

Educaid.be International Conference 2026

Speech Tom Vandenbosch

Good morning everyone,

Let me pick up where Evelien left us.

This conference starts from a very important focus:
education in emergencies.

And rightly so.

Because when a crisis hits, education is often one of the first systems to be disrupted,
and one of the hardest to rebuild.

But as we reflected on this conference,
we felt there was something more we needed to bring into the conversation.

Because if we only talk about education in emergencies,
we risk asking the question too late.

What if we also asked:
what is the role of education in preventing crisis in the first place?

Let me briefly take you to Mahama refugee camp in Rwanda,
in the Eastern Province, near the border with Tanzania.

A large camp. Thousands of children.

We were there to understand how education was working in that context.

And what I remember most was not only the challenges.

It was the determination.

Children showing up.
Teachers doing their best in very difficult circumstances.

A real effort to create normalcy.

But at the same time, it was very clear:

Access was not enough.

Classrooms were overcrowded.

Resources were limited.

Learning outcomes were fragile.

And you realise in a moment like that:

If education is present, but not working well enough,
it does not deliver on its promise.

Not for those children.

And not for the stability of the system around them.

That is why today's theme matters.

Not only education as a response,
but education as a driver of stability, resilience, and peace.

And that conversation is not abstract.

It connects directly to policy priorities,
including here in Belgium and at European level,
where stability is increasingly central.

At Educaid.be, the Belgian platform for education and development, this is not new.

We have explored education and climate.

We have explored education and health.

And today, we take the next step:

education and stability.

Because in a world of growing fragility,
we need to better understand how education systems can help societies cope, adapt, and hold
together.

At VVOB, we work on strengthening education systems, often starting with foundational learning.

But this is not just about whether children can read.

When large numbers of children go through school without learning,
it is not just a technical issue.

It is a signal.

A signal of inequality.

A signal of exclusion.

A signal that the system is not working for everyone.

And when those signals accumulate,
they do not stay in classrooms.

They shape societies. In many contexts, schools are the first place where children experience the state. If that experience is exclusion or failure, it shapes trust far beyond the classroom.

And the scale is worrying.

In many countries, 7 in 10 children cannot read a simple story by the age of 10.

That is not just a learning crisis.

That is a stability risk.

Now, let me be very clear.

The relationship between education and stability is not automatic.

Education systems can strengthen cohesion,
but they can also reinforce division,
or deepen grievances if they are not inclusive and fair.

So, the question is not only whether we invest in education.

It is how.

Because at its best, education systems build something very powerful.

They build capabilities:

the ability to think and solve problems,
the ability to collaborate and manage uncertainty,
the ability to participate in society,
and the ability to build a meaningful livelihood.

And when these capabilities are developed for everyone,
education does more than support individuals.

It strengthens societies.

And there is strong evidence for that.

Each additional year of schooling reduces the risk of recruitment into armed groups, not only because education increases income, but also because education strengthens civic trust and social cohesion.

Higher levels of secondary education are linked to fewer conflicts and more durable peace.

In that sense, education is not just a sector.

It is infrastructure for stability.

And that requires a shift in how we think.

Because when we talk about stability, we often think of physical infrastructure.

We invest in roads.

We invest in energy systems.

We invest in security.

And rightly so.

But if the people using those roads,
connecting to those energy systems,
or living under that security
do not feel included,
do not have opportunities,
do not trust the system,

then that infrastructure alone will not create stability.

Education is different.

It is slower.

Less visible.

Less immediate.

But in many ways, it is more fundamental.

Because it shapes how people think,
how they support themselves,
and how they see their place in society.

But none of this happens automatically.

It depends on choices.

Choices about who is included.

Choices about quality.

Choices about how systems respond to inequality and diversity.

If we get those choices right,
education can reduce the risk of instability.

If we get them wrong,
it can unintentionally contribute to instability.

So, if there is one message I would like to leave with you this morning, it is this:

We need to move from seeing education only as a response to crisis,
to recognising it as a central part of how we build stability and prevent crisis.

That means investing earlier.

Investing more consistently.

And investing in systems that are inclusive, resilient, and built to last.

Stability is built in classrooms, every day.

Let me end with a simple thought.

Without education, there is no growth.
Without growth, there are no opportunities.
And without opportunities, instability follows.

So, if we want more stable societies,
if we want fewer crises in the future,

education is not just part of the solution.

It is the foundation.

Thank you.