1. 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 Ahlan Simsim. A program with audacious goals, Ahlan Simsim delivers early learning and nurturing care to millions of children and caregivers affected by displacement in the Syrian response region and aims to transform the humanitarian sector by establishing early childhood development (ECD) as a critical part humanitarian response, worldwide.

In 2019, Year Two of Ahlan Simsim, we expanded direct services implementation and are now reaching children and caregivers in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. We will reach millions more with our brand-new, localized version of Sesame Street, which premiered across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in February 2020. We also developed plans to scale our Ahlan Simsim approaches with national partners in Jordan and Lebanon which will help sustain the reach and impact of Ahlan Simsim during and beyond the five-year grant period. With ongoing support from the MacArthur Foundation, and additional support from the LEGO Foundation, Ahlan Simsim has become a major catalyst and convener in the call to prioritize and invest in support for children in crisis settings.

1. Ahlan Simsim started in February 2018 with a 10-month Discovery Phase. Towards the end of 2018, we began mass media and direct services implementation, reaching caregivers and children in Lebanon and Jordan.
GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

Since the inception of Ahlan Simsim, we knew that implementing a multi-faceted intervention in a dynamic context would be challenging, requiring us to remain informed, agile, and responsive in our delivery. In 2019, the geopolitical situation in the Syrian response region grew increasingly volatile. Military escalations in Syria significantly restricted our ability to reach children and caregivers, as did the civil disturbances that erupted in Lebanon. These developments necessitated shifts in program delivery and recalibration of reach targets.

At the time of writing in early 2020, the displacement crisis has deepened even further. The UN’s Global Humanitarian Overview projects that a record 168 million people worldwide will need humanitarian assistance and protection in 2020—and crises in the Syrian response region represent a large proportion of this worsening global tragedy. As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds, it is those who are already the most vulnerable—including refugees and displaced communities—who will be most at risk. Reports are emerging that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these communities will be grave. In Iraq, restrictions on movement were already delaying delivery of crucial supplies to displaced communities, and the pandemic is exacerbating these challenges. Similar concerns present in both Lebanon and Jordan, which together are home to millions in need of humanitarian assistance. Due to the challenges of delivering vital medical supplies to conflict-affected zones, as many as 120,000 people could die from COVID-19 in Idlib Province, Syria, alone.

These developments are a reminder that interventions like Ahlan Simsim are as necessary as ever. We remain committed to reaching children and families with critical early learning and caregiving support, and we will continue to adapt our programming as needed in order to do so.

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

Mass Media

• We further refined our language approach for Ahlan Simsim. Based on the input of 29 language advisors, we developed a hybrid language approach for the show that incorporates aspects of both colloquial and formal Arabic.

• We conducted several reviews of show content. Formative research, plus reviews from education and language advisors, guided adjustments to Ahlan Simsim.

• We refined our multi-platform distribution strategy. We moved forward with plans to air daily on a pan-Arab broadcast channel in February 2020. We also continued negotiations with local broadcasters and secured meaningful promotional support from YouTube.

• We produced Season 1 of Ahlan Simsim. After five months of in-studio production, we delivered twenty-six 26-minute episodes to broadcasters.

• We started work on Season 2. Through in-region workshops, we developed the curriculum and show creative for Season 2. Production is slated to begin in mid-2020.

Direct Services

• We developed new Sesame educational content for use in direct services. We trained writers and illustrators, created 16 new storybooks, 20 short-form videos, e-learning content for facilitators, and more. We also developed a plan to produce additional print materials in the years to come.

• We expanded direct service delivery in all target countries through the IRC and partners. We are now reaching children and caregivers in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

• Multiple challenges impacted our programming. Delays in government approval, camp closures, social unrest in Lebanon, and renewed conflict in Syria limited our Year Two reach. We realigned reach numbers for Years Three to Five and will reassess again in 2020.

