

Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Socio-emotional Learning Systems through a Data-Driven Scaling-Up Approach in Iraq and Jordan

A case study of IRC's *Ahlan Simsim* approach to supporting national governments departments through school readiness programs to strengthen their education systems to prepare children affected by crisis and conflict in the Middle East to successfully enter elementary school



A class attending a lesson as part of the implementation of the Readiness Program in Iraq (2022) - ©IRC

PRACTICE PROFILE

In 2018, IRC and Sesame Workshop came together to pair mass media resources with service provision through the *Ahlan Simsim* initiative, to support young children impacted by conflict and crisis with early learning and nurturing care — reaching children through the narrow window when it's most important. *Ahlan Simsim* worked with ministries of education in Jordan and then in Iraq to co-design contextualized school readiness programs that meet a core need to prepare young children for the transition into primary school. The program uses evidence-based social-emotional learning (SEL) frameworks and activities, and it includes various components including classroom resources for children, training for teachers, and support for caregivers.

Contexts and identified needs: strengthening pre-primary education systems affected by the crises in Iraq and Jordan

Protracted conflicts and acute crises across the Middle East region have significantly damaged national infrastructure supporting children and their caregivers and limited access to education for children and young people.

Although preschool education is recognized as essential to build foundational learnings and ensuring higher retention rates in later stages of education, pre-primary enrolment rates across the region, including in Jordan and Iraq, remain low, particularly among poor households, refugee households, and internally displaced people and returnees.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this situation, with school closures significantly affecting access to learning. According to a recent UNICEF report, in Jordan only 28% of 5-year-olds have attended pre-primary or elementary school, meaning that 72% are not in school. In Iraq, data shows that over 90% of 3 and 4 year-olds are not accessing formal pre-primary education opportunities. According to the National ECD Strategy developed by the Iraq Ministry of Education and UNICEF, while the number of children aged 5 accessing pre-primary education has notably doubled in Iraq since 2000, it remains at just 9%. This lack of access to early childhood education has resulted in children being underdeveloped in critical areas such as social-emotional, language, pre-numeracy, and pre-literacy skills.

To address these gaps, one of the identified needs is to strengthen existing institutional education information systems to improve access to quality early childhood education (ECE) for all. Evidence shows that the main obstacles to access to pre-primary education in Jordan and Iraq include the lack of sufficient and dedicated planning and funding for pre-primary education, the exclusion of the most vulnerable children - especially children affected by crisis such as those living in IDP/refugee camps who are more likely to never enter the education system - and the lack of dedicated teacher development programs.

This case study highlights how, as part of the implementation of IRC's school readiness program in close collaboration with ministries of education in Iraq and Jordan:

- 1) **strengthening the capacity of institutional education information systems to collect and use relevant and quality data** needed to understand and address specific gaps to ensure access to quality education for all **played a key role in the overall strengthening of early childhood education systems** in both contexts, and
- 2) data and evidence collected on project's impact were **instrumental in influencing program adaptation, building institutional commitment, and scaling up** reforms.

The approach and implementation :

The *Ahlan Simsim* initiative works in partnerships with local organizations, governments, and ministries of education (MoEs) in the countries of implementation to develop sustainable, locally owned, contextualized solutions. Instead of just delivering services, the initiative supports existing local and national systems by mapping contextual needs based on available information from the MoEs, defining the problem and a theory of change with relevant stakeholders, and co-designing a collaborative solution that aligned with each country's education objectives that can be adapted as needed.

The interventions implemented are **partner-centred, systems-based, evidence-driven and respond to a critical gap identified by and with the MoEs, teachers, and communities** through initial assessments of needs or coordination with the Ministry to understand what gaps existed, then aligning these with national

¹ More than a decade after the war in Syria began, it is estimated that more than 1.3 million Syrians live in Jordan, with 60% of the families living in extreme poverty. Access to education is very difficult, it is estimated that 40% of children do not attend school regularly, this number has further deteriorated with the closure of schools during the pandemic.

policies, and finally identifying the core competencies and program components from *Ahlan Simsim* that could help fill these gaps. In Jordan, the MoE identified the need for social-emotional learning support, and IRC built upon this identified gap through the team's technical expertise by providing comprehensive resources to prepare children for successful entry into primary school. In Iraq, following several meetings with key focal points in the ministries, the implementation of the readiness program was identified as a need to address that gap created by low pre-primary enrolment. Building on the school readiness programs as an entry point across these two different contexts, the IRC worked with MoEs and key partners in both countries to co-develop context-specific content and curriculum fully owned by the ministries themselves, from the start.

