

REGRADE RESILIENCE + GRADUATION + EVIDENCE

CONCERN
worldwide

 Irish Aid
Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

LEARNING BRIEF: FINAL EVALUATION LESSONS LEARNED & RECOMMENDATIONS

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The programme was relevant and majorly achieved the planned outcomes and impact.
- The design is scalable to many other locations and countries.
- The planning process, targeting and activity selection was participatory, rigorous and transparent.
- The watershed approach was effective.
- The Graduation model used demonstrated the ability of targeted beneficiaries to graduate to a food secure status.
- To ensure sustainability, government is encouraged to maintain the momentum as it takes over responsibility of the programme.

INTRODUCTION

From 2017–2021, Concern Worldwide implemented an Irish Aid funded Graduation Programme entitled REGRADE: REsilience / GRADuation / Evidence with the goal to ‘build livelihood security and improve nutritional outcomes among the extremely poor households living in South Wollo, Amhara and Wolaita Zones, SNNPR Ethiopia’. Graduation programmes provide an integrated and sequenced package of support to create pathways out of extreme poverty.

This includes:

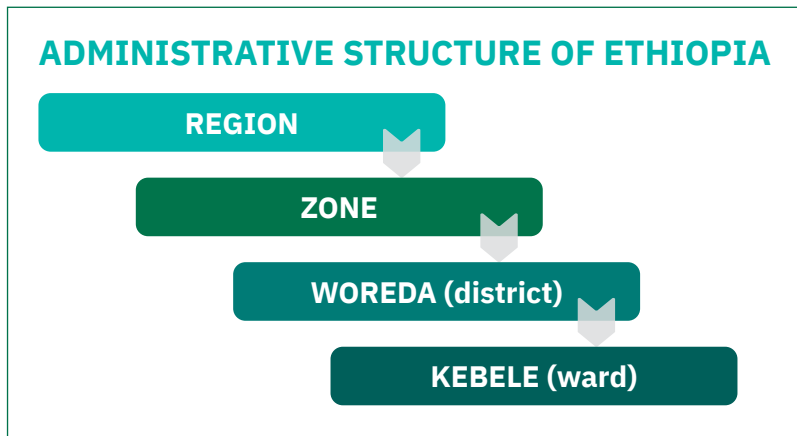
- social protection
- livelihood promotion
- financial inclusion
- social empowerment

The approach helps programme participants meet their basic needs whilst allowing them the opportunity to invest in themselves and expand new or existing livelihood activities. In addition to building household assets, the REGRADE Programme aimed to address the root cause of poverty in a given context and so it followed a Participatory Community-Based Watershed Management Approach in order to build the resilience of participating households and the wider community. This approach is a priority of the Ethiopian government and policy is guided by the Participatory Watershed Development Guidelines. Watershed Management is the process of managing human activities and natural resources within a watershed, taking into account social, economic, environment and community interests.

DESIGN OF REGRADE



An external consultant (Oda Development Consultant) was contracted to carry out a Final Evaluation to assess the overall impact of the programme. The evaluation assessed the programme against the OECD-DAC criteria, key Concern policies and approaches, and provided evidence-based recommendations. The evaluation recommends scaling up of the programme design through the application of lessons learned and promotion of good practice. A mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were



used in the evaluation including structured household surveys, document review, focus group discussions, key informant interviews and direct observation. This brief outlines the lessons learned and recommendations from the evaluation.

EVALUATION CONCLUSION

The overall conclusion of the evaluation is that the programme was relevant and majorly achieved the stated outcomes and outputs and is scalable to other locations both within Ethiopia and other countries.

The planning process, *woreda*, micro watershed and beneficiary selection was participatory, rigorous, and transparent. The programme demonstrated that the watershed approach is effective. Moreover, the resilience and Graduation model demonstrated the possibility of accelerating graduation of target households out of food insecure status. The evaluation also found that the programme was streamlined with government and Concern processes. While the capacity building actions were included in the programme, the evaluator found that the sustainability of benefits will depend on the government structure and functionality. The evaluation also found that considering the impacts brought about as a result of the programme implementation and unit cost (beneficiaries to total cost), the programme provided value for money.

