

The Path to Progress: Using Advocacy for Impact

Play to Learn Advocacy Report #1

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on behalf of the Play to Learn Consortium

Foreword

Advocacy is rarely a linear process—there are frequent obstacles on the road to progress, requiring rerouting, extra stops along the way, and sometimes even retracing our steps. The winding path of advocacy also offers great opportunity—while we start with careful strategy setting and audience selection, our first steps may open new and unexpected paths toward progress.

Regardless of topic, the core elements of advocacy often repeat across contexts—identifying which actors have the best potential to drive scalable or sustainable investments, cultivating champions over months or years, contextualizing evidence and messages to meet the needs of different decision-makers, and building consensus across diverse stakeholders. All of these elements are labor- and time-intensive, laying crucial but sometimes invisible groundwork.

This report aims to describe the full scope of activities involved in several strands of advocacy work implemented by the Play to Learn project and its constituent members. The goal of the report is to move beyond just measuring numbers—which don't always capture the depth and significance of an advocacy journey—to more thoroughly illustrate the process and dive deeper into intermediate successes along the way.

Play to Learn is a trailblazing early childhood development (ECD) program from Sesame Workshop, BRAC, and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), with generous funding from the LEGO Foundation and independent evaluation from research partner NYU Global Ties for Children. The project's goal is to help children and families affected by crises around the world secure opportunities to learn, grow, and thrive. The partners do this through direct services and educational media, research and evidence generation, and strategic advocacy.

Around the world, one in every six children lives in a conflict zone, and the number of children caught up in conflict and crisis is only expected to grow. Young children and their families are too often overlooked in these times of crisis. Despite clear evidence that early childhood development programming has both

immediate and long-term benefits for children and their communities, these interventions remain dramatically underfunded around the world, with only 2 percent of humanitarian assistance dedicated to ECD.

Play to Learn is working to change this reality through strategic advocacy. We share what we learn about implementing high-quality ECD programs in crisis or emergency contexts (ECDiE), empowering others to adapt, scale, and build upon these lessons to meet the needs of all children and caregivers affected by crisis, wherever they may be. By bringing visibility to these issues and demonstrating the value of meeting these needs through play-based ECD services, we aim to increase prioritization and investment in ECD in crisis and conflict settings globally.

This report consolidates lessons learned and successes achieved as part of the advocacy strategy of Play to Learn. Our main advocacy targets are: (1) humanitarian actors (such as UN agencies and NGOs) who are the key implementers and coordinators of many humanitarian responses; (2) donors, including both government and private entities, who contribute significant funding to humanitarian responses and, as a result, have a significant role in shaping policy and programming; and (3) refugee-hosting governments, which are key to securing ECD services for children living in these countries.

This report, the first of four covering the group's work in 2022 and 2023, outlines progress driven by the Play to Learn consortium with a particular focus on the first half of 2022. Four case studies are highlighted that together provide a representative illustration of the different advocacy goals, targets, strategies, and contexts represented across the project.

Advocacy progress can be difficult to track and measure on traditional project timelines or with common reporting metrics. With this report, we hope to tell the story of Play to Learn's efforts and intermediate successes on our way toward our long-term goal of sustained investment and prioritization of young children in every context.

Thank you for taking the time to learn more about our project, and please reach out to Emily.Garin@sesame.org with any questions, comments, or ideas for collaboration.

Introduction

Early Childhood Development (ECD) in Crisis Contexts

During early childhood, the brain grows more quickly than at any other phase of life, laying the foundation for future health, happiness, and prosperity.¹ But millions of children around the world experience these critical years while living in crisis or conflict situations: as of 2019, 1 in 6 children in the world lived in an active conflict zone;² and in 2021, nearly 37 million children were living in forced displacement.³ A significant body of evidence demonstrates that prolonged adversity during early childhood can disrupt brain development, with devastating, long-term effects on health, learning, and behavior.⁴

Early childhood development (ECD) interventions support children and their families from birth to age 8. They are multi-sectoral by nature and encompass a wide range of services and supports, including health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, safety and protection, and education. Across countries and contexts, there is clear evidence that ECD interventions have both immediate and long-term benefits, including higher wages earned as adults, greater educational attainment, reduced violence, and improved mental health outcomes.⁵

ECD in emergencies (ECDiE) programming refers to the provision of ECD services in crisis and context settings. Research on the specific impact of ECD interventions in crisis settings remains limited, in part due to the dearth of ECD programming in these settings.⁶ Despite its demonstrated benefits, ECD programming accounts for just over 2% of humanitarian assistance funding globally.⁷

The Play to Learn Program

Striving to fill these gaps in ECD provision, the Play to Learn program is a groundbreaking partnership between Sesame Workshop, BRAC, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and the LEGO Foundation, with independent evaluator NYU Global TIES for Children (NYU TIES). Established in 2018 and originally designed to last for five years, the program leverages the capacities of all partners to make high-quality ECD programs an essential component of humanitarian and crisis responses. There are three core pillars of this work:

- Engaging with communities affected by the Rohingya and Syrian refugee crises to understand the needs of families, and meeting those needs through a combination of educational media and direct services;
- Generating new research and evidence to understand how to best reach and support children affected by crisis globally with play-based learning approaches; and
- Engaging in strategic advocacy with key local, national, and global decision makers to increase prioritization of and investment in ECD interventions in crisis settings around the world.

This report is focused on this third pillar: the Play to Learn consortium's advocacy workstream, coordinated by the Play to Learn Advocacy Working Group (AWG), which includes representatives from Sesame Workshop, IRC, BRAC, the LEGO Foundation, and NYU TIES.

The Play to Learn Advocacy Working Group and this series of reports

The goal of the Play to Learn AWG is for local, national, and international stakeholders to prioritize and invest in high-quality ECD programs that utilize learning through play approaches, especially in response to crisis and conflict. Because of the large and growing need for ECD programming in crisis contexts and the desire to make systemic change, the Play to Learn AWG focuses on actors with the potential to drive investments, programs, and policies that are sustainable and scalable. Play to Learn AWG members seek to build strong working relationships with these government and institutional actors, and to apply lessons learned in program implementation to influence policy. There are three core, high-impact advocacy targets for this work:

- Humanitarian actors (such as UN agencies and NGOs) that are the key implementers and coordinators of many humanitarian responses;
- Donors, including both government and private entities, that contribute significant funding to humanitarian responses and, as a result, have a significant role in shaping policy and programming; and
- Refugee-hosting governments, which are key to securing ECD services for children living in these countries.

This report, the first of four covering the group's work in 2022 and 2023, tells the story of advocacy progress driven by the Play to Learn consortium, with a particular focus on the first half of 2022. This includes an examination of which advocacy strategies have been effective, what progress has been made toward stated goals, and what challenges were encountered along the way. The report will document the AWG's work via four representative case studies, each focused on a different advocacy goal, with a different target, in a different context:

- **Sesame Workshop, IRC, and BRAC's collective work to advocate for increased ECD support from the US government**, which outlines the many layers of engagement required to build a donor champion;
- **Sesame Workshop's efforts to embed ECD into the global humanitarian architecture**, which demonstrates the value of research-informed advocacy, especially in navigating complex and overlapping systems with competing and emergent demands;
- **BRAC's work to integrate play-based learning and psychosocial wellbeing into Bangladesh's new nationwide curriculum for 4-5 year-olds**, a testament to how an organization's reputation as a trusted expert on ECD can yield significant national reforms; and
- **IRC's work to establish standards for private nurseries in Lebanon**, an example of how a smart and durable advocacy strategy can have great impact, even when faced with the headwinds of a country's historic economic collapse.

Because of the large and growing need for ECD programming in crisis contexts and the desire to make systemic change, the Play to Learn AWG focuses on actors with the potential to drive investments, programs, and policies that are sustainable and scalable.

Despite the very different settings in which these advocacy campaigns took place, there were several common strategies, grounded in evidence-based advocacy practices, that contributed to the impact of each effort. These include, among other strategies: cultivating strong relationships with decision makers; building ECD champions in decision making positions; conducting and deploying research to make the case for change; and working in partnership with other well-placed and like-minded organizations and coalitions.