To address the country-specific needs of children ages 5 to 6 in Jordan and 4 to 6 in Iraq, IRC worked alongside the ministries to co-develop a solution that fit the urgent and existing needs and strengthened the national system, followed by the co-implementation with the MoEs of a tailored "school readiness program" integrated into the school year in Iraq and into the curriculum in Jordan, and launch of continuous professional development for teachers. As they were co-designed with each MoE, based on data and needs identified at national levels, the implementation of the school readiness program is different in each context and variation in approach speaks to the highly adaptable nature of the program's framework to ensure it is addressing country-specific needs and aligns with national education priorities.

From the co-designing and joint implementation of the school readiness program with line ministries, the IRC engaged in comprehensive **data collection, and a learning and reflection process used to adapt solutions to better address challenges faced** when needed while also serving to **develop new pathways with ministries and inform potential new opportunities for engagement** in new geographies. The data-driven approach is instrumental to ensure the sustainable ownership of the program by the ministries.

In both countries, programme implementation resulted in significant quantitative evidence and data on the practice as well as learnings to be shared internally with IRC and externally with other humanitarian actors. Programs were piloted on a small scale. **Monitoring tools, including staff observations and surveys of children and caregivers, were co-designed and jointly implemented with the ministries of education.** They are used to **collect data comparable to a set of learning outcomes that reflect the key areas of child development with which the expected outcomes of program implementation are aligned.** Data collected throughout piloting **informed content adaptation by IRC and the ministries.** This collection of evidence and learning **informed the expansion and scaling up of the programs** in Jordan and Iraq and eventually in other geographies. The learning and reflection process at each step of piloting and implementation to collect feedback from partners and beneficiaries is at the core of the approach to **ensure that the activities continue to be adapted to respond to problem identified,** which may change during project implementation. The data was also used to advocate with MoE for the importance of ECD programs during education sector planning and decision-making processes.

ECD champions within the ministries were instrumental in taking these learnings and data forward to influence internal actors. With the positive feedback and observational data, these government actors have been able to advocate for the uptake of this program. **Patient relationship building to establish trust and strengthen the relationship with the champions is a large part of the success of this program.** They became **invested in the success of the program and were able to support it with data when they approached ministry leadership.**

The level of quality and type of information and data collection processes differ depending on the capacity of the Ministry of Education to collect data. The Jordanian MoE has higher capacity, more advanced institutional education information system and processes that allow it to own and collect comprehensive and quality data sets readily available for use. However, during the pilot phase, the Iraqi MoE had limited

capacity and was limited to collecting quantitative data on paper. At their request, as part of the scale-up phase, IRC provided significant capacity building to Iraqi authorities in monitoring, evaluation, and education information collection. This included the training of trainers and the development of technical committees internal to the Ministry where IRC shared their knowledge and worked with the MoE to develop their expertise on SEL and supportive learning components beyond the comprehensive cognitive development their curriculum included. Additionally, after introducing the ministry to its own monitoring tools, IRC co-designed with them a monitoring approach with them and supported them in collecting accurate data and quality reporting.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS AND RESULTS

The practice was piloted successfully in Jordan and Iraq, and the project is now deployed nationally in both countries :

- As part of co-implementation and co-design of the practice with ministries of education, a **result framework with baselines and specific indicators was developed jointly to measure achievements and progress** of ECE and SEL integration in the education system over time.
- **Data, evidence, and learnings collected** by the MoE on the co-designed result framework and through research on implementation conducted by IRC **contributed to build trust, interest, and commitment from the MoE towards scaling up the whole-system data-driven approach to education system strengthening.**
- Both **MoEs expressed their willingness to integrate jointly developed indicators to measure project progress into their national information systems.** In Jordan, IRC's monitoring and evaluation team presented their own tools, assessed the ministry's resources and practices for monitoring, and amended existing data collection tools to measure indicators related to school readiness. In Iraq, the IRC team trained supervisors on data collection methods and worked with them to implement these during the trainings and in the classrooms. IRC teams supported the data collection in some schools, with strong accountability measures in place including daily follow-up with teachers. The data gathered from these monitoring tools fed back into content revision.
- **Data and information collected throughout the pilot processes in both Jordan and Iraq played a key role in building confidence among ministries** to scale-up the practice at national level.
- If some capacity and resource gaps related to data collection tools and processes were a challenge to the collection of quality and timely data in the piloting phase of the project, notably in Iraq, the **MoE can now collect all data against the result framework indicators in digital form, verify and share them, ensuring full ownership.** This was made possible thanks to the commitment and interest of the MoE itself, requesting IRC and partners to provide them with capacity building on this specific component as part of the scaling-up.
- Data collection mechanisms included child, caregiver, and teacher surveys, as well as classroom observation of instruction :
 - In Jordan, the School Readiness and Remedial Programs reached over 285k children, and in over 82k children across 1,800 schools in Iraq.
 - In Jordan, 95% of observed educators established a supportive, secure, predictable, and inclusive early learning environment, and 86% of caregivers achieved the minimum score required for the test, indicating developmentally supportive interactions with their children.

