

Family Agency and Voice: Designing the Next Generation of Family Engagement

COLLABORATORS:



Introduction

Close your eyes and imagine a preschool program working to actively increase its father engagement. Despite offering a variety of events ranging from male involvement workshops to Donuts with Dads, the staff lament that father participation rates remain consistently low. Why aren't fathers taking part?

Now imagine staff trying something new. Instead of randomly designing more activities for fathers, hoping one will stick, they begin to talk with families. Staff talk with mothers, fathers, and grandparents both at the program and out in the community to understand why fathers aren't engaging in their children's early learning experience and the barriers preventing them from doing so. And what if through these conversations the staff learn something groundbreaking: that it's not that fathers don't want to engage, and it's not that they don't have the time to do so. They learn that what is difficult for fathers is navigating relationships with mothers. They also learn that often community members—based on cultural norms—perceive early childhood programs as a space where only mothers engage. And staff find that mothers question fathers' motives when they try to participate.

The staff have an "aha" moment. To more robustly engage fathers, they have to work with mothers, too. So staff develop a "Mommies Waiting Group," where mothers can have a space for themselves to talk with one another about topics relevant to their lives. And staff design a "Daddy's Promise" for fathers to sign, attesting that their sole purpose for attending the preschool activity is to support their children. Over time, the preschool experiences more interest in family participation at the father-child play groups. Within months, more and more fathers begin to actively co-engage in children's learning in and out of the program, encouraging other fathers to join as well.

—Steven Salinas, Early Learning Lab Parent Innovation Institute

This opening vignette is not just a dream. It's the result of a yearlong process based on a deep understanding of designing with and for families. Families play a variety of roles in their children's learning—from being their children's first teacher to nurturing and advocating for them. To build on their power, a new generation of transformational family engagement is emerging. This new generation of family engagement is based on a shift of power and control: a move away from the engagement of some families and family members, particularly economically advantaged mothers, to a focus on shared responsibility and conditions that enable all caregivers and communities to engage meaningfully in their children's education. And perhaps most important, there is a shift in mindset from doing for and to families to actively co-creating and co-designing* family engagement opportunities with families to better develop programs and services.

But how can programs build capacity to co-design with families? At the LEGO Idea Conference 2019 in Billund, Denmark, our five organizations—Global Family Research Project, Omidyar Network, Ubongo, International Rescue Committee (IRC), and the Early Learning Lab (ELL)—engaged in a conversation with a broad audience about how co-design creates shifts in family engagement and gives families agency and voice. From these conversations, four critical concepts emerged that individuals and organizations can use to develop, expand, and improve the knowledge, resources, and mindsets needed to grow their capacity for co-design. These four concepts are described below, and in the appendix of this report, we provide ideas for using the activities that were presented at the conference for utilization by a range of organizations and communities.

*We use the term *co-design* to refer to the active and intentional design of programs and services with the people the service is meant to serve. Co-design is one form of co-creation.

Concept 1: Create mechanisms for deeply understanding families

Empathy was one of the top and most powerful recurring themes that emerged throughout our conversation. Co-designing is about understanding families' values and relinquishing the notion that one individual or organization can know best for all. Instead, co-design requires an institutional culture rooted in the premise that success derives from a deep understanding of the families the organization serves. For instance, in the opening narrative, preschool staff were able to build powerful father engagement services and supports only after they spent extended time talking with families out in the community—waiting with fathers seeking day labor jobs and chatting in grocery stores and laundromats. One focus group would simply not have been enough.

The process of coming to know and understand families takes root when families are at the center of the services and products organizations create. In the Tunakujenga Learning Through Play program in Tanzania, for example, Ubongo and IRC joined together to co-produce short and fun instructional videos that teach parents in refugee camps in East Africa different games that they can play with their children to help them develop specific social and emotional skills. The videos were created after a three-month qualitative phase of in-depth interviews and observations of what parents already did and valued. The development of the videos involved staff extensively piloting and localizing the materials and giving families a chance to provide feedback and design their own iterations and ideas.

