

PlayMatters Scaling Study Emerging Findings

November 2024

Introduction

The protracted and complex nature of conflict has led record numbers of children and youth to seek schooling while forcibly displaced from their homes. Amidst this crisis, numerous actors, such as governmental ministries, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), United Nations agencies, and donors – often with competing priorities – work towards providing education for children and youth. Growing numbers of children and youth learning in displacement require these actors to consider how to implement, sustain, and scale educational interventions. While research has explored the opportunities, barriers, and principles for scaling educational interventions in middle- and low-income countries, there is limited empirical evidence on scaling pathways in conflict and protracted crisis settings. In light of the increasingly protracted nature of displacement and shrinking budget for refugee education, understanding the challenges and opportunities for scaling educational interventions in refugee and host communities is critical to improving education service delivery for all children and youth, regardless of their displacement status, and meeting global education goals. This study aims to contribute to this evidence base by examining the factors that enable or impede scale for PlayMatters as the project enters its third year.

Project Background

PlayMatters (PM) is working to reimagine childhood for more than 800,000 refugee and host-community children across Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda through teacher professional development by cultivating holistic learning and well-being for children ages 3-12+ through active teaching and learning through play (LtP) methods. This study builds upon PM's humanitarian-development process evaluation as well as Ahlan Simsim/Play to Learn's scaling work to identify and analyze the scaling pathways for PM in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda.

Methodology

This qualitative case study examined the challenges and opportunities PM faces in identifying, investing in, and strengthening scaling pathways across the humanitarian-development nexus in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda. The study asked the following interrelated questions: *What scaling pathways are available for PM to enhance sustainability and expand reach? What barriers and opportunities emerge in each scaling pathway?*

We employed purposive sampling to invite key informants working with PM across government ministries, high education institutions, and INGOs, to participate in semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Data collection took place with 58 participants over a two-week period in August 2024. We recorded and transcribed interviews and FGDs with participant consent; data collection was primarily conducted in English, except two cases at the field-level with PM staff translation support. Analysis is ongoing, with the final report expected to be complete in early 2025.

	PM / Consortium Organization Staff	Government Officials	Higher Education Institutions	Humanitarian/ Development Partners	Total
Ethiopia	5	5	4	8	22
Tanzania	2	10	2	0	14
Uganda	11	7	0	4	22
Total	18	22	6	12	58

Conceptualizing Scale

PM conceptualizes scale through the BARI framework for approaches to scale. Scaling is the ability of a project to grow, expand, or deepen its reach, impact, and influence within a given delivery system, context and scope such as: sector, geography, population, and content. This framework highlights four approaches to developing scale partnerships with both government and NGO partners. The BARI Framework depicts the ways in which PM approaches and products can be flexibly scaled considering interest, mandate, and technical and financial capacity of a scaling partner.

BARI Framework



Build-on

PM influences scaling partner to build on their programming with key concepts or resources.



Adapt

Scaling Partner can fully adapt PM products for a new context.



Replicate

Scaling Partner can replicate all or parts of PM products with contextualization as needed.



Integrate

PM products integrated into national and regional systems.

Emerging Findings

Preliminary analysis reveal three key findings that present opportunities and challenges for PM in its scaling efforts:

1. Creating opportunities for scale requires sustained coordination with multiple actors throughout the project's timeline.
2. Ensuring scaling efforts are effective requires developing and sharing long-term handover strategies and plans with relevant actors (well before the project end-date).
3. Creating an enabling environment for scale requires demonstrating evidence of impact of the intervention.


Key Finding 1: Creating opportunities for scale requires sustained coordination with multiple actors throughout the project's timeline.

Scale requires ongoing and contextualized coordination with different education stakeholders to enable collective approaches for integrating LtP into schooling in refugee and host communities. The range of education stakeholders includes actors from government institutions, higher education and teacher training institutions, and humanitarian-development organizations including multi- and bi-lateral agencies or inter/national NGOs. These stakeholders have different mandates for funding and implementing education and require different approaches for engagement, support, and influence coalesced around a coordinated strategy for scaling LtP through teacher professional development.



Opportunities


PM has prioritized coordination with multiple stakeholders throughout the project's timeline which has enabled the project to identify and invest in scaling partnerships and pathways. Regular meetings and long-term engagement with government actors, in particular, has enabled policy change that has and could be leveraged for further scaling PM's impact. Further, this close collaboration has positioned PM as a trustworthy entity with key expertise on ECD, LtP, and teacher education. For example, in Ethiopia, the process of regularly convening national and regional education officials alongside humanitarian-development partners to

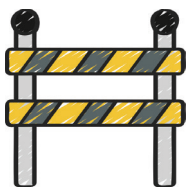


develop and validate the national pre-primary education teacher training strategy signifies strides towards the integration of LtP across the country. While the policy is still under development, PM's leadership in its development holds promise for national implementation of teacher training on LtP agreed on by regional education officials and humanitarian-development partners alike. In Uganda, PM's sustained coordination and advocacy has amplified IRC's standing as a key actor in the ECD technical space with both government and NGO partners, paving the way for new ECD grants that build-on and integrate PM resources and approaches into program design.