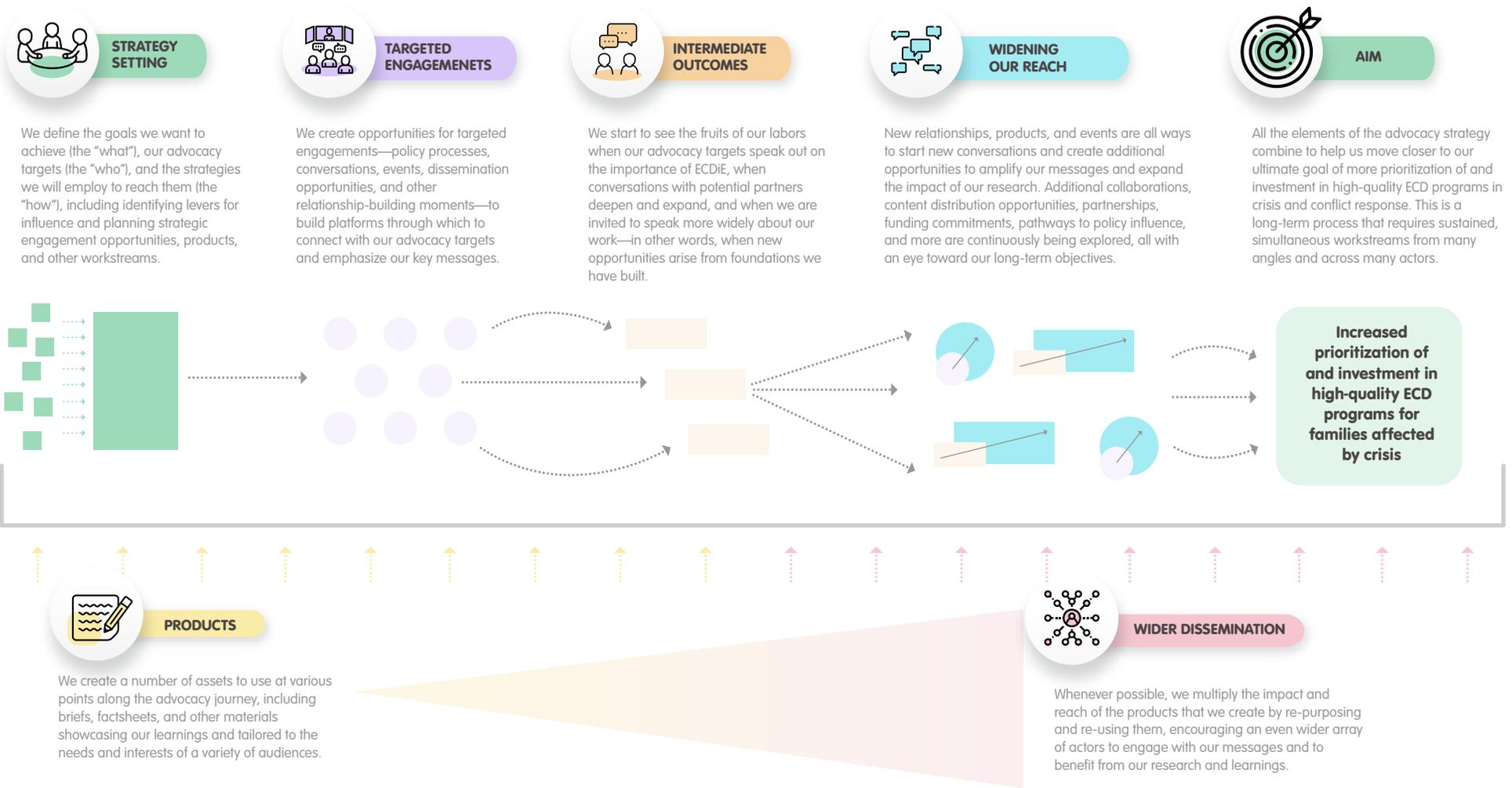
Research shows that advocacy is rarely a linear process—there are frequent obstacles and setbacks on the road to progress, and many incremental steps that must be taken along the way.⁸ In each of the four case studies, Play to Learn partners had to contend with external and internal challenges, which demonstrated the importance of approaches that promote resilience, adaptability, and nimbleness. The case studies also speak to the importance of incremental progress on the path toward achieving ultimate goals. The Play to Learn consortium offers this report to its partners and the field more broadly, in the hope that the learnings contained within can contribute to the ongoing dialogue between practitioners and donors about the process, timelines, and value of issue-based advocacy in the international sphere.

Methodology

The Play to Learn AWG brought on an external consultant team, Understory Consulting, to document its advocacy work. Understory conducted a series of interviews with AWG members (Sesame Workshop, IRC, BRAC, LEGO Foundation, and NYU TIES), including both staff based in Bangladesh, Jordan, and Lebanon as well as regional/global advocacy leads. Understory also interviewed partners who collaborate with AWG members on advocacy initiatives, including the University of Virginia’s Humanitarian Collaborative (UVA), the Moving Minds Alliance (MMA), the Thrive Coalition, the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), and Plan International. These interviews, supplemented by desk research and a review of AWG-related materials (such as strategic plans, annual reports, and fact sheets), formed the basis of this report. After synthesizing its findings, Understory facilitated a reflection meeting with the AWG members to discuss the research findings and develop recommendations for future advocacy work.

This report is the first of four semi-annual reports documenting the process of change driven by the Play to Learn consortium. The subsequent reports will each cover a half-year period through the end of 2023 and will strive to capture how the Play to Learn AWG makes progress toward various objectives over the long-term, and how lessons learned over the course of the work inform future advocacy strategies and successes.

The journey toward our advocacy goals



Research shows that advocacy is rarely a linear process—there are frequent obstacles and setbacks on the road to progress, and many incremental steps that must be taken along the way.



Case Studies

The following case studies are meant to document some of the most substantial advocacy efforts undertaken and the most significant progress made by the AWG and three of its members (Sesame Workshop, IRC, and BRAC). While there is a focus on milestones achieved during the time period of January to June 2022, these initiatives span multiple years and the case studies attempt to capture this full scope. The case studies were selected to highlight the breadth of the AWG's work, with at least one case study covering each of the AWG's three core advocacy targets: the humanitarian architecture, donors, and refugee-hosting governments.





IRC, Sesame Workshop, and BRAC Advocacy with the US Government after Passage of the Global Child Thrive Act

Major humanitarian donors have key roles to play in bringing ECD to the forefront of crisis response: in addition to the direct financing they provide, donors influence programming decisions, establish monitoring standards, and encourage the investments of their peers. For these reasons, donors—in particular major government donors—are among the core advocacy targets for the Play to Learn consortium. The United States government (USG) spends more on foreign aid than any other country, and is among the most influential with other donors. Given this, and the strong representation of Play to Learn partners in the US, the USG has been a major advocacy focus for the consortium.

ADVOCACY TARGETS AND GOALS

The focus of Play to Learn’s USG advocacy was initially on passage of the Global Child Thrive Act (GCTA), which became law in January 2021, in part through the advocacy of IRC and other allies in the Thrive Coalition (a group of more than 40 organizations and individuals dedicated to optimizing USG support for global ECD). The advocacy focus then shifted to ensuring robust and rapid implementation of the law, which calls on a wide range of USG entities to improve prioritization and coordination of ECD investments in foreign assistance. The Play to Learn AWG’s GCTA implementation work focused on two primary advocacy targets: the US Congress and President Biden’s administration (primarily the Office of Management and Budget, USAID, and the State Department). With each of these targets, AWG members—including Sesame Workshop, IRC, and BRAC—worked together to build political will around the importance of ECD in humanitarian settings and to secure funding that would support the implementation of the GCTA.

ADVOCACY ACTIVITIES

While the GCTA represented a landmark achievement, its implementation requires specific guidance, country-level take-up, and Congressional funding and oversight to achieve its full impact. Play to Learn AWG members pursued a comprehensive advocacy strategy with the US government, employing a diverse range of tactics to build understanding of and support for ECD in humanitarian settings among a wide range of stakeholders.

