

# Building Resilience to Recurrent Shocks: The Graduation Approach

CONCERN  
worldwide

ENDING  
EXTREME POVERTY  
WHATEVER  
IT TAKES

## Background

719 million people in the world live on less than \$2.15 a day. This equates to approximately 9% of the world's population living below the global poverty line (World Bank). Secure livelihoods offer people living in extreme poverty a pathway to forge their way out of it; one of the approaches Concern Worldwide uses to facilitate this pathway is the **Graduation<sup>1</sup> Approach**. The Graduation Approach is an example of a 'big push' intervention designed to move people out of conditions of extreme poverty by simultaneously boosting livelihoods and income, providing access to financial services and improving social wellbeing. The approach provides an integrated and sequenced package of support to targeted households over a period between 18 to 36 months. Collectively, this package helps people to address the root causes of, and barriers they face to moving out of poverty – from situations often defined by food insecurity and high levels of vulnerability – towards sustainable livelihoods.

Concern has been implementing graduation programmes since 2007, and as of 2024 has implemented programmes in 11 countries (Bangladesh, Burundi, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Haiti, Malawi, Pakistan, Rwanda, Somalia and Zambia), reaching 172,846 people directly and many more indirectly. Alongside programme implementation, Concern has invested in several high profile pieces of research with the aim to producing learning on what works and where. Between 2012 and 2016, Concern partnered with the Centre for Social Protection at the UK's Institute for Development Studies (IDS) to assess changes in key indicators over time and the sustainability of these changes (**Rwanda**) and the relative contribution of the coaching component (**Burundi**). Continued collaboration between 2017 and 2019 further explored graduation trajectories and the effect of graduation programmes on intra-household dynamics and inter-generational transmission of poverty (**Rwanda** and **Burundi**). Then between 2017 and 2021, Concern partnered with TIME (Trinity IMPact Evaluation unit) at Trinity College Dublin in **Malawi** to test an innovative approach to engaging male and female spouses in gender transformative dialogue to improve gender equality and poverty-related outcomes amongst programme participants.

In addition to these pieces of operational research, Concern has also undertaken impact evaluations and smaller studies in **Bangladesh**, the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, **Ethiopia**, **Haiti**, **Somalia** and **Zambia**.

## Building resilience

In the contexts where Concern works, people face varying degrees of risks<sup>1</sup> to different hazards/shocks – defined as potentially damaging events, phenomenon or human activity that can cause harm. They can differ between urban and rural contexts and whether they affect whole communities (covariate shocks) or just individuals (idiosyncratic shocks). There are conditions that make people more vulnerable to hazards/shocks such as lack of assets including land (quantity and quality) or shelter, low education levels, gender inequality, lack of access to basic services or social protection, lack of legal identity, lack of information etc. The less economic, political and cultural power people have before an event, the greater their suffering during and in the aftermath of a hazard/shock.

The term resilience has become embedded with international development and humanitarian aid however, there are differences in how it is defined and measured. In our case, resilience is taken to

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<sup>1</sup> Risk = the chance (high or low) of a hazard having harmful consequences

mean *being able to cope with and recover from the effects of shocks and adapt to stresses without compromising long-term prospects of moving out of poverty.*

There are a number of ways that Concern’s graduation programmes aim to support participants manage risk including reducing hazards, reducing exposure or reducing vulnerability as see in Box 1 below.

*Box 1: Managing risk through graduation programmes*

Programme actions	
<b>To reduce hazards</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical and biological soil and water conservation activities</li> <li>• Training on natural resource management</li> </ul>
<b>To reduce exposure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risk assessments and risk management strategies</li> <li>• Early warning systems and preparedness activities</li> <li>• Contingency planning at micro, meso and macro level</li> </ul>
<b>To reduce vulnerability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service mapping and linking participants with basic and financial services</li> <li>• Livelihood diversification to reduce dependence on one income source</li> <li>• Social safety net coverage</li> </ul>

Graduation programmes are designed to bring about sustainable changes in people’s well-being; this implies a level of resilience. This brief is one of a series of briefs synthesising Concern’s experience adopting the Graduation Approach since 2007 and specifically looks at how programmes have helped to build resilience amongst programme participants. It shares specific experience from Rwanda, Burundi and Malawi.

