

Innovating to meet the needs of young children and their caregivers in every context

Testimony submitted for the record

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Innovation in Development Policy: Maximizing Impact and Results

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Chairman Castro, Ranking Member Malliotakis, and Members of the Subcommittee,

On behalf of Sesame Workshop and International Rescue Committee, thank you for convening this session to focus on such a crucial topic. We also are grateful for the chairman's leadership on the Global Child Thrive Act, a truly innovative approach for working across the U.S. government to better the lives of children.

For more than 50 years, Sesame Workshop has been committed to helping kids become smarter, stronger, and kinder. Whether in the classroom, on screen, or in communities, we are doing everything we can to meet the needs of young children in more than 150 countries.

Founded at the request of Albert Einstein, the International Rescue Committee responds to the world's worst humanitarian crises and helps people whose lives and livelihoods are shattered by conflict and disaster to survive, recover, and gain control of their future. In more than 40 countries and over 20 U.S. cities, we provide clean water, shelter, health care, education and empowerment support to refugees and displaced people.

Sesame Workshop and IRC are working around the world to ensure that the best evidence drives investment for early childhood development. Current collaborations include Ahlan Simsim, which supports children affected by the Syrian crisis, and Play to Learn, which is focused on children and communities affected by the Rohingya and Syrian refugee crises in Bangladesh and the Middle East.

We know from decades of tackling some of the toughest challenges facing children that if we reach them early, we can help change their trajectories.

Across the globe, one in every six children lives in a conflict zone; 71 million children under the age of 5 have lived in conflict areas for their entire lifetimes. For the youngest children, experiences with crisis and conflict come at a particularly critical point in their lives. From birth to age 3, the brain develops faster than at any other time, forming up to one million new connections every second. By age 5, up to 90 percent of a child's brain has already developed. Missing this window of opportunity can mean irreversible losses for a child.

To address these challenges, the ways we reach children and caregivers have evolved over the past five decades, teaching us time and again that necessity can be the mother (and father) of invention.

Our work during the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the need for that flexibility and innovation into ever sharper relief. While face-to-face services are on hiatus, we are providing resources for educators and families through WhatsApp, strengthening access to our content through new partnerships and television distribution channels, and creating content on COVID-19 to support early learning and help families navigate the wide range of challenges they are facing.

Lessons identified and examples from the field

Through these and other partnerships, our most recent experiences in innovation have shown us the value of tapping both the newest and oldest of resources: technology and human relationships.

Our adaptations have demonstrated an unprecedented leap in the capacities of caregivers, educators and other service providers to make use of new technologies to support children's learning. We have also seen a more understanding and collaborative relationship between caregivers and educators. **Maintaining and fostering these working relationships will be essential for building the base of trust and capacity needed to confront new challenges and explore innovative solutions.**

Our experience has also demonstrated that **innovative approaches to programming need not be high tech**. In some cases, our innovative adaptations have actually moved from newer but less-contextually-appropriate technology to more traditional communication media, such as radio and television, which, due to their territorial scope, facilitated more democratic access to learning materials. As in all aspects of our work, **innovation should be demand- and context-driven, rather than supply-led.**

The changes that COVID-19 has necessitated are key reminders of what we should always be doing by design: **developing human-centered, context-appropriate solutions alongside the communities we hope to support.**

Many of our adaptations offer lessons for future innovation opportunities in both crisis and non-crisis contexts:

- In the **Syria response region**, our Ahlan Simsim programming has pivoted from school and in-person service delivery to adaptations such as digital dissemination and audio interventions. We are implementing a new mass messaging program to be distributed by WhatsApp and other mobile programs that allow caregivers to select which age-tailored content they would like to receive and foster two-way communication between staff and caregivers. Lessons on foundational literacy, numeracy and social-emotional learning originally designed for children in classrooms have been changed into 5 –10-minute videos, with each lesson's complementary activities distributed to caregivers for use the home.
- In **Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda**, PlayMatters supports the development of cognitive, creative, social, emotional and physical skills in children. While the program's primary focus is on strengthening play-based learning within Originally designed for classrooms, the pandemic forced PlayMatters to pivot and convert its content for distribution to children and their caregivers at home. A strong example of how "no tech" or adaptive innovations can have significant impact, the program developed a series of paper-based home learning guides tailored

to young and primary school-aged children, their caregivers and educators. Guides for children and caregivers recommend daily routines and fun activities and suggest ways that caregivers can turn daily interactions into teachable moments. Those designed for educators provide guidance on how to check in with families remotely and ways they can support their own well-being during this challenging time.

- Sesame Workshop and IRC are also driving solutions in **Central and South America**. The combination of COVID closures and pre-existing access challenges for Venezuelan children displaced across the region calls for a response that is versatile and able to reach these young people where they are.

The IRC has developed an innovative radio program called Play Well, designed for children ages 3 to 12, with a focus on developing social-emotional learning skills. The IRC is also currently developing a new program called Audioclass, which will aim to provide engaging educational content across a variety of platforms including radio, mobile phones, smart phones and tablets. Primarily relying on audio but also including video and interactive content, Audioclass works directly with Colombian educators to create lesson plans that can be distributed and accessed by students beyond school buildings and classrooms.

Sesame Workshop is working through two new distribution models in the region: our Jardín Sésamo device and the Sesame ChatBot. Jardín Sésamo is a state-of-the-art Sesame intervention built around a small plug-in device that broadcasts engaging, age-appropriate and education-driven content over free local WIFI access in selected spaces. Simple instructions explain how users can connect over WIFI on a personal smartphone, tablet or laptop at no data cost and how to connect the device to a television set or projector for collective use. Families are also able to access the content and download it for future use. Through our local brand, Sésamo, we have integrated content into a WhatsApp chat response system (ChatBot) to reach families with trusted educational content tailored to meet families' current needs. The Sésamo resources are designed to support children's learning across our whole-child curriculum, from physical and social-emotional wellbeing to academic skills and mutual respect and understanding. Adult-facing resources also support caregivers' adoption of positive parenting practices and tools to

Recommendations for improving outcomes in U.S. development investments through innovation

Support to early childhood development programming is the cornerstone for maximizing impact and results of U.S. investments in international development and crisis response. Evidence shows that quality support in the early years can provide tremendous returns – up to 13% per year – through improved education, health, and economic outcomes.¹ To capitalize on that potential, future U.S. investments should:

- Facilitate innovation by allowing grantees the flexibility to adapt their programming to meet rapidly evolving implementation conditions;

¹ García, J.L., Heckman, J.J., et al. "The Life-cycle Benefits of an Influential Early Childhood Program" NBER working paper (2016).

- Strengthen coordination across humanitarian and development actors through implementation of the Global Child Thrive Act;
- Prioritize multiyear, flexible funding for early childhood interventions that support young children and caregivers in crisis contexts, who face the most immediate threats to their well-being and to their long-term development;
- Reach those families through the most context-appropriate innovations, sometimes relying on less technology rather than more; and
- Build on the core principles from decades of best practice: community-driven, context-appropriate solutions that build on the strong networks and relationships already in place around the world.

Finally, we encourage the U.S. government to continually realign its investments with the growing evidence base on effective early childhood innovations and interventions. As we continue to build these lessons into our own programming, we are grateful for the opportunity to share them with you and learn alongside our partners across the U.S. government.

Thank you.