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أهلاً سمسيم

Ahlan Simsim  
**ANNUAL REPORT**

2022: YEAR FIVE

SESAME  
WORKSHOP™



## INTRODUCTION

Ahlan Simsim has demonstrated that integrating educational media resources with early childhood development (ECD) services can have transformative benefits for children whose lives have been upended by conflict and crisis. Combining Sesame Workshop's expertise in creating quality educational media with the International Rescue Committee's (IRC) vast experience providing direct humanitarian services to communities around the world, Ahlan Simsim is a historic collaboration strengthening national and humanitarian systems, generating a body of evidence that demonstrates new impact models, and creating quality learning resources that will last long into the future.

As of 2022, Year Five of our Ahlan Simsim program, the Sesame Workshop/IRC partnership reached over a million children and caregivers through direct ECD services in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria and over 23 million children through *Ahlan Simsim*, our award-winning, impactful, and locally produced Arabic-language version of *Sesame Street*, airing across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Our research partner, New York University's (NYU) Global TIES for Children Research Center, finalized three impact studies on different components of the Ahlan Simsim initiative: confirming our program's positive impact on children and caregivers throughout the region. These impressive results include:

- Watching *Ahlan Simsim* episodes daily in a classroom setting for 12 weeks **significantly increased children's ability to identify emotions, and they were more able to apply simple emotional regulation strategies, like pausing, calming, and reflecting, to regulate emotions.**
- An 11-week phone call-based Remote Early Learning Program that integrated *Ahlan Simsim* video and other resources resulted in **large improvements across all domains of child development, and comparable to a year of preschool for emergent literacy and numeracy.**
- A six-month phone call-based remote adaptation of the Reach Up and Learn (RUL) curriculum for caregivers of children aged 0-3 had a positive impact on **reducing caregivers' depression.**

With the support of the MacArthur Foundation and the LEGO Foundation, Ahlan Simsim is reaching children and families wherever they are—from classrooms to health clinics and learning centers to TVs and mobile devices. Through our scaling efforts with national ministries, they are incorporating Ahlan Simsim into national educational curricula and social service systems that are important to families. Based on feedback received from families,

we have enhanced our content creation and media distribution strategies for *Ahlan Simsim*: incorporating new educational goals and deepening our digital platforms to make our resources available to more children and their families.

**Additional accomplishments from Year 5 include:**

- Season 5 also brought the historic introduction of Ameera, Sesame Workshop’s first Muppet to use a wheelchair and crutches. Thoughtfully designed to challenge stereotypes and reflect children’s lived experiences, the launch of Ameera brought visibility to the more than 12 million displaced persons and 240 million children worldwide estimated to have a disability, as well as to the important role of girls in science. Results from performance evaluations of the show indicate that parents appreciate the positive representation of disabilities on *Ahlan Simsim* and feel that modeling such behaviors will help guide their children in treating individuals with disabilities in a kind and respectful way.
- With additional support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Ahlan Simsim is strengthening our work in Iraq through the creation of the Ahlan Simsim-Iraq (AS-I) project. Through this expansion of the program, we are creating local content with diverse groups of Iraqi children to help them develop a sense of positive self-identity and mutual respect, promoting social cohesion. In partnership with Save the Children and Mercy Corps, we have already reached over 9,000 children and over 500 youth.
- As part of Ahlan Simsim’s efforts to inform policy, the IRC, the Arab Network for Early Childhood (ANECD), Save the Children, UNICEF, and the World Health Organization (WHO) supported strategy workshops held by National Task Forces in various countries in the MENA region to advance commitments on the implementation of the Nurturing Care Framework for Children Living in Humanitarian Settings.



## CONTEXT

Globally, the needs of children affected by crisis and conflict continue to grow. While the health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have begun to stabilize, families in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria continue to be adversely affected by economic crises, political turmoil, flares of violence, natural disasters, and climate insecurity. In March 2023, the Syrian conflict reached its 12-year anniversary with no peaceful resolution in sight. Financial and economic turmoil has escalated, particularly in Lebanon, and all four programmatic countries experienced weather extremes that negatively impacted crops, health, and

livelihoods. These compounding crises place children's early development at risk, especially for the most vulnerable; having the potential to thwart progress made in this area and threaten children's education and development for years to come. Ahlan Simsim's proven models are, therefore, especially crucial in this volatile context—ensuring that children are continually supported with innovative, high-quality educational media and ECD services that build the cognitive and social-emotional skills they need to flourish and thrive.



