

Innovators' Response to COVID-19



Photo credit: Mobile Creches

Lessons from Four Early Childhood Development Programs

By Helen G. Walsh, with Jasmine Lam, James Radner,
and the Saving Brains Learning Platform Team

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ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This policy brief is part of a series **exploring practical lessons** from ongoing Saving Brains Transition to Scale projects.

Saving Brains, a collaboration of **Grand Challenges Canada** and its partner organizations, supports innovations for early childhood development in low- and middle-income countries. Saving Brains seeks bold ideas to enhance three key areas of healthy development that are essential to every child: health and nutrition, enrichment and nurturing, and protection against maltreatment. Saving Brains values effectively integrating solutions for these areas and sustainably delivering them to the highest number of children possible.

The present brief tracks the experience and lessons from four innovators' responses to the COVID-19 emergency. The work of the four innovators and the preparation of this brief were supported by Grand Challenges Canada (funded in turn by the Government of Canada) and a lead private donor, together with individual project funders.

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INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 and related restrictions created major challenges for the programs of Saving Brains innovators and in the lives of the people those programs serve. Childcare centres were closed, program staff were prevented from meeting with families in person, and families faced loss of livelihoods, acute food insecurity and, for example among migrant families in India served by Mobile Creches, sudden and large-scale displacement. To prepare this brief, we reviewed the experiences and responses of three Saving Brains innovators – aeioTU in Colombia, Mobile Creches in India, and RTCCD in Vietnam – plus one separately funded program – Ana Aqra in Lebanon. We were inspired by the remarkable way the innovators stepped up, with creativity and flexibility, to adapt their programs and supporting the wellbeing of the families served.

In each case the innovators developed a unique response to COVID-19 that was creatively tailored to their community context, to their own capacities and circumstances, and to the content of their work. There was no one-size-fits-all solution emerging from these experiences. At the same time, some important common themes are observable across the four cases:

1. Innovators focused not on simply sustaining the existing program, but rather on identifying and responding to the challenges **families** were facing, writ large. They stepped up to the dual challenge of providing ongoing services and responding to the society-wide emergency.
2. To develop a uniquely tailored response in this context, innovators conducted an **assessment** of families' circumstances, priorities, and capacity to access services under social distancing.
3. Based on the priorities and capacities identified, innovators adapted program **content** and developed new programming to meet the emergency; they also created new **delivery** strategies, ranging from simple phone-calls and physical play kits to use of online platforms, to assure ongoing **availability** to client families in ways that met public health restrictions.
4. Innovators maintained close **ongoing connection** and communication with families throughout the crisis; this enabled an **agile** approach based on **continuous adaptation** and refinement of their programming and delivery.
5. Innovators looked for longer-term **strategic value** in advancing their early childhood development mission even as they created their immediate COVID-19 response. They built on, mobilized, and developed strategic relationships and capabilities, and are now aiming to help their communities build back better.

THEME 1: Innovators focused not on simply sustaining the existing program, but rather on identifying and responding to the challenges **families** were facing, writ large. They stepped up to the dual challenge of providing ongoing services and responding to the society-wide emergency.

A pattern observable across the responses was that innovators were focused on much more than sustaining their own existing programs; rather, their priority was to understand the impact COVID-19 was having on their communities and to adapt and mobilize their resources in the best way possible to support children and families in the context of the global crisis. For example, Mobile Creches, which ordinarily provides service in childcare centres, became directly involved in organizing food distribution to communities in addition to adapting their in-person curriculum for remote delivery.

THEME 2: To develop a uniquely tailored response in this context, innovators conducted an **assessment** of families' circumstances, priorities, and capacity to access services under social distancing.

Each innovator developed their response based on an assessment of children's and families' new situation under COVID-19 restrictions in general, and on their access to technology in particular. They based those assessments on some combination of review of existing data, ongoing informal contact with families, and special surveys, in pragmatic fashion depending on available assessment resources in the emergency. For example, RTCCD

conducted a systematic phone survey of families they served, which provided insight about specific economic and social stresses families faced under lockdown and led in turn to decisions about adapted programming. Ana Aqra worked with 20 education partner organizations to conduct a systematic needs assessment across almost 10,000 families, including determining their access to technology and preferences for remote delivery. They asked each family about the technology they have access to, their preferred communication channel, when they would prefer to receive material, and the amount they would like to receive each week. aeioTU began by systematically reviewing families' access to technology and their home environment from their annual data collection, while their teachers remained in touch with families to understand their current needs. Mobile Creches developed their response based on a telephone survey plus continuous community contact.

THEME 3: Based on the priorities and capacities identified, innovators adapted program **content** and developed new programming to meet the emergency; they also created new **delivery** strategies, ranging from simple phone-calls and physical play kits to use of online platforms, to assure ongoing **availability** to client families in ways that met public health restrictions.

With ongoing communication and the needs of their communities as a priority, each innovator developed flexible approaches to continue service within the constraints

imposed by COVID-19 on families and program staff. This included changes to the content of the programs as well as their delivery. A dramatic example of new content is the food distribution strategy Mobile Creches initiated, as noted above. Emphasizing equity and social cohesion, Mobile Creches provided food to all families in communities where they normally operate, not just to families whose children attend their childcare centres. In Vietnam, after hearing about financial pressures and emotional stress families were facing under stay-at-home restrictions, RTCCD developed material showing parents how to use ordinary household items, rather than purchased toys, for play, and developed messaging around stress reduction. In Colombia, aeioTU worked with private companies to develop workshops and webinars for their employees to help them encourage children's learning and development during the quarantine while managing their work responsibilities.

Each of the innovators also developed creative approaches to delivering their programming under emergency restrictions. In Lebanon, Ana Aqra adapted their in-person curriculum into "mini-lesson" videos, delivered to families weekly via WhatsApp. They also created and distributed play kits as families began to run out of paper and pencils. RTCCD also used small modules for virtual curriculum delivery, in their case via the Zalo platform. aeioTU adapted their individualized curriculum for remote delivery (videoconferencing or phone calls with children and families) to continue children's learning through play and



Photo credit: aeioTU

rolled out a digital platform to support their teachers and families and those from other early childhood education centres. Mobile Creches, based on their survey of families' capacities, used phone-calling to deliver an adapted curriculum to families.

THEME 4: Innovators maintained close **ongoing connection** and communication with families throughout the crisis; this enabled an **agile** approach based on **continuous adaptation** and refinement of their programming and delivery.

Throughout the crisis, all four innovators have remained in touch with families and continuously adapted their program by incorporating families' feedback to further refine their programs to better meet participants' needs. For example, RTCCD held phone surveys with five randomly selected participants from three communes after each remote session. The women were asked about the online material, their engagement with it, and the challenges they were facing due to COVID-19. Once they had this information, the innovators were able to adapt their programs and continue service delivery within the limits of COVID-19 in a way that would work for children and their families.

