

# Transforming Tomorrow: Innovative Solutions for Children in Crisis

*Learning from Ahlan Simsim's experience in the MENA region*

A Report from the International Rescue Committee  
March 2024



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Shema, age 7, participates in Ahlan Simsim activities in an IRC women's protection center in Mosul, Iraq.



IRC's President and CEO David Miliband during a storytelling session with the Smile Caravan in Jordan.

## Foreword by David Miliband: Innovating New Models in an Era of Uncertainty

A little over six years ago, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation chose to invest in what would ultimately become the largest early childhood intervention in humanitarian response – Ahlan Simsim. The initiative won MacArthur's rigorous "100 & Change" competition, beating 1,900 alternative "world-changing ideas" for a \$100 million grant.

With this investment, MacArthur was making a big bet on expanding a piloted concept. Could the needs of young children and their caregivers be placed at the center of crisis response? Could combining direct service programs with educational media offer a powerful solution to one of the most challenging global problems? Could we build resilience, even in extreme contexts, with developmentally appropriate care? And, as we discuss at length in this report, could we bridge the divide between immediate, short-term response and long-term impact for millions of people, making change with depth, at scale?

Six years later, the answer is a resounding yes, with a powerful lesson to share not only for early childhood development, humanitarian aid and philanthropy, but with any entity working to address the world's greatest challenges.

Today, Ahlan Simsim has reached over 3 million children and caregivers with direct support in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria and over 27 million children across the Middle East and North Africa have watched the television show *Ahlan Simsim*, an Arabic-language version of *Sesame Street*. A growing body of research shows Ahlan Simsim is dramatically improving children's learning and development outcomes.

The bottom line on our most important takeaways: Our teams took risks, tested, and ultimately developed a set of programs, services, and approaches that were best suited

to their unique and challenging environments. To better serve children and caregivers, we partnered across sectors, reshaped and strengthened systems, and solved for long-term problems rather than short-term wins. By investing in innovation, research, and adaptation, we upended old models of how progress is made. We believe this is a model for how the entire international community should operate.

MacArthur's CEO John Palfrey reflected on the foundation's big bet: "If philanthropy doesn't act as society's risk capital, we're making a terrible mistake." Six years on, we've learned that doing things differently is the necessary path to make real change.

In this sense, this report "Transforming Tomorrow: Innovative Solutions for Children in Crisis" is a blueprint for how to think differently about upending current ways of working. Ahlan Simsim has shown that we can deliver transformational change at scale, even in the most difficult circumstances. We hope these learnings inspire you to join us.

Indeed, in an era of turmoil and uncertainty, transformational change for children's development may be the only path to progress.

**David Miliband,**  
President & CEO

March 2024



Rawda, a Syrian refugee, reads a story to her 6-year-old granddaughter, Latifa, in Ma'an, Jordan.

# Acknowledgements

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## Ahlan Simsim

The Ahlan Simsim initiative, from which this report draws its learnings, was made possible due to the many people who worked together towards a common goal to ensure young children learn, grow and thrive. **Thank you to the dedicated staff** who make up the IRC staff teams across Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as MENA regional and Headquarters offices, and the Sesame Workshop teams.

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## Partners

Partnership is foundational to Ahlan Simsim. Launched in 2018 by Sesame Workshop and the IRC, and with Global TIES for Children at New York University as our external evaluation partner, the work of Ahlan Simsim to make meaningful change for children's lives is a collective effort. It is with deep appreciation that we acknowledge the following list of the more than 100 partners who have contributed to Ahlan Simsim over the past six years.

### In Iraq

Al Mesalla Organization for Human Resources Development, Bent Al-Rafedain Organization, Iraqi House for Creativity – Mosul, Iraqi Institute for Development, Iraqi Network for Social Media, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs–Child Welfare Commission, Sabe Sanabul Organization for Relief and Development, Sahara Economic Development Organization, Swaed Mawseleya, and Taafi Centers.

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### Regional and Global Partners


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Mariam participates in activities as part of the Smile Caravan programs in southern Jordan.



Bara'a (right), a Syrian refugee, with her 3-year-old daughter Malak and an IRC facilitator (left)

# Executive Summary

Worldwide, 71 million children ages 0 to 5 have never known a life outside conflict. This reality is especially pronounced in the complex landscape of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Children who were born at the start of the Syrian conflict are entering adolescence, and are now responsible for shaping the path forward for the next generation.

Traditional approaches to short-term humanitarian aid and long-term development assistance have often been unable to come together to address the adversities these children face, robbing millions of the essential building blocks that provide the safety, security, and stimulation they need to thrive. In part this is because response initiatives are often designed without children and their caregiver's realities in mind, failing to empower crisis-affected populations to adapt and transcend the constraints that have redefined their lives.

**New methods and strategies are desperately needed. If we can't invest in critical support during the period of life most impacted by crisis, and the decades long displacement that is likely to follow, then we are failing as a global community—with grave consequences.**

It was within this context that the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Sesame Workshop came together to launch Ahlan Simsim ('Welcome Sesame' in Arabic), a transformative initiative designed to deliver and scale up programs, services and resources in early childhood development (ECD) for families impacted by conflict, crisis, and displacement.

When Ahlan Simsim launched operations in 2018, the realities of families in the MENA were front and center. The conflict in Syria was entering its seventh year, with a population in dire need of humanitarian assistance. Lebanon was struggling with a political crisis and strained economy, with both Syrian refugees and Lebanese families

becoming increasingly vulnerable. Jordan was host to one of the largest refugee populations in the Middle East. Iraq continued to face challenges during a time of transition following years of conflict. In 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these ongoing crises.

Powered by a transformational \$100 million grant from the MacArthur Foundation, followed by additional support from the LEGO Foundation and others, the IRC-Sesame Workshop partnership brought together the IRC's long-standing expertise in working with communities affected by crisis and Sesame's proven ability to create powerful and popular educational media.

The Ahlan Simsim initiative integrates direct early childhood development services for children and caregivers with educational media – including the Arabic-language TV show produced by Sesame Workshop, also titled *Ahlan Simsim*. This report is the culmination of analysis focused on the IRC's experience delivering and scaling these integrated direct services for children and caregivers in partnership with local actors.

Over the course of the initiative, we found that to serve both short- and long-term aims, and implement fully scaled up solutions, **we had to question and even upend what we now see as false choices between silos, and embrace new ways of working, learning, and partnership.** The combination of flexible and agile multi-year funding coupled with the team's unrelenting focus on child outcomes enabled us to rethink traditional concepts of crisis response and prioritize results.

We achieved this by designing programs to meet children and families where they were—not just in classrooms and health clinics, but also in nurseries, community centers, and at home, including on TVs and mobile devices. We also knew that partnership was vital to achieve widespread scale and sustained impact. Ahlan Simsim is a collective effort with over 100 partners who played a role in co-designing engaging user-centered content, reaching children and families with vital support, or scaling up solutions. These ranged from government ministries and civil society organizations, to broadcasters, technology companies and academic institutions.

Ahlan Simsim has reached over 3 million children and caregivers with direct support, and over 27 million children have watched the *Ahlan Simsim* TV show.

In six years, the initiative launched dozens of programmatic pathways that have **reached over 3 million children and caregivers with direct support** in a range of acute and protracted crisis-affected settings across Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. **Over 27 million children have watched the locally produced, Arabic-language TV show, also titled *Ahlan Simsim*.** Moreover, rigorous research and evaluation have demonstrated the cost effective impact of Ahlan Simsim programs: Our 11-week remote preschool program delivered in Lebanon achieved learning gains for 5–6-year-old children comparable to a year of in-person preschool.<sup>2</sup>

An impact evaluation\* of the 11-week Remote Early Learning program produced learning outcomes on par with those seen from a year of in-person preschool.

From this experience, we identified three key learnings with implications that extend well beyond the field of child development that are applicable to work on food insecurity, climate change, among other global crises. These lessons have significance for actors who strive to bridge the gap between the ever accelerating pace of challenges and meaningful solutions, to ensure conflict and crisis-affected populations can recover and gain control of their lives.

\* This impact evaluation was led by New York University's Global TIES for Children in collaboration with IRC and Sesame Workshop researchers.<sup>3</sup>



Children in grade 1 gather with IRC facilitators and school teachers before an Ahlan Simsim activity in Baghdad, Iraq.

## Key Learnings

### 1. Investment in innovation, learning and adaptation is needed to deliver effective nimble solutions

- Deliberately designing for innovation in program delivery has been a critical ingredient in finding unconventional approaches that empower crisis-affected populations facing a myriad of interconnected challenges across education, health, and safety.
- A focus on innovation was accompanied by deliberate evaluation and learning, a tolerance for failure, and a willingness to adapt or deprioritize programs. Enabled by time and resources, this combined focus produced the most effective methods.

### 2. Reaching everyone who can benefit requires understanding the wider system and partnering within it

- Designing programs with an understanding of the entire system of service delivery in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria allowed for a more focused approach on who we were reaching across host and displaced communities, and whether we actually made a difference in reaching both these population types, both in the present and in the long-term.
- Our people-first strategy opened opportunities to codesign problem statements and the approaches that followed with our local partners, who were often best placed to reach the majority of children. Where gaps in the existing systems emerged, we looked for alternative methods to reach the most marginalized. This combined approach is critical in pursuit of 'equity at scale', a principle we explore throughout the report.

### 3. Reconsidering the categories and silos that define work in crisis-affected regions can remove barriers to drive innovation and scale

- Transcending the categories of "humanitarian aid" and "development assistance" to design for both immediate and long-term needs, while working across sectors, was crucial to creating solutions to today's protracted challenges. In a crisis context, any family lacking access to one life-saving intervention is almost certainly lacking access to more of them.
- Embracing an interdisciplinary focus enabled us to build programs based on outcomes, maximize existing bodies of research, and present a case for more efficient investments. This has implications for other interdisciplinary frameworks—such as climate change or the study of food systems—to transcend perfunctory ways of working.



These learnings were underpinned by **three important enablers: flexible and adaptable financing; a focus on outcomes for children above all else; and a team culture that encourage staff to learn, think, and work differently, and to view failure as opportunity to learn and iterate.** These enablers were important pre-conditions for Ahlan Simsim's successes.

The combined package leads us to make the following topline recommendations, further expanded upon at the bottom of the report:

### FUND NIMBLE SOLUTIONS

#### **Enable investment strategies that encourage prototyping, micro-pilots and pivots.**

Structure funding investments around outcomes-driven approaches to be responsive to changing contexts and unforeseen opportunities. This means encouraging adaptive management practices and shoring up risk appetite for testing—with failure seen as a route to learning and iterating—to contribute to long term change. Develop infrastructure and accountability to guide funding that puts the outcomes and the needs of people at the center rather than assumed solutions.

### DEDICATE FOCUS TO CHILDREN AND CAREGIVERS

#### **Establish effective strategies to meaningfully engage affected communities.**

Establish or empower specific forums for assessing the comprehensive needs of children and caregivers—who are predominantly women—where related challenges and solutions can be discussed. This can be achieved by mandating interdisciplinary decision making across education, health, nutrition and protection policy and programming. Ensure that funds allocated will maximize the needs and voices of the most marginalized.

### LINK FUNDING, RESEARCH, AND DATA

#### **Fund evidence generation to learn what works, for whom and at what cost, linked to data-based needs.**


Allocate funding for evidence generation specifically in humanitarian settings. This requires increasing commitment to learning, research, and cost analysis that leads to improved practice and policy. Invest in collecting and generating population data as well as monitoring and learning feedback across the lifecycle, disaggregated by gender, age, ability, and crisis affected.

Ahlan Simsim has become a transformational experience that is now part of daily life for millions of children and their families, but we know there is still so much work to do for all people impacted by ongoing crises in the region. And we are conscious of other global challenges, such as climate change and malnutrition, that are already disproportionately impacting children and their ability to thrive.