*Jad reads together with a friend in Beirut, Lebanon. Ryan Heffernan/Sesame Workshop*

1. OCHA Flash Appeals for Türkiye and Syria Feb 2023, <https://www.unocha.org/t%C3%BCrkiyesyria-earthquakes>



*Gargur exchanges smiles with a girl and her father in Beqaa Valley, Lebanon.* Ryan Heffernan/Sesame Workshop

**February 2023 Earthquakes**

At the time of writing this report, a series of earthquakes across Türkiye and Northwest Syria killed over 50,000 people and impacted over 18 million people. Many of the families affected were already displaced prior to the disaster due to the ongoing conflict in Syria. Ahlan Simsim’s immediate support included directing families to our Arabic and Turkish video and digital resources that support the needs of children who have experienced traumatic events. The IRC will integrate Ahlan Simsim ECD messaging and support in both Arabic and Turkish throughout their response.

As an evolution of Sesame Workshop’s work addressing the needs of children affected by conflict and crisis that began in MENA with Ahlan Simsim, we have built on the learnings of this program to shape our broader “Welcome Sesame” initiative that includes supporting Rohingya refugees, migrants in Latin America, and our responses to the Afghan crisis, the war in Ukraine, and the earthquakes in Türkiye and Northwest Syria.



*Basma meets a new friend in Beqaa Valley, Lebanon.* Ryan Heffernan/Sesame Workshop

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION



Mass Media, Content, & Distribution

In 2022, its third year of broadcast, *Ahlan Simsim* launched Seasons 5 and 6, reaching children throughout the Levant and wider MENA region. Focusing on kindness towards self and others, Season 5 premiered with a Ramadan Special, and included new short formats on Literacy, Do-It-Yourself (DIY), Healthy Habits, and the new animated *Watch, Play, Learn* segments.

The primary educational objective of Season 6 was to build children’s imagination skills, both in service of their social-emotional wellbeing and their ability to cope with obstacles in their everyday lives. Children who have experienced trauma tend to engage in rigid thinking in response to a perceived threat. Imagination is a valuable tool that can support flexibility and broaden their coping capacities. Parents view the lessons on imagination in Season 6 as a means for developing their children’s thinking, problem solving, and social behavior skills.



To launch these seasons, we continued to build awareness of the show and expand its audience, while working to further embed *Ahlan Simsim* in the regional culture by featuring MBC TV presenter and Arab celebrity Raya Abirached on the show. A Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), Raya has been a strong voice for supporting and empowering children, particularly those impacted by displacement, making her a natural partner for *Ahlan Simsim*.

As of May 2022, more than half of displaced Syrian children in Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon were watching *Ahlan Simsim*. Additionally, the show saw steady growth in popularity and viewership across the region, with one third of children in the Levant (Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria); and over a quarter of all children in MENA tuning in. We continue to build awareness of *Ahlan Simsim* across the region through digital channels to achieve reach and engagement in preparation for future phases of *Ahlan Simsim*.



**Ahlan Simsim Making Friends Around the World**

Sesame Workshop has leveraged *Ahlan Simsim*'s dynamic and engaging characters: Basma, Jad, Ameera, and Ma'zooza to reach children in over 10 languages across 50 countries. Basma and Jad appear in Spanish videos and books supporting families on the move across Latin America. They join Elmo, Cookie Monster, and Grover in the animated *Watch, Play, Learn* segments connecting with children in Ukrainian, Urdu, Pashto, Dari, and multiple languages in South Africa.

A screen capture featuring Ahlan Simsim characters in a Ukrainian dubbed version of Watch, Play, Learn.



## Direct Services

Ahlan Simsim direct services integrate Sesame Workshop's educational content with IRC's platform programs, where ECD services are delivered by trained IRC facilitators, partner implementers, and scaling partners, including national ministries. As of 2022, we have reached 1.2 million children and caregivers with direct services. Over the course of the year, Ahlan Simsim direct in-person services made up over 94 percent of the total 433,533 clients. However, IRC staff and partners have continued to utilize remote and hybrid programming as an effective means of reaching vulnerable populations in conditions where they face barriers to accessing in-person services, including during times of security concerns, severe weather, or lack of transportation to a center. Ahlan Simsim reached over 130,000 children and over 58,000 caregivers via in-person and remote caregiver- and child-facing programs delivered by the IRC and implementing partners, as well as almost 43,000 caregivers through scaling pathways.