## Evidence of impact

### *Rwanda*

In-depth interviews with programme participants targeted during Phase 1 of the programme (2012-2016) illustrated the precarious nature of livelihoods in rural Rwanda, where households face unpredictable and sometimes overwhelming shocks. During the impact evaluation of phase 1 (2012-2016), researchers identified two different categories of participants – ‘**slow movers**’ who were progressing more slowly through the programme and seeing lower returns and ‘**fast movers**’ who were progressing more quickly through the programme and seeing higher returns. ‘Slow movers’ were often those households that faced severe shocks during the programme cycle, whereas ‘fast’ movers experienced relatively few debilitating shocks throughout the programme lifecycle.

During qualitative research, undertaken ex-post (2018) graduation trajectories were studied in more depth with researchers identifying four different livelihood trajectories:

- **Improver:** Participating households who sustained positive change, both during and after programme participation.
- **Late improver:** Participating households who experienced positive change, but only after the initial consumption support phase;
- **Decliner:** Participating households who experienced positive change initially, but partially fell-back later (but not below baseline metrics).
- **Dropout:** Participating households who may or may not have experienced positive change but then declined to below baseline metrics.

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*“Yes, there were several climate shocks, even last year the harvest was not so good but they did not affect me that much. If you knew the level of poverty I was at before, you would know that there is no way I am going back there”*  
*[Imp-H1]*

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During the ex-post qualitative research, most respondents reported having experienced climate shocks in recent years following the end of the programme - either drought, flood or strong winds, which affected both their livelihoods and their homes. Several respondents (nine out of 24 interviewed) reported that they were not resilient against these shocks with some having lost any gains made through the Graduation programme. Conversely, other many programme participants (13 out of 24 interviewed) reported that they were resilient against these climatic shocks with some attributing their resilience to the effects of the Graduation Programme.

Of those households who reported that they were not resilient against climatic shocks following the programme, all came from the category of 'decliner' or 'drop-out' households. Whilst those who reported that they were resilient to these climatic shocks came from the 'improver' and 'late improver' categories.

### *Burundi*

Concern implements programmes in three provinces – Kirundo, Cibitoke and Bubanza. Towards the end of Phase 1 of the programme (2012-2016), Kirundo was particularly adversely affected by two shocks namely **drought**, as a result of El Niño 2015/16 which led to widespread failure of harvests and caused food insecurity and hunger; and **socio-economic unrest** that affected the country from mid-2015 onwards. Social unrest led to migration and displacement of people, both temporary and longer-term, within the province and beyond. It also made cross-border trade with Rwanda more difficult, severely affecting the livelihoods of those living in the northern area of the province.

During qualitative research, undertaken ex-post (2018), researchers found that a large majority of programme participants were unable to retain the positive effects of the programme in the face of large scale covariate shocks. Newly established businesses and income generating activities (IGAs) collapsed and many community-based savings groups (SILCs) were discontinued leading many former participants resorting to the distress sale of assets to buy food. The most prevalent post-programme trajectory was a 'declining' one, denoting a deterioration of wealth and wellbeing although reassuringly this did not drop down to or below the level that was experienced before the start of the programme. Additionally, despite deteriorations in living conditions, programme participants felt that their lives were still better than before the programme and that they felt better able to improve their lives again compared to others. Reasons given included the contribution of training and coaching provided through the programme, indicating that it afforded them with knowledge, skills and experience that put them in a better position to withstand shocks and initiate new activities.

Other factors considered vital to withstanding the shocks facing people post programme included the availability of assets, ownership of land and economic opportunities. The benefits of assets were mostly short-lived, providing a source of one-off cash for the purchase of food or other necessities in very lean times, whereas the ownership of land offered more sustained benefits as it allowed for cultivation (despite the drought) and renting out of land. Programme participants who had managed to develop IGAs that did not rely on cultivation, such as hairdressing, fishing or transportation were also faring comparatively well after the end of the programme. Additionally, strong household collaboration and dynamics were also reported to contribute to better resilience.