We really try to understand what families already do very well, what are the norms of the community, and where there are different values that might not be represented in all of the curriculum that is being developed. We make sure that the activities and games we create represent what people WANT to do, and makes sense to them, and are not just fitting our preconceived notions.

- Nisha Ligon, co-founder and CEO of Ubongo

Doing this work well requires the allocation of resources, time, and staff hours to cultivate relationships with families by inquiring and listening. This means staffing programs and services with the right people, those who not only have content knowledge but also organizing and community experience.

Some of the things that we learned for us to truly take co-design seriously is that we need the right people and even more, we as an organization need to be comfortable addressing power hierarchies. There's a lot the nonprofit and public sectors can learn from the private sector in this regard. In the public sector, our programs too often continue, even if our services don't meet the needs of our clients. Co-design creates a platform to prioritize families.

- Catherine Atkin, founder & senior advisor of ELL



Early Learning Lab Team

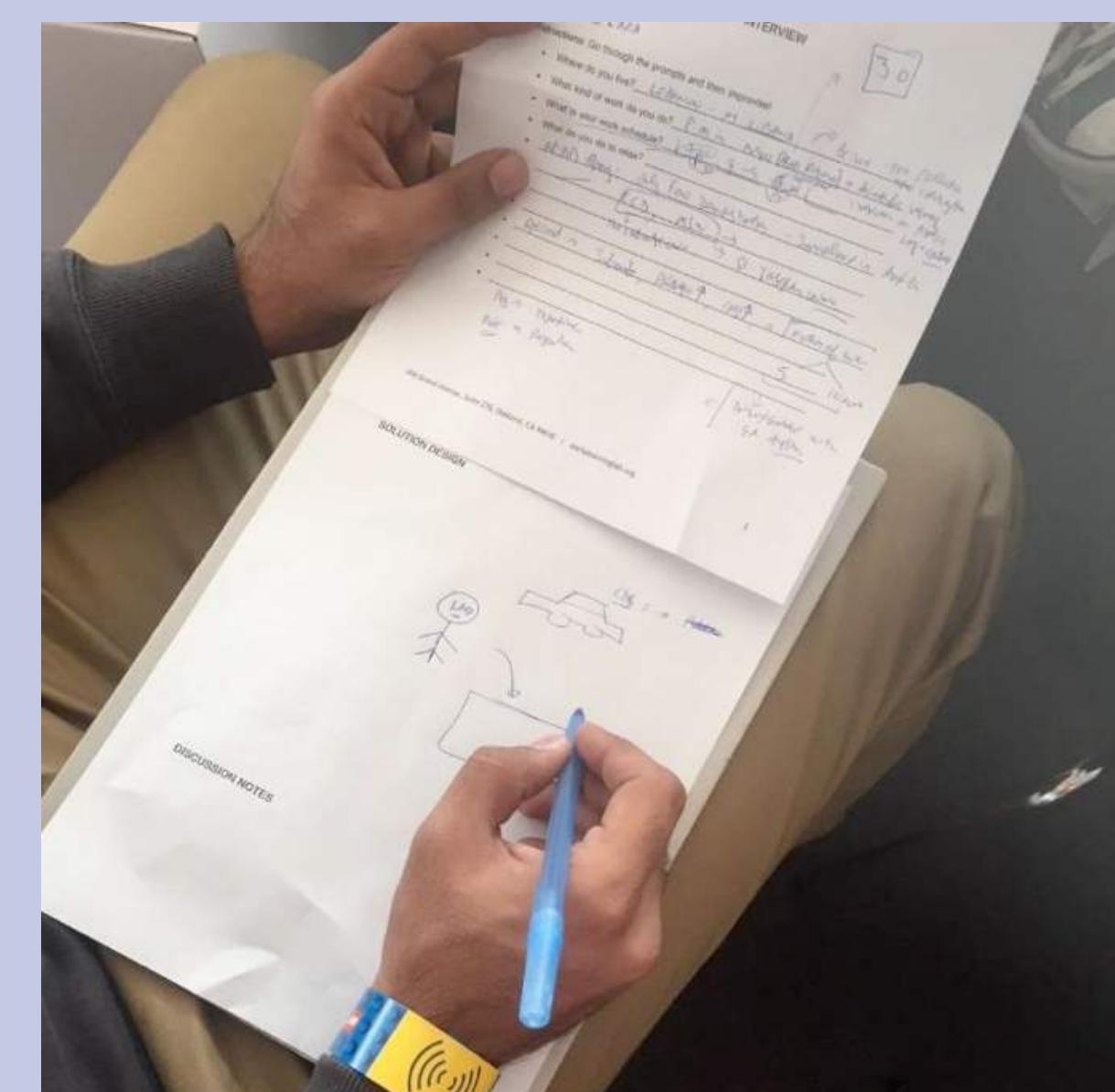
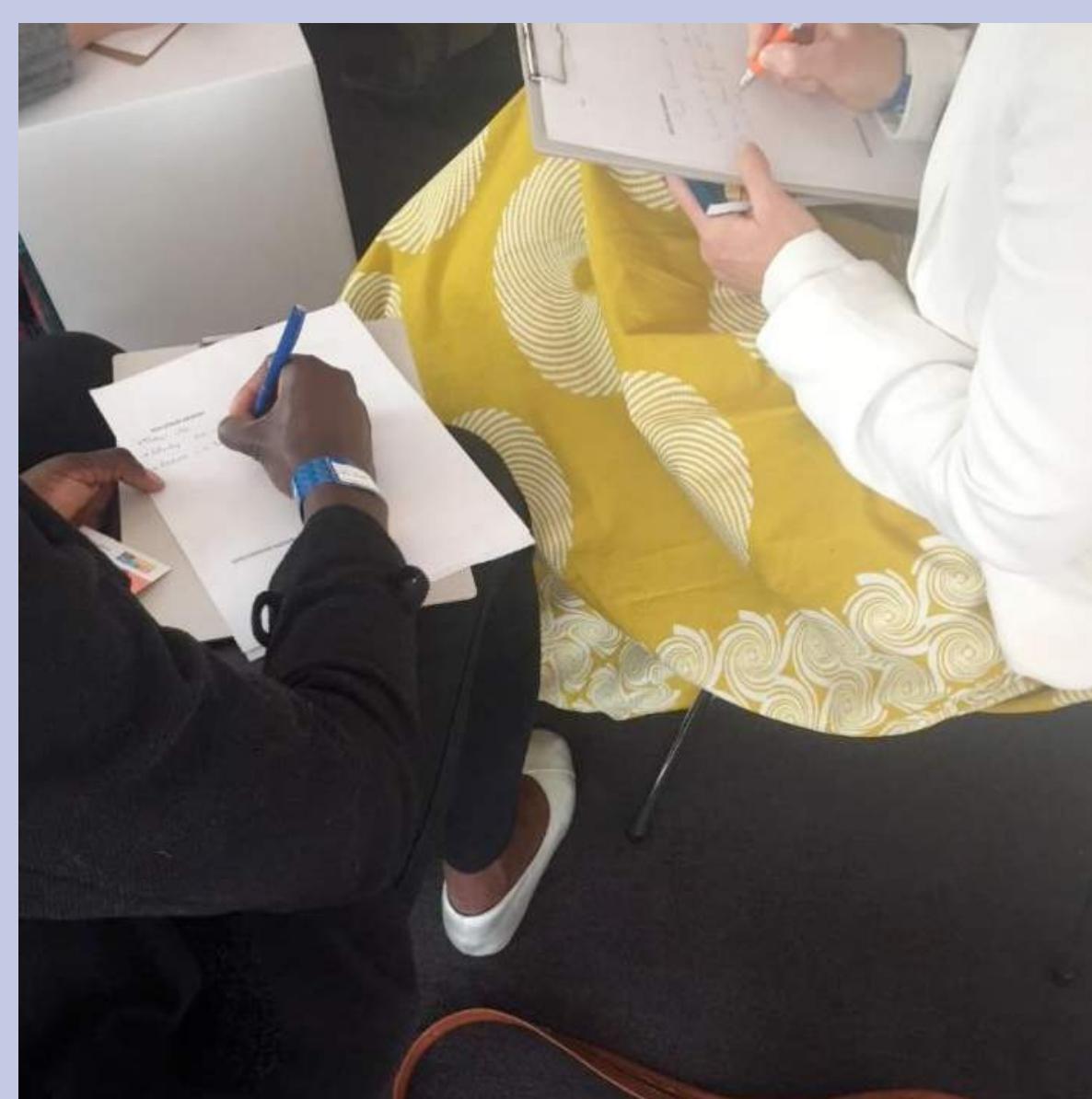
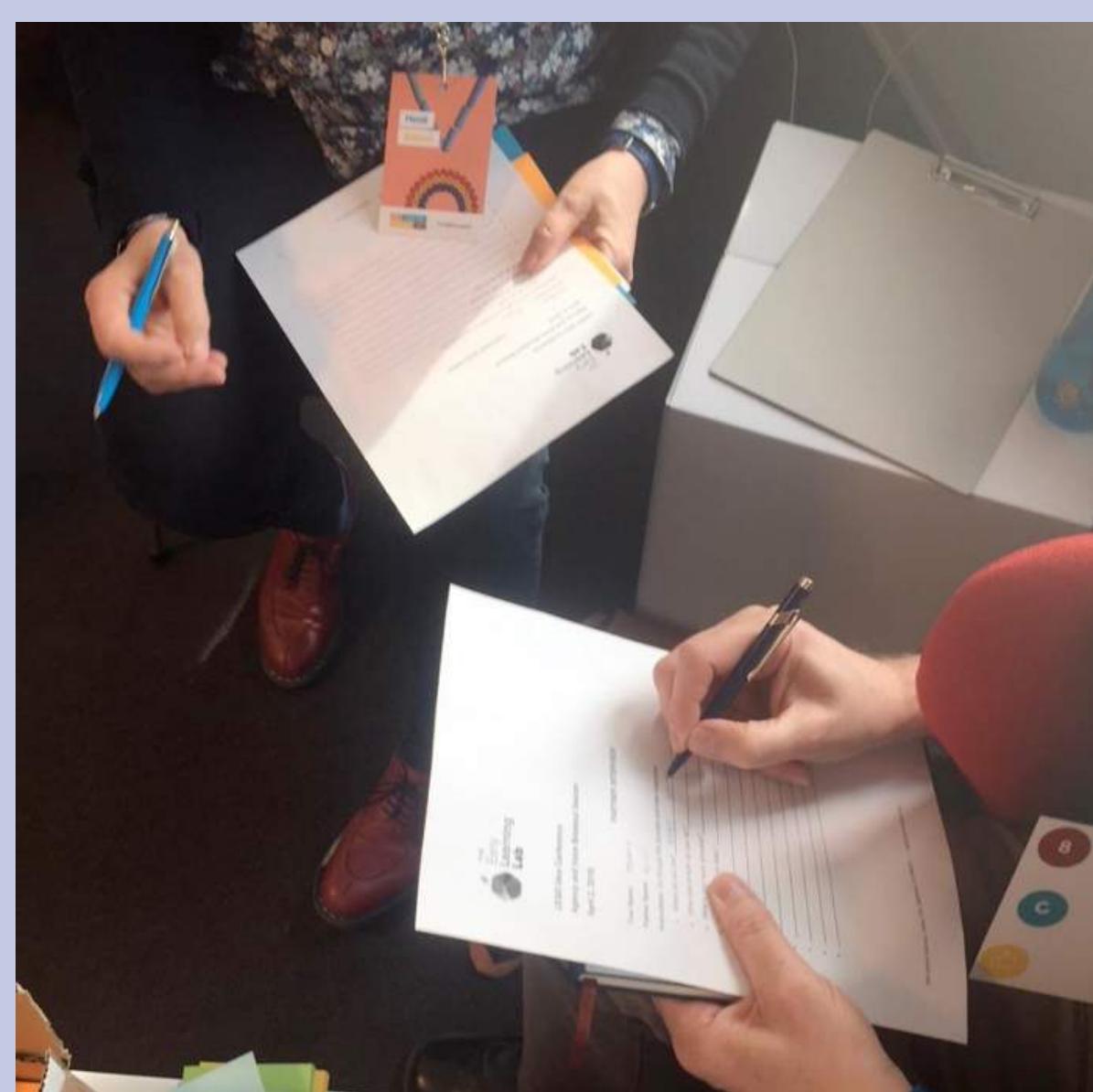


