

Regional **NEWSLETTER**



**Wrapping up 2024:
Reflections, and
the future ahead**

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Message from the Deputy Project Director

Achieving major milestones and looking forward to opportunities ahead



Paul Timothy Mwebe
Deputy Project Director

As I look back on the last few months since the last newsletter edition, I reflect on a period that has been rich with milestones and opportunities to advance our mission of improving holistic learning outcomes for children through play. From the very impactful System Actors Conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in August to the leadership group’s visit to Billund, Denmark, in November the journey has been as inspiring as it has been rewarding.

The System Actors Conference was not just an event but a testament to what we can achieve collectively when we bring our shared vision to life. The teacher testimonials shared at the conference were particularly moving. They provided concrete evidence of how Learning through Play is transforming lives, not only for children but also for educators.

Out of the leadership group’s visit to Billund, I am pleased to share that the LEGO Foundation expressed their satisfaction with the project’s progress and performance as you will read. There is growing interest in PlayMatters’ materials, approaches, and emerging evidence, indicating that we have reached a critical point of momentum. Although the LEGO Foundation’s new strategy does not include Tanzania in the upcoming phase of PlayMatters, I want to recognize and celebrate the incredible contributions and dedication of our Tanzania team, that has been inspiring over the phases of the project and the footprints the team has made in government collaborations, host community and refugee school communities.

As we approach PlayMatters Year 3 in 2025, I wish to remind us that preparations are already underway for our Annual Work Planning and Learning Workshop in January 2025 in Kampala. This workshop will be a critical moment for reflection, strategy, and collaboration as we chart the path forward that will focus on the road map to the Project close outs and celebrations of achievements in all three countries.

Thank you for your continued dedication. Let’s keep the momentum going as we work towards an even brighter and sustained lifelong learning for all children.



Highlights from Quarter 2



The leadership group takes a group photo at the LEGO Foundation offices in Billund.

PlayMatters leadership group visits the LEGO Foundation in Billund, Denmark

Last month, the PlayMatters leadership team traveled to Billund, Denmark, to engage with the LEGO Foundation. The visit brought valuable insights that will shape the project's work as the journey into Year 3 and beyond starts. Participants in the visit included Anne Smiley, Catherine Alejo, Lillian Viko, Hadijah Nandyose, Lauren Schmidt, Susanne Thorsbøll, Rekik Getahun, Hiwotie Simachew, Eva Smallegange and Parwez Anis, among others.

The visit highlighted how impressed the LEGO Foundation is with PlayMatters' performance

since the project redesign and the growing interest in PlayMatters materials, approaches, and emerging evidence, signaling exciting opportunities for scaling our work.

Notably, the LEGO Foundation CEO highlighted the potential to expand the PlayMatters Emergency Pack.

Key takeaways from the visit:

- Tanzania will not be part of PlayMatters 3.0 due to the LEGO Foundation's new geographic priorities.
- Funding for PlayMatters 3.0 is confirmed to begin in July 2026, with potential expansion into South Sudan.
- To ensure continuity between PM 2.0 and PM 3.0, a \$4M bridging grant has been requested.



Lillian Viko, Senior Policy & Advocacy Advisor makes a presentation.

Empowering teachers through EdTech: The inaugural East African community regional education conference

As PlayMatters continues to advance foundational learning through EdTech and Learning through Play, the project is reinforcing the transformative potential of collaboration, innovation, and teacher

empowerment in shaping the future of education in Tanzania.

