



Our Work in the Middle East & North Africa

ROOM TO READ OVERVIEW

Room to Read envisions a world in which all children can pursue a quality education that enables them to reach their full potential and contribute to their community and the world. We design our programs under the guiding principle that all children are entitled to education as a fundamental human right. Unfortunately, this is not a reality for many children in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). According to UNICEF, one out of every five children in the region is not in school, and that was before the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked additional havoc on the global education system, with children in low-income communities experiencing the worst disruptions. Additionally, children in MENA have dealt with challenges to their learning brought on by several conflicts and crises.

OUR HISTORY IN THE REGION

Room to Read began working in the Middle East with a literacy project in Jordan in 2017. With support from Dubai Cares, we focused on building the capacity of local partners to develop high-quality storybooks in Arabic. As a result, more than 600,000 copies of 20 new storybooks were distributed across the country to Jordanian children, as well as to young refugee girls and boys. Working with the Ministry of Education and local and international NGOs, copies of the books were distributed to all government primary schools, informal schools, refugee camps and community centers. We also worked closely with the Jordanian publishers Dar Al Yasmine, Jabal Amman and Majdalawi Masterpieces to increase their capacity to publish quality children's books. The publishers participated in and facilitated portions of the Room to Read's workshops for authors and illustrators in Amman over the course of 2017, and worked closely Room to Read during the book editing process, building their skills and understanding of best practices in book design. Books were distributed widely throughout the country.

Following this initial project, we were selected to be the Print Content Creator for Ahlan Simsim, a joint, five-year project between Sesame Workshop and the International Rescue Committee serving the needs of



THE CONTEXT

1 in 5

CHILDREN IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA IS NOT IN SCHOOL.¹

OF THOSE WHO DO RECEIVE AN EDUCATION, MANY FIND THEMSELVES UNEQUIPPED FOR THE LABOUR MARKET, AND UNABLE TO ENGAGE IN MEANINGFUL AND DIGNIFIED WORK.

¹<https://www.unicef.org/mena/education>



Room to Read is a leading international nonprofit founded on the belief that World Change Starts with Educated Children.® Since 2000, we have benefited 32 million children across 21 countries and more than 49,000 communities.

Syrian children displaced by conflict in Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria. The overall project focused on young children and their caregivers and sought to provide them with training and learning materials on early childhood education, including literacy, numeracy and socioemotional skills. Over a nine-month period, Room to Read led the development of 12 storybooks and activity sheets that feature Sesame Street’s Ahlan Simsim characters. Room to Read writer and illustrator workshops took place in Jordan, and the books were developed to meet the needs of Syrian refugee and host community children ages three to six.

OUR REACH

172,000

CHILDREN BENEFITED IN JORDAN TO DATE.

LOOKING AHEAD

In line with our current strategic plan – [Vision 2025: Ending the Impossible](#) – we embarked on a process to determine what’s next for Room to Read in MENA. We analyzed qualitative research and data, consulted with key education stakeholders in the region, and worked with our own literacy and girls’ education experts to understand how Room to Read can provide the greatest support.

Based on a combination of factors, including need, government readiness and language alignment, we identified Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine as places where we are poised to make a difference in the lives of children. In addition to determining geographic focus, this process helped us identify five key ways that we can transform education in the region:

- **Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) Books and Expertise in Developing Early Literacy Skills** – Harnessing our digital learning platform, [Literacy Cloud](#), we will leverage our existing MSA books and resources for teachers to create excitement among governments and local organizations for Room to Read’s work.
- **Early Grade Reading Instruction** – Given low Early Grade Reading Assessment scores in the region, we will pilot teacher trainings for reading skills development, prioritizing countries where national interventions in early grade reading do not already exist and where infrastructure is in place to help integrate Room to Read’s programs into national education systems.

- **Book Publishing** – Effective early grade reading instruction goes hand in hand with local book publishing. Children require a plethora of high-quality reading material to build reading skills and foster a habit of reading. To support this need, Room to Read helps build the capacity of local publishers in order to develop high-quality children’s books.
- **Public School Libraries** – Further complementing the reading skills developed through early grade reading instruction is the ability to foster a habit of reading through public school libraries. School libraries house the books developed by publishers and make them more accessible to children. Room to Read trains teachers and schools on how to set up and manage school libraries and use the library space effectively to foster a habit of reading. As a project priority, we aim to establish 50 more libraries in Jordan by 2024, working with schools to develop the materials and systems needed to adapt the Room to Read library model for MSA. The model can then be transferred to other MENA countries such as Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine.
- **Girls Education and Life Skills** – Finally, we will prioritize girls’ education and life skills education sessions in schools in Jordan and Egypt. Our analysis of both countries shows that there is a great need to support girls through the many challenges they face, including pressure to marry early. Room to Read provides life skills education to ensure that girls stay in school and develop the skills needed to navigate key life decisions. We also work with families, schools and communities to create environments that empower girls to succeed in school and beyond.

Stay up to date on Room to Read’s work in MENA and around the world by signing up for our newsletter at roomtoread.org/subscribe, and follow along on our blog, [The Latest](#).

