



Knowledge hub
-
Collection of best practices

Summary of the best practice

1. Title of the best practice (e.g. name of policy, programme, project, etc.) *

Building a Foundation in the Early Years: Supporting Children across the Middle East for Successful Entry into Primary School

2. Country or countries where the practice is implemented *

Iraq & Jordan

3. Please select the **most relevant** Action Track(s) the best practice applies to *

- Action Track 1. Inclusive, equitable, safe, and healthy schools
- Action Track 2. Learning and skills for life, work, and sustainable development
- Action Track 3. Teachers, teaching and the teaching profession
- Action Track 4. Digital learning and transformation
- Action Track 5. Financing of education

4. Implementation lead/partner organization(s) *

International Rescue Committee

5. Key words (5-15 words): Please add key descriptive words around aims, modalities, target groups etc. *

Early Childhood Development (ECD), Iraq, Jordan, School Readiness, Social-Emotional Learning, Learning through Play, Conflict and Crisis Settings

6. What makes it a best practice? *

This program sets an example of best practice as it works to address the contextual needs of thousands of children in two countries affected by the Syrian Crisis, while promoting the prioritization of ECD in the present at future, keeping sustainability at its core.

Description of the best practice

7. Introduction (350-400 words)

This section should ideally provide the context of, and justification for, the practice and address the following issues:

- i) Which population was affected?
- ii) What was the problem that needed to be addressed?
- iii) Which approach was taken and what objectives were achieved? *

Conflict and displacement have been shown to negatively impact children's intellectual and social development and threaten long-term economic prosperity, health, and well-being. Due solely to the circumstances of their birth into a conflict and crisis setting, children affected by the Syrian conflict in the Middle East are at high-risk for failing to reach their developmental potential.

According to the most recent Jordan Country Report on Out-of-School Children, "more than one in three (38%) five-year-old children attend pre-primary or primary school, meaning that 62% are not in school,"¹ and in Iraq, only 5% of children attend any kind of pre-primary program before entering grade 12. Early child enrollment in pre-primary education in 2018 in both countries was staggeringly low, creating gaps in key developmental skills and lessons children need to properly prepare for primary education. The Jordan Ministry of Education recognized these gaps and in 2018, committed to making Kindergarten Level 2 (KG2) mandatory for all children across the Kingdom; however, even with this laudable commitment, they were met with obstacles to implementation including limited resources and limited access to those most vulnerable. The need for quality programming related to developing reading, writing, cognitive, and social-emotional learning (SEL) skills remained out of reach and was only compounded by COVID-19 when access to daycares and preschools was even further diminished. In the absence of universal early childhood education (ECE), children were left unprepared for the education system academically, socially, and emotionally.

To respond to the urgent, unmet needs of children across the Syrian Response Region (in Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria) the International Rescue Committee and Sesame Workshop partnered on the Ahlan Simsim early childhood project to restore hope and opportunity for a generation of children by providing critical programs and opportunities to that support healthy development through learn and play. In 2018, as part of Ahlan Simsim, the IRC launched partnerships with Ministries of Education in Jordan and Iraq to meet national early childhood needs building upon existing Ahlan Simsim ECE models.

Across these two different contexts, the IRC worked alongside each ministry in addressing identified needs by co-developing context-specific school readiness programs, with heavy emphasis on SEL and learning through play (LtP) that help prepare children for an academic environment including healthy peer interaction. The IRC co-developed contextually appropriate content and curriculum that was co-designed alongside other key ECD stakeholders; in Jordan, this included GIZ, RTI, and USAID. Designed from the start as interventions owned by the Ministries themselves, IRC offered expertise from its Ahlan Simsim ECD programs that range from low- to high-dosage and target both children and their caregivers with emphasis on SEL and LtP components.

8. Implementation (350-450 words)

Please describe the implementation modalities or processes, where possible in relation to:

- i) What are the main activities carried out?
- ii) When and where the activities were carried out (including the start date and whether it is ongoing)?
- iii) Who were the key implementation actors and collaborators? (civil society organizations, private sector, foundations, coalitions, networks etc.)?
- iv) What were the resources needed (budget and sources) for the implementation?

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In Jordan, the program was offered to families as a precursor to grade 1, held prior to the start of the academic year from July to August of 2021 in schools and community-based organizations. In 2020, a 2-week remote version of the program was piloted with caregivers receiving phone calls from trained facilitators and at-home resources for their children. The next year in 2021, a 5-8-week in-person readiness program ran, and the initiative has further evolved to include incorporation of SEL and LtP components into regular teacher training for all Kindergarten through Grade 3 teachers for continuous professional development.