- In Iraq, feedback from children and caregivers collected through surveys during the pilot reflected that 93% of children participating felt happy when attending school readiness programming. 94% of caregivers expressed satisfaction with the program and its impact on pupils' development, and 90% of them would recommend the program to their community. The feedback received from teacher surveys was consistent with the observations made during the quality research on the implementation.
- As a result of the program's success in Iraq, the Ministry of Education announced an endorsement for the readiness program to be part of teacher training plans in all schools across Iraq, signifying **government ownership now seeded in policy and an expansion that looks toward long-term sustainability.**

KEY LEARNINGS AND EVIDENCE

➤ Key learnings on supporting system strengthening aims within national education systems and across the humanitarian-development nexus through better coordinated and harmonized crisis and risk-related data :

In Jordan, learnings came from monitoring and evaluation tools such as surveys, alongside learnings observed by IRC's scaling-up team. In Iraq, implementation research was assessed by the quality of implementation as the model progressed.

- **Ensure coordination and harmonization with a wide range of stakeholders:** critical to the successful piloting of the program in Jordan and to substantiate the case for scaling up and expansion. This entailed mapping the system of partners working with the MoE on ECE and setting meetings with all stakeholders, agreeing on one budget, and sharing it among partners and IRC. This complex and evolving coordination scheme has required a combination of relationship-building, process learning by the scale-up teams, and quantitative data collection from beneficiaries by the research, monitoring, and learning teams.
- **Build a strong partnership with ministries and key education partners based on a common knowledge base and co-identification of central issue:** through the collecting and sharing of complementary sets of quantitative and qualitative data, coupled with existing information and background research from the ministry.
- **Understand the internal dynamics of ministries of education and flexibility:** essential to have as much visibility as possible into the institutional structures to understand the relations between the different departments and teams, who is leading and making decisions, what the internal constraints are, and the different decentralized levels that need to be consulted and integrated into the design and/or implementation phase. Regular evaluation and reflection on feedback from partners have been essential to understanding this and correcting/adapting practices.
- **Work in a system-wide approach, ensure sector coordination and gain buy-in:** (multi-stakeholder approach): allowed IRC to continue to fill gaps that arose during evaluation processes throughout the first piloting phases in Jordan and Iraq. It was noted that short-term interventions and steppingstones such as pilot programs worked to demonstrate IRC's expertise and resources to leverage buy-in from the Ministry on larger-scale opportunities to promote institutionalization as identified by the MoE scaling champions. Positive results and feedback from beneficiaries from data collected by ministries helped build interest in scaling up to the national level.

