![International Rescue Committee logo]

INSIGHTS FROM THE AHLAN SIMSIM SCALING JOURNEY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Key stakeholders from the Ministry of Education in Jordan, MacArthur Foundation, Sesame Workshop, and the IRC convene in a high-level meeting to strategize approach to scaling.

Message from Lawrence S. Cooley

I have had the pleasure of working with Ahlan Simsim initiative since before day once. Initially, as an advisor to the MacArthur Foundation when they were considering IRC and Sesame Workshop's proposal for the highly competitive and prestigious *100&Change* award in 2018, and subsequently through Ahlan Simsim's partnership with the Brookings Institution throughout the scaling journey, I have had a front row seat throughout the process. And, as the convenor of a 4,000+ community of practice focused exclusively on the dynamics of scaling, I have joined many others in watching the evolution of Ahlam Simsim's scaling strategy and results.

Delivery of interventions and outcomes at scale demands we find ways to deliver services in an effective and sustainable way to all or most of those who need them - that requires a funder and an implementer able and willing to step up to these challenges. Because these needs cross sectoral lines, exist in perpetuity, and fall outside the range of services most governments budget for as entitlements, early childhood programs

have proven to be notoriously difficult to scale under the best of circumstances. Ahlan Simsim team faced those challenges and the extra complexities of implementing its programs in four separate countries, with displaced and host communities using funding seen by many as one-time humanitarian assistance.

In the face of these obstacles, the scaling accomplishments of Ahlan Simsim, documented in this study are particularly noteworthy and I hope they get the attention they merit. Among many insights captured in the report, I would draw particular attention to the role played by flexible, long-term funding and the willingness of program implementers to tailor and tweak interventions to take advantage of local opportunities, to reflect local circumstances, and to engage local stakeholders.

If you take the time to read this report carefully and to think about its implications for your own work, I can promise you'll be glad you did.

Larry Cooley

Founder and President Emeritus,
Management Systems International

A meaningful dialogue unfolds between IRC team members and community residents in Jordan's southern region.

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OUR VALUABLE PARTNERS
Northern Syria: The Entity of Education, the Entity of Women, the Entity of Municipalities, and the members of the ECD Network in Northwest Syria

Iraq: The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, specifically the Child Welfare Commision, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health

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Introduction

Ahlan Simsim ("Welcome Sesame" in Arabic) is a transformational early childhood development (ECD) initiative dedicated to improving outcomes for children in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, particularly for children impacted by conflict, crisis, and displacement. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Sesame Workshop launched Ahlan Simsim in 2018 as winners of the MacArthur Foundation's first 100&Change competition with additional support from the LEGO Foundation. While Ahlan Simsim was initially launched in response to the Syrian refugee crisis, the project expanded the focus to all children in need across the four countries where we worked.

Since the launch, Ahlan Simsim has sought to deliberately respond to immediate urgent needs while also thinking towards long-term impact. As such, scaling – *expanding, deepening, and sustaining impact* – is core to our approach. The Ahlan Simsim initiative integrates direct early childhood development services for children and caregivers with educational media – including the Arabic-language TV show produced by Sesame Workshop, also titled *Ahlan Simsim*.

This report focuses on insights from the IRC's analysis of the components of Ahlan Simsim led by IRC to scale these direct service interventions for children and caregivers in partnership with local actors, such as ministries of education, health, and social development. More than three million children and caregivers have been reached with early childhood services and programs through 2023[1] across Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and northern Syria, with a collective of 80 partners from local NGOs to government ministries. Approximately 90% of this reach was delivered by our scaling partners – government ministries and local NGOs with whom we co-designed interventions that strengthened national systems to improve early childhood outcomes. **These interventions led by national ministries or local entities are projected to sustain year on year to reach more than a million children annually.**

While we had ambitious goals from the start to scale and to work in collaboration with government and civil society partners, the path to scale and the development of our "scaling approach" took time, resources and a commitment to humility and learning. Along the way and with support from the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution, from Larry Cooley, Founder and President Emeritus at Management Systems International and others, we evolved our approach.

Ahlan Simsim Reach of Programs Delivered with Scaling Partners
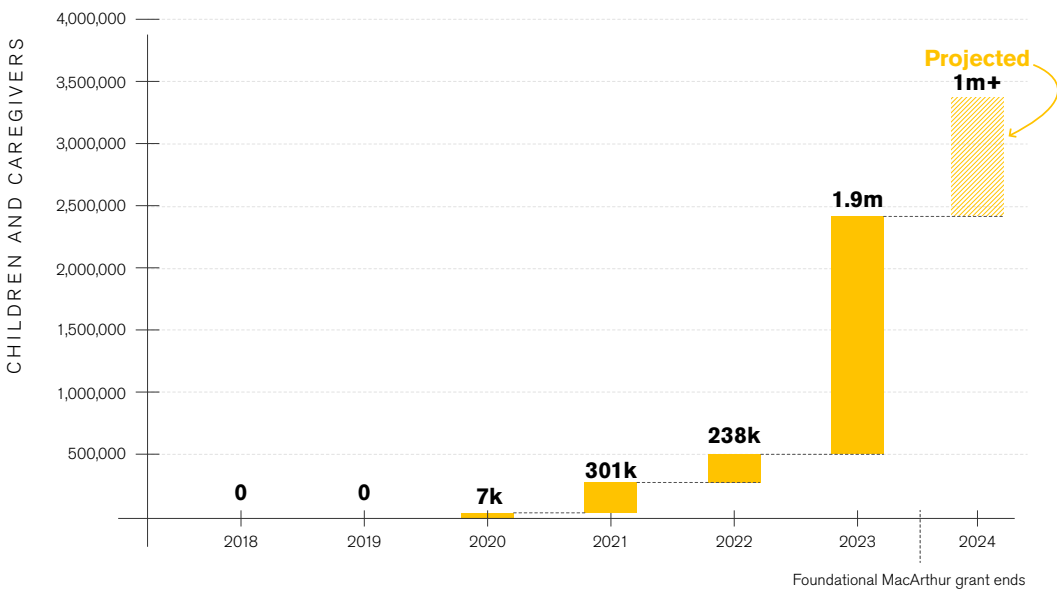
We anticipate that interventions now embedded within government systems will continue to reach at least a million children annually for years to come.

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[1] Additionally, 27 million children have watched the *Ahlan Simsim* broadcast TV show, an all-new Arabic language version of *Sesame Street*.

[2] A 'scaling pathway' refers to the combination of the scaling partner, the intervention being scaled and the avenue to integrate this intervention within a national system.

6-year-old Bailsan concentrates on completing an Ahlan Simsim worksheet.

This approach included pursuit of multiple "scaling pathways"[2] in each country, engaging in partnerships for scale across education, health, and social development sectors. This gave our team the opportunity to connect across sectors and to work towards a 'whole child' approach. At one point during the project in 2021 we were working simultaneously to scale 15 separate interventions.

The team also learned that to be most effective we had to lean into co-designing interventions with partners for contextually relevant solutions tailored to the circumstances, systems, and people rather than scaling up a single program. This work was guided with an investment mentality focused on sustainability. Accordingly, with Ahlan Simsim there was no transfer of financial resources to government ministries. We ensured that all parties brought their own valuable contributions to the conversation in a collective effort involving all stakeholders.

With learning and research as core values of Ahlan Simsim, we invested staff time and resources to undertake a comprehensive analysis of what enabled our successes in scaling with key questions: What propelled scaling and sustainability forward? What held it back? This report, *Insights from the Ahlan Simsim Scaling Journey*, presents a comprehensive overview of the lessons learned by the IRC's Ahlan Simsim team about "what works" in scaling ECD outcomes, including the factors that support or inhibit scaling. These insights aim not only to enrich ongoing and future initiatives within the field of ECD but also to contribute to the broader humanitarian and development communities seeking to scale innovative solutions to the world's most pressing challenges.

Numerous scholars, practitioners, and thinktanks have investigated the subject of scaling, all with the aim of gaining deeper insights into the prerequisites for successful scaling. Among them are prominent entities such as the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution, the Griffith Centre for Systems Innovation, USAID, and the Center for Global Development. This document draws heavily from the extensive body of literature developed in this field. It aims to strengthen the existing scaling literature by providing additional empirical support for the importance of these findings. Additionally, it presents more detailed aspects and practical examples for themes such as systems approach in scaling, the role of champions, and the importance of local ownership.

Our analysis method focused on qualitative thematic analysis, which allowed us to extract unique insights and practical takeaways, strengthening the existing literature with real-world examples from the Ahlan Simsim scaling experience. Furthermore, **this cross-sectoral and context-sensitive approach adds depth and breadth to our understanding of scaling in diverse settings.**

The *Insights from the Ahlan Simsim Scaling Journey* report is organized into six interconnected themes: Understanding the System, Ownership, Collaborative Partnerships, Adaptive Management, Co-Design for Scale, and Investment for Scale. Overall, we found that success in scaling ECD outcomes critically depends on careful consideration of each of these six themes. In cases where one or more components within a theme was not addressed, progress either stalled or the intervention was discontinued. The components of each theme are also interlinked, and many are mutually reinforcing, laying the groundwork in combination for sustaining scale through strengthening systems.

Our journey was marked by both successes and failures, each instrumental in guiding our scaling approach and strategies. **The failures we faced were as critical as the successes, and provided valuable insights that led to more effective and sustainable scaling initiatives.** A critical factor that facilitated our work across the six themes and successes in scaling was the flexibility of financing and trust from our donors and partners. It enabled the teams in each of the four countries to adapt quickly and respond to dynamic contexts and changing circumstances, such as economic instability or civil unrest, ensuring the continuity of essential ECD initiatives. **This adaptable financing proved crucial in maintaining the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions.** Ultimately, this adaptive approach has laid a foundation for future initiatives where sustainability may still be uncertain, but the path to reach the ECD outcomes is clearer.

Throughout the Ahlan Simsim scaling process, a commitment to ensure lasting impact on child outcomes has remained pivotal in understanding scaling across the six learning themes. We **aim to contribute to the collective understanding of what is needed for successful scaling in the humanitarian sector and to promote the adoption of effective strategies for scaling interventions.** While we have generated a significant portfolio of insights and learnings, there remain important questions that have not yet been thoroughly answered by this analysis. We have included these for reflection at the end of each theme under "Additional Areas for Exploration". We recommend that other originating organizations consider these questions during their scaling work.

