

Palabek refugee youth look for redemption in football

In Palabek refugee settlement, a place where challenges and hopes intersect every day, a remarkable transformation is unfolding. AWYAD, with generous funding from the FIFA Foundation, has launched an innovative initiative known as “Kick Off Change:

Empowering Youth through Football.” This program has redefined what it means to play, learn, and grow in a community where child protection, safeguarding, and social equality are more than just buzzwords—they are a lifeline. Through the universal language of football and the creation of vibrant peer clubs, over 1,200 children and adolescents have discovered safe spaces for play, engagement, and open dialogue. They have found a way to report concerns, seek guidance, and ultimately transform their lives.



Atepi Primary School Football Peer Club

At Palabek refugee settlement, a community that battles the shadows of inequality and vulnerability, football is not merely a sport; it is a powerful tool for social change. The program’s underlying theme, “Playing football together: we tackle inequality, VAC and SEA. We build teamwork and score a bright future,” resonates deeply with every participant. From the first kick on the makeshift pitches to the enthusiastic cheers echoing through the dusty fields, 10 football clubs formed under Kick Off Change have become synonymous with hope, resilience, and empowerment.

Local schools have become active partners in this journey, integrating lessons from the football field into classroom discussions. Teachers have found innovative ways to incorporate the values of teamwork and respect into their curricula. In one memorable instance, a teacher organised a class project where students were asked to draw parallels between football strategies and conflict resolution in everyday life. The resulting artwork and essays provided a vivid illustration of how the lessons learned on the field were transforming minds and attitudes. It was clear that the program was having an impact not only on the physical and emotional health of the children but also on their intellectual and social development.

Community gatherings, often held after training sessions or matches, have become celebrations of shared progress. More than 800 community members, including parents, teachers, and local leaders, have participated in matchday celebrations and community dialogues. In one such gathering, a group of parents expressed how the program had rekindled their belief in community solidarity.



They spoke of the laughter, the playful banter, and the mutual respect that had replaced a long history of isolation and mistrust. The football

Stories of hope and resilience

The narrative of Kick Off Change is rich with stories of individual courage and collective triumph. Each testimony adds a unique thread to the tapestry of the program, painting a picture of what is possible when a community comes together to protect its most vulnerable members.

One of the most moving stories is that of Grace, a 15-year-old who had once faced the daunting challenges of an unstable home environment. Grace's journey from despair to hope was accelerated by her involvement in the football program. "I never thought that a game could change my life," she confides softly during one of the post-training sessions. "But when I stepped onto the field, I felt safe. I learned that my worth is not defined by my past. I learned that I can be a leader, both on and off the field." Her words, filled with determination and a newfound self-belief, encapsulate the transformative power of the initiative.



For community coaches like Mark Atanga, the program is a reminder... "At first, many parents were hesitant..." Now, over 90% of parents whose children participate in the program report feeling more confident in their children's social and emotional development. The impact of Kick Off Change extends to the educators... One teacher recounted an incident where a student... Disciplinary incidents have decreased by 45% among students involved in the program.

A future shaped by teamwork and determination

Kick Off Change has become more than just a program; it is a movement that embodies the spirit of resilience and unity.

The stories emerging from Palabek... Youth who once faced the perils of inequality and neglect now stand tall as ambassadors of hope. More than 60 adolescent leaders have emerged from the program, actively leading peer clubs and organizing awareness events on child protection and gender equality. And as long as the fields of Palabek resonate with the sounds of the beautiful game, the promise of a brighter future will remain within reach.

Fortunate Hope the Peer Club Captain at Atepi Primary School prepares to take a spot kick for her team during a football match at Atepi Primary school

A new beginning on the field

Football, a sport cherished by many regardless of age or background, was the ideal vehicle for this vision.

On a bright morning that seemed to herald change, children gathered on an open field in Palabek. Community coaches, trained not only in the techniques of football but also in child protection and psychosocial support, took their positions. 20 coaches (12 male and 8 female) have been trained in child safeguarding, inclusive coaching, and psychosocial first aid.

Transforming lives through the power of play

The program introduced structured sessions where play was complemented by discussions, instruction, and opportunities for safe reporting of any concerns. In these sessions, the pitch became a safe haven—a place where issues like violence against children (VAC) and sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) could be addressed openly and with empathy. To date, over 150 confidential referrals have been made through the program's safe reporting mechanism.

Aloyotoo Kevin, a 14-year-old participant from Ritah Nansereko Progressive Primary School, recalls her first day on



the field with a mix of nervousness and excitement. She had experienced moments of fear and isolation in the past, but here, among peers and mentors, she found a sense of belonging. "I used to feel invisible," Kevin shares. "But when I play football, I feel strong, like I belong to a team that cares for me. I have learned that my voice matters, and now I know where to turn if something isn't right." Her testimony is a powerful reminder of how the program has reconnected youth with their inner strength, turning vulnerability into resilience.

