Input for report on thematic priorities of the SR IDPs

Submitting organisations: International Rescue Committee, Sesame Workshop
Contact persons: Elana Banin, elana.banin@rescue.org; Emily Garin, emily.garin@sesame.org
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19. Compounding emergencies — many of which last between 10 and 26 years — are too often matched by cycles of crisis-driven investments rather than sustainable solutions for uplifting individuals and communities. IDP movements are overwhelming local systems, and often result in protracted, parallel humanitarian responses rather than a scale up of the state's response. Limited services in host communities are often pushed to the brink. The results are restricted access to jobs, children left out of school, and a never-ending dependency on aid, leaving these populations consistently at risk of falling through the cracks.

While many country-level humanitarian leaders express a desire for change by increasing the focus on people and families rather than sectors and coordination structures, the pressures generated by funding needs, a lack of clear organizational incentives, and limited intellectual space to conceptualize differently makes this hard to achieve. Country-level leaders are unable to focus on creative and innovative on-the-ground changes in the way aid is delivered at the household level. Simultaneously, the core humanitarian coordination and planning architecture—the cluster system—is beset by persistent weaknesses. It organizes humanitarian action around major technical sectors, producing fragmented funding and program implementation.

The net result is a coordination and planning system in which the needs and priorities of affected people are intermediated through an architecture oriented more toward the prerogatives of major aid agencies. A reorientation is badly needed: toward a system that is foundationally organized around the actual needs of families as well as national system actors.

Some examples of such contexts where the International Rescue Committee (IRC) operates include Iraq, where continued violence and migratory flows impede the growth of already fragile infrastructure while deepening the disadvantages of crisis affected populations, as well as Syria, where with 12 years of pre-existing conflict coupled with the recent earthquake has created continued instability. Amongst these populations, millions of young children spend their entire childhoods in crisis contexts that seriously threaten their long-term development but are consistently treated as though their needs are independent. Without cohesive support, children face cognitive, physical, and social-emotional disadvantages that not only impede how they learn, grow, and interact with others, but can also impact the well-being of future generations.

We can however mitigate these effects through targeted interventions, adopting sustainable response and recovery approaches achieved through a long-term investment mindset. This means working alongside government partners to embed solutions for IDPs within existing policy priorities, as well as investing in solutions that put children and families' comprehensive needs at the center of integration approaches. An example of which is early childhood development (ECD), which supports the long-term trajectory of children's cognitive and physical development, fostering conditions that scaffold IDPs social and economic contribution to host communities, with implications for removing dependency on aid.

20. Globally, over 200 million children have been identified as at risk for failing to reach their developmental potential, and whilst only 30% of the world's population are children, they account for 41% of all forcibly displaced. Young children who have experienced displacement face compounded risks to their development stemming from multiple adverse experiences which may include exposure to war and conflict, forced migration, and resettlement in new settings, such as a refugee camp, or integration within host communities. In these contexts, children are exposed to a variety of colliding risk factors which can have lifelong impacts, such as poverty, neglect, violence, disease, malnutrition, maternal depression, and lack of stimulation.

These factors literally limit neural connections in the brain, making populations prone to lasting consequences as a result of hindered growth and development. Whilst access to school, health and protection services address these challenges, many displaced children are never given the opportunity to access these interventions. With adults also experiencing stress being preoccupied with survival, long term priorities are indefinitely put on hold, and with mothers often serving as primary caregivers, insufficient care infrastructure prevents gains in gender equality and discourages caregivers to enter the labour market.

Simultaneously, there is a large gap in the humanitarian response aimed at mitigating the negative consequences emergencies have on IDP children and their caregivers. Humanitarian programming for the early years cut across several sectors — health, nutrition, education, WASH, protection — making it difficult to advance holistic programming in a heavily siloed humanitarian system. As a result, the long-term trajectory of these populations remains on the periphery, as opposed to being woven into standard operating procedures.

To counter these challenges, research shows that ECD programming is one of the smartest investments countries can make to enable communities to thrive, helping children to overcome traumatic events, and enable caregiving well-being and empowerment across IDP and host community populations. Most critically, investment in children and families as a collective has groundbreaking potential to drive sustainable impact across a range of necessary solutions crisis contexts. [Research shows](#) that support in the early years for children and their caregivers can provide returns of up to 13 percent a year through improved education, health, legal, and economic outcomes.

21. To achieve durable solutions, it is crucial to work within the existing national systems and in partnership with government and humanitarian actors to invest in resilience measures and bridge the gap toward integration or reintegration of IDPs. Data gaps often correlate with where evidence is most acutely needed, further hindering deepened engagement.

Recognising that families are the most important and immediate layer of supporting children's well-being and development, in 2018, the IRC and Sesame Workshop launched Ahlan Simsim ("Welcome Sesame" in Arabic), a multi-faceted initiative that offers high-quality programs and services to support children affected by the displacement, chaos, and violence that come with crisis and conflict. Ahlan Simsim employs the power of play as a vehicle for learning and development with a focus on mental health and psychosocial support. The program also engages the wider community of adults important in children's lives — including caregivers, local communities, teachers, and health providers.

