



Grand Challenges Canada®
Grands Défis Canada

Play Learn Thrive

Key Drivers in Early Child Development and Education in Emergency Settings



Preface

Since 2024, Grand Challenges Canada, in partnership with the LEGO Foundation, has been developing Play Learn Thrive to address the needs of children and their caregivers caught in the throes of polycrisis—compounding, simultaneous and interdependent economic, social, public health, environmental and conflict-driven disasters that have detrimental impacts on children and their caregivers’ ability to survive and thrive.

Building on our rich experience in humanitarian innovation and early childhood development,

Play Learn Thrive will invest in locally-led innovations in early childhood development and education in emergencies, creating and sustaining strong support systems for all children to play, learn and thrive. Employing Grand Challenges Canada’s model for sourcing, investing in, and supporting the scaling of innovations, Play Learn Thrive has the potential to propel forward global Early Childhood Development in Emergencies (ECDiE) and Education in Emergencies (EiE) goals by pushing the boundaries of traditional humanitarian assistance delivery models.[1]

POLYCRISIS

The World Economic Forum defines polycrisis as “a cluster of related global risks with compounding effects, such that the overall impact exceeds the sum of each part”.¹



We aim to create strong support systems for children in complex crisis settings so that they can play, learn, and thrive.

Our work has demonstrated that children’s needs and challenges in emergency settings are urgent and specific to their experiences, requiring dedicated and continued investments in supporting lasting infrastructure. With funding from the LEGO Foundation, we will create a pipeline of new, scalable and locally-led solutions that draw on 15 years of lessons to better meet the specific needs of children and their families in emergency settings.

We will work to find and sustain innovative, locally-led approaches that meet the needs of children across culturally diverse geographies, including Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon and Uganda.

Over the past 15 years, Grand Challenges Canada has invested over \$115 million in 252 innovations that improve the lives of children and adults affected by conflict and crisis.

CREATING HOPE IN CONFLICT: A HUMANITARIAN GRAND CHALLENGE

Creating Hope in Conflict: A Humanitarian Grand Challenge accelerates life-saving and life-improving innovations in communities that are hardest-hit by conflict.

SAVING BRAINS

Saving Brains develops sustainable and scalable ways of nurturing healthy brain development in the first 1000 days of life.

Between the two programs, Grand Challenges Canada has enabled early-stage innovations to successfully test and prove their innovations in fragile contexts, and funded and supported 80 innovations at the critical, underfunded juncture between seed and scale to grow their innovations and accelerate their impact, collectively reaching over 10 million lives.

ARRIVING AT PLAY LEARN THRIVE

Play Learn Thrive will invest in locally-led innovations in early childhood development and education in emergencies, creating and sustaining strong support systems for all children to play, learn and thrive. Employing Grand Challenges Canada's model for sourcing, investing in, and supporting the scaling of innovations, Play Learn Thrive has the potential to propel forward global Early Childhood Development in Emergencies (ECDiE) and Education in Emergencies (EiE) goals by pushing the boundaries of traditional humanitarian assistance delivery models.

SOURCING TRANSFORMATIVE INNOVATIONS

Using Grand Challenges Canada's scaling model, Play Learn Thrive aims to build a pipeline of scalable solutions. In January 2025, we launched the first funding call for proposals for Play Learn Thrive, targeting innovations in Kenya, Uganda, Lebanon and Jordan. Over the course of four years, Play Learn Thrive will award up to nine (9) seed grants and support up to seven (7) Transition to Scale innovations. In the longer-term, we aim to evolve Play Learn Thrive into a multi-funder platform, broadening our areas of engagement and, most importantly, helping more children thrive, globally.



The Partners

The LEGO Foundation

The LEGO Foundation, Play Learn Thrive's anchor funder, supports playful, child-centered learning worldwide. It focuses on children in vulnerable environments and those with special educational needs and disabilities, equipping them with the skills needed to thrive in a constantly changing world.



Grand Challenges Canada®
Grands Défis Canada

Grand Challenges Canada (GCC) is one of the world's largest impact-first investors. We tackle global challenges by investing in locally-led solutions. This approach builds a healthier and more equitable world, and boosts sustainable change in the humanitarian space. GCC will leverage our existing investment platform to create a pipeline of new and scalable solutions that better meet the unique needs of vulnerable children, parents, and caregivers in emergency settings, with a focus on those facing barriers to inclusion that impede access to quality and enriching learning environments.



THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY

Aga Khan University's Institute for Human Development (AKU-IHD), a global thought leader in ECD and education, was contracted by GCC as a subgrantee to lead on the foundational scoping of Play Learn Thrive. AKU-IHD contracted E&K Consulting, a global consulting firm, drawing on its deep in-country experience in East Africa and global expertise, as well as Edvise ME, a consulting firm with deep ties in Jordan and Lebanon, to support scoping and stakeholder engagements.