Building High-Level Political Will for GCTA Implementation

One key element of the Play to Learn consortium’s advocacy strategy was building political will among key government decision makers with influence over GCTA implementation.

Within the Biden administration, USAID (the US government’s international foreign assistance agency) and the State Department were identified as especially important targets. Members of the Play to Learn AWG worked together with Kyle House Group (KHG), a Washington, DC-based lobbying firm, to develop a plan for engaging high-level leaders within USAID and the State Department. There were three USAID bureaus that the AWG focused on: the Bureau for Global Health; the Bureau for Development, Democracy, and Innovation (which includes the Center for Education and the Office of Children in Adversity); and the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance. The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration in the US State Department was another key target.

The first step in engaging leaders within USAID and the State Department was demonstrating the breadth of support within civil society for the GCTA and its stated aims. In March 2021, the Play to Learn consortium, led by Sesame Workshop and IRC, wrote a community advocacy letter with 58 civil society signatories to US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and then-acting Administrator of USAID Gloria Steele.⁹ The letter asked USAID and the State Department to prioritize the full implementation of the GCTA, and to marshal resources to support young children in crisis contexts. The letter

was followed up by high-level meetings with senior leadership at key bureaus within USAID and the State Department, reiterating key points in the community letter. Samantha Power, now the Administrator of USAID, responded positively to the civil society letter, including in the agency's written reply: "As a top donor on humanitarian child-protection programming...we support the GCTA's emphasis on the importance of the first years of life, and we promote this integration of early childhood initiatives across humanitarian and development programming."¹⁰ Administrator Power's response to the Play to Learn letter demonstrates a growing support for ECD in crisis settings among key stakeholders in the Biden administration. Following the Administrator's written reply, the Play to Learn AWG led the development of another community letter, this time highlighting a consensus around a more precise set of requests for USAID leadership to demonstrate their prioritization of ECD in crisis contexts.¹¹

At the same time, the Play to Learn AWG worked within Congress to build up political will for GCTA oversight and funding. This involved the ongoing fostering of relationships with ECD champions in Congress, including the sponsors of the GCTA (Representatives Joaquin Castro and Brian Fitzpatrick, and Senators Roy Blunt and Christopher Coons). Sesame Workshop and IRC held meetings with these leaders, engaged in multiple briefings for Congressional offices, and provided background materials to bring staff members the information they needed to raise these issues at relevant hearings and confirmations. Sesame Workshop and IRC were able to submit testimony and questions for the record in Congressional hearings. In total, from January-June 2022, Play to Learn members were represented in meetings with 58 congressional offices, including over 28 meetings at the member level, to cultivate opportunities and create demand for crisis-focused ECD programming and funding. Sesame Workshop and IRC, via KHG, are now regularly contacted by key Congressional offices and committees for input on ECD topics.

Engaging Technical Counterparts to Accelerate Policy Implementation

A second strand of the advocacy strategy was ensuring that affected agencies are prepared for and understand the value of GCTA implementation. This rests on USAID issuing an official implementation guidance for the GCTA. IRC and Sesame Workshop met with USAID's Children in Adversity team to offer feedback on the developing guidance, pushing for a clear focus on children affected by crises. Once the guidance is issued, USAID's country-level missions will be responsible for implementing the GCTA. To prepare for that stage, Play to Learn AWG members have been working with the Thrive Coalition to develop materials that could be used for outreach to USAID country-level missions. For example, BRAC created a slide deck with background on the GCTA, the importance of ECD, and evidence-based programming models that can be tailored based on a particular audience's familiarity with the issues. This deck has been distributed to several USAID missions, including those covering Bangladesh, Uganda, South Sudan, and Liberia. IRC also began developing relationships with the USAID Middle East Bureau, sharing program learnings with key advocacy targets.

Securing Financing and Expanding the Playing Field for Policy Change

Working in coalition, Sesame Workshop, IRC, and BRAC have pushed for increased ECD funding in federal budget accounts related to GCTA implementation. Budget advocacy for the 2023 fiscal year began with meetings with the President's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in November 2021, during which IRC and Sesame Workshop made the case for investments in key ECD-related budget accounts. Securing this meeting was a success in and of itself—opening another door for engaging the Administration on both financing for and oversight of ECD programming.

The budget work continued with the House Appropriations staff in early 2022. With support from

KHG and working with the Thrive Coalition, IRC and Sesame Workshop joined a wide range of partners and allies to press for specific funding requests for key development and humanitarian accounts, including the Vulnerable Children Account and the Development Assistance Account. In support of these requests, Sesame and IRC supported the drafting of “Dear Colleague” letters for Congressional ECD champions to send to their colleagues on the House Committee on Appropriations, asking for the prioritization of crisis-affected children in key federal accounts. This tactic was another opportunity to solidify champion support and demonstrate the value of ECD to a wider range of potential leaders on the issue.

Finally, Play to Learn AWG members have capitalized on the political support for the GCTA and increased engagement on ECD-related issues to press forward on additional policy opportunities. Starting in 2020, IRC co-wrote a new piece of legislation—the MINDS Act—to address mental health issues through US foreign assistance. The bill was introduced by Senator Bob Casey and Congressman Ted Deutch in May 2021, and Sesame Workshop and IRC are now working alongside UNICEF USA to promote the legislation, using it as an opportunity to highlight parenting mental health support elements within Play to Learn programming.

IMPACTS

Securing and Growing Administration Commitments to ECD

The Play to Learn consortium’s advocacy work has helped clarify and amplify the USG’s support for ECD initiatives, especially in crisis contexts. While discrete parts of USAID and other agencies have always shown a deep commitment to the issues, the topic of ECD—as a clear, purposeful focus on the unique needs of young children and their caregivers—has increased in prominence with the passage of and advocacy around the GCTA. This deepened commitment to ECD is also reflected in communications such as USAID Administrator Samantha Power’s response to the coalition letter, in which she took the time to directly address the coalition’s asks and express USAID’s commitment to ECD.

In the course of this work, Play to Learn AWG members have built strong relationships with the key bureaus responsible for GCTA implementation and have been brought into the process of USAID’s creation of the GCTA implementation guidance. AWG members have similarly become trusted resources for USAID missions at the country level. When it comes to the State Department, AWG members were invited to participate in the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration’s development of a child protection initiative, which, in its initial formation, included ECD as a key pillar.

Driving Congressional Oversight and Funding

The AWG’s Congressional advocacy work has several purposes, all of which have been advanced over the course of 2022. Most concretely, AWG members aimed to increase the total funding available for ECD programming. As such, the Thrive Coalition, including Sesame Workshop, BRAC, and IRC, secured a \$2.5 million increase in the Vulnerable Children account, which funds the personnel charged with overseeing GCTA implementation. There were also increases in budget accounts for health and nutrition. In all of the key target accounts, Sesame Workshop and IRC succeeded in getting directive language into the FY22 and FY23 appropriations bills. This language pushes USAID to prioritize the implementation of the GCTA and puts crisis settings at the forefront of how these accounts should support young children. This represented a significant shift, as many of these accounts had not previously reflected ECD or crisis-affected populations as part of their scope of work.

A second goal of the Congressional work is to build champions for specific legislation as well as a broader set of issues that are essential to advancing ECD in the future. As outlined above, new congressional champions have come forth to introduce the MINDS Act, an indication of the growing importance of ECD-adjacent issues within the USG.

Finally, Congressional advocacy is designed to complement advocacy with implementing agencies. With support, funding, and, occasionally, nudging from Congress, executive-side agencies have been encouraged and enabled to accelerate their own implementation work.

Leveraging the Assets and Influence of Allies and Partners

Membership in the Thrive Coalition (Thrive) has been integral to advocacy progress with the USG and has allowed Sesame Workshop, BRAC, and IRC to elevate the importance of ECD in crisis contexts within the broader ECD community. Sesame Workshop and IRC have become increasingly involved in Thrive leadership; following Sesame Workshop's election in the fall of 2021, both organizations now serve on Thrive's executive board.

