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Ahlan Simsim
ANNUAL REPORT

2021: YEAR FOUR

SESAME
WORKSHOP™



INTRODUCTION

Ahlan Simsim remains committed to serving the needs of children affected by conflict and crisis today and to transforming national and humanitarian systems to include all children and families in crisis into the future. After adapting our program to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the previous year, we hit our stride across all of our program’s dimensions during Year Four of the Ahlan Simsim program. Shifting into the more mature phase of the program, we significantly increased and expanded our reach across broadcast, digital, and direct services; continued our award-winning innovative content creation; extended support for quality early childhood development (ECD) programming in partnership with government ministries and humanitarian actors; enhanced our multidimensional partnerships; and continued our ongoing commitment to rigorous assessment and evaluation to enhance programming for children and caregivers in conflict settings.

Major accomplishments from Year Four include:

- **We began our second year of airing *Ahlan Simsim* with Season 3 in the spring of 2021.** At that time 5.2 million children in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria had watched *Ahlan Simsim*, with an additional 12 million children across the rest of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Season 4 aired in the fall of 2021.
- **Through ECD services provided by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), sub grantees, and a growing number of national scaling partners, we reached 550,000 children and caregivers across Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.** We are on track to pivot reach from direct services to scaling.
- **We developed the educational curriculum and produced Seasons 4 and 5 of *Ahlan Simsim*** and launched seasons 3 and 4 to both viewer appreciation and critical acclaim.
- **We expanded our digital promotion of *Ahlan Simsim* to reach 16 million views through our YouTube Channel.**
- **New characters were developed and joined the *Ahlan Simsim* cast**—expanding and diversifying representation in our programming.
- **The success of the *Ahlan Simsim* program has leveraged additional funding for ECD in conflict settings**, including complementary grants for our work from USA for UNHCR; Unilever and the United Kingdom’s Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO); GSMA; and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

- **Sesame Workshop and partners advocated for and championed the passage in January 2021 of the Global Child Thrive Act (GCTA), which elevates and integrates ECD in US foreign assistance.**
- **Lifting of COVID-19 restrictions in the second half of 2021 allowed Ahlan Simsim to continue the vital work of in-person services,** as well as monitoring and evaluating the program; the results of which directly influence program creation and delivery.

Tragically for families and societies across the region, conflict continued throughout the year, compounded by worsening economic hardships, political challenges, and the ongoing pandemic. The Syrian conflict reached its 10-year anniversary and continues at the time of writing. Across the region, the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact continued to affect communities. However, towards the end of 2021, countries in the region began to ease some pandemic restrictions—opening schools and businesses. The lifting of restrictions allowed Ahlan Simsim more direct access to children and caregivers.

As we move into 2022, these ongoing political, economic, and health crises (in addition to possible issues emerging from the evolving conflicts) will continue to challenge us, but Ahlan Simsim is well positioned to meet these challenges with resilience and resourcefulness; continuing to develop new strategies and opportunities to reach children and caregivers in crisis settings with innovative, high-quality educational media and ECD services.



Front and back cover photo: Ryan Donnell/Sesame Workshop.

CONTEXT

Over the course of 2021, ongoing conflict, economic crises, and political upheaval increased the number of vulnerable families in the MENA region. While the COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact societies across the region, governments eased restrictions in the second half of the year, including allowing schools and learning centers to reopen. Each country within the Ahlan Simsim program’s response (Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria) has faced its own unique contextual issues and challenges during this time.

In Iraq, there was a slight economic improvement coupled with a stable and credible election in October 2021. However, there has been an increase in violence compounded by allegations of election tampering, which have highlighted the ongoing political, and social instability. In Jordan, national events highlighted potential political uncertainty. Despite an increase in unemployment rates among both men and women, Jordan saw a growth in gross domestic product (GDP), which was attributed to recovery in the tourism, real estate, construction, and industry sectors, supported by the easing of COVID-19 restrictions.

