

Regional NEWSLETTER

A young child with dark skin and short hair is focused on playing with colorful plastic blocks. The child is wearing a red and white striped shirt. The background is a warm, out-of-focus indoor setting.

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Message from the Project Director

Charting the path ahead: We are starting Year 3 with purpose and momentum



Martin Omukuba

Project Director

As PlayMatters transitions into Year 3, I find myself reflecting on the remarkable journey we have walked together; as colleagues, partners, educators, system actors and communities while united by the belief in the transformative power of Learning through Play (LtP).

As we concluded Year 2, we witnessed the conclusion of Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA)'s role as a technical partner in the consortium. Over the past five years, IPA has been a cornerstone of our evidence-based approach. We held a farewell meeting as a befitting tribute to their legacy on the project. Before their exit, IPA also led the consortium to celebrate a major learning event, the Learning through Play Evidence Summit in Kampala. This summit brought together over 90 key stakeholders, including government agencies, academia, and civil society. The summit underscored the immense potential of LtP to foster holistic development in children,

especially those from vulnerable backgrounds. But it also highlighted ongoing challenges: a lack of teacher preparedness, insufficient materials, and limited policy support.

On a global stage, PlayMatters presence at the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) Annual Conference in Chicago was remarkable. Our team, alongside researchers from Ethiopia, Uganda, and Tanzania, presented cutting-edge work on LtP in emergency contexts. These sessions, often filled, reinforced the growing international interest in Learning through Play approaches.

Another particularly proud moment for us was the global launch of the Learning through Play in Emergencies (LtPiE) Package. The package is now live on our website, ready to support educators and humanitarian actors working in the most challenging environments.

As we look ahead to the transition and closeout phase, our focus is twofold: sustaining impact and preparing for what comes next. During our Year 3 planning workshop, we revisited our core mission and agreed on the urgency of maximising funds, every hour, and every opportunity to leave behind systems and practices that will endure.

Finally, I want to emphasise that scaling is everyone's responsibility. Whether you work in operations, logistics, programs, or policy, your contributions are vital to making LtP accessible, relevant, and lasting.

Together, we are building something that will outlive the project itself.

Highlights from Quarter 4

IPA's time as a partner on PlayMatters comes to an end



Members of the PlayMatters project steering committee pose for a photograph with the IPA team after handing IPA a certificate of appreciation for their work in the consortium.

After nearly five years of impactful collaboration, Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) concluded its formal role as a partner on the PlayMatters consortium. Since 2020, IPA has played a pivotal role as a technical support partner, helping to shape the project's research and policy strategies, all in close coordination with the Ministry of Education and Sports. This partnership has left an enduring mark on how education systems can be transformed through Learning through Play (LtP) approaches in East Africa.

To commemorate this milestone, a closure meeting in honour of IPA was held in March led by the Project Steering Committee. As an evidence partner, IPA ensured that every element of PlayMatters, from teacher training to policy interventions, was

grounded in research. "We have worked as an evidence partner... making sure all the work and products are based on evidence," said Vianney Mbonigaba, Senior Policy and Research Manager, IPA.

As IPA transitions out of its formal role, the partnership's achievements stand as a model for how evidence, and collaboration can come together to drive educational transformation.

"Thank you so much. You're still part of the community and there are going to be so many opportunities for us to continue interacting and working together," said Hadijah Nandyose, the senior project coordinator Uganda PMC. While IPA's formal role may have ended, its influence and engagement remain.