In addition to working closely with government actors, coordinating with teacher training institutions and institutions of higher education (that focus on teacher education) is critical for scaling LtP. These institutions span pre- and in-service teacher education and have the mandate to enact teacher professional development policies, thus PM has worked closely with tutors and other personnel in these institutions on teacher training and supportive supervision for PM implementation. For example, through the aforementioned policy engagements on the pre-primary education teacher training strategy, PM was selected by the Ethiopia Federal Ministry of Education to collaborate with Kotebe University of Education to create skills-building courses associated with the teacher training strategy, leading to additional scaling opportunities to train assistant teachers in the Addis Ababa Administrative Zone and integrate LtP into a new program for early childcare providers. However, it is important to note that to leverage these scaling partners to enhance the potential for scale, many participants described the need to expand support, both technically and financially, to these institutions. This requires a holistic, contextualized approach, particularly in decentralized systems, building on the momentum generated under PM thus far.

Humanitarian and development actors are also key scaling partners for PM. This is particularly true when there are strategic opportunities for these actors to engage with government officials. PM has created such opportunities, which buttresses the reputation of PM in ways that enable advocacy for LtP and increase buy-in for integrating this approach into education (often through PM's resources). Further, this engagement between government and NGOs facilitates coordination in crowded education spaces that contend with acute budget deficits alongside increased funding for LtP in the region. In fact, nearly all participants described the importance of coordinating priorities, approaches, and resources for ensuring complementary programming. For example, PM established and currently co-leads the LtP Community of Practice (CoP) in Uganda with the Basic Education Department in the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES). The CoP convenes partners to share knowledge and resources and specific task teams to streamline technical approaches to implementing LtP in the country. Participants described the benefits of the CoP and value in regularly convening partners, particularly to share resources and content, with some noting the value in scaffolding technical capacity of partners on supporting uptake of these products. Additionally, because PM co-developed LtP content with government entities, participants from partner organizations spoke about the quality and credibility of PM content and shared how they wanted to utilize the resources in their own programming. However, despite this buy-in, there have been delays in sharing resources due to prolonged timelines for receiving official approval from the MoES and establishing intellectual property guidelines.





Barriers

While PM has invested in sustained coordination with multiple actors throughout the project's timeline thus far, it is important to note that coordination requires time, resources, and staff. Coordination activities do not always yield tangible or measurable outputs, particularly in relation to client reach, and are therefore not always embedded within workplans, budgets, and organograms; this results in technical and financial resources for coordination – alongside devoted activities – to be left out of project plans. Nearly all participants spoke about a desire to enhance and deepen coordination, yet felt restricted by organizational and project mandates that limit the scope of and capacity for collaboration. Some coordination challenges are inherent to the humanitarian and development aid system architecture and the education sector at-large. Humanitarian-development actors spoke about a lack of coordination at both national and local levels in mapping donors and projects for both present and future implementation. Despite government offices liaising with NGO partners and other existing coordination mechanisms, coordination challenges are exacerbated in a technical niche like LtP. Furthermore, aligned with the PM Humanitarian-Development Process Evaluation, coordination has its limits when foundational needs and education scaling needs are vast in comparison to available and projected resources.

Compounding coordination challenges in aid architecture are challenges of coordination between different government entities and relevant strategies to navigate the complex and often political space. This is perpetuated when the education sector continues to be underfunded, causing ministry departments to compete for funding opportunities and support. For example, in Uganda, PM has had challenges of which department within the MoES to engage with to implement programming aligned with policies. This is further complicated when teacher policies have changed but operations at implementation levels have not fully aligned due to limited national infrastructure to enact such revisions. These tensions have led to delays in PM programming while also potentially limiting scale when it is unclear which government department is responsible for sustaining and integrating PM content and approaches beyond the life of the project.

Additional coordination challenges – and opportunities – extend to LEGO Foundation (LF)-funded projects focused on LtP. More specifically, participants spoke of gaps in dedicated resources and staff to coordinate across the breadth of LF-supported projects and partners. Humanitarian-development participants in particular discussed how some LF-funded projects with the similar population target clients were not convened for complementary programming. This led to duplicative activities by different partners, such as content development despite PM having government-validated content. Participants highlighted the critical need for a dedicated coordinating body to maximize impact and enable scale.



