Achieving social impact through graduation programmes

CONCERN worldwide

ENDING EXTREME POVERTY WHATEVER IT TAKES

Introduction

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' 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 engaged 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 to assess changes in key indicators over time and the sustainability of these changes (**Rwanda**) and the 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. 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**.

The role of social assets

Concern defines a livelihood as '*the means by which a person or a household makes a living over time*'. Livelihood security is 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. Building on the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework. Concern identifies six categories of assets upon which individuals draw, or rely on, to pursue their livelihoods – **Natural**, **Physical, Financial**, **Human, Social** and **Political**. 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.

Whilst poverty is multifaceted, when measuring it there remains a strong focus on economic indicators (such as income levels or asset ownership). Social impacts however, which are defined as '*the effect on people and communities that happens as a result of an action, project, programme or policy*'[1], can have an effect on people's experience of poverty and can facilitate economic improvements. Therefore, whilst social assets are not always front and centre of the discussion around livelihoods, they are crucial to programme

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[1] Good Finance (2021) https://www.goodfinance.org.uk/measuring-social-impact

success and sustainability. Social assets include networks, group membership, relationships of trust and access to wider societal institutions, as well as an individuals perceived sense of wellbeing, their mental health (as opposed to physical health) and bandwidth (mental and emotional capacity to deal with a variety of situations). People living in conditions of extreme poverty often withdraw from, or are excluded, from social activities either because their circumstances reduce the time and money available for such events or because of feelings of shame.

This brief is one of a series of briefs synthesizing the learning from Concern's experience adopting the Graduation Approach and looks specifically at how programmes have advanced social assets of programme participants. It shares specific examples from **Burundi, Rwanda** and **Malawi**.

Measuring social impact

There are many ways to measure social impacts; the approach will vary depending on the social assets being pursued. Group membership for example, could be measured by recording attendance rates at specific group meetings, whilst relationships of trust is more subjective and would require measuring an individual's perceived improvement or satisfaction in this area.

Standard indicators used to monitor changes in social assets include (but are not limited to):

Indicator	Definition
Individual Self-Efficacy	Average level of belief in personal ability to complete tasks and reach goals. The indicator is scored on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates a very strong disbelief in one's own ability to complete tasks and reach goals and 10 indicates very strong belief in one's own personal ability to complete tasks and reach goals.
Perceived Community Efficacy	Average level of belief in community's ability to complete tasks and reach goals. The indicator used is scored on a scale from zero to 10, where zero indicates a very strong disbelief in the community's ability to complete tasks and reach goals and 10 indicates very strong belief in the community's ability to complete tasks and reach goals.
Self-Esteem	Average score on the Self-Esteem scale. The indicator is scored on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates a very low level of self-esteem and 10 indicates a very high level of self-esteem.
Community and Social Belonging	Average personal perception of community belonging and social value. The indicator is scored on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates a very weak sense of social integration and contribution and 10 indicates very strong sense of social integration and contribution.

Other indicators used by programmes have included, **engagement in community activities, feeling respected in the community**, **sense of well-being** and **personal bandwidth**.

Evidence of Impact

Engagement in community institutions and social activities
Engagement in community institutions and social activities is often used as a proxy for social capital as it is considered key to a person's sense of social belonging. Research undertaken in **Burundi** (2012-2016) monitored participation in social management committees (SMC), community health communities (COSA) and disaster risk reduction (DRR) with participants asked to respond if they attend these meetings always, sometimes or never. It found that participants were more likely to 'always' participate in meetings by the end of the programme relative to a control group however, engagement and trends depended greatly on the type of group. Participation in SMC meetings increased between the start of the programme and the midline but then stayed consistent between midline and end line relative to the control group. Whereas, participation in COSA meeting declined between midline and end line though remained higher than the control group. Finally, participation in DRR meeting actually increased between midline and end line.

Similarly, research in **Rwanda** (2012-2016) monitored female participation in women's meetings and membership of cooperatives and found that the programme had a significant and sustained impact. At baseline 62% of women in cohort 1 participated in women's meetings whilst at the end of the programme (36 months later) 79% of women in cohort 1 were participating in meetings, this fell to 72% year later (48% after the start of the programme). Whilst, 69% of females in the control group were participating in women's meetings at the start of the programme and this fell to 67% at the end of the programme and further fell to 58% a year later.

