

Achieving social impact through Graduation programmes

Background

Graduation programmes support people living in extreme and chronic poverty with a pathway out of it. They provide sequenced and tailored packages of support to help people address the barriers they face to moving out of a poverty - from situations often defined by food insecurity and high levels of vulnerability, towards sustainable livelihoods.

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 graduation programmes (also known as economic inclusion programmes), they are crucial to programme success and sustainability. Social assets, which include networks, group membership, relationships of trust and access to wider societal institutions should also consider an individual's 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).

This paper looks at the social impacts of Concern's Graduation programme in Malawi; specifically at how well the programme has advanced social assets of programme participants.

Graduation in Malawi

Concern has been implementing a Graduation programme in two districts (Nsanje and Mangochi) of southern Malawi since 2017. The programme, designed to address the many challenges of extreme poverty, targeted 2,000 households (directly reaching 12,800 people) with a comprehensive package of support consisting of income support, technical and business skills training, coaching, access to financial services and capital.

The programme fosters a community-wide approach to addressing issues that affect the whole community (including climate risks and lack of financial service provision) therefore, alongside the 2,000 households reached with a comprehensive package of support, a further 6,000 households (38,400 individuals) benefit from a broader set of activities (such as training on climate-smart

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

agriculture technologies, community-based saving and loan associations)². The programme also takes a gender transformative approach to tackle entrenched gender attitudes and norms and is complemented by research, led by Concern and TIME (Trinity Impact Evaluation Unit) at Trinity College Dublin, which is testing the efficacy of gender transformative dialogue approach with couples.

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.

Here we present data on community efficacy - the belief in the community's ability to complete tasks and reach goals, external relationship, overall sense of well-being and personal bandwidth – having the mental and emotional capacity to deal with a variety of situations. Data is taken from annual programme monitoring and supplemented with qualitative findings from the QUIP (2018; 2020) as well as a study on the effects of Cyclone Idai in 2019 and two studies on the effects of COVID-19 in 2020.

Findings so far

Community efficacy

Perceived community efficacy reflects an optimistic belief in one's community. This is the belief that the community can perform basic or difficult tasks, or cope with adversity. Perceived community efficacy facilitates goal-setting, effort investment, persistence in the face of challenges and recovery from setbacks.

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. In Malawi, the average level of belief in the community's ability to complete tasks and reach goal has increased from 5.81 at the start of the programme to 6.98 three years later. This increase was seen in both Mangochi (which saw an increase from 5.95 to 6.61) and Nsanje (which saw an increase from 5.66 to 7.67). Household 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.



'Community Members at Luwalika in Mangochi' © Eoin Hickey, Concern Worldwide (2019)

External relationships

The effect of the programme on external relationship is less clear and data is mixed. In the 2018 QUIP exercise, 9 out of 28 participants cited improved community relations whilst 7 out of 28 participants cited improved networks since participating in the programme. Positive changes were attributed to a number of drivers including participating in agricultural training and community-based savings groups.

² Concern Worldwide Malawi (2018) [Enabling Sustainable Graduation out of Poverty for the Extreme Poor in Malawi](#). Concern Worldwide Malawi: Lilongwe

Similar numbers of respondents cited negative changes in their external relationships and increased animosity in the community however, although that study ranked it as the 24th most cited outcome suggesting that it might not be as pervasive issue as suspected.

The driver of negative changes were, for the most part, due to being participants of the programme (2018 and 2020). Receiving income support in particular, was cited as driving jealousy and discrimination in the community. In addition to this increased animosity, several participants also mentioned having been crowded out from other available social protection programmes (MASAF and food for work programmes) due a result of their participation in the graduation programme. 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.

Despite efforts to promote fair distribution of resources and fostering a community-wide approach to addressing issues that affect the whole community, isolated cases of jealousy were cited again in the 2020 QUIP. A misunderstanding of the targeting process or the perceived success of programme participants were cited as drivers.



