



INTERNATIONAL
STEP by STEP
ASSOCIATION

Prioritizing Young Children's Development in Emergencies

The ISSA Network Advantage

If you want to go far, go together!

In recent years, migration, climate change, war, health crises and other disasters have affected more young children worldwide. It is evident that early childhood development (ECD) is critical to the development of human capital but, like most multi-sectoral issues, it is both “everyone’s problem and no one’s problem”, and as a consequence, the amount of investment in ECD is scarce and very fragmented. **Less than one-fifth of early childhood development in emergency funds (19%) has been reported as ‘multi-sector’ funding.**¹

Young children in emergency contexts

What is the problem?

Findings from the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) landscape analysis, reveal the root causes for the underestimation and underfunding of ECD and education in emergencies (ECDEiE):²

- low prioritization of ECDEiE across sectors
- limited consensus on strategic advocacy for ECDEiE
- lack of systematic characterization of ECDEiE institutional and programmatic landscapes.

The findings from the analysis signal the importance of addressing the humanitarian needs of young children, caregivers, and the early childhood workforce in a more coordinated way.

More than half of humanitarian and refugee response plans, and flash appeals, focus on immediate needs while neglecting the overall development, learning and well-being of the youngest children and their caregivers. The existing funding does not allow programming to be sustained for lasting impact, which requires well-coordinated action.

There is an urgent need to bolster local action and significantly improve engagement, coordination and alignment across actors and levels of policy implementation to better connect the local to the national, regional, and international levels.

Due to its complexity, ECD can be best guaranteed within a multisectoral and integrated approach, mobilizing various resources in a well-coordinated manner, and this is even more of a prerequisite for the provision of services during emergency and humanitarian contexts. However, to sustain investments efficiently, there is a need to better understand and identify key knowledge gaps and put better frameworks and mechanisms in place, ones that ensure equity and inclusion in times of disruption.

Why ECD networks can make a difference

ECD networks that bring together a wide range of stakeholders can be capable of organizing effective response and recovery actions which are impactful, scalable, and sustainable.

Due to their experience and expertise, network members can respond with agility to new issues and challenges, or

address barriers and existing issues, with different members taking on specific tasks. This is crucial in ensuring that ECD can continue to advance while protecting hard-earned gains across the sector.³

Founded in 1999, the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) is a well-established network of leading ECD experts in Europe and Central Asia. With over 90 Members from 42 countries, mostly in Europe and Central Asia, the network represents a wide variety of actors in the ECD field: NGOs, professional associations, academic institutions, public bodies and international organizations.

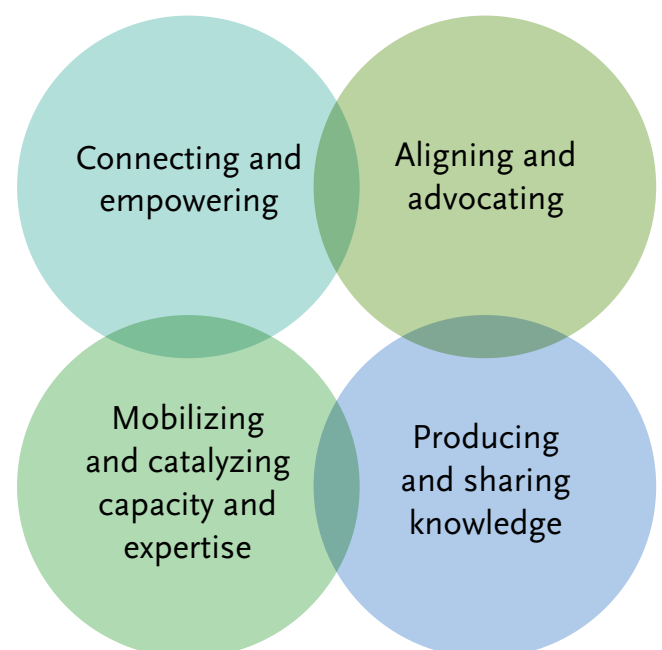
In addition, ISSA is an **international ECD player** with strong links to other global and regional actors.

The robust framework of ISSA's Response in times of crisis is built on its well-tested **network mechanisms and functions**:

- ▶ providing Members with needs-based professional development opportunities and technical assistance.
- ▶ facilitating knowledge-sharing and peer learning activities.
- ▶ performing rapid needs assessment and identifying gaps and priorities.
- ▶ disseminating Members' work and learning at the grassroots level.
- ▶ mobilizing and catalyzing cross-border and cross-sectorial collaboration among experts and supporting fundraising efforts.

