

Building an Inclusive and Equitable Early Childhood Education for  
Refugee Children: Framework for Action

# Executive Summary of a Review of the Research Evidence on Early Childhood Education and Care in Refugee Contexts in Low- and Middle-Income Countries

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## Executive Summary

Refugee children are some of the most vulnerable populations in the world, the majority of them living in low resource context, and burdened with experiences of past traumatic events, and post-migration deprivation and stressors. Adding to those risk factors, past trauma and experiences of deprivation and stress also affect their family members and caregivers, who can in response struggle to provide their children with nurturing and supportive care needed for their healthy development, including responsive stimulation and opportunities for learning. Vulnerability in the first years of life is particularly high. A rapidly expanding body of scientific research demonstrates that the early years of a child offer an irreplaceable window of opportunity for children to learn and grow. Importantly, we know today that interventions with a focus on early childhood development can address threats to young children's development and enable families and communities to better provide what young children need for their development and wellbeing. Attention to early learning and responsive caregiving is essential to early childhood development, and early childhood education and care (ECEC) is therefore a key element to early childhood development programming.

High quality ECEC has been shown to bring substantial economic, social, educational and developmental benefits. For refugee children, early childhood education and care can offer physiological, psychological, and cognitive protection. The delivery of ECEC to vulnerable refugee and migrant populations has recently been identified as a research priority. Yet, until today almost everything that we know about providing early education for refugee children is based on research studies in the resettlement context, carried out in high income countries, which are united by the fact that they have common cultural and historical ties to Western Europe. Yet, 80% of refugees live in countries neighbouring their countries of origin, which are mostly low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). This summary highlights the findings of a report (Ereky-Stevens, Siraj, Kong, 2022), which presents a focused and systematic literature search, carried out with the aim to collect evidence about ECEC programmes for refugee children in LMICs. The aim was to evaluate what we know about accessibility and quality of ECEC programmes for refugee children in LMICs and how they support young children in refugee contexts.

### Key Findings

- Results of our review show that research to date is scarce, the research evidence base in this field is still very young, and studies can face significant challenges which affect their methodological rigour.
- Findings of those studies that were identified for this review all point in the direction of benefits of ECEC for children's wellbeing and their developmental outcomes.
- Importantly, qualitative findings demonstrate that children can also take their newly learned skills out into their home environment and into the community, thus benefitting their interactions and learning outside ECEC.
- Resources for providing early childhood services can be extremely limited and providing good quality ECEC can be highly challenging.
- Those promising approaches and strategies that were identified matched well with many of the quality indicators listed in the broader literature on refugee ECEC – mostly studies carried out in higher income and resettlement contexts:
  - play-based opportunities for learning, a focus on learning of literacy and numeracy skills, as well as a wider focus on basic needs
  - providing stability, safety, normality, and support for social and emotional learning
  - community and family engagement and culturally responsive environment and practices
  - focusing on parent attitudes towards learning and parent-school partnerships
  - space and resources for teaching and learning
  - staff preparation, and training on play-based approaches

## Methodology

The literature search followed three routes:

- 1) Academic literature search: Child Development & Adolescent Studies (EBSCO), ProQuest Education Collection (including ERIC and Education Database), ProQuest Social Science Database, ProQuest Dissertation and Thesis Global, PsychNET (PsychINFO), Web of Science searches for publications from 1995 onwards. Use of keywords refugee, forcibly displaced, forced migration, forced migrant, asylum-seeker, and transient, to constrain the search to the population of interest. Use of keywords early child/childhood-education/care/centre/provision/programme/intervention/development/learning/pre-primary, preschool, childcare, day care, to constrain the search to the interventions of interest. A series of trial searches was completed using a string of search terms.
- 2) Grey literature search: Hand searches on websites of the most relevant organisations funding or providing ECEC in refugee contexts, and research institutions with a focus on education and refugee contexts were used to identify relevant grey literature. These searches were carried out on 46 different websites. Searching of bibliographies of identified grey literature (snowballing).
- 3) Identification through key experts and organisations: Identification of experts working for those organisations that provide or fund ECEC in refugee contexts, and those in research institutions with a focus on education and refugee contexts. Experts in 19 organisations were contacted with a request to help identify further relevant publications in the academic- and grey literature.

