

**AHLAN SIMSIM
MONITORING, RESEARCH,
AND EVALUATION
PRACTICES WHEN BRINGING
PROGRAMS TO SCALE**

BRIEF - MAY 2024



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The IRC Ahlan Simsim MEL, scaling and partnership, and program management teams who worked with scaling partners on MEL in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, northern Syria, and MENA regional office.

OUR VALUABLE PARTNERS

Northern Syria: The Entity of Education, the Entity of Women, and the Entity of Municipalities

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

Lebanon: The Ministry of Public Health, the Ministry of Social Affairs, and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, specifically the Center for Educational Research and Development

Jordan: The Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Social Development, specifically the National Council for Family Affairs

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INTRODUCTION

Ahlan Simsim, or “Welcome Sesame” in Arabic, is a **transformational initiative from the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Sesame Workshop to bring early childhood development and playful learning to children affected by conflict and crisis** in the Middle East. Sesame Workshop and the International Rescue Committee launched Ahlan Simsim in 2018 with funding from the MacArthur Foundation and with additional support from the LEGO Foundation. While Ahlan Simsim was initially launched in response to the Syrian refugee crisis, the project expanded to focus on all children in need across the four countries where we operated: Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

Since the launch, Ahlan Simsim has sought to deliberately respond both to immediate urgent needs while also thinking towards long-term impact. Scaling – expanding, deepening, and sustaining impact – is core to our approach. The Ahlan Simsim initiative integrates direct ECD services for children and caregivers with educational media – including the Arabic-language TV show, also titled Ahlan Simsim. Monitoring, evaluation, and research are key to the Ahlan Simsim initiative to generate learning about what works to improve ECD outcomes, improve services, and for accountability to ensure that services are delivered to target populations as planned.

Ahlan Simsim has reached more than three million children and caregivers with early childhood services and programs through 2023 across Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and northern Syria with a collective of 80¹ 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.

This brief focuses on lessons learned about monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) for scaling ECD outcomes based on the experiences of IRC’s Ahlan Simsim MEL staff. This brief is a complement to IRC's report, [Insights from the Ahlan Simsim Scaling Journey](#) that presents a comprehensive overview of learning about “what works” in scaling ECD outcomes drawn from 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. Measuring outputs, outcomes, and processes for scaling work through MEL is key to identifying “what works” - whom scaling activities reach, quality of ECD services, effectiveness of services at improving ECD outcomes, and changes within systems.

This brief is based on focus group discussions and key informant interviews with 11 IRC Ahlan Simsim MEL, scaling and partnership, and program management teams who worked with scaling partners on MEL in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, northern Syria, and MENA regional office. This brief is primarily meant to guide MEL specialists working on scaling and their managers as they consider the structure and processes necessary to conduct high-quality MEL for different types of scaling activities, but may also be useful to anyone working on scaling.

[1] Additionally, 27 million children have watched the Ahlan Simsim TV show across the MENA region.

DEFINITIONS

SCALING

As defined by the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution, scaling is about expanding, deepening, and sustaining impact rather than growing an organization or a specific model. Scaling can occur in several ways—"from deliberate replication to organic diffusion to integration into national systems—that expand and deepen impact leading to lasting improvements in people's lives."

ORIGINATING ORGANIZATION

The stakeholders (ministry, NGO, local actor, INGO or private sector) who will adapt, co-develop and ultimately deliver at scale and in a sustained manner

SCALING PARTNERS

The organization or entity who initiated the scaling process and started the initial initiative to explore solutions to be scaled within the existing system. In the case of Ahlan Simsim, "originating organization" references either or both IRC and Sesame Workshop

MEL TEAMS

Staff from originating organizations and scaling partners responsible for ensuring that all aspects of a project's MEL activities are implemented effectively. This includes ensuring that programs, policies, and/or processes of scaling are on track to achieve their objectives and to inform continuous improvement. In addition to collecting and analyzing data, assessing outcomes and impacts, and facilitating the integration of insights and learnings into future planning and decision-making with stakeholders

THEORY OF CHANGE OR LOGIC MODEL

This outlines how and why a desired change is expected to occur, detailing the causal pathways from inputs to outputs to outcomes in a specific intervention

DISCUSSION

The discussions with IRC country and regional teams **resulted in the following set of 3 key recommendations:**

1. Co-Design Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning to fit into and build upon the scaling partners' existing systems and resources.
2. Ensure that MEL for scaling is flexible in how MEL tools are applied to fit different types of scaling partner structures, systems, and changing needs over time as interventions grow from pilot to expansion to scale.
3. Ensure that MEL, scaling and program teams from the originating organization and scaling partners understand that they all contribute to MEL for scaling and that MEL is an integral part of building effective scaling activities to reach intended target populations.