By investing in scaling partnerships and co-developing programs with national ministries and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Ahlan Simsim is strengthening formal systems for the long term. Our scope for scaling is intersectional and holistic as it compliments multiple aspects of ECD by covering education, health, and social development. Across 14 different scaling pathways, our work with national partners and ministries in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Northeast Syria across education, health, and social development reached almost 200,000 children.

These programs include variations on a school readiness program being implemented across different



countries and ECD Health Integration Program in Jordan, and the establishment of nursery standards in Lebanon. In Iraq, the Ministry of Education (MoE) Technical Committee played a major role in convincing Ministry decision makers to successfully adopt the School Readiness Program in the national plan, and in ensuring all education directorates provide buy-in and prioritize the program. Increased ownership by local actors is not limited to government partners. In NWS, network members are integrating Ahlan Simsim activities across their different programming, and many consider it to be the most efficient ECD programming in the country.

### Scaling Content with the Iraq MoE: School Readiness Program

Following the successful piloting of the School Readiness Program in 2021, the IRC and the Iraqi MoE conducted a co-design workshop in July 2022 to discuss scalability for the program's future. Several materials were developed to support technical supervisors, trainers, and teachers to build their capacities and enhance their knowledge and skills on ECD and school readiness topics. This material includes: a Training-of-Trainers Manual; a Resource Guide; a School Activities Manual; a School Activities Worksheets Annex; a Caregivers Awareness Sessions Manual; and monitoring tools to assess children's progress. All materials and mass media content were shared with trainers and teachers on USBs following the trainings. Teachers were also provided with links to mass media materials, such as videos, songs, storybooks, busy pictures, and DIY videos, to be shared daily with the caregivers to continue the learning process at home.

## PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION



### Influencing Policy & Practice

Through the work of Ahlan Simsim, Sesame Workshop and the IRC are leading global advocates for:

- **Raising awareness of the needs of young children and caregivers in humanitarian response**
- **Increasing investments in ECD in crisis response**
- **Improving quality of ECD service provision in crisis contexts**

Working alongside the Play to Learn (PtL) program funded by the LEGO Foundation, we continued our efforts to demonstrate the need for and value of ECD in humanitarian programming by using evidence to highlight successful strategies and interventions and providing frameworks on how to integrate and streamline efforts within the global humanitarian system. Our advocacy continues to influence major bilateral and multilateral donors to increase their investment in ECD in crisis contexts, improve the coordination and evaluation of their work in this area, and champion the issue in their realms of influence. Over the course of 2022, we also expanded the knowledge and evidence base of ECD in humanitarian response with the release of reports and articles on our programs and research.



Advocacy highlights include:

- **Sesame Workshop presented before the UN Security Council on the importance of reaching young children in crisis contexts.** This provided us an unparalleled opportunity to spotlight the specific needs of Ukrainian children, as well as draw attention to the larger global challenge.
- **We secured additional funding in the U.S. federal budget for key issues of young children in U.S. foreign aid,** including increased funding for the Office for Vulnerable Children, which oversees some of the most important early childhood interventions.
- We collaborated with the Early Childhood Development Action Network’s (ECDAN) Global Policy & Advocacy Advisory Group (GPAAG) to encourage thought leadership around its Global Childcare Campaign; in turn working collaboratively to engage with the World Bank **to drive a more seamless narrative around the intersection of ECD and women’s economic empowerment in crisis contexts.**
- In collaboration with our teams across the Middle East, Bangladesh, and Colombia, we are **producing seminal evidence on how to effectively coordinate services for early childhood in crisis contexts. This will be used to advocate for UN-level reforms around ECD.**





## Research – Impact Evaluations

A critically important dimension of the Ahlan Simsim program is our commitment to nearly doubling the amount of research on ECD in contexts of conflict and crisis. NYU Global TIES for Children is the program’s research partner, leading three impact evaluations on different aspects of our work: the *Ahlan Simsim* show; remote early learning support for caregivers and children that integrate *Ahlan Simsim* content; and a phone call-based program providing support to caregivers of children aged 0-3. The results of each of these studies indicate that Ahlan Simsim’s interventions are having profound positive impacts on children’s learning and caregiver wellbeing.