One of the most interesting takeaways from this experience is what Ahlan Simsim tell us about the untapped potential of ideas from outside our standard practice. The key learnings from the Ahlan Simsim experience, and core enabling factors, have individual importance as well as collective relevance to those who support funding, program implementation, and policymaking for outsized impact in the MENA and around the world.



Mohammed, a 2-year-old Syrian refugee in Irbid, Jordan, participates in an Ahlan Simsim activity with IRC facilitator, Yosur.



Fatima, a Syrian refugee, with her 4-year-old daughter Talia, outside their home in Tripoli, Lebanon.

# Introduction

Over the long term, the world cannot hope to achieve its goals for ending poverty, as well as ensuring health, gender equality, peace and security without ensuring children have what they need to thrive. The Syrian context is a microcosm of the growing set of global populations who are experiencing long-standing displacement. In the MENA, 15.7 million people are displaced, and a third of children in the region are affected by ongoing conflict and violence.<sup>4</sup> This is amplified by key accelerators of crisis—including armed conflict, climate change and economic turmoil—which are driving long-standing problems to new extremes.<sup>5</sup>

A generation of children in the MENA are at high risk for lasting repercussions from a childhood disrupted by conflict, crisis, and displacement. Less than half of children in the region participate in early childhood education and 63% of 10-year-olds are unable to read and understand a simple written text, known as learning poverty.<sup>6</sup> Disparities persist across and within the different countries in terms of access to adequate nutrition, immunization, and healthcare services.

Yet humanitarian response is currently not structured to drive the type of progress required to make a long-term difference in the trajectory of these children's lives. Women and children are often held up as symbolic recipients of aid, but the evidence demonstrates that programs largely continue to be designed without their specific realities in mind, and ultimately fail to respond to their real needs or support their empowerment.

In countries like Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, the future of these nations will depend on whether the current generation of children grows up to become healthy, thriving, and productive adults. We need a radically different way forward that allows for stepping out of the perpetual retrofit of an antiquated response system. We need to own the shift from a focus on outputs to outcomes in strategy and tactics. And we need to operationally tackle the realities of outstanding needs in comparison to shrinking levels of financing. Or be prepared to fall short.

So, the question remains, how do we tackle such boundary-blurring, intergenerational crises? Millions of children across the world, including in the MENA, require

a concerted effort to synchronize immediate aid with enduring needs. This means incorporating a realistic and comprehensive focus on the welfare of children and caregivers, and substantial investments in research and evidence-based strategies underpinned by innovation to drive quality solutions.

For over 40 years, the IRC and our partners have delivered aid and programming in the MENA, growing our expertise from emergency response in moments of crises to contributions to long-term development in the areas of education, health, safety, and empowerment. It is notable that the IRC as a leading humanitarian response organization has acknowledged there is work to be done to shift our solution set and realign our approach.

The Ahlan Simsim initiative provides a unique case study to be examined. Early childhood development (ECD) is a cross-cutting issue that demands solutions that put caregivers and children at the center. Ahlan Simsim was launched to meet these needs, enabled by multi-year, adaptable funding, and a robust partnership model baked into the initiative's research and innovation-driven solutions.

With a mandate to support the unique contextual needs of children in each country we found there was no one-size-fits-all program model. Instead, the Ahlan Simsim approach has utilized flexible and adaptable content and delivery modalities that align with local priorities and recognize the distinct needs of a combination of displaced, refugee, and host community children.

We demonstrate how ECD can serve as a catalyst for realizing the changes we seek in the world. This is not a vain effort to add another priority to the list, but because ECD is a test case for people-centered, outcomes-driven, and localized reform agendas. Together with our partners, we created models that are much greater than the programs, tools, content, and products created—they are about changing modes of operations and re-imagining the way entire systems can work for government, multilateral organizations, private sector, and civil society actors across the MENA region and globally.



Children in Azraq, Jordan pose with *Ahlan Simsim* Muppet Basma.  
Photo: Ryan Donnell for Sesame Workshop

## What is Early Childhood Development?

Early Childhood Development (ECD) refers to the holistic support for a child's health, cognitive development, and social and emotional learning from prenatal development through age eight. The brain undergoes its most rapid period of development in these early years and is extremely sensitive to environmental influences.

The impact of prolonged stress and adverse experiences during this time can have serious negative consequences. But research also shows that quality ECD support in these crucial early years can mitigate the effects of early adversity.

This critical window of opportunity to shape the trajectory of a child's development and build a foundation for their future. The World Food Programme describes ECD as "the inter-connected needs children require in order to develop to their full potential."<sup>7</sup>

Supporting early childhood development means ensuring all children have access to:

1. Good health
2. Adequate nutrition
3. Responsive caregiving
4. Opportunities for early learning
5. Security and safety

ECD is also critical to achieving progress on multiple UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly #4 (Quality Education) but also progressing on SDGs like elimination of poverty, gender equity, good health and wellbeing and economic growth. These definitions were endorsed in the "Nurturing Care Framework" released by the World Health Organization, UNICEF, and the World Bank in 2018.<sup>8</sup>

## The relevance of Ahlan Simsim as a solution in an evolving humanitarian landscape

As we enter a new era of protracted and overlapping humanitarian crises, interventions in child development are more necessary than ever for achieving the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The complexities of addressing growing humanitarian crises reveal a collection of interconnected challenges.

**First**, the frequency and length of crises culminating in development challenges have rendered the old division between aid and development sometimes moot or even counterproductive.<sup>9</sup> At the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, the UN committed to “working towards achieving collective outcomes that reduce need, risk and vulnerability over multiple years, based on the comparative advantage of a diverse range of actors.” The resulting humanitarian-development “nexus” framework was further expanded upon by the Grand Bargain, an agreement between top donors and humanitarian organizations who have committed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of getting more means into the hands of people in need.<sup>10</sup>

Yet these reform agendas have largely failed to deliver in an era with increasingly overlapping challenges and an ever-tightening funding landscape. This has culminated in the circulation of billions of resources that are not comprehensively, or sometimes meaningfully, meeting people’s needs.

On top of that, conflicts are increasingly protracted; in IRC’s 2023 analysis, conflicts now last on average 12 years, while the 26 active humanitarian response plans were on average only funded at 33%.<sup>11</sup> For countries facing long-term crises, the transition from humanitarian to development assistance is challenging and rarely linear.

Between 2017 and 2021 while humanitarian assistance increased,<sup>12</sup> the volume and proportion of development assistance for countries facing long-term crises reduced.<sup>13</sup>

Traditional humanitarian funding structures are also not agile enough for the sector’s reform promises. According to ALNAP, among recipients surveyed in its annual State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) report, only 36% thought aid went to those who needed it most, with the prevailing model of short-term funding by far the largest barrier. Both the quality and amount of multi-year, flexible financing available that would allow for toggling between different “types” of response is limited.<sup>14</sup> Pressures on overall aid budgets—in part due to the global increase in public debt—have also meant that many actors see humanitarian versus development funding as a zero-sum game.<sup>15,16,17</sup>

**Second**, even though 71 million children between ages 0 and 5 have lived their entire lives in a conflict-affected area,<sup>18</sup> the solutions geared toward children and their caregivers—who are predominantly women—often lack a holistic approach to support their specific vulnerabilities. This undermines the effectiveness of interventions targeting their access to medical care, quality education, proper nutrition, and protection.

For example, 224 million crisis-affected girls and boys need quality education<sup>19</sup> and 50% of maternal, newborn and under five mortality presently occur in humanitarian settings.<sup>20</sup> Yet humanitarian aid explicitly targeting components of ECD stood at \$463 million in 2018, only 2% of the total distributed funding. Just 19% is reported as ‘multi-sector’ funding.<sup>21</sup>

Humanitarian response evaluations consistently call for a more impact- and solution-oriented approach, supporting a move towards multisectoral responses, and adapting approaches and modalities to local contexts and the priorities of affected communities.<sup>22</sup> However well-meaning, approaches to date are at best generic, and solutions do not meaningfully address the capacity, skills, and the political will that is needed to create change.<sup>23,24</sup>



Syrian refugees Hind, Musa, and Mohammed stand outside their home in Lebanon.

**71 million children between ages 0 and 5 have lived their entire lives in a conflict-affected area.**

**Finally**, the dearth of investment in robust research and empirical evidence skews program investment decisions, hindering evidence-based interventions essential for long-term impact. The implications of the research gap are amplified by lack of innovation, resulting in a rigid mindset of effectiveness and efficiency methodologies in humanitarian action.

As the largest OECD donor, the US government's baseline is important to consider. A recent internal US government review found that the share of USAID projects with a formal impact evaluation is low, and the share of impact evaluations rated high quality was very low at 3%.<sup>25</sup> Rigorous evaluations and empirical research studies in fragile and humanitarian settings are even fewer. For example, a review of humanitarian program evaluations identified only 38 impact evaluations out of more than 900 studies.<sup>26</sup>

ALNAP's SOHS report also found that new system-wide approaches or technology-driven solutions have predominantly failed or stalled. Key challenges cited were under-investment, limited support for innovators, and a lack of reliable monitoring and evaluation data to understand the impact of innovations.<sup>27</sup> ALNAP also found that to conduct impact evaluations in emergencies, it is crucial to have ready-to-deploy, flexible designs with outcomes that can be tested quickly and results that are easily actionable.<sup>28</sup> Arguably, crisis conditions can amplify the opportunity to explore alternative approaches and should be viewed as such to achieve novel solutions.

**While these challenges can feel insurmountable, there is evidence that the global aid community recognizes the need to do business differently.**

Humanitarians are taking steps to move forward with localization and human-centered approaches on their own terms. Building from commitments around the Grand Bargain, the UN's humanitarian coordination body, OCHA's Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths has launched pilot initiatives in four countries, with the aim to develop "original country or area-based coordination and response solutions" that respond more nimbly to the needs articulated by affected populations.<sup>29</sup>

The 2023 Global Humanitarian Overview, the UN's annual comprehensive report on aid needs, included a spotlight on ECD stating: "ECD is a cost-effective investment, generating returns across sectors," even while it observed that such programs were "dramatically underfunded."<sup>30</sup> Localization agendas are closely aligned with calls for greater accountability to crisis-affected populations, and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, the highest-level humanitarian policy-setting forum, has formed a task force intended to make responses more "empowering, accountable, and inclusive."<sup>31</sup> OCHA, in its 2023-2026

Strategic Plan, and the UN Office of the Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement Action Agenda have committed to be more inclusive, move towards multi-sectoral responses, and adapt approaches and modalities to local contexts and the priorities of affected communities, putting people and their needs at the center.<sup>32,33</sup> Humanitarians are also increasingly relying on unearmarked funding pots like the UN-run Central Emergency Response Fund and country-based pooled funds. "The growing reliance on these funds is a stopgap for an inflexible system."<sup>34</sup>

**There is evidence that the global aid community recognizes the need to do business differently.**

**Bridging humanitarian and development modalities is also taking effect, examining new ways of working.**

The World Bank has stepped in as a partner in displacement crises, with investment in fragility, conflict and violence (FCV) situations now accounting for more than 25% of the World Bank's education portfolio. This includes leading on a commitment to action to ensure children in conflict and crises can develop foundational learning to realize their full potential.<sup>35</sup>

Both the World Health Organization and UNICEF are dedicating a significant portion of their capacity to strengthen systems for crisis affected populations.<sup>36,37</sup> The World Food Programme (WFP) put a spotlight on its revised approach to flexible funding<sup>38</sup> and sought to maximize accelerated innovation at the nexus of humanitarian and development work.<sup>39</sup> The WFP's Regional Cairo Bureau also partnered with the IRC to develop a position on early childhood development, a result of country-based demand.<sup>40</sup>

While these emerging practice examples are inspiring, it is notable that actioning these aspirations has all proven difficult in execution. They are certainly not enough to offset the spiraling costs, including the overwhelming \$46.4 billion emergency response bill in 2024.<sup>41</sup> Nor do they tackle the comparative lack of know-how on how to materialize slower pace development outcomes in difficult crises ridden environments.