The Play to Learn consortium's influence on USG stakeholders stems from the organizations' expertise on ECD in crisis settings and their unique cultural and political importance. Thrive leaders spoke to the particular value add of Play to Learn AWG members in driving USG advocacy. In an interview with Understory, a member of the Thrive executive board said, "Sesame [Workshop], IRC, and LEGO [Foundation] have such a huge cache with lawmakers and staff, which has been hugely helpful. When I've gone to Congressional meetings with them, the reception I get is far more warm and welcoming than if it's just me alone."

While the reputations of the Play to Learn consortium's member organizations have benefitted the coalition, Thrive's breadth and depth have also supported Play to Learn goals. By influencing Thrive objectives and activities, and deepening their focus on crisis contexts, the Play to Learn consortium has been able to leverage the power of a large network of major organizations.

CHALLENGES

There are several challenges—both structural and issue-specific—when it comes to Play to Learn's USG advocacy. For purposes of this case study, the authors focus on project-level strategic challenges as opposed to macro-level global crises throughout all case studies.

From the outset, USG advocacy was a relatively new capability for Sesame Workshop and IRC's ECD units, and this lack of experience represented a challenge. To fill this internal gap, Sesame Workshop and IRC hired KHG, a lobbying firm that helped develop relationships with key legislators.

Due to the US election cycle, there are frequent changes in congressional leadership, putting policy agendas and issue champions in flux. Furthermore, the political climate within the legislature has become increasingly partisan and antagonistic. This has required Sesame Workshop and IRC to think strategically about how to insulate their advocacy progress from these potential impacts. Sesame Workshop and IRC have focused their efforts on developing ECD champions among a wide number of both Democratic and Republican representatives, including inserting ECD in crisis contexts as a topic for the Problem Solvers Caucus (a bipartisan group of legislators committed to working across the aisle). By elevating ECD as a topic above the political fray, the partners are working to ensure that progress can continue regardless of electoral outcomes.

There have also been challenges in GCTA implementation, due to bureaucratic delays that are common in implementing this sort of large-scale policy initiative. USAID has not yet issued its guidance on GCTA implementation, which has held up Sesame Workshop, BRAC, and IRC's ability to advocate with country-level USAID missions. Sesame Workshop, BRAC, and IRC have followed up routinely with the staff at USAID and other contractors responsible for issuing the guidance, pushing for an accelerated rollout. This follow-up is important; the timeliness of the guidance being issued will go a long way in determining the amount of progress partners can make in the next two years.

Finally, while working as part of a coalition brings many advantages, consensus-building work, an essential step, can slow the pace of progress. Each new organization brought on board represents additional strength, but also comes with its own perspective and internal processes that can make momentum difficult to sustain. Managing this balance of consensus and momentum is a labor- and time-intensive endeavor that is rarely reflected in either planning documents or outcome analyses.

In ongoing USG advocacy, Play to Learn AWG members will build on the progress achieved to date.



Sesame Workshop's Advocacy to Embed ECD within the Humanitarian Architecture

As key implementers and coordinators of humanitarian responses, humanitarian actors represent one of the three primary advocacy targets for Play to Learn. The formal humanitarian architecture includes a variety of actors and mechanisms such as: the coordinating UN agencies; the cluster system that focuses on each of the main sectors of humanitarian work; and the funding appeals coordinated across implementers.

ADVOCACY TARGETS AND GOALS

As noted earlier in this report, ECD remains a small portion (2%) of global humanitarian assistance. The Play to Learn consortium's overall goal in this area is to grow this number by securing lasting commitments to ECD in the core humanitarian architecture and ensuring that ECD is regularly included in the humanitarian system's core assessment, appeal, programming, and monitoring tools. Early in the project, Sesame Workshop partnered with the University of Virginia (UVA) Humanitarian Collaborative to identify the highest-impact targets and best approaches for securing those commitments.

ADVOCACY ACTIVITIES

Using Research to Inform Advocacy Tactics

The first key element of the Sesame Workshop and UVA partnership was research on how to incentivize humanitarian leaders at the country- or crisis-level to become champions for increased prioritization of ECD. In their first report for Sesame Workshop, "Promoting Humanitarian Field Leadership for ECDiE," the UVA team identified opportunities to embed ECD into the humanitarian architecture. The research process involved a desk review followed by a series of key informant interviews, with the UVA team leveraging their extensive experience within the UN system to both map

the potential inroads for influence and to solicit feedback from system stakeholders who are well-positioned to make change. The report highlighted several key opportunities, including using humanitarian response plans (HRPs) to create space and set standards for ECD.

Based on this research, Sesame Workshop and UVA played a leading role in a collective effort to increase the representation of ECD in the UN COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) in 2020. As part of this work, the team conducted a technical scan of the first COVID-19 GHRP (published in March 2020) to identify where and how ECD was represented. Results of this scan were shared with the Moving Minds Alliance (MMA) and UNICEF, and UNICEF used the analysis to advocate for stronger inclusion of ECD in the July GHRP update and the UNICEF COVID-19 Humanitarian Action for Children Appeal. Sesame Workshop and UVA then collaborated with the IRC and UNICEF to create an ECD GHRP advocacy tool for humanitarian actors, which they presented to the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) ECD Task Team in October 2020. This prompted a concerted effort among advocates and other stakeholders to promote increased inclusion of ECD in global humanitarian planning and funding tools. For example, the INEE ECD Task Team drew on the GHRP review to feed into their advocacy around the 2021 Global Humanitarian Overview.

A second piece of research from UVA, based on interviews with key leaders within the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, the agency responsible for overall coordination of UN humanitarian responses), led to several more recommendations on how to embed ECD more firmly within the humanitarian architecture. These included:

- Engaging with Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs) to make them ECD champions;
- Increasing the visibility of ECD with OCHA leaders and their targeted stakeholders and donors; and
- Better understanding the best opportunities for coordinating ECD work at the crisis-level.

Sesame Workshop and UVA worked together to explore these options and to share additional findings with the wider ECDiE community.

Adapting Strategy to Match Capacity

UVA identified Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs) as high-value targets for better embedding ECD within the formal humanitarian system. Within the UN response to a humanitarian crisis, the HC is the senior-most UN official coordinating the humanitarian response at a country or crisis level. As such, HCs have oversight of the cluster coordination system and in-country humanitarian response teams, with the power to highlight key issues to UN officials, donors, and in-country implementers.

After an internal analysis of its strengths and capabilities, Sesame Workshop decided that work to influence HCs was best led by a multi-partner network that had deep operational ties within various crisis settings. As such, Sesame Workshop has taken the UVA research and its own scoping work to the MMA Joint Advocacy Group on Humanitarian Architecture, which has a wider array of partners and operational capacities. Conversations about pursuing this line of work are ongoing within the MMA Joint Advocacy Group.

Raising the Profile of ECD in Key Humanitarian Processes

Humanitarian funding appeals are written from both the bottom up and the top down: country- and crisis-level partners make specific appeals for their key needs (the HRP process) which are compiled into global documents including the Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO). Produced by OCHA, the GHO is the world's most comprehensive assessment of humanitarian need, and includes the sum of country-level appeals as well as thematic focus areas that cut across geographies. Influencing both the crisis-level and the global-level appeals processes would be important for driving sustained attention to ECD, and Sesame Workshop prioritized its engagement accordingly.