In Iraq, a 2021 pilot of the school readiness program replaced traditional curriculum for the first 2 weeks of first grade in 112 schools in one governorate in November 2021. The full program is planned to expand across 8 more governorates in 2022, signifying a strong commitment to expansion of this program and integration of program content into the regular school calendar without ongoing costs, leading to a culture shift among government priorities and teacher approach for standardized practices over time. In both country programs, a key driver of the design and execution was a focus on sustainability through institutionalization through both policy and financial/budgetary commitments.

Implementation of programming included a wide range of resources and activities for teachers and facilitators to use with children included: a School Activities Manual that included lesson plans for 60 activities that encompass a variety of subjects key for young children's cognitive development, worksheets and flashcards to go along with lessons, teacher's resource and training guides that aid teachers in implementing activities and utilizing the various complementary resources, an electronic library containing stories, songs, and videos to support teachers during activities, and caregiver awareness sessions ensuring that children are receiving proper support beyond the classroom

9. Results – outputs and outcomes (250-350 words)

To the extent possible, please reply to the questions below:

- i) How was the practice identified as transformative? (e.g., impact on policies, impact on management processes, impact on delivery arrangements or education monitoring, impact on teachers, learners and beneficiary communities etc.);
- ii) What were the concrete results achieved with regard to outputs and outcomes?
- iii) Has an assessment of the practice been carried out? If yes, what were the results? *

Implementation of the programs were monitored closely and utilized resources such as surveys and classroom observations to gauge caregiver, teacher, and child satisfaction and engagement with content. Topline achievements in both contexts have included a demonstrable positive influence on teachers; programming has continuously built up their capacities and expanded their skillset in the classroom while institutionalizing key aspects of the IRC ECD approach. Feedback and surveys have also illustrated a high level of satisfaction with programming from teachers: “We were lucky to be part of this program, we are happy to see how the content was developed to cover all the developmental domains of the child, especially the socio-emotional domain which used to be ignored. This is a wake-up call for all of us to start thinking about how children’s early education should be,” said Dr. Ayham, a first-grade teacher supervisor with the Ministry of Education in Ninewa.

In addition to expansion of teacher capacities, the program has emphasized the importance of inclusion and gender equity and the importance of an inclusive and diverse environment for children to thrive in. Lessons on inclusion have evolved the opinions of non-disabled children of their disabled peers, and adaptations to certain activities were made for children with disabilities to be able to participate and learn alongside their peers.

Overall, the school readiness program in both Iraq and in Jordan have been transformative for the national education systems and have reached thousands of children in both countries. In Jordan, the readiness program in 2021 reached 5.8k children, 5.3k caregivers, and 1.6k teachers; in Iraq, the readiness program pilot reached 7.1k children. Both programs are expected to scale nation-wide. Institutionalization of ECD as a national priority in Jordan and the uptake of co-designed content in Iraq have demonstrated country-wide shifts in how to approach properly preparing vulnerable children for primary education and social settings, indicating a national-level increase in prioritization of ECD for sustained outcomes in both policy change and financial commitment. But beyond the institutional shifts happening at a large scale, change can be seen at the individual level with those who have participated in the programs. 34% of caregivers who filled out the survey in Iraq demanded an extension of the two-week readiness program. One mother expressed: “I have never imagined that my son would love the school that much; he is shy and had never attended preschool before. I’m very satisfied with this program as I see my son engaged in unusual way.”

10. Lessons learnt (300 words)

To the extent possible, please reply to the following questions:

- i) What were the key triggers for transformation?
- ii) What worked really well – what facilitated this?
- iii) What did not work – why did it not work? *

In developing this program alongside the Ministries while considering the distinct political and financial contexts and specific identified needs of each country, our team learned what functioned to facilitate expanded reach and uptake and adjustments needed between the pilot and expansion phase. Key takeaways that have aided in yielding results have included:

