

PlayMatters



Evidence Summit Report

“A confident teacher and a happy child equals learning,”
Martin Omukuba, *PlayMatters Project Director.*

In partnership with



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INSIGHTS
TEAM

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Until we are all equal

The LEGO Foundation

Introductory Remarks

Martin Omukuba – PlayMatters Project Director, International Rescue Committee

Mr. Martin Omukuba officially opened the Evidence Summit by welcoming delegates. He highlighted the significance of the event, emphasising the achievements of the PlayMatters project to date, stating that the summit represented a major milestone. He said, “The summit offers a valuable opportunity to reflect on the evidence gathered, celebrate the progress made, and collectively envision how teams can further strengthen and sustain Learning through Play within education systems”. Martin further emphasised how the Learning through Play (LtP) approach is powerful and that it transforms children’s engagement with education.

Elijah Okeyo – Country Director, International Rescue Committee

IRC Uganda’s Country Director, Mr. Elijah Okeyo, welcomed the delegates and participants from the three countries to the summit aimed. He noted that the summit served as both a celebration of achievements and a platform for sharing evidence, insights, and innovations in LtP. Mr. Elijah further noted that the delegates would have the opportunity to hear from Ministries of Education from Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda, alongside global education leaders, development partners, key collaborators and consortium partners, such as the IRC, War Child Alliance, Plan International, IPA, and The LEGO Foundation. He highlighted that participants would be able to learn and understand the technical accomplishments of the project, its practical innovations, such as whole-school approaches, teacher professional development, emergency education enhancements, and Six Bricks. He stated that the panel discussions and presentations would support participants in exploring the impact of play-based learning on teacher and child outcomes, and its association with policy, practice, and long-term sustainability.

Adam Sparre Spliid – Danish Deputy Head of Mission, Danish Embassy

The chief guest, Mr. Adam Sparre Spliid, the Danish Deputy Head of Mission, emphasised Denmark’s education and learning priorities, particularly within the humanitarian-development nexus. He highlighted that play is universal and transcends borders and cultures, and that it fosters essential skills such as creativity, resilience, and problem-solving, making it a powerful tool for children’s holistic development and learning.

Phoebe Kasoga – Country Director, Plan International

The Country Director of Plan International Uganda, Ms. Phoebe Kasoga, highlighted that each country is undergoing a humanitarian reset, applauding the Government of Denmark for increasing its investment in the humanitarian space. She mentioned that funding from the LEGO Foundation has been instrumental in scaling LtP efforts. She then stated that there is a growing recognition of the need to present well-researched models, which are not only critical for implementation but also essential for effective advocacy. Additionally, she indicated the concern that major mental health challenges persist in refugee settings, exacerbated by issues such as reduced food availability.

Parwez Anis – Country Director, War Child Alliance

The Country Director of War Child Alliance Uganda, Mr. Parwez Anis, highlighted the importance of reflecting on the prevailing aid situation for the sustainability on the current gains. Additionally, he observed that fewer financial investments were coming from bilateral and multilateral donors. He expressed gratitude for the LEGO Foundation for its steadfast commitment to Uganda and for the consortium’s commitment to supporting the government, UNHCR, and all other partners to ensure every child has the opportunity to thrive.

Aseged Meresa – Teacher and Educational Leader Development Director, Federal Ministry of Education, Ethiopia

Ms. Aseged Meresa started her submission by stating that the Ministry of Education in Ethiopia had

demonstrated a strong commitment to the role of play in fostering children's social, cognitive, and emotional development. Despite facing challenges such as teacher shortages and constraints in education quality, the Ministry remains focused on adopting evidence-based approaches to inform policy decisions and guide programme design. She concluded her remarks by re-echoing the commitment of the Ministry of Education in Ethiopia towards the importance of grounding interventions in research to ensure impact and sustainability.

Dr. Lucas Mzelela – Chief Tutor, Agency for the Development of Educational Management representing the Ministry of Education Science & Technology, Tanzania

Dr. Lucas, representing the delegates from Tanzania, spoke about the continuation of the PlayMatters initiative in Tanzania and that LtP practices and strategies were now integrated through the Tanzania Institute of Education Learning Management System (LMS). He gladly informed the delegates that LtP was integrated into the LMS, a strategical partnership to support the required and ongoing training of teachers through culturally-sensitive and contextually-appropriate learning materials. He further stated that the development of an e-course for teachers, with support from PlayMatters, was underway, pointing out that it was a cornerstone for sustaining LtP practices and enabling broader access and continuity.