Introduction

In 2022, an estimated one in six children worldwide were living in conflict zones.² Nearly half of all school-age refugee children globally were reported to be out of school with significantly lower primary school enrolment than their peers in host countries,³ Additionally, more than half of girls without access to education are in crisis-affected countries.

Compounding already horrifying global humanitarian crises affecting child development, nearly half of the world's child population live in countries that are at an "extremely high risk" from the impacts of climate change.⁴ According to UNICEF, 43.1 million children were internally displaced due to climate-related disasters in the last six years.⁵

For young children, prolonged exposure to conflict, displacement and environmental shocks can fundamentally alter life trajectories.⁶ Early years are foundational to cognitive, emotional, and physical development, but the psychological trauma experienced during crisis, combined with physical deprivation and inadequate access to basic services, can have lasting impacts on young children's ability to grow and learn.⁷ Research has shown that young children born into environments with compounding negative experiences, such as exposure to violence, trauma, poverty, lack of opportunities and limited responsive interactions with caregivers, are more likely to face poor health outcomes, toxic stress responses and decreased wellbeing.⁸

In humanitarian contexts, young children are often overlooked.⁹ As families struggle to survive, consistent learning and caregiver routines are disrupted and support systems falter.¹⁰ Forced displacement heightens the risk for disrupted parenting, neglect, and exploitation of children, often after the death of parents, separation from families, or forced marriages.¹¹ Vulnerability exacerbates the potential for harm to befall children who are already disenfranchised through their experiences of childhood in crisis zones. During displacement, community structures and support also deteriorate, family structures may break down, and chances of experiencing discrimination and harassment in host communities may increase, further impeding children's socio-emotional development.¹²

In conflict zones, children's play spaces vanish as families prioritize physical safety, keeping children indoors and limiting recreational activities.¹³ But play is not a luxury. Thoughtfully designed play experiences are vital to children's wellbeing, allowing them to cope with trauma, build relationships, and regain a sense of agency. Through play, children express their emotions, develop social skills, and practice problem-solving in safe and supportive spaces. For those who cannot speak about their pain due to language barriers, age, or trauma, play offers non-verbal avenues for expression.

Imaginative play, in particular, offers a powerful tool for resilience, allowing children to reshape their narratives and find hope in the midst of uncertainty.¹⁴ By protecting and nurturing play in crisis settings, we protect the possibility of brighter futures.

Methods

In partnership with E&K Consulting and Edvise Me, AKU conducted a scoping review,¹⁵ which included stakeholder consultations to identify the key challenges affecting children's access to ECDiE and EiE programs across the four focus countries included in Play Learn Thrive. AKU also carried out desk research to apply context to the unique landscapes in Jordan, Lebanon, Kenya and Uganda and set the foundation for consultations with stakeholders.

CONSENSUS BUILDING WORKSHOP

Building on insights from stakeholder consultations and our initial review, we brought together 40 experts from 25 local and global organizations in Early Childhood Development in Emergencies (ECDEiE) for a virtual workshop. Through interactive discussions and breakout sessions, participants validated key findings, identified the most pressing gaps, refined interpretations, and explored high-impact investment opportunities to drive change.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

The teams engaged 429 stakeholders across the four focus countries. Stakeholders were identified through local referrals, existing networks, and by mapping key experts and implementers in ECDiE and EiE. Those consulted included children, caregivers, ECDEiE experts, government, community-based organizations, NGOs and international NGOs.

Children participated in focus group discussions in Kenya, Jordan, and Lebanon. In Uganda, children were completing end of school assessments at the time of the scoping process, and they were unable to participate. Discussions aimed to center children's voices in the narrative, chronicling insights gleaned from children regarding their experiences, preferences, and the perceived benefits of play-based learning in their daily lives and educational settings



Stakeholders engaged in the four countries (N=429)

Country	Key Informant Interviews		Workshops*		Focus Group Discussions		Total
	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Jordan	9	16	9	50	12	12	108
Kenya	20	13	36	25	7	7	108
Lebanon	4	20	5	43	12	12	96
Uganda	15	18	29	55	-	-	117
							429

*A percentage of participants from the Key Informant Interviews also participated in the workshops.

**Children aged 8-12 from refugee settings participated in focus group discussions

JORDAN

GENERAL POPULATION

11.6 MILLION PEOPLE
34% 14 years old or under

REFUGEE POPULATION

717,446 PEOPLE
30% 12 years old or under

PRIORITIES

- Capacity building for teachers and caregivers
- Inclusion of children with disabilities
- Improved learning environments (safe spaces, teaching and learning materials)

WHO DID WE CONSULT?

28 Parents
24 Kids
10 Teachers
10 NGOs
6 CBOs
5 INGOs
3 Thematic Experts
3 Private Entities
2 Government

OVERVIEW

Jordan is facing a polycrisis shaped by complex geopolitical dynamics, economic strain, and environmental pressures. The country has welcomed a large number of refugees, but infrastructure and social services haven't kept up with the growing population.¹⁶ Debt is on the rise, partly due to the investments needed to host refugee populations, and because of geopolitical dynamics that force people to flee their homes.

