



Disburse and Invest for Lasting Impact:

How the World Bank's IDA21 can strengthen education and early childhood development for communities impacted by fragility, conflict, and violence

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INTRODUCTION

Extreme poverty and climate impacts are increasingly concentrated in low-income countries, particularly those experiencing conflict. According to the World Bank's projections, up to **two-thirds** of those living in extreme poverty globally will live in fragile, conflict, and violence (FCV) affected countries by 2030, the target year for the fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The growing rate of poverty in FCV countries is in part a result of conflict and crises becoming **protracted** and harder to permanently resolve. Twelve out of 20 countries on the International Rescue Committee (IRC) **Watchlist** are either in or at moderate to high risk of debt distress.

It is no accident that countries with the greatest climate vulnerability are also increasingly **overlapping** with FCV settings. The IRC's 16 Watchlist countries most affected by conflict are in the top 25% of climate vulnerability and receive 60% of humanitarian aid, exacerbating both growing levels of poverty and the longevity of underlying challenges.

Yet to date, traditional approaches to short-term humanitarian aid and long-term development assistance are often unable to come together to address the adversities that crisis-affected populations face. Humanitarian response is not structured to drive the type of progress required across the trajectory of a life span, with implications for whether the current generation of children grow up to become healthy, thriving, and productive adults.

Given 80% of extreme poverty is **concentrated** in the 13 countries defined by the United Nations as least developed countries, there is an opportunity for IDA resourcing to fill the longer-term gaps that are not tackled under the remit of humanitarian response. This opportunity is complementary to accomplishing the Bank's new **mission** "to eliminate extreme poverty on a livable planet" and will depend on a replenished and reformed IDA that can finance and deliver results in FCV settings.

Therefore this brief will detail why education and early childhood development (ECD) are exemplary areas for strengthened IDA21 investment in FCV settings and how the World Bank can set out to achieve a lasting impact.

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12 of 20

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Cover image: Zenebech Yesuf, a Grade II teacher interacts with learners during a mathematics lesson at Derek Woira Primary School, Dessie, Kombolcha, Ethiopia. The school was supported with teaching and learning materials as part of the PlayMatters Ethiopia Emergency Response Mechanism. Photo credit: Derrick Taremwa for the IRC

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EDUCATION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Crisis and conflict are robbing **43 million** displaced children of the **essential building blocks** that provide the safety, security, and stimulation they need to thrive. Rising rates of conflict and climate disasters are making school closures and interruptions the **norm**. Financial hardship at the household level, in concert with the effects of displacement and trauma, ignites heavy emotional and psychosocial burdens on caregivers and families, jeopardizing sustainable development progress.

The need for reshaping investment in FCV contexts is acutely demonstrated by the neglect of education and child development services in humanitarian settings, which receive between **2-3%** of humanitarian aid. This gap is acknowledged by the Bank which allocated an additional **\$1.2B** to benefit education in FCV settings in its FY24-25 budget, with expectations that the share of FCV resources will continue to grow.

According to Education Cannot Wait, these struggles **translate** to 78 million children worldwide being out of school. In addition, 120 million children who are in school are not meeting minimum learning proficiencies, resulting in 63% of 10-year-olds being unable to read and understand a simple written text, termed by the World Bank as **“learning poverty”**



43M

children live in forced displacement

2-3%

of humanitarian aid is allocated to education and early childhood development

63%

of 10-year-olds are unable to read and understand simple written text

Every \$1 invested in international education delivers as much as \$15 in economic returns.

Yet we know that supportive policies, resources, and services centered on education and ECD can significantly reduce or even reverse the harmful **effects** of adversity, positively influencing lifelong economic and social outcomes. Every \$1 invested in education delivers as much as \$15 in **economic returns**. The Bank has long invested in education and ECD as a strategy to **boost** human capital, translating to improved stability and security. Research demonstrates that education and ECD are particularly **essential** in FCV contexts, where returns for children's learning and development are outsized for the remainder of their lives. Yet there are limited evidence-driven investments, with severe implications for shaping the path forward.

