

Early Childhood Development

IRC Lebanon

Ahlan Simsim & Play to Learn



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 Lebanon, for both refugee and host communities, prioritizing early childhood development (ECD) is an even more pressing issue as the country entered a state of acute economic and political crisis in 2019, and conditions for children and their caregivers have dramatically worsened.

AHLAN SIMSIM & PLAY TO LEARN

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, launching Ahlan Simsim. In 2019, the LEGO Foundation joined this bold commitment, awarding an additional \$100 million to bring the power of learning through play to children in Lebanon and Jordan, as well as in Bangladesh, through the Play to Learn project. These high-quality early childhood interventions are aimed at improving children's social-emotional and intellectual development, as well as offering programming for caregivers including tips and tricks to aid in their child's development beyond the classroom. The programs offer solutions in partnership with local and national actors to some of the most critical developmental challenges we see today.



Ahlan Simsim programs delivered in IRC centers are implemented in the labeled governorates. As programming scales up in partnership with Ministries, reach will extend country-wide.

CONTEXT

The rapidly evolving context in Lebanon has exacerbated needs across Lebanon. While Lebanon currently hosts the highest number of Syrian refugees per capita in the region with **Syrian refugees representing 1 in every 4 individuals living in Lebanon**, Lebanese citizens represent a growing population of those in need.² As families in both communities struggle to

80% of Lebanese families and 90% of Syrian refugee families residing in Lebanon have fallen below the poverty line.

700k children are out of school.

1 in 10 children are engaged in child labor and **1 in 5 girls** between ages 15 and 19 years old is married.

77% of Lebanese households and **99% of Syrian households** report they do not have enough money to buy food.

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

² <https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/2491>

acquire basic life-sustaining resources, children and their well-being are often deprioritized³. The Ahlan Simsim/Play to Learn projects are committed to providing crucial services for vulnerable children and their caregivers across Lebanon 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 Lebanon 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.

Since the start of the Ahlan Simsim project, ECD programs have **reached close to 40,000 children and caregivers** across Lebanon.

Programs IRC has designed and delivers directly in Lebanon to support ECD include:

- **Preschool Healing Classrooms** (in-person, hybrid, and remote): intensive program offered to children ages 3 to 6 years covering pre-literacy, pre-numeracy, and social-emotional learning.
- **Remote Early Learning Program:** a learning program delivered by teachers through WhatsApp and phone calls with caregivers on lessons related to cognitive and social-emotional learning. This program is also the subject of an ongoing impact study with New York University with results forthcoming.
- **Ahlan Simsim Families:** a modular and flexible program targeting caregivers of children 0 to 8 years. The program convenes groups of caregivers 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 on social-emotional learning and other crucial subjects and includes worksheets, storybooks, and videos.
- **Health Integration:** one of our newest launches in Lebanon, this program uses a child-centered approach and draws from our core belief that health actors are crucial partners for child development. The program integrates core ECD messages and activities coupled with immunization, vaccination, and nutrition programming to support health care providers to engage in development-focused discussions with caregivers.

Alongside service delivery is the locally-produced Arabic-language version of *Sesame Street*, also titled *Ahlan Simsim*, designed specifically for refugee and host community populations by Ahlan Simsim/Play to Learn partner Sesame Workshop. These programs bring together the *Ahlan Simsim* mass media content and the critical needs on the ground for an immersive child- and caregiver-centered experience. Ahlan Simsim/Play to Learn also manages and curates content on Instagram and Facebook for easy, online access to information and activities that complements the show and direct services.

SCALING & SUSTAINABILITY

Underpinning the approach of Ahlan Simsim is partnership with local actors to influence national systems that govern and deliver ECD in order to scale up access to ECD services and impact to ensure sustainability long term. As the situation in Lebanon has continued to deteriorate, these scaling, advocacy and systems-focused efforts have been especially challenging with government priorities pivoting to address high levels of inflation, staff turnover, and the many needs and consequences that arose with the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the difficult circumstances, partnerships between IRC and key government ministries have made remarkable progress in developing pathways to scale.