'Mary Joseph, Mpomba Village'
© Chris Gagnon, Concern Worldwide
(2021)

Sense of wellbeing

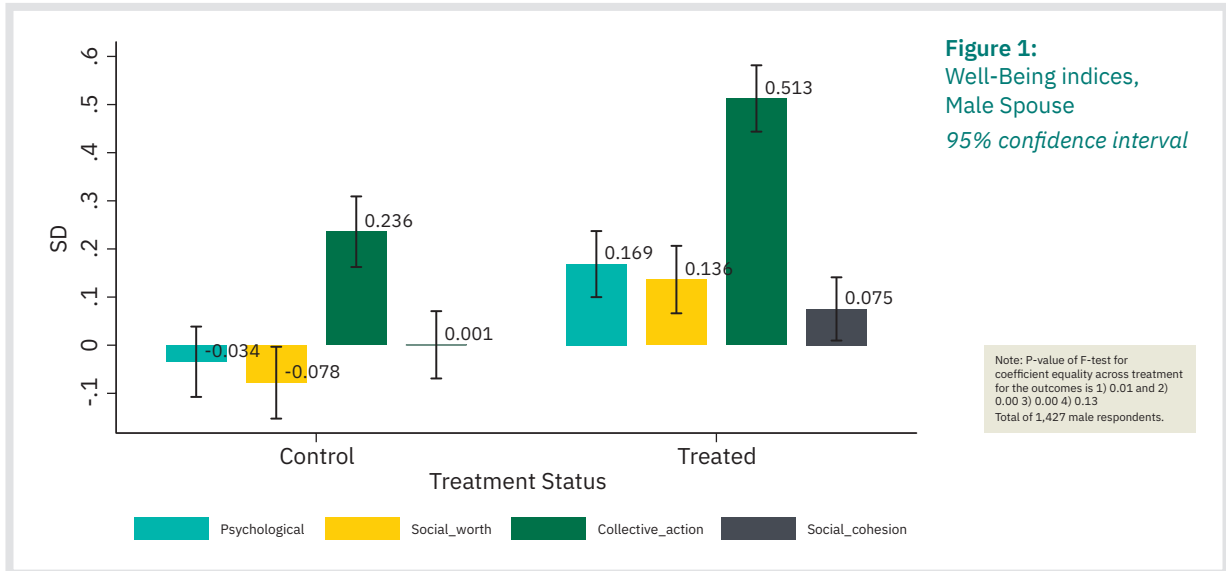
Improved wellbeing was frequently cited as a positive outcome in both the 2018 and 2020 QUIPs. In 2018, 96%³ of respondents reported that their own personal wellbeing had increased for the better during the period of study and 92%⁴ reported that their household wellbeing had increased for the better 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.

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.

How the graduation programme affects the psychological wellbeing of treated households was also studied. In the quantitative study data was collected on both male and female spouses separately using an index comprising three measures; the total number of days the individual did not exhibit specific symptoms of depression in the prior week, the total number of days the individual did not exhibit specific symptoms of stress in the prior week, and their level of satisfaction with their current life situation.

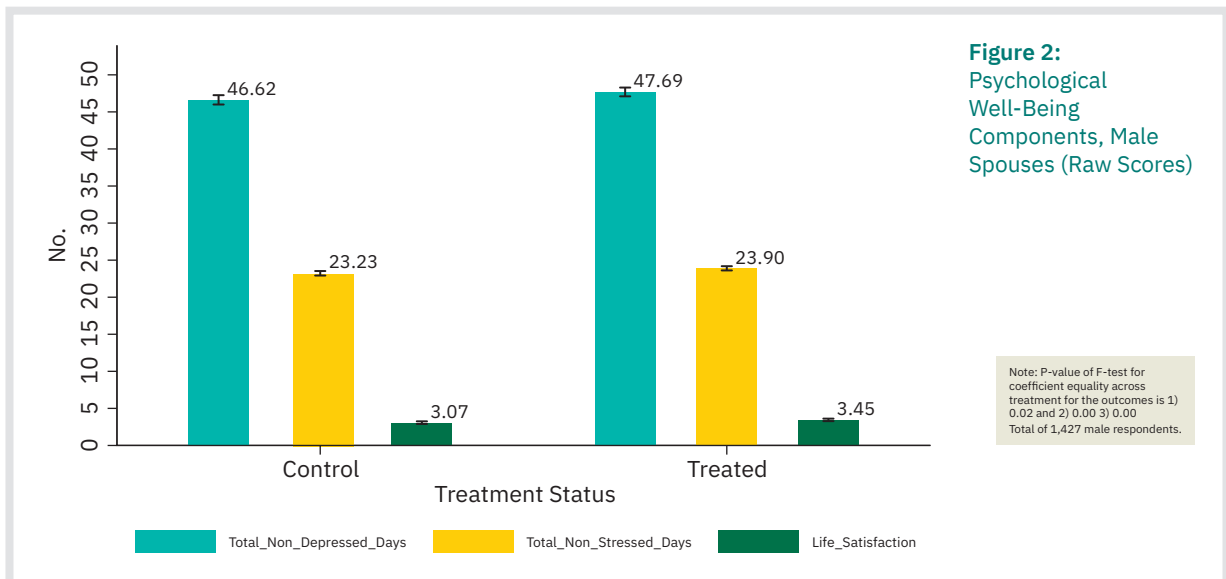
³ 1 participant did not answer the question