Scene from Al Hol refugee camp in northern Syria

# Context Matters

## Examining the MENA Humanitarian and Development Landscape

Ahlan Simsim sought to build contextualized solutions that meet the distinct needs of children and families. The success or failure of each program solution hinged on the degree to which it fit into local priorities. The following factors created the policy and programmatic environment for Ahlan Simsim that were foundational for our approach:

- **Who** has oversight over populations in a given country or sub-national area? And who are the entities that provide or govern the provision of services for children and caregivers?
- **How** are these entities meeting the needs of children and caregivers? And with what services or programs? Where are the gaps?
- **What** policies and commitments are already in place to deliver the services authorities are responsible for providing?

Oversight for ECD and crisis-affected population services are split in all countries between government, UN, or civil society actors and distributed across health, education, and social protection sectors. Many of these ministries face a lack of funding or mandate to reach vulnerable communities. Yet local actors, in every context we worked in, showed a demand for different approaches to early childhood services to help solve for national needs.

The following summaries ground Ahlan Simsim's programs and experience, as detailed in the latter sections of this report, in both the opportunities and challenges that local and national partners face, with a duty and commitment to supporting them.





**Iraq**



**Jordan**



**Lebanon**



**Syria**



Jawwad, sits with his grandchildren and a facilitator from Ahlan Simsim partner Syrian Relief and Development (SRD) in northern Syria. Photo: Syrian Relief and Development



# IRAQ

POPULATION:

**44.5**  
million<sup>42</sup>

## Operating Context

While the conflict with the so-called ISIS group ended in 2018, Iraq remains at a crossroads in which immediate humanitarian and development needs coexist. Political gridlock, an economy still in recovery from the conflict and COVID-19, as well as weak service delivery capacities, have impacted the Government of Iraq's ability to reach vulnerable communities such as internal displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. While relative stability has presented a unique opportunity for displaced Iraqis, returnees, and refugees to gain greater access to public services and social protection systems provided by the government, years of conflict have weakened the capacity and resilience of national institutions, rendering the country vulnerable to further shocks.

**2.5 million** people in need of humanitarian assistance and **1.2 million** people are displaced across Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.<sup>43</sup>

In January 2023, the UN-led humanitarian response and cluster system transitioned out of Iraq. The cluster system had previously overseen the coordination of humanitarian efforts, serving as the focal point for humanitarian assistance. While vulnerable populations generally do have legally conferred access to services delivered by formal systems of health, education, and social protection, this transition created clear gaps in service delivery to people in Iraq. With the government expected to take on the programs and funding required

to reach all children and their families. In governorates where access to formal systems is limited and displaced populations are higher, NGOs often fill gaps in service delivery.

**37.9%** of the population live in poverty.<sup>44</sup>

One type of policy initiative that seeks to fill the gaps for displaced populations is "durable solutions", defined as a guiding set of principles that target the safety and dignity of those who remain displaced post-conflict, those who have returned to their areas of origin, and those who have settled in new areas. The achievement of durable solutions in Iraq is intrinsically tied to broader development goals within the country, and part of the commitment by the Federal Iraq and Kurdistan Region of Iraq authorities to implement the 2020 Iraqi National Plan for IDPs.

**35.4%** of youth are unemployed.<sup>45</sup>

The transition out of humanitarian response has resulted in a dramatically decreased funding landscape as financial support from the humanitarian sector has largely halted, while development support has not appreciably increased. This has made it difficult for government actors—inclusive of ministries working most directly with vulnerable populations—to support long-term development and stabilization needs.



## Policies on Early Childhood

In May 2022, the National Strategy for Early Childhood Development (2022–2031) was launched, spearheaded by the Iraqi General Secretariat for the Council of Ministers, and written by a committee that included the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA), and the Ministry of Education (MoE). The strategy recognizes there is “little attention to special groups of children, such as children with disabilities, orphans and IDP children,” but it does not specifically target underserved populations, leaving a gap, sometimes filled by informal programs. There also remains almost no coordination between ministries responsible for ECD, and there is very limited data available on levels of funding for ECD within each of these ministries.

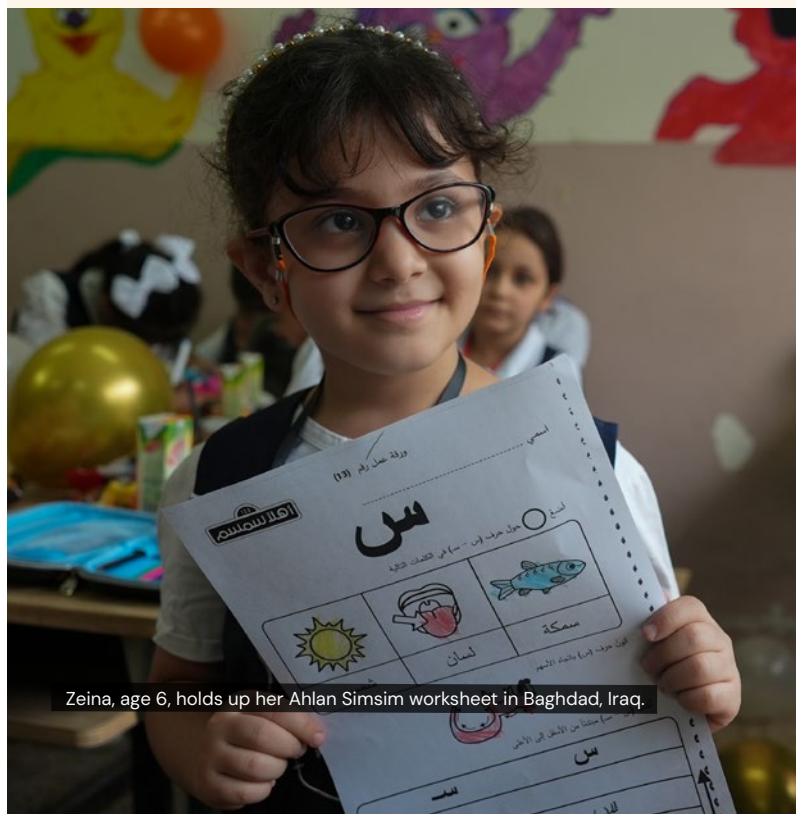
## How Early Childhood is Overseen and by Whom

In Iraq, ECD is the responsibility of a multiplicity of governmental and private sector bodies, according to the National Strategy of Early Childhood Development. Various ministries including the MoLSA, the MoE, the Ministry of Health (MoH), and the Women’s Empowerment Directorate within the Ministry of Justice contribute to ECD mandates across Federal Iraq.

Implementation of services for young children is split by the MoLSA which supervises nursery licenses and regulations; the MoE which supervises kindergarten curricula, teacher training and standards; and the MoH which supervises prenatal care, vaccination, disease treatment, and early detection of delays. Iraq’s Child Welfare Commission (CWC) provides additional support to the implementation and coordination of ECD efforts and is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the National Strategy for ECD. However, the CWC suffers from a “lack of autonomy in decision-making and lack of financial resources allocated to its operations.”<sup>746</sup>

## Snapshot of ECD Indicators

Iraq	MENA	World
Infant mortality rates, per thousand births (2021) <sup>47,48</sup>		
21 deaths	18 deaths	28 deaths
Enrollment of children in preprimary education (2011 for Iraq, 2020 for MENA and World) <sup>49,50</sup>		
4%	34%	61%
Children under age 2 immunized for diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough), and tetanus (2021) <sup>51,52</sup>		
78%	89%	81%
Percentage of national GDP dedicated to public education (1989 for Iraq, 2013 for MENA, 2021 for World) <sup>53,54</sup>		
3.6%	4.1%	4.2%



Zeina, age 6, holds up her Ahlan Simsim worksheet in Baghdad, Iraq.



# JORDAN

## Operating Context

Jordan has the world's second largest refugee population per capita. While 20% of Syrian registered refugees live in formal refugee camps, the remainder are found mostly in Jordan's urban areas.<sup>56</sup> Although the geopolitical context in Jordan has remained relatively stable compared to many surrounding countries, the Kingdom faces strained resources and conditions for vulnerable communities such as natural resource scarcity, and a long history of unemployment.<sup>57</sup>

**654 thousand** Syrian registered refugees<sup>58</sup>, though estimates range up to **1.3 million.**<sup>59</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic added to the already precarious living conditions for refugees and vulnerable Jordanians. For example, while there has been progress in issuing work permits to Syrian refugees, these are limited to basic industries, which were heavily impacted by the pandemic. Limited employment and socioeconomic mobility have resulted in increasing numbers of both Syrian refugees and Jordanians falling below the poverty line. Vulnerable Jordanians and refugees alike are often in need of better access to social services, health care, and economic opportunities. While a declining economy has tested Jordanian hospitality in recent years, Jordanians remain broadly sympathetic towards refugees.

**24%** of Jordanians<sup>60</sup> and **66%** of Syrian refugees live in poverty.<sup>61</sup>

Led by the Government of Jordan, the multi-year Jordan Response Plan (JRP) is the mechanism through which the international community provides financial support for the short- to mid-term response to both refugees and vulnerable host communities in Jordan. The JRP has been historically underfunded, with funding covering only 29% of the 2023 budget requirements. While the JRP is led by the Government of Jordan, the overall humanitarian response is under the supervision of the Jordan Strategic Humanitarian Committee (JoSH), led by UNHCR. Given the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on delivering quality education in Jordan, in 2020 the international donor community launched the "Accelerating Access Initiative 2.0" (AAI 2.0), a multi-donor account with an expanded mandate to provide school access for the most vulnerable children in Jordan.

**39.4%** of youth are unemployed.<sup>62</sup>

## Policies on Early Childhood

In 2000, Jordan launched the National Early Childhood Development Strategy intending to ensure education for all children, especially grades 1–3 and preschool, and protect children with disabilities at schools and nurseries. This strategy and subsequent plans were renewed, but expired in 2011. The National Strategy for Human Resource Development (2016–2025) spans all phases of education, from early childhood to entry into the job market, aiming to increase citizens welfare and improve the basic services available to them. In 2022, the Kingdom launched a new Vision for Economic Modernization, targeting growth and opportunities for the next decade, where early childhood care and education was included as a strategic priority for the country. The vision for ECD is to develop “an integrated, equitable, just and child-centered system for the development of healthcare and early childhood education” for all children in Jordan by 2033.<sup>63</sup>

## How Early Childhood is Overseen and by Whom

The Government of Jordan makes ECD services available for both host and refugee children and their families via education, health, and child protection services. While these ministry-run ECD services are not limited to Jordanian citizens, there are no national or subnational systems for tracking which populations receive what services, making it a complex endeavor to measure if crisis-affected populations are accessing national systems.

The National Council for Family Affairs (NCFA) is the coordinating body for the delivery of ECD services in Jordan. A nongovernment entity, the NCFA was founded by Royal Decree in 2001 and is presided over by Her Majesty Queen Rania Al-Abdullah, with the support of Plan International.

In 2018, the NCFA established a National ECD Team with representation from the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD), the Ministry of Education (MoE), the Ministry of Health (MoH), as well as community based organizations and international NGOs. However, the NCFA can only put forward recommendations and does not have the mandate to hold stakeholders accountable, representing a key challenge in the equitable delivery of integrated ECD services.

Implementation of services for young children is split between the MoSD, which regulates daycare for children ages 0–4; the MoE, which governs preschool education; and the MoH which is responsible for providing prenatal care, immunizations, and developmental checkups for children.

