

Game Connect: Endline Impact Summary

Program Description

Game Connect is a sport-for-protection initiative located in the districts of Kampala, Adjumani, Kamwenge, and Lamwo, Uganda and ran from 2020 until 2023.

Program delivery was led by AVSI Foundation in partnership with Youth Sport Uganda, the Uganda Olympic Committee, UNHCR, and Right To Play. The program was made possible thanks to support from the Olympic Refugee Foundation.

Research estimates that 20% of people in post-conflict settings have depression, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorders. This project aims to engage youth in refugee communities through sport to improve their mental health, psychological well-being, and increase social cohesion between displaced and host communities. Over 10,000 youth participated in weekly sports-for-protection sessions, more than 70% of whom were refugees.

As part of the program, Right To Play contributed to the development of a program resource containing 63 sport-based activities that supported the development of 13 life skills, including coping with emotions and stress and relationship-building. These activities were led by trained coaches and peer leaders, who engaged youth through sessions that build trust, leadership, and coping skills.

A randomized controlled trial found that the Game Connect program significantly reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression among displaced and host community youth. The findings were published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders*.

Context

Uganda hosts over 1.6 million refugees—the largest refugee population in Africa—and more than half of them are children and youth. Many have fled violence and now face ongoing challenges including poverty, discrimination, and limited access to education and mental health support. For refugee and host youth in Uganda, sport and play are more than just games, they are powerful tools for healing and connection.

[*Click here](#) to read the full randomized controlled trial.

[*Click here](#) to read the full endline evaluation report.

KEY RESULTS

- 1 Depression dropped by 89%**
After participating in the sports-for-protection program, the number of displaced youth experiencing depression dropped by 89%, compared to a 23% drop among non-participants.
- 2 Anxiety was reduced by 89%**
Participants also experienced reduced levels of anxiety by 89% after just 16 weeks. This includes boys, girls, and youth with disabilities.
- 3 Youth with high self-efficacy are 3.7 times less likely to be depressed**
Through sport-based life skills sessions, youth reported increased self-efficacy, meaning they felt more capable of handling challenges and making decisions for themselves. This boost in confidence played a key role in improving their mental health and outlook on life. It also reduces their likelihood of experiencing depression.
- 4 Improved parental understanding of mental health reduced stigma**
As parents, caregivers, and community members improved their understanding of mental health, their attitudes towards youth with mental health challenges improved as well. This led to reduced discrimination and stigma.

KEY LEARNINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Coaches would benefit from more training**
Increased training could equip coaches with sport-specific skills, enabling them to effectively guide youth through games while supporting their mental wellbeing.
- 2 Flexibility and creativity are essential**
Allowing for adaptations to curriculum content and games, such as incorporating youth-suggested games, helped ensure greater relevance and engagement across diverse contexts.
- 3 Coaches gained valuable personal and professional benefits.**
Positive impacts were seen not just amongst youth but also coaches. Many of them received the life skills training for the first time. This not only enhanced their ability to engage youth meaningfully but also improved their own relationships and well-being.



Photocredits: AVSI

Finding Empathy Through Sport: Nankunda's Story

Nankunda is a teenager from a host community in Kampala. She grew up surrounded by friends who fled conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo and now live in settlements in Uganda. Many of her friends escaped violence and now face ongoing challenges, including discrimination and limited access to mental health support.

These pressures strain already limited resources in host communities, sometimes leading to tensions between refugee and host communities.

After joining Game Connect, Nankunda deepened a powerful life skill that stood out to her—empathy. Through weekly sport-for-protection sessions, she was able to put herself in someone else's shoes and empathize with their circumstances.

For Nankunda, sport is no longer just about fun, it's a way to build connections, make new friends, and improve mental health together: "we are coming to solve mental health problems, we are all going through the same problem, but we can solve it as a team."

Game Connect is a three-year project funded by the Olympic Refugee Foundation and led by AVSI Foundation in partnership with Uganda Olympic Committee, UNHCR, Right To Play, and Youth Sport Uganda.