⁴ 2 participants did not answer the question



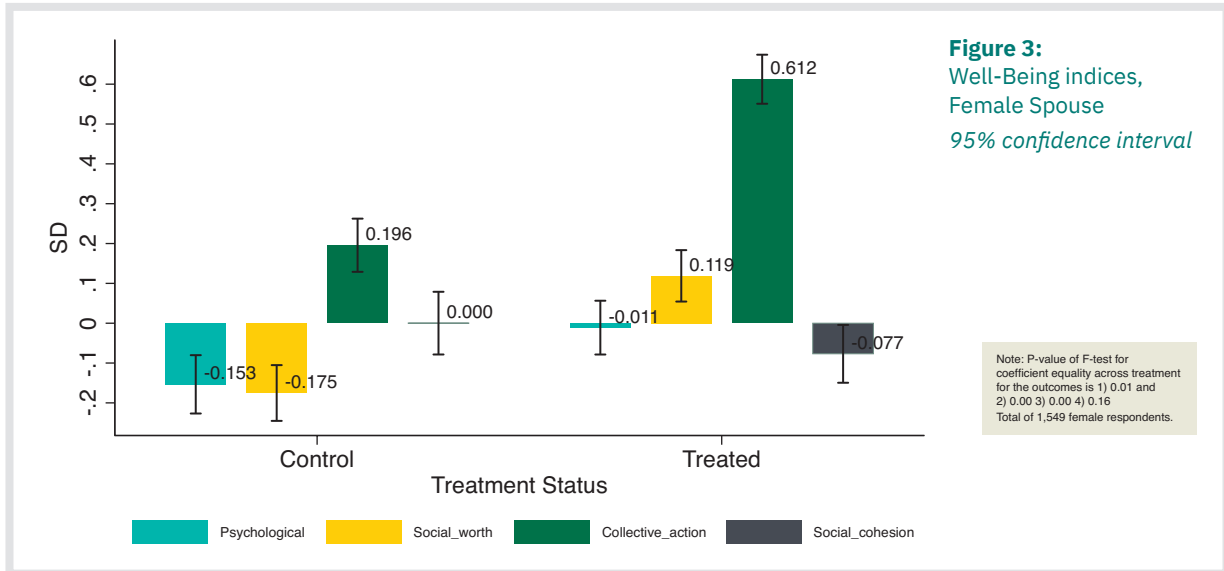
In figure 1 we see that (for the male spouse), being part of the graduation programme meant their mean psychological well-being score was 0.17 standard deviation above the mean, compared to households in the control arm who were -0.03 standard deviation below⁵. This is an increase from the baseline scores, where male spouses in participating households had a mean psychological well-being score of 0.12 standard deviation. As the psychological well-being index is standardised with mean 0 and standard deviation 1, this means that participating in the programme increased the psychological well-being of male spouses by 27% of the standard deviation of the well-being index.

Figure 2 breaks psychological well-being down further, and shows the results for the three individual measures used to create the psychological index.