## Snapshot of ECD Indicators

Jordan	MENA	World
Infant mortality rates, per thousand births (2021) <sup>64,65</sup>		
13 deaths	18 deaths	28 deaths
Enrollment of children in pre-primary education (2021 for Jordan, 2020 for MENA and World) <sup>66,67</sup>		
27%	34%	61%
Children under age 2 immunized for diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough), and tetanus (2021) <sup>68,69</sup>		
77%	89%	81%
Percentage of national GDP dedicated to public education (1999 for Lebanon, 2013 for MENA, 2021 for World) <sup>70,71</sup>		
4.9%	4.1%	4.2%



Malak, age 13, holds a handmade doll in her home in Sabha, Jordan.

LEBANON

Beirut

POPULATION:

**5.5**  
million<sup>72</sup>

# LEBANON

## Operating Context

Lebanon is grappling with a combined political and economic crisis that has pushed hundreds of thousands of people into poverty, and has severely limited the essential functions of the Lebanese state—including its ability to deliver basic services. The current situation is rooted in years of poor governance and unsustainable financial policies, which have been dramatically worsened by the impacts of COVID-19 and the 2020 Beirut Port explosion.

**1.5 million** Syrian refugees, the highest number of displaced people per capita in the world.<sup>73</sup>

More recently, a political impasse has left the country with neither a head of state nor an appointed cabinet, effectively preventing much needed reforms.<sup>74,75</sup> A 2023 assessment by the European Union labeled the national government nonfunctional and encouraged response actors to work with the country's "active civil society and extensive network of national NGOs."<sup>76</sup> As a result of the severe strain on both the host and refugee communities, there has been increasing resistance by government actors to provide services to non-host community populations, as the needs of Lebanese citizens increase.

**40%** decline in the economy since 2019,  
**171% inflation** reached in 2022.<sup>77,78</sup>

Humanitarian Coordinator/Resident Coordinator, supported by OCHA, and overseen by the Humanitarian Country Team. Two response plans are currently in place: the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan which targets Syrian refugees and host communities, and the Emergency Response Plan which targets vulnerable Lebanese, migrants, and Palestinian refugees.

Coordination also occurs with the Lebanon Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (3RF), which sought to address the consequences of the Beirut Port explosion and ensure policy formulation that benefits a "Whole of Lebanon" crisis response. A unified framework, the Lebanon Response Plan (LRP), aimed at serving all communities and is anticipated to be adopted in 2024. However, funding is a major barrier, with just 23% of LCRP funding needs met for 2023.<sup>79</sup>

**80%** of Lebanese families and **90%** of Syrian refugee families live in poverty.<sup>80</sup>

While efforts to streamline services are ongoing, responses addressing refugee and migrant needs are kept mostly distinct from Ministry service delivery for host populations. There are exceptions in Ministry-led programs which serve refugee populations, such as the second shift model for education.

The humanitarian response in Lebanon is led by the UN

## Policies on Early Childhood

In 2016 the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) launched the National Plan for the Protection of Women and Children—a national strategy to shield children from “all forms of violence, abuse and neglect.” The policy does not indicate whether it applies to both host and refugee children. Implementation has been inconsistent as accountability is lacking. The MoSA has announced plans for a National Plan for Childhood and a National Early Childhood Development Strategy, aiming for clear roles and responsibilities for comprehensive and integrated child development, but neither the plan or strategy has been completed. Since 2003, the government has been working to enact pre-primary education reforms, achieving the expansion of public services, but participation remains voluntary.

## How Early Childhood is Overseen and by Whom

The High Council for Childhood (HCC), affiliated with the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), acts as the coordinating body for early childhood development support and services. The HCC works with the MoSA to liaise between relevant government entities, civil society, and other key stakeholders, with a focus on compliance with international conventions and the development of national ECD strategies. The MoSA, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education Directorate (MEHE), and the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) all play key roles in implementing child development services.

The MoPH is responsible for the overall health of children under age 5. The MoSA provides health and child protection services in its holistic social development centers. Oversight for nursery programs is split between the MoPH and the MoSA, with the MoPH responsible for the regulation of private nurseries and the MoSA responsible for regulating public nursery programs. The MEHE is responsible for oversight of education, with its Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD) overseeing the national school curricula. ECE is provided through two sub-national systems including a specialized program targeting refugee children.

## Snapshot of ECD Indicators

Lebanon	MENA	World
Infant Mortality Rates per thousand births (2021) <sup>81,82</sup>		
7 deaths	18 deaths	28 deaths
Enrollment of children in pre-primary education (2021 for Lebanon <sup>83</sup> , 2020 for MENA and World) <sup>84,85</sup>		
70–80%	34%	61%
Children under age 2 immunized for diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough), and tetanus (2021) <sup>86,87</sup>		
67%	89%	81%
Percentage of national GDP dedicated to public education (1999 for Lebanon, 2013 for MENA, 2021 for World) <sup>88,89</sup>		
2.4%	4.1%	4.2%



Syrian refugee Mohammad and his mother read a story together in their home in Bekaa, Lebanon.



POPULATION:

**22.1  
million**<sup>90</sup>

# SYRIA

## Operating Context

With the conflict in Syria entering its 13th year, the country remains marred by protracted crisis and poly-crisis flare-ups. As a result, the ability of humanitarian agencies to reach those in need is severely constrained. The consequences of conflict have been devastating, with hundreds of thousands of people killed and millions displaced. Children and young people in particular have been severely impacted, as essential services such as education and healthcare have been decimated. There are now more people in humanitarian need in Syria than at any other time in the conflict.

**16.7 million** people including 6.8 million IDPs<sup>91</sup> and 155,000 IDP returnees<sup>92</sup> are in need of humanitarian assistance.

Across Syria, the economic situation has deteriorated severely, with many now unable to afford to buy food to feed their families, and a marked increase in negative coping mechanisms such as school dropouts and child labor. The dire situation for child survival and development was further exacerbated by the earthquakes that struck Syria and Türkiye in February 2023, affecting 8.8 million people,<sup>93</sup> and resulting in more than 5,900 deaths. Many Syrian children remain vulnerable to post-traumatic stress disorder as they are forced to absorb yet another shock and the continuing consequences of the destruction left behind.<sup>94</sup>

**43 thousand** people in the northwest remain displaced by the earthquakes.<sup>95</sup>

In northwest Syria there are informal governance structures, and oversight over basic services sits with the UN and bridged by national and international NGO direct services. In northeast Syria, local authorities serve that same role. In 2015, a Whole of Syria (WoS) coordination approach was established to bring humanitarian actors working in Syria and in neighboring countries (cross-border operations) together to increase the overall effectiveness of the response.

The WoS coordination architecture—with a mandate to ensure efficient multi-sectoral response in Syria through direct, cross-border assistance—is led by the UN's Humanitarian Country Team in Damascus, the Syria Strategic Group in Amman, and the Humanitarian Liaison Group in Gaziantep. The main coordination forums regularly engage with the donor community via the Syrian Donors Working Group. Humanitarian clusters, divided by sector, all have their own priorities and ways of working. NGOs play a key role in terms of response, coordination, advocacy, and access.

**90%** of people in Syria live below the poverty line.<sup>96</sup>

Although humanitarian needs across the country are at their highest, the humanitarian response remains chronically underfunded, with the 2023 Syria Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) receiving just 37% of the required funds for 2023.<sup>97</sup> Last year marked the highest funding deficit for the HRP since the conflict started in 2012 with a funding gap exceeding \$3.3 billion.<sup>98</sup>

## Policies on Early Childhood

In 2022, OCHA's northwest Syria education cluster affirmed that to ensure children maximize their chances of learning and promote future opportunities, early childhood development must not be neglected. They recommended that to support pre-school level activities, support should be given for teacher incentives, learning materials, capacity building, operational support for learning spaces and provision of cash-based assistance. There are no policies to date in northeast Syria that support ECD.<sup>99</sup>

## How Early Childhood is Overseen and by Whom

When local authority is outside of formal government control, humanitarian actors have prioritized collaboration with de facto locally acting authorities and organizations to ensure the provision of quality ECD activities. ECD priorities are often tackled at the operational or programmatic level rather than through strategic overarching direction. Across northwest and northeast Syria, humanitarian action is mainly implemented by over 200 national NGOs partnering with the UN and bridged by national and international NGO direct services, and ECD is delivered by local organizations<sup>100</sup> (see partners list at front of this report). While progress to support families is underway, a mapping of the Syria HRP in 2020 revealed that the provision of ECD services is only reaching a fraction of the total number of children in need.<sup>101</sup>

### Snapshot of ECD Indicators

Syria	MENA	World
Infant Mortality Rates per thousand births (2021) <sup>102,103</sup>		
18 deaths	18 deaths	28 deaths
Enrollment of children in pre-primary education (2013 for Syria, 2020 for MENA and World) <sup>104,105</sup>		
6%	34%	61%
Children under age 2 immunized for diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough), and tetanus (2021) <sup>106,107</sup>		
48%	89%	81%
Percentage of national GDP dedicated to public education (1999 for Syria, 2013 for MENA, 2021 for World) <sup>108,109</sup>		
5.1%	4.1%	4.2%

Hamed with his 7-year-old son Tamer who needs additional support due to his disability, outside of their tent home in Idlib in northern Syria.

Photo: WATAN Foundation



A girl and her grandmother do an activity together with Ahlan Simsim Muppet Ma'zooza in their home in Zaatari camp, Jordan.

Photo: Ryan Donnell for Sesame Workshop

## Key Learnings

Ahlan Simsim teams developed contextualized programs to meet children and families where they are. The range of partnerships, programs, interventions, and advocacy efforts that came together with the Ahlan Simsim initiative added up to more than the sum of their parts. The combination created a tangible, noticeable change in improving child outcomes, and in strengthening the systems that support children and caregivers.

We learned valuable lessons about how to better address the needs that emerge from acute, protracted and overlapping crises—learnings that have deep significance for humanitarian and development actors across the globe.

Throughout the six years of Ahlan Simsim, we did not always get it right. Where we did, we can draw direct lines to the success we are now seeing from impact research\* in widespread scale, and in measures of sustainability with local and government partners. Where we didn't, we can point to where learnings pushed us to adapt and iterate.

\* For a summary of results of three Ahlan Simsim impact evaluations, see research briefs here: <https://globaltiesforchildren.nyu.edu/as-findings/#early-learning>.<sup>110,111,112</sup>

The learnings we lay out below come from our analysis of what worked and what didn't, along with which factors enabled success and which decisions propelled us toward meaningful solutions. These learnings are translated into a set of recommendations for funders, policymakers and implementers in the following section.

### | Key Learnings

1. Investment in innovation, learning and adaptation is needed to deliver effective, nimble solutions.
2. Reaching everyone who can benefit requires understanding the wider system and partnering within it.
3. Reconsidering the categories and silos that define work in crisis-affected regions can remove barriers and drive innovation and scale.

These key learnings are discussed in detail below, however it is first important to recognize three foundational inputs that served as enablers.



## | Enablers

### Adaptable, multi-year, trust-based financing

The financing for Ahlan Simsim came primarily from two high-value grants over six years. **The funding structure enabled an adaptive management approach and afforded our teams flexibility to shift between budget lines with agility**, reallocate funds between countries, and test new program solutions. Our ability to regularly evaluate and iterate program delivery decisions stands in stark contrast to most humanitarian grants that are shorter-term and require rigid adherence to a static plan. Ahlan Simsim's adaptable financing made our initiative more stable, not less.

### Outcome- rather than output-based focus

Maintaining a laser focus on outcomes for children and their families was a core part of Ahlan Simsim's design from the start, **evolving a set of initial program models to respond to evolving needs**. This people-first approach informed how we reshaped existing program models and designed new programs and services as needed—leveraging the needs of people, local government, and civil society to guide what and how we scaled up.

### Team Culture


**Team members embraced creativity and the testing of new ideas, viewing failure as an opportunity to learn and iterate.** This culture was fundamental to transcending traditional ways of programming. It shored up an appetite for taking on risks, making way for innovations like Ahlan Simsim's remote preschool program, and it drove the evolution of our approach to partnership with government ministries.