> RECOMMENDATION 1

Co-Design Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) to fit into and build upon the scaling partners' existing systems and resources. This is key to partner buy-in and ownership of MEL for scaling interventions and to institutionalizing MEL tools and processes for scaling interventions.

- **Understand existing scaling partner systems** for collecting, analyzing, reporting, and learning from data on reach and quality of services.
 - The originating organization should discuss MEL with partners from the beginning of their collaboration, starting in the design phase, to build understanding of partner MEL structures, resources, and staff roles and responsibilities. Originating organizations should also consider how to build MEL-specific partner champions early in scaling work, who can advocate for and facilitate implementation of MEL for scaling pathways.
- **Co-design MEL for scaling interventions with scaling partners** to fit existing partner MEL systems and resources and be sustainable. This is key to building partner buy-in and ownership of MEL for scaling interventions and institutionalizing MEL tools and processes for scaling interventions.
 - Ensure that all indicators and targets used for scaling interventions are aligned with scaling partner existing ways of calculating indicators and setting targets.
 - In order to ensure accountability for the output of activities and interventions, include sources for and processes to access the following types of data in MEL plans, whether from existing partner MEL systems, primary data collection, or other places: number of staff trained, quality of staff training, reach or number of participants, quality of implementation, outcomes.
- Different types of scaling interventions have different MEL needs. **MEL for scaling requires flexibility**, in how MEL tools are applied to fit different types of scaling partner structure and system needs. Below are several examples of different types of scaling activities and how the IRC, as originating organization for Ahlan Simsim, collaborated with scaling partners on MEL to fit partner requests and existing MEL systems.

TYPE OF SCALING ACTIVITY	EXAMPLE OF COLLABORATION
<p>SCALING PATHWAY OBJECTIVE The scaling partner and originating organization collaborate to modify or add to existing services.</p> <p>MEL APPROACH Scaling partners may choose to continue using their existing MEL systems for these services, with or without minor changes, depending on what is needed to monitor implementation and effectiveness of the modified services, and whether these monitoring needs differ from those of previous, existing services. MEL collaboration with the originating organization is often limited in these cases.</p>	<p>When the IRC collaborated with the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Jordan to revise and add more material on social emotional learning to an existing school readiness program, the MoE already had a robust supervision and monitoring system for its school readiness program. Therefore, the MoE and the IRC collaborated to add a few new questions to existing tools to capture data about the revised parts of the school readiness program. But overall, the IRC's involvement in MEL was minimal, as the partner was satisfied with their existing MEL system and did not request much MEL input from the IRC.</p>
<p>SCALING PATHWAY OBJECTIVE Scaling partner and originating organization co-design new service.</p> <p>MEL APPROACH The scaling partner may choose to design a new MEL plan, tools, and system if no MEL system exists for these services, and may request MEL technical support from the originating organization.</p>	<p>In Iraq and northern Syria, education officials collaborated with IRC to co-design new school readiness programs that had not existed before this partnership. Therefore, education officials and the IRC collaborated to design new MEL plans, data collection tools, and systems for analysis and sharing of results.</p>
<p>SCALING PATHWAY OBJECTIVE Scaling partner and originating organization co-design quality standards and accompanying quality assurance assessments and systems to implement and monitor standards.</p> <p>MEL APPROACH These pathways are creating a MEL system, as their goal is to monitor service quality and implementation of standards and generate learning about how to improve service quality to meet standards.</p>	<p>In Lebanon, the IRC worked with the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) and Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) to develop quality standards for nurseries for children. In addition, MoPH, MoSA and the IRC collaborated to develop assessments to measure whether nurseries are meeting standards and provide nurseries with feedback on how to improve to meet standards. MoPH and MoSA hope to continue to carry out assessments on a regular basis to check nurseries improve and/or continue to deliver services that meet standards in the long-term.</p>

RECOMMENDATION 1 (cont.)

