



Refugee-Led Early Childhood Education

Little Ripples Implementation in Greece

By Katie-Jay Scott



Little Ripples (LR), an iACT education program, is a refugee-led and culturally adaptable early childhood development program that strengthens the capacity of displaced community members and improves the development of children ages three to six. iACT works directly with trained refugee teachers and leaders to establish, adapt, and implement LR—laying the foundation for a lifetime of wellbeing, learning, health, and peace for children affected by displacement and violence.

The program has been replicated and culturally adapted by refugee communities in Chad, Cameroon, Greece, and Tanzania. iACT partners directly with forcibly displaced communities to lead, manage, and expand programs. The initial introduction to the community is facilitated with the help of non-governmental, refugee-led, and local organizations that also support specific tasks such as securing training space, printing materials, and other needs that lay the foundation for refugee-led program management.

Guiding Principles in Support of Refugee-led Programs

- Center programs on needs that are vocalized and identified by the community.
- Listen to and co-create programs with community members.
- Refugee and displaced community members make key decisions and manage day-to-day operations.
- Trust is the foundation for success.
- Building community through implementation is as important as the program itself.



Implementation in Greece

In 2019 and 2020, the Global Whole Being Fund (GWBF) provided iACT with essential funding to launch Little Ripples with the displaced community members living in Greece. This began with an extensive desk review and interviews with potential organizational partners currently working in Greece who reflected iACT's principle to uphold the dignity, humanity, and agency of conflict-affected and displaced people. In March 2019, iACT team members organized a listening and learning trip to meet with Second Tree, a local organization that best-matched iACT's values, and refugee community members living in Ioannina, Greece and in nearby camp, Katsikas. After meeting directly with several community members from places such as Syria, Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, Iran, Afghanistan, and Congo, it was clear that there was an existing gap in early childhood development programs and a need to support families with young children. The women voiced several concerns around parenting, social and emotional development, and the stress of living in the camp:

"Stress that we have is being passed down to our kids. Then it pushes the kids to carry the weight."

"There is more negative stuff than positive stuff in the camp."

"We have been here for two years and we have not benefited from anything in our lives."

"Children live in cycles of promises, waiting, and expectations."

"Kids need a space to be kids."

After the listening and learning trip, we began to review Little Ripples and how the program might meet some of the vocalized and identified needs. Our team of expert advisors brings knowledge of early childhood development, teacher training, early education models, psychology, trauma-informed care, mindfulness, and mindful movements. The Little Ripples curriculum itself is a pre-established framework of evidence-based practices. It is designed to address the holistic wellbeing of the child and improve the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development of refugee children by guiding teachers in a daily structure and activities that use a play-based framework to promote literacy and numeracy, development of fine and gross motor skills, character development, hygiene practices, mindfulness, and trauma recovery.

In August 2019, a three-person iACT training team returned to Ioannina to launch Little Ripples. After in-person outreach with four translators speaking six different languages, there was a community meeting to discuss the opportunity, followed by four days of training with 25 community members. The training was hands-on and experiential during which participants created play-based activities, learned to work across cultures and languages, practiced in activities that supported the Little Ripples pillars of *peace*, *helping*, and *sharing*, and together decided what days and hours the program would run and the structure of the teaching team. The single greatest challenge was finding an in-camp location for the program to run. The Little Ripples teaching team tried to approach the camp manager, who denied access to the few available community spaces. After working in partnership with Second Tree, members of the teaching team decided to begin the program outdoors in a fenced children's play area inside the camp. The program began immediately and ran smoothly through to early fall 2019 when the weather began to turn colder.

The Little Ripples teaching team once again approached the NGO in charge of camp management to request indoor space, and was denied. There is a general mistrust of refugees and refugee-led organizations which leads to challenges, such as access to physical spaces. Partnerships between iACT, the refugee community, NGOs, and local organizations provide an avenue for trust to develop. Through our partnership with Second Tree, the teaching team was given the opportunity to use an indoor space at the same time Second Tree ran its adult English classes and youth Scouts program. Although not ideal, the women decided it was an opportunity.



iACT returned to camp Katsikas for follow-up training in January 2020. Through initial interactions with the teaching team, it was clear that the women needed a space to both express themselves and be heard. Over the four days of training, the iACT team adjusted the training modules to foster several opportunities for the women to share how they were doing, what they were feeling, and anything else they wanted to add. This led to honest discussions about challenges that the women were facing in offering the program and then solutions to better work together. The women needed a shared space for themselves to figure out how to work together as a team, as much as the children of Katsikas needed a space to be kids. Additionally, the women's capacity to manage the program and develop the curriculum significantly increased over the second training. The teaching team shared the importance of the program during the second training:

"All the kids, from all over, they learn from each other. We come together. United."