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*“I had a field and I got a significant harvest before the drought which enabled me to face it without having to buy food. I have managed to rent other fields and I am expecting a good harvest in the days ahead.” [FGD-M-Kag]*

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## Malawi

During the first programme cycle (2017-2022) programme participants had to deal with both idiosyncratic and covariate shocks. In March 2019 for example, southern and central regions of Malawi experienced a tropical cyclone (Cyclone Idai). The cyclone and associated floods had a devastating impact on people's lives and livelihoods.

At the time Cyclone Idai struck, households in cohort one were 9 months into the programme and receiving consumption support. These households suffered extensive losses of livestock (worth equiv. MWK 52,673 or EUR 64.20<sup>2</sup>), crops (worth equiv. MWK 49,834 or EUR 60.70) and business (worth equiv. MWK39,748 or EUR 48.40), all of which were greater than those losses suffered by non-programme participants – (MWK 4,749, MWK 17,071 and MWK 21,253; or EUR 5.80, EUR 20.80 and EUR 25.90 respectively). This in part can be attributed to the higher asset holdings that<sup>3</sup> households had acquired. However, despite these losses, in terms of **food security**, non-participating<sup>4</sup> affected by the flood recorded a food security score of 3.53 post flooding compared to a score of 4.52 amongst participating households.<sup>5</sup> rly, in terms of the **Hunger Gap**, non-participating households affected by the flood were estimated to be food secure for 7.95 months of the year, with a hunger gap of 4 months whereas participating households reported being food secure for 8.1 months of the year. Whilst the difference between non-participating households and participating households not affected by the flood was considerably larger at 9.3 for non-participating and 9.9 months food secure for participating. This suggests that despite their lower level of losses non-participating households still had greater food insecurity than participating households.

After such events, individuals can experience increased stress that may lead to poorer long-term decisions. Following the Cyclone in 2019, data was collected to measure internal psychological constraints that can play a role in perpetuating poverty traps, or be a contributing factor to why households fall into poverty after a shock. Specifically, data looked at memory, attention, inhibitory control and fluid intelligence (ability to problem solve, retain information and engage in logical reasoning)

Figure 1: Average Reaction Response Times

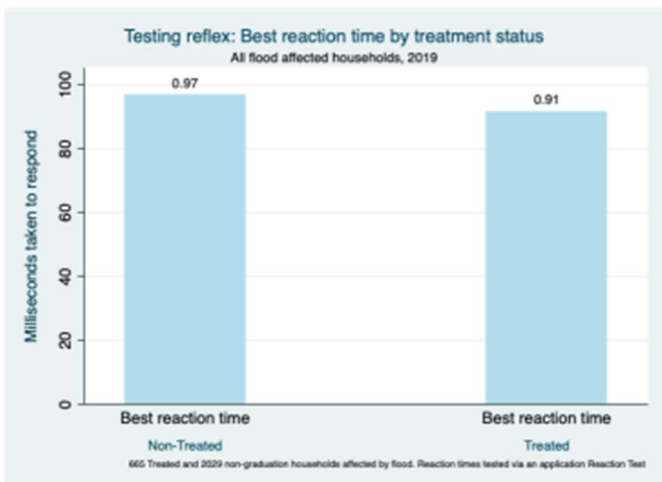
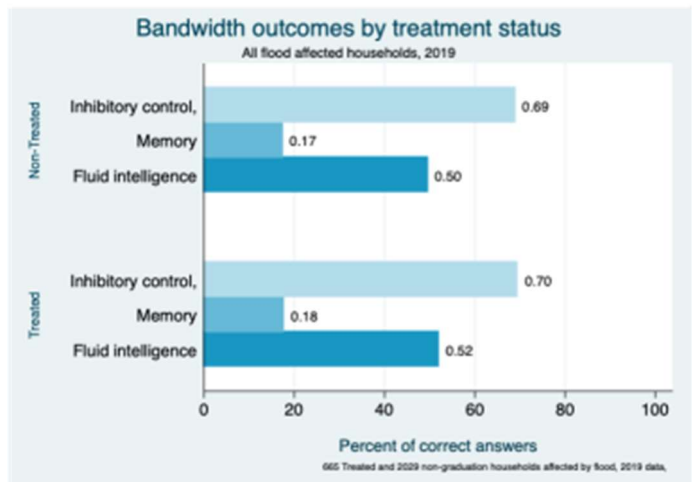


Figure 2: Bandwidth Outcomes by Treatment Status



<sup>2</sup> Based on exchange rate on the 16/03/2019 of 0.00121846 EUR/MWK (www.xe.com)

<sup>3</sup> At the start of the programme, there was no statistically significant difference between participating and non-participating households in terms of asset ownership.