Inclusion criteria were defined. Documents were included if they addressed early childhood education and care programmes for preschool aged refugee children from the age of three until the start of primary school, if ECEC was delivered in LMICs currently included on the OECDs' Development Assistance Committee (DAC) list of countries eligible to receive official development assistance (ODA), if the study was carried out in or after 1995, if the document was published in English, and if the study met defined characteristics (primary study, stating research questions and/or aims related to the aims of the review, specification of research design/data collection tools and other methods, presentation of sample and selection/recruitment).

Identified documents were added to an electronic data base (Mendeley), and duplicates were removed. A screening strategy was followed, including screening by title, screening by abstract, first screening by inclusion criteria (intervention-, age-, country-, data-, and language criteria); second screening by inclusion criteria (study characteristics). For search protocol example, the full list of websites searched for grey literature, the list of organisations that were contacted, and the full definition of inclusion criteria, see Ereky-Stevens, Siraj, & Kong (2021).

The database search returned 2,503 documents; the website search returned 222 documents. Following the removal of duplicates, and the screening of abstracts and titles (and keyword searches for documents without abstracts), 163 full-text documents were identified to be screened for eligibility. Expert responses added 47 additional documents to be screened. Screening of 210 full-text documents excluded 190 documents for the following reasons: not situated in LMIC (n=21), not focused on refugee population (n=11), not focused on preschool aged children/the provision of ECEC (n=41), not published in English (n=1), study criteria not met (n=101), not addressing research questions related to the review's aims (n=12), single case studies (n=3). 20 documents were identified for inclusion.

Results of our search clearly show how scarce the research evidence in this field is. In total, only 20 publications (reporting on 17 different studies) were identified to meet the specified inclusion

criteria. We intended to include studies published after 1995, but the earliest document included in this review was published in 2013, and all but two of the studies were published within the last five years. Thus, the research evidence base is still very new, but growing, and there are important lessons to be learnt from those studies that have been published so far.

Those studies that were identified were published between 2013-2021 and were spread between nine different countries located in South- and Southeast Asia (Thailand, Bangladesh)<sup>1</sup> the Middle East (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey)<sup>2</sup>, and north-central and East Africa (Chad, Uganda, Tanzania)<sup>3</sup>. Participating refugee families were originally from Myanmar, Sudan, the Republic of Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Syria. The majority of studies were carried out in refugee camps; some studies focused on resettlement communities. Many programmes were NGO-supported, and community-led. Nearly all programmes were offered to refugee children only and did not integrate children with and without refugee background. ECEC programmes were either centre-based or home-based and programmes were provided in schools, community centres, and tented homes. Most programmes were holistic and focused on supporting a broad range of child outcomes; some programmes had a stronger emphasis on school readiness, one of those being an accelerated summer preschool education intervention. Sixteen of the identified documents address research aims related to investigating the benefits of ECEC on child outcomes. Eight studies were quantitative in nature, and seven studies employed qualitative research approaches. Three documents addressed research aims related to investigating the facilitators and barriers of ECEC on child outcomes, all of them qualitatively. Six documents addressed research aims related to investigating the quality of ECEC, often using mixed methods, but the main emphasis was on qualitative data collection.

