

MacArthur  
Foundation

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أهلاً سمسيم

Ahlan Simsim  
**ANNUAL REPORT**  
2020: YEAR THREE

SESAME  
WORKSHOP™







*Basma and a friend practice handwashing in Amman, Jordan. Ryan Donnell/Sesame Workshop*

As the midpoint of our initiative approached in 2020, [Ahlan Simsim](#) had ambitious plans in Year Three, setting out to reach over 300,000 children through early childhood development (ECD) services and millions more by launching two seasons of our new locally-produced show *Ahlan Simsim*. We also planned to initiate two research studies with children in schools and to influence policymakers at the national and global levels to prioritize early learning for children affected by crisis. In early 2020, we identified seven possible interventions with ministries of education, health, and social welfare in Jordan and Lebanon to adapt and adopt our ECD models to sustain Ahlan Simsim’s impact beyond the life of our project. In the first few months of the year, our field programs were growing, and in February 2020, we launched the first

season of *Ahlan Simsim*, a new Sesame show for a new generation across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

By March 2020, COVID-19 had begun to spread across the world, leaving no community untouched. Those most vulnerable, particularly displaced families, faced greater risk of infection and saw their limited ability to provide basic needs for their children, including opportunities for learning, further diminished. Initial, and now intermittent, closures of schools and early learning centers around the globe affected “almost all the world’s 1.5 billion” students.

Through the commitment and flexibility of our experienced teams and donors, Ahlan Simsim met this challenging time with firm resolve. Ahlan Simsim’s established services to families and strong partnerships with ministries, combined with our award-winning show and other digital

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1. UNICEF, “COVID-10: Are Children Able to Continue Learning During School Closures?”, New York, 2020

materials, enabled us to adapt in real-time to a rapidly changing reality. From the onset of COVID-19 restrictions, we maintained contact with families that were already engaged with Ahlan Simsim, providing them with remote support through phone calls and mobile messaging. We also adapted the production of the second season of *Ahlan Simsim* to support children and caregivers as they stayed home to stay healthy. Through diverse efforts—including co-hosting an event on ECD in emergencies with UNICEF at the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in December 2019—Ahlan Simsim had become a trusted convener and catalyst in the call to invest in ECD support for children and caregivers in crisis settings.

In 2020, we were able to provide in-person and remote ECD services to reach a cumulative project total of over 215,000 children and caregivers. Over three million children in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as 12 million more across 21 countries in the MENA region, watched *Ahlan Simsim* on MBC3 and on our [YouTube](#) channel, which achieved one million subscribers by May and over 142 million views during 2020.

At the time of writing, we mark the tragic ten-year anniversary of the Syrian conflict and are faced with a continuing pandemic that has intensified existing social, economic, and political challenges. Because of and despite these conditions, we have redoubled our commitment to creating engaging learning opportunities for children in crisis settings. We are eager to grow our capacity to provide the skills they need to overcome today's challenges and thrive as they build tomorrow's societies.



**The Chicago International Children's Film Festival (CICFF) awarded *Ahlan Simsim*'s "Piece of the Past" episode with the Teachers' Choice Award at its first virtual festival. Directed by local filmmaker Tamer Naber, the episode features characters doing a show-and-tell of their favorite toys. Jad doesn't have his beloved drum anymore because he left it behind in his previous home, so Basma decides to make a special new drum for her friend.**



## CONTEXT

Ahlan Simsim is a flexible intervention designed to operate within a complex context. The geopolitical situation in the Syrian response region is one of continued instability, and in 2020, the displacement crisis further deepened. Events beginning in late 2019—including the withdrawal of US troops from the region in December followed by incursions into Northwest Syria (NWS) by Syrian Government forces and Turkish troops—resulted in the largest number of people displaced in one incident of the conflict. Over 840,000 of them remain displaced, 60 percent of whom are children.

