



Grand Challenges Canada®
Grands Défis Canada

Play Learn Thrive

Innovation Lookbook
2026



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About Play Learn Thrive

Play Learn Thrive is a funding portfolio launched by Grand Challenges Canada, in partnership with the LEGO Foundation, focused on supporting innovative solutions for children in complex crisis settings. The program aims to create strong support systems for children aged birth to 12 years in emergency contexts, with special attention to those whose developmental and educational needs are not being met.

THE CHALLENGE

Children in crisis-affected settings face compounded threats to their education, development, and wellbeing, with one in six living in conflict zones in 2022 and nearly half of school-aged refugee children are out of school—girls disproportionately so. Climate change further intensifies these vulnerabilities, displacing over 43 million children in the past six years and exposing them to violence, trauma, and instability that can cause lasting cognitive, emotional, and physical harm. Displacement erodes family and community support systems, undermines caregiver capacity, and deprives children of nurturing care and safe learning environments essential for their holistic development.

THE NEED

Recent UN figures show that nearly 450 million children live in conflict zones, and over 220 million face educational disruptions due to emergencies. For refugee children especially, access to early education is severely limited compared to global averages. These children not only miss critical developmental opportunities but also face long-term consequences for their future wellbeing and potential. The combined pressures of conflict, climate disasters, and forced displacement create an urgent need for creative solutions that help children not just survive but thrive through play-based learning, even in the most difficult circumstances.



The Partners

LEGO Foundation

The LEGO Foundation, Play Learn Thrive’s anchor funder, supports playful, child-centered learning worldwide. It focuses on children in vulnerable environments and those with special educational needs and disabilities, equipping them with the skills needed to thrive in a constantly changing world.



Grand Challenges Canada®
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Grand Challenges Canada (GCC) is one of the world’s largest impact-first investors. We tackle global challenges by investing in locally-led solutions. This approach builds a healthier and more equitable world, and boosts sustainable change in the humanitarian space. GCC will leverage our existing investment platform to create a pipeline of new and scalable solutions that better meet the unique needs of vulnerable children, parents, and caregivers in emergency settings, with a focus on those facing barriers to inclusion that impede access to quality and enriching learning environments.



JORDAN

OVERVIEW

GENERAL POPULATION

11.6 MILLION PEOPLE

34% 14 years old or under

REFUGEE POPULATION

717,446 PEOPLE

30% 12 years old or under

1.4 million of Jordan's children are under 5 years old. With only 1,100 licensed daycare centres, there's a significant gap between the demand for quality early learning and available resources to support early childhood development.

In recent years, the country has also welcomed a large number of refugees, and infrastructure and social services haven't kept pace with this demand. Debt and unemployment rates are on the rise, particularly for youths and women. Moreover, limited access to education creates a cycle in which fewer educational opportunities lead to fewer job opportunities. Climate-related challenges add yet another layer to Jordan's crisis. Extreme temperature fluctuations force parents to keep children home during periods of intense heat or cold to protect their health, while water shortages threaten both access to clean water and agriculture.



Proof-of-Concept in Jordan

Proof-of-Concept (POC) grants support early-stage innovations to test novel ideas and approaches to early childhood development and learning in polycrisis settings.

In Jordan, we invest in POC innovations that create strong support systems for children age 0-12 in complex crisis settings so that they can play, learn, and thrive.





Implementing Organization:

Abu Alanda Association for Social Development

Type: Proof-of-Concept

Location: Jordan

PROJECT ASOBI PROGRAM

Project Asobi (Japanese for "Play") is a low-cost, high-impact innovation that transforms early learning for children ages 4-5 in under-resourced kindergartens in Southeast Amman. Addressing critical gaps in teacher professional development and children's fine motor/socio-emotional learning (SEL) skills, the program utilizes the joyful power of paper and origami.

