Adapting the Graduation Approach to Promote Resilience in the Ugandan Context

September 2024

Introduction

The United States Agency for International Development's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA)-funded Graduating to Resilience Activity (the Activity) developed a robust learning agenda to drive evidence generation and facilitate Activity implementation and adaptation. This technical brief documents the adaptations that the Activity made to the graduation approach based on the context in Kamwenge district in Western Uganda. The Activity triangulated data from internal and external sources at key points during the design, implementation, and post-implementation phases to continuously inform and adapt programming. These adaptations aimed to improve the quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of interventions while responding to the rapidly changing context. To view other technical briefs in this series please visit: www.avsi-usa.org and www.air.org.

Key Takeaways

The graduation approach has been tested and proven effective in helping participants escape from poverty and improve their quality of life.

The graduation approach relies on an organization's ability to adapt and contextualize interventions and implementation strategies to the specific needs of the target population based on individual contexts.

The USAID/BHA funded Graduating to Resilience Activity drew on internal and external data at key points during the design, implementation, and post-implementation phases to inform and adapt the graduation approach to fit the context in Uganda

Implementing organizations, donors, and governments interested in adapting to graduation approach should:

- Build in flexibility from the very beginning
- Design a robus monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) system to support adaptive management
- Incorporate evaluation and research activities strategically to test, assess, and adapt specific components while maintaining flexibility
- Invest in staff capacity building

Global Context

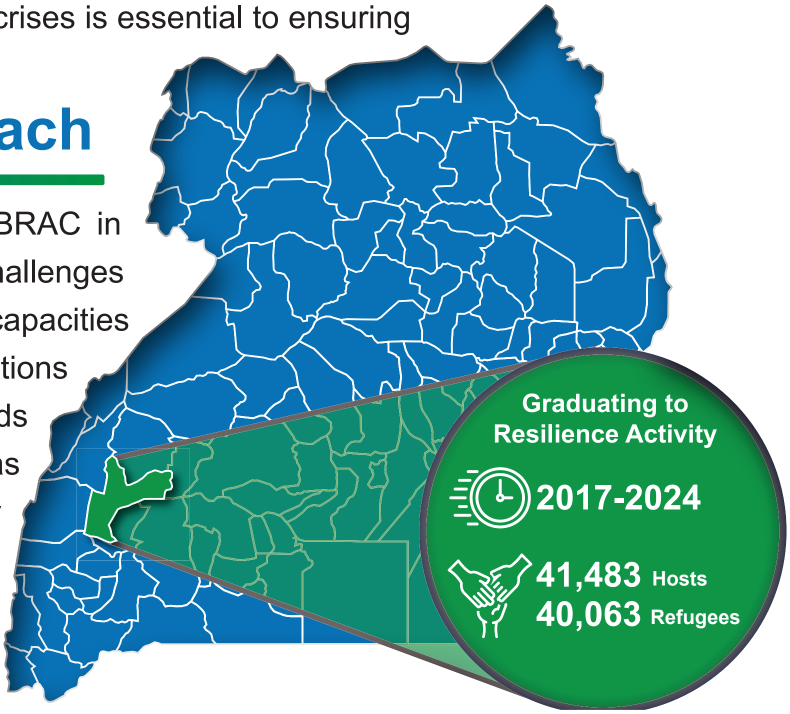
Substantial progress in reducing global poverty has been made over the past three decades; however, increasingly frequent and recurrent crises along with protracted conflicts and displacement threaten to derail development progress. This is particularly true for poor and extremely poor households that are disproportionately affected by such shocks and stressors. At the same time, donors are facing funding constraints and continued scrutiny over effectiveness of development assistance. In the face of these realities, governments and donors are looking for cost effective, sustainable interventions that can be applied at scale. The focus is on interventions that strengthen the resilience of individuals, households, communities, countries, and systems to prepare for and rebound from shocks and stressors. Strengthening resilience capacities and providing participants and implementers with the tools and resources to respond to and sustain well-being during crises is essential to ensuring that development progress is sustained.[6]

Global Context

- In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic increased the number of people in extreme poverty to **720 million.**[1]
- Severe food insecurity is estimated to affect more than **240 million** people until 2027.[2]
- Up to **130 million** more people may fall into extreme poverty by 2030 because of climate change.[3]
- Extreme poverty is largely **concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa.**[4]
- The world is experiencing a refugee crisis, with nearly **43 million refugees, 17 percent of whom have taken refuge in East Africa.**[5]

The Graduation Approach

The **graduation approach,** first used by BRAC in Bangladesh in 2002, seeks to address these challenges and strengthen household-level resilience capacities by delivering an integrated set of interventions that build on each other to help households address the root causes of poverty. Whereas traditional poverty alleviation programs may support those who are on the margins of poverty thresholds, the graduation approach targets the "ultra poor," those who suffer from



[1] The World Bank. Global Progress in Reducing Extreme Poverty Grinds to a Halt. 2022. https://tinyurl.com/2uastw2t

[2] The World Bank. A New Era of Development Annual Report 2023. 2023. https://tinyurl.com/mu5dprwx

[3] Jafino,Bramka Arga; Walsh,Brian James; Rozenberg,Julie; Hallegatte,Stephane. Revised Estimates of the Impact of Climate Change on Extreme Poverty by 2030 (English). Policy Research working paper,no. WPS 9417,COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Washington, D.C. : World Bank Group. https://tinyurl.com/6vk96uu4

[4] The World Bank,. Global Progress in Reducing Extreme Poverty Grinds to a Halt. 2022. https://tinyurl.com/2uastw2t