THEME 5: Innovators looked for longer-term **strategic value** in advancing their early childhood development mission even as they created their immediate COVID-19 response. They built on, mobilized, and developed strategic relationships and capabilities, and are now aiming to help their communities build back better.

The responses described here represent more than tactical adaptations – they are also strategic steps in the ongoing work innovators are advancing to best serve their communities. Effectively responding to this crisis meant mobilizing resources, enhancing existing capabilities and relationships while also building new ones. For example, Ana Aqra's response has deepened their relationship with Lebanon's Ministry of Education, where Ana Aqra now serves on a national educational taskforce on distance learning. Mobile Creches developed new

relationships with donors, NGO partners, and coalitions, strengthening their long-term capacity to promote ECD nationwide. Meanwhile, the virtual programming all four innovators developed is now part of their scaling up strategy, to reach new and more remote populations, or to provide hybrid models combining digital with in-person services.



Parents interacted with RTCCD facilitator and peers: Posting questions and sharing video clips for a contest

Program Overview

Based in Bogotá, Colombia, aeioTU is a social enterprise with a mission to enable children under five, particularly those in vulnerable populations, to develop to their full potential through access to high quality, comprehensive education. aeioTU advances this mission through four core strategies:

1. **Direct Service:** aeioTU provides quality early childhood development (ECD) through their 22 centres in 13 municipalities, serving over 8,000 children and their families in Colombia. aeioTU uses a cross-subsidy model where the earnings from middle- and high-income centres subsidize the social impact centres in vulnerable communities.
2. **Collaborative Service:** aeioTU also provides consulting and training services, designed for teachers and educational leaders at other centres, to improve the

quality of ECD services and their teaching practices. aeioTU has worked with ECD educators in Colombia, Mexico and Panama, reaching 30,000 children.

3. **aeioTU Digital:** aeioTU is developing a portfolio of digital services to share their knowledge and experience. They currently offer a free platform (Aprendiendo) with content for families and teachers to improve their educational and parenting practices. aeioTU is also developing a virtual community to promote collaborative work, the co-construction of knowledge among users, the mobilization of resources and the sharing of strategies to encourage children under five to develop to their full potential.
4. **Advocacy:** aeioTU mobilizes multi-sector groups to diagnose, develop, and promote strategies in favour of ECD.

Before COVID-19

- Centre-based early childhood educational experience
- Consulting services for other early childhood educators and organizations
- Advocacy

After COVID-19

- “aeioTU at Home with You” remote curriculum
- “Aprendiendo” digital platform
- Workshops for companies to help their employees adapt to working remotely and caring for their children

aeioTU's COVID-19 Response: Concerns and Goals

To prevent the spread of COVID-19, on March 16, 2020 the Colombian government closed schools and soon after enacted a nationwide quarantine. With schools closed, María Adelaida López, the Executive Director of aeioTU, was concerned for her staff, and for the parents, children and caregivers they serve. They had entered a set of circumstances no one had anticipated.

In particular, the closure of schools and daycare centres presented a series of challenges for the families aeioTU serves. Maria and her staff were also concerned that these closures would widen social and educational gaps between high- and low-income families, while generating new stresses for parents who, in the absence of daycare and educational services, saw their responsibilities multiply. Many of aeioTU's families do not have formal jobs and would have to continue doing informal work during the crisis, leaving their children with older siblings or other family members who may be hard pressed to support their development.

aeioTU's staff were worried about their jobs, about being able to support their families and pay rent. Teachers wanted to continue to support the families and children they serve yet did not have the technical support and curriculum to do so when not in a physical classroom.

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Leadership is about plumbing and poetry, a teacher said this to me. I see myself as a plumber and a poet who needs to go into mechanics of the situation and see the poetry of it.

María Adelaida López
Executive Director, aeioTU

Maria knew that she and her staff had to confront the pandemic as a group so that together they could understand how COVID-19 might impact everyone and how they were going to respond. “Since everyone had to work from home, we had to ensure that everyone had the basic tools, from chairs to computers. The changed circumstances challenged us to find ways to protect aeioTU culture, to be present for one another and be aware of each person's everyday situation so that we could help one another. Also, we needed to understand the concerns of families and children so we could come up with a new way of offering service.”

aeioTU's leadership met with the Board of Directors and together they agreed on three principles to guide their COVID-19 response: 1) protect their team while trusting each other's ability to continue working with creativity and

honesty; 2) ensure aeioTU's operation would maintain stability and support innovation; and 3) mobilize the entire organization, together with stakeholders, to respond to the humanitarian crisis.

The leadership team invited those who work in aeioTU's centres to help develop new, remotely delivered home-based programming powerful enough to support parents who have never been teachers and provide children with a quality educational experience. This had to be accomplished in a way that would work for parents and families, so the strategy could not be to simply replicate what had been done at aeioTU's centres for home use. Holding onto aeioTU's approach and philosophy were equally important: to keep kindness, humility, optimism, and compassion in every activity, and to seek opportunities for the organization to learn and improve. New solutions could serve not only as immediate responses to the crisis, but also as pathways to advance aeioTU's mission in the long term.

aeioTU's leadership held virtual meetings every Monday to check in, learn from their experiences, plan for potential developments, and support each other. As Maria put it, each Monday morning, "we start these meetings with play

for a while and listen to each other. This is similar to what we do with children." The Monday meetings set the foundation for communication across the organization and the families aeioTU serves. Teachers and families continued ongoing communications with the aeioTU team. These communications have been vital for understanding how families were doing and how aeioTU could best serve them, as aeioTU worked to support families' physical and mental health and to continue learning through play during the lockdown.

In summary, aeioTU developed their COVID-19 response through:

- A flexible approach to working from home for all of aeioTU's staff, with self-care as a priority, to foster continuity in their work.
- Reorganizing teams, redistributing resources, and authorizing project deliverables under lockdown restrictions.
- Focused effort to maintain constant and fluent communication with clients and allies as a strategy to maintain warm and close relationships.

aeioTU's COVID-19 Response: Main Activities

The main elements of aeioTU's COVID-19 response included:

1. "aeioTU at Home with You," a remote curriculum for families in aeioTU's network.
2. Aprendiendo ("Learning"), a digital platform for use by teachers and families at aeioTU's centres and beyond.
3. Wider collaboration with other organizations through diverse channels, and support for the emergency response.

