UNLOCK LITERACY IN URBAN CONTEXTS: ADAPTATIONS, LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS

CASE STUDY BRIEF

Unlock Literacy (UL) has been implemented across diverse urban settings—from dense informal settlements and border migration zones to more stable neighbourhoods. While the core model focuses on improving children's foundational reading skills, teams adapted it to navigate the governance complexity, socioeconomic diversity and spatial inequality characteristics of urban systems. This case study synthesises lessons from Unlock Literacy programmes in Honduras (El Progreso, Tegucigalpa), Lebanon (Beirut and Mount Lebanon), Peru (Lima, La Libertad, Ayacucho, Tumbes) and Philippines (Malabon, Quezon City, Mandaue). These contexts ranged from fragile to stable and adaptations focused on multi-level governance engagement aligned with World Vision's Citywide Approach, linking local implementation to broader systems strengthening and applying a humanitarian–development–peace (HDP) nexus approach.

Adaptations and lessons learned across contexts

Implementing Unlock Literacy in cities required more than relocating a rural model—each team reworked activities to respond to the density, diversity, dynamism and realities of urban life. Teams in Honduras, Lebanon, Peru, and the Philippines redesigned materials, schedules, and delivery methods to meet fast-changing community realities, sometimes trading scale for depth and stability for flexibility. Their experience shows how responsive, locally grounded design can make Unlock literacy programming more inclusive and resilient, while also exposing the limits of adaptation without adequate resource planning and stronger system support.

Flexibility expanded reach but strained delivery systems. Teams used mobile reading hubs, weekend clubs, and short 'burst' sessions to reach children in informal settlements and high-mobility areas. They also selected safe spaces based on local trust and accessibility—sometimes schools were the most secure and visible option, while in other cases, church halls, day-care centres, or neutral community venues offered greater safety or inclusivity. This flexibility allowed continued learning during shocks such as migration surges or security restrictions. However, it also created uneven quality and heavier demands on facilitators, underscoring the need for support and continuity planning from the start.

Localised materials and playful methods strengthened connection in diverse, mobile settings. Adapting stories and materials to local languages and experiences is standard practice across Unlock Literacy programmes. In urban areas, however, this process became more complex and more creative. Teams often worked across multiple languages and social identities within the same neighbourhood, requiring flexible, multilingual facilitation and materials that reflected both host and migrant or other marginalised children's realities. In places like Lima and Beirut, stories were co-created with children and caregivers using simple digital tools, blending local imagery, humour, and everyday urban scenes. Play-based approaches such as mobile libraries and 'travelling backpacks' also helped engage children in constrained or unsafe environments. These creative methods deepened relevance and belonging but required ongoing community input and resources that were difficult to sustain at scale.

Hyper-local facilitation built trust and belonging. Recruiting facilitators from the same neighbourhoods—such as the Nanay Tutors in Malabon—strengthened cultural resonance and trust with families. As respected community members, these local facilitators created familiar and safe learning spaces for children, bridging language and cultural gaps and improving their sense of belonging. However, high turnover—especially where volunteers lacked stipends or clear progression pathways—often disrupted continuity and quality.

Inclusion succeeded where it was built in from the start. Designing literacy spaces to include girls, boys, children with disabilities, and displaced learners expanded participation and strengthened equity. In Honduras, children with disabilities participated in school-based reading camps, supported by teachers and community volunteers to ensure accessibility. In Lebanon, mixed reading groups of Palestinian, Syrian, and host-community children fostered social cohesion. However, inclusive design required adaptive materials, intentional training, and some different venues—elements often dependent on short-term project resources rather than integrated into government systems.

Social–emotional learning (SEL) and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) integration enhanced learning but stretched facilitators. Embedding SEL and psychosocial support helped children manage stress and re-engage in fragile urban settings. In Beirut, Honduras, and other fragile contexts, facilitators used breathing or art activities to help children settle, creating emotionally safe spaces for learning. Many of the reading activities themselves also reinforced SEL and psychosocial well-being by encouraging positive peer interaction, self-expression, and persistence. This integration of psychosocial and literacy goals enriched learning but demands greater coaching and care for teacher and facilitators' own well-being.

