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Making Noor and Aziz: The Research Behind Sesame Workshop's Rohingya Characters

Editor's note: For the first time, Sesame Workshop unveiled two new Muppet characters designed to resonate with Rohingya refugee children in Bangladesh as part of its Play to Learn program with the LEGO Foundation, BRAC, and the International Rescue Committee. It made news on NBC's Today Show, the New York Times, BBC, and elsewhere.

You can see the NBC News video below. We spoke with Sneha Subramanian of IPA Bangladesh about IPA's role in research behind the twin characters, Noor and Aziz.

Can you describe the research behind the new Muppets?

In late 2019 and early 2020, Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit behind *Sesame Street*, and BRAC, the world's largest NGO and a frequent IPA partner, were designing new characters for playful learning programs in the camp (this was pre-COVID). Sesame of course has years of experience tailoring their programming to kids in different countries and is committed to doing good research. With BRAC they wanted to know how to do this for Rohingya kids under six years old. Because of our experience in the camp, we were able to help them do qualitative research with kids and parents - to try to figure out both a physical design for new characters, who became Noor and Aziz but also try to figure out the content of educational programming that would fit priorities of the parents and resonate with the kids.

Can you describe the kinds of things you looked at?

There was a range—on a basic level, we looked at different potential physical designs for characters to try to figure out what would resonate with the kids—we learned things like for Noor, the girl, having earrings or a nice haircut would mark her as “rich,” an outsider not like them. But we also learned about what the parents wanted their kids to learn about in the eventual educational programming. Some things you'd expect- handwashing and bathroom hygiene for example. Other things though we wouldn't have thought of—like car safety—often cars come barreling down the roads at high speeds and kids need to learn to watch out for them. Or be careful with strangers—refugees are among the vulnerable people

who can be victimized by human traffickers, there are always lots of people around and parents wanted to make sure their kids knew to stay near home and not be lured away. And we also presented parents and kids with everyday socioemotional scenarios— like what a child should do if they want a toy someone else has, or see another kid being bullied, to try to find appropriate scenarios to use in the programs.

Can you describe the situation in Cox’s Bazar and why research teams have been there?

The area itself is a region along the coast of Bangladesh, that, a few years ago became the home to the world’s largest refugee camp, with over 700,000 Rohingya refugees who fled genocide in Myanmar. One astounding statistic is that more than half of the refugees are kids, and many lost one or both parents in the violence. Bangladesh itself isn’t a rich country, so IPA had been there already, doing research into the many challenges facing the refugees and host communities—economic, educational, health, logistical, and then more recently, early childhood development.

On that last point, can you explain why IPA is doing child development research there?

Living in a refugee camp of course presents a whole host of challenges to kids' normal development, but on top of that they’re often coming into the camps traumatized, or the parents who are raising are, or they might not even have parents anymore. What does normal child development look like in that context? We just don’t know. We do know that your formative environment in the early years can have lasting effects on your outcomes later in life. And sadly around the world, almost 80 million people—that’s far more than the population of the UK—have been forced to leave their homes. IPA is part of several consortiums of research teams— in Bangladesh, in Tanzania, and in Jordan, starting an ambitious set of studies on child development in refugee contexts. The Sesame Workshop research grew out of one of those partnerships.

What other kind of research are you going to be doing?

Sure, the Sesame project was really rewarding—it was amazing to be able to see something physical come out of the research insights that went right back into helping the kids. The broader collaborations, including in the other countries, are going to be long term and hope to get at what I mentioned before—understanding what healthy child development looks like and how to help kids. We’ll be working with child development and refugee specialists and doing a number of longitudinal studies following kids as they develop, and seeing which kinds of programs seem to help the most. The label of a refugee “camp” implies a temporary solution, but the truth is more and more kids are spending their whole childhood—and sometimes, adult lives—in these environments, and establishing child-centered, supportive services are critical to these children's well-being as well as to their future prospects as adults.

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