1. aeioTU at Home with You

To design aeioTU's remote program, aeioTU's pedagogical team drew upon information gathered from each family at the start of the school year, including knowledge regarding childhood development, access to technology at home, and the time and resources families have available to facilitate experiences for children at home. This year, 40% of their families have access to the internet via computer, 50% have a smartphone to access internet, and 10% in more rural areas have cellphones, but not smartphones. This information enabled aeioTU to adapt their program for remote delivery in a way that works for all families. The pedagogical team was able to determine which types of experiences teachers should design based on each families' needs and capabilities. This approach, grounded

in aeioTU's explicit philosophy of respect for each family, formed the foundation for "aeioTU at Home with You".

"aeioTU at Home with You" includes synchronous and asynchronous sessions. The synchronous sessions are either individual meetings between the teachers and a family or small group sessions with a few families using technology the families can access (e.g., videoconferencing for families with access to internet and a computer, over the phone for families with cellphones). The asynchronous sessions include experiences for families and children to do on their own schedule. The experiences all revolve around play and exploration with materials families have available at home, for example, using sunlight or a flashlight to make shadow puppets. aeioTU's model views parents as their children's partners through their learning process. The teachers engages with each family to understand their environment and practices, and the resources available to them. Teachers then adapt the program accordingly; parents and teachers remain in constant dialogue not only to assure effective program delivery, but also to provide general support through the crisis.

2. Aprendiendo ("Learning")

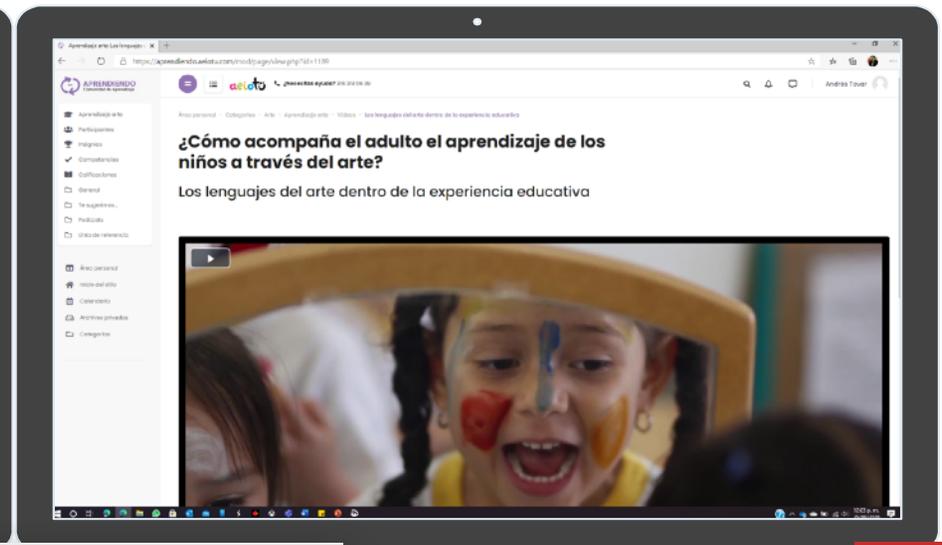
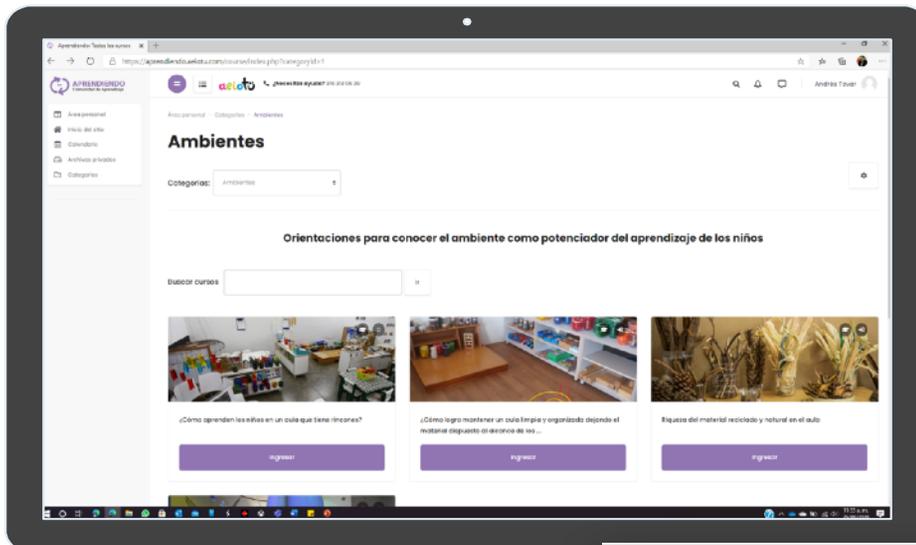
On May 4, 2020 aeioTU launched a free digital platform, Aprendiendo ("Learning"), to support teachers and families in their community more broadly. Though the COVID-19 crisis created a greater demand for online learning, aeioTU had already begun developing their online platform to

increase the reach of their model to more teachers and families. When the platform launched, it comprised almost 1,000 virtual items, including videos, tips, and best practices. Aprendiendo quickly became a tool for teachers to share and gather ideas for different experiences to encourage learning and development. The platform also aims to develop families' knowledge and capabilities to support their children's development at home and to provide ideas for experiences families can share with their children. aeioTU continues to develop and upload content to Aprendiendo based on what families and teachers are requesting. Teachers making videos from their homes with available resources serve as examples to families, sparking family creativity and further demonstrating aeioTU's belief that learning can happen anywhere. aeioTU's reputation for quality remote programming has attracted new families to

enroll their children in the private centres, including internationally.

3. Wider Collaboration

During the COVID-19 crisis aeioTU has supported educators and families outside of their community as well. aeioTU offers training and consulting services to other schools and ECD centres in Colombia, Panama and Mexico and shares resources with schools beyond the aeioTU network of centres. At the request of private sector companies, aeioTU has held workshops and webinars for employees on how to encourage their children's development during the lockdown and how to cope with remote work and balancing professional and family responsibilities. aeioTU's staff engaged in a campaign, aeioTU Solidaria (aeioTU in Solidarity), where they each donated a day of work to the emergency response.



Looking to the Future

Maria views the need for the education sector to respond to COVID-19 as “an opportunity for educators to re-imagine learning and to deconstruct the meaning of the classroom.” Traditionally, people think of learning taking place in a formal educational institution. The COVID-19 emergency disrupted that pattern, encouraging aeioTU to rethink ECD services to guarantee quality education as a right for all children. As a result, aeioTU is investing in a hybrid educational model of in-person and virtual offerings which will allow more flexible opportunities for families and help democratize quality education. Aprendiendo is central to aeioTU’s plans for this as it will build a learning community while supporting their services.