Key Finding 2: Ensuring scaling efforts are effective requires developing and sharing long-term handover strategies and plans with relevant actors (well before the project end-date).

Joint planning to strategize handover with sufficient time is critical for ensuring the sustainability and success of scaling plans. In these efforts, PM needs to co-develop handover plans across multiple levels, including system actors at the national, sub-national, and local-level, humanitarian-development partners, and school-level actors (head teachers, teachers, etc.). It is critical that these efforts are coordinated to strengthen the potential for scaling opportunities to be realized; however, equally important is that these efforts are contextualized to the actors and entities they are engaging. Nearly all participants explained the relevance of co-developing and sharing handover plans with clear roles and responsibilities to outline the mechanisms by which scaling partners could sustain PM content and approaches. This is particularly relevant for ensuring there are adequate financial and human resources to scale and sustain PM gains once the project concludes. It is important to note that there are fewer examples of opportunities and barriers as handover plans were under development at the time of data collection.

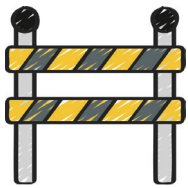


Opportunities

In their scaling efforts, PM has taken a tailored approach to develop handover plans that builds upon existing relationships with scaling partners. For example, PM's sustained coordination with government actors has created opportunities to integrate PM resources into national systems which has significant potential for scale. This is due in part to a sense of ownership government actors feel from co-developing PM content. In Tanzania, the relevant content development authorities expressed their plans to digitize PM content into their Learning Management System, an e-Learning resource hub for all teachers in Tanzania, signifying a huge opportunity for LtP to reach schools across the entire country. Across all countries, the co-development process of PM content laid the foundation for scaling opportunities with humanitarian and development actors as well. Participants from humanitarian and development organizations consistently expressed their desires for PM content to be open-access and accessible by all. These partners viewed PM content not only as high quality and acceptable for use but also as the materials that should be implemented by any partner because of the government's involvement and ownership. Identifying access and use protocols for PM resources in line with government and university knowledge hubs can ensure the longevity and scale of PM resources.

There are also important opportunities for scale at the sub-national/regional and local level with government stakeholders. For example, a district education official in Ethiopia discussed the potential for PM to get scaled through the regional education bureau's continuous professional development system to schools beyond the target area, signifying an opportunity to increase PM's reach. Similarly, a district education official in Tanzania described facilitating logistics to enable the movement of champion teachers across schools to cascade knowledge acquired through PM to additional schools

within their catchment area which did not receive PM support. These examples highlight the willingness and energy at the local level to scale and sustain PM and indicate important opportunities for PM to more systematically develop handover plans with these stakeholders to operationalize these scaling pathways.



Barriers

The nature of the humanitarian-development system results in project cycles that are often viewed as insufficient for achieving scale. This is in part due to the tension that many system actors face in the bold international commitments to supporting refugee inclusion, particularly for Uganda and Ethiopia, without adequate financing to ensure quality implementation. Thus, stakeholders, both government and non-governmental, expressed interest and desire to scale PM resources but frequently cited a lack of financial resources to do so. Moreover, the nature of project life cycles has implications on staff retention and technical capacity to sustain or scale LtP in follow-on or other projects. PM consortium staff may feel uncertain about their professional futures and transition roles, taking technical expertise, rapport with scaling partners, and/or motivation to integrate PM resources into other programming with them.

In addition to the complexities of achieving scale in the humanitarian-development sector, challenges persist in investing in scaling opportunities with national institutions – such as teacher training colleges and universities – due to restrictions on donor funding. Many participants spoke of the need for technical and financial capacity to be strengthened in national institutions, particularly at the regional and local levels, to adequately sustain and scale PM gains. While PM has engaged myriad individuals from relevant institutions, particularly as trainers of teachers, there has not been comprehensive support for these institutions due to limited resourcing, which threatens sustained or expansive gains achieved by PM. Participants in all three countries spoke of the importance of engaging more higher education staff in training to systematically integrate LtP into all aspects of teacher professional development. This is particularly important when these institutions are responsible for the implementation of national teacher management and training policies. For example, in Ethiopia, while there is significant potential in the validation of the national pre-primary teacher training strategy and accompanying training modules, regional education bureaus and the corresponding 39 pre-primary teacher training institutions lack the technical capacity and financial resources to contextualize and implement this strategy.

Finally, participants, particularly system actors, described the importance of transparent planning in the handover process. When probed about roles and responsibilities for sustaining and scaling PM beyond the life of the project, many participants seemed to lack understanding of when the project is ending and their role moving forward. While sustained coordination has been valuable for project implementation, system actors requested more information on the handover process. PM has primarily focused on quality and fidelity of implementation to-date and, in efforts to develop transition plans, stronger approaches to sensitize and co-develop these plans may be needed to ensure PM gains are sustained.

