

Enhancing Education Programs in Refugee Contexts



Improving educational outcomes for children and assuring they have the skills needed to thrive is a challenging endeavor anywhere. For those living in refugee contexts, achieving this goal is much more complex. Many refugee and host community children are out of school and require tailored support to access quality education in order to strengthen their learning outcomes, coping mechanisms, and resilience.

In partnership with The LEGO Foundation under the Creative Solutions initiative, Innovations for Poverty Action's (IPA) Right-Fit Evidence Unit worked with nine organizations to support them in testing six novel education programs in refugee contexts across Ethiopia and Uganda.

This brief presents five common lessons observed from this collaboration. While these lessons are not novel, they highlight persistent challenges that remain unaddressed and require greater attention to improve educational contexts in refugee settings.

IPA's Partnership with The LEGO Foundation

As a learning partner, IPA supported the organizations in the Creative Solutions initiative as they tested and refined innovations aimed at improving access to quality education for vulnerable out-of-school children in refugee contexts. These innovations employed various approaches, including integrating social emotional learning (SEL)¹ components into existing programs, engaging children in learning through introducing mobile school buses with play-based learning activities, and implementing teaching strategies focused on practical skills for everyday challenges.

Organizations prioritized different learning objectives to better suit their programs to the operating contexts. To support this learning process, The LEGO Foundation promoted iterative learning, encouraged transparent communication about both successes and failures, and enabled the use of findings for decision-making and program refinement. In parallel, IPA supported the organizations in this goal through:

1. A **Community of Practice (CoP)** to facilitate capacity building and knowledge sharing.
2. Customized **monitoring, evaluation, and learning support** to each program to boost design effectiveness and cost-efficiency in the learning process.
3. **Process evaluations** for each program model, providing practical insights from mixed methods approaches to help organizations make decisions about how to advance or refine their programs in the next stage of implementation.

¹ Social emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children learn and apply self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills and behaviors, to set them up for academic success and positive relationships.

5 Lessons from Implementing Programs in East Africa

IPA identified five key lessons from the collaboration that can inform the design of future education interventions operating in refugee contexts. The importance of these lessons does not stem from their novelty, as they have already been largely acknowledged by the development and humanitarian sectors. Their identification and inclusion in this project, however, does underscore the persistent, recurring risk of overlooking them when designing programs for refugee settings

Throughout the engagement, IPA and the organizations identified that failing to take these lessons into account undermines the feasibility and sustainability of education programs operating in refugee contexts.

1 Underlying Constraints Should be Addressed at the Outset

In refugee and host communities, inadequate infrastructure and limited access to basic resources such as school feeding programs can disrupt education programs, leading to challenges in effective curriculum delivery. **It is important for implementers and funders to consider underlying constraints in the program design and budget, as well as establish contingency plans to respond to these needs.**

Results from the process evaluations revealed that the lack of access to food continues to pose a major challenge for learners, leading to decreased attendance and motivation. Moreover, the lack of proper facilities, such as inadequate lighting and unsuitable infrastructure, made it difficult for teachers to deliver lessons effectively and hampered the overall experience for both learners and teachers. While some programs adapted to these issues during implementation through integrating school feeding programs and utilizing community spaces for lessons, many encountered difficulties due to insufficient budgeting and lack of planning for these constraints from the start of the implementation.

2 Involve Key Stakeholders in Decision-making Early and Frequently

Caregivers and school administrators are critical stakeholders to engage when designing and implementing education programs, given their deep understanding of children's learning needs. **Engaging key stakeholders early and often and establishing regular communication channels supports program adaptations that meet children's learning needs, garners support for program continuation, and fosters a sense of ownership among stakeholders.**

Active communication with caregivers and school administrators significantly improved program objectives and delivery across programs in the Creative Solutions cohort. In one program, for instance, caregiver feedback helped set up appropriate schedules for parent meetings, crucial for monitoring children's progress. In another program, caregivers and community leaders played pivotal roles in mobilizing learners for program activities. Similarly, involving school administrators nurtures joint ownership and buy-in, as they hold comprehensive knowledge about school operations and decision-making authority, and increases the likelihood that programs continue to be implemented in schools.

3 Consider Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Components in the Program Design

Refugee and host community children often face challenges due to traumatic experiences. **Incorporating SEL skill development into education program design – even if not the primary focus – can secure vital caregiver support and improve learners' peer and teacher interactions.**

The majority of the programs explicitly focused on the development of children's SEL skills, aiming to improve their coping mechanisms and resilience. Although the process evaluations didn't measure the impact of SEL components on educational

outcomes, feedback from teachers highlighted benefits such as reduced bullying, enhanced academic performance, improved peer interactions and improved teacher and student interactions. In addition, caregivers acknowledged SEL's role in promoting psychosocial well-being and increasing motivation for learners to attend school.

4 Extend Support to Teachers

Many teachers in refugee contexts are refugees themselves and require assistance in overcoming their own traumatic experiences. **Beyond providing inputs for lessons and training support packages, teachers may benefit from holistic support to help navigate the challenging conditions in which they teach.**

The findings from the process evaluations show teachers found trauma-healing and wellness modules beneficial for both themselves and learners. Teachers also cited improvement in their personal and professional well-being, crediting it to improved stress management, prioritization of self-care, enhanced emotional regulation, and the implementation of positive classroom management and conflict resolution strategies.

5 Comprehensively Train Teachers to Implement Novel Learning Approaches

Teachers are often unfamiliar with innovative curricula, such as play-based learning, and encounter significant learning curves when implementing them in their classrooms. **It is important to dedicate time and budget to provide comprehensive and ongoing training for teachers on play-based learning throughout implementation to ensure they have the space to understand and adopt new practices.**

The process evaluations showed that teachers across all programs highly valued training sessions on innovative pedagogical approaches such as learning through play, especially when they were more practical than theoretical. They suggested having more than two trainings throughout the six- to ten-month implementation period, tailored to their needs. Teachers also found playguides, live demonstrations of play, continuous mentorship sessions with more experienced teachers, and establishing peer learning communities useful to understand and adopt new practices.

Conclusion

Children in refugee and host communities require tailored support to access educational opportunities and successfully transition into formal school systems. By addressing the identified five lessons, the humanitarian sector will likely see greater success in educational interventions in these contexts. Through embracing these and other lessons as input for continual adaptation, and reacting to new challenges that will inevitably arise, programs can be strengthened towards higher potential for impact on refugee and host community children's access to education.

IPA's Right-Fit Evidence Unit is available as a learning partner for organizations implementing their programs, as well as for funders aiming to improve learning and cost-effectiveness in their portfolios. For more information about its work, please visit its [webpage](#) or contact rightfit@poverty-action.org.

For more information on the LEGO Foundation, please visit www.LearningThroughPlay.com.

Writers: Daniela López, Pratik Patel, Michael Podesta and Katrina Sill | **Editors:** Ana Tamayo | **Design:** Ana Tamayo

IPA's Right-Fit Evidence Unit | poverty-action.org/right-fit-evidence

Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) is a research and policy nonprofit that discovers and promotes effective solutions to global poverty problems. IPA brings together researchers and decision-makers to design, rigorously evaluate, and refine these solutions and their applications, ensuring that the evidence created is used to improve the lives of the world's poor. Since our founding in 2002, IPA has worked with over 575 leading academics to conduct over 650 evaluations in 51 countries. Through its Right-Fit Evidence unit, IPA advise funders, NGOs, social businesses, and governments to help them be smarter producers and users of data and evidence.