Figure 1 shows the attendance of cohort 1 participants in women's meetings and membership in cooperatives.

Figure 1: Attendance at women's meetings and membership of cooperatives, Rwanda 2012-2016 (Cohort 1)
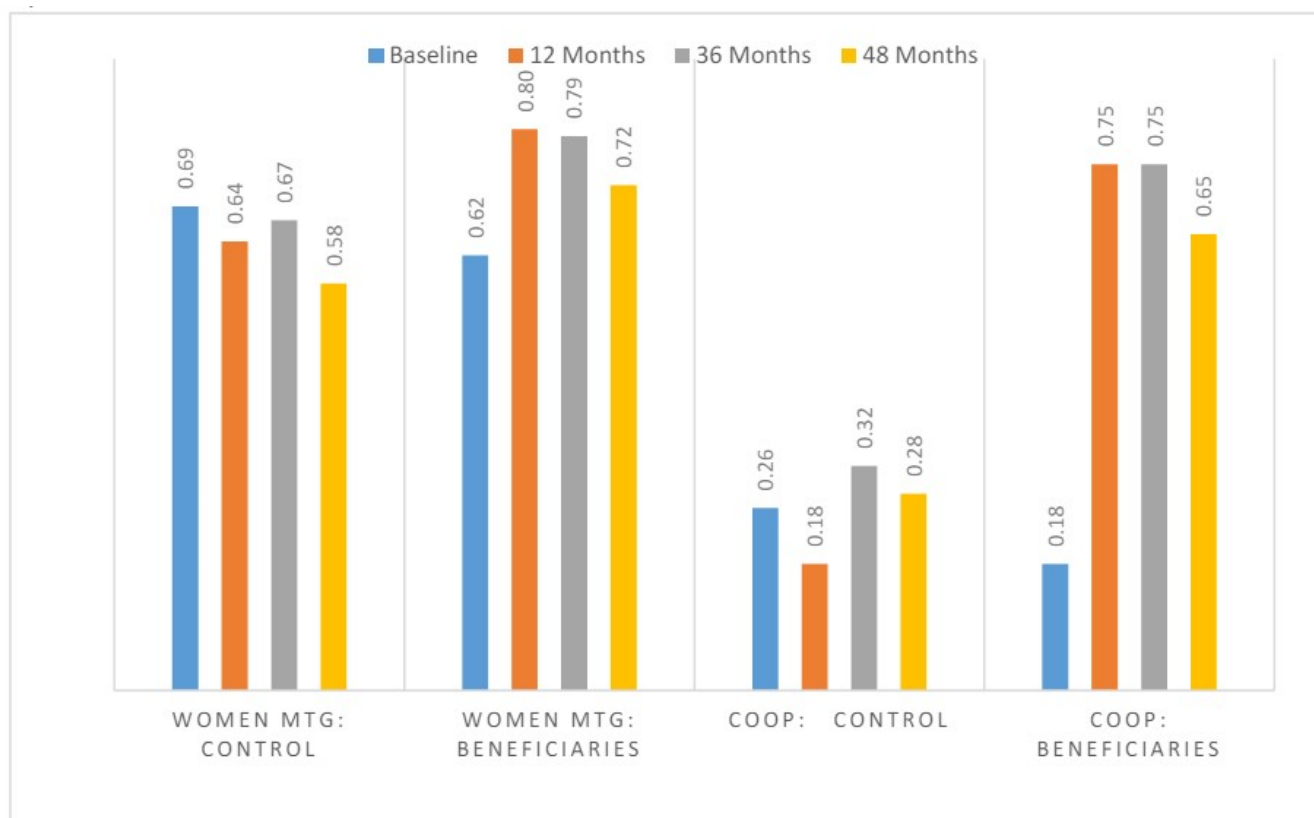
Qualitative research in **Malawi** (2017-2021) undertaken in 2018 found 7 out of 28 participants cited improved networks since participating in the programme with these positive changes attributed to a number of drivers including participating in agricultural training and community-based savings groups.