As Ahlan Simsim services are fully integrated into existing systems for reaching crisis affected and host communities, we have successfully achieved tangible impacts at scale for IDPs in Iraq and Syria. As the

largest ECD intervention in the history of humanitarian response, Ahlan Simsim has reached over 1.3 million children and caregivers with direct services across Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria. As of April 2023, in Iraq and Syria Ahlan Simsim has reached 190,000 IDP children, caregivers, and facilitators.

The interventions implemented are partner-centred, systems-based, evidence-driven and respond to a critical gap identified by and with government ministries, teachers, health workers, and communities. Contextually relevant ECD solutions are co-developed and implemented with national partners, with the intent on strengthening the system in which the programs operate. We use the term "scaling pathway" to represent these solutions. Each scaling pathway is comprised of the lead system actor (context dependant), the intervention, and the delivery channel, including integration into existing health clinics, daycares, or primary school classrooms. The portfolio of Ahlan Simsim scaling pathways aims to expand and deepen programmatic impact and strengthen existing systems to create sustained change in children's lives.

Ahlan Simsim is effective in reaching the most vulnerable by deploying a range of cost-efficient programs with flexible models, inclusive practices and modalities of implementation adapted for in-person and remote delivery. We are also nearly doubling the evidence base on ECD in crisis contexts by completing five rigorous impact evaluations of programming around the world. These programs are generating research and testing new models to build knowledge about the kinds and costs of different approaches that can achieve impact for children and their caregivers, emphasising play-based approaches.

For example in the MENA region, although early learning is recognised as essential, preschool enrolment rates remain low, not least amongst IDPs. In Iraq, data shows that over 90% of 3- and 4-year-olds don't have access to pre-primary education. This lack of access has resulted in children being underdeveloped in critical areas such as social-emotional, language, pre-numeracy, and pre-literacy skills. Evidence shows that the main obstacles to access to pre-primary education in Iraq include the lack of sufficient and dedicated planning and funding; the exclusion of the most vulnerable children, particularly IDP children who are more likely to never enter the education system; and the lack of dedicated teacher development programs.

IRC Iraq's Ahlan Simsim team began engagement with the Iraqi Ministry of Education (MoE) in 2020, with the Ahlan Simsim team conducting a needs assessment for children transitioning to primary school from home or kindergartens. Based on the identified needs, the Ahlan Simsim team, in coordination with the MoE's Curriculum Department and other officials, created the 'School Readiness Program' in 2021 to support the transition into formal learning environments for children entering Grade 1.

A 2021 pilot of the Ahlan Simsim School Readiness Program in Iraq replaced the traditional curriculum for the first 2 weeks of first grade in 112 schools in one governorate in November 2021. Based on the positive feedback and the success of the program in supporting children having a smooth transition, the MoE expanded the program to 1,800 schools across Federal Iraq in 2022, reaching 77k children. The MoE then committed to its inclusion into the national education plan and mandating implementation of the program gradually nation-wide starting 2023. We are still breaking out IDP specific reach in our data.

While this is only one example focused specifically on education, community demand for solutions that tackles multiple ages and stages across sectoral divides for IDP children and their families can be met by drawing upon the lessons from Ahlan Simsim's approach to partnership and coordination. Expanding and scaling this contextualized approach can drive sustainable economic and social cohesion outcomes while

also serving as a model for working with both government and humanitarian actors across a variety of populations in service of inclusion, resettlement, and durable solutions.

22. At a time when more than 100 million people are displaced worldwide, we are in crucial need of cost-effective multi-outcome investments that drive sustainable solutions. We have experienced firsthand the potential of advancing such solutions, achieved through integration of system actors who are accountable for long term, multigenerational advancements. The Ahlan Simsim program model and its approach to scaling pathways can be tailored to local contexts and adopted in other regions where crisis and conflict are preventing large groups of people from resettlement or return. Some learnings from our programs, applicable to across several contexts, include:

LOCALLY DRIVEN FLEXIBILE PROGRAMMING: Programs should be co-designed in partnership with local communities and service providers from the start. IDP solutions should be shaped by service providers who are working with the populations directly, to both identify the problem and design contextualized solutions while maximizing population reach. Governments can match community demand by drawing upon proposed solutions like Ahlan Simsim programming. The success of this program lies in part with its approach to flexibility. When considering volatile and varied contexts across the MENA region, moving toward community driven approaches that allow for flexibility in settings with varying demands across IDPs and vulnerable host community members is crucial.

COORDINATION: Thinking through the lens of multigenerational outcomes succeeds in an environment of cross-sectoral collaboration among national, regional, and international stakeholders. As it stands, no individual agency is taking a lead at the international level to support cross-sectoral integration. While each coordination environment is unique, the provision of some basic tools to support rapid establishment of a coordination structure across humanitarian and development actors and across cluster silos should be prioritised, alongside advocacy on situational awareness, resource mobilisation and program cycle management operations for those who cut across these divides.

INVESTMENT: Learnings from IRC and Sesame Workshop impact and monitoring research can inform the development of effective, cost-efficient, and forward-thinking humanitarian aid which makes the transition toward inclusive and sustainable development. Our research in particular is generating substantial findings on remote programming, the use multimedia, as well as approaches to coordination and scale. Investments in future research and programming can build on these learnings to test and refine similar approaches with other IDP populations.