1. Utilizing a systems-based approach while also tailoring interventions to accommodate contextual needs based on evolving priorities of national actors including COVID-19 restrictions; utilizing technology and digital and remote resources to continue accessing vulnerable populations were crucial to program success
2. Identifying and cultivating an ECD champion within the government ministry to support scaling of programming, alongside patient relationship building efforts contributed in large part to program success thus far; dedication to intensive relationship building with key stakeholders and engaging a champion who understands and highlights the importance of prioritizing ECD to act as an internal advocate pushed forward national expansion
3. Syncing together both IRC and partner principles and standards of practice throughout the design process for an outcome that both parties are proud to support
4. Embodying agility and flexibility, while keeping sustainability at the core of approach design for best possible outcomes.
5. Maintaining consistent communication and coordination with ministry and other stakeholders and relevant actors throughout each step of the process

Throughout the process of co-design and implementation we learned from the things that were not working and used these to inform changes. The Ahlan Simsim original plans anticipated a relatively short time period in which to bring programs to scale nationwide in each of the countries. However, early on it became clear that scaling takes time, particularly scaling designed for long-term sustainability. The process of building relationships and advocating to key stakeholders took multiple years; investment in supporting urgent needs, for example shifts for COVID, were key in building up trust and relationship that later opened doors to scaling work. In Jordan, rather than approaching with pre-determined solutions based upon assumed problems that we understood these ministries might have, we learned that working together with the Ministry to identify the needs or “problem”, and support internal government actors in generating a functional solution tailored to their needs, as well as maintaining a high level of flexibility made for the best approach. In Iraq, our team learned that creating opportunity to scale programming nation-wide had to begin at a much smaller scale and prove effectiveness at the governorate level.

11. Conclusions (250 words)

Please describe why may this intervention be considered a “best practice”. What recommendations can be made for those intending to adopt the documented “best practice” or how can it help people working on the same issue(s)? *

The success of the school readiness programs in Iraq and Jordan can be attributed to the various learnings we have taken away from each step of the process in each country and associated shifts in process and approach. Both programs are successful examples of best practice, embodying intrinsic commitments to partner ownership and collaborative design processes as well as promoting key components of ECD. The school readiness programs in both countries also kept sustainable practices and an understanding of what functions well to remain consistent across contexts and maintain the integrity of the Ahlan Simsim project goals and what can be appropriately adjusted to fit specific needs and contextualize outputs throughout each step. At its core, the school readiness program places the priorities of children and their caregivers at the center of the approach and offers a holistic/encompassing set of resources for teachers and caregivers to use and prepare children at an early age with skills needed for healthy development in a cost-effective and sustainable way that will carry on past end of project.

Based upon what we have learned while operating in Jordan and Iraq, we hope to promote key aspects of this program that aided in creating and expanding this example of best practices. Recommendations for others include but are not limited to:

1. Consider sustainability from the start. Design with scale in mind to further change beyond immediate intervention and cost.
2. Emphasize the importance of and invest in relationships with key stakeholders for scale to be successful and cultivate champions who will advocate for the initiative or change from within.
3. Be clear with concrete steps rather than advocate with abstract goals.
4. Approach from within a system and build upon existing interventions or structures within that system.
5. Identify needs with the partner; an intervention is only successful if it clearly represents how to best work in a given context. Remain in tune with these needs as they evolve and shift over time and link together national priorities with scaling aims for sustained uptake.
6. And consider short term interventions and pilot programs to gain access to larger windows of opportunity with ministries. While piloting the program in 2020 in Jordan, IRC bolstered the relationship with the ministry while meeting urgent pandemic needs through an adapted version of the school readiness programming delivered via phone calls that gave children tools through their caregivers.

12. Further reading

Please provide a list and URLs of key reference documents for additional information on the “best practice” for those who may be interested in knowing how the results benefited the beneficiary group/s. *

1. Brookings Blog on School Readiness Program in Jordan:

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2022/05/19/3-insights-on-expanding-the-impact-of-early-learning-opportunities-in-jordan/>

2. Ahlan Simsim 4-page Summary Document:

<https://rescue.box.com/s/iy7wj6nqukcmagd1ap81dx91i9lvq2s0>

3. Iraq Country Summary Report on Out-Of-School Children (Oct 2014):

https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/6506/file/Iraq%20Country%20Report%20on%20OOSC%20Summary_EN.pdf%20.pdf

4. MENA Regional Fact Sheet on Out-Of-School Children (2018):

[https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/6706/file/MENA%20OOSCI%20Regional%20Fact%20Sheet%20\(2018\).pdf%20.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/6706/file/MENA%20OOSCI%20Regional%20Fact%20Sheet%20(2018).pdf%20.pdf)