Learning Through Play Evidence Summit highlights the power of play in learning

In March, the Learning Through Play (LtP) Evidence Summit convened 96 key stakeholders in Kampala including representatives from the Ministry of Education and Sports, the Ministry of Gender and

Children Affairs, the National Planning Authority, the academia, and national and international NGOs invested in early childhood development. Mr. Brighton Barugahare, Commissioner of Education Policy and Research, officially opened the summit, which spotlighted the transformative potential of LtP in improving learning outcomes for young children. Presentations by Selfago Fuse and Lillian Viko from the PlayMatters project showcased compelling research

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demonstrating that LtP enhances cognitive development, problem-solving, creativity, and social-emotional skills. These benefits are especially evident among marginalized children in early learning centers. However, challenges remain. Many educators lack the training to implement LtP methodologies, and most primary schools are yet to adopt LtP practices. This gap creates discontinuity in learning as children transition from early childhood development (ECD) centers to primary education. In addition, there is limited capacity to produce locally relevant learning materials, and a national policy to support LtP is still lacking.

To overcome these barriers, participants proposed strengthening teacher training, both pre-service and in-service, to embed LtP methods across all early education levels. Panel discussions stressed the need for clear



Selfago Fuse delivers a presentation on behalf of PlayMatters at the CIES.

policies to ensure continuity of LtP practices and encouraged partnerships among government, NGOs, and the private sector to drive systemic change.

The summit underscored LtP's vital role in fostering holistic child development and improving educational outcomes.

Global launch of Learning through Play in Emergencies Package a success

The PlayMatters Research team launched the Learning through Play in Emergencies (LtPiE) Package, a major milestone in our efforts to support children affected by crisis. The virtual event brought together a

global audience of educators, humanitarian actors, and child development experts eager to explore how play can be used to transform learning in emergency settings.

The LtPiE package is an open-access, evidence-based toolkit designed to bring Learning through Play (LtP) into both formal and informal education spaces during acute emergencies. Built from real-world experiences in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda, the package has already been adapted for use in South Sudan, the DRC, and Northwest Syria, showing just how relevant and flexible it is across different crisis contexts.

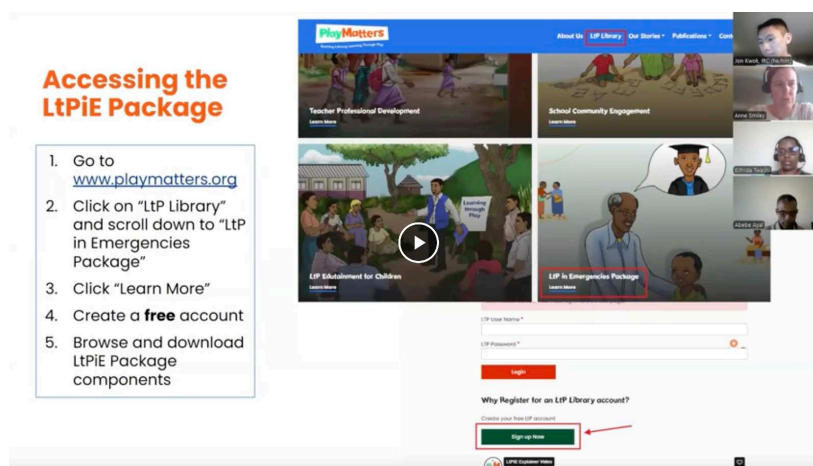
At the launch, our team of experts walked participants through the package, shared stories from the field, and highlighted

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growing evidence on how LtP helps children heal, engage, and learn even in the most challenging environments.

The LtPiE Package is now available to all via the [PlayMatters website](https://www.playmatters.org).



LtP showcased at global education conference - CIES

Learning through Play (LtP) was showcased at the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) Annual Conference in Chicago, USA. This global forum on education brought together four members of the Regional Project Team (RPT) and three external researchers, who shared valuable insights from the PlayMatters project with an international community of education stakeholders.

The team delivered a series of compelling presentations, covering the Learning through Play (LtP) in Emergencies package, the project's approach to scaling, and its systems strengthening strategy to support teachers working in refugee contexts. A special panel featured implementation research drawn from all project countries; Ethiopia, Uganda, and Tanzania, offering a rich cross-country perspective on how LtP is transforming learning outcomes in crisis-affected settings.



