Early Childhood in Crisis and Conflict

A crucial window to secure a brighter future

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.1 Increasingly, children affected by crisis and conflict are spending their whole childhoods without access to the necessary foundations of healthy human development.

The Challenge

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.2 Substantial evidence shows that prolonged adversity in this narrow window of time can negatively alter brain development. The long-term effects can be devastating, adversely impacting health, learning, and behavior for children. This, in turn, threatens a pernicious cycle of instability and poverty, affecting both individual prospects as well as larger community goals of social cohesion, resilience, and equity.

Despite evidence that early childhood interventions are both essential and effective, they remain dramatically underfunded. Globally, ECD accounts for just over 3 percent of development assistance going to crisis-affected countries, with only a sliver of that specifically allocated for nurturing care and pre-primary education; in humanitarian assistance, only 2 percent of funding is dedicated to ECD.3 The limited funding that does exist is thinly spread and poorly coordinated, limiting its accessibility and its efficacy.4

By the Numbers

1 in 6 children worldwide lives in a conflict zone

90% of a child’s brain has developed by age 5

ECD investments can yield up to 13% annual rate of return

Globally, approximately 3% of development assistance and just 2% of humanitarian assistance is for ECD
The Opportunity

The United States government has long been a generous and influential partner in protecting the health, education, and safety of children affected by crisis and conflict across the humanitarian-development nexus. Its role in securing global gains for children is irreplaceable. Together, we can build on that legacy to ensure that children – especially young children – are not just surviving adversity, but thriving. With the right investments, we can help young children reach their full potential. To that end, the U.S. government should:

1. Galvanize the resources needed to meet the learning and developmental needs of young children in crisis and conflict contexts.

As a leading donor in global humanitarian response, the United States has a unique opportunity and obligation to lead the world in ECD investments. By increasing its own funding and leveraging its relationships globally, including with multilateral institutions, to encourage partners to expand their investments, the U.S. can help every child in crisis secure a brighter future.

2. Align with and invest in evidence-based programs to support young children in crisis and conflict.

There is significant evidence that early childhood interventions can help children overcome traumatic events. There is a smaller, but growing, body of research about the specific ECD approaches that work best in crisis contexts. Future U.S. investments for ECD in these settings should be guided by the existing evidence and should include resources to expand the evidence base.

3. Improve the quality and coordination of U.S. investments in ECD with oversight of key legislation.

The 2021 passage of the Global Child Thrive Act was an important step forward for U.S. investments in ECD. The Thrive Act offers a blueprint for improving the impact of U.S. foreign assistance by strengthening coordination and evaluation of ECD investments across humanitarian and development authorities. It is now crucial to commit to rapid implementation with the relevant agencies and focused oversight from Congress.

About Us

We are working with governments around the world to ensure that the best evidence drives investment for early childhood development in crisis contexts. 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.

The partnership is based on three proven approaches for program delivery: (1) delivering early education through mass media; (2) providing services directly to children with support for facilitators, childcare workers, and teachers; and (3) offering services directly to caregivers with a focus on playful early learning and responsive caregiving. The partners are also focused on two key areas of work to support the larger field of ECD in crisis contexts: working together to advocate for increased investments and improved quality of ECD and generating new evidence on what it takes to design and implement early childhood programs in these challenging environments. Together, this work will triple the existing evidence base on early childhood in crisis contexts.

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Sesame Workshop is the non-profit organization committed to helping kids grow smarter, stronger, and kinder. Sesame Workshop delivers high quality early childhood programming in more than 150 countries.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) helps people whose lives and livelihoods are shattered by conflict and disaster to survive, recover, and regain control of their future.

BRAC works to empower people and communities in situations of poverty, illiteracy, disease, and social injustice, seeking positive changes that enable individuals to meet their full potential.

LEGO Foundation, which is funding the Play to Learn project, is dedicated to re-defining play and re-imagining learning to ensure children build the broad set of skills they need to thrive and succeed. The Foundation works with the LEGO Group to support governments leading on behalf of children around the world.

Global TIES for Children is the independent evaluator of the Ahlan Simsim and Play to Learn projects and is an international research center which works towards a world where all children have equitable access to opportunities that allow them to thrive in an ecosystem where caregivers and teachers have the resources they need to support them.