

Resourcing Community-Led Early Childhood Support in Eastern Chad: a Model for What's Possible



In refugee camp Alacha in eastern Chad, iACT is piloting an evolution of our community-led approach: one that begins not by creating something new for refugees, but by identifying and resourcing what already exists.

SUMMARY

While global humanitarian actors deliberate how best to support Sudanese refugees and issue urgent appeals for more funding, Sudanese refugees are already taking action. With limited resources and in their own “homes” and in makeshift shelters, they are organizing, teaching, sharing food, providing comfort, and finding ways to restore dignity in the face of crisis.

These individuals are not passive recipients of aid. They are community builders, caregivers, educators, and leaders responding to the needs around them with compassion and ingenuity. Their leadership is not just a stopgap; it’s the foundation of any truly effective humanitarian response. What they need is to be resourced, recognized, and included in shaping the solutions that will define their future.

And that’s exactly what iACT is doing.

We’ve listened. We’ve witnessed the strength, care, and initiative already alive in refugee camp Alacha. And we’ve made a conscious choice: to resource this leadership and to support what they’ve already been building.

iACT is supporting refugee-led efforts in early childhood education to ensure that the youngest children — those who are most vulnerable — have joyful, safe spaces to play and learn. And just as importantly, we are making sure that Sudanese refugees feel seen, supported, and trusted in their leadership in responding to the needs of their community’s children.

We are now resourcing three existing home-based childcare spaces with materials, funding, and training. In this report, we share how our community-led approach took shape in refugee camp Alacha, and the meaningful outcomes it is already producing.

We also extend a call to action to our peers and funders at-large: join us in resourcing community-led early childhood education in Alacha and across all other refugee camps in eastern Chad. Together, let’s reimagine what’s possible. Let’s redefine humanitarian action, while at the same time providing children the support they deserve at the most critical stage of their development.



CONTEXT

Prior to April 2023, eastern Chad hosted around 380,000 refugees from the Darfur region of western Sudan, many of whom had fled during the genocide that began in 2003. Since the outbreak of the current war in Sudan, the crisis has escalated dramatically. As of mid-2025, more than 844,000 people have crossed the border into Chad, with thousands more arriving each week, fleeing extreme violence and ethnic targeting in places like West Darfur. Of the newly registered refugees, UNICEF reports that children account for approximately 61 percent. ([UN, 2025](#))

Humanitarian organizations consider the conflict in Sudan — and its ripple effects in Chad — one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises. The UN Refugee Agency has described the situation as

a “crisis of humanity.” ([UNHCR, 2025](#)) In Sudan, more than 24.6 million people face acute food insecurity. ([WFP, 2025](#)) In Chad, conditions are deteriorating fast: transit camps in Adre and Tine are overwhelmed, and the World Food Program has warned that food assistance is running dangerously low, with major shortfalls already affecting thousands. Despite the scale of the crisis, global attention and funding remain scarce.

This moment is about more than emergency relief; it’s about learning from the past and listening to those who have lived it. It’s about resourcing refugee-led, community-driven solutions that not only meet urgent needs, but build lasting dignity, healing, and opportunity.

WHY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION?

Early childhood education is one of the most under-resourced areas in global education, making up less than 2% of global humanitarian funding. ([WHO, 2018](#)) This gap is even more profound in humanitarian settings. In countries like Chad, where host communities are stretched far beyond capacity, young refugee children are often the last to receive the support they need.

Yet decades of research are clear: the first five years of life are critical for a child's brain development and lifelong wellbeing. During this time, 700 new neural connections form every second, shaping how a child thinks, feels, and relates to the world. ([Harvard, 2009](#))

Adverse experiences in these early years, such as displacement, trauma, and food insecurity, can have long-term effects on physical health, learning capacity, and mental health unless children receive nurturing care, play, and early learning opportunities. ([WHO, 2018](#))

At the heart of fostering development during these early childhood years lies a simple but powerful tool: play. Through play, children process trauma, practice social skills, explore emotions, and build resilience. Play-based learning supports not only academic development, but also healing and emotional regulation, particularly for children



living in a crisis context. ([UNICEF, 2018](#)) For these children, play isn't a luxury: it's a lifeline.

Despite everything we know about children's development, very few humanitarian actors in eastern Chad are investing in early childhood education or play-based programming. This leaves a critical gap in care right at the stage when support is most needed, and where the opportunity for lifelong impact is greatest.

iACT'S COMMUNITY-LED APPROACH

iACT's community-led approach is about shifting power and ownership to the people directly affected by war and conflict. It starts with listening and building genuine relationships: not assuming answers, but collaborating with communities to co-create programs that respond to their unique needs, strengths, and aspirations.

This approach is built on mutual trust, respect, and shared vision. iACT provides resources, time, and space for community members to design, implement, and manage programs themselves,

with ongoing support as needed. Knowledge and skills are exchanged equally, honoring culture, traditions, and expertise.

iACT prioritizes patience and adaptability, recognizing that true partnership requires moving beyond Western donor timelines and working at the community's pace, allowing programs to evolve naturally. Ultimately, this process fosters sustainable, locally owned solutions that resource communities to lead and create the futures they desire.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN CAMP ALACHA

The Future of Humanitarian Action in Progress

Just six months after the current war in Sudan broke out, refugee camp Alacha was created to provide areas of shelter for people fleeing into Chad. iACT first visited in April 2024. Five iACT team members from two different camps in eastern Chad traveled to Alacha to meet with families and individuals to learn about their experiences and needs as well as to offer familiar, welcoming faces to these “new arrivals.” Our colleagues heard about a lack of services, opportunities, and programming for children and youth.