On the ground, program delivery required us to adapt to the changing of authorities that control access to communities, including renegotiating and reconfirming access when the Turkish military took control of parts of NWS. The global health pandemic has deepened

existing social and economic vulnerabilities, diminishing economic opportunities and intensifying the isolation, exclusion, and stigmatization of displaced families. The layers of crisis—from prolonged conflict, to regional destabilization, to the COVID-19 pandemic—have positioned parents and caregivers as children’s primary instructors, assuming an even more critical role in their early learning.

Despite the obstacles posed to direct services during Year Three, we were able to adapt and provide care and support to tens of thousands of families through in-person and remote services and millions more through mass media, adapting to their changing needs in uncertain conditions.

*Ma'zooza and a friend learn through play at Azraq Camp, Jordan. Ryan Donnell/Sesame Workshop*





## GROWING SUPPORT

Generously supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Sesame Workshop and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) launched Ahlan Simsim in 2018 in order to deliver early learning opportunities and nurturing care to millions of children and caregivers affected by displacement and crisis in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. In 2019, the LEGO Foundation invested further in our efforts to deepen our play-based learning approaches, create new content, and reinforce our advocacy efforts. In 2020, with the support of additional funding partners, we were able to expand our content creation and reach:

- **GSMA, the global association of mobile network operators, supported the production of six new video messages for caregivers.**
- **Unilever and the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO), through the Health Behavior Change Coalition, supported the dubbing of videos and print/digital assets on health, hygiene, and COVID-19 for distribution by our partners CARE in Northeast Syria and Oxfam in government-controlled Syria.**
- **The LEGO Foundation provided additional support for Sesame Workshop's Caring for Each Other initiative to deliver targeted COVID-19 messaging, including public service announcements (PSAs) that were aired by our regional broadcaster MBC3.**
- **The Bezos Family Foundation supported the adaptation of content from their Vroom app for Ahlan Simsim to distribute to participants through WhatsApp and Facebook.**



*Basma, Jad, and Ma'zooza explore the Amman Citadel with new friend Salma, portrayed by Mariam Amer. Mohamed Ewiss/Sesame Workshop*



**PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION**



**Mass Media & Distribution**

- **We premiered *Ahlan Simsim* on February 2, 2020** on regional channel MBC3, followed by Season 2 on August 30, 2020. The show also aired on national channels in Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq.
- **We expanded our approach for Season 2** on social-emotional learning (SEL) to mirror the reality for families of video calls and remote learning.
- **We produced two *Ahlan Simsim* half-hour prime time special episodes** to support children and families learning at home during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **We produced Season 3 of *Ahlan Simsim*** in the fall of 2020 and further expanded the diversity of our show with a new character, an Egyptian preschool teacher named Salma. Season 3 launched on February 28, 2021.
- **We created 22 new storybooks and over 70 video and print resources** that are available to children and caregivers on our new website: [AhlanSimsim.org](http://AhlanSimsim.org).



**Direct Services**

- **At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we adapted our program models to maintain contact with families that were already engaged in *Ahlan Simsim*.** We supported them with phone calls and mobile messages that included links to digital materials.
- **We maintained a high level of ECD services despite pandemic restrictions.** 60 percent of our reach in 2020 was achieved through in-person services (mostly in Syria), while 25 percent was achieved through phone calls, and 15 percent through mobile messaging.
- **We reached children through our scaling collaborations with ministries and other national partners.** For example, with the Jordanian Ministry of Education (MoE), we piloted a two-week School Readiness Program to support caregivers in preparing their children to enter grade one. In January 2021, the MoE also began to distribute our *Ahlan Simsim* content through their Darsak broadcast and digital platforms.
- **Through these adaptations, we have developed remote models to reach children and caregivers when in-person services are not possible.**



*Ahlan Simsim* puppeteers Nowar Mahyri, Hind Jaal, and Fatima Amaireh on location at the Amman citadel. Mohamed Ewiss/Sesame Workshop