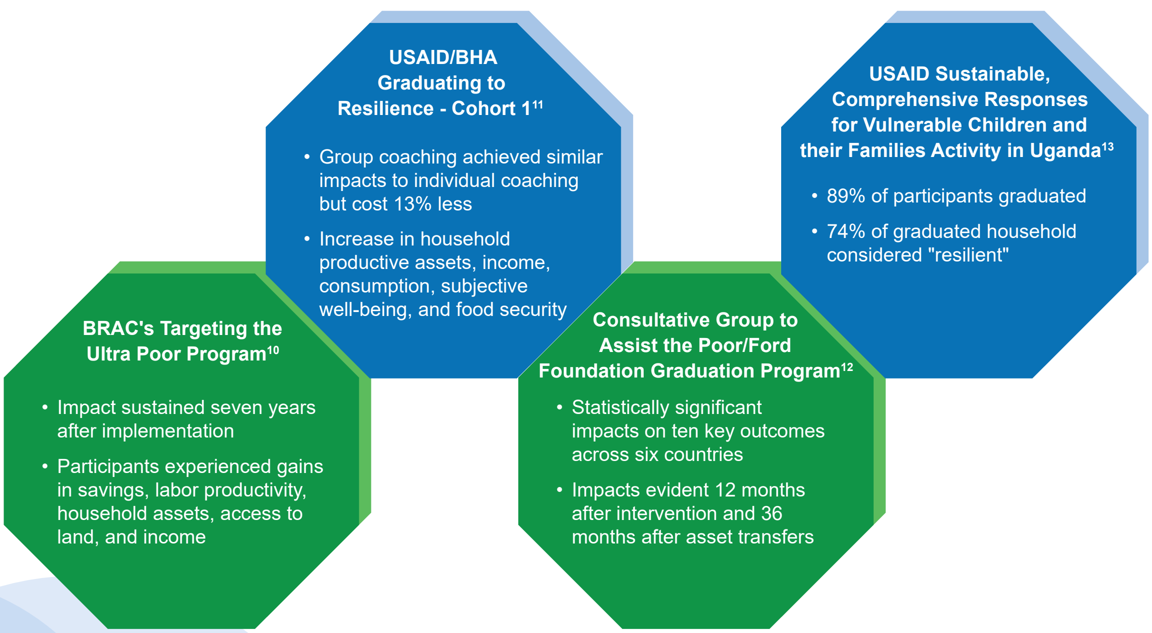
[5] UNHCR. Global Trends Report 2023. 2023. https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2023

[6] Harshani Dharmadasa et al., PROPEL Toolkit: An Implementation Guide to the Ultra-Poor Graduation Approach (Bangladesh: BRAC), 2015. https://tinyurl.com/5n79p79n

chronic food insecurity and fragile livelihoods and are acutely vulnerable to shocks and stressors. These populations tend to lack access to markets, social services, and even local and international support. The graduation approach is a **timebound, sequenced, multisectoral** set of interventions delivered at the household level that targets women and youth as primary participants and the point of entry to the household, but it engages all members through different activities. The graduation approach centers on four pillars: **(a) social protection, (b) livelihood promotion, (c) financial inclusion, and (d) social empowerment.**[7] Although the core elements of the approach are vital to addressing the key challenges facing poor and ultrapoor households, the success of the model relies on an organization's ability to adapt and contextualize the interventions and implementation strategies to the specific needs of the target population based on individual contexts.

Since 2002, the graduation approach has been tested in various countries and contexts and has **proven to be successful in helping participants escape from poverty and improve their quality of life**. Furthermore, the graduation approach has shown to provide long-term positive impacts with households sustaining economic gains in income, labor productivity, and household assets five years after implementation has concluded.[8] Given these positive findings, as of 2021, there have been 219 economic inclusion/graduation programs implemented in 75 countries, reaching nearly 92 million households and 70 million individuals, directly or indirectly.[9]

Exhibit 1. Graduation Program Successes



[7] PROPEL Toolkit, 2015.

[8] https://www.theigc.org/sites/default/files/2015/12/IGCJ2287_Growth_Brief_4_WEB.pdf

[9] Colin Andrews et al. (2021). The state of economic inclusion report 2021: The potential to scale. World Bank. https://tinyurl.com/2s4nvvre

[10] Balboni, C., Bandiera, O., Burgess, R., & Kaul, U. (2015). Transforming the economic lives of the ultrapoor. IGC Growth Brief Series 004. London.

[11] Technical and Operational Performance Support (TOPS) Uganda Graduation Randomized Control Trial Associate Award. 2022. Endline Report of the Resilience Food Security Activity Graduating to Resilience in Uganda, Cohort 1. Washington, DC: The TOPS Program.

[12] Banerjee, A., et al. (2015), A Multifaceted Program Causes Lasting Progress for the Very Poor: Evidence from Six Countries. https://tinyurl.com/yxd7wp5f

[13] E3 Analytics and Evaluation Project. 2018. Ex-Post Evaluation of the Sustainable, Comprehensive Responses for Vulnerable Children and their Families Activity in Uganda. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00TJ6B.pdf

Ugandan Context

Recognizing the profound impact that the graduation approach could have on tackling global poverty, in 2018, the USAID/Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) piloted graduation programming as part of its effort to reduce chronic food insecurity and promote sustainable pathways out of poverty for extremely poor populations.Hosting the largest number of refugees in Africa,[15] Uganda was identified as a good place to pilot the graduation approach because of its progressive government policies toward refugees including right to land, right to mobility, and right to work. In particular, the Kamwenge district in Western Uganda, home to the Rwamwanja refugee settlement, was identified as a target area for testing the graduation model because of several enabling factors, including the following:

