

## Testimony of Yasmine Sherif

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Distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to testify on improving access to quality education in Africa. Your leadership on this issue is critical.

I am the Director of Education Cannot Wait, the world's first and largest fund for education in emergencies and protracted crises.

Education Cannot Wait was founded in 2016 by international humanitarian and development aid actors, along with public and private donors, to establish education as a priority on the humanitarian agenda, usher in a more collaborative approach among actors on the ground, and foster additional funding to ensure that every crisis-affected child and young person is in school and learning. The United States is a key donor to Education Cannot Wait, and most recently pledged a \$37m contribution to the fund in 2021 – the United States' Government's largest contribution to date. Today I would like to offer my thoughts on why this contribution is timely and critical to unlocking education access and quality in Africa, why education is important, and why continued commitment to education in Africa is necessary.

For this testimony, I am drawing on 30 years working within and outside the UN, including in international NGOs and as a lawyer specialising in international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law. I have worked in some of the most crisis-affected countries in the world, including the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan, and led missions to many African countries affected by emergencies.

My experience in conflict and crisis-affected countries has made me aware of the urgency of the need for quality education across the African continent, the consequences of not meeting the educational needs of the most vulnerable children, and the opportunities offered by education and learning all children – including girls, children with disabilities and other marginalised groups.

In this testimony I will discuss the role of donors to education in Africa, particularly the role of the United States, and how investment in education in Africa serves the United States' interests and values. I will discuss the current state of education in Africa: the progress in delivering education access across the continent in the past 20 years, and the enormous challenges that remain.

**The importance of education:** Providing children and youth in Africa with an education is not only a legal and moral obligation – it is a game changer. In our globalized world, the United States' investment in Africa's education system is an investment in more resilient economies

and in global peace. It is an investment in local African efforts to build strong nations. It is an investment in our common humanity and our common future. Investing in education in Africa is an investment in creating a qualified workforce that matches the needs of the local – but also global - labor market. It will cost the world and Africa more not to invest in its children.

While education for all children is crucial to African and global development and stability, girls' education has outsized benefits – not just for the individual girls, but for her family, community and country. Girls' education is about more than just getting children into school, but making sure they are safe there, and get the skills they need to compete in the labor market, make decisions about their lives, and participate fully in their communities. Educated girls are better equipped to make good decisions about nutrition and health, have fewer children at a later age, and have healthier families. They are more likely to have higher incomes, which can lift their households and communities out of poverty. Educating girls in Africa is likely to be one of the best development investments that donors such as the United States can finance.

**Overview of Education in Africa:** Over the past 20 years, Africa has made considerable progress in increasing access to education, particularly at primary level. In the year 2000, almost a third of primary school aged children were out of school – by 2019 this had decreased to 17 percent. Basic education is compulsory across Africa, and progress has been made to improve policy and legal frameworks to promote equal access to education for all children. We can see that committed and long-term investment in Africa's education systems – by national governments, local communities and also by donors such as the United States - has had huge positive outcomes.

However, despite this progress, Africa continues to face the highest rate of out-of-school children and adolescents in the world. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rates of education exclusion in Africa. Over one-fifth of children between the ages of about 6 and 11 are out of school, followed by one-third of youth between the ages of about 12 and 14. According to data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics, almost 60% of school-aged children between the ages of about 15 and 17 are not in school.

If the world does not act, the situation will likely worsen as Sub-Saharan Africa's school-age population continues to grow. However, the challenge of delivering quality education in Africa can also be viewed through a lens of opportunity and hope. Africa has a young population, with 3 out of 5 Africans under 25 years old. By 2050, Africa will be home to almost 40% of the world's children and adolescents. By investing in education, Africa and the world can unlock the continent's demographic dividend and invest in the human capital that will make the continent thrive.

The Sustainable Development Goals define the level of ambition that the world has set on education: Sustainable Development Goal 4 says that the world will “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. Given the high rates of out of school children in Africa, it is clear that tackling the education and learning crisis in Africa will be key to achieving the global Sustainable Development Goal. The leadership of the United States is crucial to meet this ambition.