Feeling respected in the community
Personal relationships are important in securing livelihoods and can lead to improvements in psycho-social impacts such as self-respect and empowerment. When it comes to improving community relations, research found mixed results. In **Burundi** (2012-2016), qualitative research found that programme participation led to improved social status of participants as a result of improved living conditions and appearance. '*People used to mock me because I lived in a house covered with grass but since I built a better house they stopped and respect me*.' [C-Bu-T2F] and '*One of my neighbour used to laugh at my children saying that she is the one who feeds them however since the start of Terintambwe she has stopped and my children are well regarded because our living standards have significantly improved.*' [K-Ny-T2F] The level of respects appeared to depend on the extent to which the participant made visible progress, with community members considering the participant to be more respectable when having made considerable progress – '*Now, even respected people come to my house*' [CBu-TiM].Whilst, in **Malawi** (2017-2021) qualitative research undertaken in 2018 found that 9 out of 28 participants cited improved community relations.

That said, despite positive impacts, most programmes have reported some negative impacts – mostly in relation to jealously amongst community members. In **Burundi** (2012-2016), one programme participant spoken to reported that *'people do not regard me well because according to them I receive a salary from Terintambwe'* [K-Ka-CT1M]. A supervisor from the programme mentioning that *'There are jealousies from some community members who are angry that they were not involved in Terintambwe* [C-Ma-CS]. Similarly, in **Rwanda** (2012-2016), qualitative research found that resentment by non-participants led to loss of friendships, withholding of social assistance and even theft of assets. Though the scale of this is less clear.

In **Malawi** (2017-2021) whilst respondents cited negative changes in their external relationships and increased animosity in the community, it was the 24th most cited outcome and so it might not be as pervasive as suspected. The driver of negative changes were, for the most part, due to being participants of the programme. Receiving income support in particular, was cited as driving jealously and discrimination in the community. Several participants also mentioned having been crowded out from other available social protection programmes (MASAF and food for work programmes). Depending on the reason for this, this either potentially undermines the prospects of sustained improvements in living conditions or could be a sign of programme success – that these individuals are no longer meet the criteria for being considered living in extreme poverty.

Sense of wellbeing

How the graduation approach affects the psychological well-being of treated households was studied both quantitatively and qualitatively in **Malawi** (2017-2021). In the quantitative study, data was collected on both male and female spouses separately using an index comprising three measures; I) the total number of days the individual did not exhibit specific symptoms of depression in the prior week, II) the total number of days the individual did not exhibit specific symptoms of stress in the prior week, and III) their level of satisfaction with their current life situation.

Research found that male spouses in participating households saw, on average, a one day increase in the total number of days that they are not depressed, over half a day increase in the total days they are not stressed and a 0.38 point increase on a scale of 10 in a life satisfaction score (see figure two). These results were considered statistically significant by research partners. A similar picture was shown for female spouses who reported an increase in the total number of non-stressed days in the prior week and who scored 0.5 points higher (on a 10-point scale) in terms of life satisfaction than those in the control group (see figure three).

