EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2018, Sesame Workshop and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), with generous support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, began implementing Ahlan Simsim, a program to bring vital education and nurturing care to children affected by displacement in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Ahlan Simsim, which means “Welcome Sesame” in Arabic, is poised to become the largest early childhood intervention in the history of humanitarian response, reaching millions of children across the Syrian response region. Fueled by the MacArthur Foundation’s groundbreaking $100 million grant, Ahlan Simsim is elevating awareness, engaging policymakers, and increasing investment for early childhood development (ECD) in crisis settings. Our program has the potential to transform humanitarian response, benefitting children affected by conflict for generations to come.

We are proud to report that in Year One, we made significant progress in all aspects of our program, from designing key aspects of our educational children’s television series to launching direct services in Jordan and Lebanon. We participated in international public fora, seminars, and events and garnered international media coverage to highlight the need for ECD programs in crisis contexts. We have also advanced our goal of catalyzing additional, sector-defining support for children affected by displacement. Inspired by the MacArthur Foundation’s audacious philanthropy and Ahlan Simsim’s bold approach to ECD, the LEGO Foundation awarded Sesame Workshop an additional $100 million in December 2018, which enables us to expand our programs and further promote ECD in humanitarian settings.

2018 has also been a year of learning. Guided by feedback from our stakeholders and participants, we’re working to make Ahlan Simsim ever more efficient, engaging, and inclusive. This year, we laid the groundwork for future learning, too; our independent evaluators at New York University’s Global TIES for Children Center have planned a series of evaluations designed to improve Ahlan Simsim as we scale up to reach millions of children by 2023. We will also pave the way for broader systems change: By sharing our findings, we will empower stakeholders at the national and international levels to scale, adapt, and build upon the lessons from our program in other humanitarian contexts.
CONTEXT

In 2018, the Syrian conflict entered its eighth year. There are an estimated 6.2 million internally displaced people within Syria and another 5.6 million registered displaced people outside of Syria, many of them in Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. Nearly half of these displaced people are children, vulnerable by definition. They’ve lost homes and loved ones, seen violence, and endured the kinds of trauma that even adults might struggle to process. Millions of children in host communities are affected by the refugee crisis too; with public services under immense strain, many are not receiving the care they need. Despite the research that shows the immense benefits of ECD for children and their communities, less than 3% of humanitarian aid goes to education in crisis contexts, including the Syrian response region, and just a fraction goes to the youngest children. Without learning experiences that support their holistic development, these children are at risk for lifelong consequences.

In the last months of 2018, the Syrian government re-established control over significant territory in the south, effectively closing that part of the country to humanitarian aid. While the IRC will continue to provide services in northeast and northwest Syria through the end of 2019, our delivery strategy and projected reach for Ahlan Sisim in Syria beyond 2019 are uncertain at this time due to restrictions in access. We will continue to monitor the geopolitical context and leverage our flexible direct services models to reach and teach as many families and children as possible, even as the need evolves.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

The official name of our humanitarian program in the Syrian response region is Ahlan Sisim, which means “Welcome Sesame” in Arabic.

What’s in a name? For us, a whole lot of research.

We knew we needed a name that would be meaningful across the various dialects of Arabic spoken in our four target countries—Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria—and across the Middle East. We needed a name that children could easily say and understand and that captured the spirit of our program. With all this in mind, we consulted with Arabic linguists, media advisors, IRC colleagues, and families from both displaced and host communities across the region. Enthusiastic feedback from all these sources indicated that Ahlan Sisim hit the mark.

Next, we worked with designers in the region to create a logo based on the classic Sesame Street sign. Our designers created a unique Arabic typeface to match the playful essence of our program. Our new logo unites all aspects of our initiative, from the Ahlan Sisim TV show to our new direct services materials, including storybooks, posters, play mats, and more.

Under the banner of our new name and logo, “Welcome Sesame” is a powerful reminder of what we’ve set out to do: give all children, from displaced and host communities alike, the opportunity to grow smarter, stronger, and kinder—and build a better future together. It’s an ambitious goal, but one that’s worthy of the challenge.
Though 2018 marks the program’s first official year, we laid the foundation for Ahlan Simsim back in 2016 with a partnership between the experts in children’s educational media at Sesame Workshop and the global leaders in humanitarian relief at the IRC. That same year, the MacArthur Foundation announced their first 100&Change award: a $100 million grant for a single proposal that addressed a critical issue of our time. In 2017, we became the first recipients of the 100&Change grant for our joint program to bring vital early learning and nurturing care to children and families affected by displacement in the Syrian response region.