Ubongo/IRC Team

Concept 2: Design programs and services with low floors, high ceilings, and wide walls

Mitchel Resnick, LEGO Papert Professor of Learning Research at the [MIT Media Lab](#), suggests creating solutions, programs, and services similar to ways you would build a house: with low floors so that everyone can have easy entry and access; with high ceilings so that there is room for people to grow; and with wide walls so that individuals can develop and explore according to their own distinct pathways. This concept takes into account that despite commonalities among cultures and communities, there are enormous individual differences within them, and as such, services, products, and programs for families must acknowledge and honor these variations. In this way, our conversation centered on the notion that building capacity for family engagement requires designing programs that all families can access and use. And it requires infusing play and the joy of learning into co-design as well.

One such effort, established in partnership with Sesame Workshop, is Alhan Simsim (meaning “Welcome Sesame” in Arabic), which includes a home-visiting program designed for young refugees in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. The IRC team explained how through the initiative, visitors go to children and families with a library of interactive materials that they can engage with together. Experiences are designed so that all families can work with the materials in ways and styles they would like, regardless of their situation. For instance, all families have something they can create art or a game from, even if the supplies are simply household objects such as plastic cups or bottle tops. And instead of telling parents what to do in a scripted way, staff expand on what parents naturally encounter, and model and guide different possibilities for using the materials provided. Ultimately, this approach leads to empowerment when families participate in and help improve the resources and take ownership over them.



Audience participants practice using the design thinking process to develop programs and services that are user centered. To learn more about this activity visit the [Family Agency and Voice: Designing the Next Generation of Family Engagement Activity Guide](#).

Concept 3: Build learning feedback loops, and keep iterating based on learning

When evaluating co-designed initiatives, our conversation underscored that it is important to be clear about what the program is trying to effect, and to ensure that all stakeholders feel good about it. For instance, the Early Learning Lab's Parent Innovation Institute was designed to focus on three areas of impact: (1) human capital development, (2) the leadership of parents, and (3) changes in the broader agencies serving children and families. It was important for families and organizations to see that everyone was involved in change, not just one stakeholder group.

By co-designing and talking about evaluation, we enfranchise people in the process. People have their own ideas of what impact is, and many of us who serve in the social sector work in organizations or with funders that have logic models, where we've identified metrics for what impact is. Something we have to own upfront with people, if we're really going to democratize the process, is to create opportunities for families to be partners in deciding what impact looks like and when we have a North Star we are committed to, we need to be clear with participants and get their buy-in.

- Catherine Atkin, founder & senior advisor of ELL

Ubongo and IRC staff analyze parent interviews both before and after the family members participate in services. By looking at differences in what families say about learning and play, staff are able to see the value and influence their program is having. At the outset of the work with Tunakujenga in Tanzania, many parents who deeply value discipline and obedience felt that if parents and children play together, it would disrupt the authority in the parent-child relationship. One parent commented, "Well, if I play with my child too much, what will happen is that he will start to disrespect me, and he won't be a disciplined child."

After the three-month pilot, many parents had changed their views of play, sharing sentiments such as,

Well, what this has done for me is that, at the beginning, my kids used to be scared of me. And if they ever did something wrong, they would not actually go and talk to me. But now we're closer. And it means that if something happens, they'll come to me.

- Parent

A powerful yet somewhat unanticipated component of the program was bringing children and parents together in closer relationships. Ubongo staff used the data to reframe and re-create materials so that they are now focused on building stronger parent-child relationships, and this, in turn, has improved the program.