Image: Valeri participates in JuJú a la Calle, a play fair organized as part of the iJUJUÉGALO! (Play Movement) project. Photo credit: Julian Ruiz for IRC

THE NECESSARY ROLE OF THE WORLD BANK

As **extreme poverty** soars, multilateral development banks must recognize that longer-term assistance for crisis-affected populations can be the first step in reform. The World Bank has the potential to be a leader in improving education and ECD outcomes in FCV settings to help achieve these goals, as well as fulfill the appetite for innovation, community acceptance, and the risk tolerance required for change at scale.

As such, the Bank must serve as a frontrunner to better navigate, adapt to, and **deliver services** to children and caregivers in crisis contexts, particularly those most affected by **climate change**. Education and ECD offer exemplary areas of investment to ensure services to FCV populations are inclusive and maintained, enabling feasible and effective disbursement of IDA resources to eliminate extreme poverty on a livable planet.

The Bank can help reduce the financing gap by providing development funding for crisis contexts. It can help ensure that essential education services are continued that may have otherwise been suspended, particularly through disaster risk financing. And of equal importance, it can inform the wider operational ecosystem by enabling evidence generation, filling rigorous, imperial, and cost research gaps.

How can the Bank play a role?

The Bank has already **committed** to greater efforts toward social cohesion to ensure refugees and migrants are embedded in national education systems. These commitments remain key to progress. Alongside this approach, strengthening national education systems should be accompanied by investments in childcare as a livelihood and empowerment-generating strategy for improving poverty reduction in FCV settings. This is noted as a priority in the Bank's developing **Gender strategy** and could benefit from greater alignment with related education and early childhood FCV investments.



Image: At the Itambabiniga Primary School in the Kyaka II Refugee Settlement in Uganda, Izidoro Akantambira is teaching his students math. Photo credit: Derrick Taremwa for the IRC



Image: At the Itambabiniga Primary School in the Kyaka II Refugee Settlement in Uganda, children worked together to create an entire village using LEGO bricks, including a sign welcoming refugees. Photo credit: Derrick Taremwa for the IRC

In addition to systems strengthening, progress will also require new ways of working. The share of World Bank commitments disbursed in the countries **defined** by the Bank as conflict and fragile affected is **lower** than more stable IDA countries. The “disbursement gaps” reveal the delivery challenges the Bank faces, including the limits of its government-first approach.

Crisis after crisis has demonstrated that an exclusive reliance on government partners can cause learning to be suspended. For example, as noted by a World Bank **evidence review**, in countries such as Chad, Pakistan, and Sudan — education for displaced populations was heavily supported by international organizations, who both funded and administered much of the education system.

The evidence review states: “respondents in Chad were so reliant on international organizations that they hesitated to believe that the government could be relied on to follow through on their commitments to financing, training, and general support at the local level. Similarly, in Sudan, respondents doubted the Ministry of Education (MoE) could create permanent positions and fund the number of camp teachers that would need to be absorbed into the MoE’s payroll”.

Trialing new ways of partnering in conflict-affected countries will not only help reach those most at risk of being left behind but also help the Bank implement partnership diversity commitments articulated in its Evolution Roadmap. As supported by Bank findings, these settings **require** an adapted approach that is informed by the expertise and experience that humanitarians and other non-government actors can offer.

This is also true for coping with climate and disaster shocks, which the Bank states **necessitates** focusing on partnerships with non-government actors to enhance capacity building, and supplement or substitute for government systems.

How the International Rescue Committee aspires to advance ‘people-first partnerships’ to ensure inclusivity of marginalized communities.

Ahlan Simsim

In 2018 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 ECD for families impacted by conflict, crisis, and displacement.

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. 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.

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. 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.

Our people-first strategy opened opportunities to codesign problem statements with our local partners and the solutions that followed. Often this meant partnering with government ministries who were best placed to reach the majority of children. In countries facing major crises or active conflict, or in places that are challenged by access constraints, the government is not always an option or the most appropriate partner. Where gaps in the existing systems emerged, we looked for alternative methods to reach the most marginalized including direct service delivery by IRC and other NGOs. This combined approach is critical in the pursuit of ‘equity at scale.’