### Mass Media (Jordan)

The Ahlan Simsim mass media evaluation set out to determine the impact of viewing *Ahlan Simsim* video content on children’s knowledge about emotions and self-regulation. Through this evaluation, we have been able to assess changes in children’s learning across a spectrum of social-emotional skills, in line with the developmental approach of the show’s curriculum. Our results show both a significant increase in children’s ability to identify emotions and in their ability to apply emotional regulation strategies in their everyday lives. **This evidence illustrates the potential and unique value of utilizing mass media as a means to communicate and deliver important Social Emotional Learning (SEL) messages to large, diverse groups of children around the world.** Since exposure to prolonged stress during these critical early years can inhibit brain development and have lasting effects on learning, health, and behavior, these findings demonstrate the promise of utilizing mass media to address emotional regulation and other SEL skills to help children navigate adverse experiences, such as conflict and displacement.

### Media Integrated Remote Early Learning (Lebanon)

This evaluation seeks to identify what level of impact a remote early learning intervention has on children’s early learning and development. Early results show significant improvements in children’s literacy and numeracy; improvements achieved in a relatively short span of time (11 weeks). **This evidence is compelling as it shows that remote learning that incorporates educational media resources can be extremely effective in delivering key lessons, comparable to a year of preschool for emergent literacy and numeracy. This is particularly important for crisis-affected communities around the world, who may not have access to safe, consistent in-person educational opportunities.**

### Phone-Based Reach Up & Learn (Jordan)

This study is among the very first causal impact evaluations of an audio-only caregiver intervention in a low- or middle-income country (LMIC) and the first, to our knowledge, in a humanitarian context. Our analysis found positive effects of the phone-based RUL intervention in three areas: improvements in caregiver depressive symptoms, enhanced call quality, and increased *Ahlan Simsim* TV show co-viewership. **This study shows that building a supportive, non-judgmental space to impart parenting advice through audio-only delivery is not only possible—but can be life-changing—alleviating stress and lowering depression symptoms in parents and caregivers.** Based on our findings, we have several recommendations for further research and ways in which future phone-based programs could be designed to include increasing the duration and/or frequency of calls and providing supplementary materials, such as visual aids or video calls.



*Elmo learns with friends at a school in Saida, Lebanon.* Ryan Heffernan/Sesame Workshop

## RISKS, OPPORTUNITIES, LESSONS, & FINDINGS

As a program, we continually monitor a range of risks that pose threats to our ability to reach the most vulnerable families with our services and hinder the work of the broader humanitarian system. During 2022, extreme weather exacerbated economic conditions and created health crises. The limited availability of resources, including water, throughout the region has escalated political tensions and increased the vulnerability of those already in need. In March 2023, the Syrian conflict marked its 12th anniversary, with no peaceful resolution in sight. Lebanon's continued political uncertainty and economic decline has worsened over the past year, leading to over 40 percent of its population now requiring humanitarian assistance. In Iraq, despite some progress in forming a new government and resettling internally displaced families, out of a population of 44.5 million, 4.1 million people remain in need of humanitarian assistance. While we achieved meaningful success

in reaching children with ECD services through some of our scaling pathways, we remain deliberately cautious to align with existing and/or shifting national priorities in a turbulent context.

Over the course of the project, we have learned that the success of scaling efforts depends on a number of factors, including identifying and fostering an internal champion within a ministry's structure to whom Ahlan Simsim can be allied with to advance national policies and practices on ECD. Creating buy-in at the onset of the process through governance and coordination is also critical to ensure joint creation and ownership. By approaching scaling opportunities with flexibility and a focus on addressing a ministry's core objectives, we have been able to explore and adapt our approaches to strengthen the systems that supports children and caregivers.

## LOOKING AHEAD

In Year Five, we achieved significant success across all areas of Ahlan Simsim, positioning us to build upon the momentum we have generated over the course of the project, to support the transition of our activities into sustainable pathways beyond the end of the project.

One of Ahlan Simsim's biggest opportunities lies in leveraging our learning, including the results of our impact research, to develop two new programmatic concepts: one in support of children's transition from pre-primary to primary school and the other in support of caregivers and educators who are providing nurturing care and learning support to children. By serving the entire ecosystem of a child, including supporting their educational transitions and the mental wellbeing of those that support and care for them, we can holistically strengthen systems that work for children and families, and adapt, build upon, and scale these models in other humanitarian contexts.