The program trains female kindergarten educators as "Asobi Fellows," who master a Jordanian culturalized curriculum blending Japanese folding mathematics with Arabic storytelling. Each Fellow designs and delivers a "Fold & Play" unit in their classroom and contributes the lesson to the open-access Asobi Library. The project also engages caregivers through at-home "Folding Missions" to ensure continuity of learning.

The goal of the program is to improve children's fine motor skills and enhance teacher self-confidence and well-being. The program is continuously monitored and implemented in strategic partnership with Jordan's Ministry of Education and the Charitable Societies Union, proving that simple, integrated play can sustainably boost development in crisis-affected environments

Implementing Organization:

Al Zaatari Charitable Society
for Community Development

Type: Proof-of-Concept

Location: Jordan



SAFE PLAY AND LEARNING HUB

The Safe Play and Learning Hub is a child-centred initiative designed to support the early learning and psychosocial well-being of children aged 4–10 in Zaatari. The project provides structured, safe, and engaging environments where children participate in play-based learning, early literacy and numeracy support, and activities that build emotional resilience—particularly for those affected by displacement and inconsistent access to schooling.

The project trains and equips community-based facilitators, including mothers and local educators, with practical skills in play facilitation, positive behaviour support, and child protection. These trained facilitators lead daily sessions across four community hubs, ensuring consistent, high-quality programming tailored to the needs of children in the area.

The project also strengthens the role of parents and caregivers by offering practical workshops on positive parenting and home-based play, enabling them to reinforce learning and emotional support within the household.

The hub aims to improve children’s learning outcomes and wellbeing and produce a fully documented, replicable implementation toolkit—covering curriculum, training materials, and monitoring tools—to support future scale-up in similar humanitarian contexts.



**Implementing
Organization:
GAME**

Type: Proof-of-Concept
Location: Jordan, Lebanon

STEMPLAY

STEMPlay is a youth-led invitation to play, learn, and heal for children aged 6–12 and their caregivers in crisis-affected communities across Lebanon and Jordan. Blending STEM learning with street sports, the program turns movement into discovery—where jumping, building, and experimenting spark curiosity, confidence, and joy. Sessions are led by GAME’s Playmakers (ages 16–25) in safe, inclusive spaces, using a new curriculum designed especially for younger children that combines free play, sensory and motor activities, and social-emotional learning.

Born from the urgent gaps in early childhood education caused by displacement, economic crisis, and inequality, STEMPlay creates informal learning spaces where formal systems fall short. Piloted and refined in Lebanon before expanding to Jordan, the program brings caregivers into the journey through Family Day workshops and builds local ownership through Playmaker training. Low-resource tools, digital simulations, and community-led design make STEMPlay adaptable, sustainable, and rooted in everyday life—offering children space to grow, connect, and imagine new possibilities, one playful moment at a time.

Transition-to-Scale in Jordan

Transition-to-Scale (TTS) funding supports promising early-stage innovations that have achieved proof-of-concept or demonstrated initial positive results and have significant potential to achieve sustainable impact at scale or as they reach more people.

In Jordan, we invest in TTS innovations that create strong support systems for children age 0-12 in complex crisis settings so that they can play, learn, and thrive.



KENYA

GENERAL POPULATION
55 MILLION PEOPLE
38% 17 years old or under

REFUGEE POPULATION
770,255 PEOPLE

OVERVIEW

Kenya is navigating a multifaceted crisis driven by climate change, conflict, and rising costs of living. These pressures are felt most acutely in refugee camps like Kakuma and Dadaab, where food insecurity and health challenges are taking a growing toll on families and children. Climate-related events, including prolonged droughts and sudden floods, are destroying livelihoods, worsening water scarcity, and driving displacement.

These overlapping crises are disrupting education, straining healthcare access, and increasing the risk of sexual and gender-based violence. The influx of refugees and asylum seekers from neighbouring countries such as South Sudan, Burundi, Ethiopia, and Somalia continues to stretch already limited resources in camps and along border regions. As a result, access to consistent education and safe, stable environments remains out of reach for many children, putting their overall development at risk.