In the hybrid model, aeioTU Digital will amplify the impact of aeioTU’s educational model and support both aeioTU’s direct operations and its consulting services. Following the approach developed for the COVID-19 emergency, aeioTU will continue to offer synchronous and asynchronous experiences for children and their families, and continue to base services on respectful, trusting relationships with families, partners and communities. In the future, aeioTU plans to offer more digital services to families through Aprendiendo including access to specialists. aeioTU will continue expanding its reach through a virtual community platform, aiming to connect all of the different parties involved in early childhood development to work together towards offering high quality education.

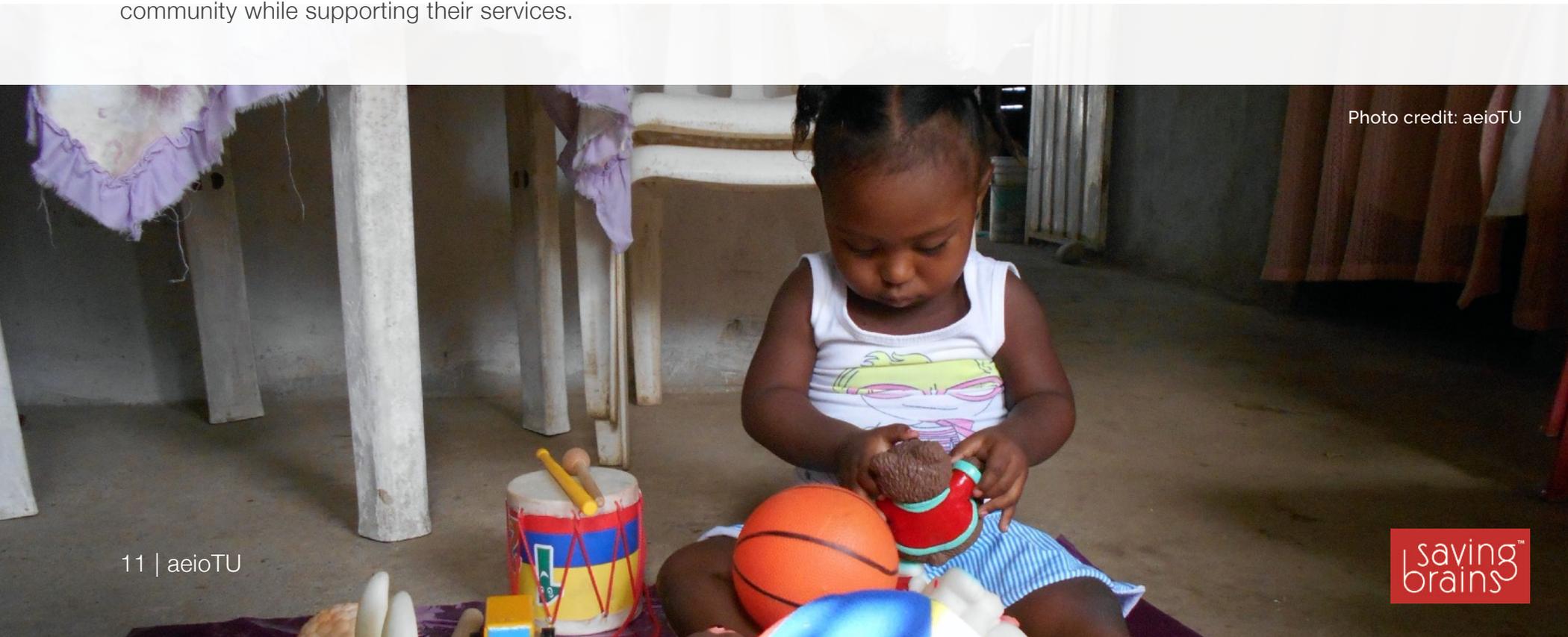


Photo credit: aeioTU

Maria says her training and years of work as an artist helped her with leading the organization through the crisis:

Despite the stress of the pandemic, aeioTU has approached the crisis as an opportunity to make the organization stronger, to change the classic educational paradigm via new possibilities, and to continue to create extraordinary value for early childhood development, in Colombia and with a view to the global level.

“

As an artist you engage with understanding the environment; you look for the dots that need to be connected, and challenges and opportunities that need to be embraced. It's really a disposition to learn and be able to change what is necessary without losing the core. The creative process is always wired to practice – which is capacity to ask difficult questions in order to be clear about what is happening.

María Adelaida López
Executive Director, aeioTU



Photo credit: aeioTU

Capabilities & Relationships Underpinning aeioTU's COVID-19 Response

Capabilities

USE OF EXISTING ASSETS

- Ability to gather information from, listen to, and adapt services for individual families
- System for teachers to document what happens in their classrooms, which provided a basis for online content
- Web-based technical capacities already in place

Relationships

- The strong relationship between aeioTU teachers and families was central to aeioTU's response. Parents had been active participants in the in-person operations and were already engaged in aeioTU's model, allowing them to take on their new role in the home-based curriculum
- aeioTU leadership has a strong relationship and communication with each other and staff that allowed the organization to address challenges COVID-19 posed for client families while protecting the staff's wellbeing

NEW ASSETS DEVELOPED THROUGH RESPONSE

- "aeioTU at Home with You" virtual curriculum
- Aprendiendo digital platform
- Teachers' capacity to work remotely
- Companies have engaged aeioTU to hold workshops and webinars for their employees to help them encourage children's learning and development during the quarantine
- aeioTU is helping other preschools and kindergartens adapt their services and leverage their resources for virtual ECD service delivery

POTENTIAL FUTURE VALUE

- The new online capabilities developed will support aeioTU's future hybrid model and ongoing development of Aprendiendo as a learning community and online platform
- Relationships with companies could lead to providing aeioTU services as an employee benefit through ECD centres and memberships to digital services
- Relationships with other educators could expand aeioTU's consulting and training services

Ana Aqra Association



Funded by Saving Brains partner

Program Overview

Ana Aqra (“I read”) is a non-profit association that supports marginalized students’ success in the public education system throughout Lebanon. Ana Aqra’s programs promote the educational, psychosocial, and cultural development of children through work with their families, teachers, and school administrators. As part of this larger mission, Ana Aqra designed and operates a Community-Based Early Childhood Education (CB-ECE) program for children ages 3-6 from underserved communities, including children from the Syrian refugee community. The CB-ECE program prepares children to enter and succeed in the Lebanese formal education system by developing their psychosocial, language, cognitive and motor skills through play and structured experiences. Language instruction is a key to meeting the prerequisites to enter Lebanon’s formal education system, which include knowledge of English or French, as well as Arabic. In addition to working directly

with children, CB-ECE includes capacity building for their parents through Ana Aqra’s “I Can Also Teach” program. The aim is to empower parents and to frame their home as the first and ongoing site of learning and development for their children.

