

Good morning everyone, and a very warm welcome to all of you here at Enabel and online. It is a pleasure to welcome you to this conference, Education in Times of Turmoil, on behalf of Enabel, together with Educaid.be and so many committed partners. I warmly welcome all our speakers, guests, and colleagues from education, development, humanitarian action, policy, and civil society.

A very special welcome goes to:

- European Commissioner for Preparedness, Crisis Management and Equality, Hadja Lahbib;
- His Excellency the Deputy Minister of Education for Palestine, Dr Nafieh Assaf;
- UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Farida Shaheed;
- Director-General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Affairs, Heidi Rombouts;
- Director General of the Directorate of Vocational Education at the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, Iryna Shumik (who will be joining us online);
- UNICEF Global Adviser on Education in Emergencies, Helena Murseli; and
- Assistant Professor of Conflict Studies at the University of Amsterdam, Line Kuppens.

5 years ago, speeches used to start with, “the world is changing fast”. Now, we no longer say this; The world is not going fast, it has turned upside down. Where we used to have a clear separation (and silo’s) between humanitarian aid, development aid and economic diplomacy and trade, this is no longer the case. This is uncomfortable but it is a reality we have to deal with. Geopolitical uncertainty, conflict, displacement, fragility, and geopolitical uncertainty are forcing us to fundamentally rethink, innovate, and adapt how we work in fragile and fast-changing contexts.

For education, this is especially challenging. Education systems are often slow to adapt, and the returns on investment are long term and not always immediately visible. Yet the evidence is crystal clear: education and skills development are among the most important foundations for sustainable development, and failure to invest in them risks reinforcing social unrest, insecurity, and slower economic growth.

*While it takes decades to build up, It can be destroyed in seconds...*

Today’s programme reflects the urgency of this challenge: from the morning plenary on why education must be protected and continued in support of stability, development, and peace, to the afternoon learning labs on education in fragility and armed conflict, and its links to mental health and psycho social support, inclusion, and social cohesion. Throughout the day, we will hear how education is not only about the continuity of learning and building skills, but also a protective and stabilising force that helps preserve structure, resilience, in times of turmoil and already starting the reconstruction and the construction of hope at the same time

For Enabel, this is not an abstract discussion:

In Palestine, the line between emergency response and longer-term development has become increasingly blurred. Protecting continuity of learning is part of protection, recovery, and development. We have had to adapt our support flexibly, including through temporary learning spaces in Gaza and digital solutions as schools become less safe. In this context, education and skills development remain a top priority for resilience and opportunity for young people.

In Ukraine, we help create the conditions for a return to in-person learning, including through shelter infrastructure, while also supporting vocational education as part of the broader recovery effort.

We also work in fragile regions, including the Sahel and other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, where keeping learning and skilling going is vital for gender equality, stability, and opportunity for a fast-growing youth population.

Across all these contexts — including through our global citizenship education programme in Belgium — it is fundamental to invest in young people by strengthening critical thinking, promoting meaningful participation, and supporting them not only as a target group, but as partners, innovators, and actors of resilience, recovery, and change. This was also reflected in yesterday's side event, Education in crisis. Youth speak out, where young people exchanged on the challenges facing education, and some of the results will be shared during the conference.

What gives me hope is that this conference does not only ask what is going wrong, but also what can be done — together. The programme brings together practical experience, policy reflection, youth perspectives, and partnerships across sectors. That is exactly what we need: not isolated responses, but stronger collaboration across education, humanitarian, and development actors.

Let me close by warmly thanking Educaid.be for many years of constructive collaboration through annual conferences and working groups. I hope this conference will once again be a space for honest exchange, practical learning, and renewed commitment — not only to improving learning outcomes, but also to building resilience, expanding opportunity, and laying the foundations for a more peaceful and stable future.

My thanks as well to all speakers and contributors, and to all of you for being here today. I wish you an inspiring conference.