The International Step by Step Association (ISSA)

The ISSA Network responds effectively in times of crisis



Ukraine Response

ISSA Network in action

With the refugee crises and the war in Ukraine, it has become evident that although there had been a massive mobilization of resources, an immediate, informed, and attuned response had been delayed by the absence of a social, organizational and knowledge infrastructure which could connect the grassroots reality with local and regional expertise.

Given its **adaptive capacity** and using the **connective tissue of collaborative learning networks** for responsive solutions to early childhood complex issues, the ISSA Network has been able to quickly and successfully respond to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, and is currently able to react to the challenges posed by the war in Ukraine.

ISSA's strategic response

Five streams of action

Workforce capacity in countries

Rooted within existing in-country expertise and ISSA's support system, ISSA's strategic response has focused on five key elements of the system's ability to effectively respond to emergency contexts, resulting in **five streams of action**.

1. **Strengthen the capacity of early childhood practitioners to provide psychosocial support to children and their caregivers**

Data collected from ISSA Members on the ground has indicated the **strong need to equip the workforce** of services and local partners with the necessary competencies for approaching children and families, ensuring a welcoming and smooth integration in the new country context while policy arrangements for their integration are put in place.

ISSA has joined forces with War Child Holland and ISSA Member, Amna Refugee Healing Network (Amna), the UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia (ECARO), and the Minderoo Foundation to strengthen the capacity of early childhood development professionals to provide an attuned response to the incoming refugee children and families.

- ▶ The **Foundational Training on Psychological First Aid and trauma-informed practices with young children and their caregivers**, developed by ISSA with Amna and War Child Holland, is for experienced trainers in the ECD field at the country level, equipping them with foundational

knowledge and skills in this area. It provides core content to be used in formal or non-formal early childhood services with children under six years of age and their caregivers, some of whom may have had traumatic experiences. The training also includes a focus on the importance of self-care for the ECD workforce.

The training package consists of different materials, translated into **eight languages** (Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Russian, Polish, Slovak, Czech and Hungarian).

- ▶ ISSA has organized **learning exchange and coaching sessions** to support the cross-country community of learning and the country teams of trainers in the roll-out of the package at the national level.

The learning exchange sessions have been extremely helpful. Likewise, the best practice models shared by colleagues from other countries have significantly consolidated our experience of intervening in crises situations like those caused by the war in Ukraine.

— Master trainer from Romania

Since the training, I have felt more confident and calm, and I believe in tomorrow. I have a better understanding now that it is impossible to help children in stressful situations if you yourself are not in a state of psychological peace. The training has helped me not only at work, but also personally. I would like as many colleagues as possible to participate because we are all in a state of distress.

— Teacher from Ukraine

2. Empower Members to build capacity at the municipality level and support a strategic response in the short and medium-term

Locally attuned measures and plans for providing refugee children and their families with meaningful support largely depend on the **capacity of local governments to articulate responsive plans**.

Capacity at municipality level for response

- ▶ ISSA has leveraged pre-existing expertise in the network to empower its Members supporting refugee or internally displaced young children and families with the necessary **competencies to assist municipalities in developing needs-informed strategic plans for ECD services**. This has been achieved by using the **Primokiz approach**, a methodology focused on supporting local governments in developing early childhood strategies which are inter-sectoral, comprehensive, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of the communities they serve.

In 2023, ISSA Members from Ukraine, Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland received a license for the Primokiz program and in Hungary, the implementation of the program started with six selected municipalities. With the peer support of experienced implementers in Romania and Slovenia, an emerging cross-country Primokiz community has been able to respond to the emergency in Ukraine, while always keeping an eye on the local structural challenges faced by young children and their families.

- ▶ **Non-formal services** have been created in Poland under the name of [Spynkas](#) (known in Romania as [PrimoHubs](#), and in Hungary and Slovakia as [Play Hubs](#)). In Ukraine, there have been efforts to refurbish pre-existing preschool facilities and shelters, allowing young children access to early learning and play while ensuring their safety and emotional well-being.

Children going to kindergarten are totally satisfied – a key indicator of an excellent preschool – thanks to the caring and highly qualified professionals who have worked hard to organize a comfortable environment. I am very glad that my child is in the hands of such responsive and kind people. I sincerely thank you!