#### DEFINITION

**Adaptive management** is an intentional approach to making decisions and adjustments in response to new information and changes in context. It is not about changing goals during implementation; it is about changing the path being used to achieve the goals in response to a changing environment.<sup>113</sup>



4-year-old Nagham, and her 3-year-old sister, Alma, at a center run by Ahlan Simsim partner, Al-Qantara in Ma'an, Jordan.



First grade students engage in collaborative activities with their teacher as part of the Iraq school readiness program in Baghdad, Iraq.

## Key Learning 1

# Investment in innovation, learning and adaptation is needed to deliver effective nimble solutions

Investment in innovation, learning and adaptation means investing in team culture, and in learning processes that promote and facilitate creative experimentation. They were key to the Ahlan Simsim initiative's origin story—the partnership between the IRC and Sesame Workshop that paired and integrated a new *Ahlan Simsim* TV show and mass media content with direct service programs for children and families. From the launch of Ahlan Simsim—and reinforced throughout the project—was the acknowledgment that no single program or set of core programs could meet needs in all contexts.

While foundational elements of quality ECD programs needed to be consistent, the most effective solutions came from prioritizing local factors that resulted in a contextualized library of highly engaging content, designed through iteration, and tested to adhere to high-quality standards of the brand that aimed to support children's early developmental outcomes across domains of numeracy, literacy and social-emotional learning.

In learning and interpretation workshops, the Ahlan Simsim team openly discussed key success metrics such as access, relevance, quality, and impact, and reflected on challenges and opportunities openly. Collective problem-solving and celebrations of success helped to keep morale high, even in the face of significant challenges and unexpected crises. These team norms were supported by our trust-based donor relationship that valued transparency of failure and resulting pivots or adaptation.

Ahlan Simsim's funding from the MacArthur Foundation also came with a substantial allocation to learning and research—encouraged by MacArthur at the proposal stage—as a deliberate priority, with 15% of the total budget invested in learning including rigorous impact evaluations. Later funding received from the LEGO Foundation increased the pot of funding for research alongside advocacy work to build on and leverage research findings.

The resulting studies from Ahlan Simsim have contributed to the global body of evidence of what works for whom and at what cost.

This investment in research is rare in the humanitarian sector. Implementers of programs are often forced to weigh tradeoffs, making decisions between investing in learning and research or in programming that reaches people in the immediate. Ahlan Simsim later received additional funding from the Van Leer Foundation to learn in real-time and analyze what it takes to scale successfully, which further cemented a commitment to learning, backed up by financial resources.

### DEFINITION

In Ahlan Simsim, **innovation** meant exploring new and different ideas, and with inspiration from outside traditional industry solutions, drawing on creative problem-solving, digital technology and introduction of novel concepts. It meant a combination of imagination, experimentation, and cross-pollination of ideas across teams and partners to bring out change for children and drive progress.

The combined focus on innovation, learning and adaptation propelled us towards new ways of reaching children and caregivers in crisis-affected settings—from mass media and school curricula to nursery standards and healthcare check-ups—and the aligned delivery approaches, including programs that reached families in their homes, over the phone or with mobile caravans. It enabled us to quickly pivot to unproven but vitally needed remote learning methods when disruptive crises like COVID-19 emerged. By investing in innovation, learning and adaptation we were also able to establish nimble solutions that were responsive to changing contexts and unforeseen opportunities such as the 2023 earthquake in northern Syria and Türkiye.

The IRC intentionally maintained a high caliber ‘team of innovators’ that allowed us to constantly evaluate, iterate and refine our work.

## Content for Impact: Innovation for contextualized, accessible content combined with the unifying Ahlan Simsim brand

DEFINITION

**Content** in this report refers to the combination of resources, such as training guides and curricula, and materials, including activities, worksheets, storybooks, videos, and information sheets, among others that advance outcomes for children.

The Ahlan Simsim logo and familiar characters from the TV show appear on worksheets for children used across programs and video clips were integrated into program curricula. The connective power of Ahlan Simsim as a beloved household name observably boosted enthusiasm, joy, and trust, linking families, caregivers, and front-line providers across the region.

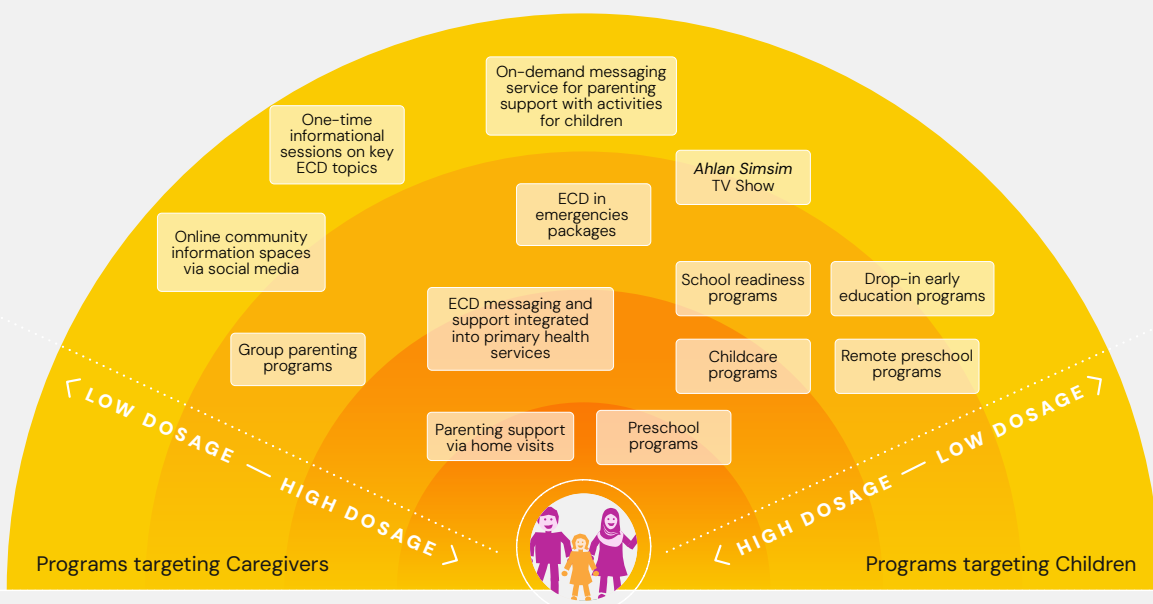
Content and delivery have been designed to support a whole-of-child approach and reach children and caregivers where they are to improve child development outcomes. Practically, this means Ahlan Simsim includes an array of programs. Some were designed for use in a broad range of contexts that can be used flexibly with children or caregivers wherever they congregate, such as in a gathering area in a refugee camp, a women’s center, a local community center, or a classroom. Others were co-designed as a specific and bespoke fit for a singular system, such as our work in partnership with the Ministry of Health in Jordan or with the Ministry of Education in Iraq.

Learning from what worked in one program or context also influenced the design of others. The school readiness program designed with the Ministry of Education in Iraq was influenced by a similar program run with the Ministry of Education in Jordan, and by other Ahlan Simsim preschool programs delivered by IRC teams.

## Ahlan Simsim – A Broad Spectrum of Programming

No one size fits all. Ahlan Simsim is made up of a variety of programs and services that meet the needs of children and caregivers across a range of contexts. This includes programs for caregivers and for children, tailored to the child’s development from birth to age 8 and based on playful practices.

They range from one-time information sessions and emergency support kits, to group parenting sessions and preschool programs, with educational media from the *Ahlan Simsim* TV show integrated throughout. Programs are embedded in education, health and social protection sector services, and are delivered with a range of modalities — in-person, remote and hybrid.





Mohammad, a Syrian refugee, with his 3-year-old daughter Jana who has Down's Syndrome outside their home in Azraq, Jordan.

## Learning and adapting for inclusive experience: Design for disability inclusion

Holistic design means considering the needs of both the individual and the collective. When putting children and families at the center of design, this means understanding what critical barriers to participation exist for children and families.

Disability intersects with other barriers impacting children's access and experience of education, and disability inclusion was an important design consideration. The project implemented a monitoring systems measuring disability inclusion. Midway through project implementation, the team assessed data on inclusive experiences for children, caregivers and service providers, and found we were not effectively promoting inclusion in program content and delivery.

As a result, we adjusted the Ahlan Simsim parenting program and FamilyCornerIRC digital platform materials to facilitate more inclusive practices and access, and encourage inclusive practices and attitudes in the community. Training for service providers was adapted for the inclusion of children with disabilities.

We also created spaces for providers to come together to share best practices and resources. In some cases, more intensive interventions were designed—including through mobile outreach "Smile Caravans" in Jordan that traveled to underserved or remote areas and provided disability detection and inclusion services among other programs.

Alongside adaptations for inclusion in content and direct services, in 2022, the *Ahlan Simsim* TV show welcomed a new character, 8-year-old Ameera, who loves science and uses crutches and a wheelchair to get around. This investment in the representation of a character with a disability reinforced the commitment to inclusion, with a strong positive reception from children and caregivers alike.

# Adaptation for Impact: COVID-19 and the evolution of Ahlan Simsim

Schools and nurseries across the globe closed with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and vulnerable populations were cut off from their usual support services. Caregivers didn't know how to care for their families' changing needs and ensure their children had access to early learning. Globally, learning poverty shot up from 57% to 70% in low- and middle-income countries between 2019 and 2022<sup>114</sup> and extensive data has been collected on the pandemic's profound effects on child and caregiver wellbeing.<sup>115,116</sup>

Ahlan Simsim was well-positioned to offer solutions to families and broader systems during a time when the

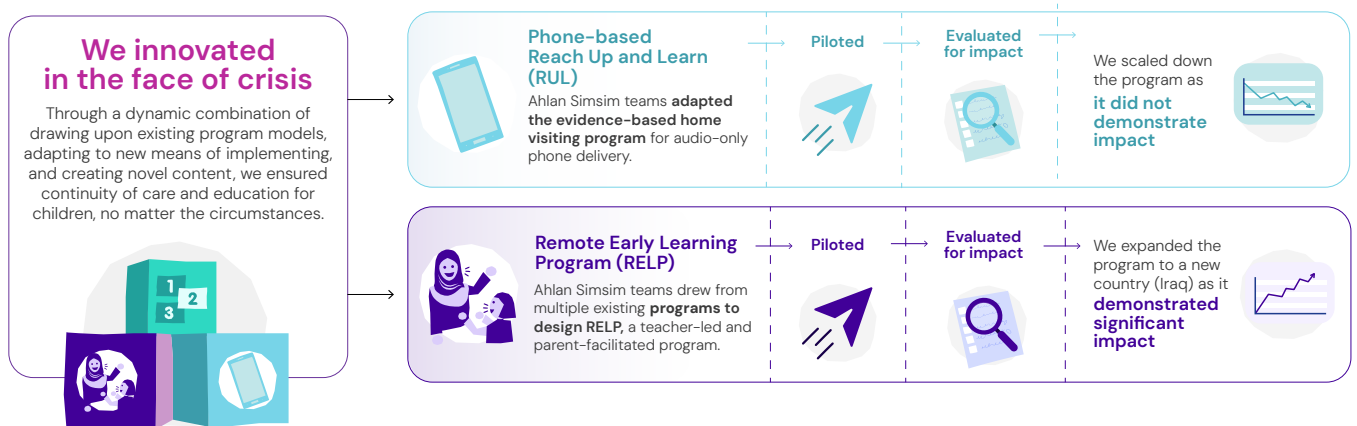
world was burdened with a global pandemic response. We focused our immediate responses on continuity of services and multimedia when in-person modalities were prohibited. This included leveraging digital and mobile technology to reach families with continued learning opportunities at home.