The combination of mass media and direct services is central to our program design, reaching children and families wherever they are with the learning resources and caregiving support they need most. Trained IRC facilitators make home visits, offering families parenting strategies and stress relief techniques. Children join teachers at preschools for educational group activities. The Ahlan Simsim TV show will introduce young learners to new Muppet role models who reflect their lives, languages, and experiences. Appearing in storybooks and classrooms, and on mobile phones as well as TV, these characters will use stories and songs to share essential social-emotional lessons that children need to thrive into adulthood.

Year One of Ahlan Simsim began with a nine-month Discovery Phase: a time to test our assumptions, deeply understand the opportunities and challenges in the region, and align our partnership, educational objectives, content, and staffing around the program’s ambitions. In November 2018, we officially entered the Implementation Phase with training for IRC staff to bring Sesame’s proven educational materials into direct services. The program model we established is now poised to help a generation of conflict-affected children achieve its potential.
Sara* (pictured above with her mother) lives in the town of Arsal in northeast Lebanon. After her home was destroyed in the Syrian Civil War, Sara and her family fled to Lebanon with nothing but the clothes they could carry.

Now she lives with her mother, father, and four siblings in a four-by-four-meter tent. Her family relies on money from selling boiled peanuts and corn to cover their basic needs.

Despite deep uncertainty, Sara’s parents imagine a bright future for their children. Her mother is keen to see her daughter, who already missed a year of school due to the conflict, continue her education. “I hope Sara can keep learning and can live in peace together with her family,” she says.

For children like Sara who have experienced the trauma of displacement as a result of the Syrian conflict, Ahlan Simsim was designed to surround them with the learning opportunities and sense of belonging they need to thrive. In a colorful IRC Safe Healing and Learning Space in Arsal, its walls covered in children’s drawings, Sara was invited to join in playful educational activities with other refugee children.

“She was so happy and excited,” her mother recalls about the first time Sara came home from the center. “She told her sisters about it and practiced the activities with them at home.” Sara added, “It made me and my friends get to know each other and play together. I would like to come back to the center and spend more time having fun with friends.”

As Sara’s family shows us, in the face of great difficulty there is also great hope.

*Names have been changed for protection reasons.
**PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION**

Below are key accomplishments, challenges, and learnings from each of our program components in Year One.

### Mass Media

We set the stage for the 2019 launch of our new educational TV show, *Ahlan Simsim*.

- **We researched the competitive media landscape** to understand the best ways to reach families across the region through mass media, including a study of the broadcast channels and digital platforms that children and caregivers are using to access video content.
- **We held a series of in-region workshops** that brought together teams of ECD specialists, art therapists, linguists, and other experts to explore creative ideas for the show’s characters, setting, storylines, and songs.
- **We focused Season One of *Ahlan Simsim** on social-emotional development and designed an educational framework to effectively support that goal. Based on research and feedback from advisors, we also shifted the structure of *Ahlan Simsim* from magazine format to single-plotline narrative format—a structure better suited to helping children empathize with characters and understand the emotional self-regulation strategies we’re teaching.
- **We created our lovable new Muppet characters:** the adventurous almost-six-year-old purple monster named Basma; her new best friend, the shy, golden-furred Jad, who’s new to the neighborhood; and their mischievous goat sidekick Ma’zooza, who eats everything in sight. We also developed the animated and human characters they will meet on their adventures.
- **We selected Jordan Pioneers as our production partner** for *Ahlan Simsim* through a competitive bidding process. Jordan Pioneers previously worked with Sesame Workshop to produce the Jordanian *Sesame Street* series, *Hikayat Simsim*.
- **We started negotiations with pan-Arab broadcasters** informed by our media landscape study.

### Direct Services

We put the content and personnel in place to reach the first families with our direct services, and despite delays, began implementation in Jordan and Lebanon.