— A Ukrainian mother whose child is attending PrimoHub in Tulcea, hosted in kindergarten no.3 – Romania

- ▶ In collaboration with enterprises such as HP, Microsoft and Amazon and NGOs such as Save the Children, ISSA has distributed 1,300 **free laptops** and 195,000

newly printed **children story books** in Ukrainian from ISSA's Reading Corner series to its Members in Ukraine and neighbouring countries.

The books are a great help for Ukrainian mothers who volunteered to assist Romanian educators in kindergartens and who had little (if any) time to prepare for classes.

These colorful books are a joy for the kids. In Bucharest, at a Registration Center for refugees, the storybooks instantly put a smile on children's faces.

— Sorin Dragomir, Development Director at Centrul Step by Step, ISSA Member in Romania

3. Ensure inclusion, respect for diversity and equity in early childhood policies and practices

Despite inclusion efforts, the seeds of animosity can spread fast in communities with a large Russian minority (along with other inter-ethnic tensions), or between the receiving population and refugees. Increases in inter-ethnic conflicts have been witnessed in many countries. Additionally, inequities and gaps in early childhood systems, policies and practices to ensure the right of every child to quality services (not sufficiently addressed over the years) have been revealed.

- ▶ Based on the experience developed in the past 20 years and its own Embracing Diversity Programs, ISSA has supported its Members in instilling respect for diversity and promotion of inclusion in early childhood practitioners across sectors and services, along with recognition of and appreciation for multiple identities. Moreover, ISSA has given them support to **transform ECEC settings into more welcoming, inclusive, empowering and quality learning spaces** that encourage participation, strengthen social cohesion, nurture children and families' sense of belonging, and where caring relationships based on respect, responsiveness and mutual support are built.

Inclusive policies and practices in countries

Most of the Ukrainian refugees coming to Hungary are Roma and in Hungary, Roma are the largest minority. These Hungarian Roma have done much to help the recent refugees. However, Roma living in Hungary have long faced discrimination and often express, “How come we’ve been here for centuries without support, and now a new group of people is coming, and they get accommodation, they get food, a lot of people are listening to them and trying to meet their needs? We are also here and who cares for us?” Their perspective is entirely relevant. Those of us working in this field must consider their perspective. We have to deal with this when we provide services for children and families.

— Eva Deak, Managing Director of Partners Hungary Foundation, ISSA Member in Hungary

- ▶ ISSA has relentlessly advocated for early childhood to be placed high on the emergency response agenda. It has also advocated for the most vulnerable children to be included in any action taken at local, national and regional levels through its work and the *First Years First Priority* Campaign which it co-leads.
- ▶ ISSA has leveraged its [Romani Early Years Network](#) (REYN) initiative to mobilize resources and provide emergency support to young Roma children in Western Ukraine. In February 2022, the host organization of REYN in Ukraine, the Blaho Foundation, developed a **Station of Hope** by converting its early learning center for Roma children in Uzhhorod into a shelter. They also rented a former restaurant in order to accommodate the increasing influx of families with children.

People affected by the war receive three meals a day and free hygiene products. Teachers are working with children, and psychologists are supporting those in need. Medical and legal support is also being provided. Roma families live in the shelter together with non-Roma families, building up an inclusive community and adjusting to the needs of children together.

— Eleonora Kulchar, Blaho Foundation chairperson, ISSA Member in Ukraine

4. Facilitate and sustain a learning community of professionals across countries

The ISSA Network can act upon its vast expertise in the early childhood field, its commitment, and eagerness to engage and co-construct new approaches and models. ISSA has treasured the work of its Members and harnessed this diversity through different enabling mechanisms.

- ▶ The network has activated a **learning community across countries** by organizing regular peer-learning exchange sessions among Members involved in the Ukraine Response, thematic webinars and *ISSA Connects for Ukraine* events open to the broader ISSA membership, partners, supporters and the general public. The community has met frequently to: find solutions to common challenges; delve into lessons learned from practice on the ground; run self-assessment evaluations of the actions implemented and share outcomes; highlight the emerging needs and possible strategies for addressing them while opening pathways and links across and beyond the network for further learning and exchange.
- ▶ The network has collected **resources from different sources**, disseminating them on a newly created section of ISSA's website, which is accessible to all in multiple languages.
- ▶ The network has been sharing **news about Members' work** at the country level in Ukraine, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Moldova, Poland, and Romania to showcase and disseminate good practices and solutions, inspiring the work of others in the ISSA Network and beyond.
- ▶ The network has gathered **human interest stories** and produced videos with testimonies from the ground to document the impact of the collective response.
 - *A Network in Action for the Families and Young Children of Ukraine*
 - *Hear me – See me –Stand by me! Station of Hope Ukraine*

Cross-country learning and support

System reconstruction in Ukraine

- *Professional learning communities: best practices in Moldova and Slovenia*

We have learned how to make a treasure trove of knowledge acquired in similar challenging situations in the past and how to apply it, building resilience as a network to be better prepared to face future crises.