Image: Syrian refugee siblings in Lebanon engage in activities as part of Ahlan Simsim’s remote preschool program. Photo credit: Ahmad Al Jarery for the IRC

In Lebanon, 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. However, 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.

Despite the potential for impact, many nursery staff lacked clear guidance or training on education, safety, and nutrition best practices. As a result, Ahlan Simsim teams worked with the Ministry of Public Health to design quality standards and assessment tools. This culminated in the ministry launching new minimum requirement care standards for all of Lebanon's approximately 400 national private nurseries. Ahlan Simsim complemented its work with the Ministry of Public Health by also supporting standards for Ministry of Social Affairs daycares to improve the quality of care in public nurseries, alongside subsequent training and assessment.

In Iraq, the population remains at a crossroads in which immediate humanitarian and development needs coexist. While recent stability has presented a unique opportunity for displaced Iraqis, returnees, and refugees to gain greater access to public services and social protection systems, years of conflict have weakened the capacity and resilience of national



institutions, rendering the country vulnerable to further shocks. The Ahlan Simsim team partnered with the Ministry of Education to address a stark shortage of pre-primary programs—more than 90% of Iraqi children do not attend any kind of pre-primary education. A school readiness program designed with the Ministry was integrated into the first two weeks of school for incoming first-graders to solve for this gap.

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 the start of the 2023-24 school year. Following the program's success, the Ministry of Education has made public commitments to scale up the program to all primary schools in the country, with lasting benefits for both impact and scale.

In Jordan, children in remote areas in the south have limited access to government services. In pursuit of equity at scale, the IRC 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.

One example of expanding access was inspired by mobile health units that traveled to underserved areas to administer vaccines and deliver health information. Ahlan Simsim launched “Smile Caravans” in partnership with the national NGO Princess Taghrid Institute. 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.

Image: Shema, age 7, participates in play activities as part of the Ahlan Simsim initiative in an IRC women's protection center in Mosul, Iraq. Photo credit: The IRC

Addressing the impact of climate change through the Climate Resilient Education Systems Trial.

The IRC is joining the dots between the effects of climate change and education provision in crisis-affected countries. With funding from FCDO and in collaboration with Africa Risk Capacity Limited, the IRC is piloting a £3 million, 30-month Climate Resilient Education Systems Trial (CREST) which will draw on best practices in the humanitarian sector to reduce the impact of climate-related crises on schools, children, and communities.

Through combining cash assistance, education, and protection objectives, CREST will connect early-action approaches with parametric climate insurance to increase the volume and speed of funding available for communities affected by climate-related school closures. It will ensure continuity of learning, safe return to school where possible, and prevent adverse coping mechanisms impacting children's development and well-being.

Building on the innovative financing modalities this project offers, there is scope for complementary insurance from MDBs. By expanding its partnerships, the Bank could advance new financial instruments to deliver education services to those hardest-to-reach populations that country governments cannot or do not reach. As one of the main funders of new education infrastructure in low-and-middle-income countries, World Bank has an opportunity to advance complementary innovative finance modalities and shore up a more coordinated approach to disaster risk financing.



Image: In 2022, a school in Southern Pakistan is surrounded by flood water from all sides with zero accessibility - severely affecting the education of students in the village. Photo credit: Saima Javaid for IRC

Ensuring ambitious levels of IDA21 financing reach populations impacted by Fragility, Conflict, and Violence

Education, ECD, and the care economy are key pathways for achieving long-term outcomes in FCV settings. Realizing the potential for these poverty-reducing tools will depend on the Bank prioritizing:

A robustly funded IDA, **tripling** its size by 2030; in part to provide long-term financing for the inclusion of refugee populations in least-developed countries' national education and care systems.

- Respond to IDA20 policy commitments by investing IDA resources through the Window for Host Communities and Refugees as well as the Global Concessional Financing Facility to strengthen the quality of financing allocated to children and caregivers.
- Maximize the Inclusion Support Programme for Refugee Education Fund, Early Learning Partnership Fund, and Rapid Social Response Fund to leverage other World Bank public financing mechanisms to reach FCV populations at scale.
- Increase the financing toward the Bank's education commitments to foundational learning, including ECD. This can be expressed in part by working with the new International Finance Facility for Education.