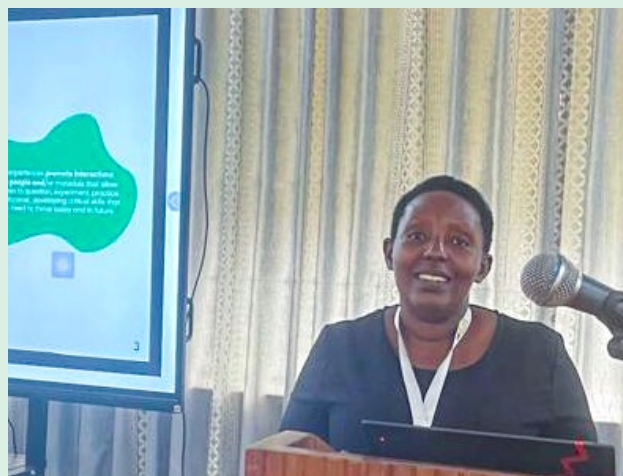
To highlight this, PlayMatters participated in the inaugural East African community regional education conference commemorating the African Union year of education in Arusha, Tanzania in August. The conference was held under the theme, Educate an African fit for the 21st Century: Collective Action for Quality, Inclusive and Life-long Learning in East Africa.

Highlights from Quarter 2

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The project was represented by Lillian Viko, Senior Regional Policy & Advocacy Advisor, Juliana Ndyeyura, Technical Lead, PlayMatters, Tanzania and Leticia Amuduki, Education Coordinator, International Rescue Committee, Tanzania.

Together, the team made a presentation on, Empowering Teachers: PlayMatters Advancing Digital and Edtech Foundational Learning Initiatives in Tanzania, strengthening teacher capacity to deliver Foundational Learning and Secondary Education using EdTech.



Juliana Ndyeyura, Technical Lead, PlayMatters Tanzania makes a presentation at the conference.

Regional System Actors conference highlighted milestones in Learning through Play



Ministry of Education Officials from Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania join the PlayMatters team for a group photo at the start of the Regional System Actors conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The PlayMatters Regional System Actors Conference, held in August in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, marked a pivotal moment in the PlayMatters journey of transforming education through Learning through Play (LtP) in East Africa. Under the theme, “Achieving Quality Education by

Teaching & Learning through Play”, the event brought together government officials, education leaders, and stakeholders from Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda to celebrate achievements, share insights, and explore opportunities for the scaling and sustainability of LtP approaches.

Stories from the Field

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The conference included inspiring speeches from officials of the Ministries of Education from Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania as well as representatives of the International Rescue Committee and Plan International. Speakers set the tone for collaboration, innovation, and commitment to providing quality education for children.

Netsanet Demewoz Molla, Deputy Director of Education at IRC, underscored the collaborative spirit saying, “Delivering quality education is the business of everybody by joining minds and hands for millions of young



PlayMatters staff take part in a Six Bricks activity during the conference.

Africans.”

Paolo Cernuschi, IRC Ethiopia Country Director, aptly stated, “Governments bear primary responsibility for quality education, but collaboration with humanitarian organisations and other education actors is essential.”

PlayMatters Project Director **Martin Omukuba** asserted, “To maximize the project’s long-term effects, more attention needs to be paid to the integration of the LtP approach into primary and pre-primary education.”



(left to right) Plan and IRC Ethiopia Leadership, representative from the Ethiopia Ministry of Education and the Project Director of PlayMatters display a signed PlayMatters Core Package.

Celebrating World Teachers’ Day: A call for valuing teacher voices

PlayMatters joined government officials, teachers and the community in Kyegegwa District, western Uganda to celebrate World Teachers’ Day on October 6, under the theme, “Valuing Teacher Voices: Towards a New Social Contract for Education”. Hosted at Humura Primary School, the event drew over 400 dedicated teachers, who began their day with a march accompanied by a brass band, through the town to highlight the importance of educators in society.

Acknowledging Teacher Dedication
The celebration kicked off with warm words



PlayMatters Project Director, Martin Omukuba signs a commitment board at the event.

Stories from the Field

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from **Moses** Nuwamanya, the head teacher of Humura Primary School. He commended the unwavering dedication of teachers, saying, "I commend teachers for being self-driven and smart both in the physical and in mind."

His appreciation set a positive tone for the day, emphasizing the essential role teachers play in shaping the minds of children and future generations.