## Influencing Policy & Practice

- **With the IRC, BRAC, and the LEGO Foundation, we refined our collective advocacy strategy through an integrated approach across our Ahlan Simsim and Play to Learn programs.** Together with other partners, we have targeted humanitarian actors, donors, and national governments to prioritize and increase investment in ECD in humanitarian response.
- **Through the Moving Minds Alliance (MMA), we targeted specific bilateral and multilateral donors to identify potential opportunities to influence policy change.**
- **We championed the needs of families in crisis and displacement contexts,** advocating for meaningful inclusion of ECD in the UN’s COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) and the UNICEF COVID-19 Humanitarian Action for Children Appeal.
- **We played a key role in advocacy at the World Bank Fragility Forum, Concordia’s World Refugee Day, Council on Foreign Relations events, and more.**



## Research

- **As schools were closed due to lockdowns, we postponed our plans to conduct in-person research in early childhood centers and kindergartens.**
- **With our research partner NYU Global TIES for Children, we adapted our research agenda to investigate new remote models:** a mobile messaging program for caregivers and a phone-based version of the High-Contact Caregiver-Facing model of Reach Up and Learn (RUL) home visits.
- **We conducted a formative study, with support from the GSMA Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation Fund,** to determine who caregivers in the Middle East trust as messengers about ECD. These results informed the videos we created for caregivers and the third season of *Ahlan Simsim*.
- **These shifts in our research plans have allowed for testing and learning on new remote models** that will strengthen our program and our research contribution to the sector over the long term.



**In the aftermath of the Beirut explosion in August 2020, we curated and promoted existing Sesame Workshop and Ahlan Simsim video content and digital resources to help families cope with the emotions many children experienced.**



## RISKS, OPPORTUNITIES, LEARNINGS, AND FINDINGS

We continue to monitor the significant risks of geopolitical instability and socio-economic pressures across the region. In a context of conflict and crisis, the pandemic compounds existing risks for the vulnerable communities with whom we work, as well as our own teams. Our adaptable program implementation proved to be critical in this context, helping to ensure the safety of our colleagues and the continued success of the program amid continuous disruptions.

After years of fostering relationships with national partners and global stakeholders, and conducting direct services on the ground, Sesame Workshop and the IRC entered Year Three as a trusted creator of locally-relevant educational content and provider of ECD services. Ahlan Simsim’s respected profile also generated increased interest and demand from existing and new partners, allowing us to engage quickly, adapt approaches, and deliver services and materials where they were needed.

On a programmatic level, we are learning about the long-term implications of this year’s events, not just for our program but for the humanitarian system.

Our ECD service models prioritized in-person engagement directly with children and caregivers, and has always included some remote components.

An important lesson from the past year is that caregivers are eager to join Ahlan Simsim activities in new ways—through phone calls and mobile messaging. We adapted our methods to help caregivers cope with the stress and uncertainty of the situation. We supported caregivers in their new role as educators by providing guidance and Ahlan Simsim digital resources to use for playful learning activities with their children.

The flexibility of our program and our donors continue to be our most significant assets, giving us the ability to react adeptly to a rapidly changing environment. Across Sesame Workshop, the IRC, and NYU, the depth of technical and operational skills within the teams allowed us to problem solve and imagine new ways to achieve significant results in 2020. Above all, this year underscored the power of media as an integral tool for reaching families in crisis settings.



*Gargar gardens with a friend in Zaatari Camp, Jordan. Ryan Donnell/Sesame Workshop*



## LOOKING AHEAD

As a result of the challenges of Year Three, we are reassessing how we achieve our program's longer-term commitment to reach 1.5 million children and caregivers with ECD services and to reach over six million children through our broadcast. While we experienced significant delays in our research, we are now able to incorporate the lessons of Year Three into our studies, particularly regarding new ways to reach families.

