



## Read-out of Donor Briefing and Panel Discussion on Early Childhood Development: Ensuring a Generation's Future, December 2019



The **No Lost Generation** (NLG) initiative is a concerted effort by multiple stakeholders to ensure that children and young people affected by the crises in Syria and Iraq have access to education, protection and opportunities to engage positively in their communities and society. Initiated in 2013 in support of the responses in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt, the initiative comprises joint, evidence-based advocacy to push for investment, policy change and programmatic improvements in relation to the areas of education, child protection and adolescents & youth.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of December 2019, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation hosted a briefing on Early Childhood Development (ECD), under the auspices of the No Lost Generation (NLG) initiative and organized by Plan International and the International Rescue Committee in collaboration with other NLG partners. This event built on a Regional ECD Workshop held in August 2017 by Plan International, which convened key actors to address funding and programming gaps and to discuss ways to improve ECD coordination in the region. An initial mapping revealed that while compelling work to support families is underway, the provision of ECD services in the Syria and Iraq Humanitarian Response Plans is only reaching a fraction of the total number of

children in need.

The briefing and panel discussion presented an opportunity for the NLG partners to engage with key stakeholders on evidence, developments and policy as well as programmatic priorities with regards to ECD in the region. The briefing brought together donor representatives, UN agencies and INGOs to share their expertise and recommendations. During the briefing, the participants discussed and identified:

- Compelling evidence on the benefits of investing in ECD and the promotion of best approaches in supporting ECD through humanitarian and donor agencies;
- Best practices, challenges and recommendations for inclusive ECD programming in the region, drawn from existing documentation, programming experience and recent assessments;
- Key priorities with donor agencies and policymakers including opportunities, obstacles and challenges to investing in ECD; and
- Specific ways for donor agencies, experts and policymakers to lead by example on how to invest in ECD (awareness, services, systems) across all relevant sectors (health, education, child protection, etc.) with the aim of promoting at scale and relevant policy changes.

Early Childhood Development (ECD) services in humanitarian and fragile settings are essential to help end preventable deaths of newborns and children under five, to support healthy brain development and to drive recovery and peacebuilding in children's and parents' communities and countries. No Lost Generation (NLG) partners are working to ensure an ambitious, sustainable and context-appropriate ECD response to the millions of Syrian children whose most formative years have been marked by displacement, chaos and violence.

Children from birth to age eight are the most affected by emergencies. Children under five living in fragile contexts have the highest illness and death rates of any age group, twenty times higher than standard levels (UNICEF, 2017). Emergencies arising from armed conflict negatively affect the physical, mental, and psychosocial well-being of children, their families and communities. Research in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa indicates 15 to 50 percent of children living in chronic conflict conditions experience PTSD (El Zein & Chehab, 2015).

When children experience high levels of toxic stress, their cortisol hormone levels increase, and the child's brain architecture is adversely impacted, affecting all subsequent areas of child growth and development. An ambitious and sustainable ECD response is not only vital to ensure that children's intellectual and social-emotional development is fulfilled, but also to enable them to become protagonists of the long-term economic prosperity, social cohesion and well-being of their country.

## Highlights from the host's introductory remarks:

**Kristen Molyneaux**, Vice President of Social Impact, Lever for Change, MacArthur Foundation, opened the discussion by highlighting the need to ensure an ambitious, sustainable and context-appropriate ECD response to the 5 million Syrian children whose most formative years have been marked by displacement, chaos and violence. She further explained that in 2017, the MacArthur Foundation awarded IRC and Sesame Workshop the first-ever \$100 million "100&Change" award to restore hope for a generation of children in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Ms. Molyneaux highlighted that in 2018, the LEGO Foundation joined MacArthur in making a bold commitment to support ECD in humanitarian contexts, awarding an additional \$100 million to Sesame Workshop, BRAC and IRC to bring the power of learning through play to children affected by the Rohingya and Syrian refugee crises. Ms. Molyneaux stressed the importance of the international community stepping up support to national government's ECD services. She also highlighted the importance of hosting

this panel discussion in Amman since it promotes further momentum for the policy debate and interventions of the NLG partners in Syria, Iraq, and the wider MENA region.