Ana Aqra has experience in responding to previous crises by adapting their educational programming. Major disruptions to education in Lebanon have included the 2006 war with Israel and, from 2011, the Syrian refugee crisis. Ana Aqra’s experience with these disruptions has helped the organization understand the current context and to apply their own adaptive procedures. Ana Aqra is regarded as a thought leader in this domain in Lebanon. Ana Aqra documents all adaptations, processes and program design, providing a resource to enable the organization to respond quickly to new crises.

Before COVID-19

- Community-based early childhood education and parent capacity building programs

After COVID-19

- Remote training of staff
- Three “mini lessons” delivered weekly on WhatsApp
- Play kit creation and distribution

Ana Aqra's COVID-19 Response Summary

The Lebanese government responded early to the threat of COVID-19, for example by requiring all schools, including Ana Aqra's centres, to close by the end of February. The precautions taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 achieved significant benefit in containing the virus, but the economic costs were significant. To respond, Ana Aqra:

1. Established how the crisis was affecting families and how to best support them through a needs assessment.
2. Developed and adapted service based on that assessment and determined how their staff could effectively execute it.
3. Documented each step of their response, which allowed Ana Aqra to reflect, learn and improve.
4. Served in an advisory role and led the learning component for Lebanon's Education Sector Group in adapting the Non-Formal Education (NFE) program implementation to online learning. The program learning outcomes were aligned to national curriculum objectives.
5. Engaged with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education to develop a strategic response to improve the quality of public education.

By engaging comprehensively with families, rapidly adapting, and connecting with public and private partners in response to the crisis, Ana Aqra was able to serve families in a new way, while refining their programming and deepening their relationship with the government. The result was more than an emergency response: it was also strategic step toward a better future.



Photo credit: Ana Aqra

Ana Aqra's COVID-19 Response Details

Ana Aqra took the first week after the closure to assess the situation and the impact on local communities. Program managers communicated with parents, government officials and school directors to see how they were handling the crisis. At the same time, Ana Aqra began discussing with their donors the potential to shift to distance learning. Donors agreed to support distance learning as long as Ana Aqra could ensure that each child was able to participate, with evidence that teaching and learning were occurring. While figuring out how to best adapt their model, Ana Aqra sent families instructions and links to free online materials aligned with their learning objectives, for example a link to an alphabet song. This gave Ana Aqra time to complete a needs assessment, adapt their model, and train the teachers.

To ensure the distance learning model would be appropriate for the families it serves, Ana Aqra worked with over 20 education partners from the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) to conduct a needs assessment of almost 10,000 families, including 1,300 families directly served by Ana Aqra. The assessment asked families about the technology they have access to, their preferred communication channel, when they would prefer to receive videos, and how many videos they would like to receive per week.

Parents expressed a preference for using WhatsApp, so Ana Aqra created WhatsApp groups for each age group, where each week families receive videos and instructions from the teachers. Ana Aqra started by introducing the new modality with its purpose, along with videos on social and emotional learning, and assurance that more resources will follow. Based on parental feedback, the videos focus on core subjects. On a weekly basis Ana Aqra shares three learning outcomes for three core subjects: Arabic language, foreign language (French or English), with math and science alternating weekly. To support delivery of the educational model, Ana Aqra's teachers held virtual weekly meetings to share ideas and suggestions and to support each other.

To fully build out a virtual educational model, Ana Aqra first identified the skills their staff would need to transition the program to distance learning. Afterwards, they mapped the teachers' skills against that list and reassigned roles and responsibilities accordingly. Ana Aqra then reviewed their early childhood curriculum and identified relevant online resources. The team created guidelines for the structure and length of videos, based on the results of the assessment surveys. The resulting model featured 2-3 minute "mini lesson" videos giving direct and simple instructions, with each video lesson being followed by three activities that use resources available at home. After sharing the guidelines with teachers, Ana Aqra trained them on the new online modality, its purpose, how to perform assessments of students' learning remotely, and



how to interact with parents. Ana Aqra developed and published a [Distance Learning Framework and Guidelines](#) based on their approach.

Ana Aqra regularly checks in with families to see how they are doing and to solicit feedback on the program. When parents shared that they were running out of materials like paper and pencils that support children's engagement with the educational material and activities, Ana Aqra developed and disseminated ECE play kits with pencils, markers, and reusable materials. The material included in the kit develops children's literacy, logic, numeracy, and math and science skills. Ana Aqra laminated the paper, games and cards so they can be reused and easily sanitized. The kit, which functions as an extension of the "I can also teach" parent capacity building program, is easy to use, with simple instructions in words and, pictures, that work regardless of parents' literacy level or foreign language fluency. Ana Aqra provided these kits to 1,000 families, prioritizing those without access to WhatsApp. Parents have been telling their neighbours about the kits, which has led to more families enrolling with Ana Aqra.



Ana Aqra decided to continue the distance learning program through the end of 2020, even as lockdown restrictions change. This has allowed Ana Aqra to focus on adapting the model to ensure it safely meets the needs of the communities they serve.

Capabilities & Relationships Underpinning Ana Aqra's COVID-19 Response

Capabilities

Relationships

USE OF EXISTING ASSETS

- Thorough documentation of tools and processes prior to COVID-19 facilitated initial curriculum redesign and ongoing adaptation during the crisis
- Strong communication and teamwork allowed Ana Aqra to adapt to working and developing the response
- Grant and proposal writing secured funding needed for the response

- Ana Aqra's relationship with parents and communities and ability to listen enabled them to develop a model that worked for communities and families and adapt and implement it with full parental engagement
- LCRP education partners and Ana Aqra conducted the families' needs assessment
- Ongoing relationship with the Ministry of Education, which deepened during the crisis

NEW ASSETS DEVELOPED THROUGH RESPONSE

- Remote training
- Video teaching curriculum
- Play kit development and distribution
- Provided funding for families' monthly internet costs so they could participate in distance learning
- [Distance Learning Framework and Guidelines](#)

- Learning community of Ana Aqra's teachers developed through the response
- Participation in an educational task force supporting the Ministry of Education with adapting to distance learning
- Families who were not previously engaged with Ana Aqra have enrolled their children in the program

POTENTIAL FUTURE VALUE

- Remote training and remote teaching will be useful in future crises where students or teachers cannot get to school

- Learning community of teachers will strengthen teachers' capabilities through sharing of best practices and resources
- The response strengthened the relationship between Ana Aqra and the Ministry of Education, which will benefit Ana Aqra as they implement their new strategic framework

Program Overview

Mobile Creches is a non-profit nongovernmental organization (NGO) based in Delhi, India. For the past 51 years, Mobile Creches has worked for marginalized children's right to early childhood development. A major focus of the work has been with young children of migrant workers. Migrant families typically live in temporary slums at worksites without access to health and social services for their children. Through partnering with other NGOs and the private companies that employ migrant workers, Mobile Creches offers workplace-based childcare centres for children under six. These centres provide care that address children's full mental, social, physical, and emotional needs

6 days per week by providing physical care, mental stimulation, emotional nurturing, psychosocial bonding with caregivers, nutritious meals, health services, hygiene and early learning. Historically, Mobile Creches have been located mainly at construction sites and urban slum settlements, but their scaling strategy entails expansion to serve migrant families at tea plantations and other agricultural sites, and at factories and brickworks. Mobile Creches also advocates with industry and government to ensure onsite early childhood development (ECD) services, breastfeeding breaks, maternity leave, and childhood immunizations.