For 2022, Sesame Workshop focused on building the global relationships necessary to influence the GHO. Sesame Workshop's advocacy plan included raising the visibility of ECD through key events and bringing the issue to the attention of Humanitarian Coordinators, with the ultimate goal of embedding ECD in the annual GHO. While UVA worked to better understand the process and relationships needed to add a new topic into the GHO, Sesame Workshop set about using the OCHA-hosted Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Weeks (HNPW) in May 2022 as an opportunity for visibility raising and relationship building. Sesame Workshop established ECDiE as a visible topic at the event by setting up an interactive installation in the exhibition hall as well as organizing a panel focused on the feasibility and importance of ECDiE. Sesame Workshop targeted impactful potential champions to include on its panel, eventually securing the participation of the head of the OCHA Coordination Division, which oversees the GHO, and the Regional Director for UNICEF South Asia. These relationships will be instrumental in ultimately influencing the GHO and wider UN investments in ECDiE. Throughout the HNPW week, Sesame Workshop had additional side conversations to prepare for a briefing meeting with UNICEF-led clusters and cross-sectoral specialists and to continue to raise the visibility of ECDiE resources with conference attendees through distribution conversations.

Creating Networks for Collaboration and Learning

Another strand in the workstream of embedding ECD within the humanitarian workstream involves strengthening and supporting coordination efforts. UVA and Sesame Workshop recognized the importance of strengthening coordination efforts between various ECD stakeholders in humanitarian settings, and worked to better understand the landscape of ECDiE coordination models. In April 2021, Sesame Workshop and UVA interviewed a variety of key stakeholders in the ECDiE community, and learned that there were no existing ECDiE coordination models ready for formal evaluation, but that there was strong interest in learning more about existing coordination efforts.

These findings were disseminated to the ECDiE community in June 2021 and informed the launch of Sesame Workshop and UVA's real-time learning cohort for ECDiE coordination. Leveraging the Play to Learn network, Sesame invited participants from Bangladesh, Jordan, Lebanon, and Colombia. (The coordinators in Bangladesh and Colombia and the policy advisor in Jordan and Lebanon are funded by the Play to Learn consortium). The cohort generates learnings from their work and shares these learnings with the broader ECDiE community to inform coordination efforts in other contexts.

Sesame Workshop and UVA launched the learning cohort in October 2021. The cohort met for one hour every other month, and Sesame Workshop and UVA synthesized learnings from its work and shared them with the broader ECDiE community. After piloting this approach, Sesame Workshop and UVA recognized that the ECD coordination role varies considerably by context, and the cohort would benefit from wider membership representing a greater diversity of contexts. After inviting MMA and the INEE ECD Working Group to nominate coordinators to join the cohort, Sesame Workshop and UVA have selected new cohort members and plan to host the first expanded cohort meeting in October 2022 with new coordinators from different crisis contexts (including Uganda, Syria, and Ukraine).

IMPACTS

The ultimate goal of this advocacy workstream is to embed ECD into the humanitarian architecture, including in core assessment, appeal, programming, and monitoring tools. There have been several significant markers of progress toward this goal.

Sesame Workshop and UVA's research on advocacy with humanitarian actors has been influential in the broader ECD community. As a co-lead of the MMA working group on humanitarian architecture, Sesame Workshop has used the UVA research to influence a much larger group of organizations. In interviews with Understory Consulting, various ECD stakeholders spoke to the novelty and value of the research. According to a leader within MMA: "The presentation that UVA did on influencing the humanitarian architecture [at the MMA meeting] was one of the best presentations I saw last year... That's work that MMA hadn't really thought through."

For Sesame Workshop, one of the strategies that came out of the UVA research was a focus on OCHA advocacy to influence the GHO. The HNPNW represented a significant win for Sesame Workshop in this work. Having the leader of OCHA's division responsible for producing the GHO moderate Sesame Workshop's ECDiE panel demonstrated increasing buy-in among senior OCHA leadership on the importance of ECDiE. His support of including ECDiE in the GHO represents a critical stepping stone to Sesame Workshop's ultimate goals for the GHO. According to UVA, OCHA and UNICEF's participation on the ECD panel was a major win in "building champions in the places that we need them."

Meanwhile, Sesame Workshop's support of ECD country coordinators was valuable on multiple levels: first, and most immediately, it helped build much-needed capacity for crisis-level ECD working groups. The ECD coordinator in Cox's Bazar described to Understory the needs of a stretched ECD working group: "We are almost 55 members in the Working Group. All members are volunteers, and without dedicated staff, it is very hard to organize. Sesame Workshop's support for an ECD coordinator gave us opportunities to organize better."

The strengthened coordinating function helped the ECD Working Group in Cox's Bazar develop operational standards for the group, a common framework for ECD in Cox's Bazar, and materials for distribution among ECD stakeholders (which Play to Learn also funded). The ECD coordinator in Cox's Bazar noted that Sesame Workshop's involvement in the working group, along with Play to Learn partners IRC and BRAC, "helped to motivate other working group members, contributing to the momentum needed to make ECD a priority [in Cox's Bazar]." Each of these wins had substantive value for the response in Bangladesh. Similar successes have been reported by the coordinators in the Middle East and Colombia.

Via the ECD coordination cohort, Sesame Workshop has generated new knowledge for the broader ECDiE community, translating into new advocacy opportunities. In January 2022, an initial report of learnings from the cohort was shared with MMA, the INEE ECD working group, and the Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN). ECDAN expressed interest in maintaining Sesame Workshop's coordination cohort as a broader, ongoing "community of practice" that would be hosted within ECDAN, providing opportunities for scale and sustainability to Sesame Workshop's model. Via INEE, the coordination cohort's learnings have been elevated to the Global Education Cluster, which led to meetings between Sesame Workshop, UVA, INEE, UNICEF, and other cluster leads and inter-cluster coordinators. According to a leader within the INEE ECD working group, these relationships with the cluster coordination system will be especially valuable in embedding ECD in all humanitarian responses: "What we would like to do is engage directly with the different cluster coordination leads (child protection, education, etc)...If the coordination lead agrees to include ECD as a point in the agenda on all the relevant cluster meetings, that would be a big step forward."

CHALLENGES

Over the course of this advocacy, Sesame Workshop encountered and adapted to a number of challenges.

While UVA's research recommended focusing advocacy on humanitarian coordinators, Sesame Workshop determined that it was not the best-positioned organization to advocate at that level. After making this determination, Sesame Workshop presented its work to MMA, hoping that a broader network with more crisis-level implementation capacity would be better suited to executing on the strategy. According to one of its advocacy leads, Sesame Workshop focused its own advocacy on a "narrower set of objectives," including influencing OCHA's GHO and launching the ECD coordination cohort.

Relatedly, Sesame Workshop tabled its plan to bring an ECDiE request to the Humanitarian Coordinators retreat in 2022, given that there was not enough consensus within the ECDiE community to agree on an ask. This lack of consensus around what ECDiE is and how to meet ECD needs in humanitarian settings came up often in Understory's interviews. Some of this stems from the absence of a shared definition of ECD among stakeholders. As one AWG member noted, "The issue itself [ECD] is not well-defined—is it education, what's the age range, are we serving both parents and kids? It's not a totally crisp population and set of needs."

The lack of consensus around an ECDiE policy request in this context may also stem from an absence of descriptive evidence. Some interviewees noted a lack of comprehensive data, especially on children under the age of three, which can make it difficult to identify the biggest gaps to fill. Other interviewees felt that more evidence was needed on which interventions can have the most impact in filling those gaps. This lack of

shared understanding on the scope of ECD, and what programming is most likely to work in humanitarian contexts, may be hindering advocates' ability to coalesce around a shared request.

Finally, the sustainability of Sesame Workshop's ECD coordination cohort represents a challenge. Sesame Workshop's goal is to expand the real-time learning cohort to include coordinators in other countries, funded by other organizations. This will make the cohort durable beyond the period of Sesame Workshop's current grant, as the coordinator roles will not be dependent upon

a single source of funding. Once the group is well-established, Sesame Workshop hopes that EDCAN can serve as a host for the coordination cohort, expanding the group into an ongoing "community of practice." This line of succession will be necessary in order to continue convening the coordinators and synthesizing their insights.

Going forward, Sesame Workshop will strive to build on the progress achieved to date, further solidifying the place of ECD in all humanitarian responses.