<sup>4</sup> The index is calculated by the standardised weighted average score of 9 questions answered by female respondents, which includes whether the household ever experienced any difficulty in having enough food to fulfil the needs of the family, the number of meals and days that the household did not have enough food to eat, the number of days that the household ate meat over the past week, whether any household member skipped any meal or reduced consumption due to the shortage of food and the number of days and meals skipped, whether the household borrowed food or received any help from friends or relatives, and the order in which household members are served food when food is in short supply. The total score ranges from 0 (severely food insecure) to 9 (food secure).

<sup>5</sup> This measures the number of months that the household did not struggle to feed the family from any source of food. If the household responds that they did not face any food insecurity, they get a score of 1. If they say yes, then the total number of months they were food secure are added to give them a score out of 12, the total score ranges from 0 (severely food insecure) to 12 (food secure).

– otherwise referred to as **bandwidth**. The study found that, of households affected by the flood, participating households had a statistically quicker reaction time in responding to visual stimulus than non-participating households and a slightly higher percent of correct answers.

Figure one, shows the average reaction response times of participants and non-participants. Figure two, then captures the relationship between the other bandwidth measures and whether a household was affected by the flood. For households affected by the flood, those households participating in the graduation programme had a slightly higher percentage of correct answers across all three areas compared to household not participating in the programme. Similarly, an additional study conducted by TIME in 2020, found that being part of the graduation programme improved participant’s ability to respond and cope with the effects of COVID-19. In this instance, the main household welfare measure considered was food security, with the research finding that being a programme participant was correlated with being more food secure over the pandemic.

## Summary

A livelihood is considered sustainable (or resilient) when it can cope with and recover from stress and shocks yet continue to provide opportunities for the next generation. In the contexts where Concern works, people face varying degrees of risk to different hazards or shocks. Concern is committed to facilitating livelihood security - the adequate and sustainable access to, and control over, both material and social resources, to enable households to make a living without undermining the natural resource base.

There are a number of ways in which Concern’s Graduation programmes aim to facilitate resilience building through supporting programme participants to manage risk - reducing hazards, reducing exposure to hazards and/or reducing vulnerability to hazards<sup>6</sup>. Evidence from Concern’s Graduation portfolio since 2007 has shown some success in supporting participants to be able to cope with, and recover from the effects of hazards/shocks and adapt to stresses. With the components found to be most impactful being the provision of training and coaching, facilitating access to financial services (community-based savings groups), contributions to insurance schemes and greater social capital.

However, research also shows that we still have a way to go and provides implications for future programming - some of which is evident in the current portfolio (2017-2023) including greater use of contingency funds and crisis modifiers, wider diversification of IGAs and greater focus on investment in durable assets. The current portfolio also has a greater emphasis on **reducing hazards** (with a greater focus on environmental protection and sustainability) and **reducing exposure** (risk assessment and disaster risk reduction). Additionally, under the Irish Aid Long Term Development Programme (2023-2027) Concern is investing in a new piece of operational research designed to explore the role of social capital and self-efficacy in building individual and community resilience to both covariate (climate crisis, economic stress and conflict) and idiosyncratic (intra-household) shocks.

The logo for Concern Worldwide, featuring the word 'CONCERN' in a large, bold, white sans-serif font above the word 'worldwide' in a smaller, lowercase, white sans-serif font. The background is a dark green with abstract, lighter green shapes.

This report is one of a series of briefs produced in October 2024, synthesising Concern’s experience in designing and implementing Graduation programmes.

For more information on Concern’s Graduation portfolio please visit:  
<https://www.concern.net/knowledge-hub/graduation-programming>

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<sup>6</sup> See ‘Addressing risk within Graduation programmes’ in Concern Worldwide (2021) Knowledge Matters: Concern’s Experience and Learning from the Graduation Approach