High unemployment rates remain a major issue, particularly for youths and women. Only 14% of women are active in the workforce—interviewees cite early marriage as a key barrier to work. Limited access to education creates a cycle where fewer opportunities in school lead to fewer opportunities in the job market, which is common in communities experiencing polycrisis.¹⁷

Climate-related challenges add yet another layer to Jordan's crisis. Extreme temperature fluctuations force parents to keep children home during periods of intense heat or cold to protect their health. Water shortages, made worse by regional geopolitical issues, threaten both clean water access and agriculture.

The country's ECD sector is struggling. With 1.4 million children under five, there's a gap between the demand for quality early learning and available resources. Jordan has only 1,100 licensed daycare centres,¹⁸ though an estimated 40,000 are needed. Organizations like UNRWA have made strides in expanding access to education, providing critical support to many children. Still, interviewees emphasize that gaps remain, and too many communities lack early learning opportunities.

Education and ECD Challenges

ACCESS

Most stakeholders pointed out that families who can afford private kindergarten programs give their kids an early learning advantage that lower-income families, including refugees, miss out on. Kindergarten is optional, so enrolment remains low even in the final year of kindergarten, the only public option. Expanding kindergarten access emerged as a critical priority.

In some communities, barriers to education, including poverty, distance, and political unrest, lower attendance rates, increase dropout rates, and make the likelihood of child labour higher. Because schools don't have adequate funding, they frequently can't maintain high standards.

Several children shared that low school attendance is the result of interpersonal conflict amongst peers and is often a reflection of conflict and insecurity outside of schools. Affordability is another major barrier; children's inability to buy learning materials influences attendance decisions. Children in UNRWA schools, where resources are provided, described better educational experiences.

Respondents shared that gender roles drive older children out of school, with girls above the age of 13 sometimes pushed into marriage and boys forced into child labour, cutting their education short. Families also spoke about the challenges they face in accessing quality early learning for children with learning disabilities or language barriers, pointing to a system that isn't equipped to meet every child's needs.

QUALITY

Stakeholders highlighted that younger children, particularly refugees, receive less attention, leading to gaps in the quality of their education. While some community-based organizations (CBOs) registered with the Ministry of Social Development offer early education programs covering basic subjects, these don't always meet national standards. Even with differences in quality and teacher training, CBOs remain one of the few affordable options available to families in many areas. Children themselves pointed to the lack of basic classroom resources, like toys, paper, pencils, and limited opportunities for physical activity or sports, all of which are vital for their learning and development.

Respondents painted a bleak picture of the educational realities of children living with disabilities, which, in many communities, far surpass the already dire circumstances of their non-disabled peers. An estimated 11% of Jordan's population lives with a disability, with higher rates among refugee communities (for example, 22.9% of Syrian children in Jordan have a disability). School services aren't tailored to children with disabilities and there is limited advocacy for inclusion, leading to their exclusion from education, particularly in conflict zones. Caregivers and teachers expressed a need for tailored training to address gaps in support that hinder the school experiences of children with disabilities. The Jordan Department of Statistics estimates that 79% of school-aged children with disabilities don't have access to any form of education.¹⁹

TEACHER AND CAREGIVER DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

Overall, interviewees emphasized the need for resources to strengthen teaching quality and supporting learning. Some interviewees stressed that learning doesn't stop in the classroom. Home-based learning plays a critical role in reinforcing what's taught at school and fostering ongoing growth, and when caregivers don't have the tools to support their children's development, young learners are stunted from reaching their full potential.



MENTAL HEALTH AND LEARNING LOSSES

Respondents shared that the ongoing crises and economic instability have deeply affected the mental health of both children and their caregivers. This emotional strain makes it harder for children to focus, learn, and reach important developmental milestones. Many teachers and caregivers, struggling with their own mental health, feel unprepared to support the children who rely on them. The impact is clear: learning setbacks are widespread, and dropout rates are rising. While some educators are making mental health and psychosocial support a priority, their efforts are often limited by a lack of resources, which affects both the quality of education and their ability to meet students' needs.

JORDAN'S POLICY LANDSCAPE

Education is a national priority in Jordan, as reflected in strategies like the National Education Strategic Plan (2018–2025) and the National Strategy for Human Resource Development (2016–2025).²⁰ These initiatives aim to ensure that all children have access to kindergarten (KG2) by 2025 by increasing investments into classrooms and implementing online programs to bridge existing gaps in access.

Still, stakeholders pointed out that while there are a variety of early learning programs available, many of them lack coordination, limiting their overall impact. Most current efforts focus on improving access and quality for children aged six and older, with much less attention given to younger children or to non-academic programming. While creative approaches like art, play-based learning, technology, and drama are used in informal settings like as camps or local community spaces, they're rarely included in formal education and don't reach nearly enough children.