BRAC's Advocacy to Establish a National Play-Based Pre-Primary Curriculum in Bangladesh

Refugee-hosting governments are one of three core advocacy targets for the Play to Learn consortium, and the Bangladesh government is an especially important actor. As an AWG member noted in an interview with Understory, ECD services cannot be scaled or sustained without the host government taking on “ownership” of those services. As part of the Play to Learn project, BRAC's advocacy with the Bangladesh government focuses on expanding play-based learning for all young children living in the country. In recent years, the government of Bangladesh has taken initiatives to expand access to pre-primary education. For example, in 2010, the government piloted pre-primary programs for 5-6 year-olds, which were scaled up to all primary schools in 2014. More recently, the government has started implementing a pre-primary program for 4-year-olds. BRAC has emphasized the importance of play-based learning in pre-primary education, piloting Play Labs for 5-6 year-olds in 396 government primary schools in 2018, and implementing Humanitarian Play Labs for Rohingya children living in the Cox's Bazar refugee camps.

As the Bangladesh government expands its commitment to pre-primary programs, BRAC worked with the government to develop a new, play-based curriculum for use in the country's pre-primary public schools.

ADVOCACY TARGETS AND GOALS

The main objective of BRAC's curriculum advocacy was to integrate play-based pedagogy and psychosocial wellbeing into the new two-year pre-primary curriculum in Bangladesh. The primary target for BRAC's advocacy was the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), an organization within the Bangladesh Ministry of Education that is responsible for the development of curricula and the production of textbooks for all primary and secondary public schools. While the curriculum will primarily benefit children outside of the Cox's Bazar camps, the BRAC team sees it as a critical stepping stone to embedding play-based learning across Bangladesh, including expanding such services for refugee children as well.

ADVOCACY ACTIVITIES

BRAC's advocacy campaign to integrate play-based learning and psychosocial wellbeing into the national pre-primary curriculum was a multi-year effort, relying on BRAC's existing relationships and its field experience running play-based learning programs.

Investing in Relationships Leads to Opportunities

BRAC's strong relationships with the Bangladesh government and its reputation as an expert on ECD led to BRAC being invited to join the NCTB-led pre-primary curriculum design committee in 2020. It was through this committee that BRAC was able to advocate for the inclusion of play-based learning and psychosocial wellbeing. Three BRAC staffers were invited to join

this committee, making BRAC one of the most well-represented organizations in the group. BRAC was also invited to join a committee formed by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME), which contributed to the pre-primary curriculum development, especially in terms of developing materials to train teachers.

Over many years, BRAC has fostered close, positive ties with the Bangladesh government, including with key agencies governing the national education system (like the NCTB). Often, BRAC partners with these agencies on programming, and proactively seeks out regular engagement within these partnerships. For example, in BRAC's development of its Play Lab curriculum, BRAC consulted with the NCTB throughout the process, gathering government feedback on the new curriculum. Touchpoints like this strengthen the working relationship between BRAC and the Bangladesh government on multiple levels and cement BRAC as an expert and leader on issues related to play-based ECD programming.

BRAC University, a private research university established by BRAC, is also a key asset in building relationships with government stakeholders and advancing BRAC's policy priorities. A number of government officials, including staff from NCTB, the Ministry of Women & Child Affairs (MoWCA), the Bangladesh Shishu Academy (BSA), and the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE), have attended BRAC University to earn their Master's degrees, which makes them familiar with BRAC's programming and approach to education. Strong relationships helped BRAC identify and foster champions for play-based learning within the NCTB and other key ministries.

Using Evidence to Advance Play-Based Learning and Psychosocial Wellbeing

After joining the NCTB-led technical committee and several related working groups, BRAC used this platform to advocate for the integration of play-based learning and psychosocial wellbeing.

For years, BRAC has been highlighting the importance of play-based learning to the Bangladesh government.

Already recognized as an expert, BRAC was able to speak with credibility about the value of play-based learning models, and to use evidence from the BRAC Play Lab initiative to make the case for their integration. The BRAC Play Lab model, developed in partnership with the LEGO Foundation, was implemented in government public schools and also in the Cox's Bazar refugee camps (as BRAC Humanitarian Play Labs, with materials relevant to Rohingya culture).¹² The Play Lab programs were shown to improve several measures of development (physical, intellectual, and socioemotional) for participants between the ages of 3 and 5.¹³ Using this evidence, and building on long-standing advocacy for play and play-based learning in Bangladesh, BRAC was able to successfully advocate for NCTB to include play-based learning in the new pre-primary curriculum. Via a separate NCTB working group on socioemotional learning, BRAC was also able to present evidence on the importance of psychosocial wellbeing for young children, especially given the hardship and anxiety associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

IMPACTS

After a multi-year curriculum design process, NCTB submitted the new two-year pre-primary curriculum for children aged 4-5 in June 2022. As a result of BRAC's advocacy, the curriculum integrates play-based pedagogy and psychosocial wellbeing. The curriculum was approved for a pilot in 3,214 government primary schools beginning in January 2023.

The new curriculum will greatly expand access to pre-primary education in Bangladesh. Prior to this curriculum's approval, pre-primary education in Bangladesh began at the age of 5. The new two-year curriculum will now cover children aged 4-5, with the inclusion of 4-year-olds representing up to 3 million more children who will receive pre-primary education. If the pilot is successful, the new curriculum will be implemented in all 65,000 public primary schools in the country. Compared to the previous pre-primary curriculum, the new curriculum includes significantly

more play-based learning components, focused on interactive engagement with the child, fostering creativity, and building socioemotional skills. Building off the demonstrated impact of the Play Lab model, this new pre-primary curriculum offers the opportunity to drive improved ECD outcomes at an even greater scale. The curriculum achievement also aligns with Bangladesh's current five-year development plan (2021-2026), which prioritizes expanding the country's ability to deliver pre-primary education to more children.

CHALLENGES

ECD is an emerging field in Bangladesh, one that is increasingly prioritized by government stakeholders. It has taken several years and a significant amount of effort for BRAC and other actors to build awareness about the importance of ECD (and in particular for BRAC, play-based learning) among key government decision makers. Over a multi-year process like this, it can be

challenging to stay the course and to keep track of the changing government landscape. In an interview with Understory, a BRAC advocacy staffer in Bangladesh noted, "When you work with the government, there are always changes, including new people coming in, and we have to continuously build that rapport with a changing group of people."

COVID-19 was also a significant disruption that hit during this advocacy effort, closing schools and temporarily putting the initiative on hold. BRAC used this time to gather information on COVID's impact on psychosocial wellbeing, and to further develop the case for strong psychosocial support in early childhood learning.

As the Bangladesh government deepens its commitment to ECD at the national level, BRAC will continue to provide support as an expert on the implementation of the new curriculum and leverage the national commitment to ensure it applies to all those living in Bangladesh, including in the Cox's Bazar camps.



IRC's Advocacy to Establish National Standards for Nurseries in Lebanon

This case study provides another example of AWG advocacy with refugee-hosting governments, this time in the Middle East, an area of focus for IRC's Play to Learn advocacy. Given the concentration of refugees in Lebanon and the importance of engaging refugee-hosting governments in providing ECD services, the government of Lebanon is a particularly critical stakeholder. Similar to BRAC's approach with the government of Bangladesh, IRC's approach with the government of Lebanon is to ensure strong ECD services nationwide, providing access to high-quality programming for as many children as possible. For ECD services in Lebanon, there are both publicly-run daycares and privately-run nurseries; until 2022, there were no national standards for services and programs offered in either setting. This case study documents IRC's work to develop national standards for nurseries run by the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH).

ADVOCACY TARGETS AND GOALS

Beginning in 2020, IRC partnered in a multi-year effort with the Lebanon Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) and the Knowledge to Policy (K2P) Center at the American University of Beirut (AUB) to create the first-ever standards for private nurseries in Lebanon, focused on MoPH-run nurseries. By creating and implementing common standards, the partnership sought to ensure a consistent quality of ECD programming for all children nationwide. This work happened to coincide with the ongoing economic crisis in Lebanon, which began in 2019 and remains ongoing. According to the World Bank, Lebanon's financial crisis may rank in the top three of all global economic crises since the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁴ Facing historically bad economic headwinds, which impacted nearly every aspect of Lebanese government and daily life, IRC worked to ensure that the standards developed would meet the needs of community members, ensure delivery of high quality ECD services for children, and be feasible to implement for daycare owners and staff.

