



make mental health a priority

We aim to improve the psychological well-being of war-affected persons, their families, and the communities they live in



CCVS-Uganda

Annual report 2022



Fonds au Profit des Victimes
The Trust Fund for Victims



ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

CCVS Uganda was initiated in 2008 after the closure of the Rachele Rehabilitation Centre for former child soldiers in Northern Uganda. Following a request of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interuniversity cooperation was started to conduct research on support for and wellbeing of formerly abducted children and war-affected children in general. Three Belgian universities gave form to this centre: Ghent University (Department of Social Work & Social Pedagogy), Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Research Unit Interpersonal, Narrative and Discursive Studies), and the University of Leuven (Research Unit Education, Culture and Society).

Since then, CCVS-Uganda is playing an active role in promoting the psychological health of children, youth and adults living in post-war Northern Uganda. Our activities are built around three areas:

1. **Research** studying the psychological wellbeing of people in Northern Uganda, especially those in post-war communities. These studies are practice-oriented, which means that the research questions are relevant for practitioners, and study results are disseminated as widely as possible. Studies are conducted in collaboration with local universities and researchers.
2. **Support** for individuals and communities in Northern Uganda, all aiming at supporting the psychological wellbeing of war-affected persons, their families, and the communities they live in. These activities range from psychological trauma counselling, training in mental health care, and mental health sensitization, to community therapy, conflict resolution and peacebuilding.
3. **Dissemination** of practices and knowledge through the organization of local workshops, publications, social media, and participation in national and international conferences and fora.

With support from the CCVS interuniversity research cooperation, the Peace Building Department of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Trust Fund for Victims, and Vlir-UOS, CCVS-Uganda has grown to become an established expertise and learning centre regarding psychological support for war-affected children, youth, and adults.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The psychological impact of over twenty years of civil war on individuals, families, and communities in Northern Uganda is continuing today. High numbers of physically and mentally wounded people in Northern Uganda have never received appropriate assistance since the end of the civil war. The breakdown of communities and social networks because of displacement, stigmatization, and broken families, and the high prevalence of various mental health challenges like (unresolved) trauma, depression, anxiety, and ambiguous loss results in increased abuse of alcohol, domestic and gender-based violence, and further family breakdowns. The impact of war on the social fabric of communities can potentially evoke the risk of continuous long-term tensions in communities.

The World Health Organization (WHO) published its Mental Health Global Action Plan (mhGAP) in 2013 indicating that about one out of four people will be affected by a mental health disorder at some point during their life. Moreover, by 2030, depression will become the leading cause of disability worldwide. About three-quarters of people suffering from mental health disorders and challenges have no access to services, especially in low-income countries. This is also true in Northern Uganda where, despite high rates of psychological stress and mental health problems, there is a serious lack of psychological support services.

Given the prolonged and far-reaching impact of war and armed conflict in Northern Uganda, it is important to target both individuals and families who have been directly and indirectly affected by collective violence and who need (specialized) psychological support services. As people's long-term mental health is shaped by both war experiences and post-conflict factors like COVID and poverty, it remains vital to provide and strengthen psychological service provision within post-conflict Northern Uganda. The services should use a wider contextually oriented perspective in order to make as much use of the strengths and resources of the wider social network of the individual clients, hereby increasing the sustainability of the interventions and rebuilding social community support networks.

OBJECTIVES

Given the problem statement above, CCVS-Uganda developed a psychological rehabilitation project in cooperation with the Trust Fund for Victims (International Criminal Court) and CCVS-International. The project envisages to enhance the psychological rehabilitation of victims of war crimes, with a particular emphasis on former child soldiers, victims of sexual and gender-based violence and people suffering from both physical wounds and psychological problems. It also will promote community reconciliation, peacebuilding, reintegration and social acceptance through enhancing social support and cohesion among community members and addressing issues of stigma and discrimination. Lastly the project will mobilize local resources and partners to help victims rebuild their lives through awareness-raising, providing (basic) psychosocial support and referral pathways, and raise awareness nationally and internationally on the situations of victims of war crimes and to share best practices to support them.