KEY ASPECTS OF LESSONS LEARNED

Overall

- The resilience and Graduation model was tested and found practicable. Components of the programme namely effective targeting, cash and assets transfer, coaching and mentoring, training, livelihood diversification, and Graduation performed well. To enhance the process of graduation from poverty, the evaluation recommends strengthening the skills of front-line staff (case workers).
- Integrating the programme with other Concern and Government programmes demonstrated the possibilities of soliciting other funding, enhancing sustainability, reducing costs and increasing programme impacts.
- The Graduation model used in this programme showed that it is possible to accelerate graduation of resource poor households to a food secure status. It was found that effective targeting, consumption smoothing/cash transfer, training, livelihood diversifications, coaching and linkages with financial institutions were important elements of this success. It is recommended that these activities be maintained and strengthened through increasing the size of the cash fund injection, engaging in fast returning IGA. Furthermore, the role of the case workers was found to be very successful and this element is strongly recommended for future similar programmes.
- Although stakeholders are contributing their time, energy, and resources, this was not accounted for as matching funds in the programme documentation. The evaluator recommends valuing this

matching fund and acknowledging contributors as it develops the sense of ownership, which has implications on sustainability of the services and interventions.

- The sustainability of the programme service and impacts very much depend on the commitment of the local government in terms of budget allocation and ensuring their functionality at optimal level going forwards. As such the transition period is important in planning in sufficient time and official handing over as the programme has done.

Targeting

- Using the Government of Ethiopia's Hot Spot Classification as criteria for target woreda selection was a sensible and transparent targeting methodology.
- Beneficiary selection using participatory wealth ranking, appraisal at community level and further screening through the complaints response mechanism (CRM) was acknowledged in the evaluation for its role in reducing inclusion and exclusion errors.
- It is important that the households to be targeted are registered in the name of both the wife and husband to promote equality in benefits of the programme.

Soil and Water Conservation

- The micro watershed approach used in this programme demonstrated the possibility to increase impacts due to the connected interventions and development of a sense of ownership by the community. It is recommended that this approach be replicated with a detailed study to ensure that all parts of the watershed are covered by the end of the programme period.
- The watershed approach was found to be feasible and replicable. The programme tested using the watershed approach instead of a geographical targeting model, and this was found to result in what the evaluator termed 'superior features':
 - » Interventions under the watershed approach were interconnected and supported each other
 - » Using the micro watershed as the targeted area of the intervention concentrated the programme activities and benefits in a small area, which boosted the impact on people in that area.
 - » The watershed approach promoted a sense of belonging, as the whole community were the direct beneficiaries of the conservation work. Community members reported a sense of ownership, which the evaluator found promoted programme sustainability.
- Soil and water conservation (SWC) activities were carried out on communal land and farmlands. The communal lands are closed and relatively safe, while structures constructed on the farmland can be negatively affected due to open grazing.
- For cases of micro watersheds that fall between two or more *kebeles*, the watershed committee is formed by representatives from all the *kebeles*. For this reason, it is imperative that the *kebeles* are connected for joint actions to ensure representation and sustainability. The watershed committee in these cases also has the potential to act as a peace-building tool, given the joint planning and conservation of natural resources for the benefit of all communities in the affected *kebeles*.

- The registration of the watershed committees is a positive step. Some committees in Wolaita registered at the Justice Office and some committees in South Wollo registered at the Agricultural Office. However, the government has issued proclamation number 1223/2020 which states that the Agricultural Office's duty is "In cooperation with the office responsible to organize cooperative societies shall organize the founding committee of community watershed users cooperative societies". Hence, there is a need to align the registration with the proclamation and make required adjustments during and after the phasing out of the programme.
- Open grazing can potentially harm conserved areas and the programme impacts. Hence, care is required from the government side on how to sustain SWC measures constructed on farmlands under the open grazing system.
- *Kebeles* are umbrella structures for Watershed committees. In the case of where a watershed committee is formed by representatives from two or more *kebeles*, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) among *kebeles* is in place to ensure the sustainability and coordination as part of the handing over process.
- It was noted that the lower part of the micro watersheds in most cases are not yet covered by conservation measures but the construction of structures on the remaining parts of watershed is included in the MoU as the responsibility of the Government of Ethiopia.

Early Warning

- Implementation of early warning activities was not as strong as responses to disasters. However, the role of early warning activities in saving lives and reducing suffering was stressed and therefore additional effort to support the Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) committees through simplifying their tasks or digitising systems. Furthermore, the linkage between the DRR committee and development agents was stressed as needing strengthening.
- Though the system and structure are in place for DRR/EW, the performance particularly for early warning was limited. One of the reasons was the time and energy required for data collection, analysis and submitting the report. Hence, the introduction of a digital system that can reduce the workload and improve quality information communication on time is recommended for the future. Moreover, strengthening the linkage between the *kebele* agriculture office and DRR committee is recommended.
- Early warning is as important as response, hence strengthening the early warning aspect of the disaster risk reduction component is recommended for future programmes.
- Early warning system should be led by the community (Community early warning system)
- It is important to link development efforts (Resilience building and evidence base graduation) with timely emergency response (whenever shock and stress happened) to prevent any negative impact on the graduation efforts.