Programs aimed at educating parents on topics like health, nutrition, and child development tend to operate in isolation, weakening their effectiveness. Meanwhile, teacher training often focuses on traditional approaches and online instruction, without enough emphasis on more holistic or inclusive methods. Respondents stressed that what's needed are more coordinated, community-driven efforts that bring together diverse partners to create sustainable, meaningful programs for Jordan's youngest learners.

KENYA

GENERAL POPULATION

55 MILLION PEOPLE
38% 17 years old or under

REFUGEE POPULATION

770,255 PEOPLE

PRIORITIES

- Capacity building for teachers and caregivers
- Enhancing learning resources

WHO DID WE CONSULT?

18 Parents
14 Kids
18 Teachers
6 NGOs
3 CBOs
8 INGOs
4 Thematic Experts
8 RLOs
4 Government

OVERVIEW

Kenya is navigating a multifaceted crisis driven by climate change, conflict, and rising costs of living. These pressures are felt most acutely in refugee camps like Kakuma and Dadaab, where food insecurity and health challenges are taking a growing toll on families and children. Climate-related events, including prolonged droughts and sudden floods, are destroying livelihoods, worsening water scarcity, and driving displacement.

These overlapping crises are disrupting education, straining healthcare access, and increasing the risk of sexual and gender-based violence.²¹ The influx of refugees and asylum seekers from neighbouring countries such as South Sudan, Burundi, Ethiopia, and Somalia continues to stretch already limited resources in camps and along border regions. As a result, access to consistent education and safe, stable environments remains out of reach for many children, putting their overall development at risk.²²



Education and ECD Challenges

ACCESS

Stakeholders highlighted conflict as a barrier to education. Insecurity from cross-border tensions lead to school closures and make families hesitant to send children to school. Many refugee children aged 2 to 6 don't have access to nearby schools, and those that do often lack trained early childhood teachers or safe, child-friendly spaces.

The growing number of refugees has stretched government resources beyond capacity. As a result, schools are shutting down, teachers are leaving, and critical supplies are running out. Families and stakeholders also pointed to other major barriers that hit vulnerable children the hardest: limited parental involvement, poor school infrastructure, safety concerns, and a lack of essentials like food and clean water.

Families shared that they simply can't afford school supplies or transportation. Many stressed basic needs like food, shelter, and protection are essential to supporting quality education.

QUALITY

Respondents highlighted a growing need for more trained teachers in disadvantaged regions, along with greater access to educational resources and safer learning environments. They emphasized the importance of investing in comprehensive training programs that prepare teachers to deliver inclusive and high quality education, especially in challenging contexts.

Key areas for development include ongoing professional training, crisis responsive teaching strategies, and play based learning approaches that support children's overall growth.

There was also concern about the lack of alternative learning methods in refugee camps and underserved areas. Tools like educational radio and digital learning platforms, which could help bridge access, remain largely unavailable.

CAREGIVER AND EDUCATOR SUPPORT

Respondents shared that in polycrisis, education often takes a backseat as families focus on meeting immediate survival needs, and highlighted the need to better engage parents in supporting and encouraging their children's education.

Several interviewees pointed to the deep impact of trauma. For children, this trauma can make it harder to focus, learn, and play. For caregivers and educators, it can limit their ability to provide nurturing and responsive support.

INCLUSION

Respondents pointed to major challenges in providing education to refugee children. For children aged 2 to 6, access is especially limited. Many camps and border areas lack nearby schools and spaces designed to support young learners in safe and supportive ways.

In many refugee settings, a shortage of trained teachers was flagged as a serious barrier. Educators do not have the necessary training or tools to create inclusive and engaging learning environments. Children from remote and harder to reach communities are among the most affected, often missing out on education entirely during times of war, economic hardship, and forced displacement.

Ongoing conflict not only disrupts schooling but also creates a sense of fear and insecurity, making children feel unsafe attending school even when it is available.

KENYA'S POLICY LANDSCAPE

The Kenyan government's policies are paving the way for innovation and collaboration in inclusive education in crisis settings. With frameworks like the National Education Policy and the Special Needs Education Policy, inclusive education is firmly recognized as a right for every child, no matter their situation. The draft Integrated ECD Policy (2023) takes this a step further by aiming to expand early childhood education centres and improve children's overall well-being.^[1]

A key takeaway from stakeholders is the importance of government bodies, INGOs, and community organizations working together to improve crisis management, coordinate efforts, and unlock innovation in education. Partnerships that offer bursaries, extra learning materials, and involve community engagement through FBOs are seen as essential for supporting education during challenging times. Respondents emphasized the need for a well-rounded, well-coordinated, and properly funded approach to truly address the unique challenges crises bring, with backing from development planning tools like the County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP) to ensure sustained impact and inclusive education.



UGANDA

GENERAL POPULATION

4.9 MILLION PEOPLE
45% 14 years old or under

REFUGEE POPULATION

1,622,738 PEOPLE
41% 12 YEARS OR UNDER

PRIORITIES

- Capacity building for teachers and caregivers
- Parental engagement
- Inclusion of hard-to-reach children

WHO DID WE CONSULT?