- Access to existing social support systems and services including education and health services;
- Stable refugee settlement with refugee occupants settled for an average of six years;[16]
- A largely homogeneous refugee population, with the majority of refugees (99 percent) having Congolese nationality;
- Sociocultural and economic similarities between refugees and the host communities, which creates a welcoming environment and fosters cooperation between the two populations;
- Livelihood patterns and climate conditions similar in Kamwenge and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the primary country of origin for refugees, allowing for easier adaptation of livelihood skills; and
- Access to land, through government allocation, and local markets to promote livelihood development.[17]

USAID's contribution to the evidence base around the graduation approach: [14]

- 25+ graduation programs have been tested using **randomized impact evaluations** in 20+ countries, including fragile and conflict-affected contexts.
- Almost all find **positive impacts on income** (12–60 percent gain) and **consumption** (5–30 percent gain), and all evaluations find positive impacts on **assets** (10–400 percent gain) and **savings**.
- When measured, **food security, psychological well-being,** and **social capital** also tend to improve as a result of the graduation approach.
- Graduation programs **build vulnerable households' resilience** to shocks and stresses.

[14] USAID conducted an internal review of Activities using the graduation approach. Publication of conclusions from this review are forthcoming.

[15] USAID. (2016). Opportunities to provide refugees and Ugandans with alternative livelihood activities in Uganda's Kamwenge District.

[16] The Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement was established in 2012 and at the time that the Graduating to Resilience Activity started, the settlement was not receiving any new arrivals. Over the seven-year implementation period, the settlement has seen an influx of refugees with the new arrivals reaching 1.6 million refugees and asylum seekers as of December 2023. https://tinyurl.com/nueny7p4

[17] Opportunities to provide refugees and Ugandans with alternative livelihood activities in Uganda's Kamwenge District.

Graduating to Resilience Activity

With these conditions in mind, USAID/BHA funded the **Graduating to Resilience Activity** (the Activity), which adapted the graduation approach, contextualizing the design to support 13,200 refugee and Ugandan host community households in the Kamwenge district to graduate from conditions of food insecurity and fragile livelihoods to self-reliance and resilience. Using a woman-plus-household graduation approach, the Activity provided an integrated mix of interventions including coaching, farmer field business school (FFBS), enterprise selection, planning and management, financial and digital literacy, village savings and loan associations (VSLAs), food consumption support, asset transfer, referrals to critical services, linkages to private and public sector services, and business coaching.

To contribute to the evidence base and to help identify the most cost-effective and efficient approach to reaching ultra poor refugees and host community populations, **the Activity was implemented in two 24- to 30-month cohorts (2018–2021 and 2022–2023), with each cohort testing different variations of the model.** Through a randomized controlled trial (RCT) conducted by Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), the Activity tested these variations and generated rigorous evidence of impact compared to a control group. During Cohort One (2018–2021), the Activity tested three approaches: (a) the standard graduation model based on existing best practices (individual coaching) and adapted to the Ugandan and refugee context, (b) the group coaching model, which tested the efficacy of group coaching instead of one-on-one household coaching, and (c) the empowerment model, which tested the efficacy of direct asset transfers. Based on results generated from the Cohort One evaluation, the Activity then tested an additional variation of the model in Cohort Two (2022–2023), in which the group coaching model plus group interpersonal therapy (G-IPT) approach was compared to the group coaching approach model alone.

Exhibit 2. Cohort One and Cohort Two Activity Components

Cohort 1 Components	Arm 1 Standard Graduation	Arm 2 Group Coaching	Arm 3 Empowerment Model
Consumption Support	●	●	●
Livelihood Skills Training and Support	●	●	●
Savings and Financial Inclusion	●	●	●
Asset Transfer	●	●	▬
Coaching	Individual	Group	Individual
Linkage and Referrals	●	●	●

Cohort 2 Components	Arm 1 Standard Adapted Model	Arm 2 Standard Adapted Model + Mental Health
Consumption Support	●	●
Livelihood Skills Training and Support	●	●
Savings and Financial Inclusion	●	●
Asset Transfer	●	●
Coaching	Group	Group
Linkage and Referrals	●	●
Inter-personal Therapy - Group	▬	●

Graduating to Resilience Activity Adaptations

The Activity triangulated data from internal and external sources at key points during the design, implementation, and post-implementation phases to continuously inform and adapt programming. These adaptations aimed to **(a) improve the quality of interventions; (b) identify the most cost-effective design** to help USAID and other donors, implementing partners, and the Government of Uganda to determine how best to scale the model; **(c) respond to the rapidly changing context; and (d) ensure compliance with local and international standards and policies.**

In this technical brief, we document the adaptations that the Activity made throughout the life of the Activity. This includes adaptations made to the intervention design, processes, and delivery mechanisms to fit the local context. The brief is organized into two main sections.

Section one discusses the **graduation processes** including:

- Targeting
- Timing and sequencing
- Measurement

Section two discusses the six **graduation components:**

1. Coaching
2. Linkages and referrals
3. Financial literacy and savings
4. Consumption support
5. Livelihood skills training and support
6. Asset transfer

Data Sources That Informed Adaptations

- **Internal Data**
  - Performance indicator data
  - Participant feedback
  - After action reviews
  - Formative assessment findings
  - Operational research
- **External Data**
  - External impact evaluation
  - Context monitoring data
  - Emergent external evidence
  - Policy changes

Within each section, the first subsection (in the blue box) **describes the purpose of the graduation processes or component,** drawing on literature and documentation from the graduation community of practice. This description of the graduation process or component lays the framework for the subsequent subsection, which then discuss **how the Activity adapted** the graduation process or component, including what data and information were used to inform the adaptation to meet the needs of the refugee and host communities in Kamwenge district. Lastly, where possible, results of how these adaptations affected implementation and outcomes is provided.