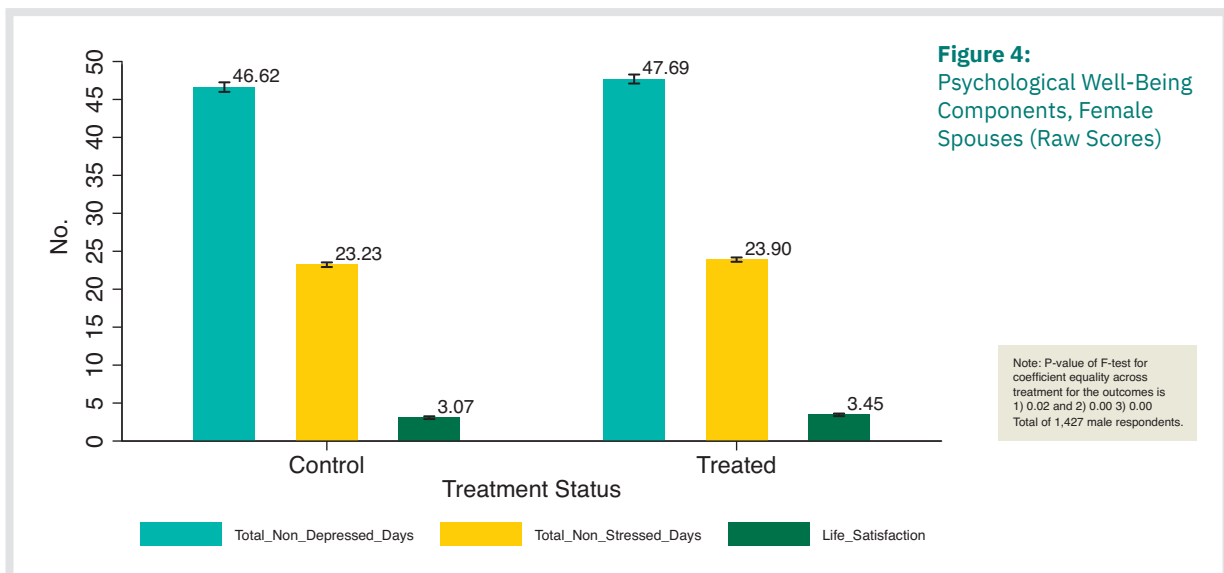
Here we see that male spouses in participating households, see a one day increase in the total number of days that they are not depressed, over half a day increase in the total days they are not stressed, a 0.38 point increase on a scale of 10 in the life satisfaction score. All of these results are statistically significant.

⁵ Standard deviation is a measure of how far away data is from the average (mean). Low standard deviation means data is close to the average and high standard deviation means data is further away.



Looking at the results for female spouses shows a similar picture. Being a participant in the graduation programme meant they had a score 0.142 standard deviation higher in their psychological well-being index (figure 3). This increase in psychological well-being is mainly driven by an increase in the satisfaction rating of her current situation.

In figure 4, we find that female spouses in participating households had a score of 0.5 points higher (on a 10-point scale) in terms of life satisfaction than those in the control group. It is also driven by a slight increase in total non-stressed days in the prior week.



Bandwidth

During the course of the programme (2017-2021) participants have had to deal with several covariate shocks. The first being in March 2019, when 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. The second being in 2020, when the world experienced the onset of the COVID-19 virus. Malawi, like most countries not only felt the health effects of the virus but also the impact of measures such as border closures and movement restrictions put in place to reduce or prevent transmission of the virus.