In April 2025, another iACT group, consisting of team members from both the US and eastern Chad refugee camps, went to Alacha to speak with the community there specifically about early childhood programming. We were informed that barely any formal services or funded activities existed for young children, outside of a few preschool classes that are attached to primary schools. As of summer 2025, the population of the camp is approximately 57,000, with over 5,000 children between the ages of three and five.

During that visit, we learned that there were at least two community members voluntarily opening up their homes to children and leading group activities in an attempt to address the prevalent need. Through conversations with camp leaders and representatives, the suggestion was given for iACT to partner with the greater community in Alacha in support of young children.

One month later, in May 2025, iACT returned to Alacha to further explore the possibility of working alongside camp residents, especially and particularly with current hosts of at-home childcare spaces. Multiple existing home-hosted programs were identified, several of them varying in numbers of children attending, hours of operation, and types of activities. Alacha community representatives, together with the iACT team, decided upon three of these with which to pilot a new form of partnership with iACT. Subsequent discussions established the responsibilities of each partner.





Whereas our original Little Ripples model involves co-creating early childhood education programs from the ground up — [starting in 2013 in refugee camp Goz Amer](#), eastern Chad, where no such programs existed — our approach in Alacha recognizes and builds upon the initiative taken by the refugees there, in already having turned their homes into informal learning spaces.

In this new style of partnership, iACT will be providing support in the forms of educational material items; a minimal amount of monthly funding to help the program hosts cover some daily living expenses so that they can focus on their activities; and training on iACT’s trauma-informed, play-based learning approach. Each month, the hosts will share information with iACT: types of activities done, behaviors of children (including any changes in behaviors over time), attendance numbers, etc. The hosts will also begin to have semi-monthly meetings with each other. This peer-to-peer support as well as regular engagement with iACT team members is intended to cultivate a community of practice within which learnings can be shared.

This model costs less per center than it does to run our traditional Little Ripples “Ponds” across eight camps in eastern Chad, and does not rely on constructing any physical structures. Furthermore, the costs of our initial support were not determined by iACT, but by experienced Little Ripples team members and the home-center hosts in Alacha, and for now include:

- ▶ **\$715 per center** has been allocated for the initial three months of the 2026–2027 school year. This amount was determined collaboratively by the home-center hosts and iACT local team members. It was agreed that after this initial period, both parties would review how the funds were spent and determine an equitable amount for ongoing program costs.
- ▶ **\$800** for an iACT Little Ripples team of three to travel from their respective camps to camp Alacha, to collaborate with the Alacha community and provide teacher training and technical support.

WHY THIS MODEL?

1. It's responsive to the current moment.

The refugee crisis in eastern Chad is growing by the day, and most of the displaced are women and children. Resources are stretched beyond capacity, and traditional models of humanitarian aid and financing are not keeping pace with the scale or complexity of this emergency. With limited resources and immense urgency, we must meet the scale of need by embracing flexible, community-driven approaches.

2. It respects existing leadership and traditions.

People are already taking initiative for their community. This model is about resourcing — not replacing — community ingenuity. It reflects the culture and traditions of the immediate community, including language, activities, schedules, and values; and even any ethnic sensitivities (e.g., tribal tensions), which means that potential socio-political issues can be appropriately navigated. This cultural connection helps children feel safe and understood. Furthermore, communities have more trust for a program that they are meaningfully engaged with. This occurs when the community is either heavily involved in or completely leads the design, planning, implementation, daily operation, and management.

3. It centers listening, trust, and adaptation.

After more than a decade of work in eastern Chad, iACT is deepening — not departing from — our commitment to community-led action. Had it not been for an initial listening trip taken by our Sudanese team members to Alacha, we would not have known there were existing efforts being undertaken from the

community there. So, before writing a grant proposal or sending US team members or ideating solutions from our Global North headquarters (i.e. the traditional top-down humanitarian approach), we first listened to our local colleagues, resourced them to do the listening in Alacha, and trusted their learnings and insights.

4. It's cost-effective and provides growth opportunities.

With minimal infrastructure and a smaller financial footprint, this model offers the potential to scale faster. Although there may be challenges finding reliable and consistent funding streams, a community-led program is cost-efficient, since local resources, both human and material, are leveraged. This, along with community commitment, also increases the likelihood of growth.

5. It creates a responsive early childhood program for children and families:

Educators from the community can more easily adapt to unique needs of different children, since they own the program and are under their own authority to modify the curriculum and daily routine and practice. Specifically in a refugee context: refugee educators in a community-led preschool can better understand the displacement and experience that refugee children have; therefore, they can better support children's emotional needs and development. There is higher potential for caregiver engagement, which leads to a building of caregiver networks. Families feel more connected to the educators — who are likely also their neighbors — and more likely to participate in and contribute to their child's learning.

CONCLUSION



The reality is that supporting refugee- and community-led programming is a journey and a process: one we ourselves, as an organization, are still in. We are still learning and adapting alongside each unique community we work with. Every one of our programs is at a different point on the path toward full community ownership, and what that looks like is shaped in partnership, and not prescribed.

Our vision is to build an evidence-based approach that shows how and why refugee and conflict-affected communities should be directly resourced to design, lead, and scale the humanitarian programs they know they need. Ultimately, we hope this contributes to a broader transformation in the humanitarian system, one that reduces reliance on large international actors

and redefines them not as aid providers, but as equal partners to the communities they aim to support.

We invite our peers and funders to stand with us in resourcing community-led early childhood education — not only in Alacha, but across every refugee camp in eastern Chad. Now is the time to reimagine what's possible. Let's reshape humanitarian action into something more just, more effective, and more grounded in the leadership of those most impacted. And let's ensure that every child receives the nurturing care and support they deserve during their most vital stage of life.

For more information on iACT or its community-led early childhood education work, send an email to felicia@iact.ngo or info@act.ngo.