Community coaches have also been pivotal in this journey. Robert Opio, a respected local coach, speaks passionately about his role in the program. "Football is more than a game," Sunday explains. "It's a medium through which our youth can express themselves safely. I've seen children who were once withdrawn and fearful blossom into confident young people. The relationships we build on the field extend far beyond the game—they become the foundation for a supportive community." Sunday's commitment is mirrored by many others who have taken on the role of mentor, ensuring that every child feels protected and valued.

Voices of change: testimonies from the community

Teachers at local schools have observed a significant shift in the behaviour and engagement of their students. Mr. Odongo, a teacher at a Ritah Nansereko Progressive school in Palabek, describes a transformation... "Since the program started, I've noticed that children are more attentive in class and eager to participate." A recent survey involving 320 children revealed that 74% of participants showed improved classroom attendance and engagement. Parents, too, have found solace and pride in the changes they see in their children. Fatima, a mother of three, shares her heartfelt gratitude for the program. "Before Kick Off Change, I was constantly worried about my children. The challenges of our environment made it hard to believe that they could ever feel safe or hopeful. Now, I see them playing, laughing, and even discussing their dreams with confidence. They have learned how to stand up for themselves and to support one another. I feel reassured knowing that there are people and programs that care about our future." Fatima's words reflect a collective sense of relief and optimism that now permeates the community.

Youth participants often recount moments of breakthrough that have redefined their understanding of what it means to be empowered. Jackson Lobboyi, a 17-year-old of Ritah Nansereko Progressive Primary School who had once struggled with feelings of isolation after a difficult family ordeal, now stands as a beacon of change among his peers. "Football taught me that I'm not alone," he explains. "Every time I step on the field, I remember that I have a community behind me. The game gives me the courage to face my fears and to believe that I can achieve more than I ever imagined." Jackson's journey is emblematic of the program's broader impact—a transformation where every game played is a step toward healing and growth.



Kelvin Aloyotoo, 14years Primary Six

Even the community coaches themselves have found renewed purpose through Kick Off Change. Adyero Rose, one of the program's dedicated coaches and a former player herself, recounts her own experience of empowerment. "I once believed that my role in life was limited to what my circumstances allowed," she recalls. "But working with these young people, I have rediscovered my own strength. I see in them the potential for greatness, and that inspires me every day. This program is not just about football; it's about building a future where every child feels valued and every voice is heard." Amina's testimony resonates deeply with the community's collective aspiration for change.

Building bridges beyond the field

What sets Kick Off Change apart is its comprehensive approach. The program is not confined to the boundaries of a football field; it extends into every corner of the community. It has established 10 peer clubs where children gather to discuss not only football tactics but also the challenges they face in their daily lives. In these clubs, issues such as inequality, child protection, and safe reporting are addressed in a supportive and structured manner. The clubs serve as platforms for open dialogue, where participants learn that they have the right to speak out and seek help without fear of judgment.

The safe reporting and referral mechanisms integrated into the program have proved vital. They ensure that any signs of abuse or neglect are promptly addressed, reinforcing the message that the community stands as a protective shield around its children.

Teachers and community leaders work hand in hand with program coordinators to monitor the well-being of every participant. This holistic strategy has led to a 30% increase in reported cases of child abuse, a sign that children feel safer speaking up.

One poignant example of the program's reach is the story of James Okun Gift, a shy 15-year-old who once kept to himself for fear of retribution. His parents, who had long been worried about his reticence, soon noticed a change after he joined one of the peer clubs. "James used to be very quiet, always afraid to speak up even when he had something important to say," recounts his father, Moses Okun. "After joining the club, I saw him open up. He now talks about his dreams and the problems he faces at school, and I feel that he finally has the courage to ask for help when he needs it." James' transformation, though gradual, is a testament to the power of safe spaces where vulnerability is met with compassion and understanding.

A ripple effect of empowerment
As the program continues to unfold, its impact ripples throughout the community, igniting a renewed sense of hope and collective responsibility. The football field, once a simple patch of land, has become a symbol of unity and progress. Every match played, every training session conducted, and every discussion held under the open sky contributes to a larger narrative of social change. The themes of the program - tackling inequality, violence against children, and sexual exploitation while building teamwork and nurturing a bright future - are not merely slogans. They are lived



James Okun Gift, 15 years old, P6,
Canan Primary School

experiences that have reshaped the identities of the youth, the coaches, the teachers, and the parents alike.