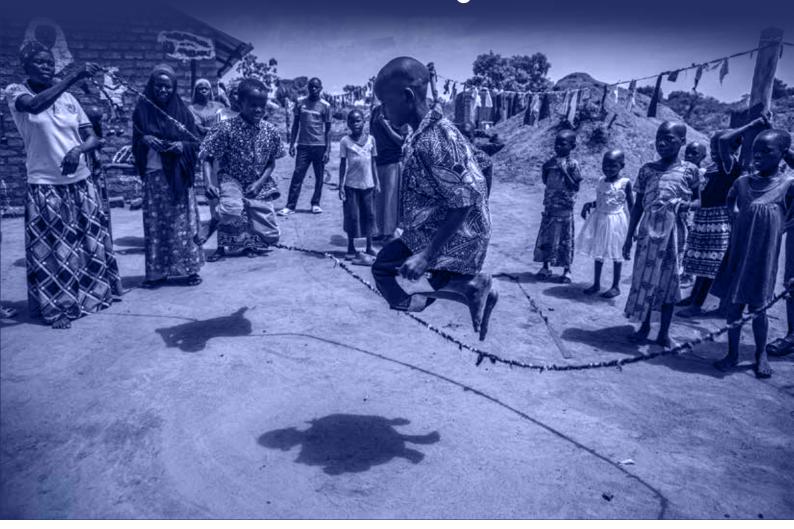


# **LEARNING BRIEF**EVIDENCE FROM KULEA WATOTO

**APRIL 2025** 



In Partnership With















# IMPLEMENTING A TWO-GENERATION APPROACH TO SUPPORT EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

#### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Globally, 43% of children under five in low- to middle-income countries face risks like poverty and malnutrition, hindering their development. In Uganda, this figure rises to 63%. Refugee children, who make up 50% of the world's displaced population, are particularly vulnerable and often lack basic needs. These realities necessitate interventions addressing children's holistic needs—including household needs and income. While relatively new to the humanitarian sector, the two-generation approach has the potential to bring better outcomes for both children and their families. When children have stability and nurturing care at home, their overall learning and development can flourish.

Thanks to the generous partnership of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) is leading a consortium of local partners, including the Madrasa Early Childhood Program in Uganda (MECP-Ug), Literacy and Adult Basic Education (LABE), Kabarole Resource and Research Centre (KRC), and AfriChild to implement a three-year project (Oct 2022 – Sept 2025) in Uganda titled 'Kulea Watoto.' Kulea Watoto is a Swahili phrase meaning 'nurturing children.' The project uses a unique two-generation approach to reach young children under five years of age and their caregivers in three refugee-hosting districts: Yumbe in the West Nile region, Kyegegwa in the Western region, and Kampala in the Central region.

This learning brief synthesizes best practices since launching Kulea Watoto. From practitioners who implement early childhood development programs in similar contexts to policy actors, these lessons and recommendations provide insights into implementing two-generation interventions successfully.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Black, M. M., Walaker, S. P., Lia, C., Fernald, H., Andersen, C. T., DiGiorolamo, A. M., Chunling, L., et al. (2017). Early childhood coming of age.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Lu, C., Black, M. M., & Richter, L. M. (2016). Risk of poor development in young children in low income and middle-income countries: An estimation and analysis at the global, regional, and country level. The Lancet Global Health, 4, eg16–eg22.

Banin, E., & Post, L. (2021). Early childhood development in forced displacement, conflict & violent contexts: Considerations and recommendations for the World Bank Group and other invests

# 2.0 METHODOLOGY

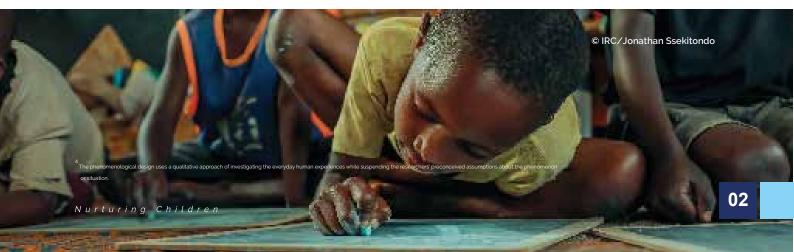
The brief is informed by a study conducted by the Kulea Watoto Research Team to identify and document best practices and lessons learned. The study combined an in-depth analysis of program reports, partners, and fieldwork to generate recommendations for scaling effective two-generation strategies in different contexts (urban versus rural). The research covered links between livelihoods, food security and early learning programs, as well as feedback from program beneficiaries.

A qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design was used to capture participants' experiences and insights from the three project sites. The participants included parents/caregivers, district local government officers in charge of education and production, Kulea Watoto beneficiaries and partner staff. Data was gathered through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, observation guides, and documentary analysis. Audios recordings from the interviews were transcribed and translated for thematic analysis.

# 3.0 KEY EVIDENCE

Evidence for a two-generation approach that integrates livelihoods, food security, children's nutrition, and learning programs

- Several beneficiaries during the focussed group discussions reported that before Kulea Watoto, they struggled to balance work, income, and their children's education. The program also helped parents realize that hungry children cannot learn effectively, and they have started either packing food for them or paying for food served to children at Early Childhood Development (ECD) centers.
- Livelihood activities provided parents with income to buy nutritious food and school supplies, improving their children's well-being. Beneficiaries testify that business grants provided by the project have enabled them to take their children to school because they can afford to pay school fees from the business returns/profits.



- The program successfully tailored livelihood interventions based on community-specific needs and considered individual choices. For example, beneficiaries could choose enterprises or specific crops to grow based on location. (In Yumbe, beneficiaries are growing orange-fleshed potatoes, yet in Kyaka, they decided to do goat rearing.)
- The kitchen gardens component of the program helped families grow their own food, reducing dependency on market purchases and allowing families to redirect income from food purchases to education and business investments.

#### **Evidence for Localization**

- Business startups and skills training elements of Kulea Watoto have thrived in urban areas due to better market access, even though space for large-scale businesses is limited. In rural areas, agribusiness and farming have been more successful due to the availability of land and fewer security concerns.
- In the urban areas, parents were more receptive to supervised daycare services for children aged 0-3 years due to work commitments. In rural areas, parents were less open to daycare services, preferring to keep young children at home.
- In rural areas, Village Health Teams play a significant role in supporting ECD playgroups and making home visits. Families prefer engaging with health facilities rather than VHTs in urban settings, as they believe formal healthcare providers offer better support.
- In rural settings, beneficiaries primarily engaged in farming, including crop cultivation, animal rearing, and poultry. These activities provided food security and additional income when surplus produce was sold. In urban settings, beneficiaries, including urban refugees engaged in food vending and grocery businesses, contribute to local food supply chains while earning a livelihood.<sup>5</sup>

# 4.0 BEST PRACTICES

#### **Designing Programs with Local Partners Based on Local Practices**

Designing Kulea Watoto involved collaboration across partners implementing different approaches to ECD, such as LABE's home-based model tailored to rural settings and IRC's center-based model suited to urban settings.

<sup>5</sup> Village Health Teams (VHTs) are community-based volunteers who serve as a crucial link between the villages and formal health services as well as other services that benefit the local community

The diversity of approaches allowed for more flexibility in integrating two-generation interventions in different contexts. Using tailored approaches to local contexts improved buy-in from local stakeholders.

During the inception phase of the project, partners agreed to work with local communal structures. For example, Village Health Teams (VHTs) would help deliver parenting sessions and home visits, Centre Management Committees would support ECD centers, and so on. <sup>6</sup>



Encouraging feedback between local partners and communities during implementation

Kulea Watoto consortium partners collectively share insights and corrective measures through learning visits, research activities, and meetings. This approach has helped partners connect and has improved overall program efficiency. Feedback registers were introduced to enhance community involvement. These registers have allowed beneficiaries to express concerns, suggestions, and complaints, which led to problem-solving meetings and strengthened accountability mechanisms. Partners have also popularized community barazas, attracting more community members and leading to more inclusive decision-making and feedback collection.

