



Early Childhood Development IRC Iraq – Ahlan Simsim



For millions of children across the Middle East, conflict and crisis have marked some of the most formative years of their lives with displacement, chaos, and violence. Currently, more than 52 million children in the Middle East are in need of humanitarian assistance¹. Conflict and displacement can negatively impact children’s intellectual and social-emotional development and threaten long-term economic prosperity, health and well-being. These children are at high risk of failing to reach their full developmental potential. In Iraq, prioritizing early childhood development (ECD) for all vulnerable communities continues to be a pressing need that requires persistent investment and attention. According to UNICEF, only 2.4% of children aged 3 to 5 years old attend an early childhood education program². As a result, when these children enter the Iraqi education system for primary school and beyond, they are severely underprepared socially, emotionally, and academically.

AHLAN SIMSIM

In 2018, the MacArthur Foundation committed \$100 million to Sesame Workshop and the IRC to support children impacted by conflict and crisis in the MENA region. This high-quality early childhood intervention consists of program models supporting children’s social-emotional and intellectual development and programming for caregivers supporting them to aid in their child’s development beyond the classroom. The program includes services delivered in IRC and NGO partner centers, as well as in partnership with government ministries to reach children at scale and address some of the most critical developmental challenges we see today.

CONTEXT

For years, Iraq has struggled with conflict and destruction, with long-lasting impact to the major infrastructural institutions particularly in areas with high rates of displacement. Access to basic services is limited and varied. Consequences of the violence are evident at the level of the individual child, family, and society and have included a long history of government instability, destruction of schools, inconsistent access to basic human services, among many others, affecting vulnerable populations most. Since 2014, roughly



Ahlan Simsim programs reach children across Iraq, delivered in partnership with local NGOs and government Ministries

Since start of Ahlan Simsim programming, IRC and partners have **reached 155,000 children and their caregivers in Iraq.**

¹ <https://unicef.org/mena/reports/humanitarian-action-children-middle-east-and-north-africa-2023>

² https://data.unicef.org/resources/data_explorer/unicef_f/?ag=UNICEF&df=GLOBAL_DATAFLOW&ver=1.0&dq=IRQ.ECD_CHLD_36-59M_EDU-PGM.&startPeriod=1970&endPeriod=2022

According to the UNHCR, **only half of IDPs** registered have access to safe and adequate housing

2.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in Iraq, of which 45% or roughly **1.1 million are children**

15% of the population – 6 million Iraqis³ – have been displaced. As a result, the largest populations in need of humanitarian assistance include internally displaced people (IDPs), which account for 1.2 million people across Iraq. Additionally, IDP returnees – those returning to their home region – account for nearly 5 million of those living in Iraq⁴. While Iraq is now experiencing relative stability, the country continues to face protracted humanitarian and development needs, a complex political environment, and the worsening impacts of climate change, with Iraq's most vulnerable populations suffering the greatest effects. The Ahlan Simsim team and partner organizations are committed to providing crucial services for vulnerable children and their caregivers across Iraq and are working more diligently than ever to continue to implement, improve, and advocate on behalf of children.

PROGRAMMING

IRC's ECD programs are designed and adapted to meet the distinct needs of children and families in Iraq with social-emotional learning and learning through play at the core. These intentional, tailored program models support children's development, facilitate instructors' professional development, and bolster parental engagement and caregiver wellbeing.

Programs IRC has designed and delivers directly through IRC's ECD centers in Iraq include:

- **Ahlan Simsim Families:** a modular and flexible program targeting caregivers of children 0 to 8 years. The program gathers caregivers together to discuss topics related to child development, play, and parenting with tools and activities for follow-up.
- **Ahlan Simsim Friends:** a modular and flexible program targeting children 3 to 8 years old, this program can be implemented for as little as six hours and can be included in a wide range of settings in partnership with any sector that programs for caregivers or children. The program includes activities focused on social-emotional learning along with other crucial subjects and includes worksheets, storybooks, and videos, and is designed to include children with disabilities.

This critical services delivery are complemented with the locally-produced, Arabic-language version of *Sesame Street*, also titled *Ahlan Simsim*, designed specifically for refugee and host community populations by Ahlan Simsim partner Sesame Workshop. The combination of targeted direct services and mass media helps meet critical needs on the ground for an immersive child and caregiver-centered experience. Ahlan Simsim also curates content on Instagram and Facebook for easy, online access to information and activities that complements the TV show and direct services.