ADVOCACY ACTIVITIES

IRC engaged in several key advocacy activities throughout this process, from formalizing its partnership with the MoPH to securing the buy-in of important community stakeholders.

Forming a Partnership with the Ability and Expertise to Enact Change

In 2020, the MoPH, IRC, and K2P signed an agreement to work in partnership on the creation of nursery school standards for nurseries overseen by MoPH across Lebanon. This agreement came after months of meetings between IRC and MoPH in which IRC sought to better understand the needs of the Ministry and identify areas for collaboration. Despite the ongoing and devastating economic crisis and its toll on public health services, this project remained a priority for MoPH, in part due to IRC advocacy and support. At the end of the assessment phase of the collaboration, the MoPH and IRC agreed to focus on nursery school standards, which would ensure that all children enrolled would experience a certain quality of programming.

Over the process of developing the standards, IRC served as project managers for communication and coordination between the partners. Over the life of the project, IRC held weekly meetings with the MoPH and daily meetings with K2P, in addition to separate meetings bringing together all three partners.

Identifying and Engaging Champions

The success of this advocacy effort depended on having a champion within the MoPH: the head of its Mother, Child, and School Health Department. IRC knew that the person in this position at the time already had a strong commitment to ECD and focused its MoPH advocacy on this department as a result. “We call her our ‘ECD champion.’ Without her, the work would not have advanced as fast as it has over the past short period,” an IRC staff member with the ECD program in Lebanon told Understory. “Her dedication and belief in ECD helped a lot in advancing the work.”

Involving Community Stakeholders to Inform the Process and Achieve Long-term Buy-in

In designing the new standards, IRC and K2P conducted an assessment of six private nurseries, identifying several key gaps that contributed to inconsistent service delivery: there was no unified curriculum for nurseries; many nurseries were not in line with best practices in terms of food and drink provision; some nurseries did not provide physical activities to children; and not all nursery staff had completed key trainings (e.g. training on screen time recommendations for children). K2P also conducted a literature review of nursery care best practices from countries around the world. This information informed the drafting of the standards, which cover curriculum, physical infrastructure (including external and internal play areas), health and safety (including sanitization procedures), and how to be inclusive of children with diverse backgrounds.

Once drafted, the standards were reviewed by the MoPH and external experts, including community stakeholders and private nursery care providers.

This ensured strong support for the final standards. “Staff and owners of nurseries were involved in the development of the standards, so their points of view were taken into account,” an IRC ECD staff member in Lebanon told Understory. In fact, regular collaborative meetings with community stakeholders “were a strong point of the process that made the standards stronger and prevented disputes.”

IMPACTS

According to the head of the MoPH’s Mother, Child, and School Health Department, the new nursery standards are a significant achievement in ensuring high-quality ECD services for children in Lebanon: “The standards represent a first step to... quality assurance of ECD services in daycares. These are more essential than ever today, given the country’s hardship and the impact on the most vulnerable, specifically young children.”

On June 27, 2022, the MoPH launched the new nursery school standards. At a press conference at the Lebanese Order of Physicians, the Director-General of the MoPH noted that there are 400 private nurseries in Lebanon that will be governed by the new standards. The launch event showcased a strong sense of local ownership of the new standards, and belief in the cause among key institutions and stakeholders. At the event, the standards were distributed on USB drives to all event participants (including those from private nurseries, local NGOs, international NGOs, UN agencies, and the Lebanon Ministry of Social Affairs). The standards will also be posted on the MoPH website, and the MoPH will issue a decree to all private nurseries instructing them to adopt the standards.

Now that the standards are in place, IRC will collaborate with MoPH on an assessment of the current state of private nurseries. The assessment will identify the gaps private nurseries need to close in order to comply with the standards, and develop a plan to close those gaps. The goal is to have all nurseries in Lebanon under the MoPH’s mandate achieve a basic level of compliance with the standards within 6-8 months of enactment.

Building on this success, IRC is working with the Ministry of Social Affairs to develop a similar set of standards for the public daycare centers under their mandate that serve the most vulnerable families in Lebanon. Standards for MoSA daycare centers are expected to be launched in early 2023.

CHALLENGES

The nursery care standards were developed during a time of incredible turmoil in Lebanon, with the country in the midst of an historic economic crisis that was exacerbated by the Beirut port explosion in August 2020. The crisis resulted in the devaluation of the Lebanese currency, sharp increases in fuel and electricity prices, and frequent lapses in Internet connectivity. All of this made life and work much harder across Lebanese society, including for MoPH staff, whose work time was limited to three days a week, and whose salaries were equivalent to \$40 USD per week given the devalued currency. These circumstances slowed down the process of creating and establishing standards. “If we had been a more stable country, things would have moved a lot quicker,” an IRC ECD staff member in Lebanon told Understory, “but we managed

to work within the context we had, to be flexible.”

Taking into account the economic crisis, and the reduced capacity of private nursery care providers due to worker and resource shortages, MoPH, IRC, and K2P created three levels of standards that could be applied to the nurseries. The first level established the minimum standard of service that all MoPH-run nurseries must meet. The second and third levels of care increased the standards under which a nursery should aim to operate. By structuring the standards in this way, the partnership ensures that private nurseries are providing a basic standard of care, without demanding more from nurseries than they could reasonably achieve given the country’s financial situation. As an IRC ECD staff member in Lebanon noted to Understory, “We linked the short-term priorities of the first level standards to the longer-term needs and goals of the level three standards, which would be more achievable once things stabilize more in the country.”

With standards in place for private nurseries, IRC and K2P will focus their efforts on establishing similar standards for public nurseries in Lebanon.

Synthesis of Key Themes and Lessons Learned

The above case studies are meant to be representative of the advocacy strategies employed by Play to Learn AWG members. This section of the report synthesizes key themes from the case studies, capturing the AWG’s overall advocacy approach, which strategies have been most effective in driving change, and what lessons should inform future work of the AWG and the field more broadly.

First off, it is important to situate the Play to Learn AWG’s approach within a broader spectrum of advocacy methods. There are many ways to go about advocacy. One dimension of this is how the advocate relates to its advocacy target, a relationship that can range from collaborative to antagonistic. Some advocates strive to foster close, positive relationships with government or institutional stakeholders, with the goal of making change from within. For example, the Danish Refugee Council accepts funding from and partners with several government agencies and multilateral institutions.¹⁵ Other advocates seek to maintain distance from government or institutional stakeholders, and work to investigate and publicly expose government failures or shortcomings. For example, Human Rights Watch famously engages in “name and shame” advocacy, investigating and exposing government human rights violations.¹⁶ Another dimension of advocacy is how to make the case for change. Some campaigns try to make arguments that are evidence-based and technocratic. For example, Ceres conducts an annual analysis of air pollutant emissions compared to GDP in the US to make the case that emissions reduction and economic growth can occur in tandem.¹⁷ Other campaigns use more theatrical methods, seeking to create evocative and emotionally affecting images. For example, Greenpeace has often hung up massive banners bearing short environmentalist messages on government or corporate property.¹⁸

In general, the Play to Learn AWG and its members engage in a collaborative form of advocacy, seeking to foster positive working relationships with the government and multilateral stakeholders that hold the keys to change. There are many reasons for this orientation. For one, the need for ECD in crisis contexts is massive, and sustainably meeting that need requires government and multilateral buy-in. The Play to Learn AWG’s theory of change believes that these institutional stakeholders—including humanitarian actors, donors, and refugee-hosting governments—can be convinced to increase prioritization of and investment in ECD in crisis contexts. In addition, some Play to Learn partners—in particular BRAC and IRC—have programmatic partnerships with governments beyond the scope of the Play to Learn project. As such, Play to Learn-related advocacy has to fit into a broader ecosystem of existing relationships and priorities.

