Step on the Scale:
How Early Childhood Development (ECD) has Become a Heavyweight in Integrated Programming at Scale

Hosted by Sesame Workshop at
Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Weeks (HNPW), May 2022

Speakers

Ramesh Rajasingham,
Director, Coordination Division,
UN-OCHA (moderator)

George Laryea-Adjei,
Regional Director for South
Asia, UNICEF

Anita Anastacio,
Initiative Lead, the LEGO
Foundation

Manar Shukri,
ECD Technical Lead,
International Rescue Committee

Carolina Casas,
Regional Director of Education
and Outreach, Latin America,
Sesame Workshop

At Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Weeks (HNPW) 2022, Sesame Workshop hosted a panel to draw attention to early childhood in crisis contexts. Millions of children are caught up in conflict or crisis situations worldwide, and the number is only growing as crises from Ukraine to Ethiopia to Afghanistan continue to uproot millions of families.

Prolonged adversity during a child's early years of life can disrupt a critical period for brain development, with devastating long-term effects on health, learning, and behavior – threatening to produce a lifelong cycle of poverty and instability for individuals and communities alike. That cycle, however, can be interrupted with appropriate early childhood development (ECD) interventions.

ECD interventions support children from birth to age 8. They include services that promote nurturing care, including health, nutrition, safety and protection, responsive caregiving, and play-based early learning.

Investment in ECD requires a multi-sectoral approach and provides long-lasting economic, educational, and health benefits in return. Quality support for young children and their caregivers can provide significant benefits—if we commit to taking their unique needs into account every step along the way.

This was the main goal of our conversation at HNPW: to discuss concrete ways that those committed to supporting young children and their families can incorporate the goals of ECD into their work—from program design to data collection to implementation to communications and advocacy—and see multi-sectoral returns from those investments.

During the event, we explored:
- **Evidence** that demonstrates the value of ECD programming in crisis- and conflict-affected settings
- **Approaches** that prioritize ECD as a key investment toward achieving multi-sectoral results related to health, education, socioemotional wellbeing, and more
- **Frameworks** for how to integrate and streamline these efforts within the global humanitarian system.

Below is a list of action items that participants and panelists generated together during that event, offering concrete opportunities for individuals and organizations to take in support of young children in crisis:

1. Identify the unique needs of young children and caregivers in your context:
   - Invest in a targeted situational analysis focused on early childhood in your area. This will be useful as you develop your organization's strategy but will also serve as a public good for all response actors, since it's likely to bring to light issues of interest to multiple sectors and agencies.
   - Consider the full range of people who will engage with a program so you can incorporate their needs into program design and implementation from the start. Walk around the location where your program will be implemented. What does the area look like from the height of a 3-year-old child? The perspective of a pregnant woman? What can they see and access? What are they missing?
   - Include questions focused on early childhood development—addressing the needs of both young children and their caregivers—in formal needs assessments.
   - Collect and analyze data in age-disaggregated formats, especially breaking down the under-18 population in recognition of their distinct needs. As a further step, in data collection and use discussions, advocate for greater visibility for young children and a developmental or life-cycle (rather than sector-based) approach to information gathering.

2. Integrate the priorities of early childhood development into existing systems and structures:
   - Embed programs in structures or networks that can facilitate access to other critical services for young children and their families. This kind of collaboration can support alignment around the needs of children and their holistic development.
   - Establish a working group that gets the government and the humanitarian response coordination structures (such as clusters) to engage in conversation around young children from a life-cycle and whole-child development perspective, rather than limiting the scope to a single sector. One important task for a working group is to establish an integrated framework of services that should be available to young children affected by emergencies in your area. This framework will allow partners to identify gaps in data and services, which can improve both the scope and efficiency of coverage.
   - Include language on ECD in relevant HRPs/JRPs (either embedded within traditional sectors or pulled together in a single, young-child focused way) to make sure the unique needs of young children are highlighted and prioritized.

3. Design all programs with the needs of young children and their caregivers in mind:
   - Think about ECD the way you would think about inclusion, localization, or gender—as a cross-cutting issue that should be considered when designing any program or intervention. If you have a process that considers the intersections of these cross-cutting themes with your topic area, consider adding ECD to the list.
   - For an overview of example ECD interventions and a list of actions that program planners and implementers can take to minimize the impact that emergencies have on the lives of young children and their families, see this brief created by the Nurturing Care Framework.

4. Advocate and communicate about the importance of early childhood development to your stakeholders and communities:
   - If you want to communicate about the importance of early childhood development, the scope of the crisis facing young children worldwide, or the impact of ECD programs on children in the short and long term, please see our handout with helpful statistics and citations you can use in communications or advocacy materials.