Centre Management Committees are comprised of selected community members and parents who oversee the day-to-day management of the ECD facility, including staffing, resources and program delivery

Community barazas are gatherings where community members come together to discuss issues affecting their community and share information that result into decisions to improve their tives collectively

#### Learning over multiple cohort enrollments

Kulea Watoto adopted a cohort enrollment modality to allow learning throughout the program's implementation. Iterating from cohort to cohort has allowed for diverse perspectives and experiences among Kulea Watoto clients. For example, learnings from cohort one suggested that supervised care groups were not working for children aged 0-3 years, especially in rural areas, because caregivers did not trust leaving their young children in the hands of another caretaker. In cohort two, the care groups were revised to target children aged 3-5 years, and caregivers started leaving their children with the groups. Refining the program from cohort to cohort has honed a Kulea Watoto model that a range of local partners can implement. Now, this package of program interventions can be taken to scale.

#### **Collaborating with Centre Management Committees can sustain critical programs**

Kulea Watoto is collaborating with ECD Centre Management Committees (CMCs) to improve and sustain the quality of early learning at ECD or home learning centers. The Kulea Watoto team trained local CMCs in responsive caregiving, financial literacy, business enterprise startups, and overall ECD center sustainability. The CMCs were also provided cash grants to start volunteer-based business enterprises to sustain and invest in improving local ECD centers. For example, one CMC in Kyaka started a soap-making business. In the first 6 months of its existence, it had accumulated profits to support the local ECD center. Other CMCs have started poultry farming, goat farming, or other businesses to help sustain the ECD centers. These CMCs function as a critical part of each ECD center infrastructure, and the businesses will help sustain Kulea Watoto interventions long after the program's presence.

In rural areas, each CMC at an ECD or Home Learning Center <sup>8</sup> also established a demonstration garden with nutritious foods (especially vegetables) to support sessions with parents on child nutrition.

#### Integrating efforts with government actors unlocks long-term progress for ECD

Several policies in Uganda are designed to promote a two-generation approach to early childhood development, emphasizing the vital link between the well-being of children and their caregivers.

<sup>8</sup> Community barazas are gatherings where community members come together to discuss issues affecting their community and share information that result into decisions to improve their lives collective

The key policy is the National Integrated Early Childhood Development (NIECD) Policy (2015). This is a multi-sectoral policy, and its implementation brings together several stakeholders concerned with ECD programming, including education, health, and livelihoods. The Kulea Watoto project works with the implementors of this policy, including the Ministry of Gender, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Local Government at the national level. The project also works with local district governments, sub-counties, and local community structures, which also allowed the project to contribute to policy processes at all levels. Kulea Watoto has supported the IECD committees at all the targeted centers in Kyegegwa and Yumbe Districts to facilitate the integration of ECD services in the communities.

At the start of the project, these committees were not fully functional and did not meet regularly. With support from Kulea Watoto, they have been reactivated, and the committee members were trained in their roles, for example, planning for and reporting on IECD activities. Through champion building, Kulea Watoto collaborates with leaders at different levels to inform and empower them to make the right and actions regarding IECD. These include local council leaders, refugee leaders, district leaders and Members of Parliament. These engagements have contributed to policy processes fhat work towards the prioritization of ECD such as developing the Early Child Development Policy Guidelines and Standards by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development.

Collaborating with government agencies to align community programs with national early childhood development policies is essential for ensuring program sustainability and impact. Engaging with policymakers helps promote supportive policies for early childhood development and parenting education.

# **5.0 CASE STUDIES**

### Cash grants for economic empowerment among urban refugees

Business cash grants given to beneficiaries who do not have the collateral to guarantee a loan payment (a common reality for urban refugees) have been a game changer for some of the project beneficiaries. For example, a 20-year-old Burundian refugee in Kampala, responsible for her the care of her younger siblings, received a business loan without collateral. This support allowed her to save money for her education. She aspires to become an automotive engineer. She also pursued vocational training opportunities, demonstrating how financial aid fosters hope and independence among vulnerable individuals.

