



Education System Strengthening

The Challenge: Children affected by conflict and crisis face barriers to education and early childhood development

Over 234 million children affected by crises are school aged and experience a range of barriers to quality education and early childhood development. A lack of investment in crisis and conflict settings despite vast and growing needs and access constraints preventing delivery to hard-to-reach communities are among the challenges to building resilient education systems. Providing inclusive, high-quality learning and development opportunities for these children requires collaboration with system actors and scaling effective solutions.

IRC objectives

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) aims to enhance the quality and resilience of education systems, ensuring they can continue to function during and after crises, with a focus on the most vulnerable populations. By focusing on comprehensive policy approaches - encompassing legal frameworks, financing, and school support - the IRC aims to enhance access to quality education for marginalized children, ultimately fostering self-reliance and reducing dependency on humanitarian aid.

IRC's approach

Across IRC's education and early childhood development portfolio, system strengthening is a core strategy to ensure that quality, inclusive, and sustainable services reach children affected by crises. Our foundational principle for all systems-strengthening work is that local and national system actors are primary partners to develop contextually appropriate solutions. Joint partnership approaches are driven by a range of actors including governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), schools, health clinics, and other stakeholders engaging with communities. This work involves supporting these actors to improve service delivery through technical assistance, policy reform, institutional capacity sharing, financing strategies, and inclusive data systems.

Rather than substituting systems, IRC aims to reinforce and complement them, especially in contexts where fragility, displacement, or conflict pose barriers to access. While approaches vary by country and context, the unifying goal is to strengthen local ownership and resilience, enabling education systems to function effectively both during and after crisis.

Education Systems Strengthening

How does system strengthening improve quality education for crisis-affected communities?

With the increasing frequency and intensity of global crises, it is essential that education systems are resilient and capable of effectively scaling successful solutions to improve learning. **The Ahlan Simsim initiative** offers one example of how a partnership-driven approach can strengthen early childhood services across multiple sectors. Launched by the IRC and Sesame Workshop in 2018, it now consists of more than 100 local actors. Ahlan Simsim (“Welcome Sesame” in Arabic) combines evidence-based early childhood development programs and services with educational mass media, to support children affected by conflict and crisis in the Middle East so they can grow, learn and thrive.

Over the past six years, the initiative has launched various programs reaching over 4 million children and caregivers across Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. The initiative **co-designs interventions** with national governments to integrate them within national systems and works with local NGOs and community-based organizations to reach marginalized and vulnerable families, including those outside the reach of national systems.

Developing contextually appropriate solutions through co-design is only the first step. It is also necessary to make these solutions **accessible to as many children as possible**. In Iraq, nearly all children enter primary school without essential early learning experiences. The Ahlan Simsim team partnered with the Ministry of Education to design the School Readiness Program, ensuring a smooth transition into primary school. The program, initially piloted in 2021, is now integrated into the first two weeks of school for incoming first graders and has expanded to schools across Federal Iraq. The Ministry of Education has committed to scaling up the program nationally to ensure children enter school ready to learn. This reflects the principle of co-designing responsive system-level interventions with national actors, while also allocating resources to achieve equity at scale. As a result of the readiness program, children enter school ready to learn .

IRC recognizes the need for innovative approaches to reach children outside national education systems. **Cross-sectoral programming** (caregiving, health, nutrition, protection, and education) can create efficiencies and provide opportunities for holistic services to clients. For example in Jordan, 86% of all children receive early childhood vaccinations via primary healthcare centers overseen by the Ministry of Health, making clinics an ideal entry point to equip caregivers with tools to support their children’s development. Ahlan Simsim co-designed a program with the Ministry of Health to integrate early childhood development (ECD) guidance into well-child visits in primary healthcare centers. By leveraging existing service delivery systems (health clinics), this model ensures broader access to ECD. Additionally, this effort expanded health services, including mental health and social-emotional learning for children and parents, and enhanced midwives’ skills when working with parents.

Education Systems Strengthening

Aiming for equity at scale through partnerships

Diverse partners are needed to deliver education in crisis and conflict settings. Ahlan Simsim's success in scale and impact relied on understanding the wider system, determining the right partners or solutions that support system strengthening, and providing systems support and systems substitution where formal systems cannot reach all children. This required an assessment of approaches to achieving equity at scale, leveraging alternative ways to reach children such as through technology or mobile delivery systems that overcome barriers to physical space or access. This complements existing available services and facilitates a continuity of care for hard-to-reach communities.