The Activity made many adaptations, large and small, throughout the seven-year implementation period. To contribute to the graduation community of practice's efforts to share and learn from different adaptations of the model in various contexts, this brief highlights the key adaptations made to accommodate the Ugandan and refugee context, but is not inclusive of all ways in which the Activity adapted.

Graduation Processes

The follow section discusses the adaptations that the Activity made to the key processes required for implementing the graduation approach. This section is not inclusive of all processes needed for effective implementation but highlights the key processes within the graduation approach where the Activity made adaptations during the design, implementation, and monitoring phases.

Targeting

Graduation Process Description

Participant targeting, or selection, is an essential first step in implementing the graduation approach. Through a rigorous, multistep process, organizations **identify and select participants to ensure that the poorest and most vulnerable households in a community engage in and benefit from the activity.** By applying a rigorous targeting approach, graduation programs seek to minimize *exclusion errors*, when ultra poor households are not selected to participate in the program, and *inclusion errors*, when those who are not ultra poor benefit from the program.

Targeting happens at three levels: **geographic selection, community selection, and participant selection.** In many instances, geographic and community targeting is conducted by donors or other national-level stakeholders, whereas participant targeting is done by implementing organizations. Participant targeting starts by **defining categories for eligibility and then using contextually appropriate methods and data to determine which households meet those criteria.** As a best practice, targeting approaches should include **triangulation of different methods and involve community members in the process.** Organizations typically use a participatory rural appraisal (PRA) process, incorporating different targeting methodologies based on the context and operating environment.[18]

How the Activity Adapted

Through internal processes, USAID/BHA identified and selected the geographic locations and communities the Activity would operate in. As such, the following section describes the Activity's approach to participant targeting and selection.

Piloted multiple targeting methods to identify the most appropriate approach for the context. During Cohort One the Activity tested a series of targeting methodologies in two pilots, each consisting of six villages (three in the host community and three in the refugee settlement), to refine and adapt the targeting approach to the context in Kamwenge. After the first pilot was

[18] Dharmadasa, H., Hashemi, S. M., Samaranayake, S., & Whitehead, L. (n.d.) PROPEL toolkit. BRAC. https://tinyurl.com/53n8pbs3

conducted, the Activity reviewed the results and refined the methodology for the second pilot, which was then scaled up. One quantitative method originally used was the modified version of the Probability of Poverty Index (PPI) questionnaire, to determine each household's economic status; however, this was dropped because it was not identifying the right participants. This approach was followed by the PRA methodology, which combined two approaches: social mapping (referred to as a "scorecard"), in which each household in the village is located and validated as a member of the community and quantitative data on key indicators are gathered and profiling of households is conducted, and poverty wealth ranking (PWR), also referred to as the "bucketing exercise," in which community members assigned each household in their village to community-determined wealth categories (extremely poor, poor, moderate, or rich). By conducting two pilots, the Activity team was able to successfully **identify and address the unique challenges presented by working in a refugee settlement and the surrounding communities, where numerous actors are present and perceptions of and relationships between humanitarian workers and locals can be shaped by past experiences.** Below we highlight the adaptations made to each pilot and the key takeaways.

Lessons Learned: Targeting

- Consider oversampling by 10–20 percent to account for dropout
- Allow sufficient time for targeting (3–6 months).
- Ensure sufficient financial and human resources are allocated to the process.
- Engage community members early and often to avoid exacerbating existing tensions.
- Engage local and opinion leaders to build trust and promote transparency.
- If including an RCT design, conduct public lottery to promote transparency and minimize resentment among community members.

Involved community leaders in the targeting process to ensure most vulnerable households were included. During the first pilot, the Activity found that household lists provided by the local leadership to be used in the PRA pilot process were often incomplete, leaving out some of the most vulnerable households. The Activity therefore prioritized **conducting an extensive social mapping exercise in the second pilot and found that doing so with the village leaders as the first step was a more effective way to validate the household lists provided by the local leadership** and ensured that as many households were included in the PRA targeting as possible.

Developed locally conceptualized poverty classifications to more accurately predict poverty in target communities. The Activity found that the PPI, though it is an effective poverty measurement tool on its own, did not necessarily align with the community definition of poverty and was not sensitive enough to detect the differences among the PWR categories. In the second pilot, the Activity **created a new survey based on the community definitions of the poverty**

categories, which was able to more accurately predict poverty in the target communities. This survey was later used by the Activity to inform the graduation criteria measurement tool (refer to Measurement section), which was used to monitor household progress throughout the Activity.

Timing and Sequencing

Graduation Process Description

The graduation approach is a time-bound intervention that is intended to provide a series of intensive, sequenced interventions to help move participants out of extreme poverty. Graduation **programs range from 18 to 36 months in length,** with the majority (75–98 percent) between 24 and 36 months because 18 months is typically too short to build household resilience unless there are follow-up programs or services in place. It is important to note that regardless of the length of the specific graduation program, given that the graduation approach targets ultra poor and extremely poor households, it is not the intention that the participants should completely lift themselves out of poverty by the end of the implementation period. Instead, **the intention is to put households on a path toward lifting themselves out of poverty in the future, a path that includes continued access to services and social protections provided by donors or government services.**[19]

How the Activity Adapted

The Activity considered different implementation intervals to contribute to the understanding and evidence base around cost-effectiveness and scale of the graduation approach. In parallel, the Activity refined and adjusted the sequencing of activities to better align the timing of key interventions with expected outcomes.

