

Enabling Sustainable Graduation out of Poverty for the Extreme Poor

An overview of the Concern Worldwide Graduation Programme in Malawi

Introduction

Concern Worldwide's organisational focus on extreme poverty recognises the multi-dimensionality of extreme poverty characterised by three factors: the lack of basic assets and the low return on these assets; inequality; and risk and vulnerability. *How Concern Understands Extreme Poverty*¹ focuses our work on the causes, maintainers and obstacles that prevent people from escaping extreme poverty, and seeks to address them. In order to address these challenges, Concern developed a modified Graduation Model, based on the model first developed by BRAC in Bangladesh². The graduation approach utilises a multi-sectoral series of interventions (comprehensive targeting followed by consumption support in the form of cash transfers, skills training and coaching, saving and financial access, and asset transfers) to support a pathway out of extreme poverty³.

Concern's Graduation Programme in Malawi

AT A GLANCE:

Programme Title: Enabling Sustainable Graduation out of Poverty for the Extreme Poor in Malawi

Programme Objectives: To increase resilience to climate change and reduce inequality for extreme poor and poor households in Nsanje and Mangochi.

Approach: The programme adopts a graduation approach; an integrated package of support designed to not only move people above a certain wealth threshold but also facilitate a sustainable exit from extreme poverty. It also aims to address broader community problems through an enabling environment.

Target Group: Extreme poor and poor households with labour capacity. In addition, Cohort 1 focused on targeting Social Cash Transfer (SCT) beneficiaries, while Cohort 2 and 3 included married/couple households, due to an accompanying research project focusing on gender dynamics influence on the success of the graduation model.

Number of Direct Targeted Beneficiaries: 8,000 households in total (approximately 40,000 total direct beneficiaries), including 2,000 receiving graduation package of activities and 6,000 receiving enabling environment activities.

Programme Duration: 2017-2021 (5 years)

Programme Location: Mangochi (TA Katuli) and Nsanje (TA Chimombo, Makoko, Ndamera and Ngabu)

¹ How Concern Understands Extreme Poverty, Concern Worldwide, April 2016

² CGAP (2014) From Extreme Poverty to Sustainable Livelihoods. A Technical Guide to the Graduation Approach

³ BRAC (2015) PROPEL Toolkit. An Implementation Guide to the Ultra-Poor Graduation Approach

Implementation of the 5 Graduation Approach Components in the programme

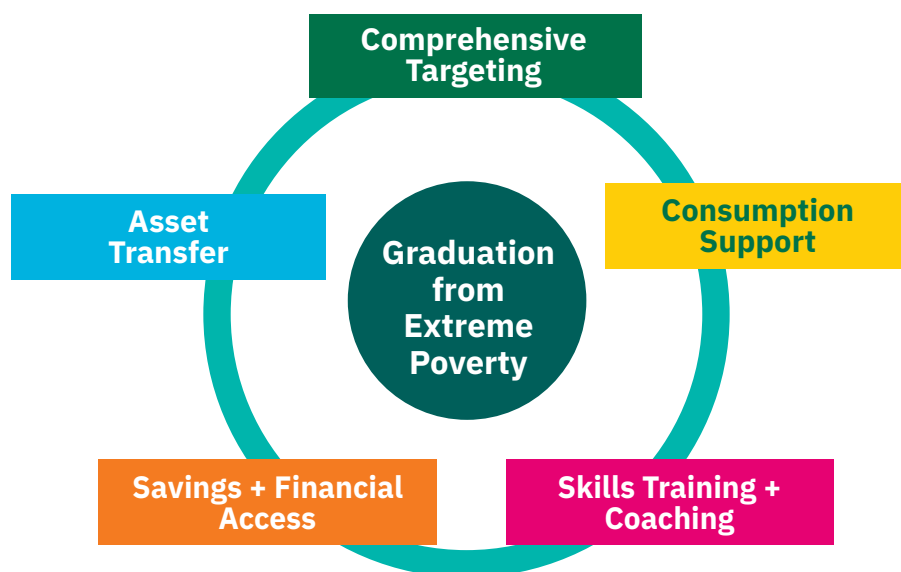


Figure 1: The 5 components of Graduation approaches

Comprehensive targeting: The programme targeted households in Mangochi and Nsanje that were in the extreme poor and poor category. The programme planned to reach 2,000 households with the graduation package of activities. Concern engaged 2000 households in the graduation package across 3 cohorts. The first cohort (pilot phase) was engaged from 2017 to 2019, the second cohort from 2018 to 2019 and the third cohort from 2019 to April 2021. During programme implementation some households ended up dropping out or being removed from the programme activities, with 1,858 household completing the full package of activities (199 cohort 1, 816 cohort 2 and 843 in cohort 3).

Consumption Support: Concern provided monthly cash transfers to graduation households. The households were given MK 15,000 each month over a set period of time. Concern used manual cash transfers for participant households in both Mangochi and Nsanje. Transfers were done between 25th and 30th of each month. Programme participants highlighted they liked the programme because the transfers were timely, i.e. they knew when to expect the transfers, so it was easier to plan for the use of the cash. Households used the consumption support mainly for purchase of food, household items, school fees for children and to cover health expenses.