Dr. Lucas further reflected on key questions that all delegates needed to consider:

- o What practical strategies can be employed to scale LtP effectively?
- o How can play-based approaches be designed to be inclusive, equitable, and impactful across diverse learning environments?
- o In what ways can the evidence and experiences from LtP be leveraged to inform and influence education policy?

Andrew Tabula – Ministry of Education and Sports, Uganda

Mr. Andrew Tabura, representing the Ministry of Education and Sports, appreciated the LEGO Foundation for its visionary investment in the PlayMatters project. He highlighted the collaboration of the PlayMatters project across multiple countries. He noted that the approach aligns with Uganda's early childhood and basic education priorities. He further stated that in Uganda, the launch of national LtP guidance documents reflects the value of harmonized coordination among stakeholders, contributing to a broader sector strategy. He drew attention to a growing body of evidence that highlighted the critical role of play in cognitive development, school readiness, and holistic learning. Despite the initial resistance from some parents who viewed play as a distraction from academic learning, significant progress has been made in shifting perceptions and demonstrating its educational value. He highlighted how LtP continues to demonstrate its power as a transformative approach for learning, development, and lifelong success when it is joyful, purposeful, and meaningful. However, persistent challenges remain, particularly around teacher capacity, retention, and infrastructure. He concluded by stating that the goal remains the same: to embed LtP as a core component of Uganda's education system, ensuring that every child benefits from engaging, inclusive, and effective learning experiences.

Mary Winters – Senior Programme Manager, The LEGO Foundation

The LEGO Foundation representative Ms. Mary Winters, highlighted that over 27 million people in East Africa have been affected by crises, making LtP a crucial approach to supporting children's learning. She added that LtP offers a vital pathway to support children's resilience, joyful learning, and creativity, and that the LEGO Foundation has expanded its engagement across East Africa, including Kenya and the core PlayMatters countries, demonstrating the potential of LtP to transform education in emergency and development settings. She emphasized the importance of evidence-based decision-making, noting that rigorous evaluations, including Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs), continue to show the transformative impact of LtP. The LEGO Foundation remains committed to using this evidence to drive system-level changes and ensure all children, regardless of context, can thrive.

System Actor Panel on Policy Impact & Scale: Leveraging policies, systems, and structures for PlayMatters Scale and sustainability

The Panel discussion was led by Ms. Camilla Woeldike, the Policy and Advocacy lead for Plan International, with the following representatives from the different key stakeholders:



Mr. Petros Melaku, ET

Senior Education Expert at the Ministry of Education of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.



Mr. Andrew Tabura, UG

Principal Education Officer, Department of Teacher Education -Training and Development, Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports.



Ms. Daphne Mugizi, UG

Early Childhood Development Specialist, UNICEF Uganda Country Office.



Dr. Fika Mwakabungu, TZ

Head of the Teacher Education Department, Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE).

Reflections on How PlayMatters Supported Commitment to Quality Education

• Dr. Fika (Tanzania)

Tanzania signed an MoU with PlayMatters to clarify roles and responsibilities. The country undertook a curriculum review that included PlayMatters' LtP approach. Modules were developed with learner input, and the Tanzania Institute of Education ensured alignment with the national curriculum before teacher training was rolled out. This process has contributed to the development of content for the Learning Management System.

• Mr. Melaku (Ethiopia)

The team clarified the concept of play and used it to inform national policy and teacher development. They created a play-based teacher framework, making foundational learning a priority. Conceptual issues were addressed before adapting materials. Teacher training approaches were designed in collaboration with academia and PlayMatters, using locally available materials rather than imported resources.

• Mr. Tabura (Uganda)

Collaboration enabled shared ownership across system actors. Roadmaps were co-developed and regularly reviewed with district teams and partners. Materials were co-created and validated by experts to ensure curriculum alignment. Joint monitoring processes enabled assessment of implementation and the use of technical expertise.

• Ms. Mugizi (UNICEF Uganda)

Uganda led the development of a national guidelines for LtP in 2024 with PlayMatters' support. Local contextualisation, creativity, and teacher ownership were emphasised. Strengthening teacher confidence and ensuring system alignment were seen as central to sustainability and scaling. Embedding LtP into teacher preparation programs is critical for long-term adoption.