Originating organization refers to the organization or entity who began the scaling process and started the initiative to explore solutions to be scaled within the existing system, in the case of Ahlan Simsim that would be the IRC and Sesame Workshop.

For more details on scaling pathways see Annex 2: Summary of Scaling Pathways.

5-year-old Saeed, who has Down Syndrome, joyfully participates in an Ahlan Simsim activity.

Notes on Methodology

Inspired by the Real-time Scaling Labs at the Brookings Institution's' Center for Universal Education, IRC teams engaged in a reflective process that involved a meticulous review of Ahlan Simsim's ongoing scaling workstream, examination of scaling milestones achieved, consideration of challenges overcome along the way, identification of recurring patterns, and compilation of insights across internal and external sources. The results of these efforts have been cross-referenced to compile a conclusive list of takeaways that have been validated with our team members and scaling partners.

The methodology employed for this analysis follows a qualitative approach, providing a systematic yet flexible framework for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns. This approach ensures a comprehensive exploration of qualitative data, including the extraction of meaningful patterns, diverse perspectives, and potentially unexpected insights. An iterative process, characterized by regular discussions among the IRC scaling research team, enhances the rigor and validity of the analysis, allowing for ongoing reflection and adaptation to the evolving nature of the work.

For more information on the research methodology, please refer to Annex 1: Methodology

Understanding the System

Scaling interventions that are maintained beyond the lifetime of a project are rooted in the system that serves the targeted communities. An in-depth understanding of the systems and contexts, including legal and regulatory frameworks, as well as culture is a key element to ensure that scaling efforts, both in approach and interventions, are relevant, beneficial, and fit to be integrated into the local system. It is important to note that achieving this level of understanding requires a combination of diverse skills and capacities of the originating organization, and a system and political environment that are conducive to productive change.

Culture here refers to the behaviors that drive people in the community to function as they do, the dynamics that influence the work, and how these factors affect the approach used within a given context.

Holistic Context and System Understanding

Gaining a profound and comprehensive grasp of a context and its systems enables informed decision-making and collaborative efforts rooted in real-world conditions rather than assumptions, and it requires both time and investment. The concept of "context" is intricate and multifaceted, defying a one-size-fits-all approach. This necessitates the acknowledgment of the unique elements present in specific situations and a comprehensive, inclusive approach that embraces the diversity inherent in various settings.

True comprehension of a context involves a deep dive into the diversity and intricacy of contexts at all levels, whether they are national, subnational, municipal, or otherwise. It also entails an understanding of targeted populations based on factors such as status, ethnicity, indigenous identity, language, rural or urban residence, caste, and experiences of marginalization, along with their influence on decision-making.

It is important to remember that systems are organic and constantly influenced by a confluence of factors including political, economic, social, and acute crises; however, understanding the baseline and being attuned to shifts and how they are set to impact each subset of the population can be achieved through comprehensive research, community engagement, and relationship-building. This relentless commitment to understanding the systems in place and historical context is critical.

> **In Iraq, the Ahlan Simsim team did not at first have a good understanding of the system and did not engage with the appropriate departments, which created barriers when planning to pilot the school readiness intervention.** The Ahlan Simsim team then invested in understanding the ministry system and culture and building relationships with the relevant department and key individuals. These strong relationships and deeper understanding of the system and context proved beneficial in advancing the work during later stages.

It is also important to think about which parts of the system to engage with for different functions involved in scaling activities and not only look for the most obvious ones. For instance, the Ahlan Simsim team began to collaborate with the statistics department of the Ministry of Education (MoE) only during the third year of the scaling initiative when discussion around the transfer of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) components began. However, the effectiveness of the MEL components could have been enhanced if the importance of the statistic department's role had been understood earlier and had been engaged from the outset of the scaling process.

Context-Adaptive Mindsets

Alongside understanding of the context, a strong commitment by the originating organization to provide support to the local system is the foundation of effective and sustainable initiatives, particularly in complex and dynamic environments. The skills of the scaling leads in the originating organization, including their ability to navigate the complexities of the system, adapt to unexpected changes, and effectively troubleshoot challenges, are essential for smooth scaling process. Maintaining an understanding of the changing context is necessary as scaling success is dependent on its alignment within the system.

> **The initial plan for scaling in northern Syria focused on supporting an ECD network that would advocate and fundraise for ECD.** However, when the earthquake hit in February 2023, leaving Syrian children specifically vulnerable to post-traumatic stress disorder as they absorb yet another shock. The focus of this network shifted to give higher priority to younger children in the emergency response by coordinating the provision of direct services as part of the emergency response. The IRC and partners were committed to changing the nature of the support provided to match the changing context and shifting needs.

Willingness and Approach to Scale by All Partners

Scaling work requires considerable effort and long-term commitment to problems and solutions. A full understanding of the context and system should include an assessment of the readiness for scale by all partners engaged in the scaling efforts. For scaling to succeed, an enabling environment is important. This includes the willingness of partners to embrace scaling (the mindset) and to invest effort (the commitment). Once this foundation is established, tools and processes to see the work through are required. When assessing readiness for scale by the originating organization, it is essential to conduct a thorough resource assessment, including funding, expertise, time, and capacities while comprehending the scope and nature of these needs.

Two approaches to scaling, "small to bigger" and "big to better" are useful and their distinction lies in their focus and implications. "Small to bigger" involves starting with a small-scale initiative or small pilot and then expanding its scope to reach more people. In contrast, "big to better"

takes an existing large-scale intervention and enhances its effectiveness and efficiency. For a Ministry already overseeing a system or program at scale (in the "big to better" approach), the concern is not about readiness for scale but rather how to integrate the components that will improve what is already reaching people at scale, and a focus on addressing existing gaps and areas for improvement within the already established large-scale framework. Both approaches are useful however it is important to ensure the final solution is tailored to addressing gaps and capitalizing on opportunities.

> **In the Ahlan Simsim experience, the work on the school readiness program in Iraq is an example of "small to bigger".** The program was piloted in 119 schools in 2021 and expanded by 2023 to run in over 7,000 schools. Here, readiness for scale by the Ministry was of fundamental concern. In contrast, the intervention designed with the Ministry of Public Health in Lebanon illustrates the "big to better" example. The partnership aimed to improve existing services within private daycares by developing quality standards and a unified "Under Three Years" program to enhance childcare quality in private nurseries.

Additional Areas for Exploration

- How does scaling in unstable contexts or where limited or no government structures exist look different from more stable contexts? How should the investment decisions reflect those differences?

- What factors incentivize decision makers to sustain their support/ investment in a given scaling pathway even in the face of contextual changes?

- How does policy change at the national level influence the sustainability of scaling work?

Ownership

Fostering ownership through collective responsibility is essential for the success of an intervention. Ownership ultimately means the scaling partners see themselves as holding responsibility and accountability to drive and sustain an intervention in both the short- and long-term. In some cases, the sense of ownership of a partner towards a scaling intervention may exist from the beginning but in many cases, it is cultivated along the way and is not fully clear until later stages.

Ownership can be nurtured by the originating organization in the way design and scaling processes are structured, ensuring all stakeholders are engaged along the way in discussions related to governance and accountability. This includes decision-making, resource allocation, learning and development, and continuous improvement and maintenance of quality. For the impact to last, the core of the intervention must be a shared commitment to aligned purpose and practices, as well as active investment among all relevant stakeholders. To this end, fostering trust-based relationships between partners is crucial; this speaks to the topic of collaborative partnerships that will be discussed in the next section.

A champion is an individual who believes in and advocates for a specific interest. They are willing to be innovative and take risks to support the integration in the national system. Champions can hold various roles: decision maker, technical focal point, influencer or – preferably - combination of all.

Champions within partner organizations or entities who actively support and advocate for intervention play a vital role. It is crucial for a champion to personally identify with the desired outcomes and believe that the intervention is a solution to achieving those outcomes. Additionally, if the champion holds sufficient influence within their organization to

garner support for the intervention, it becomes a pivotal factor in nurturing systematic ownership of the jointly designed intervention by the scaling partner. Once the scaling partner has reassumed complete ownership, the integration of outcomes-oriented initiatives into existing systems and policies becomes viable for long-term impact and sustainability.

Co-Design and Decision Making

Co-Design for Ahlan Simsim includes engagement with multiple stakeholders to ensure content and programs are responsive to needs, promote uptake, and designed to achieve impact. Co-design with partners such as local organizations or government refers to a collaborative structured process of planning, organizing, and outlining the components, goals, scope, resources and strategies required for the successful execution of a specific intervention, collaborating in equal partnership that recognizes the distinct contributions of each partner, and ensures alignment with partner objectives and the main problem facing the system.

The practice of co-design is fundamental for ownership; the intervention is seen as a joint effort designed with all relevant stakeholders. When key decisions are made together or led by the partner, this supports establishing – or shifting – the responsibility for the ultimate results of the scaling intervention to the scaling partner, paving the way to ownership. In Ahlan Simsim, interventions that were designed with partners resulted in a stronger sense of ownership by scaling partners and were more readily integrated into and adopted by the system. For team members from the originating organization and the partner organizations involved, understanding each other's work and a shared understanding of the scaling process is an important requirement for genuine intervention and content co-design.

> **In Lebanon, the Ahlan Simsim team collaborated with the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) to address the gap in basic standards for nurseries with impacts on the quality of care.** Due to the absence of a unified learning program for nurseries, many of them lacked clear guidance on best practices for the educational activities they provided and not all staff members were adequately trained. Ahlan Simsim and Ministry teams engaged stakeholders and policy experts to collaboratively design standards for quality care and assessment tools to measure effective implementation of these standards and identify what programmatic support nurseries would need to meet these new standards. The Ahlan Simsim team facilitated a participatory process that culminated in the ministry launching new care standards for the nation's 400 private nurseries.