Partnerships for scale in Lebanon include:

- **Ministry of Public Health (MoPH):** Focuses on institutionalizing quality ECD via the development of standards for privately run nurseries across Lebanon to ensure children 0-5 years old have access to safe, healthy, and inclusive environments, conducive to their development. These standards launched in June 2022 will underpin the MoPH's approach to quality and curricula. A complementary early learning program for children 0-3 years old is currently in co-development with the MoPH to support reaching these standards.

³ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/childrens-education-risk-lebanon-due-economic-crisis#ixzz7YuVByhXG>

- **Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA):** Aligned with the above work with the MoPH, this partnership has developed standards for publicly run daycares throughout Lebanon to ensure children 0-5 years old have access to safe, healthy, and inclusive environments, conducive to their development. Standards will be launched in 2023, with the associated 0-3 years old complementary program curriculum.
- **Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE)** - Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD) – This partnership is exploring integration of Ahlan Simsim digital materials into CERD’s official online educational platform and building on the existing Qitabi II USAID-funded program to extend impact to pre-school age.

Alongside active partnerships with the government ministries listed above, national advocacy efforts aim at ensuring wider coordination and prioritization of ECD, vital to successful systems-wide shifts. One significant milestone is the formation of a cross-sectoral ECD Taskforce on Health and Nutrition led by the MoPH. A national policy dialogue addressing the double burden of malnutrition through daycares in Lebanon was also conducted in March 2022 in collaboration with Knowledge to Policy Center (K2P), MoPH, and MoSA. The dialogue revealed the importance of having unified standards in daycare centers among others as one of the steps that need to be taken to improve child nutrition.

RESEARCH & LEARNING

To understand impact and quality of implementation of programming run in Lebanon, we are conducting multiple research studies, as well as continually monitoring program implementation for both direct services and scaling pathways.

A two-generation randomized control trial is being conducted to assess impact of the remote early learning program for 5-6 year olds and their caregivers, offering KG3 remote classes for children ages 5-6 years alongside the Ahlan Simsim Families program delivered to their caregivers. The impact evaluation is complemented with qualitative research input from teachers and caregivers on program implementation.

Remote Early Learning Program Evaluation

96.5% of caregivers surveyed in Lebanon would recommend Ahlan Simsim/Play to Learn programming to friends, family, or neighbors.

97.2% of caregivers expressed they were satisfied with the effect of Ahlan Simsim/Play to Learn direct services on their role as parents/caregivers.

WHERE: Lebanon

WHO: Children 5-6 years

WHAT: We aim to understand the impact of a remote early learning program when paired with a caregiver program on selected child development outcomes. This model and related study examine the effects of pairing multiple remote programs to understand novel ways of teaching young children.

IRC also carried out a measurement pilot on remote implementation of the International Development and Early Learning Assessment (IDELA) measurement tool to assess its performance and what changes might increase its reliability and validity in remote context usage. The results have indicated the tool is reliable and valid. In the upcoming stage, IRC will compare the IDELA remote tool with IDELA in-person to assess whether the remote modality can be suggested instead of in-person modality when required in humanitarian contexts. In doing so, we are centering our practices around feedback from clients and learning about best practices for our beneficiaries.

WHAT'S NEXT

As current Ahlan Simsim funding is coming to a close at the end of 2023, IRC and partner Sesame Workshop look toward sustainability, as well as understanding the persistent and emerging needs in the MENA region. In Lebanon, we know the contextual changes have caused severe stress on the country along with caregivers and children and the need, relevance and demand for ECD services in Lebanon is only increasing. The coming years will be focused on leveraging the current investments on programming and strategic partnerships, research and learning to continue to support local actors and caregivers and young children across Lebanon to develop and thrive.

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