Christopher McLennan, Deputy Minister of International Development, Global Affairs Canada appreciated the opportunity to discuss staff rotation and hosting arrangements, given their interconnectedness. He congratulated ECW for integrating gender considerations into its work, especially in addressing gender-based harms. Noting the fundraising shortfall, he highlighted the need for a clearer understanding, as only \$900 million has been raised against an initial goal of \$1.5 billion. He expressed a desire for better insights into how prioritization is determined in light of this discrepancy.

Natasha de Marcken, Deputy Assistant Administrator, USAID praised ECW's very well drafted 2023 Annual Results Report which demonstrates very impactful results in the field. She highlighted the significance of governance structures, particularly in relation to the hosting arrangements, emphasizing that these conversations are crucial for ECW's long-term sustainability and advocating for a rigorous, transparent and well-organized process that includes recommendations from the ExCom to the HLSG.

The Chair expressed appreciation for the valuable inputs provided by all members. In closing, the Chair reiterated that addressing the issue of staff rotation, the finalization of the Hosting Arrangement, and the results of the Hosting Review will all be completed in advance of the April 2025 HLSG meeting so that decisions can be made accordingly at that meeting.

5. Operational Manual

The Chair encouraged approval of the recommendations outlined in the annotated agenda related to the Operational Manual and Hosting Arrangement, noting that the updates were received by the HLSG just days before the meeting and additional time may be necessary to ensure a thorough and inclusive review prior to making a final decision. He noted that further discussions will occur before April 2025. The Chair highlighted that the provisions and recommendations in the Operational Manual and Hosting Arrangement are the result of efforts to reconcile differing views among stakeholders, including discussions with donors and legal advisors, who acknowledged the importance of the HLSG and the ExCom, both constitutionally and administratively.

The Chair noted that a provision for a performance review by the ExCom Chair, based on four objectives set with the Director in the first quarter of the year, was not activated last year. He emphasized the need for this review and requested it to be completed for future years. Additionally, he announced that the new Operational Manual will stipulate that future Directors will serve a term of four years, renewable once for a maximum of eight years.

The Chair further stated that the updated Operational Manual will delegate authority from the HLSG to the ExCom to approve operational and financial actions and decisions under \$225 million, which corresponds to the size of the annual budget. However, these decisions will still need to be ratified by the HLSG. A final version of the Operational Manual and Hosting Arrangement will be circulated to members of the HLSG at a later date for full approval and adoption. The Chair then opened the floor for comments and input from participants.

Jutta Urpilainen, European Commissioner for International Partnerships, thanked the ECW Director for her excellent work and the Chair for his effective leadership in adapting the Hosting Arrangement as ECW evolves. She highlighted the value of GPE's practices with the World Bank for enhancing staff assessments and decision-making. The Operational Manual is seen as crucial for strengthening ECW's operational framework. As this was her final HLSG meeting, the Commissioner emphasized the Group's role in strategic advocacy for education in crises. She stressed the need for efficient governance structures to ensure accountability and attract investments. The EU supports clarifying the HLSG's strategic mandate and delegating operational oversight to the ExCom, underlining the importance of clear responsibilities for advancing education initiatives in fragile contexts.

Thomas Poulsen, Assistant Director and Chief of Education, Higher Education and Research, Norad thanked the Chair and ECW Secretariat's dedicated efforts in navigating complex issues, acknowledging the challenging nature of the process. While thanking the Chair for his efforts to build consensus on a distribution of responsibilities between the governing bodies of ECW, Norway regrets that ExCom has not had an opportunity to consider this newest text proposal. It would be in the spirit of the Chair's proposal, and in line with views expressed by the Norwegian delegation and many others during the review process, if the proposed text is subject to discussion and decision by ExCom before being sanctioned by the HLSG. Norway suggested that the HLSG notes the proposal before it, and requests ExCom to ensure consensus and make a decision on the proposed text. He further noted that Norway looks forward to the review of memberships in governance bodies, which is part of the ongoing work to update ECW's rules and regulations, expertly chaired by the UK and the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). All options should be considered, including constituency models.

The Chair responded to Norway's intervention by clarifying that the only changes in the relationship between the HLSG and the ExCom included in the updated text of the Operational Manual were those

recommended by the ExCom itself. He emphasized that he has followed the guidance provided by the ExCom and incorporated the requested modifications. He pointed out that all members had the opportunity to review the text for several days, and any updates made were solely a result of the recommendations from the ExCom.