Governance partnerships at multiple levels strengthened legitimacy but revealed system capacity gaps. Engaging both formal authorities—such as municipal councils and education offices—and informal leaders, including faith groups, migrant associations, and barangay councils, helped teams secure official backing while maintaining trust and access at community level. This dual approach was critical for operating in complex, multi-layered city systems. However, it also revealed the limits of institutional capacity: embedding Unlock Literacy training, mentoring, and inclusive practices within existing teacher development or municipal structures was often constrained by overlapping mandates, staff turnover, and short project timelines.

Caregiver engagement proved vital but fragile. Parenting sessions and Parenting with Tenderness workshops strengthened emotional bonds, supported children's persistence in reading, and helped families under stress to engage positively with their children's education. In the Philippines, short caregiver sessions held around school drop-off times helped reach working parents. Participation of caregivers was hard won and difficult to sustain in most settings.

Community collaboration created protective spaces but required constant renewal. Neighbourhood reading clubs and community venues provided safe, inclusive spaces for children to learn. In several contexts, barangay councils and faith-based groups acted as gatekeepers, helping secure venues and mediate local sensitivities. Yet in dense, transient communities, these partnerships required continual negotiation and trust-building, reinforcing that community collaboration is a process, not a fixed asset.

Actionable recommendations for programme designers and implementers

1 | **Map the urban system** | Use World Vision's Citywide Assessment to understand not just physical and service patterns but also how chronic vulnerabilities, potential shocks, and social/political dynamics overlap. Mapping should go beyond geography to include social and political relationships that shape how education and protection systems function.

2 | **Design delivery for flexibility and continuity from the outset** | Combine school-based delivery (anchored in formal systems) with mobile, pop-up, or digital literacy hubs to sustain access during crises such as floods, lockdowns, or migration surges. Plan early for both routine barriers and shocks, ensuring programmes can pivot without interrupting children's learning. This flexibility requires clear accountability, resource planning and strong partnerships for continuity.

3 | **Build local capacity systems, not just training events** | Work with education authorities to integrate Unlock Literacy training, with emphasis on SEL and teacher well-being, into formal teacher professional development systems. Ensure community facilitators (e.g. Nanay Tutors, trainee teachers) receive mentoring in inclusive pedagogy, psychosocial first aid, and conflict-sensitive approaches. Sustained coaching and recognition are key to retention and quality.

4	**Recruit and retain hyper-local facilitators**	Prioritise facilitators from the communities served to enhance trust, reduce language/cultural barriers and maintain delivery during system disruptions. Provide recognition, stipends or pathways into formal roles to counter turnover, especially in fragile and high-mobility areas.
5	**Embed inclusion and well-being principles throughout literacy programming**	Integrate SEL, MHPSS, and inclusive design into every literacy session—not as add-ons, but as core to how learning happens. Use diverse, locally relevant materials to foster belonging and representation for all children, including migrants, refugees and those with disabilities. Establish referral pathways to protection and psychosocial services but also plan for the staff time and training needed to manage these linkages effectively.
6	**Forge and formalise multi-level governance partnerships**	Engage formal actors (municipalities, education ministries) for policy adoption and budget commitments, while also working with informal leaders (faith-based groups, migrant associations, community councils) for reach and trust. Where possible, secure agreements that guarantee safe venue access and protect activities during political change or crises. Be realistic: Partnerships take time to build and can falter without shared accountability and communication mechanisms.
7	**Design caregiver engagement around real-life constraints**	Offer short, practical sessions linked to school drop-off/pick-up or community events, and co-locate with other services such as health check-ups or food assistance. Include demonstrations of SEL techniques so caregivers can reinforce both literacy and well-being at home.
8	**Monitor both learning and enabling environment**	Track not only reading gains but also indicators of emotional well-being, participation equity and social cohesion. Use feedback loops to adjust activities when safety, attendance or motivation changes. Monitoring systems should be light enough for field teams to manage, but consistent enough to inform learning across sites and countries.

Urban contexts adaptation of Unlock Literacy requires continuous learning, flexible systems and grounded partnerships. Sustaining impact in urban contexts requires both strong technical content—especially the integration of SEL, MHPSS, and inclusive pedagogy—and resilient local ecosystems of facilitators, caregivers, and governance actors. Together, these ensure literacy spaces remain safe, equitable and adaptable amid the volatility of city life.

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