Adjusted the length of intervention from 30 to 24 months. In Cohort One, the Activity implemented the graduation approach over a 30-month period. However, implementation and performance monitoring data gathered during the cohort indicated that in this context, a 24-month intervention period was feasible and potentially superior to a 30-month implementation period. Firstly, all the main activities were accomplished in the first 18 months of the intervention period, including three agricultural cycles, which allowed for sufficient training, testing, and expanding of technical skills acquired through the FFBS model. Secondly, a review of the Cohort One dropout data revealed that participant dropout accelerated in the last six months of the cohort. One of the main reasons participants cited for dropping out was completion of the activities and training. Lastly, because of COVID-19-related lockdowns, Cohort One missed a data collection point, which extended the time it took households to meet the graduation criteria. It is likely that households would

[19] Dharmadasa, H., Hashemi, S. M., Samaranayake, S., & Whitehead, L. (n.d.) PROPEL toolkit. BRAC. https://tinyurl.com/53n8pbs3

have graduated earlier; estimates suggest that 73 percent of households could have met the graduation criteria at 21 months if the data had been collected without interruption. Given this evidence, the Activity felt that **in this context, the reduced timeframe of implementation would be sufficient to yield similar results while improving the cost effectiveness of the interventions.** With the 24-month implementation period for Cohort Two, the Activity achieved:

Implications for Scale

In both Cohorts One and Two, the Activity saw an acceleration in dropout rate around 18–21 months. Dropouts included those who had reached graduation and those who had not reached graduation. In both cohorts, participants cited a main reason for dropping out as completion of the activities and training. The Activity also noted that this acceleration in dropout aligned with the end of consumption support. When looking at the graduation and dropout rates as well as the timing of key interventions such as consumption support, the data suggest that an 18- to 21-month implementation period may be sufficient in this context.

- **A graduation rate of 86 percent, compared to 73 percent in Cohort One**
- **A dropout rate of 16 percent, compared to 22 percent** in Cohort One, suggesting the shorter implementation period yielded better results.[20]
- **A per-participant cost reduced from an average of $1,428 for the 30-month implementation period** (Arm One: $1,571, Arm Two: $1,428 ,and Arm Three: $1,279) **to an average of $968 for the 24-month implementation period** (Arm One: $945 and Arm Two: $992), indicating that similar, if not better, graduation results could be achieved at a lower cost.[21]

Although the shorter implementation period was effective in this context, it may not be the case in others. **Timing of programming will depend on the sequencing of interventions and implementation environment.** For example, while it is possible to complete three agricultural cycles in Kamwenge within 24-months, this may not be possible in other contexts.

The Activity introduced livelihoods training in month one so that participants could strengthen their technical skills and develop a business plan prior to asset transfer distribution in month seven. Photo: AVSI.

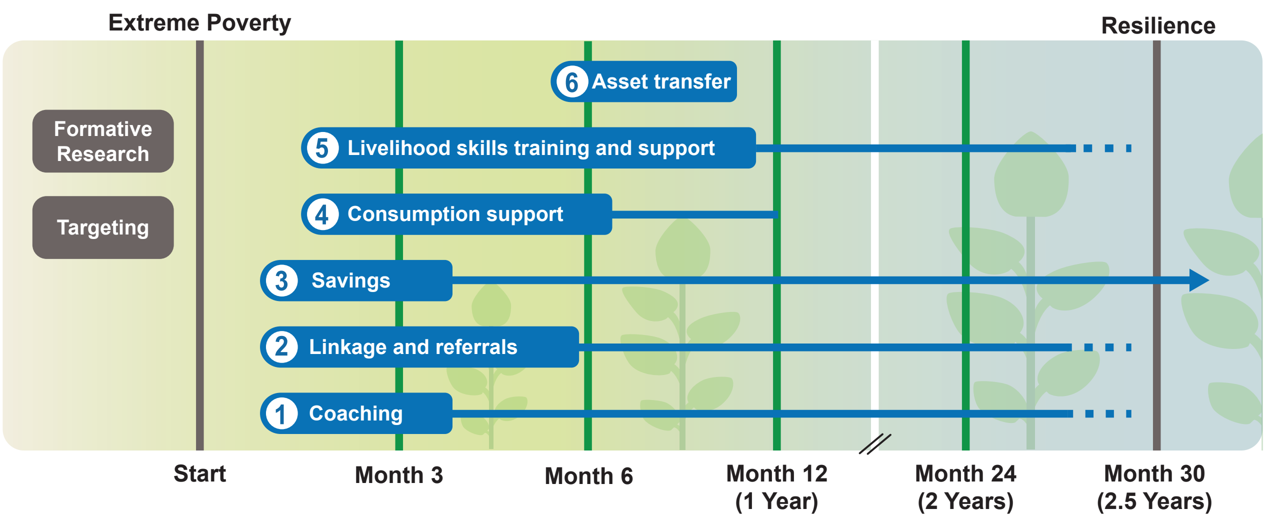
Strategically sequenced livelihoods interventions to build upon foundational skills. Based on best practices and lessons learned implementing livelihoods programming, the Activity strategically sequenced livelihood interventions in a manner to ensure that participants could built upon results to maximize anticipated outcomes. Savings is a platform onto which every other component is layered. As such, **the Activity introduced VSLAs at the start of**