David Edwards, General Secretary, Education International, Teachers' Constituency commended the Chair and ECW Director's outstanding work, sharing pride in the progress made and gratitude on behalf of teachers worldwide. He emphasized the importance of having a strong political body to mobilize support and engage with donors and heads of state, representing the diverse interests of 33 million teachers. He noted the risk of diminishing political focus in the review process, stressing the need to maintain both political advocacy and operational effectiveness. He concluded by affirming that the current proposal incorporates lessons from similar organizations, such as GPE, and expressed full support from the Teachers' Constituency for the proposed changes.

Dr. Ariane Hildebrandt, Director General for Global Health, Equality of Opportunity, Digital Technologies and Food Security, BMZ commended the diligent efforts in reviewing the Operational Manual and agreed with the European Commission on the importance of governance and accountability. She expressed concern about making a decision during the meeting, emphasizing the need for a clear division of responsibilities between the HLSG and the ExCom. While acknowledging the current proposed text as a compromise, she stressed that operational activities should remain under the ExCom's purview. Noting that not all ExCom members had seen the document, she called for a written procedure to formalize the decision-making process.

Sidsel Marie Kristensen, Chief Executive Officer, LEGO Foundation commended the work being done by ECW. She emphasized the need for clear delineation of roles and responsibilities between the HLSG and the ExCom. She concluded by stating that more time is needed to review and consider the current proposal.

Rania Dagash-Kamara, Assistant Executive Director, World Food Programme congratulated the Chair, the ECW Director and Secretariat for enabling 11 million educational opportunities, with the effective support from country teams. She praised the ECW Director for her leadership in cross-sectoral collaboration, particularly by joining the School Meals Coalition in providing school meals, which are crucial for children's learning. She welcomed discussions on improving efficiency and decision-making.

Alicia Herbert, Director for Education, Gender and Equality & Gender Envoy, FCDO represented the UK Minister, who had to depart for another engagement, and expressed gratitude for everyone's efforts in recent months. She noted that the UK, represented by Judith Herbertson on the ExCom, chairs the Operational Manual Advisory Group. Acknowledging the intensive negotiations with UNICEF, she stated that the UK recognizes that only a minor amendment has been made from the ExCom's input on the Operational Manual and draft Hosting Arrangement. Consequently, the UK supports the current language and wished to approve it during the meeting, with the possibility of revisiting it later as suggested by the Chair.

Mutesi Hadijah, Vice President, Uganda National Students Association, Youth and Student-led Constituency thanked ECW for strongly supporting students and youth. She highlighted the commitment of youth to promoting equitable education in emergencies and urged for increased funding. Youth need to be at the forefront of decision-making processes, advocating for their voices to be genuinely heard as they represent the largest demographic and are well-positioned to contribute effectively.

The Chair thanked the Representative for her remarks and proceeded with the discussion by highlighting the challenge of balancing the HLSG's responsibilities to UNICEF with their accountability to the global community, while ensuring that day-to-day operations are managed effectively through the ECW Director and ExCom.

The Chair then proposed that the current arrangements remain in place until April 2025. Amended text to be included in the Operational Manual and the Hosting Arrangement should be approved at the next HLSG meeting in April 2025 after a review by ExCom. This approach accommodates HLSG members' needs and provides the opportunity to revisit and amend the proposals. The Chair expressed hope that this would be accepted as a fair compromise and a positive way forward for the time being.

6. AOB and Close

6.1 Closing remarks by UNCHR and UNICEF

Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR thanked the Chair for his leadership and acknowledged the vital work of those on the front lines. He supported the decisions made during the meeting, particularly emphasizing the importance of staff rotation as a common policy among humanitarian organizations. He urged for representation at the HLSG at the highest possible levels to avoid overlaps with the ExCom and ensure HLSG is represented at the principals level. Focusing on the crisis in Sudan, he thanked the ECW Director and the ECW Secretariat for their invaluable support to the Sudanese crisis and highlighted that ECW has been the main contributor to education for Sudanese children both inside and outside Sudan. He called for increased advocacy to highlight the plight of children in forgotten situations such as Sudan, eastern DRC, and Myanmar, and suggested inviting UNRWA to the next meeting to discuss supporting education for Palestinians, highlighting its critical role in the region.