- **We found varying preferences among scaling partners; some expressed a lack of interest in receiving MEL support, while others specifically requested recommendations and training from the originating organization.** These requests included guidance on MEL plans, data collection tools and processes, as well as assistance with data analysis and the sharing of results.
 - While the originating organization does not need to act as technical advisers on MEL for scaling partners, it's crucial to ensure that either partners or the originating organization gather some data on service reach and quality for accountability purposes – to ensure that services are delivered and resources are used as planned.
 - When the scaling partner requests it, the originating organization should work with scaling partners to develop MEL systems that are appropriate to the scaling partners' resources, by mapping the tools and technologies scaling partners currently use for MEL and co-designing processes to use existing tools, unless partners have resources to start using new tools.
 - Scaling partners and originating organizations should consider partners' resources when discussing MEL tools and systems. For example, partners with lower MEL resources may prefer free software, such as KOBO, for data collection, rather than paid software, such as Commcare or Ona.
 - Scaling partners may or may not want to collaborate on MEL systems for scaling. The originating organization should understand, and respect partner wishes on this.
 - Partners' reasons for not wanting to collaborate on MEL vary. Some partners may decline MEL support due to their robust existing capacity, while others may have differing perceptions, goals, priorities, or limited MEL resources.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Ensure that MEL for scaling is flexible in how MEL tools are applied to fit different types of scaling partner structures, systems, and changing needs over time as interventions grow from pilot to expansion to scale. Measuring outputs, outcomes, and processes for scaling work through MEL is key to identifying “what works” - whom scaling activities reach, quality of ECD services, effectiveness of services at improving ECD outcomes, and changes within systems.

- **MEL needs of scaling can change over time.** For example, when testing a modified or new services, it may be worth investing in more rigorous data collection to determine whether the new service works as intended and identify areas for improvement before finalizing the long-term version of the service. When the Iraq school readiness program piloted in 2021, the scaling partner (MoE) requested that the IRC collect full registration records, caregiver and child surveys for all 100 schools and 5,000 children in the pilot, and monitor implementation quality for all teachers. This was a significant investment, but worth it as it provided data to refine the service and to use to build support for the program within the Ministry of Education. In later years, as the program expanded and scaled to serve 300,000+ children in many thousands of schools (operating in over half of all primary schools in Iraq at start of the 2023-24 academic year), this level of data collection from all children and

➤ RECOMMENDATION 2 (cont.)

schools was not feasible. Therefore, the IRC and Ministry of Education collaborated to collect high level monitoring data in a sample of schools as this was deemed sufficient to monitor the quantity and quality of services delivered and is more sustainable in the long-term.

- **To create MEL systems that are sustainable for scaling partners in the long-term, rigor of monitoring varies depending on what is useful, feasible, and sustainable for existing partner MEL systems and resources.** MEL for scaling must provide data for accountability and learning to ensure that scaling services reach target populations and outcomes, enabling scaling partners and originating organizations to identify what is going well and what is not so that they can learn and improve over time. Different options for measurement are acceptable and useful, depending on scaling partner resources and time. Scaling teams should agree on, document, and clearly describe MEL methods when reporting results to ensure that audiences understand the data source and what conclusions they can and cannot draw from this data.

➤ MEASURING REACH

- **High rigor, high resources required:** Count reach from verifiable, written registration or attendance records. It is preferable where possible, if scaling partners already have systems for counting who receives services or if partners have resources to build this type of system over time.
- **Lower rigor, less resources required:** Estimate reach based on data about service delivery. For example, for scaling integration of caregiver counseling into health services, we received data from the Jordan Ministry of Health (MoH) on the average number of caregivers and children that midwives see in one month, so we estimate reach by multiplying the number of midwives delivering the service times the average number of caregivers and children per month. Given that these services are reaching close to 100,000 caregivers and children per year, the team does not have the resources to count exact reach from health records, so this estimate is currently the most feasible way to calculate reach.
 - The MoH has proposed adding a checklist for parenting counseling to child health records to enable more exact tracking of how many caregivers and children receive these services, but approval and implementation of changes to health records are uncertain and takes time, so estimation is the best interim solution.

➤ MEASURING OUTCOMES

- **High rigor, high resources:** Measure child development outcomes for school readiness program through direct assessment of sample of children, using a globally validated tool such as the CREDI or IDELA. Use of these tools requires specialized staff training in data collection and analysis.

> RECOMMENDATION 2 (cont.)

NOTE

Scaling teams should consider using more rigorous methods for monitoring reach and outcomes in a sample of service locations, even when resources do not allow use of these methods in all cases. Using more rigorous monitoring in a small sample can be a less costly way to test and verify results of estimation or less rigorous outcome measures.