40 Parents
33 Teachers
10 NGOs
5 CBOs
10 INGOs
2 Thematic Experts
4 Government

OVERVIEW

In Uganda, a polycrisis driven by economic instability, food insecurity, conflict, and climate-related pressures is taking a heavy toll on communities, especially children.^[1] In refugee settings, food insecurity has fuelled tension, adding strain to already fragile systems.

The education sector is in crisis. With limited resources and shrinking budgets, schools are struggling to stay afloat. Parents—particularly among refugee and displaced populations—are forced to make choices between daily survival and their childrens' educational needs. Funding cuts have chipped away at the quality of schooling and environmental challenges make it even harder for children in remote areas to get to class.

The COVID-19 pandemic only made things worse, disrupting learning and deepening existing inequalities. Despite these challenges, stakeholders emphasize the urgent need for sustainable, long-term solutions to improve education and protect children's well-being across the country.



Education and ECD Challenges

ACCESS

Stakeholders raised concerns about the steep barriers children face in accessing education in Uganda, challenges that are even more pronounced for refugee children. Many pointed to gaps in government support, especially in early years. While primary education is officially free, early childhood development (ECD) is largely left to the private sector, making it out of reach for many lower-income families. Teachers stressed how critical it is to ensure universal access to education, particularly in early years.

There was also a shared recognition of the tough tradeoffs families often have to make. When food, shelter, and safety are at risk, education and psychosocial needs can quickly fall by the wayside. Conflict, economic instability, and environmental issues like floods and droughts often damage school infrastructure or cut off access entirely. In rural and refugee hosting areas, children are sometimes forced to travel long, unsafe distances to reach school, adding another layer of hardship to an already uphill battle.

INCLUSION

Interviewees acknowledged the efforts of existing organizations in Uganda that work to identify children with disabilities, provide assistive devices, and create inclusive learning environments. However, they stressed the need for greater investment to strengthen support systems for children with disabilities. This includes improving referral pathways for

specialized care, ongoing monitoring, and adapting programs to better meet the needs of these children.

Local groups such as village education committees, refugee welfare committees, and village health teams were highlighted as essential points of contact for promoting inclusion. Language barriers were also identified as a major challenge, particularly for refugee children who may struggle to fully participate in classroom activities. Respondents noted that many teachers are not adequately prepared to meet the diverse needs of their students.

Overall, participants emphasized the need for a more comprehensive approach that includes proper facilities, accessible learning materials, teacher training, and greater involvement from parents and caregivers.

QUALITY

Stakeholders highlighted the ongoing strain that resource scarcity places on schools, with many lacking even the most basic teaching and learning materials. A critical shortage of trained teachers, especially in refugee settings, was a common concern. Many emphasized the need for training and mentoring to better support educators in these environments. Respondents shared that without access to proper learning and teaching resources, it becomes difficult for teachers to fully support their students.

Stakeholders also stressed the importance of stronger caregiver and community involvement

in strengthening the education system. Some specifically pointed to increased participation from fathers as an important part of creating more supportive and inclusive learning environments for children.

UGANDA'S POLICY LANDSCAPE

The Government of Uganda has made it clear that early childhood education matters. Their commitment is reflected in the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy Action Plan (2016 to 2021).^[1] The Education Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities, developed with support from UNICEF, stands out as a progressive policy that includes refugee populations, who make up 3.6 percent of Uganda's population.^[2]

In conversations with community members and partners across Uganda, many shared stories of the variety of interventions currently in place to support early learning in times of crisis. These include psychosocial therapies, community training sessions, dialogues, and involvement in school management committees. Community-based initiatives such as play centers, as well as mental health and psychosocial support within schools, have also been introduced. Collaborations with local organizations and government actors help guide these efforts, which also involve caregiver training, the provision of nutritious meals, and the development of culturally relevant curricula. Additional areas of focus include support for children with disabilities, gender-responsive teaching approaches, and inclusive program design. Despite these promising efforts, many interventions remain fragmented, short term, and project based. This lack of integration limits their long-term sustainability and reach.

During the consultations, participants emphasized the need for sustained and inclusive approaches to ECDEiE. Engaging local governance structures and building community ownership from the start are vital to creating learning environments that are both child friendly and culturally meaningful. Maintaining community interest also requires clear communication, well-managed partnerships, and financial strategies that draw from a variety of sources. A participatory approach, continuous skill building, shifts in attitudes and behaviors, use of local resources, regular monitoring, and support for local organizations and staff retention all play an essential role in delivering high-quality, lasting impact.



LEBANON

GENERAL POPULATION

5.5 MILLION PEOPLE

33% 14 years old or under

REFUGEE POPULATION

795,025 PEOPLE

27.5% 12 YEARS OLD OR YOUNGER

PRIORITIES

Capacity building for teachers

Psychosocial support

WHO DID WE CONSULT?