**The scale of the challenge:** While remarkable progress has been made to expand access to education in Africa over the past twenty years, huge challenges remain. These include the disparities that continue to exist between countries, between groups (including girls, the poorest children, children with disabilities and displaced children), as well as the continuing learning crisis. Some of the most significant challenges are detailed below.

Learning: A key challenge for Education Cannot Wait and its partners is measuring and delivering not just improved access to education, but improved *learning*. Many children are in school, but simply not learning. The World Bank has estimated that 87 per cent of children in sub-Saharan Africa are ‘learning poor’ – unable to read and understand a simple text by the age of 10. Without timely improvement, the region is at risk of falling well of ending learning poverty by 2030. Based on current rates of progress, in 2030 about 43 per cent of children globally will still be learning-poor.

Teacher shortages: Teachers are one of the most central factors affecting children’s learning in school. Africa needs more and better qualified teachers to deliver education at the scale and quality needed to meet SDG 4. According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics estimates, approximately 17 million more teachers are needed to achieve universal primary and secondary education by 2030. Female teachers are particularly needed, as they have been shown to have a positive impact on the quality of girls’ education and their continued attendance in school.

Displaced children: One of the most marginalised demographic groups in Africa are refugee and internally displaced children. These children are among the most at risk of being excluded from education services – and of being impacted by violence and poverty. Sub-Saharan Africa hosts over 26 per cent of the world’s refugee population, and has the highest proportion of internally displaced children. Children represent nearly half of Sub-Saharan Africa’s 19 million internally displaced people. Where children’s education has been disrupted, children need remedial education and catch-up programmes to stop them from dropping out of school altogether. Learning environments must be safe and respond to the needs of all children – including the particular needs of girls and children with disabilities – providing WASH, healthcare, disaster risk reduction and psychosocial support.

For children who have never been able to access formal education, the availability of non-formal pathways is crucial. For example, in Somalia, Education Cannot Wait has provided internally displaced children who were overage or had never attended school with an accelerated curriculum, allowing them to catch up and re-join the formal system. The COVID pandemic has offered valuable lessons on how to use innovations to provide access to education. For example, by using home-based and distant learning programmes Education Cannot Wait supported 10.2 million children go to school despite school closures. Education Cannot Wait is also gathering evidence about effective ways to use technology to deliver distant learning where needed, to allow for continuity of education in the face of disruption or attack. For example, in Iraq, partners used apps like WhatsApp to provide information and lessons to children during school closures. In Mali, Education Cannot Wait is supporting

conflict-affected children to continue learning by distributing solar-powered radios broadcasting educational programming.

*Reaching girls and adolescent girls:* In sub-Saharan Africa, 32.6 million girls of primary and lower secondary school age remain out of school. This number increases to 52 million if we take into account girls of upper secondary school age. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, 9 million girls between 6 and 11 will never access school. When families do not have resources for food, transport, school fees, uniforms, and essentials like sanitary products, girls are the first to stop having access to school. Girls are also often at highest risk of other dangers, including child marriage and abuse. In order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, a key priority for the continent will be to close the gaps in education between girls and boys, and particularly to focus on keeping adolescent girls in school.

*Reaching children with disabilities:* Children with disabilities are particularly likely to face barriers to accessing education. Children with disabilities are marginalised as a result of stigma, lack of assistive technologies and other services needed to give them fair and equal access to learning opportunities. Having a disability also places children at a higher risk of physical abuse and exploitation. If Africa is truly to achieve education for all, children with disabilities must be included as part of governments', donors' and implementers' programmes, policies and priorities.

*Climate change:* A further important issue is the challenge faced by Africa from climate change. The climate crisis is not some distant future problem for children and young people – climate shocks are disrupting education systems today. Africa's Sahel region is particularly at risk, with droughts and floods becoming more frequent, and impacting food instability and conflict. In 2020, over 4,000 schools in Central Sahel were shut down, due to violence and the threat of violence. We know that the frequency and severity of climate-related disasters is only going to increase. It is highly likely that the Sahel crisis is tragically the 'canary in the coalmine' – the indicator of what other vulnerable regions can expect from climate change – and the impact on children has been devastating.