• We adjusted our delivery. Based on learnings from our first year of implementation, we are adjusting our programming in Static Health Centers. New approaches will be piloted and field-tested over the course of 2020.
Influencing Policy & Practice

• **We cultivated relationships with national partners to develop opportunities to scale.** IRC country teams and Ahlan staff worked to identify potential scaling partners in Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon—and in some cases formed early-stage partnerships to pilot scaling programs.

• **We advanced ambitious scaling goals for direct services.** We identified eight potential pathways in two countries to work with national-level partners in order to sustain impact during and beyond the grant period.

• **We established ECD as a headline issue at international fora.** At high-profile events such as the Global Refugee Forum, UN General Assembly (UNGA), and the Skoll World Forum, we leveraged our platform and the power of Muppets to communicate the urgency around ECD for children in crisis settings.

• **We garnered substantial media coverage.** A November 60 Minutes piece gave us a wave of coverage from top-tier outlets, including *The New York Times* and CNN.

Research

• **We conducted formative research on Ahlan Simsim show content.** Research results from animatic testing and seven community reachouts helped shape edits to Season 1 and will inform creative for future seasons.

• **We shifted our evaluation timelines due to the delay in approval from the Government of Jordan.** The delay in securing government approval had cascading effects on planned evaluations for mass media and direct services.

_Basma, Ma’zooza, and Jad interviewed by 60 Minutes correspondent Lesley Stahl. Sesame Workshop_
RISKS, OPPORTUNITIES, FINDINGS, & LEARNINGS

Geopolitical instability in the region remains a significant risk to our programming, and increased volatility impacted our programming in 2019. Adapting implementation in conflict settings is standard practice for humanitarian programs, and our teams are prepared to mitigate these risks, both for the safety of our staff and the ongoing success of the program.

A related risk is the complexity of our scaling ambitions. We aim not only to deliver urgent ECD services now, but also to scale ECD programming through partners to benefit future generations. There is no roadmap for scaling an education intervention of this magnitude. Our plans require delicate relationship management with multiple government stakeholders, whose capacity hangs in the balance amidst geopolitical instability.

In Year Two, we also grappled with tough decisions that presented trade-offs. Our decision to incorporate both colloquial and formal Arabic in the Ahlan Simsim TV show was based on input from expert advisors. We recognized that our choice was a new approach, as using exclusively Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is the traditional approach for Arabic-language children’s media. One of our potential regional broadcasters determined that our language approach was inconsistent with their policy to promote MSA. We decided against offering a fully dubbed version of the show in MSA as it would not be aligned with our educational objectives.

While our original intention was to broadcast on both main regional channels, engagement with our primary broadcaster shaped a more robust broadcast plan for daily broadcasts and more frequent seasons, which supports our objective of reaching millions of children with impactful content. At the time of writing, preliminary data from Greater Amman indicates that the show is popular with both children and caregivers.

Despite risks, difficult decisions, and trade-offs, we’ve also seen growing opportunities to advocate for ECD in conflict contexts with a range of stakeholders, including donors. We set out with the aim of transforming humanitarian response, and this year, we saw proof that our work is moving the needle. The MacArthur Foundation’s audacious commitment continues to inspire large-scale pledges: the LEGO Foundation committed another $100 million to education in East Africa, and others are announcing increased investments as well. Education in emergencies—still drastically underfunded—is often overlooked during global gatherings, but that is changing. We were proud to co-lead with UNICEF a successful side event on ECD in conflict at the inaugural Global Refugee Forum in December 2019 and were featured in a Devex article titled, “Why education stole the show at the Global Refugee Forum.”

In the coming years, we will build on this critical momentum to advance our bold goals: to elevate the unique needs of children in crisis contexts and to establish ECD as a crucial part of humanitarian response.