14 Parents

24 Kids

25 Teachers

9 NGOs

5 CBOs

9 INGOs

2 Thematic Experts

OVERVIEW

In Lebanon, conversations revealed a strong sense of urgency around the many challenges affecting both education and broader social wellbeing. Economic hardship, marked by currency devaluation, widespread unemployment, and a shrinking middle class, has made it difficult for many families to meet even their most basic needs. The ongoing effects of political instability, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the strain of hosting one of the world's largest refugee populations per capita have stretched resources thin and fueled social tensions. The aftermath of the 2020 Beirut blast continues to be felt, while environmental concerns such as pollution, poor waste management, and deforestation pose serious risks to public health and long-term sustainability.

Participants emphasized that these overlapping crises are hitting vulnerable groups the hardest, particularly those from low-income households. Gender inequality also emerged as a pressing issue, with women facing limited access to the labor market and increased risks of early marriage.



Education and ECD Challenges

ACCESS

In Lebanon, there is growing concern among community members about the country's policy and regulatory framework, particularly in regard to public administration and the universalization of kindergarten education. Many worry that the lack of a clear coordinating government body and insufficient funding for education initiatives, especially for children aged 0 to 3, will make it hard to sustain and institutionalize new programs.

Access to inclusive learning opportunities is a major challenge, and families and community members spoke with deep worry about child safety, highlighting how the ongoing crisis has created an environment where abuse and insecurity are growing risks. Parents shared how rising unemployment and economic hardship have made it nearly impossible to meet their children's most basic needs, let alone afford school supplies, transportation, or other education-related costs.

QUALITY AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

Respondents highlighted how economic instability and displacement have had a profound effect on the quality of education. The ongoing mental health challenges and emotional trauma experienced by both citizens and the growing refugee population are putting additional pressure on the education system, with limited services in place to address the rising levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among children and caregivers.

TEACHER CAPACITY

Respondents pointed out several challenges related to teacher capacity. Most teachers are familiar with both digital learning and traditional teaching methods, but their limited pedagogical skills often prevent them from effectively implementing child-centered approaches like play-based learning. Poor teacher remuneration was also raised as a concern, impacting motivation, while the rising trend of recruiting inexperienced graduates for teaching positions adds to the challenge.

In the context of early childhood education, respondents noted the lack of a systemic approach to monitoring kindergarten outcomes and highlighted a gap in having a unified framework to guide these efforts. Teacher shortages and inadequate training were also consistently mentioned. Many teachers have not received sufficient training in key areas such as classroom management, essential skills, and inclusivity in the classroom.

INCLUSION

Stakeholders noted that refugees and displaced individuals face unique challenges, such as a lack of documentation for enrollment and disruptions caused by internal displacement. These issues became even more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many families struggled with limited access to online learning due to technological and infrastructural gaps.

The need for psychosocial support for both parents and children was highlighted as crucial for supporting children's overall development. Respondents emphasized the lack of psychosocial programs, as well as the high mental health needs and lack of trauma-informed support, as key barriers to helping children and families build resilience. Creating supportive environments that foster learning and growth was seen as essential. Security concerns in some regions were also noted as a significant factor affecting students' ability to focus and contributing to poor mental health.

Children with disabilities face major obstacles in accessing education, including inadequate services, a lack of support within schools, and limited awareness and advocacy for inclusive education practices. Language barriers were also identified as a significant challenge for refugee children.

LEBANON'S POLICY LANDSCAPE

Lebanon's formal education system aligns closely with national strategies like the Ministry of Education and Higher Education's National Strategy for Education (2021 to 2025) and the Lebanese Response Plan (2023), both of which aim to strengthen formal education and address educational needs during crises. Informal and nonformal education efforts also support learning and tend to reflect the priorities set out in these national plans. However, with more than half of schools in Lebanon privately run, access to quality education has become largely dependent on a family's financial means. While ambitious initiatives such as Reaching All Children with Education (RACE) II are in place, structural challenges within the public school system require urgent attention, especially as more middle-income families are turning to public education due to the ongoing economic crisis.

The need is particularly pressing in early childhood learning, where the lack of policies focused on school readiness and holistic early development continues to widen existing gaps. Although there are numerous early learning initiatives, respondents noted that poor coordination often leads to fragmented efforts. Most programs still focus on academic outcomes for children in Grade 1 and beyond, leaving a clear gap in access to non-academic and play-based learning for younger children. These types of programs are usually only available in informal settings and have limited reach.

Parent education efforts also lack structure, and teacher training continues to concentrate heavily on traditional instruction and digital learning, with very little emphasis on early childhood education approaches. Respondents made clear that while existing programs address some challenges facing children and families in Lebanon, much more is needed.

Respondents acknowledged that while current efforts are helping to address some of the challenges children face in Lebanon, they are not enough. There is a clear call for more comprehensive and better coordinated approaches to ECE.

Opportunities for Investment in Jordan, Kenya, Uganda and Lebanon

PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Prioritizing continuous professional development of teachers is essential to support curriculum implementation, inclusive practices such as disability-inclusive teaching, individualized education programs, and effective strategies for managing large classes
- Programs supporting Father's education were highlighted by experts as necessary to support holistic growth of children.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

- Integrate mental health initiatives into community-based educational efforts.
- Support teachers both as providers and recipients of psychosocial care through training, resources, and access to trauma-informed services that help them support students while also addressing their own well-being.
- Address the holistic mental health and psychosocial needs of children and families.