Before COVID-19

- Centre-based programs for children of migrant workers at construction sites in urban centres

After COVID-19

- Food distribution
- Remote curriculum
- Remote training
- Tracking of target population and needs



Mobile Creches' COVID-19 Response

Even before closures and lockdown reached India, Mobile Creches' senior management began holding frequent meetings, internally and with stakeholders, to monitor the situation internationally and locally, and to discuss possible responses. The government of India shut down all childcare centres and schools on March 13, 2020, before mandating a countrywide lockdown on March 25, 2020. The lockdown closed the worksites where Mobile Creches operates. Mobile Creches' leadership began hearing from creche workers about the impact of lost income on their communities, as many workers began walking back to their home states, and those who stayed had no means to sustain their families.

Concerned about hunger and starvation, Mobile Creches distributed a two-week supply of high protein food to the children who attended their ECD centres as an initial emergency response. Through communication with the creche workers, however, Mobile Creches quickly realized the communities they serve needed more to survive the crisis. In particular, a more sustained response was required, and to avoid divisive and inequitable effects the response needed to include the full community, not just families from the childcare centres. Working with donors, partners, staff and families, Mobile Creches evolved a powerful, multifaceted COVID-19 response program, described in detail in their [online report](#). The response has included distributing food to entire communities, adapting their education curriculum for remote use, and advocating for children at the worksites.

What Enabled Mobile Creches' Response?

To design and implement a rapid, effective response to COVID-19, Mobile Creches built on their existing relationships and capabilities. As they heard from the communities they serve that they had no food, Mobile Creches solicited funds from donors to provide food to the communities. Mobile Creches' long experience with advocacy was also crucial as they were able to communicate the needs and reality of their communities to other NGOs and government bodies. Internal teamwork and communication within the Mobile Creches organization were also key to the response. The entire team was involved, from data entry to senior management. They viewed the response as a collective challenge and supported each other throughout the stressful, long hours spent on its development and implementation.

Relationships built over many years between Mobile Creches' workers and local communities meant that Mobile Creches remained constantly informed about what was happening in the community, so their response could be tailored and quickly adapted. In each community with a childcare centre 2-3 volunteer community leaders normally collaborate with Mobile Creches' frontline workers. These leaders helped frontline workers disseminate educational programming and messaging around the emergency response. Mobile Creches works with community volunteers for food delivery, so that food kits are delivered to everyone in the community under safe public health

protocols. Although collaboration with private employers proved challenging during the emergency, this joint work proved to be productive, as the companies employing migrant workers helped Mobile Creches and community leaders coordinate the food distribution.

Mobile Creches' active relationships with donors and NGO partners also facilitated their quick response. Existing donors promptly converted their grants to allow Mobile Creches' to reallocate their funding or gave additional funding directly to the emergency response. Mobile Creches hosted regular virtual meetings with the 13 NGO partners who normally work with Mobile Creches to implement childcare centres. Partners shared best practices, raised funds for the response, and helped with implementation, including food distribution.

Mobile Creches also developed new capabilities and relationships through their COVID-19 response. They developed a tracking system in late March to assess how many people had migrated away from, stayed, or arrived at the worksites. The system also tracked the work status of those living in the communities Mobile Creches served, what wages they earn, if any, their resources and food supplies, the health status of children and pregnant women, and domestic abuse within the community. Frontline workers gathered this information, and office staff with relevant technical skills created a structured system to store and monitor this information. Based on the information gathered, Mobile Creches was able to

determine and respond to evolving needs within each community they serve. For example, as the government began offering financial support to its citizens, Mobile Creches worked within each community to ensure not only that people were aware of the interventions, but also that they were receiving the payments.

To develop and implement the food delivery program, Mobile Creches developed new relationships with NGOs focused on nutrition. These NGOs had supplies but were not engaged with communities where Mobile Creches was working. Mobile Creches provided the connection between these organizations and communities; Mobile Creches also recruited new donors to enable their comprehensive response.

To support the educational component of the program throughout the lockdown, Mobile Creches had to adapt their curriculum for remote use. As a first step, Mobile Creches assessed migrant families' access to technology, finding less than 30% had access to a smartphone. Mobile Creches therefore based its remote curriculum delivery model on basic phones, which people did have. The core approach was simply to have frontline workers call parents regularly and discuss activities parents could do with their children to stimulate development.

To develop the remote curriculum, Mobile Creches also worked with other ECD NGOs, sharing educational activities, audio files, and other resources, including in new domains. In addition to adapting their existing curriculum



Photo credit:
Mobile Creches

for remote delivery, Mobile Creches added modules about psychosocial support, COVID-19 prevention, positive discipline, and abuse prevention due to the families' current needs. As part of the COVID-19 response, Mobile Creches and the other educational NGOs created a learning community where they could share resources to support their responses. This allowed Mobile Creches to quickly implement the education component of their response and share their best practices with other organizations.

Frontline workers each call 5-10 families once a week and give them five activities to do at home with available material and build their capacity as parents and as educators for their children. For example, one activity, to stimulate motor development, uses dough that all families receive through Mobile Creches' food distribution. Mobile Creches has received positive feedback from the parents who feel empowered to be educating their children despite their own low level of education.

Mobile Creches also developed a virtual training program for frontline workers in this curriculum. The success of this training program led the government to approach Mobile Creches to help them develop their remote curriculum and train frontline workers in government run centres in how to hold virtual sessions with parents.

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Imagine having a parent tell you they have never been educated, and they feel educated now.

Chavi Vohra

Head of Programme & Capacity Building,
Mobile Creches



Photo credit: Mobile Creches

Looking to the Future

Though Mobile Creches is still operating remotely, they are also considering how the learning tools they developed for the crisis may be useful in their programming even as in-person activity becomes more feasible. For example, their new training and educational programs, which successfully built capacity of frontline workers and families remotely, could help Mobile Creches achieve their scaling objectives, particularly as they seek to work with in sectors like tea plantations and agriculture, in locations far from their current, more urban, operations. Moreover, the ECD NGO learning community Mobile Creches developed through their COVID-19 response will continue once in-person operations are allowed. This network will help Mobile Creches create a bank of educational content, preventing

duplicative content development, and sharing best practices.