Lebanon continues to be plagued by crises; increased economic and financial meltdown, political deadlock, COVID-19, and the ongoing war in neighboring Syria. The country is also still reeling from the disastrous and lasting impacts of the August 2020 explosions in Beirut. As Syria enters the 11th year of the conflict, families affected by displacement and crisis continue to be destabilized due to violence. Their challenges are compounded by the impacts of the pandemic, shortages of food and medical commodities, as well as a rising rate of inflation and increasing poverty. Meanwhile, some countries in the region have begun improving relations with Damascus, signing agreements for exportation of Syrian oil.

Despite the many contextual-based challenges faced in Year Four, we are proud to have extended our reach in services and programming; made possible by our commitment to the program’s vision and our flexible approach of adapting our work within an ever-shifting geopolitical backdrop.



Gargur helps a friend fetch water at Zaatari camp, Jordan. Ryan Donnell/Sesame Workshop.

GROWING SUPPORT

With the generous support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Sesame Workshop and the IRC launched Ahlan Simsim in 2018 to deliver early learning opportunities and nurturing care to millions of children and caregivers affected by displacement and crisis in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Since then, with the support of additional funding partners, we have expanded our content creation and reach.

- **Through the Hygiene and Behavior Change Coalition (HBCC), with funding from Unilever and FCDO,** we created and delivered new health and hygiene content highlighting healthy habits and addressing the social emotional needs of children in support of CARE and Oxfam’s work in Syria. All content was made available in Arabic and Kurmanji Kurdish.
- **With funding from GSMA,** we reached 39 million caregivers with messages on brain building, play, empathy, gender, and other topics. In order to ensure that the messages would be valued we completed important research to identify the characteristics of a messenger that caregivers in MENA would trust and ensure the presenters emulated those traits.
- **With funding from USA for UNHCR,** we expanded our reach by making our content more accessible, animating 13 *Ahlan Simsim* storybooks and creating 30 sing-along versions of *Ahlan Simsim* songs.
- **We secured new USAID/Iraq program funding** totaling \$11 million and initiated Ahlan Simsim Iraq, a partnership with Save the Children and Mercy Corps to deepen our work to promote social cohesion and youth engagement in Iraq.



A still from the animated version of the storybook *The Biggest Wool Ball in the World*.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant delays to our original plans in 2020, and while the program began to recover in 2021, we have identified the need to extend into an additional year to allow us to leverage the momentum regained in expanding our reach and in working with our national partners to scale the ECD services developed. During this extension, we will focus on working with our partners to strengthen national ECD services and to continue our efforts to influence the international humanitarian sector and donors to prioritize ECD in crises.



Mass Media, Content, & Distribution



- We developed educational curricula, produced, and launched Season 3 and Season 4 of Ahlan Simsim.** Season 3 focuses on self-regulation and perspective-taking, Season 4 on strengthening resilience through optimism and hope, building upon the social-emotional learning (SEL) foundations established in earlier seasons.
- In Season 3, we introduced a new human character, Salma,** a preschool teacher from Egypt who leads DIY segments, helping children and caregivers make crafts using readily available and recycled materials.
- Under the LEGO-funded Play to Learn program, Sesame Workshop, with the guidance from education, disability and inclusion advisors, developed a new animated character, Ameera.** The *Ahlan Simsim* production team in collaboration with The Jim Henson Company and other partners brought Ameera to life as the first ever Sesame Muppet to use both a wheelchair and forearm crutches. This new Muppet, Ameera, is a major achievement in expanding representation and promoting inclusion in our program. Ameera joins the *Ahlan Simsim* cast in spring of 2022.
- As social media trends and consumption evolved throughout 2021, we adapted our strategy for our digital social media outreach,** working with Dubai-based agency Netizency and Jordan Pioneers (JP), to develop new formats of content for Instagram and Facebook, promos, compilations, and YouTube shorts and YouTube-live content.
- We secured three additional broadcast agreements with one regional, one Iraqi, and one Palestinian channel.**
- We diversified our distribution** through the Jordan Ministry of Education’s (MoE) Darsak platform, the Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da’esh/ISIL (UNITAD), and the Children’s Museum Jordan.
- To respond to the needs of children affected by the escalation in the conflict in Palestine in May 2021, we adapted and curated content on managing big emotions for social media distribution.**
- Ahlan Simsim was nominated for a Global Mobile Award and an International Emmy.** In Jan 2022, it was nominated for the Prix Jeunesse and in February was recognized with the inaugural Gold Anthem Award for Humanitarian Action and Services.