Proof-of-Concept in Kenya

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Implementing Organization:

Sense International Kenya

Type: Proof-of-Concept

Location: Kenya



"WE CAN PLAY, LEARN AND THRIVE": INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH DEAFBLINDNESS IN KENYA

This project improves early learning for 300 children under 12 with Deafblindness and multisensory impairments (MSI) in Kenya's crisis-affected regions—Kwale, Garissa, Kilifi, Kabarnet, and Nairobi's informal settlements—by linking hospital-based early intervention with inclusive, play-based schooling. Children under four receive communication- and sensory-based therapy, while school-age learners continue in classrooms supported by trained teachers, Learner Support Assistants, tactile materials like LEGO Braille Bricks, and accessible digital tools.

Five inclusive play centres will serve as hubs for learning and resources, and 450 caregivers will receive training, psychosocial support, and targeted father engagement. Implemented with local partners, the project addresses gaps in early skills, inclusive pedagogy, and access to structured sensory learning, improving child development, communication, literacy, peer interaction, and caregiver and teacher capacity through community-led, culturally responsive play-based approaches.

Transition-to-Scale in Kenya

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UGANDA

GENERAL POPULATION

4.9 MILLION PEOPLE
45% 14 years old or under

REFUGEE POPULATION

1,622,738 PEOPLE
41% 12 YEARS OR UNDER

OVERVIEW

In Uganda, a polycrisis driven by economic instability, food insecurity, conflict, and climate-related pressures is taking a heavy toll on communities, especially children.^[1] In refugee settings, food insecurity has fuelled tension, adding strain to already fragile systems.

The education sector is in crisis. With limited resources and shrinking budgets, schools are struggling to stay afloat. Parents—particularly among refugee and displaced populations—are forced to make choices between daily survival and their childrens’ educational needs. Funding cuts have chipped away at the quality of schooling and environmental challenges make it even harder for children in remote areas to get to class.

The COVID-19 pandemic only made things worse, disrupting learning and deepening existing inequalities. Despite these challenges, stakeholders emphasize the urgent need for sustainable, long-term solutions to improve education and protect children’s well-being across the country.



Proof-of-Concept in Uganda

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**Implementing
Organization:**
Windle International
Uganda

Type: Proof-of-Concept
Location: Uganda

PLAYFUL LEARNING TOOLKIT FOR EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES IN UGANDA

The Playful Learning Toolkit is a play-based early childhood development innovation designed to improve learning outcomes and school readiness for children aged 2–6 years in Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement. Windle International Uganda and Dream Networks will pilot this innovation, partnering with organizations that specialize in early years' education, working with refugee communities, and co-designing culturally relevant spaces for play.