Key Finding 3: Creating an enabling environment for scale requires demonstrating evidence of impact of the intervention.

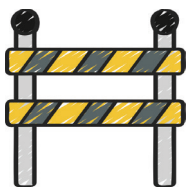
Scaling partners will be more inclined to build-on, adapt, replicate and/or integrate PM resources when they know it contributes to improved classroom teaching practices and children’s holistic learning and well-being outcomes. Therefore, evidence of impact of LtP on children’s holistic learning outcomes and well-being is essential for scale as myriad stakeholders described a desire to know how and to what extent the PM core package can be an effective educational intervention.



Opportunities

PM has centered learning in its design which uniquely positions the project to build and strengthen the evidence base on LtP through rigorous mixed-methods research. Nearly all participants expressed their appreciation of this approach and shared how evidence of impact would significantly strengthen buy-in from their organizations or institutions to use PM resources, enhancing the sustainability and scale of the project. Indeed, most participants held positive views of PM and saw potential in LtP to improve learning and well-being outcomes; at the same time, they shared their desire to see more evidence of the effectiveness of LtP and the PM Core Package on children’s holistic development. Some participants were willing to commit resources and continuous professional development initiatives aligned with PM resources but cited the need for evidence prior to full integration of PM resources. Beyond utilizing evidence to encourage the uptake of PM resources, participants also shared how evidence of impact could also be used for advocacy to demonstrate the effectiveness of LtP to broader audiences. Several participants, particularly from humanitarian and development organizations, expressed their wish to collaborate on research to contextualize and strengthen measurement approaches (aligned with SDG reporting), develop complementary studies, and engage in joint dissemination and advocacy on LtP.

Centering learning in its approach also meant that PM has pursued co-organizing events commemorating LtP or focused on disseminating evidence around LtP. Such events bring together myriad stakeholders, including government, higher education institutions, and humanitarian-development partners for dialogue on best practices, shared learning, and joint advocacy to advance LtP in each country, and were broadly recognized as important opportunities for scale by participants. For example, the coordination of the International Day of Play celebrations in Ethiopia and Uganda presented an opportunity to strengthen joint programming and coordination with other humanitarian-development partners but also served as a critical platform for increasing PM’s visibility and thought leadership with other humanitarian-development actors.



Barriers

While PM has disseminated learning and evidence with a range of partners, research takes time. Impact evaluations, in particular, require a level of intervention maturity and quality to ensure an impact evaluation is properly designed and implemented to yield useful, and likely positive, findings. This becomes challenging to navigate as content co-creation processes and sustained stakeholder engagement has built a demand for evidence since there is strong buy-in and willingness to utilize PM resources. As scaling pathways emerged, often ad hoc or as a result of policy influencing opportunities unpredicted by the project, maintaining flexibility to disseminate relevant results in a timely fashion can be challenging. Evidence of impact is likely to catalyze interest and uptake, building on existing scaling opportunities and potentially open additional pathways.

Conclusion & Recommendations

What it means to scale educational interventions across the humanitarian-development nexus remains understudied and urgently needed as the number of refugees rises globally alongside their average length of displacement. This study provides timely evidence for PM as it conceptualizes and operationalizes its plans to enhance sustainability and scale, as well as for the broader field of Education in Emergencies. Though analysis is ongoing, emerging findings point to four recommendations for PM and the LEGO Foundation to consider in the remaining years of PM as well as in future endeavors:

1. Strengthen coordination mechanisms through investing financial and technical resources to employ dedicated staff mandated through a partner organization; in some cases, staff from the LEGO Foundation may be able to take on this work. Coordination within and across projects, with government entities, and with other donors can help strengthen scaling opportunities and broaden impact.
2. Harmonize and streamline existing and new grants to avoid duplication of efforts and enhance synergy through proposal writing, program design, and implementation. This is particularly relevant for grants from the LEGO Foundation and/or in PM countries.
3. Work with and through the national systems to meaningfully pursue scaling pathways with the highest potential. This can be prioritized in two ways:
 - a. Direct investment in teacher training colleges and universities, particularly in pre-service education, as teacher education is needed to sustain and scale the technical support provided through PM.
 - b. Working with national education systems to identify annual policy priorities that generate opportunities for scale.
4. Improve coordination with donors to provide flexible and responsive financial and technical support to governments in an effort to comprehensively improve education systems. Sustainability and scale of PM will not be achieved when systems themselves face acute challenges, which are often amplified by conflict, crisis, and forced displacement (see PM's humanitarian-development process evaluation for more information on this recommendation).