The overall goals of the project are twofold, although both are closely related to each other:

1. To offer psychological rehabilitation services to war-affected children, youth, and adults through providing specialized psychological counselling and supporting the rebuilding of social relationships and networks, and
2. To increase the local capacity and know-how of key community stakeholders on mental health, providing (basic) psychosocial support and referral pathways

IMPLEMENTATION AREAS

CCVS-Uganda implemented its activities in Alebtong, Lira, Oyam and Kitgum Districts as these were largely affected by the armed conflict in Northern Ugandan and received relatively little support from national and international (non-governmental) organisations and institutions.

In 2022 the project took place in the following locations:

DISTRICT	SUB-COUNTY	COMMUNITIES
Lira	Lira Municipality	<i>Centre-based:</i> CCVS-Uganda office
	Aromo	<i>Communities:</i> Abungenga, Owene T.C
Oyam	Abok	<i>Communities:</i> Ibur, Ajaka central
	Ngai	<i>Communities:</i> Otwona, Abyenek B, Bediwot, Atego, Aweibwoti
Alebtong	Abia	<i>Communities:</i> Ngobadi, Abangoimany
	Apala	<i>Communities:</i> Aduro, Angirodyang
Kitgum	Orom	<i>Communities:</i> Ladotonen, Ladotonen central
	Kiteny	<i>Communities:</i> Kiteny Central, Kabukotum, Lalekan, Central, Kabukotum B
	Mucwini	<i>Communities:</i> Komnuru, Padwong, Yepa "A", Owiny
	Lagoro	<i>Communities:</i> Roakun, Alero, Akecha "A", Akecha Central

ACTIVITIES & ACHIEVEMENTS

PSYCHOLOGICAL REHABILITATION

CCVS-Uganda reached out to 680 beneficiaries with psychological counseling sessions in the districts of Lira, Alebtong, Oyam and Kitgum. From these 680 beneficiaries, 504 were female, while 176 were male.

CCVS offers well-structured psychological rehabilitation services to victims of the LRA war. Through group-, individual-, family-, and couple therapy psychological challenges such as trauma, depression, anxiety, loss and grief, stigma, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSD) among other mental health-related challenges are addressed.

Screening and intake

CCVS-Uganda first performs screenings to assess if the person is eligible for the psychological rehabilitation services offered and/or if there is need for a referral. Intake assessments are done for those clients that meet the criteria. The intake assessment is used to decide which kind of therapy the client qualifies for. Individual, couple, family, or group psychological therapy or trauma resilience service is offered in various project sites to improve the psychological health of war victims. In individual counseling, the person is seen one-on-one to work through his/her mental health problems. Often, the client's partner or family members must be involved to tackle the psychological problems (cf. systemic-oriented perspective) and this can initiate couple or family counseling. Clients who are experiencing similar mental health problems or symptoms can be seen in group counseling, an intervention which can also foster social support among members next to alleviating mental health problems. Within our services, we strive to provide a minimum of six (6) counselling sessions for individual counselling, five (5) sessions for couple and family counselling, eleven (11) for group counselling and 4 sessions for Trauma Resilience Workshops.

Counselling

In 2022, 315 beneficiaries were supported through group counselling in a total of 26 community groups. 100 beneficiaries were supported through individual counselling, and 75 individuals were supported through family and couple counseling.

This year CCVS are also offering a new category of counselling service called 'trauma resilience workshop' to the target communities. These target direct beneficiaries and focus on dealing with the current mental health challenges and learning coping skills from each other in the same group. The trauma resilience workshop is a non-specialised service according to the mental health and psychosocial support services. The intervention consists of three pillars;

1. Trauma- focused: The TRW has been designed with a deep understanding of the bio-psycho-social impacts of trauma, and aims to help normalize the symptoms that participants are experiencing.
2. Strength-based: The TRW aims to build the resilience of survivors. Most generally, resilience refers to an ability to overcome adversity, using internal and external resources to promote or sustain well-being.
3. Inter-disciplinary: The workshop is designed to be inter-disciplinary. It includes a consideration of the psychological, physical and social impacts of trauma.