The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the importance of the five central components of Mobile Creches' programming: education, nutrition, community development, health, and protection. Moving forward, Mobile Creches plans to focus more on the work in the community, including with parents. Mobile Creches plans to include more parental development and responsive parenting and to increase the focus on psychosocial and emotional development in their curriculum because the crisis underscored the importance of these components. Finally, spurred by the COVID-19 crisis, Mobile Creches has been working towards getting migrant families, particularly women, registered and connected to government support; this work will continue after the emergency.



Photo credit: Mobile Creches

Capabilities & Relationships Underpinning Mobile Creches' COVID-19 Response

Capabilities

Relationships

USE OF EXISTING ASSETS

- A work culture of teamwork enabled Mobile Creches to see and respond to the crisis collectively
- Mobile Creches drew on its experience in advocacy to communicate the problems migrant families were facing during the crisis
- Mobile Creches' ability to fundraise helped secure the necessary funds for their response
- Supportive Board of Directors who guided and encouraged the plans for adapting the model
- Existing donors helped quickly fund the emergency response through reallocation or provision of new funds
- Trusting relationships between frontline workers and local communities, and between Mobile Creches' management and the frontline works, enabled rapid flow of vital information, and responsive adaptation, in the design and implementation of the response
- NGO partners helped develop and implement the response in the communities they serve
- International networks helped share concerns, practices, and lessons learned on a global level

NEW ASSETS DEVELOPED THROUGH RESPONSE

- System to track and monitor health, migrant, and financial status of community members
- Network to distribute food to entire communities
- Remote (virtual) training of frontline workers
- Remote (virtual) curriculum for families
- Community development
- Parent education
- New donors
- Food and nutrition NGOs
- Educational and ECD NGOs
- Partnership with new advocacy and policy coalitions, e.g. the national CSO alliance

POTENTIAL FUTURE VALUE

- Extension of community development and parent education in future programming
- Use of virtual training tools in scaling Mobile Creches to distant regions, (e.g. tea plantation and agricultural sectors)
- Ongoing collaboration with ECD NGOs to develop a bank of educational content and resources
- Ongoing collaboration with new networks, donors, and post-COVID-19 alliances to advocate for childcare and ECD for families of migrant working women



Program Overview

Over the past 20 years the Hanoi-based Research and Training Center for Community Development (RTCCD) and Monash University have worked together to build evidence to inform improvements in primary health care for women and children in Vietnam. Through their work in the rural province of Ha Nam, the partnership developed the Early Journey of Life (EJOL) program, a low-cost, structured and comprehensive approach to early childhood development and maternal wellbeing in Ha Nam. It is designed to mitigate the multiple risk factors to health and development that, according to RTCCD and Monash's research, have limited the impact of more narrow interventions in the region. The program focuses on the first 1,000 days of life (conception to two years of age) by addressing maternal physical and mental health and child health and development through a combination of learning activities

and social support. The EJOL program comprises 19 educational sessions in facilitated group meetings, one home visit, and educational materials for parents to use at home, followed by booster sessions held less frequently until the child turns two. The community-based group sessions are organized into 5 modules targeting stage-specific knowledge and skills for parents. RTCCD builds the capacity of community-based workers who educate and enable families to understand and respond skillfully to their young children's needs. The program is gender informed and encourages fathers' active participation in their children's development and household work. It is being implemented in a community-based trial in which 42 communes offer the program and 42 offer the usual standard of care.

Before COVID-19

- In-person facilitated group educational sessions regarding parenting and early childhood development

After COVID-19

- Remote training
- Zalo facilitated group messaging educational modules
- Video contests to further encourage parents' engagement with the sessions

RTCCD's COVID-19 Response

Following celebrations of Tết, the Vietnamese New Year, on January 25, 2020, the government of Vietnam announced a comprehensive set of restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Meetings in groups were now prohibited and subject to fines, schools and factories throughout the country were closed, and RTCCD's in-person programming was suspended. Initially, both Monash University and RTCCD's leadership did not think this shutdown would last long and planned to wait until they could hold in-person meetings again. RTCCD's leadership began regular consultations, internally and with families in the program, to monitor the situation, which turned out to entail a strict, six-week lockdown followed by ongoing social distancing requirements. The lockdown was notably successful in containing the virus, but RTCCD was concerned about the

stress naturally experienced by families during this period and under the restrictions that followed.

Without a return to normal in sight, Monash University and RTCCD leadership could no longer wait to continue the booster session component of their program. RTCCD developed a short questionnaire and randomly selected five women from each participating commune to call. Callers asked the women about the impact of the lockdown on their families and how RTCCD could help. The top challenges women reported were: 1) loss of income and concerns about food security; 2) children spending too much time on screens; and 3) tension and arguing between parents. Resonating with these results was a joke circulating in Vietnam that the "specialty food" of COVID-19 was "shouting." RTCCD developed their COVID-19 response based on this questionnaire and began adapting their program for online delivery.

Photo credit: RTCCD



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Both Jane and I do not think of this program as a project, but a spirit child. We want it to grow up, to develop to its full potential... we need to deliver it as best quality possible, any impacts of COVID could harm that dream. [It was] important to implement it well.

Tran Thu Ha
Deputy Director, RTCCD

Photo credit: RTCCD



Determined to maintain their program's momentum and address families' concerns while fully observing mandated restrictions, RTCCD moved the EJOL program online with full support of the Provincial Center for Disease Control (CDC) and Department of Health. EJOL participants live in a rural area and do not have access to internet-based videoconferencing, so RTCCD turned to Zalo, a free messaging app that is similar to WhatsApp and widely used in Vietnam.

- **Preparing and training facilitators:** RTCCD had used Zalo since 2018 for ongoing communication between leadership in Hanoi and their community-based facilitators in Ha Nam. With this as a base, RTCCD leadership worked with the facilitators to build their capacity and confidence on the Zalo platform. RTCCD's leadership also worked with provincial trainers to adapt the facilitator training for online delivery.

- **Adapting family curriculum:** EJOL's in-person group sessions usually last 60-90 minutes, led by three community-based facilitators. Sessions begin with an introductory discussion of the core topic and typically then include parents watching the video clips; practicing with their child (or with a doll); and follow-up discussions, with each family receiving a poster with that sessions' message to take home. In order to make this work on Zalo, RTCCD cut each session's materials into three sections, with shorter video clips and infographics (online posters) to explain the video clips. Over the next month and a half, the program used group messaging on the Zalo platform to deliver six short program sections (one section each week), equivalent in the aggregate to two in-person sessions from the original curriculum.