The climate crisis frequently affects education systems in contexts that are already impacted by conflict and poverty: creating complex, interrelated emergencies. Climate shocks have caused extreme weather events that have damaged or destroyed schools, or made it impossible for children to reach school. The resulting absenteeism, dropout and poor learning environments are having devastating consequences on learning. Reaching displaced children with quality education is an enormous challenge. Further, climate change disproportionately affects the most vulnerable children, including poor children, girls, and young people with disabilities. Four out of every five people displaced by climate change are female. When displaced children are not able to access education, they are at high risk of sexual exploitation, early marriage, child labour and recruitment by armed forces.

The good news is that providing children – especially girls – with a quality education is one of the most powerful strategies for building the resilience of communities to climate change. Evidence shows that countries that have invested in girls' education have suffered far fewer

losses from droughts and floods than countries with lower levels of girls' education. Children with literacy, numeracy and critical thinking skills can support their families to respond more effectively to climate risks. Global leaders must urgently make the link between education and climate change not just in theory but in their financing and programming decisions. If the world is to reach the Sustainable Development Goal targets on education in Africa, we urgently need to 'climate proof' education services.

*Impact of COVID-19:* The United Nations estimates that since March 2020, 1.5 billion children have experienced prolonged interruption to their education caused by school closures during the pandemic. UNICEF has found that globally, 31% of students lack access to remote and distance-learning opportunities. School-age children in sub-Saharan Africa are the most significantly affected by the shift to distance learning, with nearly 9 in 10 children lacking access to online learning opportunities at home. Pandemic restrictions have not just affected children's access to school – they have also affected learning. Many children have missed at least two thirds of an academic year. In the absence of educational opportunities, children have experienced learning losses equivalent to a period far longer than the duration of school closures. Girls, in particular, are at increased risk of drop out, due to violence at home and social pressures such as early marriage. UNESCO estimates that 11 million girls will drop out of school due to economic impacts caused by COVID-19. The learning losses caused by this pandemic could result in lost earnings amounting to a tenth of global GDP. And of course, the failure to achieve foundational skills has profoundly negative consequences for individual children and their ability to fulfil their potential.

That these effects are likely to be worst felt by the poorest and most vulnerable children, who have so much to gain through education, is particularly tragic. The economic impacts of the pandemic are squeezing education budgets at a time when they are most needed. Before the pandemic, there was already a \$148bn annual education spending gap – this is likely to rise to \$200bn following the COVID crisis. If Africa is to recover from the impacts of the pandemic, governments and donors will need to mobilise effective back-to-school campaigns that reach the children who are least likely to return. These campaigns must also target the children who never had access to education in the first place, and tackle the barriers that prevented them from enrolling in and staying in school. Education systems also need to be properly resourced to deliver effective remedial education, including catch-up classes and accelerated learning programmes, to mitigate against the impacts of the pandemic on learning outcomes.

**Education Cannot Wait's work in Africa:** While the scale of the challenge can seem insurmountable, Education Cannot Wait and other organisations working on education in emergencies have demonstrated time and again that it is possible to deliver quality education for children in urgent need, even in the most challenging of crisis-affected settings. Education Cannot Wait is at the forefront of global efforts to deliver education to children in emergencies. Education Cannot Wait works by providing initial seed funding for its country programmes, and seeking co-funding contributions from donors, to drive an aligned approach to crisis response in the education sector. To date, Education Cannot Wait has reached 4.6 million children and adolescents affected by crisis, and approved 24 Multi-Year Resilience

Programmes globally, of which 60% are in Africa. Education Cannot Wait is financing programmes in 14 crisis-affected African countries, in which it targets over 13.3 million children who urgently need support to access quality education. These include refugees, children who have been displaced internally, and children in the communities hosting displaced people. These programmes deliver safe and protective learning environments that are accessible to all children, and that support their mental health.

Supported by the United States and other donors, Education Cannot Wait-funded programmes include disaster risk reduction interventions, and support to mitigate against the effects of climate change. Education Cannot Wait aims to bridge the gap between urgent, humanitarian education support, and longer-term development in the education sector, so that countries can transition from emergency responses to establishing the foundations for stability, peace, and prosperity.