- **Lower rigor, lower resources:** Conduct baseline and endline teacher surveys at beginning of and after school readiness program to gather teacher assessments of whether none, some, most, or all of their students acquire skills or knowledge taught in school readiness program.
 - **Least rigor, lowest resources:** Conduct only endline teacher survey and ask teachers whether none, some, most or all of their students have certain skills or knowledge after the school readiness program and, in retrospective baseline, to remember whether none, some, most, or all of their students had these skills or knowledge at beginning of program. Note: this is less accurate than baseline/endline survey as teachers less likely to accurately recall baseline if data collected after program ends.
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- **MEL teams must document scaling indicators, targets and other indicator calculations, data collection processes, data collection tools, and assumptions to ensure that all team members understand and agree upon these, and that they are documented in case of staff turnover.** For the originating organization, this documentation may be different for scaling than in typical MEL work, given that MEL tools, processes, and ways of calculating targets should reflect scaling partner MEL systems and needs. Documentation is a key part of allowing for use of MEL data for learning and accountability in any type of work, not only scaling. However, documentation can be particularly challenging for scaling in cases where scaling partner and originating organization systems of documentation are different, and originating organizations should adjust to build documentation processes that fit scaling partner existing systems.
 - This documentation also provides inputs to use in proposals or other internal or external requests for logistical or financial support to continue scaling activities.
 - **Scaling process: To understand progress and effectiveness of scaling work, the originating organization and scaling partner teams need to monitor the scaling process.** The Ahlan Simsim team collected qualitative data from scaling partner and IRC staff about how the scaling partnership and process evolved over time. This included data on how many scaling partner champions took action to support scaling activities, meetings between IRC and scaling partners and actions taken as a result of those meetings, and activities to advocate for investment in ECD within scaling partner systems. This data on how scaling happens is essential to understanding the systems changes that support long-term, sustainable implementation of scaling activities. It complements data on the quantity and quality of scaling services delivered to build a holistic picture of ECD outputs, outcomes, and systems change that are all part of scaling.
 - Tracking the process and timeline of scaling, including cultivation of champions, signing of agreements, co-design, relevant policy changes, and other milestones is important to understanding progress and effectiveness of scaling work.

> RECOMMENDATION 2 (cont.)

- Quantitative indicators related to systems strengthening, policy change, and advocacy partially capture the progress of scaling work, but numbers alone cannot tell the full story of scaling and qualitative data telling the story of these numbers is essential.
- The start-up phases of scaling work take time, as detailed in IRC's report, [Insights from the Ahlan Simsim Scaling Journey](#) and it may take several years of partnership-building and incremental systems change before teams see the results of scaling, such as number of children served, so documenting the scaling process is important to showing the huge work of scaling involved prior to seeing the results of this work in ECD services and outcomes.
- **Creating regular opportunities for scaling partners and originating organizations to analyze and discuss data on scaling processes and results is key to learning and improving scaling activities over time.** The IRC and its scaling partners conducted regular, usually annual or semi-annual depending on the pace of work, learning and reflection meetings to discuss what worked and what hadn't in the scaling and partnership processes and to examine data on scaling activity outputs and outcomes, such as number of staff trained, quality of staff training, reach or number of participants, quality of implementation, and caregiver and child assessments. For Ahlan Simsim, these meetings were key to identifying and planning ways to improve the scaling partnership, process, and services. They also provided opportunities for coordination and planning of proposals or other internal or external requests for logistical or financial support to continue scaling activities.



The data MEL shared has reflected on the impact on the partnership, and how it worked, as well as gave more visibility for the work, helps with the evidence needed. Look into the outcome or impact of the work, beyond just the intervention itself.



-IRC PARTNERSHIP & SCALING LEAD

> RECOMMENDATION 3

Building teams to support MEL for scaling: Ensure that MEL, scaling and program teams from the originating organization and scaling partners understand that they all contribute to MEL for scaling and that MEL is an integral part of building effective scaling activities to reach intended target populations. These are key factors for both scaling partners and the originating organization to consider in building collaborative processes to achieve scaling goals.

Scaling Partner and Originating Organization MEL teams: Below are tips for both originating organization and scaling partner teams working on MEL functions.

> RECOMMENDATION 3 (cont.)

- **Include MEL teams from both originating organization and scaling partner** in design of scaling pathways. Both originating organization and scaling partner MEL teams should fully understand scaling objectives and activities and be part of co-design process. Some scaling partners do not have MEL teams, in that case and in agreement with scaling partners, include other non-MEL staff from scaling partners who are responsible for MEL tasks, such as data collection, reporting, or supervision and feedback on staff performance.

“ Everybody would agree that we learned we need MEL people in discussion with governmental partners from [the] beginning. As a program we should have more discussions on how we measure impact on scaling, beyond just simple reach numbers.

”

– IRC ECD PROGRAM MANAGER

- **Both scaling partner and originating organization MEL teams should facilitate creation of a logic model or theory of change, defining learning questions, and measuring program outputs and outcomes.** However, they cannot do this alone. Input from scaling and program teams is essential for all these steps.
- **Ensure that MEL, program, and scaling teams from both the originating organization and scaling partner understand each others' work and speak a common language as much as possible.** This is important not only when scaling work is launching, but also as part of onboarding new team members at any time.