Skills Training and Coaching: Coaching and mentoring was conducted by programme employed case workers (field monitors). Coaching was done through bi-monthly visits to each of the graduation households. Cohort 1 household visits were done over an 24 month period while cohort 2 and 3 visits were done over 18 months. Concern engaged a local partner, Churches Action in Relief and Development (CARD) to implement the coaching and mentoring in Nsanje. A wide range of topics were discussed during household visits including: progress of performance contracts, Income Generating Activity (IGA) performance, WASH, Village Savings and Loans (VSL), Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA), Home gardens, food budgeting, education, exit messaging and COVID19.

Within the research component on gender (see below), follow-ups were made on the gender curriculum (called Umodzi) for treatment 3 households to understand impacts after the series of training sessions. Positive impacts were observed in the lives of targeted households, including changes in collective decision-making and sharing of household roles and responsibilities, among others.

During household visits participants were able to bring up a broad range of topics, and case workers provided linkages/referrals as relevant to connect programme participants. Most linkages and referrals were to district level government support from Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture and Victim Support Units (VSU) or Ministry of Gender.

The programme also provided some skills trainings, focusing on enhancing human capital. These included practical, short, hands-on trainings in Business Skills (for graduation households only) and Gender Transformative/*Umodzi* curriculum (for treatment 3 households in the graduation component). These trainings are discussed in more detail below. Other trainings provided in the Enabling Environment component are also discussed below.

Savings and Financial Access: All graduation households were included in Village, Savings and Loans (VSL) groups. Graduation households chose if they wanted to join already existing groups, continue with their old groups (if they were already members) or if they wanted to form new groups either just with members other graduation households or a mix of graduation households and other community members. Concern worked closely with Village Agents, who were trained by Concern in VSL methodology, to provide support and capacity building for the VSL groups. Village Agents were sensitised on COVID-19 prevention and response measures, and during COVID-19 VSL group meetings were modified accordingly. At the end of each group cycle and share out, members opted whether to continue with their VSL groups. Members used savings to purchase livestock, bicycles, building materials, support their businesses and for consumption, among others.

Capital Transfer: All cohort 1, cohort 2 and cohort 3 graduation households were trained on Concern Worldwide's *17 Point Business Skills Curriculum*. This is a Business Skills Training (BST) model tailored for participants with low levels of literacy, as an interactive approach using pictures and illustrations to impart knowledge on how to run a business. The model has 17 points (or topics) with one topic administered each week over 17 weeks. The business skills trainings were implemented by case workers to their respective graduation households. Graduation households were also trained on how to identify a suitable Income Generating Activity (IGA) along with the BST. After completion of the BST and the IGA identification, participants were supported by the case workers to develop a business plan. A short template was filled by each of the households on each selected IGA. After completion and approval of the business plans households received a capital transfer, in the amount of MK 96,000 to initiate a new IGA or boost an existing one. Participants also underwent training on technical skills in different IGA (such as tailoring, carpentry, baking, motorbike mechanics, brick laying and haircutting). The most common types of IGAs chosen by participants included fish selling, selling agricultural produce and selling livestock.

Additional components within the Concern Worldwide graduation approach in Malawi

Community Enabling Environment Activities

The programme also worked with the wider community, in addition to the selected cohort 1, cohort 2 and cohort 3 graduation households, to reduce vulnerability to the impacts of climate change and locally identified hazards. This was done by promoting Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA) and facilitating community access to savings and credit, to support livelihoods development.

The following activities were conducted as part of the Enabling Environment package (with COVID-19 measures observed as relevant).

- Health and nutrition, and hygiene promotion
- Capacity building for field level extension services (lead farmers)
- Promotion of Conservation Agriculture (CA) through demonstration plots and field days
- Agroforestry trainings
- Facilitating access to agricultural inputs through non-subsidised seed fairs and mobilisation of private agro-dealers
- Training of community animal health workers (CAHW)
- Cooperative Association member education training and cooperative registration
- Facilitating access to savings and loans services at community level
- Support to community level Disaster Risk Reduction and Management activities
- Support for local structures e.g. Village Development Committees (VDC) and Area Development Committees (ADC)
- Stakeholder capacity building and engagement
- Improving knowledge, attitudes and practices towards those living with or affected by HIV and AIDS to reduce stigma. This was done through partnership with 2 national NGO - **Community Initiative for Self-Reliance (CISER)** in Mangochi and **Friends of AIDS Support Trust (FAST)** in Nsanje
- Influencing promotion and uptake of CSA technologies at district and national level through partnership with the **Climate Smart Agriculture Civil Society Network (CISANET)**, focusing on CSA policy and advocacy at district and national levels.

Research Component

Concern Worldwide and Trinity Impact Evaluation (TIME) Unit at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) undertook a comprehensive research component to explore the impact and interaction of graduation interventions and gender empowerment on household welfare, looking at whether a gender transformative component enhances graduation programme outcomes. The results from the research will contribute to on-going discussions on Social Protection in Malawi, while at a global level this will be the first study to examine the gender dynamics of the graduation model. The results will therefore inform a variety of approaches, including on cash transfers, the graduation approach and ways to address inequality.

Transforming gender and power relations (Umodzi): As part of the research component, Concern facilitated monthly gender-transformative dialogue sessions over a 12 month period with the third research treatment arm of cohort 2 and 3 households. In this treatment, the cash transfer recipient is a women and the couple also benefits from gender transformative trainings as part of the Randomized Control Trial (RCT) impact evaluation led by Trinity College Dublin (TCD). The trainings aims to provoke positive social norm change within households to ensure women and men benefit equally from the graduation package of activities, reduce any adverse effects graduation approaches may have on women's safety and/or household dynamics, and to promote positive relationships between women and men to benefit all members of the household.

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](#).