#### Cooking demonstrations for better nutrition at the ECD Centers

Parents and caregivers at local ECD center were taught how to integrate different foods into their home meals for better nutritional value. These trainings help improve nutritional outcomes at the ECD centers and help parents replicate these lessons at home. *One example is a refugee woman in Kyaka 2 Refugee Settlement in Kyegegwa District, who shared how she started preparing silverfish with porridge and greens, significantly improving her children's nutrition.* 



#### **Cultivating a culture of saving**

Kulea Watoto has supported the formation of Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) for parents who were not initially part of the VSLAs and strengthened the existing ones. They received training on the importance of saving, borrowing and investing in income-generating activities. Beneficiaries, particularly mothers, who previously depended solely on their husbands, found saving through the savings groups a good way to build capital. One caregiver called Zamzam from a Centre in Yumbe District, was trained in household visioning and learned the importance of saving. She accumulated enough savings to buy two cows, showing how financial literacy and resource management training can empower families to build wealth and sustain livelihoods.

#### 6.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Conclusions**

Kulea Watoto is a proof of concept intervention that confirms that combining early childhood development with livelihoods interventions leads to better outcomes for children. Although the two-generation model was initially created and largely implemented in developed countries, the pilot in Uganda has provided critical insights for refining and scaling the program in developing nations.

Kulea Watoto has also enhanced collaboration among partners implementing similar ECD models using different approaches. To achieve program alignment, various compromises were made, particularly in harmonizing data collection tools and overarching program goals. This process offered valuable insights, even for experienced partners, enabling them to identify and address gaps within their established models.

#### **Recommendations**

For the Kulea Watoto consortium and other implementors of two-generation programs:

- Harmonize ECD models across partners to create a hybrid model that combines effective components. Kulea Watoto collaborates with different partners to deliver various components of ECD and livelihoods.
- Develop an integrated ECD minimum package detailing the dosage and intensity that can be delivered together with livelihood interventions. This will help guide future efforts and document best practices at a working level.
- Analyze the value of cash grants given to different beneficiaries in more detail since some beneficiaries redirected funds to urgent needs (e.g., rent). This may point towards a need for targeted grants or financial literacy reinforcement. Uniform grant amounts across program beneficiaries irrespective of their physical location didn't deliver expected results, especially because urban arears such as Kampala typically have higher costs of living compared to rural areas.
- Build gender considerations and sensitivity into ECD programming. The study revealed some gender-related dynamics which affected delivery of some interventions for example among the Somali community where men preferred fellow men talking or engaging them which was the case for women as well.
- Identify and address the needs of children with special needs. There is a lack of deliberate activities focused on children with special needs. As a marginalized population, special attention and care needs to be given to the group.
- Strengthen grant management skills among Centre Management Committees (CMCs). Some CMCs were unsure whether the grant was meant to sustain the ECD center or the committee members.

#### For Research, Monitoring and Evaluation:

- Develop a system to track ECD and livelihood outcomes among children and caregiver/parents that measure long-term impact. Implementors of two-generation programs need to track both ECD and livelihood outcomes to measure livelihood interventions' impact on the children's well-being.
- Consider savings group behavior and develop strategies to cultivate a stronger savings culture among refugees and host communities. This was observed as something that is not mainstream.
- Explore alternative approaches to kitchen gardens among refugees, especially in urban contexts with limited access to enough land for farming especially in the urban context with limited access to land for farming.
- Popularize the feedback registers among the community leaders and the structures so that they can support in collection of feedback from the community. This information helps implementors adjust and improve activities based on the needs of the target beneficiaries.

#### For National-level Policy Makers:

- Adopt a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system for ECD nationwide. This
  could enable national harmonization in monitoring and reporting across the sector
  and subsequently with other sectors.
- Address high class sizes in ECD centers and ensure that the class teacher to learner ration is in line with the recommended one of at least 1:40. This can be achieved by prioritizing investments in classroom infrastructure and training more ECD teachers and caregivers.
- Strengthen childcare services for children aged 0-3 years. Most ECD interventions in Uganda have been focused on early childhood education, targeting children aged 3-8 years. Investments in the earliest years will pave the way for more successful learning outcomes as children grow.
- Ring-fence funding for early learning and integrate it into national ECD systems.
   Pre-primary education does not currently receive direct financing from the government despite clear and proven positive impacts on children's learning and future development.
- Collaborate with partners to guide project design, implementation and evaluation for two-generation programs, which have the potential to generate holistic, sustainable gains for entire communities.