SCALING & SUSTAINABILITY

A core component of Ahlan Simsim relies on partnership with local and national actors. Through these partnership, Ahlan Simsim influences the national systems that govern and deliver ECD in order to scale up access to quality ECD services and ensure sustainability. The programs are developed based on national needs as identified in partnership with government and other stakeholders.

With less than 3% of children in Iraq accessing any kind of pre-primary education, IRC's Ahlan Simsim team and the Iraq Ministry of Education co-developed a **school readiness program** integrated into the curriculum of the first two weeks of first grade. With the program working to support successful transition from home to school. Lessons are tailored to target the development of reading, writing, cognitive, and most notably, social-emotional skills necessary for children to be successful academically, socially, and emotionally in school. This novel curriculum integrates Ahlan Simsim content into the regular school calendar without incurring extra cost. To complement the newly developed curriculum, teachers are supported with resources including manuals, worksheets, resource and training guides, and an electronic library containing

³ https://iraqdtm.iom.int/files/ILA/2021322157136_iom_DTM_ILAV_An_Overview_of_Displacement_in_Iraq.pdf

⁴ <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-humanitarian-needs-overview-2022-march-2022>

stories, songs, and videos to support their instruction during activities. In 2021, with the start of the academic year, the Iraq Ministry of Education piloted this program in 112 schools, reaching more than 7,000 children. Research and monitoring data gathered during implementation found that after one week of programming, 70% of children had improved their cognitive, social-emotional, learning, and school readiness skills. By the second week, that figure rose to 98%. As of October 2022, the program had expanded to selected schools in all governorates of federal Iraq, and reached over 75,000 children in 1,800 schools. The Ministry plans to scale up the program in 2023 and beyond.

The IRC Ahlan Simsim team also works with the Ministry of Health to support **integration of ECD into Primary Health Care Centers** in Babel, Karbala and Ninewa and improve technical capacity of doctors and nurses on pre-and post-natal care, early detection and referral of children with development delays and consultation with caregivers on how to engage in age-appropriate early stimulus activities with their children.

Plans are also underway with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs revise the minimum standards and guidelines for nurseries and nursery staff professional development curriculum. Across all government partnerships, national advocacy efforts aim at ensuring wider coordination and prioritization of ECD which are vital to successful systems-wide shifts.

RESEARCH & LEARNING

To understand impact and quality of implementation of programming run in Iraq, we have conducted research studies and continually monitor program implementation for both direct services and scaling pathways. We utilize this information to inform how we can evolve and adjust our programming for our beneficiaries.

In 2021, implementation research was conducted to assess the quality of implementation of the School Readiness pilot program launched in the Ninewa governorate. This study was focused on gathering feedback from facilitators, caregivers, and children to understand satisfaction with programming, child engagement, and quality of implementation by facilitators. The results gathered from this study have been crucial to informing how to improve and expand the program country-wide for 2022, and for scale up in 2023.

88.9% of parents/caregivers who participated in the Ahlan Simsim Families program demonstrated developmentally supportive interactions with their children.

100% of Ahlan Simsim-trained educators established a supportive, secure, predictable, and inclusive early learning environment for children.

“Through participating in Ahlan Simsim activities, my son has really changed, and I have changed with him; I have a happy and playful child now.” – Firdos, mother of 3 in Mosul

WHAT'S NEXT

As Ahlan Simsim funding is coming to a close at the end of 2023, our teams across IRC and Sesame Workshop are looking toward a focus on sustainability of impact, as well as continuing to address the persistent and emerging needs that arise within each context in the MENA region. In Iraq, we understand that while the country shifts from a humanitarian to development stage, with the unstable context and remaining gaps in support services, the need to advocate for and prioritize children and ECD services is only increasing. The coming years will be focused on leveraging and expanding current investments in programming and strategic partnerships alongside monitoring and learning to continue support to local actors with the aim of helping caregivers and young children across Iraq to develop and thrive in a healthy, holistic way.

For more information on the Ahlan Simsim initiative, contact Heidi Rosbe, heidi.rosbe@rescue.org