“ [The MEL] team led discussions on how scaling pathways contribute to the Theory of Change [or logic model], which is vital because it is easy to lose the big picture when so many entry points are identified during scaling journey. Also, they created indicators to measure the quality-it was not easy for new scaling pathways such as Ministry of Health, and this exercise helped us better define the problem and the goal.

– IRC ECD PROGRAM MANAGER

- Originating organizations and scaling partners should both contribute to introducing MEL teams to concepts and examples of scaling and systems strengthening. The originating organization should have its own training or resources for this (e.g., [IRC Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning Handbook](#)) or can look to external sources.

> RECOMMENDATION 3 (cont.)

Originating Organization MEL team: Below are tips for originating organizations, like IRC, to use in building a team to support MEL for scaling.

- **Originating organization MEL teams must calibrate ways of working to scaling partners' needs and existing systems to ensure that MEL for scaling activities is useful, feasible, and sustainable for scaling partners.** MEL for scaling can be very different from the originating organization's internal MEL systems, as it should be designed for integration into scaling partners' existing systems. In addition to strong technical skills in MEL, originating organization MEL staff need to have the capacities highlighted for the whole scaling team (not only MEL specialists) as mentioned in IRC's report, [Insights from the Ahlan Simsim Scaling Journey](#) strong networking skills, strategic and innovative thinking, and openness to learn, succeed, and fail with humility.

NOTE

Scaling partners and the originating organization may use different terminology when discussing MEL. Scaling partners may not use the words “monitoring, evaluation, or learning” but have departments such as supervision, statistics, or data analysis that carry out MEL functions even if they do not use the same MEL terminology or have same MEL team structure as originating organization. When working with the scaling partners on MEL – originating organizations and scaling partners do not need to focus on terminology but can discuss general questions about who collects and analyzes data about scaling partner work? Who provides supervision and feedback to scaling partner frontline staff about their job performance?



A lot of us think that we have better tools than other tools like in governmental tools. We know more than local entities. This is unconscious bias. It's not a personal thing, it's a cultural thing among NGO. How we calculate reach, this is what we know, what we have, this is bias, having them do them as they are. Having discussions internally is important. Being able to say how about we try to think of something different or give different approaches, try something new.



-IRC PARTNERSHIP & SCALING TEAM MEMBER

- MEL for scaling must be part of job descriptions of the originating organization MEL staff working on scaling to ensure clarity of team roles and responsibilities. MEL for scaling involves collaboration with scaling partners to understand their existing MEL systems, co-designing all aspects of MEL to fit scaling partners' needs and resources, and co-designing MEL for uptake and sustainability within partner systems.

> RECOMMENDATION 3 (cont.)

- **MEL team job descriptions for the originating organization should include tasks such as:**
 - **Logic model or theory of change:** Co-lead creation of a logic model or theory of change for scaling interventions, with participation and input from originating organization and scaling partners.
 - **Scaling partner's MEL systems:** Learn about and document scaling partner's existing MEL systems, and work with scaling partners to co-design relevant, feasible and useful MEL tools and processes for scaling interventions that fit partners' system.
 - **MEL plans and feedback:** In coordination with scaling partners, draft MEL plans and get feedback from program and partnership teams and finalize MEL plans during the design phase of scaling interventions.
 - **Implementing MEL plans:** In coordination with scaling partners, ensure that MEL plans for scaling work are carried out as planned, revise and adjust MEL plans for scaling as needed throughout scaling process.
 - **Capacity sharing:** If requested, provide capacity sharing such as, offering training, coaching, and sharing resources and capabilities with scaling partners for MEL, in addition to building activities for scaling partners on MEL.
 - **Learning and reflection meetings:** In coordination with scaling partners, organize learning and reflection meetings to ensure regular review and use of monitoring and evaluation data in addition to qualitative feedback on staff implementation experiences for continuous learning and improvement of the scaling intervention.
 - **Originating organization MEL:** Work with program and scaling staff to develop system for tracking originating organization processes and outcomes in building scaling partnerships, advocating for, and influencing scaling activities and related policies, and contributing to implementation of scaling activities as needed. Note, this is for the originating organization to track and reflect on its effectiveness in advancing scaling work and is separate from working with scaling partners to create MEL systems for specific scaling activities.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT AHLAN SIMSIM

please reach out to the Ahlan Simsim team email at ahlan.simsim@rescue.org or visit our [website](#). For more information about Ahlan Simsim's MEL work, please reach out to our Regional Research, Monitoring and Learning Lead, Rebecca Samaha at rebecca.samaha@rescue.org