The MoPH now holds full ownership for taking forward quality standards for daycares and scaling up this intervention designed under the Ahlan Simsim initiative as they are developing a national plan to address the identified issues. Throughout the design process with the MoPH, the IRC Ahlan Simsim teams primarily played a support role. The MoPH identified the main problem facing the private nursery system and subsequently a solution that met the needs and was aligned with Ahlan Simsim goals of improving child outcomes was collaboratively co-developed by the Ministry and the IRC. In this example, Ahlan Simsim teams approached the partnership with the mindset that the Ministry was the owner of defining the problem, and of taking forward the solution, while the IRC's role focused on supporting the processes of design, testing, roll out and piloting.

The Ahlan Simsim team also found that ownership evolves and usually increases over time. For example, in collaborating with partners on Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) for school readiness interventions in Iraq and northern Syria, teams found that the originating organization played a larger role in MEL at the beginning of the intervention, and a smaller role in later years as the intervention developed and the scaling partner took over full ownership of the intervention.

> **The MoE in Iraq and Ahlan Simsim team collaborated to design indicators and data collection tools, and the Ahlan Simsim team managed MEL for the first year of the program including hiring enumerators to collect data, managing data collection, and conducting analysis.** In the second year of the program, MoE staff collected data, but Ahlan Simsim staff continued to do the data analysis. In the third year of the program, Ahlan Simsim conducted training sessions for MoE staff on data collection and analysis, empowering them to take charge of all aspects MEL.

People and Relationships are Key: Cultivating and Maintaining Champions

People and relationships proved central to Ahlan Simsim's approach to co-design, develop and implement scalable interventions. The most successful scaling interventions involved efforts to identify, cultivate and consistently collaborate with champions from within the local system. Champions believe in the scaling goals and can exert internal influence towards that purpose, garnering support across multiple levels for scaling an intervention and identifying the policies that institutionalize it. They are passionate and committed to the success of an intervention and ensure that the purpose remains central to the work. Champions play critical roles in moving the work forward and unlocking challenges along the way, assuming responsibility for components of the process and are critical to seeding ownership within the scaling partner system.

Across the scaling partnerships, Ahlan Simsim worked with over 30 champions with varied roles and responsibilities. In addition to the project's teams, leadership of the originating organization in the country where the work is being conducted plays a critical role in establishing and maintaining relationships with scaling counterparts and champions. This, in turn, can help navigate complex political landscapes, bureaucracy, and influence policy implementation effectively.

Ahlan Simsim worksheet.

Distributed Ownership and Institutional Support

Systems are inherently complex and even more so in contexts like the ones where Ahlan Simsim worked, that are often marked by instability, turnover of government ministers and multiple interacting layers including international actors as well as local civil society and government. As a result, a diverse range of champions who operate at different levels of the system or institution – from decision makers to service providers or technical and monitoring and evaluation focal points – is critical for retaining commitment to and ownership of a well-designed intervention. Ownership is more stable and sustainable when it is distributed across various levels and individuals and thus supported institutionally which ensures the intervention is integrated into the system's structures, policies, and capacities, making it less vulnerable in situations where a key champion or other leader leaves.

While individual champions play vital roles, exclusively relying on specific individuals is risky. During the project, in instances where champions were replaced due to various reasons, including shifts in the context, retirements, or changes in roles, this turnover impacted progress towards scaling. This was particularly true in cases where work with that partner relied on the sole champion, and turnover of this champion resulted in pauses or delays amongst other challenges. However, turnover, or other changes had less dramatic impact in cases where multiple champions were engaged and invested in the intervention.

> **During the partnership with Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) in Lebanon, there were changes in the leadership of the Center for Education Research and Development (CERD).** These leadership transitions delayed reaching the set scaling goal for this pathway by two years – as each change necessitated generating buy-in of a new decision maker. However, in this case the presence of a champion who was consistent throughout helped maintain the basis of a relationship with CERD and thus gain buy-in of the new decision makers.

Throughout the lifetime of Ahlan Simsim, several scaling partners formed internal committees made up of key personnel from various functions within their organization. These committees were responsible for coordinating the intervention and promoting ownership across different roles, mitigating negative effects of staff turnover.

> **Another approach for distributed ownership is illustrated through IRC's collaboration with the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Iraq.** This collaboration included the establishment of a comprehensive committee comprising various departments which collectively viewed the initiative as its own and ensured that it seamlessly aligned with existing strategies. Each member of this committee acted as a champion, actively advocating for and leading the initiative.

Moreover, the strong rapport established between this committee (as a whole and not merely the members initially identified as champions) and the Ahlan Simsim team, grounded in transparent communication and adaptations based on recommendations, fostered an ideal environment for the scaling intervention to thrive and achieve success. This rapport initially began with aligning interventions with national priorities and stems from an investment in building strong relationships with the key focal points.

Staff Turnover within the Ministry (Scaling Partner) throughout the Project's Duration:

Iraq: Within two years, the Minister of Education **changed twice,** and the head of supervision at the directorate changed **three times.**

Lebanon: Within four years, there were **two changes** in the head of the Center for Education Research and Development (CERD).

Jordan: Within four years, both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health saw **four changes** in core staff.

Alignment with National Priorities to Foster Ownership

The enabling environment – made up of partnership structures, national and institutional policies, and, most importantly, people – is a critical factor contributing to full sense of ownership over the collaborative intervention by the scaling partner. By aligning the interventions with existing local strategies and policies, champions connected to a purpose can be cultivated and maintained, fostering a collaborative atmosphere where all stakeholders feel a sense of ownership towards the purpose. This approach ensures that the scaling efforts are not only effective but also sustainable. Being in harmony with goals already established by ministries aligns incentives and facilitates discussions on related subjects.

> **In Jordan, the interventions designed with national partners and Ahlan Simsim teams were aligned with the government's Human Resources Development Strategy[3] (2016-2025)** and meant the solutions co-designed with Ministries of Health, Education and Social Development matched with existing ministry mandates and government priorities. This alignment facilitated the take-up of these interventions that reached nearly one million children and caregivers in Jordan in 2023 and are expected to be taken up by Jordan's national system and sustain in the long-term.

Additional Areas for Exploration

- How do service providers in partner organizations influence the take-up of the scaling intervention, and what are their incentives, highlighting the importance of considering these factors for further uptake?

- What structures of the existing national system can be leveraged or mobilized to influence a service provider's sense of ownership?

- How can the continuity of work be ensured when champions transition to different roles, move in and out of government, or shift to civil society or other organizations?

IRC Country Director for Iraq joins children participating in the Ministry of Education school readiness program.

[3] The integrated human resource development strategy aims to equip present and future generations with the skills and qualifications needed to excel nationally and internationally.

Collaborative Partnerships

Collaborative partnerships are equal, cooperative relationships built on common objectives and an aligned vision. These relationships are characterized by shared responsibilities, open communication and a foundation of respect, trust, and flexibility. In service to scaling solutions, collaborative partnerships are formed to address agreed-upon problems facing the system and interventions aiming to create positive, sustainable change. Collaborative partnerships are inherently connected to ownership discussed in the previous section. A collaborative approach is essential for the success and sustainability of the scaled intervention.

A Note on Power Dynamics: When discussing partnerships, involved parties need to cultivate awareness of power dynamics present between and surrounding partners. Power dynamics are complex, nuanced and not easy to tackle as they are entrenched in social constructs and vary across and within contexts and partners. There is a wide array of dimensions to this including: central government/local governing body, international humanitarian actor/local actor, expat from the global north/local, expat from the global north/expat from the global south, gender of different actors, etc.

Committing to Collaborative Partnerships throughout the Scaling Journey

As mentioned in the previous section, co-design is a foundational element of collaborative partnerships. If done well, the resulting intervention is a shared product of equal partners. The timing and positioning of the "design moment" is also critical to foster collaborative partnerships and relationships.

Co-design involves allocating time for early collaboration, ensuring that all parties have the opportunity and authority to share insights, ideas, and expertise. This process results in final interventions that are relevant, meaningful, and aligned with the partner's goals and objectives. The spirit of collaboration should carry through along the journey of the scaling initiative - from design to implementation to monitoring and reflection - ensuring that the elements of collaborative partnerships fostered during design remain present.

Co-creating a detailed project plan that outlines activities, milestones, monitoring and evaluation plans, roles, and timelines based on the input and insights of relevant partners is necessary and any changes to these plans should be done jointly. During learning validation meetings, partners expressed the importance of not only designing the intervention together but ensuring close collaboration in the different phases of implementation and iteration.

Working towards Long-term Solutions while Embracing Opportunities for Quick Wins

"Quick wins" within a partnership can influence and support the eventual path to scale as they help pave the way to reach a long-term goal. A quick win could look like a minor modification to an existing intervention that opens the door for reflection meetings to think about a more integrated, long-term intervention, or could be the implementation of existing or rapidly developed interventions that respond to timely needs. These quick wins can be used to generate buy-in from partners and stakeholders who are important to the scaling process, and serve as small successes that motivate teams, while keeping a focus on the long-term vision. This propels the work toward an immediate, achievable objective that builds momentum for progress towards the broader goal.

> In the collaboration with the Ministry of Health (MoH) in Jordan, the IRC Ahlan Simsim team started by assisting the Ministry in its smoking cessation initiative, primarily targeting pregnant women and families with young children with messages on the effects of secondhand smoke on child health. Although this intervention deviated from the original plan to integrate parenting content into health services, it supported Ahlan Simsim's overall goal of improving holistic child development and positioned the IRC as a valuable strategic partner for the MoH and paved the path for the original intervention to follow. While the smoking cessation example demanded time and collective efforts from all stakeholders, other quick wins can be achieved through minor adjustments to existing interventions or processes.

A Commitment to Collective Visibility

Efforts dedicated to increased visibility for the outcome of the interventions, like organizing with the partner public events or workshops that highlight the positive impact of the scaling intervention, have tremendous potential to cultivate internal support for the intervention within the scaling partner system, alongside widespread external support in the broader community. Importantly, where work is done by the originating organization to raise the visibility for the successes in scaling interventions, it is critical to ensure partners are centered, credited, and celebrated, particularly for the scaling partners. Visibility for the Ahlan Simsim partnerships was limited and where visibility for the resulting interventions happened, often the contributions and primacy of the partner taking the intervention forward were minimized or absent, which did not support a "collaborative" way of working.