For example, in the south of Jordan, enabling access was inspired by mobile health units that travelled 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, IRC overcame the geographic and financial barriers that can prevent children and caregivers from accessing these crucial services.

Smile Caravans expanded in 2023 to reach children in all twelve governorates across Jordan—including 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 innovation illustrates how systems support and substitution approaches complementing formal systems can be used in tandem to expand access in underserved and hard-to-reach areas.

In East Africa, the provision of quality education for refugee children also remains a major education equity challenge. Since 2020, the IRC has been implementing PlayMatters, a teacher professional development program delivered through national education systems that seeks to improve holistic learning outcomes, including foundational learning skills, for pre-primary and primary aged children. PlayMatters has worked with and through national education systems in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda to strengthen policies around active learning and refugee education and improve the quality of teacher continuous professional development for both refugee and host community teachers. In addition to seconding staff to the ministry, setting up coordination mechanisms, and training a large cadre of trainers, PlayMatters has prioritized direct investment in teacher training colleges and the identification of annual policy priorities that generate opportunities for scale, all with a focus on reaching some of East Africa's most underserved communities.

Climate Resilient Education Systems Trial

In Kenya, IRC is working closely with government partners to implement a Climate Resilient Education Systems Trial (CREST) to address the growing impact of climate shocks on education. In 2022 alone, prolonged periods of drought in East Africa are estimated to have caused 2.7 million children to drop out of school in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia. Partnering with Africa Risk Capacity Limited (ARC Ltd.) - a hybrid mutual insurer - the project uses insurance to release

Education Systems Strengthening

funding when a pre-arranged trigger (e.g. a vegetation index for drought) is reached. This enables IRC to rapidly deploy a response combining cash for families, remote education and child protection support through phones using whatsapp and SMS messaging. This will ensure children remain safe, well, and learning during periods of school disruption. CREST is implemented in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the National Drought Management Authority, both at national and county levels. The program supports government-led seasonal assessments and contributes to the refinement of education and disaster risk management policies. By working through systems, CREST strengthens government ownership, aligns with national priorities, and builds institutional capacity to ensure the continuity of learning during climate shocks.

Cost efficiency and sustainability

A systems strengthening approach offers significant cost-efficiency benefits. The IRC conducted quantitative analysis of 14 distinct education partnerships with a range of national and local actors in the Middle East. Through the partnership with the Iraqi Ministry of Education, IRC's investment per child declined over time as the school readiness program expanded to additional schools annually, indicating cost-efficiency and sustainability through national systems.

By 2023, the cumulative investment by IRC in the Iraq school readiness program integrated into the Ministry of Education's services was less than USD 1.50 per child.[1] We project that by end of 2025, this investment will reduce to less than \$0.50 per child. IRC analysis demonstrated that early stage 'invisible investments' focused on understanding the context, building relationships, creating a stronger enabling environment, and co-creating interventions are critical for achieving scale and cost efficiencies.

PlayMatters has followed a similar trajectory of content development, evidence generation, cost-effectiveness, and scale. In 2025, an RCT of PlayMatters' core package in Ethiopia's Somali region demonstrated a high-level of cost-effectiveness compared to similar interventions (\$38/child vs \$300/child), accompanied by medium to high impacts on all key teacher and child-level outcomes including literacy, numeracy, social emotional learning, and well-being. Numerous scale pathways are currently being pursued with the governments across the three countries of implementation.

IRC's experience of delivering early childhood development and foundational learning programming via the Ahlan Simsim and Playmatters initiatives provides key insights into the variety of ways to achieve system strengthening particularly in countries affected by conflict and crisis. As noted, coupling interventions across different areas can improve outcomes and enable greater efficiencies. Partnering with government ministries can facilitate the scaling of programmes. Investing in diverse partnerships, flexibility, and innovation is integral to supporting governments' abilities to strengthen their delivery of resilient and adaptable education programmes.

[1] Note that this analysis only looked at IRC's investment of working with the Ministry to design, pilot and launch an initial expansion; cost of implementation by the Ministry is not included in this analysis.