Direct Services

In Year Four, we focused on:

- **Scaled reach - significant increase in children and caregivers served: In Year Four, we reached a total of 549,399 children and caregivers, more than double the reach achieved in 2020.** This dramatic increase in reach represents an inflection point in the program. For the first time in the life span of Ahlan Simsim, reaching over 290,000 clients through national scaling partners surpassed reaching almost 270,000 clients through services provided by IRC and implementing partners. This is an important achievement during a challenging year and these high reach numbers show that return on investment in scaling pathways are favorable, particularly in Jordan where scaling with the MoE through the school readiness and remedial programs reached nearly 275,000 children in the second half of 2021 alone.

- **Renewed in-person reach: With COVID-19 restrictions easing throughout the year, we were able to deliver in-person services for most of Year Four.** In the July-December period alone, we reached 422,614 children and caregivers out of the 549,399 total for the year. 87 percent of the reach achieved in Year Four was through in-person services. Unlike in previous years, we were also able to reach more children and caregivers in Northwest and Northeast Syria than in Lebanon and Iraq.



*Ameera shares a favorite science experiment with Basma and Jad.
Seif Abu-Rabea/Sesame Workshop.*

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION



Influencing Policy & Practice

Ahlan Simsim set out a bold vision to drive long-term positive change in how the world responds to the needs of children and families affected by conflict and crisis. The LEGO Foundation-funded Play to Learn (PtL) program was inspired by this vision and together the two programs build on this mission and lead our efforts to increase prioritization of and investment in ECD in crisis contexts through strategic advocacy. During 2021, our advocacy efforts focused on advancing three core objectives: elevating the importance of ECD in contexts affected by conflict and crisis; expanding political will and available financing for ECD in crises; and improving the quality of ECD services in emergencies.

The Global Child Thrive Act

Our work with US Government (USG) policy focused on the long game—supporting the passage of the Global Child Thrive Act (GCTA) in January 2021. Our engagement with the US Congress and the current Administration to promote robust implementation of the GCTA and increased focus on children in crisis is ongoing. We continue to supply guidance on its implementation through several channels: advocating for ECD to be mainstreamed across all US foreign assistance; highlighting the collective support we have achieved amongst the global humanitarian community for this through letters to USAID and the US State Department; following up on our outreach; and being elected to serve on the on the GCTA Executive Committee.



Nurturing Care for Children Living in Humanitarian Settings - Advocacy Brief

The “Nurturing Care for Children Living in Humanitarian Settings” advocacy brief, launched on January 13, 2021, was disseminated widely via social media and targeted emails to key stakeholders. Following its release, the IRC worked with the Arab Network for ECD (ANECD), Save the Children, UNICEF, and WHO to support dissemination of the brief and promote country level action to advance nurturing care for all children, especially in humanitarian settings. The IRC and partners organized several national workshops across the Middle East through the end of 2021. The IRC, the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health (PMNCH), and Save the Children are finalizing a concept note for multinational meetings and will be conducting outreach with relevant ministries, the cluster system or alternative crisis response mechanisms, and UN agencies to develop a targeted agenda.



Research

The pandemic continued to impact our evaluations plans, but our adapted evaluation agenda aligns with a 2022 survey on research priorities for ECD in the context of COVID-19 published by the Early Childhood Action Network (ECDAN). The easing of COVID-19 restrictions in the second half of the year allowed us to make significant progress in our evaluations in Jordan and Lebanon.