In key informant interviews, some partners voiced their concerns that IRC failed to provide the acknowledgment and credit for their contributions in external visibility such as communications about the success of the work. Failure to invest in visibility of the partner and the partnership can jeopardize the equality among partners by disproportionately attributing the efforts to the originating organization over that of partners who are taking the work forward, and as such, the IRC is actively working to rectify this issue. Although there is no comparative evidence from Ahlan Simsim to link the visibility of each partnership to the sustainability of a given intervention, dedicating efforts to this aspect not only strengthens the relationship but also demonstrates a commitment to fostering equitable partnerships.

Reputation of Originating Organization

The positive reputation of the originating organization can open doors to establish initial relationships with partners. Strong credibility can carry the originating organization a long way in establishing themselves as a promising partner. In the case of Ahlan Simsim, scaling partners reflected that IRC's strong reputation played a pivotal role in their choice of partner in the first place.

While the positive reputation opened doors for collaboration, as noted by several Ahlan Simsim partners during learning meetings, we learned that it was also important that our teams continued to demonstrate our value-add to our partner. This was accomplished through a variety of flexible high-quality program models as well as technical expertise and the ability to offer funding for the design and the pilot of new interventions; it also included bringing experiences from other contexts into the design with new partners.

> In Iraq, the intervention with the Ministry of Health (MoH) was built on content that was piloted in Jordan and Syria and was further strengthened by the experience of integrating these core ECD concepts into Jordan's health system, leveraging the Jordanian experience and contextualizing for Iraq. The results of the pilot supported IRC's positive reputation and expertise which lead to the decision by the ministry to expand the program and take ownership over the components.

Additional Areas for Exploration

- What are ways to successfully navigate power dynamics in collaborative partnerships?

- Could an increased focus on enhancing partners' visibility contribute to the cultivation of more equitable partnerships and ultimately support the success of the scaling pathway?

Adaptive Management

Adopt an adaptive management approach in real time.

Adaptive Management is an intentional approach to making decisions and adjustments in response to new information and changes in context. It is not about changing goals during implementation; it is about changing the path being used to achieve the goals in response to changes[4].

Contexts change and systems are dynamic. As such, by nature, scaling is non-linear and the capacity and willingness to adapt to change is critical for success. Accordingly, adaptive management is a must-have in scaling. Adaptive management involves understanding the needs and demands of the communities and systems targeted, as well as recognizing and responding to external factors (such as economic instability, civil unrest, changes in governmental bodies etc.) that may affect the scaling process. Flexibility and agility are critical, as partners may need to adjust or even halt a scaling pathway if it is no longer relevant or effective as contexts and needs change. By continually evaluating and adapting the scaling approach, partners can minimize waste of resources and ensure that interventions remain efficient and effective. It is critical to establish mechanisms to provide regular feedback, allocate adequate time and effort, as well as embed flexibility considerations within partnership agreements.

Flexibility has been closely associated with scaling, but it raises the question of determining its boundaries. The Ahlan Simsim team embraced adaptive management as a dynamic approach, emphasizing a dedication to addressing challenges encountered within the system and adapting to evolving conditions or contextual factors. Adaptive management is intertwined across different themes and is a core element for successful scaling.

All partners who collaborated with Ahlan Simsim regarded adaptive management as one of the most significant contributions of this project. A key enabler to the Ahlan Simsim's team ability to embrace adaptive management fully was the level of flexibility offered by donors; where funding for scale, and flexibility to pivot, was driven by outcomes rather than rigid adherence to an original design of solutions. In this case the funds themselves were a powerful contribution to the adaptive management approaches as well as the enabling environment for successful scaling.

> **The Ahlan Simism team initially approached work in Syria a traditional project-based mindset largely focused** on immediate program delivery in the face of instability and conflict. Over time, the team pivoted to working within the systems in place in northern Syria for long-term sustainability, and adjusted ways of working to collaborate with local entities and civil society actors. Flexibility in funding allowed the team to make this shift toward sustainable practices and creative thinking around partnership in complex contexts.

Originating Organization Commitment to Adaptive Management

Working within the rigidity of a system is possible when: (1) operational staff in the originating organization are engaged and understand the importance of adaptive management, (2) collective problem-solving efforts are

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4 https://usaidlearninglab.org/community/blog/what-adaptive-management

used to foster an environment conducive to adaptive management and (3) senior management of the originating organization and partners provide support and endorse the work.

Ahlan Simsim's management and leadership made the decision to incorporate a culture of adaptive management into the project's culture.

This approach facilitated navigation through rigid systems and enabled the employment of new roles such as technical "scaling leads" in each country program. These leads are dedicated to scaling initiatives, leading the process, facilitating effective execution, and ensuring that adaptive management is maintained. The role such technical scaling leads play in the originating organization was crucial in transforming a rigid internal international organization system from obstacle to enabler, working closely with colleagues across different departments and the internal decision makers troubleshooting and ensuring a focus on the scaling vision.

This transition from rigid systems serving as obstacles to evolving into enablers, requires humility from the originating organization's side and shifts the focus from leaving a legacy to leaving an impact.

> **A program developed for children under three years old was not planned as part of the Ahlan Simsim original modules.** However, based on the problem and the needs identified with the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) in Lebanon, Ahlan Simsim and MoPH made an active decision to prioritize this program. This resulted in a change in the scope of work to encompass an "under-three" program. The decision came after an assessment and careful consideration with the ministry of the added value of the program to the children rather than solely focusing on the "fidelity" to the Ahlan Simsim program and branding.

Regular "Pause and Reflect" Sessions

[This closely links to the previous theme of Collaborative Partnerships]

Reflection as part of the design and scaling process drives learning and iteration and helps cultivate ownership, increase efficiency, strengthen the partnership, manage disagreements, and maintain the relevance of the scaling pathway to the context and needs. It is a critical tool for adaptive management approaches to work smoothly and collaboratively across partners. Scaling often means changes to the system that go beyond the intervention itself to a transformation in mindset, procedures, policies, and established structures. These are important elements to scaling interventions and to strengthening systems and they also present challenges along the way.

Regular "pause and reflect" sessions offer a platform for scaling partners to reflect on the process and partnership in real-time and reflect on elements that enhance or pose challenges to the collaboration. This culture of learning and reflection is crucial for fostering adaptive management across teams. The adaptive management approach would be grounded in information and understanding to leverage key moments and pivot the strategy.

In cases where there was no space for this "pause and reflection" between partners, partners struggled to get past challenges and progress of the scaling work was significantly delayed.

> **In Jordan, Ahlan Simsim's collaboration with the National Council for Family Affairs (NCFA) involved a deep dive into the intervention's content,** leaving little room for reflection and adjustment. This content-focused approach

Iraqi children engage in playful learning during the school readiness program.

resulted in a two-year delay during the design phase. Consequently, in year three NCFA and the IRC collectively decided to embark on a comprehensive reflection and assessment exercise, which proved instrumental in identifying specific challenges that had contributed to the prolonged timeline.

These challenges primarily revolved around disagreements regarding the preferred course of action, communication barriers, and the need for support from another entity within the system to facilitate the adoption of the jointly developed intervention. Additionally, broader issues like staff turnover and delays in securing official approvals added to the complexities. The insights gained from this exercise played a pivotal role in helping the partners navigate and ultimately overcome these challenges.

Transparency of communication between partners throughout the partnership and during these reflection meetings leads to increased trust and collaboration. This openness, honesty, and commitment to sharing actions, decisions, processes, and information nurture a cooperative culture that underpins successful scaling efforts. This culture enables strong collaborative relationships, resolution of challenges, and the realization of shared objectives. Furthermore, it facilitates the identification of opportunities and effective troubleshooting mechanisms that could shield from disruptions to the flow of work.

> **Adaptive management does not always mean adding or adapting components:** it can mean dropping a component of an intervention or scaling down an entire scaling pathway. In

2019, Zaha applied for an IRC-funded initiative to provide ECD services within some of its cultural centers. Subsequently, Zaha took part in a scaling workshop where participants explored potential scaling opportunities to integrate ECD materials into existing Zaha services.

Zaha and the IRC had partnered for a year for the delivery of Ahlan Simsim programs in their centers, then they began exploring the intervention through the lens of scaling with the aim to institutionalize ECD materials into Zaha's ongoing services for children and caregivers. However, after almost two years of implementation of Ahlan Simsim material, the IRC and Zaha reassessed the work done vis-a-vis scaling and found challenges related to institutionalizing the ECD material being used, which were existing versions of an Ahlan Simsim program rather than programs tailored to Zaha's needs.

Discussions between the two organizations also highlighted challenges such as the lack of effective quality control mechanisms for ECD activities, the absence of a shared vision and minimal ownership across the different levels of the organization. Ahlan Simsim activities continued to be viewed by Zaha team members as an addition to the programs rather than integrated into core Zaha activities, which raised concerns around long-term sustainability and ultimately causing the IRC and Zaha to scale down the intervention. Recognizing this situation and making a joint decision to scale down was possible because of regular pause and reflect sessions that took place between the Zaha and Ahlan Simsim teams.

IRC team members engage local community residents to gather input on Ahlan Simsim services.

Co-Design for Scale

When designing for scale and identifying the problem that needs to be addressed, it is essential to adopt a systems-thinking approach. Central to this perspective is the belief that actions and outcomes are best understood in terms of interactions between elements in the system[5]. Furthermore, lasting change requires designing the intervention with sustainability in mind and with a focus on a vision that is centered around the problem.

Systems thinking refers to a comprehensive method of understanding and addressing complex issues by examining the interactions among various components within a larger system which includes considering the broader social, economic, political, and cultural factors.

Commitment to System-Relevant Problems

When a solution addresses a tangible gap in the system, stakeholders tend to feel more connected to and invested in its success. Tailoring the intervention to the specific needs identified by partners also facilitates its adoption by the system. To achieve that, co-development of the solution – the intervention to be scaled – should start with identifying what problem(s) the system is facing and how partners can work together to find contextually relevant solutions for them.