To see how the adapted version of the EJOL program was working, RTCCD held phone surveys after each module with five randomly selected women from three communes. The women were asked if they received the material on Zalo, if they opened it, if they shared the material with their husbands, and if they interacted with their child as instructed in the session. On the first survey 79% reported opening the materials, rising to 98% by the last survey. Over one third of women reported sharing the materials with their husbands. All but one woman, who worked as part of a food delivery service and reported being too busy, engaged with the material and reported interacting with their child. RTCCD also used the survey to ask women about the challenges they were facing due to COVID-19. Questions included if they or their husband lost their job, if their family had reduced income, if their husband was drinking or gambling more, if they were experiencing domestic violence, and if their children's screen time increased.

EJOL had always included prevention of domestic violence and promotion of positive discipline. During the COVID-19 crisis, this was particularly important, given the additional stress caused by the lockdown. In this context, RTCCD emphasized that how parents behave at home – both with their children and with each other and other adults when children are around – affects their children's healthy development. Facilitators conveyed that the early years are crucial to their children's later development. RTCCD worked with a national television team on a short segment

about the impact of yelling at a child on growth and development and provided tips on how parents and grandparents can control their emotions around their children.

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We wanted [parents] to continue to remember that how they behave towards the child and towards each other around their child was crucial to their child's healthy development. That's been a major way that families remained engaged. Regardless of circumstances parents are invested in their child's health and growth.

Dr. Jane Fisher

Finkel Professor of Global Health,
Monash University



Loss of income was a consistently reported problem for families. In response, RTCCD emphasized that parents do not need expensive toys to encourage development and showed parents how to use household objects and available scrap materials for their children to play with. RTCCD encouraged both parents to interact and engage with their children during the lockdown, in ways that would foster development.

In addition to their Zalo curricular sessions, RTCCD held a contest to encourage parents to have stimulating interactions with their child. They asked families to film short, 60 second interactions between parent and child, and submit them on Zalo. An RTCCD staff with a young child filmed an example interaction to accompany the instructions parents received. In April and May, families submitted 416 videoclips of the father or mother interacting with the child. Almost 40% of these submissions were between the father and child. For example, one clip featured a child categorizing mangos, tomatoes, lemon and kumquats by colour and shape and another showed the child stacking cardboard boxes with instruction from the parent. Every month RTCCD selected the five best videos, providing backpacks and picture books for the winning children as prizes.

Looking to the Future

Though Vietnam has not returned to the “normal” of pre-COVID-19 life, EJOL was able to begin holding in-person meetings the last week of May. Now that the program can continue as originally designed, RTCCD can consider how to apply its recent experience to its future development. RTCCD’s existing plans envision the EJOL program becoming universally available in Vietnam, leading to improved development in the first 2,000 days of life

(conception to age five) for children throughout the country. Given the support of the provincial government, Ha Nam has the potential to demonstrate province-wide application of the program; Ha Nam’s experience, and the rigorous data RTCCD continues to collect, can show other provincial governments and NGOs the program’s feasibility and value. To achieve universal access, RTCCD plans to develop EJOL as a hybrid model of in-person and online learning. The COVID-19 experience is relevant to these scaling plans in diverse ways:

Father and his son played putting circles into a pole



- **Ha Nam Province** is the key pathway to demonstrating universal access in a rural setting. The emergency response deepened RTCCD’s pre-existing relationship with Ha Nam’s provincial CDC and Department of Health, building partnership and trust. The collaborative response demonstrated the value of the EJOL program and RTCCD’s ability to adapt to the needs of the people of Ha Nam. The provincial government supported RTCCD’s response and helped train EJOL facilitators while also working on COVID-19 prevention and testing. During the crisis, the provincial government even committed to co-funding the next phase of EJOL, as RTCCD scales the program to all communes in Ha Nam.



- The delivery of the program through Zalo during the COVID-19 lockdown also opens up the possibility of developing **hybrid models** for rural settings like Ha Nam. Zalo tools, such as curricular modules and “contest videos,” could be used to reinforce learning and practices from in-person sessions in a cost-effective way at scale.
- **Industrial and urban areas** will require a different model, focused on direct, online delivery to parents. For the urban setting, RTCCD is adjusting EJOL’s content to meet the needs of an audience with additional health literacy. Online learning will support the ongoing in-person sessions, and here the COVID-19 response has provided a valuable experience base. Currently RTCCD has a YouTube channel (built in November 2019) and a TikTok channel (built in August 2020) for parents to engage with online but plans to build their technology capacity in the future at scale.
- **Vietnam’s National Ministry of Health** invited RTCCD to develop the early childhood development examination and counselling National Guideline for health workers. RTCCD is coordinating with UNICEF and other agencies, domestic and international, as it refines the proposed material. EJOL’s YouTube page will be included in the guideline as a parenting education resource; health workers will share the YouTube page with parents during clinic appointments. The National Guideline is expected to be finalized in 2021.

Capabilities & Relationships Underpinning RTCCD's COVID-19 Response

Capabilities

USE OF EXISTING ASSETS

- The EJOL program already included video clips (shown at in-person meetings) and posters, which could be adapted for online delivery
- Teamwork enabled RTCCD and Monash University to collectively address the crisis
- Robust communication between frontline workers and RTCCD staff prior to the crisis enabled ongoing necessary communication during the response
- Prior use of Zalo for communication between RTCCD leadership and facilitators in Ha Nam provided a foundation to build on for delivering the program through Zalo

Relationships

- Strong partnership and mutual understanding between the Monash University and the RTCCD. The two organizations held weekly Zoom meetings, which created an understanding of the situation in Vietnam allowing EJOL to develop a quick response to the situation
- Ha Nam Department of Health and CDC supported RTCCD in the development of the online training and adapting EJOL for online delivery
- Strong relationships and trust between RTCCD leadership and facilitators enabled facilitators to execute the program while feeling supported by project leadership
- In turn, relationships between facilitators and program participants enabled the transition to online delivery
- The parent groups created by the program formed a basis for online peer support during EJOL's virtual delivery

NEW ASSETS DEVELOPED THROUGH RESPONSE

- Online training for Zalo-based session facilitation
- Online curriculum
- Enhanced facilitators' capacity with technology
- Online reporting replaced paper reporting
- RTCCD developed a relationship with national media through their appearance on television as an ECD expert

POTENTIAL FUTURE VALUE

- New capabilities developed in the response has built RTCCD's capacity for the online portion of a hybrid model
- Strengthened relationship with Ha Nam provincial government, a key to RTCCD's rural scaling strategy
- RTCCD's relationship with the media could increase their reach as more people learn about the EJOL program and its benefits

To learn more about these projects and more,
visit the Grand Challenges Canada website:

www.grandchallenges.ca

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