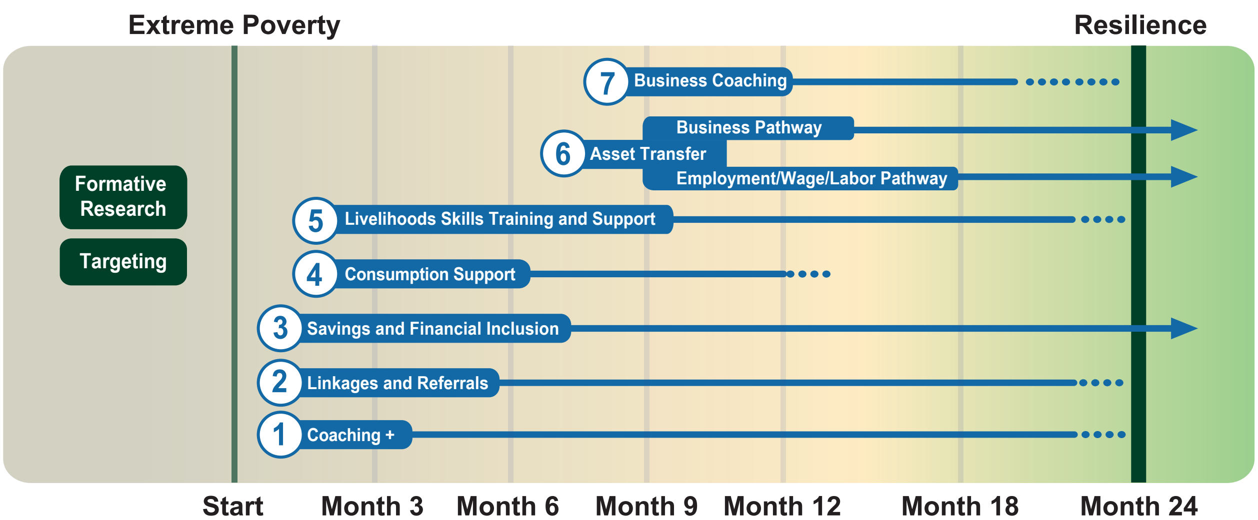
[20] It is important to note that Cohort One was implemented during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the Activity observed a higher graduation rate in Cohort Two within a shorter implementation period, we cannot say whether the Cohort One households would have achieved the same or a higher graduation rate if the COVID-19 pandemic had not occurred.

[21] Technical and Operational Performance Support (TOPS) Uganda Graduation Randomized Control Trial Associate Award. 2022. Endline Report of the Resilience Food Security Activity Graduating to Resilience in Uganda, Cohort One. Washington, DC: The TOPS Program.

month one and continued support through the end of the Activity, with the expectation that the VSLA groups would continue after the Activity ended. VSLAs provide households with access to capital needed to start or expand businesses as well as serve as a source of social connection. Also foundational is technical skills and livelihood training, which were introduced during the first month. Aligned with the agricultural season, these **trainings were intensive during the first six months of programming** before the asset transfer was disbursed and included key topics including business selection, planning, and management and financial literacy. The **asset transfer was disbursed in month seven,** to ensure that participants had sufficient time to strengthen their technical skills and develop a business plan that outlined steps to start or expand their businesses. Additionally, the asset transfer was distributed after the market event was held. The market event was an opportunity for participants to connect with input suppliers, extensions services, and financial services, all of which could be leveraged to support their businesses goals. **Business coaching was conducted after the asset transfer was distributed to provide regular mentorship and continued technical capacity building** to help participants put into action their business plans.

Exhibit 3. Sequencing Diagram, Cohort One (30 months) and Cohort Two (24 months)





Graduation Process Description

Graduation programs use the **graduation criteria** to determine when a household has achieved economic and social advancement and, as such, has "graduated" from needing program support. The graduation criteria are **context-specific and vary based on the given geographic, social, and economic situation in which the program is implemented.** In addition to serving as an essential monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tool for the program team, the graduation criteria are also a way for program **participants to engage in and track their progress and achievements.** Given the simple and often visual nature of the tool, it allows participants who have lower literacy rates to feel a sense of accomplishment by tracking progress against milestones.

At the beginning of implementation, **graduation programs define what success looks like for their participants based on different criteria,** including food security, income-related resilience, additional economic resilience through savings, household resilience to negative health effects and practice of positive health-seeking behavior, greater household structural resilience, and reinforcement of positive behavior change.[22] Graduation criteria are often **a mix of quantitative and qualitative indicators that may incorporate measures of resilience to future shocks and vulnerabilities.** Programs may weigh criteria differently or use a composite score of several indicators depending on the contextualized definition of graduation. The indicators selected must be **coherent** (criteria for measurement of progress must correspond to targeting criteria), **meaningful** (ambitious yet achievable), and **measurable** (can be accurately and consistently measured).[23]

How the Activity Adapted

Use of "responsible graduation" criteria to promote resilience. Based on AVSI's experience implementing other graduation programs in Uganda, including the USAID-funded Sustainable, Comprehensive Responses for Vulnerable Children and their Families (SCORE) Activity in Uganda, the Activity developed and refined the graduation criteria to ensure a "responsible graduation" approach that seeks to promote self-reliance and resilience.

- To start, the Activity set **the threshold for graduating to be after a household has met the graduation criteria for at least three consecutive quarters in a row,** a much more rigorous threshold than many other graduation programs.
- Second, to allow for greater nuance and understanding of a household's situation and to support the Activity in providing more targeted intervention and support to households that are struggling, the Activity developed **a color gradation system whereby answers were not associated**

[22] PROPEL toolkit.

[23] PEI Technical Graduation Guide.

with scores, but rather colors—red, yellow, and green—that symbolize the proximity or distance of each answer from an ideal profile of a self-reliant household. The color coding helped determine which criteria households are struggling with and contributed to the overall composite graduation score.

- Lastly, based on the households' responses and color gradation score, the Activity **grouped households into one of three stages: graduation stage, progression stage, and never met.** These three overarching stages included substages to capture changes between quarters.

Taken together, these adaptations to the graduation criteria and scoring methodology allowed the Activity to develop a highly contextualized and nuanced understanding of the changes and potential challenges that may prevent households from graduating.