When scaling efforts started in 2020, the interventions were based on discussions focused on areas of common interest, the Ahlan Simsim and partners teams faced challenges in co-building flexible solutions as the problem faced by the ECD system in every context was not clear. By the end of 2020, Ahlan Simsim teams were introduced to systems thinking and the importance of identifying the main problem weighing on the system and building a solution alongside local partners. Accordingly, all scaling interventions were revised to focus on the co-identified problem and build interventions that are aligned with existing national strategies. This change in approach facilitated the uptake of the systems-relevant scaling efforts; at the same time some interventions were scaled down in coordination with the partners.

Focusing on the Overarching Vision

As a part of systems-relevant design, it is important that scaling discussions center around an overarching vision rather than be overly entangled in the specifics of activities or interventions. While the success of individual activities or interventions remains important, it should be viewed as supporting the overarching goal that all parties work towards as a collective. In the case of Ahlan Simsim, a relentless focus on child outcomes was maintained throughout the project.

This commitment facilitated alignment with partners and the design of programs which aimed at ultimately achieving that goal, while providing the flexibility to iterate activities or methods when solutions did not work. It is beneficial to include and focus on obtaining support and endorsement from organizational leaders who are capable of advocating for the adoption and prioritization of long-term goals as well as the allocation of necessary funding.

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[5] https://usaidlearninglab.org/learning-approaches/systems-thinking

> **In Iraq, the school readiness program's success represents a major win for the Ahlan Simsim team.** However, even more significantly, the forward movement of the Ministry of Education and the Ahlan Simsim team in influencing early education pedagogy in Iraq to include social emotional learning and learning through play will have an even more important impact on the development of children in early grades.

Designing for Sustainability

Beginning the design process with sustainability and institutional uptake is essential for that design to be embedded and scaled appropriately. This includes strategizing for long-term financing beyond the scope of a project lifetime and planning for resource development and maintenance. These major guideposts provide a clear roadmap to achieving the shared scaling goal. In addition, it is important to consider how to diminish the role of the originating organization in an organic and productive way while simultaneously bolstering the capacity of the scaling partner to continue the work. In doing so, the role of the originating organization is cemented as a temporary one and allows for the partner organization to absorb the technical support it provided without relying on it in the long term. It also ensures that the effects of the scaling work do not regress once the funds from a specific project end.

As part of this design process, a key factor is gradually diminishing the role the originating organization plays by setting a strategy for returning full ownership to the scaling partner. Setting strategy for this transition while work is being planned helps build ownership of the partner as it makes the role of the originating organization specific and temporary. It also ensures that the effects of the scaling work do not regress once the originating organization begins to phase out. For example, when working with partners on MEL tools related to the intervention, the IRC ensured that what is being co-developed is aligned with the partners'

existing structures and capacities, does not need additional funding and accounts for the temporary role of the originating organization.

Ahlan Simsim found that the level scaling success increases when we recognize what processes, resources, and tools are already in place rather than create duplicative or extraneous products or create dependency. This approach means an intervention is tailored to the context, aligns with local practices, and garners community support and is integrated into existing budget lines. Without increasing the need for additional resources in what are often stretched and strained budgetary environments, an intervention's chance of successful maintenance is increased. For Ahlan Simsim, this meant we didn't provide direct funding allocated from our budgets to ministry partners for programming, and rather invested in alternative support such as training, content development and sharing, and logistical support.

Additional Areas for Exploration

- What is the value of a collective systems-thinking approach involving multiple stakeholders with complementary visions (or outcomes) addressing a common problem in scaling through a comprehensive system approach? How does this affect sustainability?

- When approaching sustainability, Ahlan Simsim focused on institutionalization; what are other ways to achieve sustainability when scaling?

Iraqi students play together during a school readiness activity.

Investment for Scale

Allocate resources to facilitate scaling with strategic investments of the originating organization.

This theme focuses on the investments required by the originating organization to effectively contribute to and seed scaling efforts. It encompasses the management of resources, which includes the knowledge and skills of staff involved in planning, coordinating, executing and monitoring interventions, as well as the necessary systems for collaborative and productive partnerships that embrace adaptive management.

Note: there are parallels between the insights for scaling overall, mentioned above, and the takeaways under this specific theme. For example, understanding the system of the originating organization and shifting the mindset to facilitate this change requires time, effort and champions distributed at different levels.

Governance and Coordination

Governance and coordination take time, effort and investment of resources from all scaling partners. Effective scaling work is about bringing the right people to coordinate around the table towards a common goal. This can be heavy on coordination, communication and follow-up. Governance and coordination require effort and time to ensure smooth communication with different parties involved in scaling while navigating the internal politics and dynamics of the scaling program to understand the context and system, build relationships, and establish effective coordination and decision-making structures. It is important to discuss and plan these steps ahead, as they are often overlooked while teams focus on interventions, outputs, and outcomes without considering the time needed for governance and coordination.

The Ahlan Simsim team also found that some scaling pathways got stuck in figuring out coordination and logistical needs with the partners, primarily due to the lack of understanding of the context and systems, stalling the scaling process. An adequate investment in governance and coordination facilitates successful scaling, the amount of time and resources needed depends on the context, the familiarity of the team with the intervention and actors within the system.

Ahlan Simsim started with an ambitious target to reach 500,000 children by delivering services directly and with local partners, and another one million children by scaling with government partners. For the first three years of the project (2018-2020), reach from scaling interventions remained at zero. It was only in 2021 when scaling reach started to come in, with annual reach from scaling pathways peaking in 2023 at more than two million children and caregivers. The time and efforts investments in context understanding, stakeholder engagement and in the first three years were invisible if the focus is on calculating the reach, but they were crucial to eventually achieve successful scaling.

An analysis of the financial data looking at where the team invested time and resources related to Ahlan Simsim's scaling efforts reaffirmed the importance of investing in governance and coordination.

Children listen for instructions for their next Ahlan Simsim activity at a center in Lebanon.

> **In reflection on the overall Ahlan Simsim investment in programming in Iraq,** in comparison to the relatively flat investment year on year for more traditional humanitarian program delivery by IRC and local NGO partners, there was a significant increase in scaling investments during 2021 and 2022 for scaling partnerships. When overlayed with reach data, the analysis shows that over these two years, the scaling initiative reached approximately 100,000 children. In 2023, IRC's investment in scaling partnerships then decreased as the interventions became integrated into the system, resulting in a substantial increase in reach, with approximately 600,000 children benefiting from the programs in a single year. In contrast, reach for traditional humanitarian program delivery remained flat year on year. The graph below illustrates this comparison.

Internal Management and Processes

Allocating resources to enhance internal management and processes, which can be tailored to address context-specific requirements, allows the originating organization to optimize the utilization of resources effectively, thus fostering sustainability, transparency, and accountability. Support for scaling interventions is needed from all departments whether financial, partnership management, monitoring and evaluation, or broader management, and it should be customized and allow for flexibility. Scaling interventions are not uniform, and rigid internal systems can pose barriers to scaling ambitions as they may not adapt to changing factors. Additionally, different scaling phases require different processes; for example, an intervention in the pilot phase necessitates a different approach than one in scaling phase.

In key informant interviews, several partners appreciated IRC's flexible approach to collaboration but noted that the organization's policies and procedures were seen as barriers to scaling. To support the Ahlan Simsim scaling workstream, some aspects of IRC's management support were tailored for scaling, while others remained inflexible, impeding potential growth in specific areas or, in some cases, causing delays. The IRC has been operating in humanitarian contexts and emergencies globally for 90 years. Its systems and structures were built around a humanitarian mission, and designed to serve emergency needs with longer-term development programming and calibrate systems and structures along the way, sometimes ad hoc. This was a consistent challenge, and at times the system struggled to meet the demands of scaling goals.

> **The Ahlan Simsim monitoring and evaluation team underwent a transformation in its data collection and analysis approach.** Initially, when scaling commenced, the team followed the monitoring and evaluation methods employed in IRC's existing programs. However, as scaling progressed, the team actively listened to feedback from partners and adjusted the approach to collaboratively develop tools and processes that aligned with their existing systems.

Consequently, the monitoring and evaluation processes were tailored to accommodate the various scaling phases. Ahlan Simsim learned that while it is advantageous to invest resources in comprehensive data collection, quality assessment, and feedback gathering during the pilot phase of a new scaling intervention to assess effectiveness and support iterative improvements, maintaining the same level of rigor during expansion and scaling phases can become burdensome for all partners involved.

Reem, age 6, enjoys playful activities at home with IRC volunteer, Radia.

Staff Member Capacity

It is crucial to emphasize that using resources of the originating organization efficiently is also related to the capacities of the staff members involved as navigating situations and contexts, making timely decisions and tailoring approach are not only tied to the system and processes but also reliant on the skills of the staff members involved. Collaboration between different departments of the originating organization could help bypass bottlenecks and ease the workflow.

Recruiting the right people and ensuring staff have the right capacity for scaling is central to success. Staff benefit from skills and knowledge in areas such as systems thinking, strong networking and communication, and strategic thinking. All of these can facilitate the development of collaborative partnerships. Focal points responsible for interacting with scaling partners play a pivotal role in the current and future success of scaling interventions, so investing in their capacity, especially in cultivating soft skills essential for effective collaboration with local stakeholders is crucial. These soft skills encompass a range of abilities, including negotiation, analysis, public speaking, and reflection.

The required skills and mindset are not always common in the INGO sector or are not recruited explicitly. To fill this gap, the originating organization need to reorient its expectations for recruitment, training and coaching for staff to align the workforce with the goals laid out in this paper. In the case of Ahlan Simsim this applied not only to individuals with "scaling" in their titles but also includes teams focusing on content development, monitoring and evaluation, and project management who engage with partners regularly. It is essential that these team members can apply their skill sets in flexible ways to adapt to partner needs and systems, which are often very different from those of the originating organization.

In Ahlan Simsim's experience, having staff members who are fully dedicated to overseeing scaling initiatives when Ahlan Simsim was developing its approach drove the work forward. These staff ensured that the scaling process was actively managed, allowing for a more focused and efficient execution of the necessary tasks and objectives which was important in this context as scaling was a new concept to the originating organization.