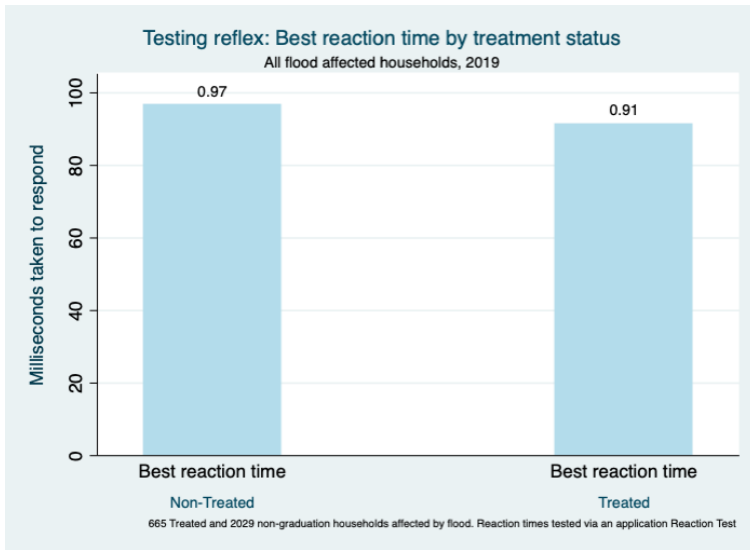


Figure 5:
Average Reaction Response Time and Flooding Effects

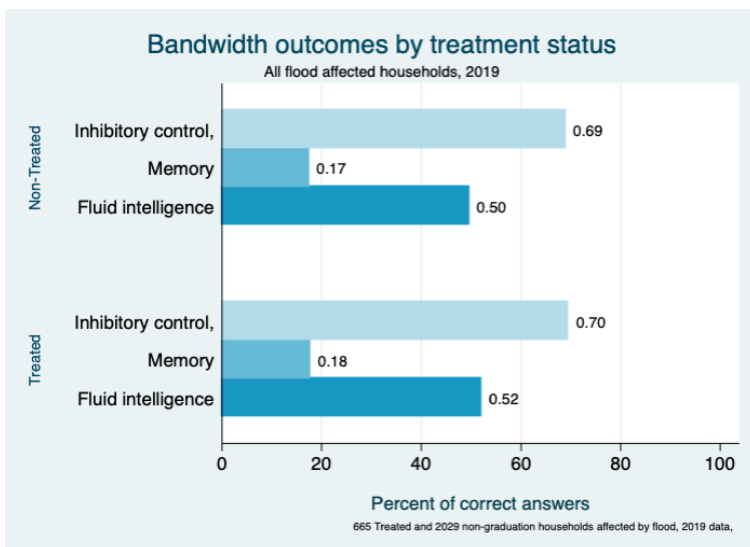


Figure 6:
Bandwidth outcomes by treatment status
All flood affected households, 2019

After these 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 they looked at memory, attention, inhibitory control and fluid intelligence (ability to problem solve, retain information and engage in logical reasoning). The study found that, of households affected by the flood, households not participating in the graduation programme had a slightly slower response than that of participating households. See Figure 5.

Figure 6 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 has a slightly higher percentage of correct answers across all three areas compared to household not participating in the programme.

Similarly, the study 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

The *Tiwooke* Graduation programme measures social impacts in a variety of manners, with data highlighting significant improvements in social assets (community efficacy, overall sense of well-being and personal bandwidth) which can be attributed to the programme itself. These improvements, whilst not only important in the short term are likely to have long-term impacts, and is a question that will be examined in more detail with the completion of the 2022 round of data collection (the endline). What is less clear is the effect that the programme has had on other social assets such as networks, group membership, relationships of trust and access to wider societal institutions. The introduction of community-based savings groups and agricultural training activities have been cited as having a positive effect on external relationships, however it is not clear whether this means that they improved relationships of trust, though the assumption is that they did.

Qualitative studies have also reported the negative effects that being a participant of the programme has had on wider inter-community relationships – cited as largely being down to a misunderstanding of the targeting process, perceived success of programme participants and an inadequate system for redressing complaints. The negative impact of the programme on inter-community relationships, whilst isolated, is disappointing given the approach of the programme, which fosters a community-wide approach to addressing issues that affect the whole community. The programme had adopted a comprehensive targeting process that involved participatory wealth ranking to ensure that the targeting process was not only transparent but that community members were involved in identifying those specific households to receive the comprehensive package of support. These drivers of negative external relationships will be explored further in the *ex-post* evaluation to ascertain what can be done to mitigate these impacts in the future.

This report is one of a series produced in November, 2021 that look at the impact of Concern's graduation programme in Malawi on (i) participant's resilience (ii) the impact of the gender transformative approach (Umodzi) being adopted (iii) employment outcomes and (iv) social impacts.

The full set is available from chris.connolly@concern.net or at Concern Insights page, using the following [link](#).