[Read More...](#)



Championing education in the community: Tifto's journey as a PlayMatters ambassador



Stories from the Field

For the past year, **Tifto**, a 52-year-old PlayMatters Play Ambassador, has been walking through the Sheraro Town community every morning on a mission. Her goal? To ensure that every child has access to education. Through her tireless efforts, she has become a vital bridge between PlayMatters project, the community, families, and schools, advocating for the transformative power of education.

"I work with school authorities and local community leaders to identify children who have not returned to school," **Tifto** explains. "Then, I visit their families to talk to parents about the importance of education for their children's future."

Tifto also plays her role during the PlayMatters back to school campaign. But her work involves more than just conversations. She collaborates with school administrators to address challenges that prevent children from attending school. For families struggling financially or navigating cultural barriers, she offers reassurance. In villages and Internally Displaced People's camps, where families have suffered displacement and trauma, Tifto prioritises building trust within the community, often relying on local leaders

Stories from the Field

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to amplify the message. One of Tifto's most significant challenges is overcoming the perception of inequality among children from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. "I work with schools to create a more inclusive environment where every child feels valued and supported," she shares.

Because of Tifto's dedication, she makes extra effort to go door-to-door in the community. She tries to track the number of children who return to school and follows up on prolonged

absences at school. "I hope to see a significant increase in enrollment and a more inclusive environment for all children," Tifto says. "Education is not just about learning; it's about building a better future for the entire community."

Through her relentless dedication, Tifto exemplifies the heart of the PlayMatters mission to ensure all children get a quality basic education and thrive.

PlayMatters Uganda holds a joint annual performance review

In a move to review the project's 2024 performance and plan for 2025, PlayMatters Uganda PMC brought together stakeholders in joint annual performance review, monitoring and planning workshops in Arua and Hoima cities. These workshops combined a performance review with practical school monitoring, empowering system actors to reflect, learn, and plan for the year ahead.

Specifically, the workshops were attended by Ministry of Education officials, officials from Teacher Training Institutions (TTIs), and PlayMatters consortium staff. Participants took time to engage in some activities including school monitoring and classroom observations to gain firsthand insights into Learning through Play in class.

Indeed, the monitoring brought forth key observations such the high teacher-to-pupil ratio, teacher shortages, and inadequate WASH facilities. On the positive side, participants noted that there was effective use of learning aids in lessons. Given these observations, it was recommended that advocacy for more teachers should be done, there should be strengthening of school-based continuous professional development mechanisms, and mobilising community support.

Ultimately, the workshops emphasised the importance of continued collaboration and government ownership in scaling the transformative power of play-based learning.



Staff take time to relax, rejuvenate and reflect on 2024

Extrême Adventure Park, Busika, was on December 6, an action-packed field as the PlayMatters team gathered for a day of rest, reflection, and rejuvenation in a team-building event. After a year of numerous activities, workshops, meetings, field visits, conferences, in all the different aspects of the project, the event, attended by 21 staff from PlayMatters Regional Team, marked the end of 2024 for the team.

“Team building activities are a core to IRC’s staff wellbeing and staff care policy. Part of what IRC promotes is the opportunity for staff care to engage in team building activities where staff go out and engage in social activities that promote cohesion, team spirit and promote the work-life balance,” **Paul Timothy Mwebe**, PlayMatters deputy project director, said.

The day was packed with thrilling activities, including Ziplining, Go-Karting, Archery, and Quad Biking. These games fostered collaboration, joy, and an appreciation of teamwork among participants.



Thoughts from some of the team members.

“My highlight of the day were the first two games that were interactive and made everyone joyful, and actively involved in a team to achieve their goal,” **Ivan Bukenya**, regional research monitoring evaluation, accountability and learning coordinator. “It was the laughter and joy we shared during the games. It was great to see everyone let



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loose and have fun together outside of the office environment,” **Precious** Atukunda, supply chain officer.