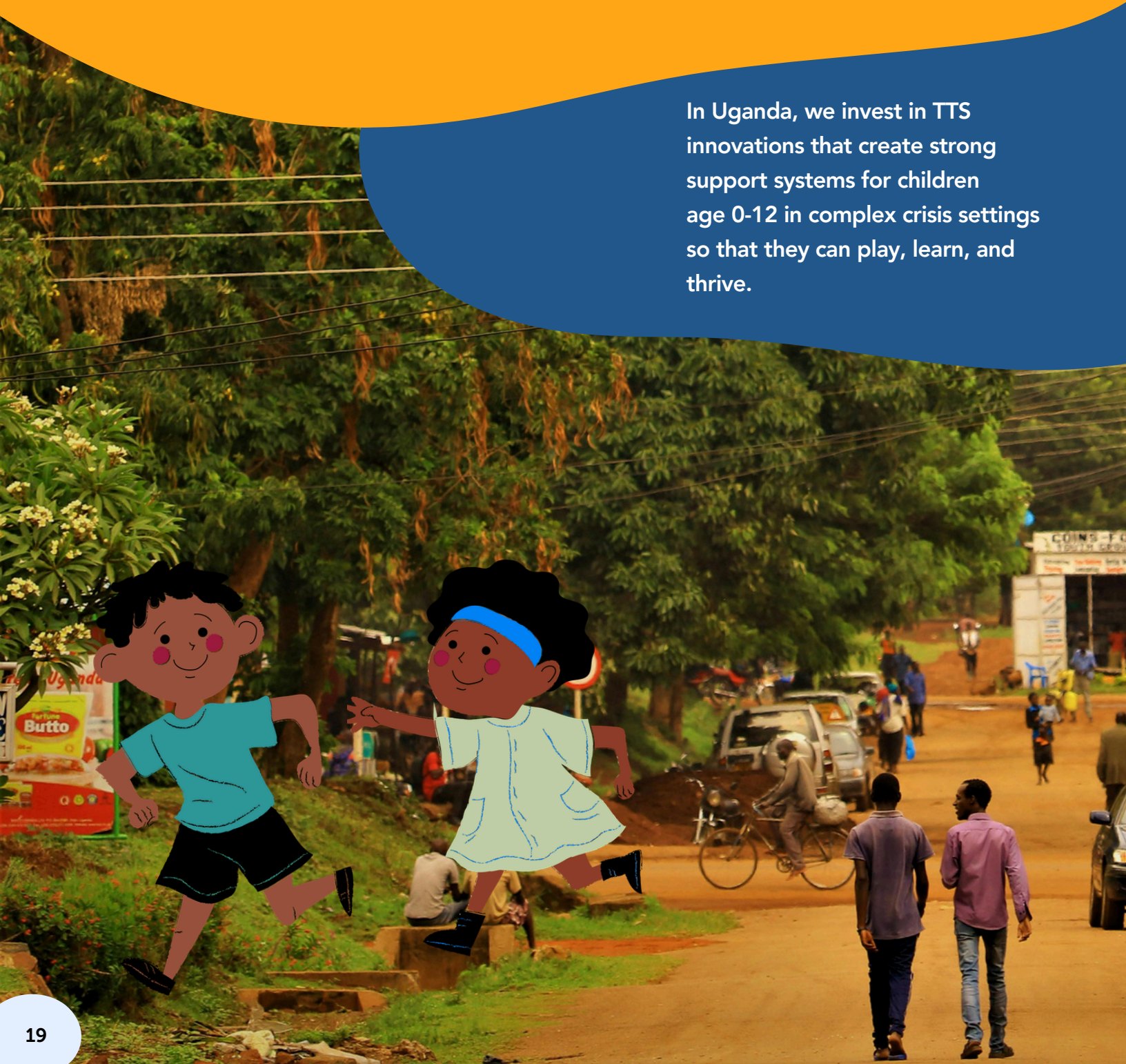
The toolkit will facilitate play and integrate local culture through co-design and activities, such as traditional rhymes, stories, and dances, making learning familiar and engaging while also fostering a sense of belonging. The innovation emphasizes key developmental domains, including language, cognitive abilities, and social-emotional development. Peer-to-peer networks will also be developed and implemented to train selected caregivers to facilitate playgroups that encourage peer-to-peer learning.

This intervention will test the effectiveness of a peer-to-peer parent network in improving children's early years learning and school readiness through play-based learning in an emergency setting. It will deploy the Playful Learning Toolkit in a manner that is flexible, replicable, and adaptable to poly-crisis situations.

Transition-to-Scale in Uganda

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LEBANON

GENERAL POPULATION

5.5 MILLION PEOPLE

33% 14 years old or under

REFUGEE POPULATION

795,025 PEOPLE

27.5% 12 YEARS OLD OR YOUNGER

OVERVIEW

Lebanon hosts the world's highest number of refugees per capita, with over 1 million refugees from neighbouring countries—half of them children. Following the September 2024 escalation, over one million people, including 546,000 children, have been displaced, many injured and living in fear.