**Education Cannot Wait's response to COVID-19:** Education Cannot Wait and other organisations working on education in emergencies and protracted crisis have also demonstrated that they have the capacity to respond to new and unpredictable global risks and events. For example, shortly after World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the pandemic, Education Cannot Wait responded rapidly and decisively to the global crisis, initiating a plan just two weeks after the first COVID-19 case appeared in an Education Cannot Wait -supported country. Within just 21 days Education Cannot Wait mobilized \$23 million from reserves, and a further \$22.4 million was approved in July 2020. This funding was distributed to 85 grantees in 32 crisis-affected areas across the world to make sure that children and adolescents could continue learning. Over 75 percent of COVID-19 response programmes were disbursed within eight weeks, making this Education Cannot Wait's fastest disbursement of funds to date.

Education Cannot Wait's rapid response to the COVID-19 pandemic allowed tens of millions of students to be reached with interventions before education loss irreversibly changed their futures. Twenty-four grantees reached more than 29.2 million children and adolescents (51 percent of whom were girls), including over 1.43 million refugees (49 percent of whom were girls). ECW's COVID response also reached nearly 1 million Internally Displaced Persons, and 16.2 million young people from other affected populations, and over 65,000 children with disabilities. This support included provision of continued primary education programmes, as well as pre-primary and secondary programmes. Our experience of delivering during the pandemic demonstrates that even when crises hit suddenly, and where financing mechanisms must respond at-scale, such rapid response is possible. Funds such as Education Cannot Wait have not just the mandate but also the ability and experience to responsibly distribute at-scale funding where it is needed most.

**United States' support to Education Cannot Wait:** In September 2021, USAID Administrator Samantha Power announced the United States, through USAID and the U.S. Department of State, would contribute an additional \$37 million to Education Cannot Wait. The \$37 million contribution - the U.S. Government's largest contribution to date - highlights the United States' commitment to lead in education in crisis and conflict. The contribution includes \$5

million dedicated to continued learning and resilient education systems for conflict-affected communities in northern Mali. The United States has a long history of supporting Education Cannot Wait both in terms of advocacy and financial support since the fund's inception. This leadership has been critical to the fund's ability to expand to deliver education services to countries with the most urgent need. The United States is one among a number of crucial donors to the fund, including the United Kingdom, Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, Ireland and Norway, as well as a number of private sector organisations such as the Lego Foundation. The United States' leadership leverages support from multiple global donors, setting high standards for long-term commitment to an often-overlooked sector that faces serious financial need.

Financing is a key challenge for the education sector, as donor countries have started shifting budgets away from aid. And in developing countries, the economic consequences of the pandemic risk squeezing education budgets at a time when they are most needed. Between now and 2024, an additional \$1.3bn is needed to fully fund Education Cannot Wait's Africa-based multi-year programmes. Funds like Education Cannot Wait must be properly resourced so that they can respond in the growing number of emergency situations where crises exceed governments' capacity to continue to deliver essential education services. Donors such as the United States and multilaterals need to make sure that they work with country governments to prioritise and fund quality education systems. Global leaders must reflect the urgency and importance of education systems in their financing and programming decisions. The world must stand together to meet its commitments to the children of Africa to deliver against the Sustainable Development Goals – because the consequences of a generation of children who cannot read, write and meet their full potential is too disastrous to contemplate, and should be unacceptable to us all.

I urge all Members here to consider the role that a quality education has played in their own lives. If all children in the poorest countries in the world could access quality education, the world would be better placed to face the urgent challenges it faces in response to conflicts, crises and climate change. As the developed world begins the process of recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, Education Cannot Wait will set an ambitious target of mobilizing more than 1 billion dollars for the trust fund. With these funds, we plan to leverage an additional 2 billion USD for multi-year investments, through in-country contributions that match Education Cannot Wait seed funds.

Getting Sustainable Development Goal 4 on track in Africa will not just require financing, but also a targeted collective effort to prioritise learning and access to education, particularly for the most marginalised. I hope the United States continues to play a central role in the delivery of education programming in Africa – particularly in emergencies and protracted crises. We hope you continue to stand alongside crucial funds such as Education Cannot Wait as we face the challenges of delivering education that meets the needs of today and tomorrow's Africa – and upholds the rights of all children to a quality education.