> **The Ahlan Simsim team in northern Syria had been managing direct implementation work for two years.** When the opportunity to work on scaling in Syria arose, the team then needed to change focus. Shifting the conversation towards a systems-based approach and adapting quickly to a different way of working proved challenging. The team had good experience delivering services for children in emergency contexts but did not fully understand the broader system which created design challenges with partners, and teams struggled to co-design contextually appropriate content.
>
> Ultimately, the scaling work in northern Syria required a shift in mindset with the support of other Ahlan Simsim team members to coach and provide guidance. These efforts contributed to shaping the intervention with the Entity of Education (EoE) to adopt a scaling mindset however the two other pathways remain limited in trainings and Ahlan Simsim modules implementation.

Mariam participates in activities as part of the Smile Caravan programs in southern Jordan.

Knowledge Management

Scaling takes time and involves many individuals and organizations. Establishing a standardized and comprehensive knowledge management system for thorough documentation and information compilation facilitates the seamless transfer of organizational knowledge among team members, thereby enhancing operational efficiency. Effective handovers, particularly when multiple stakeholders are involved, are crucial, especially in scaling initiatives.

Team members dedicated to scaling efforts invest significant time in building relationships with partner teams. The established rapport and trust are pivotal to the success of scaling work. However, when these team members transition to new roles without proper coordination and handover procedures, it disrupts the process and hinders relationship continuity and as such scaling growth. In such cases, handover is not solely about knowledge transfer; it should also facilitate the transfer of relationships to ensure the preservation of scaling investments.

Partners have observed the consequences of these changes, and a well-structured knowledge management process that is not limited to activities with proper documentation can mitigate some of these challenges, this should go beyond the traditional sharing of folders and files to include the history of the relationship, motivations of partners, and how different actors influence the outcome of the work.

⟩ **In 2022, the Ahlan Simsim team dedicated to scaling work in Jordan underwent significant personnel changes,** resulting in a transition period during which other team members stepped in to assume responsibilities pending the recruitment of new members. This transition, lasting approximately nine months, led to delays in overall scaling efforts. Although content review and development proceeded as planned, the team faced challenges with relationship handover that impacted the team's ability to maintain relationships and coordinate with key stakeholders. Reestablishing trust and cultivating relationships with the new team required considerable time and effort, consequently affecting the timeline for scaling interventions.

Influence and Visibility

Dedicated efforts aimed at raising awareness about the issues addressed by the interventions can hold significant potential to boost internal support for the intervention within the scaling partner organization. Simultaneously, they can attract substantial external support from the broader community. Engaging in community outreach and advocating for the intended outcomes within the scaling partner's framework can be crucial actions to ignite interest and cultivate strong buy-in and commitment.

When working in partnership with local actors, it is essential to invest effort in actively promoting and increasing the visibility of the partnership itself to attract attention from relevant stakeholders and foster interest and demand. This not only strengthens the partnership but also attracts potential collaborators for the scaling partner or towards the objective at hand which can mobilize resources.

Additional Areas for Exploration

- How does the specific expertise and network of the originating organization staff influence the development and implementation of the scaling work?

- How do existing partnerships influence initiating scaling work with the same partners?

Syrian refugee Sulaima plays with her two children, 5-year-old Mira and 3-year-old Jawad, in their home.

Investment in Systems for Scale and Sustainability

Analysis of IRC's Ahlan Simsim investment in scaling ECD solutions within national systems illustrated how financial investments mirrored themes in this report. Note that investment or costs incurred by scaling partners was not analyzed.

More than half of the total financial investment of Ahlan Simsim's scaling work contributed to early stages focused on understanding the system and context, cultivating stakeholder engagement, and collaborating for co-design. For scaling pathways where there is a higher investment in these early stages, this corresponds to a higher likelihood of successful scaling. Conversely, pathways that prioritize implementation without adequate investment in understanding the context may struggle to transition from a project mindset to sustainable scaling. This initial investment needs at least six months depending on team capacities of both the originating organization and the scaling partner. In some cases, for Ahlan Simsim, it took much longer— even more than two years.

Learning – including 'pause and reflect' sessions with partners – is critical as outlined in the section on Adaptive Management. While learning and reflection incurred relatively low costs, the impact of these activities on successful scaling cannot be overstated. For example, in the case of the Ministry of Education in Iraq, a small investment in learning and reflection led to a significant policy change, indicating the potential for impactful outcomes even with minimal financial resources.

Interventions that are successfully institutionalized within the scaling partner become more cost efficient for the originating organization as they scale up. There is typically a pattern of investment peaking in the initial phases, where understanding the context and stakeholder engagement are crucial. As the intervention progresses and becomes integrated into existing systems, the originating organization's resource allocations to the intervention decreases, at the same time as reach increases (See image below).

Further, by co-designing interventions with sustainability in mind and embedding those interventions into existing budget lines of a ministry, this approach aims to limit year-on-year added cost to ministries in the long run, and with no ongoing monetary investment by the originating organization.
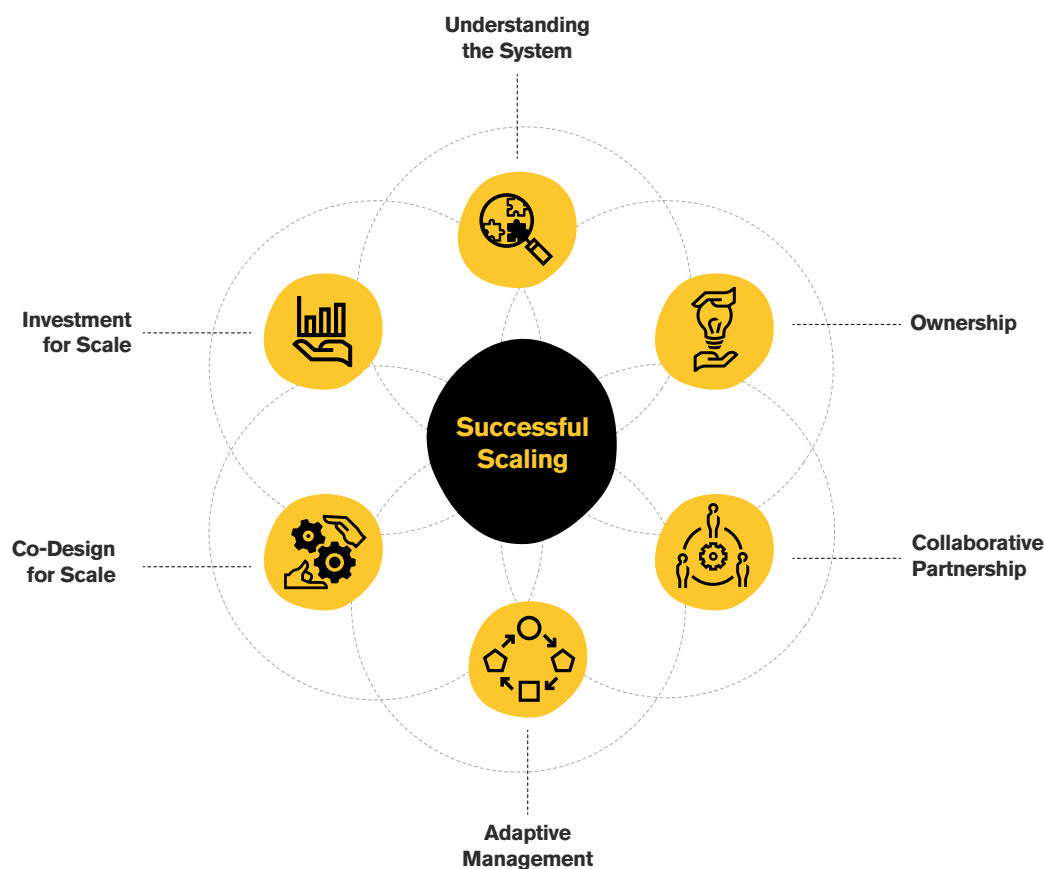
Scaling Cost & Reach: Spotlight on work with Iraq Ministry of Education
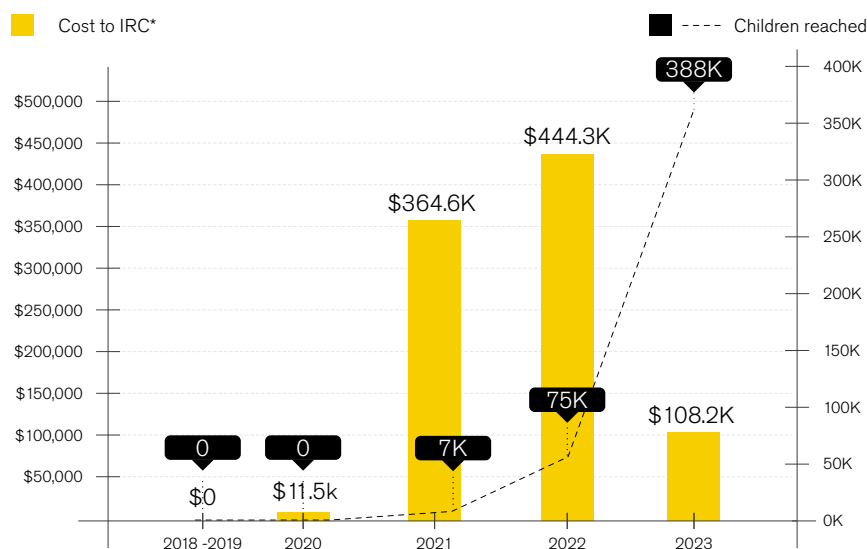
*The costs included in this graph are only those incurred by the IRC as part of this partnership for scale. These figures do not include costs incurred by the Ministry of Education to deliver this intervention.

Conclusion

Inter-connectivity of Ahlan Simsim Scaling Themes

When we started Ahlan Simsim, three things were critical in facilitating our scaling aims. The first and most important was a relentless commitment to child outcomes; this was the central driver of all our work. It influenced how we chose to partner and what we invested in over the course of the project. The second was flexible financing and trust from our donors and partners. The third was a drive for audacious goals – we wanted to push the envelope of what had been done and think outside of the box to meet our goals. From those things we created structures and teams that worked across disciplines and function, adapting as we progressed and with a commitment to learning along the way.