In the coming years, we aim to refine our approaches and models within a new and dynamic reality:

- **We will develop, broadcast, and distribute new educational content, including future seasons of *Ahlan Simsim*.**
- **We will reposition and redeploy our in-person and remote direct services with new priorities based on the lessons we learn.**
- **We will continue to work with national and international actors to leverage the reach and impact of *Ahlan Simsim*, to strengthen national ECD services, and to influence the humanitarian sector.**

- **We will double the existing body of evidence on ECD in emergencies through the impact research conducted by NYU Global TIES for Children and share these findings with our networks of national partners, humanitarian actors, as well as more broadly.**

We began this initiative with audacious funding from MacArthur Foundation's 100&Change competition, calling attention to the critical gap in ECD in conflict and crisis settings. The LEGO Foundation recognized the gravity of the issue and stepped up to match MacArthur's significant investment to support displaced families in the Middle East and to extend our work beyond the region. Since then, new funders have contributed to strengthening our work.

In the coming years, we are eager to not only deliver on our ambitious vision, but to expand our capacity with support from new funders. Looking ahead, we will pursue further opportunities to extend our reach and deepen our role to transform how the world responds to children in crisis, wherever they may be.



*Basma makes a new friend in Zaatari Camp, Jordan.* Ryan Donnell/Sesame Workshop

## Bayan and Bailsan's Story JORDAN



Six-year-old Bailsan, working on an Ahlan Simsim activity book from the School Readiness Program. Photo: IRC.

Seven years ago, Bayan and her family were forced to flee their hometown of Homs, Syria after a bomb fell near their home. Bayan, who was nine months pregnant with her first child, endured an arduous three-day journey to reach the Jordanian border. The family first lived at Za'atari camp but soon moved out to Mafraq city. Bayan and her husband, Firas, began to rebuild their lives and now have three children: Bisan, age 7; Bailsan, age 6; and Ahmad, age 1. Bayan's and Firas' only wish is to ensure a happy life and strong education for their children. "I studied till the eleventh grade," says Bayan. "Nowadays, I feel disappointed that I did not complete my education, at least to be able to teach and support my children."

When Firas lost his job early in the pandemic, Bayan searched for any opportunity to help her family. She learned about the IRC's Women's Center, and

registered for an online training to learn how to become a beautician. "The course was a blessed opportunity [for me], and it was also life-changing for my daughter," says Bayan. "During the course, I heard about the [Ahlan Simsim] School Readiness Program and signed Bailsan up" two months before the start of grade 1.

Five years ago, the Jordanian MoE began an initiative to increase children's cognitive and social-emotional preparedness for grade one. IRC's Ahlan Simsim team worked with the MoE to adapt the existing curriculum for remote delivery to reach families and children at this critical time. The Ahlan Simsim two-week School Readiness Program includes guidance for caregivers to help them support their children to engage in a combination of playful and educational learning activities. In the pilot phase, 510 caregivers received 14 phone calls with IRC facilitators. Each of their 1,006 children received ECD kits containing educational materials. Caregivers also received an Ahlan Simsim/Play to Learn Guidebook used during their phone call sessions with facilitators. The educational kit guides caregivers on how to engage with their children in age-appropriate activities that are joyful and playful.

Bayan joined the Ahlan Simsim caregiver group sessions over WhatsApp. "We learned techniques on how to teach our children [in the home] and prepare them for school," Bayan recalls. "They provided us with educational kits with an activity book plus stationery and a guidebook for parents."

"The guidebook was really helpful. There was a story or game for each lesson. The phone calls also included tips on how to do activities with our children and how to use the guidebook," says Bayan. "Bailsan learned numbers, letters, directions, and shapes; with practice and activities, she knew them all."

Through the Ahlan Simsim School Readiness Program piloted with Jordan's MoE, Bayan was able to prepare Bailsan to enter 1st grade with a strong foundation that will help her succeed in school and in life.





*Jad and a friend play football at Azraq Camp, Jordan. Ryan Donnell/Sesame Workshop*

*Front and back cover photo: Ryan Donnell/Sesame Workshop*