The country's deep economic crisis leaves more than half the population without reliable access to food, healthcare, education, or other basic services. With most schools privatized, 37% of children under 14 are out of school—a number likely to rise as 75% of schools have closed, half now serving as shelters. Syrian refugee children face the greatest barriers: 52% cannot attend school, and many struggle with behavioral, communication, and socio-emotional challenges linked to trauma and stress.



Proof-of-Concept in Lebanon

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**Implementing
Organization:**
Hilfswerk International

Type: Proof-of-Concept
Location: Lebanon

PLAY, LEARN & HEAL BUS – MOBILE EARLY LEARNING & PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT FOR CONFLICT-AFFECTED CHILDREN IN SOUTH LEBANON

Children in South Lebanon grow up amid bombed villages, damaged infrastructure, disrupted schooling, and deep psychosocial distress. They lack safe spaces to learn and play, while caregivers struggle to support their emotional and developmental needs.

The Play, Learn & Heal Bus is a solar-powered mobile unit that brings Early Childhood Development in Emergencies (ECDiE) and Education in Emergencies (EiE) directly to six conflict-affected villages in South Lebanon. Acting as a flexible hub for learning, play, and psychosocial support, the bus delivers a play-based curriculum adapted from the Lebanese national curriculum, enabling children aged 5–12 to learn languages, math, science, and essential social-emotional skills through games, storytelling, and hands-on activities. Activities are delivered by trained project staff and supported by local volunteers, strengthening long-term community capacity.

Children’s caregivers participate in parallel support sessions focused on ‘learn through play’ techniques that they can apply at home, emotional coping, and strengthening the parent–child relationship. The initiative aims to improve children’s cognitive readiness, emotional resilience, and psychosocial wellbeing while reinforcing family and community resilience.



**Implementing
Organization:**

Azahir

Type: Proof-of-Concept
Location: Lebanon

SPARK-PY: STEAM-POWERED ACTIVITIES FOR RESILIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE - PALESTINIAN YOUTH

SPARK-PY (STEAM-Powered Activities for Resilience and Knowledge – Palestinian Youth) addresses urgent gaps in education and well-being for Palestinian refugee children aged 8 to 12 living in Nahr al-Bared camp, Lebanon, where over half of the children are out of school, face developmental setbacks, and have limited access to safe and inclusive learning. The program provides weekly one-hour structured after-school sessions in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math), digital literacy, and socio-emotional learning, along with seasonal camps during breaks to reinforce learning outcomes.

The program will also train local youth (aged 18 to 35) to become trauma-informed facilitators and mentors. These facilitators will also enhance their employment readiness and serve as positive role models and community leaders.

Transition-to-Scale in Lebanon

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Opportunities for Investment in Jordan, Kenya, Uganda and Lebanon

PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Prioritizing continuous professional development of teachers is essential to support curriculum implementation, inclusive practices such as disability-inclusive teaching, individualized education programs, and effective strategies for managing large classes
- Programs supporting Father's education were highlighted by experts as necessary to support holistic growth of children.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

- Integrate mental health initiatives into community-based educational efforts.
- Support teachers both as providers and recipients of psychosocial care through training, resources, and access to trauma-informed services that help them support students while also addressing their own well-being.
- Address the holistic mental health and psychosocial needs needs of children and families.

INCLUSIVITY

- Expand access to digital solutions to enhance equity for underserved groups
- Invest in inclusive learning programs that support early identification of learning disabilities and provide targeted support in classrooms.
- Expand the notion of inclusivity to support gender, economic, and language barriers.
- Enhancing learning environments to be safe, inclusive and well equipped to support children.

COLLABORATION

- Foster collaboration among government, private sector, and NGOs to develop strategies that reflect diverse learner needs.
- Leverage current policies aimed at EiE to create sustainable partnerships between innovations and other actors, including governments, to enhance educational outcomes.