Distinguished Chair, Excellencies, Colleagues,

I speak today on behalf of 21 non-governmental organizations.

We warmly welcome the child participants and applaud the historic importance of your voices and presence in this process. We greatly valued hearing about your consultations with children around the world and your reflections on the key principles. We emphasize the importance of ensuring children's meaningful and sustained engagement throughout this process.

We welcome the Chair's development of these principles, which provide an important foundation for addressing persistent gaps in the international legal framework of children's right to education. We particularly support the scope outlined in Key Principle 1 and the development of the proposed Optional Protocol.

According to UNESCO's 2026 Global Education Monitoring Report, 194 million secondary school-age children are currently out of school, and at the current pace universal upper secondary completion will not be achieved until 2105. These figures represent millions of children whose opportunities and futures remain constrained by barriers that begin from the earliest years. Only 60% of children entering primary school have benefited from at least one year of pre-primary education. For millions of children, the cost of education remains a decisive barrier to accessing early learning opportunities and completing secondary education.

These realities demonstrate that existing commitments, while essential, have not been sufficient to fully realize every child's right to education. Stronger implementation of existing standards and the development of clearer legal obligations must therefore advance together as complementary and mutually reinforcing pathways for lasting progress.

We have heard States' interventions during the last IGWG, the informal intersessional meeting, and again earlier today. Across these discussions, we have not heard a stronger alternative proposal for strengthening international law on early childhood care and education, free pre-primary education, or free secondary education for all.

In this context, the Optional Protocol offers a transformative opportunity to establish a unified global standard on free education from pre-primary through secondary levels, strengthen accountability, support national reforms, and provide guidance to states, courts, treaty bodies, policymakers, and civil society in ensuring that every child can access early learning and complete secondary education.

Recognizing early childhood care and education as an explicit right is critical because it affirms children as rights holders from the earliest years and establishes early childhood care and education as essential to their development, well-being, and dignity. Similarly, free secondary education has been associated with higher enrolment and completion rates, reduced dropout, improved gender equality, and better long-term educational, health, and economic outcomes. It is also a critical protective factor against child marriage, helping girls remain in school and reducing their vulnerability to early and forced marriages and unions.

By establishing clearer legal obligations, the Optional Protocol would also strengthen protections for children most at risk of being left behind, including children living in crisis settings, girls, children with disabilities, and those facing intersecting forms of discrimination and exclusion.

We urge states to engage constructively in advancing the Optional Protocol towards the drafting of its text. By moving forward together, States can reaffirm that every child, from the earliest years through adolescence, has the right to free public education and the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Thank you.

Alana Institute
Avaaz
Campaña Latinoamericana por el Derecho a la Educación (CLADE)
Catalyst for Inclusive Education
Education International
Girls Not Brides
Global Campaign for Education
Human Rights Watch
Inclusion International
International Disability and Development Consortium
International Federation of Fe y Alegría
Irish Network for Education Worldwide
Jesuit Refugee Service
Lumos
Make Mothers Matter
Malala Fund
Plan International
Sightsavers
Tabitha Empowerment Centre
World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP)
World Vision