— ISSA Member participating in peer learning – June 2023

5. Support the long-term reconstruction efforts in Ukraine

Despite the multiple harsh effects of the war, the ISSA Network's intervention support has stayed focused on strengthening several pivotal anchors in the reconstruction of the early childhood system.

- ▶ **Support and equip its grass-roots Member organizations, Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation** and the Blaho Foundation in Ukraine with knowledge, skills and resources so that they may further support their own networks of professionals on the ground to engage in efforts to strategically reconstruct early childhood systems.
- ▶ **Provide timely and ready-to-roll-out capacity-building programs to ensure the early childhood workforce's** ability to overcome challenging contexts and continue supporting themselves and children's development and well-being.
- ▶ **Re-establish the early years services** which have been looted or severely damaged by shelling and made unusable due to the lack of safety facilities and adequate equipment.

Residents who were abroad or in Western Ukraine are gradually returning to their original communities, creating a need to encourage more children into kindergartens. It is necessary to restore kindergartens and ensure safe working conditions. There is also a need to overcome trauma and restore the emotional and psychosocial well-being of young children and families. We need to teach parents to help themselves and their children.

— Olena Hloba, consultant of the Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation and project expert of Reform Support Team at the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine

ISSA will continue to leverage support from institutional partners and donors to rebuild the network of preschools and primary schools with whom its Member organizations in Ukraine have been working for more than 25 years. Engaging with local authorities and strengthening solid partnerships with municipalities, including through the Primokiz approach, will be key in reconstructing early years services that are responsive to local community needs, sustainable, and long-lasting.

- ▶ Having **local and country links** allows for designing attuned solutions that are responsive and targeted to the existing and emerging needs of each community.
- ▶ Lift up the **voices of young children, families, and practitioners**, whose perspectives are often missing in program design is key. The ISSA Network has made use of its visibility to **draw attention to the situation of increasing numbers of vulnerable children and families**, shedding light on their specific needs and supporting a humanitarian response.
- ▶ Self-reflect and assess past interventions and solutions in order to **understand what works well and what could be adapted and applied in early childhood systems** to flexibly respond to the challenges created by the war. The existing knowledge and best practices have been scaled up across borders. **Quality of intervention and flexibility** have been at the core of any action undertaken. This has been a key message in ISSA's efforts to advocate and secure support for local actors.
- ▶ **Listening to the workforce and responding to needs** is essential in times of crisis. The ECD workforce is vital, as children and families rely on professionals in the here and now. The ISSA Network has been able to support the already fragile network of undervalued ECD professionals and practitioners, to strengthen them personally and professionally and equip them with new skills to best support children and families in stressful and traumatic situations, while prioritizing their own self-care.

Takeaways from ISSA's Ukraine Response

Key lessons learned

- ▶ **Accessing the wealth of expertise, capacity and operational structures that exist in networks** provides fast avenues for immediate impact. A network can easily map priorities, create channels of communication and collaboration, and provide technical support at the local and country levels.
- ▶ **Provide continued support and meet the needs of grassroots organizations** which carry out the hard work and reach out to children and families most in need. ECD networks exist to facilitate and provide peer support to strengthen the resilience of Members to be better prepared to face future crises.
- ▶ **Cross-country cooperation** in the ISSA Network allows for a better understanding of gaps and weaknesses in properly responding to similar crises, and for understanding top level priorities:
 - further strengthening early childhood organizations and systems in countries/the region.
 - including early learning/early care in emergency responses – it is as important as other areas.
 - always accompanying short-term interventions with a mid and long-term vision to ensure sustained support and outcomes and contributing to a functional/resilient and integrated eco-system of early childhood services.



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- 1 <https://movingmindsalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/analysis-of-international-aid-levels-for-early-childhood-services-in-crisis-contexts.pdf>
- 2 “Landscape Analysis of Early Childhood Development and Education in Emergencies”, <https://doi.org/10.33682/w69a-bhpt>, INEE, 2022
- 3 Network Impact, “The Network Advantage: How Regional Networks Catalyze Impact in Early Childhood Development”, 2020