## Key takeaways from panel 1:

The panel on *Best practices, challenges and recommendations for inclusive Early Childhood Development programming in the region* consisted of:

- **Ziad Twissi**, Education Advisor, War Child
- **Marianne Stone**, Director of the *Ahlan Simsim* Program, IRC
- **Aferdita Spahiu**, Education Specialist, UNICEF
- **Muna Abbas**, Head of Mission, Plan International

**Aferdita Spahiu** described ECD as a continuous process of acquiring skills from conception to entering school, where the child receives skills in a range of domains (health, cognitive, and social development). Ms. Spahiu highlighted the importance of UNICEF's Nurturing Care Framework which promotes childcare development integrated into five dimensions (health, nutrition, early learning, protection, and responsive caregiving). The discussion continued with an examination of some of the pressing needs facing the ECD response in the humanitarian context.

When it comes to ECD response, **Muna Abbas** from Plan International identified a need for improved early ECD multi-sector coordination at the early stages of humanitarian emergency response and recovery plans. This is particularly urgent due to the fragmentation and competition between sectors (education, protection, health, nutrition) and the lack of integration of ECD services into those sectors. The creation of a platform for coordinating ECD interventions that support the Nurturing Care Framework outcomes was mentioned as a possible way forward. The discussion continued with **Marianne Stone** from IRC and **Ziad Twissi** from War Child further stressing how sectors should not be competing but rather working together to provide cross-cutting ECD services to children and their caregivers in an inclusive and accessible manner.

The panelists also gave examples of existing ECD programmes which integrate multi-sectoral approaches and illustrate the importance of structured support in safe spaces in emergency settings.

- **Children and parenting/caregiver programmes:** **Ms. Abbas** gave an example of a parent-focused approach by highlighting Plan International's work in Azraq Camp, where they created safe spaces and implemented Health, Education, Protection and Parenting Programmes (HEPPP) which were developed in collaboration with the Arab Resource Collective. **Ms. Spahiu** referenced UNICEF's ECD kits for emergency settings, which includes tools and accompanying activities aimed at supporting frontline workers who help children and parents/caregivers.
- **Health and ECD:** Panelists explained how health is a great entry point for ECD services because parents visit clinics for family planning, vaccination, etc. starting from pregnancy. For this approach to be successful, close coordination with the Ministry of Health is needed.
- **Collaboration with governments:** **Ms. Stone** mentioned the importance of having a thorough understanding of the "ecosystem" within which humanitarian actors operate, i.e. through mapping government, local organisations and private sector's services. Understanding ECD priorities for host community and displaced children - with a focus on scale - is crucial in this regard. In the *Ahlan Simsim* project, for example, Ms. Stone explained how IRC focused on developing partnerships, while taking into account the local context, to ensure the sustainability of services in the long run. Speaking on how to ensure a vested ECD interest nationally, **Ms. Abbas** mentioned how Plan International, with funding from the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, was able to work with international and local stakeholders to build a National ECD team in Jordan led by the National Council of Family Affairs. **Mr. Twissi** argued in

favour of increased national government involvement in ECD programmes through an affordable and sustainable framework that promotes wellbeing and safeguarding. He further mentioned that organisations may not have the experience or expertise in ECD and must therefore develop strong partnerships to implement sustainable and accountable ECD programmes. Therefore, there must be rigorous quality assurance with regards to methodology, monitoring and evaluation of the program - in collaboration with local organisations.