Agriculture

- The introduction of improved drought resistance and/or frost tolerant varieties of crops was noted as a smart choice by the evaluator. An important lesson learned was that the programme's choice to use

multiple character crops notably fast growing, early maturing and drought resistant varieties as solutions to the impact of poor rainfall performance. The programme also explored using more root crops as they retain moisture better than crops that grow above ground. Furthermore, timely replacement of the old generation of improved seed was also noted as a lesson, as improved seed cannot be reused indefinitely without losing some productivity.

- The programme imported improved local breeds of shoats that upgraded the genetic makeup of the shoats in the programme area. This was an unintended benefit of the programme, and was recommended as a strategy to be considered in future programmes. Furthermore, maximising impact through promotion of consumption of goat milk was noted as a way to reinforce the nutrition component of the programme.
- Conducting a market assessment and linking graduating households with other marketing actors was noted as a positive step in the evaluation. This could be expanded on by conducting a full value chain study that would show the value chain stages, actors and functions for the identified income-generating activity (IGA). Selecting fast returning IGAs is also recommended to increased income and accelerate Graduation.
- The programme imported improved local breeds of goats and sheep that contributed to upgraded genetic makeup. Hence, the Woreda Livestock and Fishery Office is recommended to continue and strengthen such support in the future.
- The programme capacitated multipurpose cooperatives (for example in Wolaita for haricot bean) to distribute improved seed and revolve in the future. The strategy proposed was that households pay back haricot bean in kind to the cooperative after harvesting. Considering the quality of seed after several generations, there are reservations that households might pay back inferior seed, which could result in the failure of the revolving commodity scheme in a short period of time. Therefore, it is recommended that cooperatives and government offices observe this carefully and work to ensure quality seed supply.
- The yield from improved varieties of introduced crops reduced over time, which calls for the timely replacement of the seed with youngest generation to maintain better productivity. This responsibility is mainly vested in cooperatives with the support of the Agricultural and Natural Resource Office to maintain seed as true to type. Moreover, connecting beneficiaries with input suppliers and support multipurpose cooperatives to play their role as input suppliers.
- The integration of biological and physical conservation measures is appreciable as it has multiple benefits like fodder for livestock, agroforestry to enhance soil fertility and conserve soil. However, the programme minimally integrated fruit trees, which can support HH nutrition. Therefore, agriculture and natural resource offices are recommended to strengthen the effort to produce and distribute fruit trees as has started at Wolaita.
- The results of a feasibility study on carbon credit opportunities for communities in Wolaita watershed were not encouraging, and so the activity was cancelled. The evaluator appreciated that this cancellation of activity was sensible and based on evidence. However, there is a recommendation to instead introduce other climate smart agricultural activities including composting, promoting improved cropping practice, biological pest management, vermiculture, which

can enhance soil fertility, reduce use of chemicals and the emission of greenhouse gasses. These interventions can be integrated with other activities such as increased production and productivity in addition to enhancing soil health.

Savings and Loans

- It was noted that there was a shift from using Micro Finance Institutions (MFI) as financial intermediaries to using Rural Savings and Credit Cooperatives (RuSACCOs), which was a positive step to empower local communities and enhance sustainability. Working with RuSACCOs has multiple advantages; they are owned by members where all benefits go to them in the form of dividends, interest rates are lower, and the revolving fund remains within the community, which might not be in the case for MFI.
- Village Economic and Social Associations (VESA) and Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA) are informal financial institutions that can cultivate the culture of saving and credit; they also support social funds for times of shock and stress. It was recommended by the evaluators to strengthen the linkages between VESAs/VSLAs and RuSACCOs.
- The programme shifted from using MFIs to RuSACCOs, which had several major benefits. These were: RuSACCOs are owned by the members and profit goes back to members through the dividend sharing; the interest rate in RuSACCOs (9-13%) is lower than that of MFIs (about 19%); working capital injected into RuSACCOs remains with the community; . other intermediaries to channel fund with multiple benefits to the community. Further more informal savings groups like the VESA and VSLA groups were also promoted by the programme, with the intention that they gradually join or grow to RuSACCOs. Since VESA and VSLA have no legal framework for registration, it is recommended to continue to promote these informal structures to encourage a culture of saving, but to continue to strengthen the links between VESA and RuSACCO to promote sustainability.