Reflections on What Made the Partnership Successful

• Mr. Melaku (Ethiopia)

Pre-primary education was elevated as a national priority. Policy changes and curriculum reforms occurred in parallel with PlayMatters' implementation. Policy documents and academic collaboration now guide ongoing implementation across sectors such as education and health.

• Mr. Tabura (Uganda)

PlayMatters contributed significantly to:

- o Teacher development.
- o Strengthening school leadership for buy-in.
- o Building virtual communities of practice.
- o Active learning methods have become more widely used.
- o However, challenges remain around digital access and data systems.

• Dr. Fika (Tanzania)

Teacher Continuous Professional Development is mandatory nationwide, with weekly time allocated in all schools. Needs assessments informed priorities, starting with the lower primary. Tanzania digitized content and distributed tablets with government support.

• Ms. Mugizi (UNICEF Uganda)

Projects must be government-led. The challenge is not only establishing policy but ensuring implementation and resourcing. Collaboration should focus on joint action rather than information sharing. Empowered teachers drive better outcomes for children.

Reflections on What Is Needed to Sustain and Scale LtP Approaches

• Dr. Fika (Tanzania)

Use local expertise and ensure the right people are engaged at the right time.

• Mr. Melaku (Ethiopia)

Affirm LtP as a natural learning method while acknowledging competing pressures in systems.

• Mr. Tabura (Uganda)

Integrate LtP into the curriculum and align materials to national accreditation. Use human resources to build teacher confidence.

• Ms. Mugizi (UNICEF Uganda)

Establish inspection standards ensuring minimum play materials and environments. Promote coordination that is collaborative rather than competitive.

Key Takeaways

- Sustainability begins with strong government leadership.
- Collaborate with the right people with the right expertise.
- Apply behavior change strategies to shift teacher and stakeholder practices.
- Maintain alignment across curriculum, teacher development, and community engagement.
- Expand human resources and champions to sustain scale.

Technical Innovations & Achievements Stations

Delegates were divided into three groups to attend three stations, reflecting on key technical innovations and achievements of PlayMatters' implementation:

- **Whole School Approach:** Projects are often limited to 1–2 teachers per school but supporting the entire teaching staff leads to stronger adoption. Engagement must include school leadership, government structures, and parents.

- **TCPD Sustainability:** Sustainability depends on joint monitoring, virtual communities of practice, school-based supervision, and peer leadership (e.g., school play ambassadors).

- **Learning Through Play in Emergencies (LtPiE):** Adaptability must be balanced with contextualization. Tools and processes should guide contextual adaptation. Embedding play-based approaches in emergency preparedness strengthens teacher and student well-being.

Research Evidence Presentations

Principal Investigators from PlayMatters research team and university partners (Dr. Kizito Omala from Makerere University, Professor Pambas Tandika from University of Dodoma, Dr. Abraha Asfaw and Dr. Kassa Michael from Addis Ababa University) presented findings from PlayMatters research.

Key cross-cutting findings include:

- PlayMatters' Core Package is largely implemented with quality and fidelity.
- PlayMatters' Core Package improves teachers' self-efficacy, well-being, and classroom practices.
- PlayMatters' Core Package improves child holistic learning and well-being.
- PlayMatters' Core Package is cost-effective.

Additional reflections emerging from the Q&A include:

- Professor Pambas: The whole school approach enables teachers to mentor and advocate for Learning through Play.
- Dr. Kizito: Feasibility considerations, such as attrition, matter for study validity.
- Dr. Kassa: The project demonstrates practical potential for scale and cost-effectiveness.

Reflections on Policy and Practice Implications of Presented Research

- o Ms. Viko: Evidence supports scale-up to marginalized contexts, including refugee settings.
- o Dr. Abraha: Project success was supported by flexibility, cultural responsiveness, and alignment with policy.

Additional **key discussion points** included fidelity measurement, literacy outcomes, cost measurement methodology, and differences across countries.

Wrap-Up

Critical closing reflections included the following recommendations:

- Combine government, practitioner, and research perspectives.
- Address misconceptions among teachers and parents.
- Identify and support LtP champions.
- Use feasibility studies to guide rigorous evaluation.
- Scale LtP through system integration, not parallel programming.
- Evidence shows children are learning and teachers are gaining confidence.
- Scaling is feasible when embedded within government.