## Findings

### *Research evidence on the benefits of ECEC for children's development and wellbeing*

Importantly the findings of those studies that were identified for this review all point in the direction of benefits of ECEC for children's wellbeing and their developmental outcomes. Findings indicated that ECEC can provide safe and engaging spaces that provide children with opportunities for recovery and learning. Training programmes can increase educators' and caregivers' understanding of pedagogy and teaching and learning, and thus improve their practice. In line with the broad curriculum offered by implemented ECEC programmes, most studies reported positive changes on a broad range of child outcomes. Across the different studies, improvements were reported for children's early cognitive, literacy and numeracy skills, their language and communication, their physical/motor skills, their hygiene practices, and their behaviour with improvement in their social competence and emotional development. An important finding that emerges from qualitative studies is that children can take their newly learned skills out into their home environment and into the community, and that changes in children's skills and development can also benefit their interactions outside school, for example leading to changes in parental beliefs and behaviour.

### *Research evidence on facilitators and barriers to participation in ECEC*

Those three studies identified to address questions related to access and participation confirmed some of the barriers mentioned in the introductory broad literature review. The characteristics of home-based provision were found to support participation in removing many of the common barriers: accessibility, availability of space, cultural- and language barriers, security concerns, and

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<sup>1</sup> Laxton, Cooper, Shrestha, & Younie, 2020; Tanaka, 2013; Tobin, Boulmier, Zhu, Hancock, & Muennig, 2015; VSO Bangladesh, 2019

<sup>2</sup> Akar, 2019; Akar, Amr & Chen 2017); Erdemir 2021a/b/c; RTI International, 2020; Yalçın & Simsar, 2020

<sup>3</sup> Dalrymple, 2019; Jesuit Refugee Service & iACT, 2019a/b; iAct, 2015; Mbidde & Oguniyi, 2019; Shah, 2016, 2020; Smith, 2015; UNICEF, 2018

issues around staffing. Other barriers that were identified were sufficiency of supply, bureaucracy, and negative beliefs about refugee populations. However, research evidence on barriers and facilitators to refugee ECEC in LMICs is extremely limited. Unless barriers are identified and systematically addressed, there is a risk that they will remain in the future.

#### *Research evidence on the quality of ECEC*

In a humanitarian context, resources for providing ECEC can be extremely limited and providing good quality ECEC can be highly challenging. Our review confirmed what is described in reports on refugee ECEC in LMICs. Lack of spaces and resources was a theme throughout. Studies on ECEC provision in refugee camps described lack of spaces for early learning, lack of caregivers, training and incentives, lack of toys and resources for learning, and lack of access to clean water and nutrition.

Studies in our review also identified and described successful approaches and strategies that were found to support the development and wellbeing of refugee children. Play-based opportunities for learning were identified as strengths of provision in many of the studies, and a wider focus on basic needs, as well as a focus on learning of literacy and numeracy skills were identified as characteristics of good practice. The importance of providing stability, safety, normality and support for social and emotional learning were emphasised. Studies described the implementation of practices to support community and family engagement and culturally practices. Finally, studies highlighted the importance of staff preparation, and training on play-based approaches and described the success of educator training efforts. Many of those promising approaches matched well with indicators that are mostly derived from work in higher income and resettlement contexts and describe what is important to the provision of good quality ECEC for refugee children.

#### *Challenging research contexts*

Studies in the field faced significant challenges which affected their methodological rigour. Research participants are already under immense strains, and it can be difficult to include some of the important informants. For example, some studies had to go ahead without including parents, thus missing out on crucial information about children's and families' experiences and resources. The instability of living situations and the reachability of research participants and make it difficult to recruit and retain sufficient sample sizes and cause difficulties in collecting longitudinal data. Studies on the benefits of ECEC attendance commonly relied on data collection at one time-point only or had to go ahead without a comparison or control group.