- **The Jordan MoE issued a decision in July 2021 to allow in-person education for the 2021-2022 academic year allowing us to plan for data collection and intervention implementation on the mass media evaluation.**
- **In Lebanon, uncertainties around the modality of instruction remained, the study design was altered to evaluate a Remote Early Learning program, and we adapted the study on the hybrid version of the Preschool Healing Classroom (PHC).**

Other highlights achieved in our research of the Ahlan Simsim program, include:

- **The Ahlan Simsim Season 3 performance evaluation was conducted, with up to 92% of caregivers reporting that their children learned to apply the “Stop, Notice, Think” strategy to help them regulate their emotions, empathize with others, and overcome challenges.**
- **Caregivers report that Ahlan Simsim is a trusted show that fits with their values and is safe for their child. It shows their child how to learn by playing, makes learning fun, and teaches their child new emotion vocabulary words.**

We are continuing to expand our expertise on conducting research in crisis settings and are incorporating our lessons into practice.

*Basma and Jad share a fun moment with friends.
Ryan Donnell/Sesame Workshop.*



RISKS, OPPORTUNITIES, LEARNINGS, AND FINDINGS

At the time of writing this report, Russia has begun a military assault on Ukraine; unsettling geopolitical dynamics and adding to regional instability throughout MENA. Russia remains a significant military and political actor in relation to Syria and is a critical economic actor with countries across the region.

Countries in the region also face their own internal instability. Political and economic instability remain significant risks to the wellbeing of families and to the support children receive during their critical early learning years. Unfortunately, the growing political and economic instability in Lebanon has resulted in a significant impact on families and children in the country, particularly those affected by crisis and displacement. While our colleagues working in Lebanon have adapted our approaches to this limiting context, volatility remains a risk to families and our ability to reach them with our content and services. The IRC continues to work closely within the international community in Lebanon to coordinate on approaches to support families.

Despite improved vaccination rates and reduced rates of death or serious illness, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect families, societies, and economies. Countries have eased restrictions; optimistically expecting to weather any future infection spikes or variants. We remain vigilant on the trends of the pandemic across the region. As our program models evolved to reach families through digital and hybrid models, our growing educational content, which is digitally accessible, continues to be a valued and valuable resource for children.



Basma takes a break with friends during a soccer game in Amman, Jordan. Ryan Donnell/Sesame Workshop.

LOOKING AHEAD

Season 5 of *Ahlan Simsim* will air in the spring of 2022, introducing Ameera, an 8-year-old Muppet monster who is a natural leader with a great sense of humor. She uses a wheelchair and crutches to get around and loves science and basketball. She brings new ideas, perspectives, and experiences to share with her friends on Ahlan Simsim and across the region. Ameera will appear in live action content as well as animated segments beginning in Seasons 5. In addition, we will produce Season 7 to extend our broadcast reach into a fourth year, as originally planned. We remain on track to reach over 6 million children with our educational show in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

The IRC's direct services will continue to adapt to remote and hybrid versions of our models and will reach the targeted 500,000 children and caregivers. The scaling partnerships with our national partners will expand beyond our initial pilot activities into full implementation—reaching 1 million children through various ECD services and support.

Through Ahlan Simsim Iraq and our new partners, Save the Children and Mercy Corps, we will deepen our curricular scope to social cohesion and expand our reach to new children, caregivers, educators and youth in Iraq.

During 2022, we will complete the field work for our four research studies. These results will help us learn from our experience and double the research on ECD in crisis contexts so we can share what works and what does not with other actors in our sector. Through our collaboration with the LEGO Foundation-funded Play to Learn and our broad range of advocacy partners, we will continue to champion for the provision of quality ECD programs and services for all children and families affected by conflict and crises. As a program, we remain steadfast in our resolve and commitment to our guiding vision—to positively transform the ways the humanitarian system provides for children and families in crises—and in 2022, we will continue to make significant progress and strides towards the achievement of this vision.