LOOKING AHEAD

In Year Two, we created a new *Sesame Street* for the region, expanded direct services, deepened relationships for scaling, and raised the profile of ECD in humanitarian settings. We also developed a roadmap to strengthen and scale our program in the coming years:

- **Year Three**
  We will launch two seasons of the *Ahlan Simsim* TV show and begin developing Season 3, applying findings from ongoing formative research to make our content even more engaging and effective. Also during Year Three, we will reach over 200,000 children and caregivers through IRC direct service delivery and initial scaling partners. NYU Global TIES for Children research center will begin the first two of five planned impact evaluations on our program.

  We will continue to leverage every opportunity to advocate for increased resources and prioritization of early learning and development programs in crises contexts. We’ve seen growing stakeholder interest and are exploring ways to bring learnings from *Ahlan Simsim* programming to support children who are faced with similar trauma and challenges in other locations. We will continue to explore these opportunities into Year Three and beyond.

- **Year Four**
  We will deepen our direct reach through the IRC and extend our reach through adoption of *Ahlan Simsim* models by national partners. We will develop and broadcast new educational content.

- **Year Five**
  We will work with national and international actors to multiply the reach and impact of *Ahlan Simsim* and confirm its effectiveness in other contexts. With the impact research conducted by NYU Global TIES for Children, we will double the body of evidence on what works and what doesn’t for ECD initiatives in crises contexts. We will disseminate and share these findings broadly. Scaling *Ahlan Simsim* with national partners will enable us to triple our direct reach.

At the time of this writing, events in early 2020, including increased geopolitical instability and the COVID-19 pandemic, will require us to now reassess these overall program timelines. These unprecedented circumstances will only deepen the needs of children and caregivers affected by displacement, and we know that *Ahlan Simsim* is more critical than ever. We remain committed to reaching these families with critical ECD services, and catalyzing broader systems change to support all communities for generations to come.

_Basma makes a new friend in Azraq Camp, Jordan. Ryan Donnell/Sesame Workshop_
Fahimeh & Eman’s Story
JORDAN

Fahimeh, a mother of eight, lives in Azraq camp. Recalling her struggles of living through the first three years of the crisis without her husband, who worked in Jordan at the time, she says, “I was responsible for providing for my children, but the armed groups in control did not allow me to leave my house or work.” One winter night, she gathered her children and got on a transfer truck for sheep with seven other families. When they reached Jordan, they resided at the border for 50 days. Finally, Fahimeh resettled in Azraq camp and reunited with her husband after three long years of separation.

“One of my boys was three years old; it was the first time he ever saw his father, he had only seen him in pictures before,” Fahimeh said.

The journey put Fahimeh and her family under tremendous mental and physical pressure: three years living amid armed conflict in Syria, a risky journey to safety in Jordan, and then finally settling in tents in a refugee camp, far away from relatives and extended family. All these experiences urged Fahimeh to seek out a “home away from home.”

Fahimeh has been frequenting the IRC’s Women and Girls’ Center with her children regularly for four months, attending Ahlan Simsim caregiver sessions. The sessions help participants develop skills and techniques that can enhance children’s learning and growth. “We as parents are stressed due to what we faced in Syria, and our stress affects our children; parenting training helps us overcome these obstacles,” Fahimeh says.

Fahimeh’s youngest daughter, Eman, who is three years old, has been attending Ahlan Simsim sessions for children as well. “I come here to learn the alphabet and coloring, and I like Jad the most out of the Ahlan Simsim characters,” Eman says with excitement in her eyes. According to a volunteer from the IRC, Eman has shown advanced skills among her peers of the same age and those skills have been improving exponentially.

Fahimeh also explains how she learned to manage her stress and anger when dealing with her children: “I learned tools at the center which help me to stay calm, like breathing exercises or making sure I eat healthy food, and visiting the center for psychological support. Children have a lot of energy and they need to express it and get it out, so we have to help show them how to use this energy and invest it in good things.”

Fahimeh remembers their beautiful house in Syria and wishes to go back one day, but “it’s still risky,” as she puts it. For now, Fahimeh says that her focus and hope is entirely on supporting her children to finish school, enabling them to live a decent life.
Jad shares a moment with a boy and his chicken. Ryan Donnell/Sesame Workshop