Studies on the benefits of ECEC attendance commonly relied on information on child outcomes reported by caregivers and ECE staff rather than on results of child assessments. Experiences with child assessments were challenging, first because children were unfamiliar to having to complete structured tasks (with strangers in particular), and second because finding appropriate and uninterrupted time for assessments was difficult, and often had to fit around daily schedules and activities critical to families and children living in low-resource contexts. In addition, the lack of appropriate assessment tools was commented on, and the struggles to develop indicators to measure children's development that are clearly rooted on the cultural context (in particular in relation to children's social and emotional development, and their self-regulation). Studies commented on the fact that more work remains to be done to develop robust and culturally appropriate assessments procedures. Importantly, the IDELA assessment tool<sup>4</sup> had been used<sup>5</sup>, and was perceived as a reliable, valued and accessible instrument, suitable to monitoring refugee children's changes in development.

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<sup>4</sup> Pisani, Borisova, Dowd, 2015

<sup>5</sup> Mbidde & Oguniyi, 2019

Across the studies included in our review, there was huge variation between context in different regions and target groups, expectations for childhood, and the range of ECE programmes that are available to children LMICs. This makes it difficult to provide guides for high quality programmes, and to assess quality. Research instruments in our review studies included survey questions, guides for interviews, focus groups and observations, which were mostly developed for the purpose of each study, and rarely explained the research basis for their development. However, there were attempts to make the collection and report on observations more uniform and comparable and develop items by building on previous research instruments<sup>6</sup>.

Results from our review suggest that the need for quality (observation) tools, which focus on process quality of ECEC in refugee low-resource contexts. Acknowledging the importance of high-quality interactions that support children's thinking and emotional wellbeing, the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEW) scale was developed in 2015 to assess quality in ECEC<sup>7</sup>. Its potential to capture environmental aspects relevant for fostering children's development in low-resource refugee contexts needs to be assessed. Importantly, some other rigorous tools that have been developed in high income countries (e.g., the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale)<sup>8</sup> have been adapted to assess programme quality in low-resources contexts, and some tools have recently been developed for use in LMICs, including for example the IDELA classroom environment tool<sup>9</sup>, or the Teacher Instructional Practices and Process System (TIPPS)<sup>10</sup>. Further research needs to assess the validity and need for adaptation of such instruments for refugee contexts in particular.

## Conclusions

Despite the many challenges research in this context faces, and limitations in the strength of the research evidence obtained, findings of those studies that were identified for this review all point in the direction of benefits of ECEC for children's wellbeing and their developmental outcomes. These findings are extremely important, considering the vulnerability of young refugee children in low-resource contexts. They highlighted the potential of ECEC to address threats to refugee children's development in offering protection and opportunities for learning. Considering existing barriers to ECEC participation, limited resources for the provision ECE, and challenges in the provision of good quality, these findings are particularly remarkable. Importantly, studies have identified promising practices and approaches, which are well aligned with findings from the general literature on refugee ECEC – mostly studies carried out in higher income countries. The findings of this review add to what we know about the benefits of ECEC and ECEC quality for young refugee children. Importantly the focus here is on evidence which stems from lower resource contexts and refugee families living LMICs.

Research in this field clearly faces significant challenges that impact on the depth and breadth of information that can be collected. Nevertheless, available studies demonstrate that these challenges can be addressed. Assessing children over time and collecting detailed and meaningful information from many stakeholders can be achieved. Measures of child development based on and adapted to local cultural contexts are being developed and successfully used by research studies in the field, and quasi-experimental studies have been implemented. The research field is developing, and design and implementation improving. Importantly however, it has to be acknowledged that high quality research in low-resource and unstable contexts requires additional time and resources to build strong relationships and engage communities in research planning and implementation. These

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<sup>6</sup> Mbidde & Oguniyi, 2019; UNICEF, 2018

<sup>7</sup> Siraj, Kingston, Melhuish, & Sylva, 2015

<sup>8</sup> Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2014

<sup>9</sup> Save the Children, 2021

<sup>10</sup> Seidman, Raza, & Kim, 2018

are important considerations for further development which will help to extend the current evidence base on the potential of ECEC for facilitating the wellbeing and development of young refugee children living in LMICs.

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