This speaks to another unique facet of the Play to Learn consortium: its members are program implementers as well as advocates. This experience designing and implementing programs is a key asset and differentiator for Play to Learn advocacy,

The need for ECD in crisis contexts is massive, and sustainably meeting that need requires government and multilateral buy-in

as Play to Learn AWG members are able to use evidence from the field and leverage relationships built through programmatic work. This technical expertise also influences the Play to Learn AWG’s persuasion style. Leveraging their standing as subject matter experts, Play to Learn AWG members seek to convince stakeholders with evidence that demonstrates the size of a problem and the potential benefits of various interventions.

Within this overall approach, there are several strategies that have driven success in Play to Learn advocacy. Despite having different advocacy targets and operating in different contexts, each member of the Play to Learn AWG has deployed these strategies in their advocacy work. These shared strategies—pillars of successful advocacy campaigns across movements—are broken down below, with illustrative examples of how they were applied in each of the campaigns featured in this report.

Cultivating Strong Relationships with Decision Makers

Research shows that relationship-building with decision makers is one of the most effective advocacy tactics for NGOs to gain influence in the policymaking process.¹⁹ It can lead to a variety of benefits enabling advocacy success, including developing trust and credibility with policymakers, identifying champions, and gaining a better understanding of the political dynamics surrounding an issue.²⁰ Play to Learn AWG members are often engaged in multiyear campaigns, which require long-term investments in relationship building that span changes in government. In the campaigns documented in this report’s case studies, Play to Learn AWG members invested in relationship-building in several ways, including:

Sesame Workshop, IRC, and BRAC USG advocacy

Hiring KHG to develop and implement a plan to engage Congress and the Administration (i.e. holding meetings with 58 Congressional offices, USAID, and OMB)

Sesame Workshop humanitarian architecture advocacy

Having senior OCHA and UNICEF leaders participate on Sesame Workshop’s HNPW panel

BRAC Bangladesh pre-primary curriculum advocacy

Engaging in a long-term service delivery partnership with the Bangladesh government (including NCTB)

IRC Lebanon MoPH nursery standards advocacy

Holding scoping meetings with MoPH to assess their needs and opportunities for collaboration

Building ECD Champions in Decision Making Positions

A specific type of relationship building is the development of issue champions. A “champion” is a person with a high-level rank and/or influence within a government or institution, who uses their positioning to advance an issue or idea. Having a champion gives an advocacy campaign a number of advantages, including access to institutional and political knowledge, a built-in public platform, and the ability to move an idea from concept to implementation.²¹ In the case studies, Play to Learn AWG members fostered champions across contexts, including:

Sesame Workshop, IRC, and BRAC USG advocacy

Consistent engagement with representatives and senators who co-sponsored the GCTA

Sesame Workshop humanitarian architecture advocacy

Obtaining the support of the head of OCHA’s Coordination Division for including ECD in the GHO

BRAC Bangladesh pre-primary curriculum advocacy

Educating NCTB staffers on the importance of ECD via their enrollment in Master’s programs at BRAC University

IRC Lebanon MoPH nursery standards advocacy

Identifying and fostering the head of Lebanon’s Mother, Child, and School Health Department as an ECD champion within the MoPH

Conducting and Deploying Research

When used effectively, research and evidence can help make a persuasive case for change, both by capturing the scope of a particular problem and the impact of a potential solution. Research is most persuasive when it is conducted with accuracy and integrity, when it is communicated in a straightforward way, and when it is disseminated to specific audiences at strategic times with an approach targeted to their interests.²² Play to Learn AWG members have the additional advantage of access to data from their own programs. Across the case studies, Play to Learn AWG members used research and evidence in strategic ways, including:

Sesame Workshop, IRC, and BRAC USG advocacy

Using program learnings to make the case for the importance of ECDiE via fact sheets and other leave-behind materials for Congressional and USAID staff²³

Sesame Workshop humanitarian architecture advocacy

Partnering with UVA to conduct a technical scan of the first COVID-19 GHRP to quantify ECD’s representation, and to make the case for greater inclusion²⁴

BRAC Bangladesh pre-primary curriculum advocacy

Presenting research on the impact of play-based learning to NCTB decision makers (using evidence from BRAC Play Lab programs)²⁵

IRC Lebanon MoPH nursery standards advocacy

Leveraging K2P research on nursery care best practices from around the world to inform the new standards in Lebanon²⁶

Working in Partnership and Coalition

A widely accepted idea among advocates is that policymakers are more responsive when they hear from a group of organizations as opposed to a single organization. This can establish that a particular cause affects a large number of people and is of concern to a wide range of stakeholders. The more “constituents” an advocacy campaign can bring to the table, the more likely it is to obtain and hold onto a decisionmaker’s attention.²⁷ And coalition work is widely seen as multiplying the capacity of an advocacy campaign beyond what any one organization could sustainably offer.²⁸ Play to Learn AWG members worked in coalition in several ways, including:

Sesame Workshop, IRC, and BRAC USG advocacy

Obtaining 58 civil society signatories for coalition letter to the USAID Administrator, leading to a response affirming the administration’s commitment to ECD

Sesame Workshop humanitarian architecture advocacy

Forming, funding, and leading the ECDiE coordination cohort, bringing together coordinators from several organizations to generate new knowledge

BRAC Bangladesh pre-primary curriculum advocacy

Serving with other NGOs on the NCTB curriculum design technical committee to influence the new pre-primary curriculum

IRC Lebanon MoPH nursery standards advocacy

With K2P, soliciting input from nursery owners and operators on new private nursery standards to ensure community buy-in

While each of these case studies represents a success story, the path to progress was marked with obstacles and setbacks. This reflects a widely known truth about advocacy: it is rarely a predictable or linear process.²⁹ As such, resilience, adaptability, and nimbleness are key attributes for the successful advocate, and were instrumental in each of the campaigns profiled. For example, Sesame Workshop adapted its humanitarian architecture advocacy: upon determining that it was not best positioned to influence Humanitarian Coordinators, Sesame Workshop pivoted to focus its advocacy efforts on OCHA planning processes and identified MMA as a better driver of HC advocacy. In Lebanon, IRC navigated the massive disruption of the country’s historic financial collapse by creating “levels” within its requirements for private nurseries, to ensure that basic minimum standards were set and that these standards could realistically be met within an extremely challenging economic environment. These adaptations allowed each organization to further its advocacy goals amidst external disruptions and internal capacity limitations. Given the nonlinear nature of advocacy and the vulnerability of progress to disruption, it is essential to adjust goals and strategies to reflect the reality of circumstances, and to create incremental markers of success that provide footholds toward the achievement of ultimate goals.

Another challenge that emerged in the case studies and in Understory’s interviews was the complexity of ECD as an issue, and in particular ECD in humanitarian settings. Several interviewees spoke of the lack of consensus within the ECDiE community about how to comprehensively meet ECD needs in humanitarian settings, including how many additional resources are needed and precisely how those resources should be deployed. The multi-sectoral nature of ECD is at the core of this challenge, making the issue complex to coordinate and communicate. As advocacy experts note, advancing goals that require multi-sectoral collaboration can be a particularly challenging advocacy task.³⁰ All of this can make it difficult to drive political will around ECD, despite its demonstrated benefits. For the ECDiE advocacy community as a whole, there remains a need to more clearly and consistently articulate what ECD is, why it is particularly essential in humanitarian settings, and what suite of solutions should be implemented to comprehensively meet ECD needs.

Conclusion

The Play to Learn partnership represents a unique collaborative of organizations, all dedicated to advancing ECD in humanitarian settings. Over the past several years, the partnership has engaged in effective advocacy with its core targets, successfully installing principles of play-based learning into Lebanon's new private nursery standards and Bangladesh's new pre-primary curriculum, guiding the implementation of the US government's Global Child Thrive Act, and moving closer to embedding ECD into the core humanitarian architecture.

These semi-annual reports are meant as signposts in an ongoing process of reflection and improvement. As such, future semi-annual reports will continue to chart the progress of these initiatives, the development of new initiatives, and the ways in which past learnings translated into strategic adjustments and even greater impact.

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