“I enjoyed interacting with colleagues outside the work environment. The activities enabled everyone to take part which ensured participation.” **Geoffrey** Kusemererwa, regional monitoring, evaluation and learning manager. “The best part of the day was seeing everyone fully engaged in the activities. The energy, laughter, and teamwork were amazing to

witness. People stepped out of their comfort zones, supported each other, and genuinely enjoyed the moments,” **Jovia** Pricila Kansiiime, event organiser.

The event concluded with a good meal, cake-cutting, and giving awards and speeches. As everyone prepared to leave, it was clear they were refreshed, connected and geared up for the challenges and opportunities of the year ahead.

PlayMatters Wall of Fame

Project drivers recognized for no-accident record

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) recognized David and Adrian, both drivers at the PlayMatters Regional Office, as safe driving champions. For the past year, they have both effectively executed their role as drivers, achieving a zero-accident record.



David: A journey of skill and discipline

David Jackson Kutosi is a man of many skills. He studied Computer Science, and a certificate in Carpentry and Joinery, where he excelled among the top 10 in his class. This foundation ignited his passion for diversification, a skill that saw him start driving.

David’s driving career started in 2006 while working as an Operations Assistant at Entebbe Pentecostal Church where he was given several errands to run, a vehicle and no driver. He used this opportunity to teach himself, eventually earning his permit in 2009. Ans for over 16 years, David has enhanced his skills behind the wheel, prioritizing safety and professionalism.

In 2016, he transitioned to a Tour Company, which supported Non-Governmental

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Organisations with transport including the International Rescue Committee (IRC). It was from this that David joined the IRC under the PlayMatters project in 2020. Remarkably, David has maintained a spotless driving record and this year he has been rewarded, underscoring his commitment to road safety. "Safety has been my number one while on the road and I am mindful of other road users around me," he says. Despite his success, David has faced challenges, including contempt towards his profession. He recalls being dismissed as "just a mere driver" but handled that incident with maturity. **David** advises fellow drivers: "Know who you are, embrace traffic regulations, and comply with the organizational policies." David has demonstrated that hard work and discipline pave the way for success.

Adrian: Passionate and committed to safety

Adrian Gabula is a dedicated professional with a foundation in Public Administration & Management from Nkumba University and a passion for driving. Adrian's journey into driving was inspired by several factors. First, he appreciates the simplicity and straightforward nature of the role, and the personal freedom and independence it offers, and his love for controlling machines. Second, for Adrian, driving is an opportunity to explore new places.

Adrian obtained his driving license in 2012, although he fully started driving in 2017. In July 2021, Adrian joined the International Rescue Committee (IRC) under the Urban Office, working with the Rebuilding Livelihood Project. In February this year, he joined the PlayMatters Project 2024, where he is excelling earning him recognition for no-accident record.

Adrian attributes this achievement to his defensive driving skills, experience, and strict adherence to rules and regulations. "This role involves following rules and regulations in order," **Adrian** explains, "and if the rules are followed, there is little chance for mistakes."

However, Adrian's work has not been without challenges. For instance, weather conditions such as heavy rain or fog can create slippery roads and poor visibility, making driving more



difficult and requiring extra caution.

Adrian offers valuable advice to fellow drivers, especially on the importance of continuous learning.

"Drivers should always be knowledgeable by participating in refresher trainings such as defensive driving, eco-driving, and safe driving assessments," he advises.

"They need to be patient, follow traffic rules and regulations and always aim at passenger satisfaction."

Upcoming Events

PM 2.0 YR3 annual work planning and learning workshop

The PM 2.0 YR3 annual work planning and learning workshop will be held from January 14–16, 2025, at the Skyz Hotel, Naguru, Kampala, Uganda.

The workshop marks the start of the annual work planning process. Approximately 35 participants, including regional, PMC, and partner/IRC Country Program decision-makers and grants specialists, are expected to attend. Also to participate will be PlayMatters PMC leads, project management leads, and regional technical and operational leads.

The planning for 2025 will be on transition and closeout.



*A photo from the recent workplanning.
Kampala, Uganda, 2024*

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