We also worked closely with local and national partners, experimenting with operating within existing government and civil society online systems where possible. Our central vision remained focused on continued impact, taking into consideration widespread constraints on access and quality.

## COVID-19 Pivot: Leading with Adaptation and Innovation

When COVID-19 struck, the Ahlan Simsim team asked: **How can we continue to support the youngest children and their families with critical early childhood services?**

What did this look like for one caregiver program and one early learning program, in the face of new circumstances?



### TAKEAWAY

Innovation, adaptation and learning offer opportunities to push the boundaries of what we think is possible, and to iterate and adapt. In the case of Ahlan Simsim, new program models like RELP forced us to think outside of the box for how to reach children during the pandemic. The impact of RELP shows great potential for ECD in crisis settings or where traditional in-person services are not available. This demonstrates the importance of testing new ideas in the face of changing contexts.



Bailsan, a 6-year-old Syrian refugee, completes an Ahlan Simsim worksheet in her home in Mafraq, Jordan



An ECD facilitator holds hands with her students while doing an Ahlan Simsim activity in Tripoli, Lebanon.

## Key Learning 2

# Reaching everyone who can benefit requires understanding the wider system and partnering within it

Achieving scale for Ahlan Simsim was more than simply expanding the reach of a given program—it required partnering within and prioritizing the specific needs of a wider network. We entered every partner conversation starting from contextual needs and existing priorities of the relevant stakeholder and assessed how Ahlan Simsim could add value in each case, with developed materials and content, training for service providers, technical expertise, or technology assets. Our staff did not encourage a pre-baked program or policy solution. Despite the resources we brought to the table, we also recognized we did not have the mandate or capacity to sustain solutions for families in the long-term.

In most of the areas where Ahlan Simsim operated in the Middle East, the clear pathway to scale lay in partnership

with government ministries that have the mandate and infrastructure to reach the most children in each country.

However, in countries facing major crises or active conflict, or in places that are challenged by access constraints, government is not always an option or the most appropriate partner. In these instances, success relied on an understanding of the larger systems surrounding children and families. And it meant exploring partnerships with humanitarian actors and local civil society, and leveraging alternative ways to reach children. We used technology strategically to meet families where they are in a way that works for them; both when access wasn't feasible through government or nongovernment services, to complement existing services and to preserve continuity of care to reach families at home.

## Impact on National Systems: Government Partnerships

### Co-design and Expansion: School Readiness Program in Iraq

In Iraq, the Ahlan Simsim team partnered with the Ministry of Education to address a stark shortage of pre-primary programs available at the national level. Over 90% of Iraqi children do not attend any kind of pre-primary education program; nearly all children in Iraq then enter primary school without the early learning experiences vital for success in the primary grades. A large body of evidence highlights the critical role of pre-primary education, particularly for children in disadvantaged settings.<sup>17</sup> School closures during the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this challenge.

Together with the ministry, we co-designed a School Readiness program that was integrated into the first two weeks of school for incoming first graders. The program was designed for the Iraqi context, drawing on Ahlan Simsim's content and the expertise of Ministry of Education technical experts. Alongside novel activities introduced to support children's holistic development, social-emotional learning and learning-through-play, the program supports teachers through training and a library of interactive and child-friendly resources that includes songs, videos, stories, activity guides, and more.

Starting with a pilot in the Ninewa governorate in 2021 with 120 schools, the program then expanded the following year to 1,800 schools and has now scaled up across all of Federal Iraq, running in over 7,700 schools at start of the 2023–24 school year. The Ministry of Education has made public commitments to scale up the program to all primary schools. The impact of this partnership will have powerful implications for years to come.

### Standardizing Quality: Public and Private Nurseries in Lebanon

In Lebanon, during an assessment with partners of the most critical gaps for young children, nurseries were identified as meeting a clear national need in response to consistent political and economic turmoil. They presented game-changing potential for early childhood outcomes, along with critical importance for women in the workforce. Despite clear need and potential for impact, many nursery staff lacked clear guidance or training on education, safety, and nutrition best practices.

Ahlan Simsim teams worked with the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) to address the gap in basic standards for private nurseries to impact the quality of care. Teams engaged stakeholders and policy experts

in a consultative process to design quality standards and assessment tools. They facilitated a development process that culminated in the ministry launching new care standards for all of Lebanon's national private nurseries (approximately 400).

Alongside this policy-focused work, the ministry also identified the need for standard guidance and activities serving as the minimum requirement for programming in nurseries. The "Under Three Years program" was co-designed by Ahlan Simsim and MoPH in response to this need.

As of late 2023, standards for Ministry of Social Affairs daycares had also been finalized to improve the quality of care in public nurseries, alongside subsequent training, and initial assessment of these daycares. Results from these assessments have facilitated decisions on where to focus investments aimed at improving access and quality of nurseries in Lebanon moving forward, including an action plan.



The strategic partnership with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) is a progressive step towards enhancing education, starting with the launch of the School Readiness Program and extending to the inclusion of early childhood development programs in upcoming ministry plans. We aim to sustain and expand this collaboration further.

#### Ibrahim Namis Al-Jubouri

Minister of Education in Iraq reflecting on the School Readiness Program his Ministry co-designed with Ahlan Simsim

#### DEFINITION

**Co-design** for Ahlan Simsim includes engagement with multiple stakeholders including clients (children and caregivers), facilitators, teachers, staff and partners to ensure content and programs are responsive to needs, promote uptake, and designed to achieve impact.

Co-design with partners such as local organizations or government refers to the structured process of planning, organizing, and outlining the components, goals, scope, resources and strategies required for the successful execution of a specific intervention. It means collaborating in equal partnership that recognizes the distinct contributions of each partner, and ensures alignment with partner objectives and the main problem facing the system.

## Demand-Driven Scale Powered by Technology Solutions

A critical component of the broader Ahlan Simsim plan included use of technology solutions to promote demand-driven scale. The concept centered on a democratized approach to ECD content for anyone in the MENA. This work required the teams to think differently about what constitutes a program, how we market to consumers in the MENA in a way that targets those in need, and how we leverage learning from digital programming into other elements of our work.

The throughline of the strategy has been FamilyCornerIRC, a cross-platform social media brand. FamilyCornerIRC offers an array of resources, community support, and expert guidance—meeting the user where they are on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook—as well as using everyday messaging applications like WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Telegram. The Automated Messaging Service with chatbot technology delivers age-specific activities, built around our larger library of Ahlan Simsim content, characters from the *Ahlan Simsim* TV show, and other trusted sources, straight to caregivers.

These tools have provided information to caregivers, especially during emergencies—when on-demand information and strategies to support families are a critical need, and as targeted ways to support children, such as encouraging inclusivity practices and attitudes. As circumstances change, and based on user demand and analytics, we have continued to iterate and adapt our content and product marketing.

Caregiver engagement with Ahlan Simsim digital and social media services demonstrates demand for ECD support



374,000

followers on Facebook



48,000

followers on Instagram



22,514

additional unique users using  
the Automated Messaging Service

A separate but complementary technology development is the Kadr app—available on desktop and mobile—and tailored specifically for facilitators of direct services for families. This application zeroes in on enhancing the capabilities of facilitators by providing them with offline access to an extensive array of Ahlan Simsim resources and content—including organized program modules for direct service delivery. It also serves to streamline ways to share materials with facilitators, partners and other actors who are interested in implementing and scaling ECD services.



2-year-old Mohammed, a refugee from Syria, engages in activities with Yosur, an IRC volunteer with the Reach Up and Learn home visiting program.





Three young girls listen to an IRC facilitator working with the Smile Caravan read them an Ahlan Simsim story.

## Aspiring to Equity at Scale

Over 90% of the more than two million people Ahlan Simsim supported in 2023 alone were reached by programs and services co-designed with, and delivered by, national ministries, alongside civil society and other duty bearers. Many of these programs and services are now embedded within national services and supported by government budget lines that are likely to continue for years to come.

While working with government systems to achieve widespread scale of interventions can increase the absolute level of support that marginalized groups receive, it does not automatically achieve equity at scale. With limited time, technical capacity, and financial resources, ensuring equitable, inclusive programming is a consistent design challenge, and one that should be at the forefront of decision-makers and leaders' minds when deciding on priority investments, purposefully examining what is missed and who is left out. We consistently asked ourselves, over the course of the project, are these services reaching those who are most in need, and therefore would benefit the most?

One way we tackled this is in the overarching approach to design and content of Ahlan Simsim that offers equity in the way that we "surround" families with different options for support within the systems they already engage. This includes the *Ahlan Simsim* TV show, technology assets, programs in community centers, and local authority-delivered services that provide ways to engage with all families. The combination of programs, and how and where they are delivered can bring us closer to equity at scale.

In Jordan, for example, our work with the Ministry of Education aims to reach every child who accesses government-run early education services. However, some

children in remote areas in the south of Jordan have limited access to government services. We partnered with local NGOs to deliver early childhood education and parenting programs. This helped address what we knew were pockets of service gaps, often indicating high levels of vulnerability and critical needs for populations that have little option for support elsewhere.

Another approach for expanding access was inspired by mobile health units that traveled to underserved areas to administer vaccines and deliver health information. Expanding on this model, Ahlan Simsim launched "Smile Caravans" in partnership with the national NGO Princess Taghrid Institute (PTI). By physically bringing ECD services, multimedia content, and activities to remote and hard-to-reach locations, we overcame the geographic and financial barriers that all too often prevent children and caregivers from accessing these crucial services.

Smile Caravans expanded in 2023 to reach children in all twelve governorates across the Kingdom—across communities in informal tented settlements, Bedouin areas, Syrian refugee camps, and other rural and urban areas where no other ECD service providers had reached before. This is an example of Ahlan Simsim's innovation that was borne out of a systems-based reflection on who was not being reached by services while designing for increased scale and access for the most vulnerable.

However, programming for equity is challenging. In Iraq, we continue to grapple with the question, searching for ways to fill gaps not dissimilar to those in the Jordanian context. In our work with the Ministry of Education, the co-designed School Readiness program is on track for full institutionalization within the Ministry, and to scale up to all children who attend public school in Iraq. But we also know that it's not going to reach all children who need support, and those who do not access schooling are among the most vulnerable. We are now exploring how to expand multi-sectoral support to increase access to services and how low-tech solutions present a viable solution to that challenge.

## Key Learning 3

Ayla, age 4, and her mother, during a check-up at a primary health clinic in Jordan.

# Reconsidering the categories and silos that define work in crisis-affected regions can remove barriers to drive innovation and scale

Traditionally, staff working in “humanitarian aid” and “development assistance” have often had very different approaches to delivering services, working with governments, and designing programs. For understandable reasons, governments and NGOs typically build out services based on specific sectors of practice such as nutrition, protection, health, and education. However, children and families don’t see their reality as divided this way, as needing vaccines or school or housing, now or five years from now—they need it all. And in a crisis context, any family lacking access to one of these things is almost certainly lacking access to more of them.

The wider international community has expressed a desire to increase the focus on people and families, but this has been hard to achieve. Actors face pressures generated by funding needs and the way financing is allocated, while a lack of clear political incentives for change makes it hard to find champions and allies. For many, the need to provide immediate help in crisis makes it hard to free up the intellectual space needed to reconceptualize the work.

As a team, we were committed to working with all sectors and actors that have relevant child-centered entry points. We designed for and with children and caregivers in spaces that spanned across sectors of health, education, and social protection. We integrated content into services families were already accessing, and we expanded access to services where there were gaps.

We did this during emergencies to respond to acute crises and into early recovery, and with a more traditional “development” approach addressing persistent challenges and working within formal systems for long-term sustaining change. Driven by outcomes, program design enabled a whole-child approach. This model for transcending sectors has relevance to other interdisciplinary fields, such as climate change or food systems.