Reliance on **“people-first partnerships”** to improve the reach and delivery of World Bank projects; impacting the circumstances of FCV-affected populations in the immediate term, and benefiting national governments in the longer term, in alignment with Evolution Roadmap.

- Draw on the experience of Ahlan Simsim's flexible and innovative program delivery, working with both government and non-government actors in hard-to-reach communities to support investment in ECD and aspire for “equity at scale” in FCV settings.
- Establish a new model for school parametric insurance for those affected by climate change in FCV settings alongside IRC, embedding education as criteria for existing disaster risk financing mechanisms, such as its Climate and Disaster Risk Screening tool.
- Global thematic and practice areas should strengthen the knowledge base and publish evidence on national policies, institutions, and partners that provide education, child development, and care services to FCV populations, establishing rigorous approaches for continuity of services
- Strengthening the knowledge base must include IRC's lessons to inform the diversification of grant finance to the international community beyond the reach, capacity, and/or control of the government, working hand in hand with affected populations and marginalized communities to identify end outcomes and aligned solution sets.

ANNEX: RELEVANT WORLD BANK IDA20 INDICATORS

HUMAN CAPITAL INDICATOR

Investing in children's early years	To promote child development, restore and expand access to quality early years services, including maternal and nutrition services, in at least 30 IDA countries, of which 15 countries are among those IDA countries with the lowest HCI
Supporting core social service delivery systems	To address gaps exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, in at least 40 IDA countries, of which 10 are FCS, support access to core, quality, inclusive social services focused on: (i) social protection systems with a particular focus on vulnerable and underserved informal workers, and/or (ii) students' return to school and accelerated recovery of learning losses, with a special focus on addressing constraints faced by girls, and/or (iii) children's immunizations.
Addressing learning poverty	To fill critical learning gaps and ensure improvements in learning outcomes, support at least 20 IDA countries, of which 10 are among those IDA countries with the lowest HCI, to reduce learning poverty by (i) measuring learning, with sex disaggregation and (ii) implementing core elements of the literacy policy package (e.g. effective literacy instruction, structured lesson plans, adequate reading materials for all children).

GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT INDICATOR

Expanding childcare	Support at least 15 IDA countries to expand access to quality, affordable childcare, esp. for low-income parents.
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FCV INDICATORS

Operationalizing the FCV Strategy through better tailored country engagement	1. Reinforce implementation of the WBG FCV Strategy, by ensuring that all country engagement products in IDA FCS demonstrate how the WBG program, in collaboration with relevant partners, help address FCV drivers and sources of resilience based on FCV diagnostics and FCV sensitive portfolio analysis undertaken in Risk and Resilience Assessments (RRAs) or other FCV assessments. An FCV lens will continue to be integrated into relevant joint World Bank-IFC Country Private Sector Diagnostics in IDA FCS. Country engagement products include Country Partnership Frameworks (CPFs), Country Engagement Notes (CENs) and Performance and Learning Reviews (PLRs).
Leveraging outcomes for both refugee and host communities	2. Work with government counterparts and partners to ensure that by the end of IDA20, at least 60% of countries eligible for the Window for Host Communities and Refugees (WHR) will have implemented policy reforms related to the WHR purposes identified through the Refugee Policy Review Framework.
Strengthening core governance institutions	3. Support 40% of IDA countries in FCS (with active portfolios) to establish and/or strengthen government functions that facilitate effective, inclusive, and responsive public services, transparency and accountability, and promote resilience and trust, including partnering with key national and international stakeholders.
Addressing transboundary drivers of FCV and recovering from crisis	4. Implement regional initiatives in the Sahel, Lake Chad, the Horn of Africa, and Central Asia to help address transboundary drivers of FCV, support transboundary resilience, and / or strengthen regional crisis risk preparedness and mitigation together with key relevant partners. IFC will commit to leverage its local presence to scale up upstream and advisory service activities in these areas, leading to enhanced private sector opportunities.