- **Shift the mindset:** The appointment of dedicated focal points for the project in each MoE and the shift from a traditional project-based mindset to a systems-strengthening approach made a significant difference. It required building trusting relationships with a diverse set of MoE stakeholders to ensure sustainable commitment toward long-term objectives to push the project forward, thanks to regular meetings and continuous coordination of different partners under leadership of the ministries. Over time, rather than focusing on developing and expanding the reach of *Ahlan Simsim* materials, IRC focused on sharing evidence-based frameworks, activities, and training approaches for adaptation and integration into the education system, as requested by the MoEs and partners. Shifts like this exemplify how, over time, IRC has adapted from being the originator of a particular initiative to becoming a behind-the-scenes supporter of institutional implementers with a shared vision. Flexible funding partners are also critical to enable this shift from original designs to adapting those designs to deliver programs or services that best address gaps.
- **Ownership is essential for sustainable change in the education system**, which is ultimately the mission of ministries of education. It is achieved by co-designing with the ministry and enabling them to lead the projects, but also through the structure of the program itself and the language used. For example, the projects implemented in Jordan and Iraq are always recognized as projects of the ministries which IRC and its partners support by providing appropriate tools and facilitating an enabling environment. Communication around project success is always highlighting the work undertaken by the institutions. The projects are driven solely by the needs expressed by the institutional partners and not from a pre-design or imposed agenda. From the first phase, the demand for change must come from the institutions alone. IRC involvement in the implementation of project activities is as light as possible, and always intends to strengthen the relationship of trust (e.g., during monitoring and data collection, or using cash only when necessary for implementation).
- **Foster system strengthening through sustainable approaches:** include relevant education partners involved in system strengthening to build upon existing interventions with concrete steps and roadmap instead of suggesting the abstract goals to partner. Link together with other efforts to create a web/sturdy framework of intervention that transforms systems entirely, rather than suggesting temporary solutions sector by sector. In Jordan, in anticipation of the end of the project, a "core technical team" was created within the Ministry with dedicated staff in charge of the sustainability, continued improvement (incl. research), and the scaling up of the project. This ensures that the expertise developed on ECE and SEL is owned by and embedded within the MoE.
- **Design programs and solutions to strengthen national or subnational systems that provide essential services in crisis-affected countries** such as Iraq, which suffers from decades of conflict and destruction, and Jordan, which hosts approximately 1.3 million Syrian refugees (and another 66,000 Iraqi refugees and 2.2 million Palestinian refugees) must be sustained and continued to ensure medium- and long-term impact.

More broadly, **within the framework of the "scaling-up" approach, the School Readiness program was an entry point for IRC and its partners to engage and build trust with the MoEs, to build their commitment and capacities on ECD and socio-emotional learning (SEL) to be able to - eventually - scale up, influence, and work together at the systemic level.** In this context, the long-term objective of this highly contextualized approach is the sustainable mainstreaming of quality ECD and SEL programmes in national education systems.

MAIN CHALLENGES FACED

Regular data collection and reporting through the learning and reflection tools presented in this case study, allowed for the continuous adaptation of the approach to address the challenges identified. The challenges faced in each context varied, included both internal and external barriers, spanned across both design and implementation, and therefore required differing solutions.

In Iraq, IRC faced the following challenges:

- **Limited number of grade one teachers in the pilot:** to address this while reaching as many children as possible, the program includes adaptations to divide children into small groups to minimize the effects of a high child-to-teacher ratio.
- **Short timing at schools:** while it was planned to implement 6 activities per day, having flexible content allowed the teacher to choose activities per their children's needs.
- **Resistance from school managers:** advocacy efforts with MoE led to their sending an official letter requiring implementation. There is still some resistance, however, that IRC hope to improve.
- **Limited resources:** Iraq program was designed to utilize resources when available but also accounted for this and is easily implemented using minimum resources, allowing it to be utilized in a variety of settings.

In Jordan, IRC faced the following challenges:

- **Delays in technical committee content production**
- **Both planning and revision processes were lengthy** as IRC and Ministry were both clarifying the vision, and while the transition from design to pilot was slow, the transition from pilot to scale-up was exceedingly fast.
- **Lack of buy-in at first from the MoE champion and lack of systems thinking approach :** addressed through continuous coordination and allowing the ministry to lead while offering our support
- **Difficulties in navigating internal ministerial dynamics :** addressed by taking the time and putting in the effort to better understand the system through building relationships and involving focal points across different departments including legal, finance, among others

✦ **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** provides children, youth, and adults affected by conflict and crisis with safe, high-quality opportunities that help them learn the skills they need to survive and thrive around the world. Through their work on early childhood development or ECD, IRC aims to ensure that children aged 0 to 8 develop cognitive and social-emotional skills through high-quality interventions including comprehensive early childhood education opportunities. In Jordan, the IRC provides crucial support to Syrian refugees and vulnerable Jordanians living in harsh conditions, and in Iraq, the IRC helps Iraqis affected by conflict, particularly women, youth, and children, to access vital services and enjoy their rights in a safe and peaceful environment.

✦ **Sesame Workshop (SW)** is working specifically in supporting preschool-age children and their families all over the world, including those affected by the crisis. Through their all-new Arabic-language show *Ahlan Simsim*, SW is engaging children specifically affected by crises across the Middle East, with educational mass media programming tailored to their unique needs.