"I knew the words peace, helping, sharing. But I didn't know their meaning until being with iACT."

"There's no other activity for the women, from all the different countries, to come together. To create a shared community, a shared



Through to the end of March 2020, when the COVID-19 global pandemic forced them to close the program's doors, the women ran Little Ripples two days a week for more than 25 children. During regular meetings, the team made programmatic decisions and elected their own Education Director. While they could not meet and guide children in learning through play, the teachers continued to be leaders in their camp. Through direct cash assistance from iACT, the teachers distributed soap, masks, and information flyers to 100 percent of the families in camp Katsikas. They managed the only refugee-led response efforts to COVID-19 in Ioannina. During this same period, iACT secured funding for their salaries and materials.

Greece opened schools and programs for children in June 2020, at which point the women began to meet weekly and prepare their ideas and plans for reopening Little Ripples. iACT helped provide information on standards and requirements for reopening and guiding questions for them to think about as they reopen. Again, one of the primary barriers was a physical space for the program to meet. Using the funds provided by iACT for the program, the LR teaching team created a budget for new materials that were stolen

from the classroom during the lockdown, built a physical space adjacent and connected to the Education Director's home, and provided a stipend for the teaching team. All program decisions were discussed and decided by the local refugee team. iACT's role was to provide remote, ongoing support and connection.

As COVID-19 remains unpredictable, the Little Ripples team in camp Katsikas continues to monitor the situation, take all precautions mandated by the government, and discuss how they can share LR's information and knowledge with other camp community members. Second Tree has mentioned that other parents in the camp have requested to learn how to "be more peaceful" with their children. This is an opportunity for the refugee teaching team to share tools and strategies—for children and adults alike—that they have already cultivated and practiced by leading LR. As they move in and out of lockdown inside an uncertain and unpredictable camp setting, the LR teaching team continues to think about how they can provide quality, play-based, and trauma-informed experiences for the youngest members of their community.

iACT's Little Ripples program brought a much-needed service to the refugee community in Katsikas camp, where over one thousand refugees live, isolated from local life. It gave child-carers – both men and women – an opportunity to develop skills to help educate their children in an environment where the psycho-social wellbeing of both parents and children is an issue. While the acquisition of technical skills like best practices in trauma-informed and social-emotional learning are an invaluable asset both professionally and personally, we mustn't undervalue the social component that trainings like iACT's bring to people who feel isolated from community life. We saw a community born in these trainings: men and women stepping forward to support each-other and their children. Afghans, Syrians, Kurds and Congolese refugees working together on a shared goal that refuses to allow the development of their children to be a casualty of displacement. In a camp divided by ethnicity, seeing this was powerful. The refugee-led approach instilled a sense of ownership and responsibility in people, and enabled them to share their skills with others in pursuit of a shared goal. Their determination was visible in the most difficult moments: cleaning abandoned warehouses, opening each-other's homes for activities when space became an issue, delivering masks and hygiene products when Covid-19 lockdowns were imposed. iACT's approach enabled a community to be created between people who otherwise may have never interacted with each other, and this is an impact worth noting.

Dina Pasic, Programmes Manager
Second Tree



iACT's expansion of Little Ripples to the conflict-affected people on the move living in Ioannina, Greece is an example of how international organizations and funders can together support refugee-led programs. Greece is generally a place of transition for people on the move, and iACT saw this as an opportunity to focus investment in the individuals leading the program so that the skills and knowledge they cultivated could be taken with them wherever they end up. Listening, connecting deeply and authentically, and trust builds the foundation. Program co-creation and remote, ongoing support build capacity, promote iteration and offer refugee leaders the chance to transform obstacles into opportunities. iACT's unique process and approach to engaging communities create the possibility for refugee-led programs to address the comprehensive needs of their community, build resilience, and restore the dignity that is so often unrecognized through displacement.

iACT is a Los Angeles-based international organization providing humanitarian action to aid, empower, and extend hope to those affected by mass atrocities, creating a world where people are connected and equipped to act. All of iACT's work is grounded in community collaboration, trauma-informed approaches, restorative practices, and peacebuilding skill-development. Our global team utilizes innovative thinking, human-centered design, and collaborative relationships to deliver replicable and sustainable programs in refugee camps and for communities affected by mass atrocities and genocide. iACT challenges the traditional humanitarian top-down model by co-creating and delivering solutions together with beneficiaries in order to address the comprehensive needs of a community, build resilience, and restore dignity. Since 2009, iACT has helped refugees rediscover their empowerment and community members to lead safe, fun, and inclusive education, sports, and leadership programs that ensure displaced children and youth are able to exercise their rights to education and healthy development, in addition to providing employment, leadership, and professional development opportunities for parents, caregivers, and leaders.

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