The eighty minutes per session is designed to be implemented in four parts so as to enable participants to practice the coping strategies they have used at home and return to the group to share their experiences. In 2022 we supported 190 individuals in a total of 16 groups with this service.

Follow-up

All clients going through therapy sessions are followed up at 3-month and 6-month after start of therapy. These follow-ups are showing improvements in the psychological and social challenges of our beneficiaries and the communities we work in. Clients have shown improvement in symptoms of anxiety, depression and PTSD that were all severe during intake and changed to mild after six-months of therapy completion.



“Before I heard of and enrolled into CCVS therapy services, I used to be a very sad heavy, violent drunkard. And my relationship with my wife and the children was not good. I was not approachable. Even when children dropped out of school because of fees, no one would attempt to approach me about it.

But when I started enrolling for therapy, I realized the importance of life and how I needed these positive changes for myself and family. Now I have learnt how to related and reconnect to myself, family and community. I have my garden of maize and two goats as my livestock.

INCREASING AWARENESS OF THE IMPACTS OF WAR AND ARMED CONFLICT ONTO PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH

To increase awareness and knowledge about the impact of war and armed conflict, a range of mental health sensitization and psychoeducational activities have been implemented in 2022. All sensitization activities addressed the impact of war-related violence on children’s and communities’ mental health, the impact of problems of stigma and discrimination on people’s psychological health, and the way individuals, families and communities can support children and adults with social, behavioural and psychological problems. Our sensitization manuals will guide us in executing these activities. Increased knowledge and awareness about mental health and mental health problems will help communities and their members to deal with psychological challenges, also in the long term.

In 2022 the radio program garnered up to 242 listeners who actively contributed to psychosocial and mental health topics broadcasted on radio Peace 93.7 FM every Thursday from 7pm to 8pm. This radio program witnessed increasing call-backs from listeners and trending discussion of various social media platforms.

This year, 1,464 persons were successfully sensitized and psycho-educated in communities and CCVS-Uganda had the privileges of being invited by stakeholders to conduct dialogues in a community with a very high rate of suicide. CCVS remains playing an instrumental role in giving mental health support through local governments in the districts where we are active and plays a key role in NGO fora.



"Before hearing of CCVS services, life was really hard in the community. There was stigma in the area, that made me not to go in public places. But when I joined counselling, I started relating with people and also gaining confidence to share my opinions in the public, so slowly they started realizing I have potential and started welcoming me to gatherings. When I put my hands up to make an opinion in a community gathering, they now allow me talk and they take me more seriously."

PARTNERSHIPS

CCVS-Uganda has actively partnered with all districts through the signing of MOUs with the local governments and actively engaging with the various district committees and task forces at all levels. CCVS, together with other partners, coordinated through regular district meetings for the promotion of improved psychological health services delivery to beneficiaries.

- CCVS participated in the regular meetings that were organised by all the four District Steering Committees targeting performance and partner contributions to various communities.
- CCVS partnered with the districts of Kitgum, Lira, Oyam and Alebtong during and after the pandemic to help in designing the best response of the task force for a positive impact on various communities and to assist in (emergency) mental health cases in the communities.
- CCVS closely engages Community Stakeholders and mobilisers in the project areas to support the implementation of activities of sensitization and monitoring communities on mental rehabilitation services provided by the organisation. CCVS-Uganda has also strengthened its referral pathways. This will help in situations where community members require medical intervention for the conditions inflicted during the LRA war.
- CCVS conducted joint activities in different communities with different Local Governments in respective districts attached to both offices notably during the 16 Days of activism, Mental Health Day, and youth psychoeducation of which some were conducted after a request from the local governments, especially to areas with high suicidal ideations.