Catherine Russell, Executive Director, UNICEF building on UNHCR's remarks, emphasized that approximately 400 million children live in crisis and conflict settings, highlighting ECW's critical role in addressing these challenges. She pointed to the catastrophic situations in Sudan, Gaza, and Haiti, where many children have been out of school for extended periods. During her visit to an IDP camp in Sudan, she met resilient adolescent girls with aspirations of becoming doctors and engineers, despite their dire circumstances. The Executive Director stressed the importance of the HLSG's collective efforts in safeguarding these children's future and expressed gratitude for their ongoing support.

6.2 Process for selecting a new HLSG Chair

The Chair brought forward the process for selecting a new HLSG Chair, stating that he has served two terms. He proposed that the next Chair's tenure be two terms of three years, which would be included in the updated Operational Manual. He outlined the process for selecting the new Chair, which involves circulating the description of the role, inviting nominations, and collaborating with Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, the Executive Director of UNICEF and two-three senior HLSG members on a working committee to engage in a selection process. If necessary, a consultancy company could be brought in to assist with the selection process, though the Chair expressed confidence that this step may not be needed. A nomination will be circulated to the HLSG to be agreed in writing and that the appointment will take effect before the next HLSG meeting in April 2025. The process to select a new HLSG Chair will commence immediately.

Concluding the meeting, the Chair thanked all attendees for their participation and recognized ECW's for their remarkable work throughout the year. He extended his best wishes for the remainder of the UN General Assembly week and closed the meeting by expressing his appreciation for everyone's dedication and commitment.

Annex A: List of Participants

PARTICIPANTS

High-Level Steering Group Meeting



26 September 2024, 7:00 AM – 8:00 AM EST
633 Third Avenue, New York

Last updated 26 September

1. **Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown**, United Nations Special Envoy for Global Education and HLSG Chair
2. **Yasmine Sherif**, Executive Director, Education Cannot Wait
3. **Rt. Hon. Anneliese Dodds MP**, Minister for Development at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and Minister for Women and Equalities at the Department for Education, United Kingdom
4. **Jutta Urpilainen**, European Commissioner for International Partnerships 
5. **H.E. Dr. Jakaya Kikwete**, Board Chair, Global Partnership for Education
6. **Catherine Russell**, Executive Director, UNICEF
7. **Filippo Grandi**, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR
8. **Rania Dagash-Kamara**, Assistant Executive Director, UN WFP
9. **Patricia Danzi**, Director General, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
10. **Sarah Hunt**, Director, Policy Unit, Irish Aid
11. **Christopher McLennan**, Deputy Minister of International Development, Global Affairs Canada
12. **Lotte Machon**, State Secretary for Development Policy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark
13. **Sidsel Marie Kristensen**, Chief Executive Officer, LEGO Foundation
14. **Janine Wynne**, Deputy Assistant Secretary, US Department of State
15. **Natasha de Marcken**, Deputy Assistant Administrator, US Agency for International Development (USAID)
16. **HE Awut Deng Acuil**, Minister of General Education and Instruction, South Sudan
17. **HE Raïssa Malu**, Minister of State, Minister of National Education and New Citizenship, DRC
18. **Erica Gerretsen**, Director of Human Development, Migration, Governance and Peace at the European Commission's Directorate-General for International Partnerships
19. **Dr Ariane Hildebrandt**, Director General for Global Health, Equality of Opportunity, Digital Technologies, and Food Security, German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) 
20. **Thomas Poulsen**, Assistant Director and Chief of Education, Higher Education and Research - Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
21. **David Edwards**, General Secretary, Education International, Teachers' Constituency
22. **Mutesi Hadijah**, Vice President, Uganda National Students Association, Youth and Student-led Constituency
23. **Jan Egeland**, Secretary-General, NRC 
24. **Tom Dannatt**, CEO, Street Child, International NGO Constituency
25. **Judith Lingeman**, Director of International Affairs, Postcode Lottery
26. **H.E. Dr. Tariq Al Gurg**, Chief Executive Officer, Dubai Cares 
27. **Lisa Doughen**, Director, Humanitarian Financing and Resource Mobilization, UN OCHA 
28. **Halil Dundar**, Global Education Manager, The World Bank Group

 Participated via Zoom