INCLUSIVITY

- Expand access to digital solutions to enhance equity for underserved groups
- Invest in inclusive learning programs that support early identification of learning disabilities and provide targeted support in classrooms.
- Expand the notion of inclusivity to support gender, economic, and language barriers.
- Enhancing learning environments to be safe, inclusive and well equipped to support children.

COLLABORATION

- Foster collaboration among government, private sector, and NGOs to develop strategies that reflect diverse learner needs.
- Leverage current policies aimed at EiE to create sustainable partnerships between innovations and other actors, including governments, to enhance educational outcomes.

Cross-Cutting Theme: Play

Across Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, and Uganda, stakeholders from were asked about the powerful role play has in a child's development. Play helps children grow cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically. It builds language skills, sparks creativity, and strengthens problem-solving abilities. In short, play is a cornerstone of holistic learning.

But despite this understanding, many children still don't get the chance to play in ways that truly support their development. One of the biggest hurdles is perception; many parents and educators still see traditional teaching methods as more serious or valuable, while play is viewed as just a break from "real" learning. This mindset, combined with limited resources and a lack of safe play spaces, keeps play-based learning on the margins.

Each country faces its own version of this challenge. In Kenya and Uganda, crowded classrooms and a shortage of trained caregivers make it difficult to incorporate meaningful play into the school day. In Lebanon, play is included in the curriculum only occasionally, which adds to the belief that it's optional rather than essential. And in Jordan, financial pressures and cultural attitudes often limit both the time and space for children to engage in play.

What's clear is that more needs to be done to make play-based learning a priority. That means investing in teacher and caregiver training, advocating for the value of play in education, and creating environments where children can explore, imagine, and learn through play every day.



Overall Consensus Building Workshop Results

Across all regions, one message came through strongly: improving educator capacity is essential, not just through training and resources, but also by supporting their well-being. Stakeholders emphasized that “educator” should include not only formal teachers, but also caregivers, family members, and community leaders who play a critical role in children’s learning.

At the consensus-building workshop, participants pushed for broadening understandings of “strengthen capacity” beyond qualifications to including mental health, living conditions, compensation, and having the tools needed to teach effectively. Many highlighted the importance of balancing formal and informal education, especially in crisis settings, where community-led and grassroots efforts often step in to fill gaps.

There was strong support for including psychosocial support for educators and caregivers as a core part of any response. The growing momentum around PSS and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) was seen as a valuable opportunity, especially with efforts underway to bring these approaches into classrooms across the focus countries.

Play-based child assessment tools also stood out as a priority, both as a way to support learning and as part of educator development. And when it comes to inclusion, stakeholders urged a wider lens, focusing on children with disabilities, girls, and refugee children in

remote or underserved areas.

While each country has its own context, the scoping review revealed common challenges and a shared call to action. Overwhelmingly, participants agreed: to truly support children, we need to support the adults around them with knowledge, tools, care, and compassion.

With this guidance, we formed our challenge statement:

We aim to create strong support systems for children in complex crisis settings so that they can play, learn, and thrive.

We recognize that children’s holistic development, including their physical, intellectual, psychological, cultural, and social wellbeing, is intrinsically linked to the wellbeing and capacity of their caregivers, educators, and other key figures in their lives. Strengthening this support network is essential to foster children’s growth and development. Therefore, Play Learn Thrive will seek solutions that create more robust support systems for children from birth to 12 years of age in complex crisis settings, with a focus on those who have been left behind and whose developmental and educational needs are not being met.

Learning to Action

The scoping review underscores Grand Challenges Canada's approach to investment: those closest to the challenge are best placed to identify the key gaps and lead solutions. We are committed to supporting locally-led solutions to scale, ensuring sustained impact for children living in emergencies. We bridge the gap between practice and evidence through local solutions, ensuring that all children have the change to play, learn and thrive.

WE INVITE YOU TO JOIN US!

There is an urgent need for innovative approaches that address the barriers to healthy development and education for children living in emergency contexts. Together, we can support children through coordinated efforts to improve the support systems around them.

If you're part of an organization seeking to address child development and education in emergencies, a national or global policy or decision maker; or an ECD, Education, or Humanitarian innovation funder able to mobilize resources in the four priority countries or elsewhere...

WE ENCOURAGE YOU TO:

1. Leverage the insights from this report to support and inform your work.
2. Join us to create stronger support systems for children with your knowledge, resources, or funding. We seek new partnerships to learn together, mobilize resources together, and exchange best practices.