**Recommendations for donors and policymakers:** The discussion highlighted how donors and policymakers should support and promote ECD interventions in homes, schools, health clinics, and communities. With this objective in mind, policymakers and donors should strive to address ECD as a humanitarian need but with a long-term development mindset that fosters innovative policy, strategy and action plans. Additionally, **Ms. Abbas** mentioned the need for evidence-based programming in the field of ECD, so that partners and practitioners can have a knowledge bank of data and research on which to draw from in the implementation of programmes. The panelists recognized the importance of strong, in-depth partnerships between operational organizations and funding partners - going beyond traditional resource mobilization.

During the panel discussion, the MacArthur Foundation asked for examples of good practices of services for children in the national system. Chile, Cuba, Palestine, Tunisia and Jordan were mentioned as good examples of governments or partners that have committed to improve ECD outcomes, collaborated to support improved multi-sector approaches and then created a system to measure progress against objectives. These were good examples of a positive combination between high-level political commitments and partners' engagement in defining targets and milestones to create an action plan, mechanisms, and monitoring evaluations. **Ms. Spahiu** suggested building on the fact that the Sustainable Development Goals now view ECD as a target of children under 5 years of age, which shows that there is a global commitment to strengthening these services.

**Ms. Stone** provided an example of best practice in relation to ECD national systems strengthening by mentioning IRC's dialogue with the Ministry of Health in Lebanon on integrating nurturing and health systems to improve ECD outcomes. **Ms. Abbas** gave another example from Jordan, where the Ministry of Education has decided that KG2 will be part of the compulsory education for the upcoming year. While the large funding gap remains a key challenge, this decision is helping to mobilize resources, both from the private and public sector, to support the Ministry's ambitious goal.

ECD coordination inside Syria was also mentioned during the panel discussion and the panelists agreed that this was an important topic which should be considered in future analysis of ECD programming.





## Key takeaways from panel 2:

Moderating Panel 2, **Mari Ullman**, Manager for the Moving Minds Alliance, led the discussion on how to engage with donor agencies, experts and policymakers. Panelists for this session were:

- **Elvira Thissen**, Representative Refugee Response, Bernard van Leer Foundation
- **Anita Anastacio**, Senior Initiatives Manager, The LEGO Foundation
- **Dana Al Kahlout**, Senior Program Specialist, Doha International Family Institute
- **Jamela Al Raiby**, Regional Advisor for Child and Adolescent Health, World Health Organisation

The panel opened with **Elvira Thissen** discussing child development from a neuroscience perspective, explaining how both genes and one's own experiences influence development. She used the example of the environment (*fight or flight* mode) and the importance of a stable environment and responsive caregiving for a child to develop neural connections that are necessary to their development. **Ms. Thissen** argued that despite the abundant scientific evidence on the importance of ECD, few of these findings have informed humanitarian interventions in the MENA region so far. The moderator reiterated that children in emergency settings need programmes with a holistic approach to development and that there are many opportunities for donors to institutionalize these programmes. The discussion continued on the best approaches for implementing partners to achieve lasting impact through policy and funding opportunities, focusing on the need for scaling since the start of an intervention, on the importance to use existing platforms that are providing services to children and caregivers and on the need to empower caregivers, especially in dealing with the needs of very young children from 0 to 3 years old.

From the panelists' interventions and subsequent discussion, a number of aspects emerged as key elements of a holistic and comprehensive ECD response:

1. **Research and funding:** **Anita Anastacio** mentioned that it is important to "build, test and learn" for organizations implementing ECD programming to gain expertise in the field and maintain and

strengthen their partnerships. She also mentioned LEGO's recent US\$100 million grant awarded to a consortium led by IRC to promote play-based early-learning solutions in East Africa as a financial pledge towards the Global Refugee Forum. **Ms. Anastacio** also stressed the importance of investing in ECD advocacy. Policy changes resulting from in-depth research were the focus of **Dana Al Kahlout** (Doha International Family Institute)'s intervention. She shared examples from recent studies on children's development and mentioned that the family unit is pivotal for socialization of children. **Ms. Al Kahlout** further explained that, by focusing on parenting practices, organizations could target capacity building, protect against violence, improve the low engagement of fathers, and lack of documentation, while finding solutions to challenges such as caregiving times, distribution of roles at home, and long-term funding.