Dr. Asfaw Abraha from Ethiopia making a presentation at the CIES on behalf of PlayMatters.

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PlayMatters sessions drew significant attention, including one where rooms filled to capacity with attendees eager to learn from the project's growing body of evidence.

Regional representation included Martin Omukuba, Anne Smiley, Lillian Viko, Selfago Fuse, and Jonathan Kwok, alongside researchers Dr. Michael Kassa and Dr. Asfaw Abraha from Ethiopia, and Prof. Tandika Pambas from Tanzania.



PlayMatters gears up for Year 3 with focus on transition and closeout



PlayMatters consortium staff pose for a photo on day one of the Work planning workshop.

To organise and align efforts for the year ahead, the PlayMatters team convened for its Year 3 annual work planning workshop in Kampala. The workshop brought together 35 staff from the regional team, representatives from the PMCs, and IRC country programme leaders and grants specialists to collaborate on setting priorities for the project's third year.

The workshop centered on two critical themes for the year ahead: Transition and Closeout. Martin Omukuba, the Project Director for PlayMatters, shared an encouraging outlook on the project's progress: **"We are now in our sixth year, and PlayMatters is in a strong position. But how we finish this phase will define our future, possibly opening doors to new funding opportunities. Every dollar must be used with purpose!"**

He also highlighted upcoming challenges, including shifts in donor landscapes and reduced geographic focus, such as Tanzania's exclusion from Phase 2. He urged all teams to plan strategically and maximize the impact of limited resources.

Highlights from Quarter 4

Play, Healing, and Hope: Highlights from the Moving Minds Alliance Showcase

PlayMatters had an opportunity to attend the Moving Minds Alliance dynamic virtual showcase that brought together representatives from leading international NGOs. The event provided a valuable platform for participants to learn, connect, and explore partnerships in the vital field of Early Childhood Development in Emergencies (ECDiE).

The showcase featured compelling keynote presentations from PlayMatters' Lillian Viko delivered a presentation on behalf of the project alongside Sajed Mahmud of BRAC. Both emphasized the healing power of play-based learning for children affected by crisis. Through storytelling, dance, rhymes, and traditional games, children not only develop key cognitive and emotional skills but also connect with their cultural roots, critical for resilience and identity in emergency settings. Despite these benefits, Viko and Mahmud highlighted several persistent challenges in fragile contexts. These include low literacy levels in displacement camps, a general lack of awareness about the importance of early childhood development, and limited integration of play-based approaches in humanitarian responses.

The event reinforced the Moving Minds Alliance's core belief: every child deserves a safe, nurturing, and enriching start to life. The Alliance calls for a coordinated global response to prioritize the needs of young children in emergencies, emphasizing that early investments yield long-term benefits for individual well-being, educational outcomes, and societal resilience.

By spotlighting promising practices and uniting organizations around a common goal,

MOVING MINDS ALLIANCE SHOWCASE 5.0

WEBINAR

#PlayMatters, #HumanitarianPlayLab: Lessons from Sustainable Innovative Early Childhood Development Programs in Crisis Settings

LILLIAN VIKO
Speaker
International Rescue Committee

SAYED MAHMUD
Speaker
BRAC

DULGUUN BATMUNKH
Moderator
MMA Expert Advisory Group

06 MARCH 2025
AT 01.00 PM- 02.00 PM (LONDON)

REGISTER NOW
bit.ly/MovingMindsECDiEShowcase

www.movingmindsalliance.org @MovingMindsECD

the Showcase underscored the urgent need, and immense opportunity, to support young children living through crises.