Concept 4: Going to scale is more than just numbers

Going to scale typically conjures thoughts of growth in numbers—such as the number of users of a certain platform, the number of families reached by an initiative, or the number of communities using a particular curriculum. Scaling co-designed family engagement services, products, and programs, however, is much more complex. Families vary in their languages, values, and cultures, and the process of building relationships with families regarding their perspectives, understanding their views, and iterating and co-designing with them is messy and time-consuming, and what ultimately holds true in one community will likely not replicate and hold true in another. So how do we scale up?

One idea emerging from our conversation at LEGO is the need to think less about individual programs to scale impact, and instead, think more about a set of skills and competencies that adults in children's lives—whether they are parents, teachers, or caregivers—need to support children's growth and learning. Based on these skills, we can develop community and population indicators of what success looks like.

A second theme that surfaced is the power of partnerships and thinking of scale as the embedding of a certain intervention into the daily routines and lives of the families and organizations. To accomplish this, Tunakujenga IRC and Ubongo work closely with local and trusted agents, such as faith leaders, to ensure that someone families know really well is putting the materials and resources to use on the ground. Through partnerships with these local trusted agents, families are more likely to see the services as theirs, shift their mindsets and offer their support, and use and gain ownership over the process.



Audience participants developing and playing games based on everyday materials and creating storybooks that center on family routines. To learn more about this activity visit the [**Family Agency and Voice: Designing the Next Generation of Family Engagement Activity Guide**](#)

Conclusion

Creating opportunities for family agency and voice is emerging globally. Organizations are creating mechanisms to put family voice at the forefront, and for facilitating deep empathy and understanding of the families they serve. Organizations are designing products and services with the diversity of family experiences at the front of their thinking. Data and evaluation are being democratized to help programs evolve. Finally, many organizations that have seen success in co-designing family engagement are now considering how to go to scale and what scale actually means. We hope to continue to engage around these conversations and share more ways that they are taking place in communities throughout the globe.

4 Critical Concepts of Co-Design

Create mechanisms for deeply understanding families

Design programs and services with low floors, high ceilings, and wide walls

Build learning feedback loops, and keep iterating based on learning

Going to scale is more than just numbers

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Activity Guide

To learn more about the activities referenced in this report, visit the *Family Agency and Voice: Designing the Next Generation of Family Engagement Activity Guide*

bit.ly/GFRP_FamilyVoice_Activity

About GFRP

Global Family Research Project (GFRP) is an independent, entrepreneurial nonprofit organization that supports all families and communities in helping children find success in and out of school. We create a worldwide exchange of ideas to further the understanding and implementation of anywhere, anytime learning for all. Since 1983, our team has provided leadership to promote strategies that build pathways for children's whole development across all learning environments.

About Omidyar Network

Omidyar Network is a philanthropic investment firm that invests in and helps scale innovative organizations to catalyze economic and social change.

About Early Learning Lab

The Early Learning Lab works to ensure children's healthy development and kindergarten readiness. We identify and spread smart innovations and technology solutions that equip parents, caregivers, and teachers with better ways to help children from birth to age 5, when it matters most.

About Ubongo

Ubongo is Africa's leading edutainment company. We create fun, localized, and multi-platform educational media that reach millions of families through accessible technologies. Our programs significantly improve school readiness and learning outcomes for kids, and also promote social and behavioral change for kids, caregivers, and educators.

About IRC

The International Rescue Committee is an NGO present in 30 countries. The International Rescue Committee responds to the world's worst humanitarian crises and helps people whose lives and livelihoods are shattered by conflict and disaster to survive, recover, and gain control of their future.

About the LEGO® Idea Conference

The LEGO® Idea Conference invites thought leaders, practitioners, researchers, government representatives and social innovators to share their insights on new ways of learning that will equip and empower children to become creative, engaged, lifelong learners. Each LEGO Idea Conference features some of the most inspiring and influential speakers on topics related to learning, education and early childhood development. From young protagonists trying to change the system to established voices who are part of a deep-rooted way of thinking about learning and education.