The insights that we have collected on scale came together in the same spirit of the project; they were identified in collaboration with partners, based on context, they have changed over time, and they represent the diverse opinions and experiences of the region that we work in. The insights themselves are a system of sorts; they are interconnected and mutually influence one another. While they have unique individual value, we have experienced them over the course of Ahlan Simsim as the people within the systems, ways we work, the things we invest in, how we make decisions and, importantly, our values.

We see these insights as a way to think differently about big projects, working towards scale and having an impact. They can be applied as much to ECD as they can to climate or other critical challenges. And they are not a panacea; we see this way of working and problem set as complementary to other ways of working that might require a more tailored approach for specific communities, and we know there are questions that we have yet to answer. Ultimately, the context, system and needs should drive the way forward. In our case that meant an approach grounded in the core value of collaborative partnerships and a focus on child outcomes.

Annex 1
Methodology

Introduction

Given that scaling is a fundamental pillar of the Ahlan Simsim program, and recognizing its novelty as a recent initiative, efforts have been directed towards extracting valuable insights from this experience. This analysis aims not only to enrich current and impending interventions but also to build on it for future initiatives. Inspired by Brookings Institution's Center for Universal Education Real-time Scaling Labs, the IRC teams engaged in a thorough reflection process. This involved a comprehensive review of ongoing efforts, considering milestones achieved, challenges overcome, recurring patterns identified, and insights from both internal and external sources. Results were cross-referenced to generate a conclusive list of validated takeaways.

IRC teams working on scaling in Lebanon, Jordan, northern Syria and Iraq have adopted tools to track and analyze pieces of scaling which aided in assessing and documenting the processes. This allowed the measurement of efforts to institutionalize an initiative, gain insight into what is working well, identify areas that require additional attention and inform plans to address gaps exposed. In addition to these tools, meetings allowed all stakeholders to analyze the data, discuss it, and agree on what needs to change to facilitate scaling.

6-year-old Faisal plays with stickers while completing an Ahlan Simsim activity.

Methodology

Ahlan Simsim employed a qualitative method, offering a systematic and flexible framework for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns. This method not only captures a wide range of perspectives and experiences but also retains a nuanced view of the diverse contexts. This approach facilitates a comprehensive exploration of the qualitative data, enabling the IRC to extract meaningful patterns, diverse perspectives, and potentially unexpected insights.

A thematic analysis is one where the data analysis begins with thorough revision and reading of the data collected where researchers immersed themselves in the information gathered to gain a holistic understanding of the content. Then generate initial codes, assigning descriptive labels to segments of text that captured significant ideas. These codes were arranged into potential themes, highlighting patterns of responses. During the subsequent phase of theme development, identified themes are refined and reviewed, ensuring they accurately represent the data and are coherent in capturing the essence of the information.

In order to enhance the rigor and validity of the analysis conducted, feedback loops and reflective learning workshops were used to provide a holistic view of the scaling process, refine the approach and allow learning from discussions to influence subsequent steps by allowing for deep dives into specific challenges or opportunities in scaling projects. This exercise of ongoing reflection and adaptation of the details of the approach was crucial given the iterative nature of scaling.

Research Design

AHLAN SIMSIM PHASES OF SCALING LEARNING ANALYSIS

PHASE 1

April 2023
—
Thematic analysis of internal IRC reflection and workshop results

March 2023
—
Cross-country learning workshop

October 2022 - February 2023
—
Country teams analysis of scaling journeys

PHASE 2

May - June 2023
—
Semi-structured KIIs with partners in all locations

July - August 2023
—
Thematic analysis of interview results

Workshop with regional team: coding and analysis

Workshop with country teams: validation of results

PHASE 3

September - October 2023
—
Triangulation of information

Phase 1:

IRC country teams across the five locations conducted thorough document revision and analyzed the events and drivers of the respective scaling journeys. Subsequently, this data was analyzed, and each country team developed a list of learnings and best practices. Building on the work on the country level, staff from the Ahlan Simsim teams across the region came together in March 2023 for a reflective learning workshop to exchange and discuss scaling learnings and examine patterns across countries. Based on the preliminary analysis of information gathered, the experience of Ahlan Simsim staff and the discussions during the regional workshop, recurring themes that are cross-country and cross-pathway were used to generate key takeaways from the originating organization's perspective.

Phase 2:

To ensure takeaways are not only representative of the IRC perspective semi-structured key informant interviews were also conducted with the scaling partners who were involved in the design, planning, and implementation of Ahlan Simsim across the five locations with a total of 16 interviews carried out with the focal points from the partner organizations.

Key stakeholders were asked questions around their general experience, reoccurring themes they observe, insights gained and potential modifications they would have considered. The data collected from these discussions were thematically analyzed by the IRC team focused on scaling, identifying overarching themes. Afterwards, a reflection workshop involving country teams was convened to delve deeper into and examine the outcomes derived by the smaller IRC team, and develop takeaways based on the perspective of IRC partners.

Phase 3:

The data generated from phases 1 and 2 underwent further analyses and triangulation by the IRC team focused on scaling to the creation of a final list of takeaways that encompasses the insight generated by the IRC and partners. Subsequently, the triangulated information was validated by the broader IRC team to refine the result of the analysis and compile a definitive list of key insights. This compilation then went through a final round of validation by the IRC partners to produce the final list of insights.

Limitations

- Data management and staff changes: inadequate documentation and high staff turnover led to a loss of institutional memory, affecting document analysis and reflection.

- Tool usability and data reliability: tools (Scalability Assessment and Institutionalization Assessment) were inconsistently used across countries, with varied interpretations, making them unreliable data sources.

- Influence of project phase-out discussions: discussions occurred during the project phase-out, potentially limiting comprehensive information incorporation due to rushed responses.

- Time constraints and study phases: study timelines tied to project schedules led to condensed phases, affecting the depth and thoroughness of data collection, analysis, and reflection.
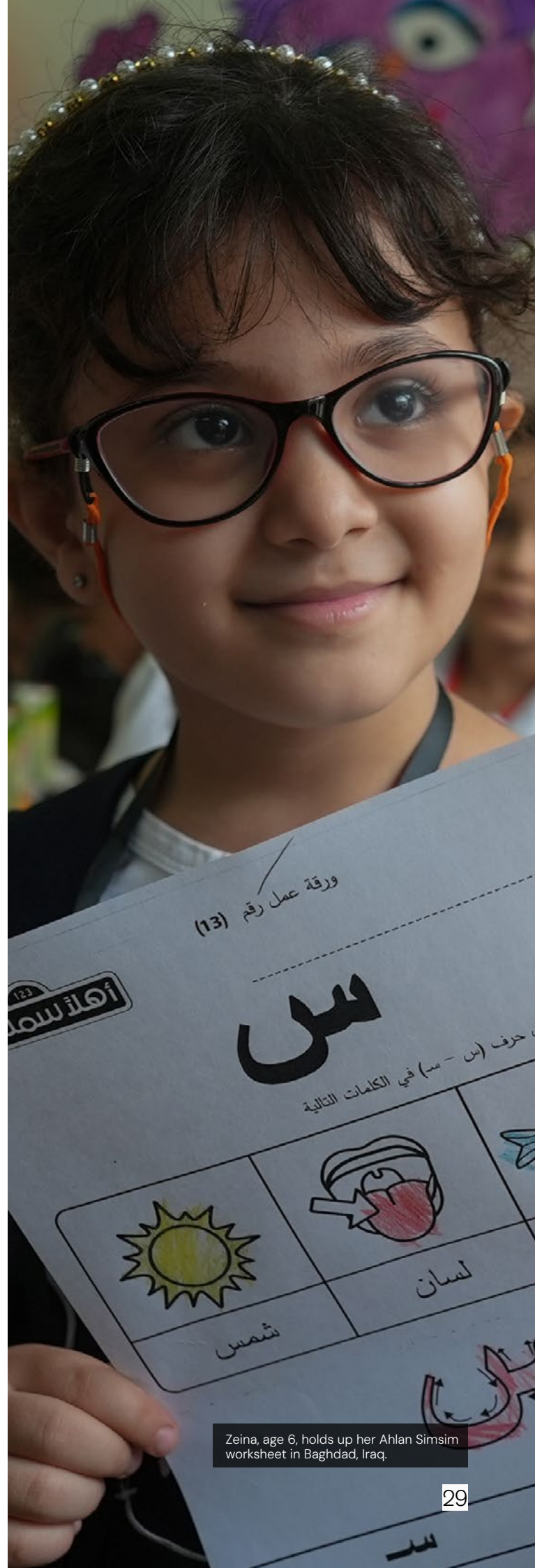
Zeina, age 6, holds up her Ahlan Simsim worksheet in Baghdad, Iraq.

Annex 2

Ahlan Simsim: Scaling Quality ECD & Strengthening National Systems

Ahlan Simsim is an early childhood development (ECD) initiative of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Sesame Workshop. It aims to restore hope and opportunity for a generation, ensuring that children aged 0 to 8 affected by conflict and crisis in the MENA region are supported with cost-effective, adaptable, and contextualized ECD solutions that are scaled and sustained for long-term impact. Ahlan Simsim leverages the power of educational mass media alongside direct services and programs integrated across **education**, **health**, and **social development** sectors, to support children's healthy development and set them on a path to a brighter future.

Contextually relevant ECD solutions, which are co-developed and implemented with national partners, focus on meeting the national needs of young children and on strengthening the systems which support them. We use the term "scaling pathway" to represent these solutions. Each scaling pathway is comprised of the lead system actor for scaling, the solutions that are being scaled, and the channel

through which a solution is delivered within the system (e.g., integration into existing health clinics, daycares, or primary school classrooms). The portfolio of Ahlan Simsim scaling pathways aims to expand and deepen ECD impact and strengthen existing systems to create sustained change in children's lives. Across Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria, Ahlan Simsim teams collaborate with a variety of partners to embed support for ECD into national infrastructure and institutionalize ECD as a shared priority. The following pages provide summaries of the variety of scaling pathways across the Ahlan Simsim initiative. Note that estimates for "Annual Reach at Scale" refer to the number of children a scaling pathway would optimally reach when considered "at scale". This is defined as the total population of children who can be reached via that channel; for example, if a solution is being scaled via public health clinics, the annual reach at scale is the total population of children in the targeted age range who access those services annually.