References

Introduction

- ¹ <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/01/polycrisis-global-risks-report-cost-of-living/>
- ² Stop the War on Children. <https://data.stopwaronchildren.org/>.
- ³ <https://www.unhcr.org/media/unhcr-education-report-2024-refugee-education-five-years-launch-2030-refugee-education>
- ⁴ Yosha Smita Gargeya, "Thriving with Play", keynote address, PEDAL Play and Mental Health Conference, Cambridge, UK, September 7, 2023
- ⁵ UNICEF. Children Displaced in a Changing Climate: Preparing for a future already underway. <https://www.unicef.org/reports/children-displaced-changing-climate>
- ⁶ Shah, S., & Lombardi, J. (2021). Editorial note: JEIE Volume 7, issue 1. Journal on Education in Emergencies, 7(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.33682/m5tn-wvc9>
- ⁷ Kadir, A., Shenoda, S., Goldhagen, J. & Pitterman, S. The effects of armed conflict on children. Pediatrics 142, (2018).
- ⁸ Shah, S., & Lombardi, J. (2021). Editorial note: JEIE Volume 7, issue 1. Journal on Education in Emergencies, 7(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.33682/m5tn-wvc9>
- ⁹ Snider, Leslie, and Wendy Ager. World Vision International - IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support, 2019, The Toolkit for Child Friendly Spaces in Humanitarian Settings.
- ¹⁰ World Health Organization. (2018). Nurturing care for early childhood development: a framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential. World Health Organization. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/272603>
- ¹¹ Hirani, S. A., & Richter, S. (2019). Maternal and child health during forced displacement. Journal of Nursing Scholarship, 51(3), 252–261. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jnu.12460>
- ¹² Speidel, R., Galarneau, E., Elsayed, D., Mahhouk, S., Filippelli, J., Colasante, T., & Malti, T. (2021). Refugee Children's Social–Emotional Capacities: Links to Mental Health upon Resettlement and Buffering Effects on Pre-Migratory Adversity. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18(22), 12180. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182212180>
- ¹³ Feldman, D. (2019). Children's play in the shadow of war. ERIC. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1220280.pdf>
- ¹⁴ Solis, S. Lynne, Claire W. Liu, and Jill M. Popp. The LEGO Foundation, 2020, Learning to Cope through Play: Playful Learning as an Approach to Support Children's Coping During Times of Heightened Stress and Adversity.

Methods

- ¹⁵ The scoping review followed Arksey and O'Malley's methodological framework and recommendations for the scoping review and data analysis [20]. The process involved formulating research questions; using a systematic search strategy to identify relevant studies focusing on early childhood, early development, education/learning, and crises situations from grey (e.g. stakeholders and websites of organizations in the ECDEIE space) and published (e.g. Google Scholar, Web of Science) literature; selecting literature based on a defined inclusion/exclusion criteria, retrieval of full texts, and reporting of results following the PRISMA protocol [21]; extracting and importing data into a spreadsheet; collating data and synthesizing results using basic numerical and thematic analyses.

Jordan

- ¹⁶ UNHCR. Syria Refugee Crisis Explained. 2024[cited 07/24/2024]; Available from: <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>
- ¹⁷ NCFA. Jordan's 1.4M Children face Daycare Shortage, 40,000 New Centres Needed 2023 [cited 07/24/2024]; Available from: <https://ncfa.org.jo/en/news/jordans-14m-children-face-daycare-shortage-40000-new-centres-needed-ncfa>
- ¹⁸ NCFA. Jordan's 1.4M Children face Daycare Shortage, 40,000 New Centres Needed 2023[cited 07/24/2024]; Available from: <https://ncfa.org.jo/en/news/jordans-14m-children-face-daycare-shortage-40000-new-centres-needed-ncfa>
- ¹⁹ [Humanity & Inclusion, Disability-Inclusive Education in Jordan 2022, Humanity & Inclusion.](#)
- ²⁰ Ministry of Education, Education Strategic Plan 2018 - 2022. 2018. Ministry of Education, Jordan.
- ²¹ [Save the Children, More than 16million children in Kenya face the double threat of climate disaster and crushing poverty, 2022 \[cited 07/24/2024\]; Available from: https://kenya.savethechildren.net/news/report-more-16-million-children-kenya-face-double-threat-climate-disaster-and-crushing-poverty](#)
- ²² [UNHCR, Registered refugees and asylum-seekers in Kakuma and Dadaab, 2023.](#)

Kenya

- ²³ ECD Network for Kenya. Early Childhood Development Systems Measurement for Kenya Baseline findings 2023 [cited 07/24/2024]; Available from: <https://ecdnetworkforkenya.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/ECD-ESA-Systems-Baseline-Report-for-Kenya.pdf>

Uganda

- ²⁴ UNHCR. Uganda Country Refugee Response – Emergency Appeal April – June 2022. 2022 [cited 07/24/2024]; Available from: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/92357>.
- ²⁵ Ministry of Health, The National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy Action Plan of Uganda (2016–2021). 2021, Ministry of Health, Uganda.
- ²⁶ Ministry of Education and Sports Education, Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities in Uganda (ERP II) 2023, Ministry of Education and Sports Education, Uganda.