## From Urgent Crisis to Long-term Needs: ECD across the Spectrum of Response

As a part of our belief that ECD must be a part of any emergency response and central to thinking about long-term needs and development potential, Ahlan Simsim developed child-centered ECD content and approaches across the spectrum of response, guided by innovation and a systems-informed approach.

### Syria and Türkiye Earthquake Response: The Power of Collaboration

In addition to the ongoing conflict in Syria, new crises emerged in the MENA during Ahlan Simsim’s operations that impacted children and families.

With each emergency in the MENA, content was deployed quickly and adapted to respond to the real needs of caregivers and children in each context. For example, during response to the earthquake that hit northern Syria and Türkiye, topics were added to support children dealing with acute fear, nightmares, and disordered eating. The resulting program materials drew from experience across varied contexts and a host of trauma-informed video content from the *Ahlan Simsim* TV program.

An ECD home kit was also developed that contains an activity-based manual to guide caregivers on how to implement activities with their children, along with worksheets, and play-based age-appropriate booklets. Digital content that can be deployed quickly and with relatively small cost also challenges the widely held belief that ECD and learning stand in contrast with urgent investment and infrastructure needs during the first-tier response to emergencies.

Our work in northwest Syria demonstrates how the combined focus on meeting emergency needs alongside partnership and scale can bring essential services to more families. Due to the conflict, basic services in northwest Syria are principally provided through the UN's "humanitarian cluster" system. To deliver sustainable programs to more children, the Ahlan Simsim team facilitated creation of an active network in northwest Syria of 19 civil society organizations working towards the goal of improving services for children and caregivers.

Network actors were quickly able to build their capacity and learn from one another, leveraging their collective knowledge and skills to advocate for including ECD and early learning. This was done for both immediate aid in the earthquake response and investment to support long-term sustained programs. As a result of advocacy from the Network, ECD was embedded in OCHA's protection and education cluster priorities for the first time in 2022.

## Long-term Thinking from the Start: ECD Integration into Primary Healthcare

In Jordan, 86% of all children receive early childhood vaccinations via primary healthcare centers overseen by the Ministry of Health (MoH), making clinics an obvious entry point for equipping caregivers with tools for supporting their children's development. During design conversations, a key need surfaced that centered on health care providers working with young children and mothers.

From prenatal development through age 5, midwives in Jordan are the primary health service providers for a mother and her children during "well-child check-ups". And while midwives were well-versed in tips for mothers on hygiene, vaccination, breastfeeding, and children's diets, they lacked confidence about other important child development. If a mother posed a question on developmental milestones, cognitive development, behavior management or broader nutrition needs, midwives reported feeling ill-equipped to respond.

As a result, Ahlan Simsim teams co-designed an intervention with the Ministry that incorporates ECD knowledge and tips into the training of midwives, nurses, and other healthcare providers at Ministry-governed clinics. Based on midwife demand, we complemented this training with resources that help providers deliver key messages during routine visits for children.

As of late 2023, the ECD-Health Integration program has trained 227 midwives, reaching over 815,000 children. The program now has widespread support from the MoH. With USAID funding, the Ministry plans to expand to train more midwives, aiming to scale up the program to support close 36% of children up to age five in the Kingdom.

Implementation research on the program conducted in 2023 and further assessment and discussion with the MoH indicate that while stakeholders within the Ministry see the value of integrating ECD into their work, there are areas that require exploration and refinement—including the challenge of limited time available during child check-ups and a tradition of caregivers going to family for parenting advice, rather than healthcare providers. These points of learning are being considered in further iterations of the program, which now has widespread support from the Ministry.



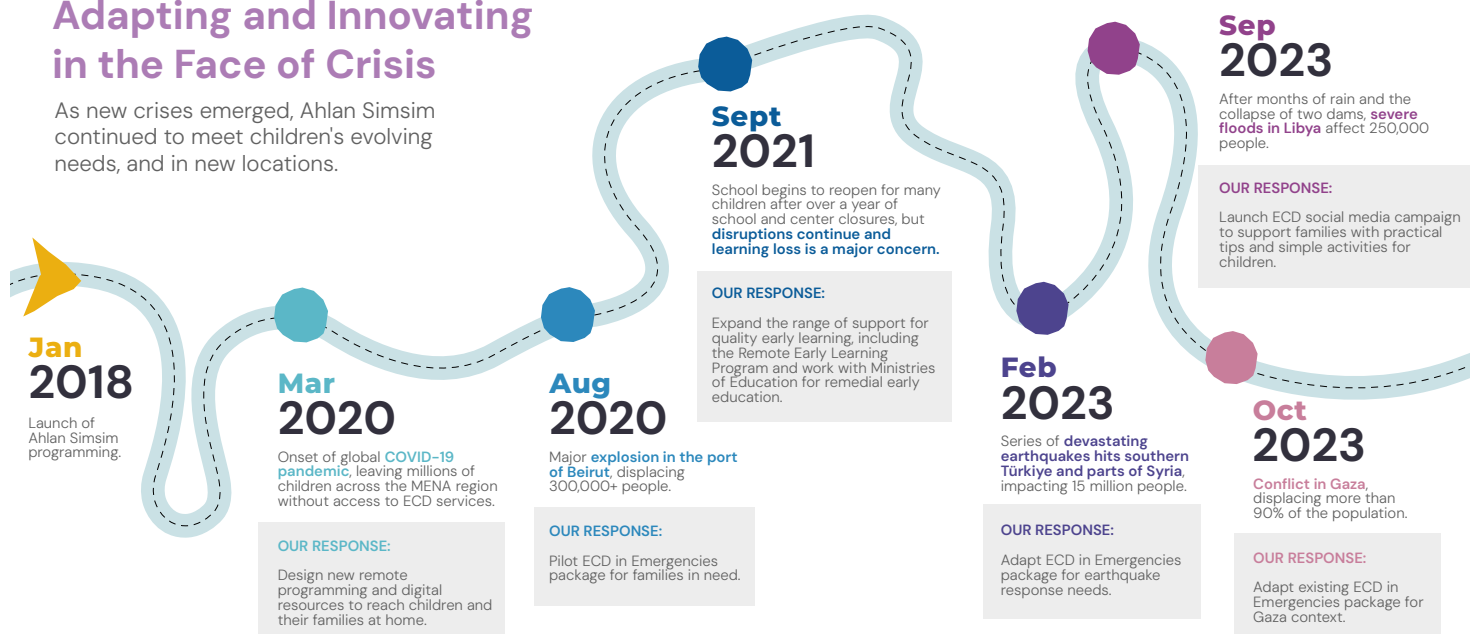
The [Ahlan Simsim ECD-Health Integration] program filled a vacuum. It covers areas such as mental health and social-emotional learning for children and parents, and enhanced midwives' skills when working with parents. It's a program that addresses childcare and counseling both inside and outside the home.

**Dr. Areej Hijawi**

Director of the Child Health Unit in Jordan's Ministry of Health

## Adapting and Innovating in the Face of Crisis

As new crises emerged, Ahlan Simsim continued to meet children's evolving needs, and in new locations.



## People-Centered, Outcomes Driven: Interdisciplinary Mindsets

ECD is people-centered and outcomes-driven; it demands meaningful action for children irrespective of the sector. Many associate only the education sector with ECD, but the work we did also spanned across sectors of health and social protection.

As the programs described in previous pages illustrate, Ahlan Simsim solutions were relevant for health workers and daycare providers, as much as for actors focused on early learning, wellbeing, protection, or nutrition. The work of the ECD Network of NGOs in northwest Syria also transcended sectoral boundaries, gaining traction for ECD support within the humanitarian clusters not only from education, but also from the protection sector.

### Care for the Caregiver: Protection and Wellbeing-focused Content

The importance of a multidisciplinary approach is especially pronounced in work focused on caregivers. Caregivers are the central stakeholders in their child's education, health, nutrition, and safety, and the Ahlan Simsim team deliberately created content on caregiver-facing topics such as stress relief, resilience and protection.

For example, Ahlan Simsim's parenting programming includes a dedicated module on wellbeing. This module equips caregivers with information and practical tips on the impact of toxic stress, self-care practices, and strategies for supporting their children's emotional wellbeing as well as their own, and connects them with valuable community resources for referrals.

To introduce topics like safety and protection, Ahlan Simsim developed modules on child body privacy, safe environment, sexual development, and ways for children to protect themselves. Additionally, safety and protection content was included in modules that supported families to be prepared in the event an emergency occurs, and foster resilience after it happens, with a focus on self-awareness, emotion regulation, and finding relevant support. These holistic people-centered solutions to support caregivers and children were only possible with a cross-sectoral approach.

## Cost and Investment

### What does it cost to deliver quality ECD programs?

### What does investment in systems for scale and sustainability look like?

The Ahlan Simsim experience has demonstrated that no one size fits all, and as a result, the approaches undertaken include a wide range of program models delivered in a variety of ways to reach families. Analysis of cost per child and what factors drove that cost, and of investment of resources reflects this gamut of agile programs that were underpinned by innovation and responsive to shifts in context and the needs of people.<sup>118</sup>

To understand cost and resource investment for Ahlan Simsim programs, we analyzed the costs to IRC across a range of programs delivered by IRC and local NGO partners, and we reviewed IRC's financial investment in working within formal government systems to scale interventions. This analysis reinforced that ECD can be delivered in cost-efficient ways. And, while cost is an important factor in decision-making, particularly in a world with limited resources, it was vital to balance cost with which program approaches are best suited to meet needs of the most marginalized children. Cheaper is not always better.

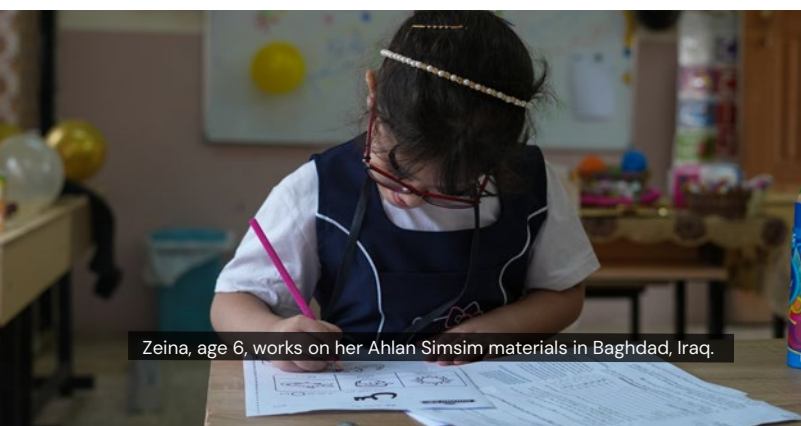
### Cost of implementing ECD programs in humanitarian settings

Ahlan Simsim reached children with a wide variety of interventions. Costs per child were similarly varied and reflected design decisions focused on outcomes, access, and accessibility, as well as a range of dosage for programs, such as the number and frequency of program contact hours.

For example, Ahlan Simsim's group-based parenting program includes a minimum total of 6 hours of programming and cost on average \$53/child<sup>119</sup>. In contrast, the in-person Reach Up and Learn (RUL) home visiting program required health workers to travel to visit families in their homes over the course of several months and cost an average of \$243/child<sup>120</sup>. Both examples at either end of the spectrum offer unique support to children and families.

Across programs, people are central to success and accordingly the cost of personnel and training to build their capacity to deliver programs was consistently the most significant driver of cost, followed by program materials. Other factors that impacted cost include the mode of delivery—in-person or remote.

In the case of the RUL home visiting program described above, the need to adapt the program for remote delivery



Zeina, age 6, works on her Ahlan Simsim materials in Baghdad, Iraq.

over the phone during COVID resulted in a 52% reduction in cost per child as compared with the average cost of the in-person version<sup>121</sup>. However, in this instance, an impact evaluation indicated that this remote adaptation of the program did not produce impact, causing teams to question design decisions related to modality and dosage. As a result, we decided to downscale this variation of the program.