Scaling Learning through Play for impact: Everyone has a role to play

As PlayMatters embarks on Year 3, the focus is rooted in scale, transition and closeout, ensuring that the Learning through Play (LtP) approaches reaches more children, educators, and system actors in a sustainable way. However, scaling is not just the responsibility of senior leaders or technical teams of the project; every staff member has a role to play in making the project impact last beyond the life of the project. If you are wondering how, in operations, or support, you can make an essential contribution, **here are FAQs to guide your understanding and involvement in our collective scaling efforts.**

- **What is Scale in PlayMatters?**

Expanding the impact of the project beyond our current reach and levels via a range of partners and education systems. It involves using the BARI framework (Build-on, Adapt, Replicate and Integrate) to reach more learners, teachers and education actors within the current project areas and beyond.

- **What is Close-out in PlayMatters?**

The thoroughly planned completion and ending of activities that are directly implemented by PlayMatters at school level. This involves activities that will no longer continue when the schools are closed out by the project.

- **What is transition in PlayMatters?**

The transfer of PlayMatters supported/implemented activities to mandated national, sub-national, regional and district system actors.

- **What is sustainability in PlayMatters?**

The integration of LtP within national and local education systems to ensure that whatever has been collaboratively developed is inclusive, is relevant to the education systems, improves holistic learning outcomes and does no harm to learners and all involved in the process.

- **What is my role in supporting scaling efforts?**

Every staff member plays a role in scaling, whether through direct project implementation, documenting good practices, impact stories, collaborating with government and local partners, supporting capacity-building efforts, or aligning implementation with national policies. Your consistent engagement, innovation, and feedback are vital to ensuring the approaches we develop are replicable and sustainable.

Pictorial



PlayMatter consortium staff gathered in Kampala to plan for Year 3 under the theme of transition and closeout.



PlayMatters Tanzania inaugurated the Nyachenda Teachers Resource Centre to support efforts in Teacher Continuous Professional Development.



Staff from Innovations for Poverty Action, pose for a photo with members of the Playmatters project steering committee and project staff after IPA farewell event in Kampala.

Stories from the Field

Teachers Resource Center officially opened to boost Learning through Play in Tanzania



PlayMatters is on a journey to train more teachers on how to use Learning through Play (LtP) as an active teaching and learning method, and has recently initiated a third cohort of pre-primary and primary school teachers. Teacher training workshops alongside comprehensive support for teachers can lead to tangible changes happening inside classrooms and a long-term impact on children's learning and well-being.

[Read More...](#)

Building resilience and joy in learning: Teacher Meselech's story



Meselech, 37, stands in her classroom at Core 107 Primary School in Sheraro, Tigray, Ethiopia, her hands carefully arranging colorful LEGO bricks on the desk. Her students, mostly local children from the Sheraro Town community, sit in small groups, their excited chatter filling the air. The walls of the classroom are adorned with colourful handmade charts, reminders of Meselech's dedication to making learning as vibrant and engaging as possible.

[Read More...](#)

Learning Through Play teacher training transforming teaching one class at a time



In the heart of Nyachenda village, Kasulu District, the vibrant sounds of traditional music and joyful laughter signaled the beginning of a new chapter in education. Teachers, education officials, and community leaders gathered with enthusiasm to celebrate the official opening of the Nyachenda Teachers' Resource Center (TRC). The resource center is a significant milestone in the journey to enhance the education of children in Tanzania through the power of active, play-based learning. [Read More...](#)

PlayMatters Wall of Fame

In every newsletter, we shall be highlighting members from the PlayMatters field teams on our **“Wall of Fame”**.

We are drawing inspiration from what motivates them to do their work and hope they can inspire all of us.

Selfago Fuse

Technical Advisor for Active Teaching and Learning – IRC




What motivates me most is helping our teams turn their knowledge into real solutions that make a difference in the lives of children and teachers in East Africa. Knowing that our work brings lasting change and supports every child's right to a quality education is deeply fulfilling to me.

Esther Nanyiri

Regional MEL Specialist – Plan International



Growing up, learning wasn't fun, it was quite the chore. What motivates me most about working with PlayMatters is knowing that teachers are making learning fun in ways that bring joy, laughter and growth for the children in the classroom.



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