Figure 2: Psychological Well-Being Components, Male Spouses
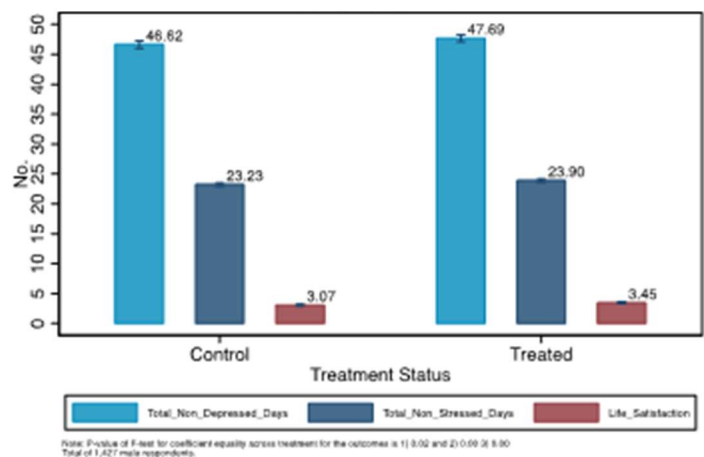
Figure 3: Psychological Well-Being Components, Female Spouses
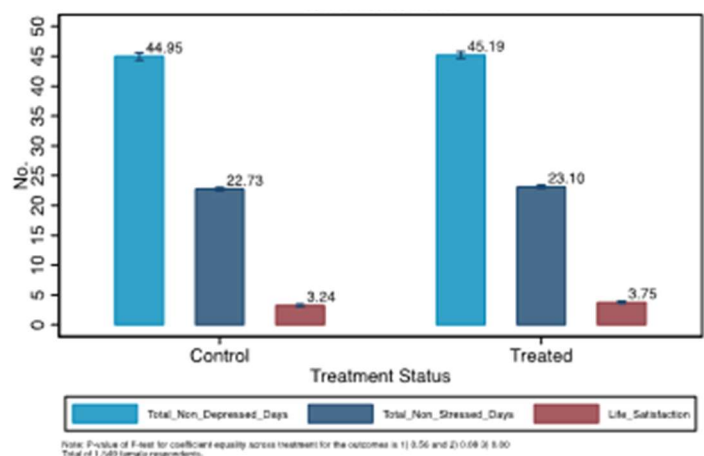
These results were backed up qualitatively with improved wellbeing frequently cited as a positive outcome in both 2018 and 2020 qualitative data collection. In 2018, 96%[2] of respondents reported that their own personal wellbeing had increased for the better during the period of study and 92%[3] reported that their household wellbeing had increased for the

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better over the same period. The key drivers of positive changes in overall wellbeing were cited as being the income support received and the participation in community-based savings groups and were explicitly attributed to participation in the Graduation Programme. Whilst in 2020, findings were slightly more varied. 57% of respondents interviewed reported that their own personal wellbeing had increased for the better during the period of study, with 54% reporting that their household wellbeing had increased. On the other hand 37% and 39% of participants also reported a decrease in their personal and household wellbeing respectively. The decrease in both personal and household wellbeing seen in 2020, was reported to be largely down to the outset of COVID-19 and the movement restrictions put in place to prevent transmission of the virus. These movement restrictions resulted in limited labour opportunities and decreased income. Households receiving couples training were more likely to report positive changes and the key drivers in overall wellbeing.

Sense of efficacy

Finally, the graduation approach has been to have significant impact on an individuals, household's and/or community's belief in their ability to complete tasks and reach goals – **sense of efficacy**. In **Malawi** (2017-2021), the average level of belief in the community's ability to complete tasks and reach goal increased from 5.81 at the start of the programme to 6.98 three years later. Households receiving the comprehensive package of support reported a higher level of community efficacy three years after the programme began than households reached by community activities despite similar starting scores. This was demonstrated in how households coped following the events of Cyclone Idai (2018) and COVID-19 (2020)[4]. A sense of efficacy is strongly aligned with the concept of resilience – defined as *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.*

Summary

Concern's experience has shown how the graduation approach can, and has, advanced social assets amongst programme participants. Participants have reported higher levels of community engagement, feelings of respect and sense of wellbeing which can be attributed to the programme itself. These improvements, whilst not only important in the short-term have also been shown to have positive long-term impacts including people's ability to cope in the face of shocks and stresses (see. Resilience brief).

However, qualitative studies have also reported the negative effects that being a participant of the programme has had on wider inter-community relationships down to (it appears) a misunderstanding of the targeting process, success of programme participants and an inadequate system for redressing complaints. The negative social impacts of programmes on inter-community relationships, whilst isolated, is disappointing especially as programmes are increasingly looking to address issues that affect the whole community. The drivers of negative external relationships should be explored further to ascertain what can be done to mitigate these impacts in the future.

One of the challenges has been how we adequately define, monitor and measure social assets – with huge variation in definitions and measurement across the organisation. This has led to work being done to standardise the indicators used to monitor changes in social assets and, from this will applicable to all new programmes. 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?

[4] See Concern Worldwide (2024) Building Resilience to Recurrent Shocks: The Graduation Approach