- **We identified and adapted existing Sesame content to integrate into direct services**—including videos, storybooks, and other materials—in consultation with in-region education advisors and IRC field staff. We translated these materials into multiple dialects of Arabic and Kurdish for use in the region.
- **We held trainings for IRC field staff on integrating *Ahlan Simsim* models** into IRC early childhood centers, health clinics, and other settings.
- **We learned that parents wanted more children included**. When parents told us that older siblings may feel left out during home visits, which are designed for children ages 0 to 3, we created activities to involve other children in the home, while still delivering ECD services where they’re needed most.
- **We encountered delays in hiring in-region staff** and were unable to fulfill our Year One reach goals in Jordan and Lebanon. However, these country programs are expected to meet their targets in Year Two.
- **We reached more than 5,000 children with direct services** in the final months of 2018 in Jordan and Lebanon. We also identified IRC program sites in Iraq and potential partners in Syria for implementation in Year Two.
Research & Advocacy

We developed our research plans and deepened our relationships with regional and global stakeholders. These efforts prepare us to not only improve our models, but also share our findings to inform ECD interventions in other humanitarian contexts.

- **We launched the Ahlan Simsim Research Community.** These focus groups of families in Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon are informing the content of our program and sharpening our approaches as we develop a localized show.

- **We conducted four in-region “reach-out” surveys** to inform brand awareness, character development, media strategies, and more.

- **We coordinated with our independent evaluators** at NYU’s Global TIES for Children Center to plan our five randomized control trials of Ahlan Simsim, which will take place in Years Two and Three. When completed, these studies will double the existing body of research about early childhood interventions in crisis settings.

- **We connected with regional NGOs and government ministries** in Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon to discuss collaboration and scaling plans.

- **We participated in international public fora, seminars, and events** (including the UN General Assembly, the Brookings Institute Scaling Lab, and events hosted by UNICEF, Save the Children, UNHCR, the World Bank, and others) to strengthen our program and support other efforts to prioritize ECD in humanitarian response.

- **We garnered coverage** by outlets such as CNN, *The New York Times*, and Voice of America, as well as peer-reviewed publications such as *The Lancet* and UNESCO’s *Global Education Monitoring Report*. This enabled us to highlight both the need for—and the promise of—ECD programs in crisis contexts.
RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Looking at Year Two and beyond, we are closely monitoring factors that could impact our progress. As we continue TV distribution negotiations, we are assessing each broadcaster’s financial health, ownership, and desires for exclusivity, carefully considering how each platform might affect the reach of Ahlan Simsim. Regarding direct services, we are aware that government approvals are frequently subject to delays and funding for humanitarian programs is seldom assured. All of these risks feed into our strategy, powered by flexible delivery methods and partnerships that allow us to adapt to challenges on the ground, whether they are geopolitical, operational, or financial.

While the risks are significant, so is the opportunity. The MacArthur Foundation’s 100&Change award for our program was a bold call to action for the global philanthropic community. In 2018, The LEGO Foundation answered the call with an audacious investment of $100 million that will enable us to deepen the play-based aspects of Ahlan Simsim—and at the same time adapt our models for children affected by the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh. We hope these visionary commitments and the promise of our program will inspire others to come forward, helping us to transform how the world responds to children and families in crisis, wherever they may be.

LOOKING AHEAD

This is just the first chapter of our story. Building on our progress, research, and partnerships, we will continue to counter the effects of conflict and crisis with laughter and learning. Here is our road map for strengthening and scaling our program in the coming years.

• YEAR TWO
  We will implement direct services in Iraq and Syria, developing new materials and models, and launching the Ahlan Simsim TV show. We will shape how our models can be adapted for other humanitarian contexts in alliance with the LEGO Foundation, the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), and other global partners.

• YEAR THREE
  We will build upon our learnings from Years One and Two to expand reach, update models and content, and deepen our impact on children and caregivers. We will inform policymakers of our progress and lay the groundwork for others to take up our approach.

• YEAR FOUR
  We will further refine our program through a multi-year foundation of research and activate efforts to adapt Ahlan Simsim models for other humanitarian contexts around the globe.

• YEAR FIVE
  We will work with national and international actors to scale Ahlan Simsim. Scaling with partners will enable us to more than triple our reach and sustain our impact for years to come.
We’ve laid a strong foundation for Ahlan Simsim in Year One. While the progress so far is encouraging, we know there is exciting and important work ahead. Millions of children continue to be affected by hardship and displacement. To these children, and to the families and communities who support them, we’re determined to bring joy, hope, and opportunity. By surrounding children and caregivers with vital learning experiences and nurturing care, we help them tap wells of resilience that run deeper than any conflict, creating a brighter future for a generation of children whose wellbeing can’t wait.