CCVS conducts regular joint monitoring of activities where stakeholders are invited to listen to testimonies from direct clients during closure of counselling cycles and where motivational speeches are made.

CCVS is continuously engaging all the key district offices to device best ways to strengthen project data reporting while being mindful of the confidentiality of the clients reached and supported in the core area of psychotherapy in all the four Districts of Oyam, Lira, Alebtong and Kitgum. This will be through creation dashboards at district level and supplying data through the OVC MIS tool under the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development of Uganda.

Courtesy visits to Pader district

CCVS conducted a survey in 2019 to assess the mental health challenges, needs, attitudes and knowledge in the district. The survey covered three sub-counties: Pajule, Acholibur, and Angagura. Since then, we have not been able to start interventions, but are aware of the needs and therefore the importance for CCVS to keep in contact with the district and sub-county leadership on possible future collaboration.

The district and sub-county officials appreciated the regular follow-up with them and requested for technical support to partners on mental health issues. They indicated that mental health activities currently implemented by government and development partners in the district are only of psycho-social nature and there is no professional trauma counselling offered at the moment.

Project review meeting with Oyam district stakeholders

The review meeting was held in the district with 17 of the officials who are key stakeholders at all levels in attendance. Sub-counties lower stakeholders, including mobilizers from Abok and Ngai were also participating. The three main objectives were to update the district as main stakeholder on project

progress, to enlighten the stakeholders of project achievements and challenges, and to seek ways forward for collaboration. We also discussed ways to mitigate current challenges and discuss the extension of contracts for operations.

CCVS-Uganda staff welcomed all officials and other participants attending the project review meeting and discuss briefly the background of the organization, its thematic areas, areas of project coverage, the explanation of cooperation between the three universities, and the support received from Trust Fund for Victims.

CCVS-Uganda in their presentation, highlighted its activities of community sensitization and psycho-education on mental health, running of therapy sessions which include individual therapy, group therapy, family/couple therapy, community dialogues, radio talk shows, research and training.

Commemoration of Massacre Day in Abok sub-county, Oyam district

CCVS Uganda was privileged to have been invited by the district to join in the commemoration of the massacre day, where up to 28 innocent civilians from Abok subcounty were massacred on 8th June 2004 by LRA rebels commanded by Dominique Ongwen. It was a sad day of reflection that attracted Around 300 participants. The crowd comprised of district officials, sub-county officials, relatives of those who were massacred and community members.

The district officials in their speeches, deeply appreciated CCVS Uganda for reaching out to the community of Abok that is not arguably very vulnerable to all psychological challenges. CCVS Uganda was given the podium to deliver its message of hope which at the end left the crowd stronger and happier than they used to view themselves as hopeless and always in deep grief.



Pictures of the monument built at the venue of the mass grave

LESSONS LEARNED

The major challenges that impacted activities of CCVS in 2022 were:

- 1- Some of enrolled clients are living with more than one condition that requires attention hence fluctuating their consistencies and attentions during therapy sessions.
- 2- Insecurity, especially in Kitgum district, in areas where we work caused by Karamojong cattle rustlers.
- 3- Lack of government and NGO support for the communities we work in other sectors, especially in the areas of health, child safety and livelihoods. High expectation of clients towards livelihoods due to poverty. Since our clients are mostly subsistence farmers, this fact skews clients to look at material support as most preferable after therapy sessions. Besides the above, many parents are seeking support for their children who suffered abuse, especially child labour, sexual abuse, neglect, and early pregnancies. The communities we work in are very remote with minor to no other support from outside. Therefore, referring our clients for follow-up services is a challenge.
- 4- Funding reduction that has led to a reduction in the number of Psychological Counsellors before targets were realized. This is the first year CCVS is implementing activities from two offices, Kitgum and Lira. During this project year, we realized that the current budget makes it very challenging to maintain the 2 offices and all the staff. Decisions have been made therefore to reduce the staff to be able to implement the services as per the proposal.



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