Jad and his friend take a moment to reflect at Zaatari Camp, Jordan. Ryan Donnell/Sesame Workshop.

Hamed and Tamer's Story

SYRIA



Hamed with his son Tamer outside their family's tent. IRC.

Hamed* is a 35-year-old father from a village in Idlib governorate in northwest Syria. In 2019, his family was forced to flee their home due to the conflict, like thousands of other people in southern Idlib. Hamed settled in a camp for displaced people with his wife and four children, Tamer*, 7 years old, Halima*, 5 years old, Manar*, 5 years old and Randa*, 2 years old. Three of his children were born with brain atrophy and have mental disabilities as a result.

In January 2021, when the IRC launched a local partnership to roll out the Ahlan Simsim program, an Early Childhood Development (ECD) Center was established at the school to integrate ECD services into other educational services offered by the school. Hamed would see the caregivers and children going to and from their sessions

and he was curious about what they were doing, but too shy to ask about them.

One day the center's supervisor, Ahmad* who had become familiar with the staff at the school, approached Hamed and encouraged him to enroll in the caregivers' sessions and to enroll his children in the children's sessions. Ahmad was surprised to see tears in Hamed's eyes when he responded, "I am like thousands of poor displaced people in the camps, but what I struggle to accept is that three of my children are disabled and unable to walk. They could never participate in the children's activities here. They all need milk, diapers and medicine all the time." Ahmad was saddened to hear of Hamed's struggles, and insisted he and his wife should at least attend the sessions for caregivers. According to Ahmad, "It was clear that Hamed felt embarrassed in the camp he lives in because of his children's situation. I knew the Ahlan Simsim program would help him. After much discussion he finally agreed to enroll in the caregiver sessions with his wife."

When Hamed and his wife Mariam* started attending the sessions for caregivers, they listened to the discussions about children's inclusive development with great interest. The facilitators and other caregivers showed them great levels of support and advised them to accept their destiny with no feelings of embarrassment or resentment. On the contrary, they should feel proud of being able to bring up their children so well. Mariam said, "In the sessions I learned how to deal with my daily pressures better and about the social support resources available to us. I was also advised to find time for my husband, children and I to sit together and spend time together to create a stronger emotional connection between us. This will help us understand the children's needs and feelings better." Hamed was really glad that he had enrolled both himself and his wife in the sessions.

In one of the sessions Hamed said, “All I wish for is to see a smile on my children’s faces. They have very unpredictable moods and bad tempers. They also have involuntary body movements that put their safety in danger.” The facilitator suggested that he bring his children to take part in Ahlan Simsim sessions for children. He decided to bring his eldest Tamer, at first feeling a bit apprehensive about it. Hamed attended the first few sessions with him because Tamer was so shy and introverted and would start crying loudly every time his father tried to leave the room. The facilitators realized that Tamer needed a special kind of care and patience, and with time he began to remain calm and watch the other children playing and laughing.

The facilitators constantly encouraged and motivated Tamer to take part in physical activities that only required hand movement. They also modified some of the other activities so that Tamer could take an active role in them, and soon he was moving his head and hands happily with other children while listening to the Ahlan Simsim songs. Hamed was elated to see his son enjoying himself, “I can see the happiness that lies beyond his smile whenever we get ready to go to the center. Thank you for this great feeling you’ve given me. My greatest dream has come true for now.”

The Ahlan Simsim team referred Hamed’s children to another organization that provides specialized services for cases of brain atrophy. Hamed feels that the sessions gave him the confidence to speak up more about his children’s circumstances and realize that there were positive things he could do for them, “When I finish work now, I make it a point to sit outside my tent with my wife and children and spend some quality time together every day. The sessions helped me to overcome my introverted nature to push for real positive change for my children.”



Hamed participating in the Ahlan Simsim sessions with his son Tamer. IRC.