### Mass Media

- Season 7 of *Ahlan Simsim* launched during Ramadan in March 2023, and Season 8 will launch in the fall of 2023.
- Our regional and national broadcasters have expressed their intention to continue to air previous seasons of *Ahlan Simsim*, allowing us to reach more children in future years.

### Direct Services

- During the final year of programming, our implementing partners continue to support the co-design of ECD content with country ministries to ensure that they meet their respective needs and will be scaled through national programs.
- Ahlan Simsim practices and resources that have been integrated into national ECD services will continue to support future generations of children.

### Research

- In 2023, we are disseminating findings from our impact evaluations and sharing our learnings with external audiences, all of which are informing the design and implementation of future programs.

- The results of our research are important contributions to building the sector and future work on ECD in emergencies.

### Influencing Policy & Practice

- In 2023, Sesame Workshop and the IRC will strengthen the inclusion of ECD in global donor and humanitarian system priorities.
- The integration of ECD into assessments and analyses has positioned ECD to remain a theme prioritized in future humanitarian work.

With the generosity and flexibility of the MacArthur Foundation, we extended Ahlan Simsim into a sixth year. Continuing to deftly adapt to the challenges raised by crises and conflict in the region, we are strongly encouraged by the results of our research and the continued commitment of our partners to support the ECD needs of conflict-affected families and communities. We look forward to sustaining the impact of our interventions and resources beyond the life of this project, and thus achieve our vision of providing all children with the opportunity to grow smarter, stronger, and kinder.



*Ma'zooza listens to a family's story in Beirut, Lebanon.*  
Ryan Heffernan/Sesame Workshop

## Nassim's Journey SYRIA



Nassim participates in the School Readiness Program. Photo: IRC

Seven-year-old Nassim belongs to a family of ten, with three sisters and four brothers. Her father works as a vegetable merchant, and the family rents a very simple house in the city of Raqqa in northeast Syria. Like many others across the region, Nassim's family has suffered tremendously from the conditions of war and have been displaced more than once during the years of armed conflict.

Nassim suffers from severe visual impairments, which have caused her to become shy and much more reserved than her peers. Her disability has also affected her mentally and socially, growing increasingly withdrawn; preferring to stay home instead of going out. Children at school often bullied Nassim, leading her to emotionally withdraw from school and to completely stop socializing with others.

However, after joining the Ahlan Simsim School Readiness Program, Nassim began to thrive. The developmental services and

support she received from her teachers and caregivers there taught her how to interact with her fellow peers. Nassim was able to directly connect with the inclusive Ahlan Simsim lessons and stories being taught. "What's in the Box," a story about a child who lives with visual impairments and learns how to use his other senses to supplement his vision loss, was particularly impactful. Nassim connected with this story; promoting her interest and engagement in the lessons and spurring her to interact and engage with her classmates.

Not only was this lesson directly beneficial to Nassim, but it also provided a teaching opportunity for the other children, who were previously unaware of disabilities like Nassim's. Using familiar *Ahlan Simsim* characters, the episode was effective in capturing and sustaining the children's attention to teach effective cognitive lessons on social awareness and emotional intelligence. The children learned



Nassim participates in the School Readiness Program. Photo: IRC

about children with disabilities and the importance of mutual respect and acceptance. Upon watching the episode, Nassim—overwhelmed with joy—began imitating the story’s character by identifying objects in a closed box using just her hands.

When Nassim returned home, she excitedly told her mother about the story and what the teachers taught her and her peers. Following this, Nassim’s mother noticed a change in her personality. She found her daughter feeling happier, more confident, and excited about going to school—a drastic change from her prior experience. When Nassim returns from school now, she happily sings the *Ahlan Simsim* theme song and moves her body and hands while singing. Her father expresses joy in seeing the change in his daughter. He notes how isolated and shy Nassim used to be around other children because of the bullying but sees that now she feels more confident and excited about school and making friends. Through the School Readiness Program, Nassim made friends with several of the other children, and they often walk to school together now.

The School Readiness Program also provided Nassim’s mother with parenting lessons and skills via a complementary parenting program that emphasizes the need for social and emotional skills in children. Through her participation in this program, she learned new coping mechanisms and discovered techniques to effectively communicate with her children to support their healthy development.

The School Readiness Program impacted Nassim’s life greatly. The happy and determined Nassim, who once refused to go to school, now dreams of becoming a doctor one day.

# أهلنا مسلم