While it can be tempting to give cost higher weight in decision-making when designing interventions, we learned that it is critical—particularly for the most vulnerable children—to also consider higher dosage and more bespoke program options. We need to also factor in access considerations that may be more appropriate for children and families and better calibrated to impact, even at a higher cost. For example, it is worth considering the higher investment to implement in-person RUL, which is known to be an impactful ECD program, in comparison to our lower-cost remote adapted version that did not produce impact.<sup>122</sup>

Alternatively, the Ahlan Simsim Remote Early Learning Program (RELP) detailed in Key Learning 1, showed improved learning outcomes for children on par with what we see globally for a year of in-person preschool, and cost \$260/child<sup>123</sup>. IRC’s scale modeling analysis suggests that costs for humanitarian actors to implement RELP could be reduced to \$140/child when expanded to reach 2,000 children or higher. The gains in learning outcomes over such a short period, 11-weeks, indicates cost-effectiveness for RELP. The program offers a solution with powerful potential to support children in hard-to-reach places where in-person formal schools are not available or accessible.

### Investment in systems for scale and sustainability

We also analyzed IRC’s investment in the Ahlan Simsim portfolio of partnerships with local actors to scale ECD solutions within national systems. While the path to scaled-up interventions looked different in each case—and few progressed linearly—investment in the early stages in building relationships and trust with ‘scaling partners’, understanding the context and systems surrounding children and caregivers, and then co-designing solutions that met local needs was

critical. More than half of our scaling portfolio costs were concentrated in this early stage.

During this initial investment phase, we did not see “results” in terms of children reached, but in retrospective analysis, the interventions that scaled successfully only did so as a result of sufficient groundwork during this early stage. Our analysis indicated that this initial investment needs at least six months depending on internal team capacities as well as staff capacity from the scaling partner (often national ministries). In some cases, it took much longer—even more than two years.

We also learned that the IRC’s investment in time and implementation costs increased during the period when interventions being scaled moved from pilot into expansion. While dedicated learning and reflection represented a small portion of costs, the value was clear; where learning with partners occurred, it propelled interventions forward to scale up. The IRC and scaling partner teams adjusted and adapted content and delivery based on assessment from pilot programs. And in many cases, teams used evidence from pilots and subsequent expansion to build up confidence in an intervention’s value with the leaders and policymakers whose support was vital for scale up and institutionalization.

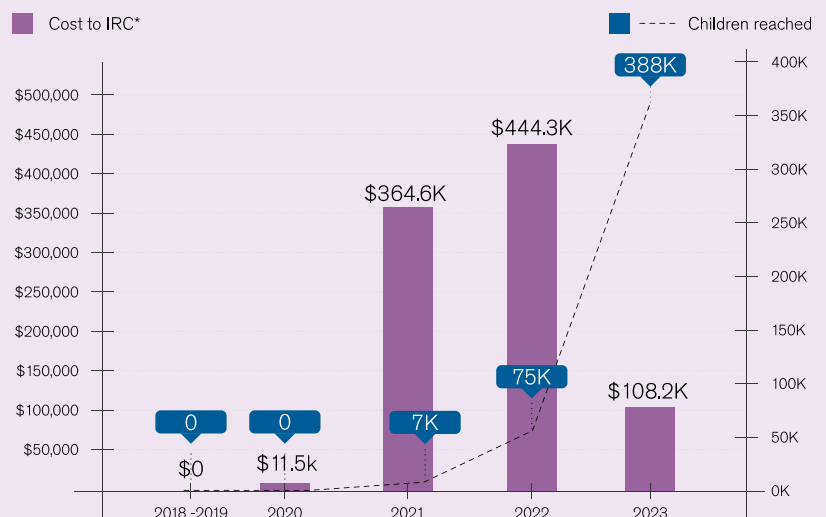
Importantly, for scaling partnerships that entered the scale-up phase and with ownership of an intervention’s success resting fully with the scaling partner, our analysis showed a decrease in the financial investment from the IRC during the phase when interventions began to scale up. In short, this meant that over time IRC costs decreased and the children number of reached increased. Our work in Iraq with the Ministry of Education is one example that illustrates this trend as shown in the image below. As of end of 2023, with over 470,000 children reached with the School Readiness program in Iraq, this represents an investment by IRC of less than \$2/child.

Finally, by co-designing interventions with sustainability in mind and embedding those interventions into existing budget lines of a ministry, our approach has aimed for limited year-on-year added cost to ministries in the long run, and with no ongoing monetary investment by the IRC. Where Ahlan Simsim invested in national systems successfully the investment paid off and will do so for years to come as children continue to benefit.

## Scaling Cost & Reach

### Spotlight on work with Iraq Ministry of Education

\*The costs included in this graph are only those incurred by the IRC as part of this partnership for scale. These figures do not include costs incurred by the Ministry of Education to deliver this intervention.





Mohammad, a Syrian refugee, with his 3-year-old daughter Jana in their home in Azraq, Jordan.

# Recommendations

## I For Funders, Policymakers, and Implementers

The Ahlan Simsim experience generated core learnings – on the importance of innovation, learning and adaptation; a systems-based approach to partnership and scale; and the need to break past siloes, both of sectors and humanitarian and development assistance. These learnings were further underpinned by three important enablers: flexible and adaptable financing, placing outcomes for children above all else in the initial design onwards, and a team culture allowing and encouraging people to learn and fail. This combination leads us to make the following recommendations for funders and policymakers, as well as for implementers—with relevance for both international and national actors.

### 1. Fund Nimble Solutions

Enable investment strategies that encourage prototyping, micro-pilots and pivots

Structure funding investments around outcomes-driven approaches to be responsive to changing contexts and unforeseen opportunities. This means encouraging adaptive management practices and shoring up risk appetite for testing—with failure seen as a route to learning and iterating—to contribute to long term change. Develop infrastructure and accountability to guide funding that puts the outcomes and the needs of people at the center rather than assumed solutions.

## 2. Link Funding, Research, and Data

Fund evidence generation to learn what works, for whom and at what cost, linked to data-based needs

Allocate funding for evidence generation specifically in humanitarian settings, increasing commitment to learning, research, and cost analysis that leads to improved practice and policy. Invest in collecting and generating population data as well as monitoring and learning feedback across the lifecycle, disaggregated by gender, age, and ability.

## 3. Resource Learning and Adaptation

Change is not organic; it needs deliberate commitment

Dedicated time allocated to learning and adaptation needs to be a committed resource decision in ways that balance other demands on staff. Deploy simple processes to facilitate learning and build key performance indicators and associated dashboards that allow for quick assessment and analysis.

## 4. Prioritize People and Culture

Build the team for the ambitions you have

Recruit people from across a variety of fields, including local expertise, for a team that represents a diversity of perspectives and approaches. Build and cultivate a team culture that promotes and facilitates creative experimentation to deliver effective solutions. Lead teams committed to the outcomes; everything else remains flexible. Explicitly encourage collective problem-solving and iteration, celebrate successes and reflect on challenges and opportunities openly.

## 5. Invest in Equitable Outcomes at Scale

Think about the system as a whole and what full-scale means for the desired outcomes

Consider which actors in the system can reach a majority of your target population. Also consider who is left out and assess routes to reach the highest number *and* the most marginalized. Where communities can be reached by government ministries, centralize solutions within formal systems at the onset of program delivery. Where communities are not reached by formal systems, prioritize partnership with civil society and other actors to access the most marginalized. These two approaches must consistently be weighed and executed in concert with one another to achieve equity at scale.

## 6. Co-Design for Sustainability

Uplift local partners and their priorities

Prioritize multi-year, predictable funding to maximize scale and impact, providing time to understand local and national systems and to build relationships with potential partners. Partner with actors who hold the ownership over long-term outcomes. Align solutions with existing local or national priorities and policies that support related outcomes. Work with technical counterparts to complement and build on existing service delivery. Partner to co-design solutions that support, strengthen, or transform systems in ways that bolster and enhance established lines of service and embed within existing budget lines where feasible.

## 7. Act Urgently, but Build for Long-Term Impact

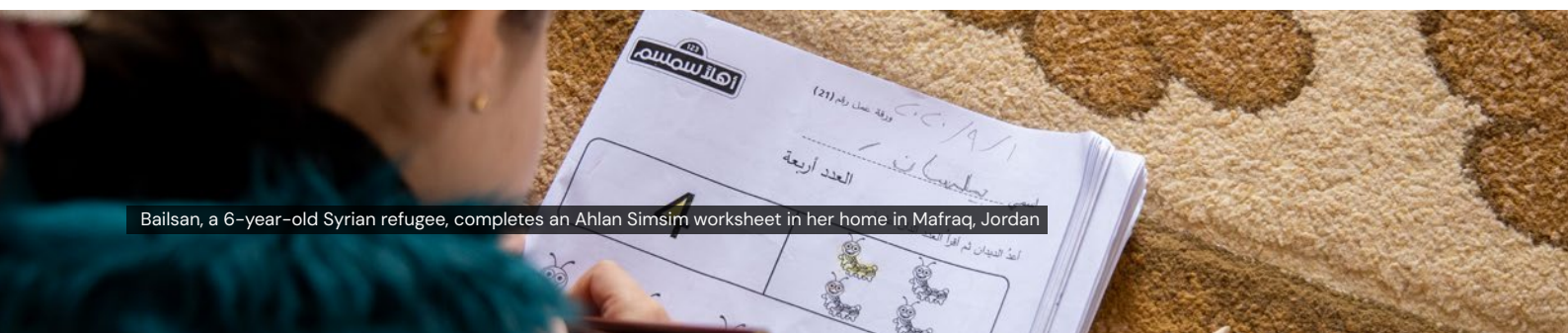
Break past false barriers between humanitarian and development assistance

Humanitarians must respond to urgent crises, while also considering longer-term needs of the populations served. Development actors must categorize crisis affected populations as last mile communities within their remit. This can be achieved by mandating regional- and country-based focal points to be accountable for bridging emergency operations with government policy, planning, and financing. All related stakeholders should be incentivized to participate together in formal and non-formal national coordination structures to foster shared decision making.

## 8. Dedicate Focus to Children and Caregivers

Establish effective strategies to meaningfully engage affected communities

Establish or empower specific forums for assessing the comprehensive needs of children and caregivers—who are predominantly women—where related challenges and solutions can be discussed. This can be achieved by mandating interdisciplinary decision making across education, health, nutrition and protection policy and programming. Ensure that funds allocated will maximize the needs and voices of the most marginalized.



Bailan, a 6-year-old Syrian refugee, completes an Ahlan Simsim worksheet in her home in Mafraq, Jordan

# Conclusion

The world's crises are not likely to end anytime soon. In fact, with deteriorating metrics on climate and poverty, we should expect that conflict and crisis continue—and worsen. We know from experience that children will be disproportionately impacted by this harsh reality. And yet, children are also our bright spot; they offer promise for a better world – the way we transform tomorrow.

Ahlan Simsim teaches us that real change in humanitarian contexts is possible. The path to change needs a enabling foundation, and calls for teams who prioritize innovation, partnership for scale driven by a people-first mentality, and a focus on outcomes that transcends sectors. Lessons from Ahlan Simsim show that progress can be made on virtually any issue in crisis contexts with the right mandate and tools to solve seemingly intractable problems.

From the macro-level policy changes that shift the way systems support the needs of people, to impact data that push us to rethink how we imagine the potential of remote learning, to every one of the more than three million people reached, we saw that the impacts of Ahlan Simsim are real and they are lasting.



Everything can be compensated in life, except for the love you get from your family and children.

**Ahmad**

Father to a 4-year-old son, internally displaced in Syria



Musa sits with his son at a learning center run by Ahlan Simsim partner Syrian Relief and Development in an IDP camp in Idlib in northern Syria.

Photo: Syrian Relief and Development



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