2. **Aligning ECD with the Sustainable Development Goals**, and thus ensuring that national ECD strategies contribute to the SDGs. With health and ECD in mind, **Jamela Al Raiby** from WHO introduced the *Life Course Approach*, which targets children from the beginning with preconception care and early parental intervention integrating nutrition, health, services and immunization.
3. **Strengthening local partnerships** as a winning approach to achieve lasting policy and funding opportunities. Operational organisations should strive to engage with host governments and ministries in humanitarian settings regarding the gaps in the response and support to ECD programmes already in place.
4. **Creating a programme mapping** database or collective such as the **Moving Minds Alliance** and **No Lost Generation** as spaces for information sharing on programmatic funding gaps, evaluation studies on programming, and capacity building from partners.

**ECD in the context of technology** was discussed following a question from the **MacArthur Foundation's** representative on examples where policy has had a successful impact. The ensuing discussion focused on the importance of children understanding digital skills and the internet to battle illiteracy, and provide safe online spaces for community engagement. **The LEGO Foundation's** representative particularly stressed the value of **play-based learning opportunities** and the importance of play to reduce the sources of stress.

The discussion was opened to the floor and a question was posed about what is needed from institutional donors for implementing organisations to support them. A representative from the **Embassy of Canada** emphasized that donors work primarily with the Jordanian government, therefore local partnerships are important for agencies or organisations to raise awareness and advocacy campaigns, e.g. through partnering with national Ministries of Education. Other participants stressed the importance of investing more in the evaluation of programs to improve learning and program design. A representative from the **World Food Programme** stressed the importance of mainstreaming ECD into existing nutrition programs. Other participants pointed to the lack of coordination of the ECD response inside Syria as a key gap that should be addressed. **Plan International** thanked the NLG platform for continuing the dialogue on ECD and suggested to continue supporting initiatives that have a capacity to mobilize partners for productive discussions such as this one.

## Conclusions and follow up actions:

The participants identified key issues for regional action to ensure the promotion and sustainability of ECD interventions. **Caroline Anning**, Advocacy and Policy Director, Syria Response and co-chair of the NLG initiative from World Vision International, gave concluding remarks on behalf of the NLG partners, summarizing the importance of early stage coordination, integration of ECD into other key sectors, and engagement of the national systems. Ms. Anning also mentioned the importance of more evidence-based interventions and collaboration. She thanked the panelists and audience members for participating in the event and mentioned that the NLG initiative will be continuing its work throughout 2020, including through support to a briefing on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support, as well as an Evidence Symposium for adolescents and youth from the region.





## Key recommendations from the discussion:

- Support key stakeholders to integrate ECD programmes and interventions into all sectors of education, health, nutrition and child protection;
- Prioritize partnerships with relevant government ministries, INGO and local NGO partners to support the development of ECD programming into ongoing government plans and programmes and in INGO & NGO programmes;
- Establish evidence-based programmes emphasizing the caregiver and/or parent interaction with children as an overall family unit that integrates a holistic approach to child development;
- Follow-up on ECD partner and program mapping to analyze the gaps and opportunities for institutional donors;
- Advocate for the inclusion of ECD metrics and priorities as a part of Humanitarian Response plans which would feed into the HRP reporting system to ensure multi-sectoral programmes of government, civil society, and the private sector are mainstreamed and mobilized;
- Strengthen partnerships with the aim to improve data and assessments, leading to a better coordinated cluster response for ECD in emergency settings by continuing to communicate and exchange knowledge and information with and through advocacy platforms such as Moving Minds Alliance and the No Lost Generation initiative; and
- Advocate for future research on and coordination of ECD programmes and strategies in Syria.

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