Lessons Learned: Measurement[24]

Under the USAID-funded SCORE Activity, AVSI used the vulnerability assessment tool (VAT) to assess household progress towards graduation. The VAT was designed to measure households' vulnerability through an index child in each household. The VAT included six sections: (a) background/demographics, (b) protection, (c) food security, (d) economic strengthening, (e) family strengthening, and (f) the assessor's general impressions. Based on the total VAT score, children were assigned to critically, moderately, or slightly vulnerable status. Households were assessed on an annual basis and were considered graduated after maintaining a VAT score below 40 for two consecutive assessment periods. While the VAT was viewed as a comprehensive tool used to gauge household vulnerability, stakeholders noted challenges with defining graduation criteria, specifically challenges with using the composite and unweighted score as the threshold for graduation. Based on this experience, the following recommendations were made for improving graduation measurement:

- Add "flags" within core component areas to guide graduation decisions
- Add weights to categories or identify critical conditions that must be fulfilled
- Do not base graduation solely on a cumulative score
- Add a household-defined variable for graduation
- Include variables such as food security to have a minimum threshold before graduation
- Consider adjusting the threshold for graduation

[24] E3 Analytics and Evaluation Project. Ex-Post Evaluation of the Sustainable, Comprehensive Responses for Vulnerable Children and their Families (SCORE) Activity in Uganda. 2018.

Activity Graduation Criteria

Q1. Meal frequency
Q2. Diet diversity
Q3. Income diversification
Q4. Household structure
Q5. Children in school
Q6. Access to Healthcare
Q7. Treating water
Q8. Handwashing
Q9. Savings and assets
Q10. Social Capital
Q11. Self-efficacy

To consider a household as having met Graduation Criteria, a household must have:

- No RED answers: in this sense, every question of the Graduation Criteria is equally important, being able on its own to "veto" the household's graduation status, and
- At least eight GREEN answers, to promote the holistic concept of resilience adopted by the Activity.

Based on the household's responses and color gradation score, it is grouped into one of three stages:

- Graduation stage – A household is considered graduated is they have met the graduation criteria for three or more consecutive quarters. Households that are in the graduation stage are GREEN.
- Progression stage – A household is considered in the progression stage if they are working towards graduation but have not yet meet the graduation criteria three times consecutively. Households in the progression stage and are designated YELLOW.
- Never met – Households in this category have never met the graduation criteria. This category is designated RED.

Graduation Components

The following section discusses the different adaptations that the Activity made to the six graduation components based on the context. These components serve as the fundamental building blocks and together make up the graduation approach. It is important to note that each component is adapted based on the specific operating context, household needs, and activity resources. As such, the adaptations made by the Activity may not be applicable to other contexts.

The Activity used the graduation approach to deliver an integrated set of interventions to help households improve their economic status and living conditions. The Activity piloted different implementation approaches and delivery mechanisms throughout the seven-year implementation period to identify the most contextually appropriate design. Photo: AVSI.

Graduation Component Description

Coaching has been **identified as one of the most critical components to the success of the graduation approach.** Through coaching on various themes including life skills, participants build confidence and develop a vision of their future out of poverty. Depending on the context, **coaching may cover a variety of social and health issues** including early or child marriage, family planning, early childhood education, nutrition, preventive health, and water, sanitation, and health (WASH), helping individuals to **build the requisite skills, knowledge, and practices that build self-efficacy,** which is essential for navigating challenges. These **skills are reinforced through weekly home visits** where program staff can track households' progress, assist households in applying the lessons and skills learned in their daily routines, and address household-level challenges.[25]

How the Activity Adapted

In line with graduation communities of practice, documented positive experiences of coaching in the previous USAID-funded SCORE Activity, and the Uganda ReHOPE strategy[26] that emphasizes the enhancement of peer-to-peer learning, building social cohesion, and reducing conflict, the Activity **adopted a coaching methodology as the main approach to deliver and support participants to develop skills, including those needed to enhance their self-efficacy.** The Activity piloted and refined the coaching structures and delivery mechanisms, tailored the curriculum themes and sequencing, and incorporated different tools and approaches to adapt to and address the needs of participant households.

Coaching Structure and Delivery Mechanisms

Based on impact evaluation data, formative assessment data, performance monitoring data, and staff feedback, the Activity made the following adaptations to the coaching structure and delivery mechanisms to better address the implementation context.

KEY RESULTS COACHING

3,227 Households
Coached at home

8,655 Households
Coached at group level

96% Women
Achieving high self-efficacy

97% Participants
With knowledge in nutrition and maternal child health

7,503 Women
With social capital

[25] PROPEL toolkit.
[26] REHOPE – Refugee and Host Population Empowerment Strategic Framework – Uganda. 2017. https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/64166

Mainstreamed the group coaching model with household touchpoints. During Cohort One, the Activity tested two different coaching models: a group coaching model and an individual coaching model. The Cohort One external impact evaluation conducted by IPA found that **the group coaching model had similar impacts to the individual coaching model but cost 13 percent less,** and therefore, from a cost–benefit perspective, was the more cost-effective approach.[27] The formative assessments conducted at the end of Cohort One revealed that **participants felt that home visits, in particular, were a critical motivating factor in changing behaviors,** because households wanted to demonstrate their progress in achieving goals, specifically around nutrition and WASH. Given these findings, the Activity **adapted a group coaching model, incorporating quarterly individual touch points,** for the Cohort Two design. The after-action review conducted at the end of Year One of Cohort Two implementation revealed that participants were happy with the combination of group coaching and individual household touchpoints. They noted that group coaching encouraged peer-to-peer learning and fostered group solidarity; and the touchpoints ensured participants implemented what they were taught while receiving individualized support, and that other household members received information and skills directly from coaches.[28]

Reduced coach-to-participant ratio. During Cohort One, the Activity assigned each group coach to be responsible for six groups (150 participants), whereas individual coaches worked with 25 participants each. Although reviewing Cohort One quarterly monitoring data and routine touchpoint data for primary participants, the Activity discovered that nearly 30 percent of participants were not being reached regularly by coaches. The Activity worked with coaches to plot out their daily activities and discovered that group coaches could realistically only reach one group per day, four days a week. Given the monitoring data, feedback from coaches, and GPS mapping of households, the Activity **reduced the caseload of group coaches from six groups to four (100 participants) so that they were better able to meet the needs of the participants.** As a result of the reduction in the coach to participant ratio, the Activity saw an **increase in participant registration data from 70 percent to 95 percent, indicating that coaches were now able to reach all their groups of participants** in addition to following up with them at home. Additionally, the Activity paired coaches with

Participants use the graduation map and household self-reflection tool to set goals and plan with their family members. Photo: AVSI.