IRC Ambassador Sepideh Moafi engages in Ahlan Simsim activities in a center in Jordan.

Iraq

Education

Vision: Quality early childhood education led by the **Ministry of Education** is enhanced with strengthened services which include social-emotional and learning through play resources.

Current Intervention: 2-week school readiness program that eases the transition into primary school. The program is implemented by teachers during the first two weeks of the school year for grade 1 students. Currently working with the ministry on the integration of social-emotional learning focused resources into the full year curriculum for first three years of school by supporting the capacity building of the curriculum developers.

Annual Reach at Scale: All children who enter grade 1 every year in Iraq (approximately 965k).

Achievements/Status: Readiness program piloted in 2021 in 119 schools, reaching 7k children, expanded in 2022 to 1,800 schools across Federal Iraq, reaching 77k children and in 2023 to reach 388k children. Ministry committed to inclusion of readiness program in national education plan, mandating implementation of the program nation-wide. 30 curriculum developers were trained and developed activities that include SEL and LtP.

Health

Vision: ECD resources and support are integrated into services led by the **Ministry of Health** in their primary health centers in Iraq, ensuring high levels of ECD knowledge among health care providers and caregivers of children aged 0-8 years.

Current Intervention: ECD resources and support integrated into primary health centers run by the Ministry, with information and guidance for parents delivered during well-child visits (ages 0-8 years) and play-based interactive physical activity spaces ("ECD corners") installed in waiting areas.

Annual Reach at Scale: All children under 6 in Iraq who access public health services, an estimate of 1.27 million children per year.

Achievements/Status: 155 doctors, nurses and midwives were trained on ECD content across all governorates and 85 of those trained will cascade the training to reach all Primary Healthcare Centers. ECD corners have been installed in clinics in Moussel, Karbala and Babel. The intervention reached 230k children and caregivers so far.

Social Development

Vision: **Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs** actors at national and governorate levels are equipped with knowledge and skills necessary to advocate for prioritization of quality ECD services for children aged 0-8 years, tailored to each local governorate's needs.

Current Intervention: Provision of support to Ministry partners under the Child Welfare Commission (CWC) to increase ECD knowledge, resources, and capacity-strengthening opportunities to conduct targeted advocacy. Child and family welfare policies and services, existing and new, take into consideration the needs of children aged 0-8 years.

Annual Reach at Scale: This intervention focuses on policy and advocacy; reach to be determined as the result of advocacy work becomes entrenched.

Achievements/Status: 29 CWC focal points from 15 governorates in Federal Iraq have been trained on ECD and advocacy tactics, with workplans for prioritization of ECD underway across all 15 governorates.

Jordan

Education

Vision: Quality early childhood education led by the **Ministry of Education** is enhanced by strengthening existing services with social-emotional and learning through play resources for teachers and students for KG2 and grades 1-3.

Current Intervention: 3-week school readiness program implemented by teachers prior to the start of the school year for grade 1 students to ease the transition into primary school. This comes alongside in-process integration of core Ahlan Simsim social-emotional and learning through play resources into teacher professional development and teacher resources, to influence wider teaching across KG2-grade 2 beyond the school readiness program.

Annual Reach at Scale: Estimated at all children entering grade 1, approximately 120k children per year.

Achievements/Status: The school readiness program reached close to 4k children in 2022, and integration of social-emotional and learning through play components into teacher guides for KG2 and science and math for grade 1 and 2, reached 365k children.

Health

Vision: Awareness, knowledge, and provision of resources that promote ECD practices among health care providers with the **Ministry of Health** is increased to be shared with caregivers and their children during health appointments.

Current Intervention: ECD knowledge and tips are incorporated into health provider training with accompanying resources. Health providers (nurses and midwives) deliver this information and guidance for parents during regular well-child visits for children aged 0-5 years. This is complemented with installation of physical ECD corners in waiting areas.

Annual Reach at Scale: All children accessing healthcare centers across Jordan (estimated at approximately 150k per year); available data indicates approx. 60% of children in Jordan are seen for check-ups in Ministry-run health clinics.

Achievements/Status: 40 Ministry staff equipped as master trainers, later cascading the training to reach 187 midwives reaching 815k children by December 2023. The program now has widespread support from the Ministry, which has plans to expand aiming to scale up the program to support close 36% of children up to age five in the Kingdom by end of 2024 and the training is integrated in the ministry promotion system for all health workers.

Social Development

Vision: The quality of nurseries and daycares in Jordan adhere to a set of high quality, holistic standards and are endorsed by key ECD actors in Jordan led by the **National Council of Family Affairs**.

Current Intervention: Tailored Quality Management System (QMS) has been co-developed and made available to daycares and nurseries to monitor practices in addition to certification licensing and in-service training for staff.

Annual Reach at Scale: All children accessing daycares in Jordan (approximately 15k).

Achievements/Status: QMS was piloted in selected nurseries and made available via the Ministry's learning and resources platform. The in-service training has been reviewed, finalized, and endorsed by the Technical and Vocational Skills Development Commission.

Lebanon

LEBANON

Mediterranean Sea

Education

Vision: Quality of the formal curriculum, overseen by **the Ministry of Education & Higher Education** and implemented in formal education services, is improved to include social-emotional learning and learning through play components.

Current Intervention: Ahlan Simsim social-emotional learning and learning through play activities integrated into the Ministry's on-line and in-person formal education services.

Annual Reach at Scale: Children entering grade 1 in public schools; notes that this number continues to fluctuate as the national economic context shifts.

Achievements/Status: Digital program resources have been uploaded to the Ministry's digital learning platform for online access and two consultants supported the curriculum development committees. Ahlan Simsim materials were integrated in SEL toolboxes that reached 79k children.

Health

Vision: Quality ECD is institutionalized in private nurseries across Lebanon and is overseen by the **Ministry of Public Health**, to improve the well-being of children aged 0-5 by ensuring healthy, child-friendly, inclusive, and safe services.

Current Intervention: Comprehensive quality standards covering eight domains from infrastructure to governance and curriculum to serve as accreditation system for private nurseries. "Under Three Years" was developed to support nurseries to achieve standards.

Annual Reach at Scale: All children entering nurseries overseen by the Ministry each year in Lebanon (approximately 25k).

Achievements/Status: Standards have been launched as of June 2022 and assessment finalized. A curriculum targeted to the needs of children under three years has been finalized. The intervention reached 14k children.

Social Development

Vision: Quality ECD is institutionalized in **Ministry of Social Affairs**-run public daycares across Lebanon to improve the well-being of children aged 0-5 years, spearheaded by the Ministry, by ensuring healthy, child-friendly, inclusive, and safe services.

Current Intervention: Comprehensive quality standards covering eight domains from infrastructure to governance and curriculum to be implemented in all daycares.

Annual Reach at Scale: With the current crisis in Lebanon and impacts on economy, this number is being reassessed.

Achievements/Status: Standards are finalized, and an assessment was developed and implemented by social workers working in the Ministry. This pathway reached 1.5k children. Even in the face of this uncertainty and limited reach, this avenue to reach children is important since Ministry-run nurseries reach one of the most vulnerable groups of children in Lebanon.

Northern Syria

Education

Vision: Quality early childhood education with the **Entity of Education (EoE)** in the northeast region of Syria is enhanced by strengthening existing services with social-emotional and learning through play resources.

Current Intervention: 2-week school readiness program implemented by teachers during the first two weeks of the school year for grade 1 students, to ease the transition into primary school and bolster preparatory education opportunities. Content development for KG3 is in process.

Annual Reach at Scale: All children entering grade 1 (estimated at approx. 200k per year) in the northeast region of Syria.

Achievements/Status: Program has been piloted in 71 schools in 3 districts of the region, led by the Entity and reached close to 5k children. The readiness program was reviewed and translated into Kurdish to ensure inclusion of all children. In 2023 the readiness program expanded to reach 104k children.

Social Development

Vision: Increased access for children and their caregivers to quality ECD resources and services available through centers run by the **Entity of Municipalities (EoM).**

Current Intervention: A co-designed ECD program targeting children and their caregivers. The program is influenced by existing Ahlan Simsim program models, tailored to address the needs of families in northeast Syria. It is implemented by entity center facilitators in municipalities and is supported with training and coordinating resources.

Annual Reach at Scale: Still to be determined.

Achievements/Status: Two Ahlan Simsim modular, flexible programs (Ahlan Simsim Friends targeting children and Ahlan Simsim Families targeting caregivers) were piloted in the Derek Municipality, reaching over 500 children in 2022. The intervention was reviewed, and IRC and EoM teams are currently developing adaptations to the program content which is tailored and contextualized to meet the needs of children in northeast Syria.

Social Development

Vision: Daycare workers with the local **Entity of Women (EoW)** are well-equipped with knowledge, skills, and resources on holistic and high quality ECD care.

Current Intervention: A co-created ECD program, tailored to address the gaps defined by the local authority, is implemented by daycare workers supported with training and coordinating resources. The program is influenced by existing Ahlan Simsim program models.

Annual Reach at Scale: Currently being assessed.

Achievements/Status: Piloted the Ahlan Simsim modular, flexible programs (Ahlan Simsim Friends targeting children and Ahlan Simsim Families targeting caregivers) in three centers run by local authorities, reaching close to 800 children in 2022. Through evaluation of the pilot, IRC and EoE of Women teams adapted the content to best fit needs of children in northeast Syria.

Cross-sectoral

Vision: ECD is prioritized in programming in the northwest part of Syria; **Syrian ECD Network** (of member NGOs) is leading ECD programs, advocacy, and fundraising for the region.

Current Intervention: Equipping local NGOs in northwest Syria with organizational and technical capacity to lead on ECD advocacy and programming.

Annual Reach at Scale: Optimally, through the work of the Syrian ECD Network, all children benefitting from involved NGOs would access ECD services; numbers to be determined.

Achievements/Status: 19 NGO members have joined the Network with governance structures in place; advocacy in Education and Protection sectors has led to the increased inclusion in Humanitarian Cluster system priorities.

6-year-old Bailsan concentrates on completing an Ahlan Simsim activity book.

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INSIGHTS FROM THE AHLAN SIMSIM SCALING JOURNEY