[27] USAID, IPA, & Save the Children. (2022). Endline report of the Resilience Food Security Activity Graduating to Resilience in Uganda, Cohort 1. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00ZNCJ.pdf

[28] USAID & AVSI. (n.d.) Graduating to resilience: Gender transformative coaching & programming in Cohort Two. https://tinyurl.com/mrxcrrzx

community-based trainers (CBTs) to reinforce and strengthen information from the technical training and provide more holistic support to households.

Coaching helps build social cohesion through peer-to-peer learning, enhances participants' capacity to develop household plans, and helps build their self-efficacy. Photo: AVSI.

Coaching Curriculum and Sequencing

Based on data from the external impact evaluation, formative assessment data, and external evidence, the Activity made the following adaptations to the coaching curriculum and sequencing to better address the needs of the Activity participants.

Piloted the integration of G-IPT in coaching. During Cohort Two sensitization sessions, the Activity found that **up to 80 percent of refugees and 60 percent of host community members surveyed reported experiencing depression at some point in their lives.** This finding aligned with similar data collected by AVSI in the Palabek refugee settlement in Northern Uganda, in which 35 percent of respondents indicated that they were experiencing depression at the time, and 64 percent reported that their depression was interfering with their daily lives. An external study found that incorporating psychosocial components into graduation programs enhances program impacts. Specifically, the study found that the inclusion of such components doubled the impact on household consumption, increased the impact on household revenue by approximately 70 percent, and increased positive outcomes on mental health, self-efficacy, and social cohesion.[29] Against this backdrop, the Activity decided to test out the integration of a mental health component into the coaching approach. Specifically, the Activity **integrated the use of G-IPT because of its focus on addressing stressful life events including dealing with grief, interpersonal disputes, life transitions, and social isolation.** Half of the Cohort Two participants engaged in G-IPT sessions in addition to their normal coaching sessions.[30]

Lessons Learned: G-IPT

As part of the Cohort Two RCT, IPA collected quantitative data to evaluate the short-term impact of G-IPT sessions. Although IPA's midline data found that there was no meaningful difference in mental health status between those who participated in G-IPT and those who did not participate in G-IPT sessions, feedback from the participants about their experiences with G-IPT highlight that the interventions gave them skills and tools to better manage the stresses they were experiencing. Implementers looking to integrate mental health programming into the graduation approach may consider lighter touch psychosocial support for general participants and referrals to mental health professionals for those with severe psychosocial support needs, given the already complex scope of the graduation approach interventions.

To learn more about how the Activity piloted the integration of G-IPT, read the full technical brief here.

[29] Bossuroy, T., Premand, P., & Thomas, C. (2023). Can psychosocial interventions make anti-poverty programmes more cost-effective? Evidence from Niger. VoxDev. https://voxdev.org/topic/labour-markets/can-psychosocial-interventions-make-anti-poverty-programmes-more-cost

[30] IMPEL. (2023). Midline Report of the Resilience Food Security Activity Graduating to Resilience in Uganda, Cohort 2. Washington, DC: The Implementer-Led Evaluation & Learning Associate Award.

Incorporated nutrition and WASH components into coaching curriculum. Based on findings from the initial Nutrition and WASH Assessment (2019), the Activity integrated several nutrition and WASH themes into the coaching curriculum, including nutrition screening, basics of food and nutrition, cooking demonstrations, malnutrition, water treatment, and handwashing. The Nutrition and WASH Assessment conducted at the end of Cohort One (2021), **revealed that coaching was the strongest influence on improving households' nutrition and WASH practices.** Participants credited coaches with increasing knowledge, sensitizing households, motivating households to follow recommended practices, and being a source of support. Participants also reported that home visits, in particular, were a critical motivating factor, as households wanted to demonstrate their progress in achieving nutrition and WASH goals. Based on this feedback, the **Activity reinforced the nutrition and WASH themes in the coaching curriculum for Cohort Two.**

KEY RESULTS **GENDER**

1,960 Women
Trained in leadership skills

1,685 Women
View gender-based violence as less acceptable

95% Women
Participate in making spending decisions

Refined and reordered the coaching curriculum to better address gender norms. The Gender Assessment conducted at the end of Cohort One (2021) found that attitudes and perceptions around gender equality had only nominally improved during Cohort One. Based on these results, feedback from staff and participants suggested that **addressing gender and conflict management themes earlier in the coaching curriculum could lead to even greater changes** in the future. As such, the Activity refined the Cohort Two coaching curriculum, moving up topics such as conflict negotiation and management, joint decision making, and shared responsibilities, as these can address inequitable gender norms from the outset and allow time for change with the support of a coach and mentor. Promoting positive gender norms early on can set the foundation for other important topics covered in the curriculum, such as nutrition and savings. During an after-action review conducted after the first year of Cohort Two implementation, coaches noted that **starting with gender topics enabled coaches to build rapport with the entire household and better understand the unique challenges participants faced.** Additionally, early introduction of gender topics **helped participants and their household**

> "I never talked about the issues I had with my spouse, but after coaching sessions, I with my spouse would resolve them quietly without any intervention of the coach or CBT. Topics like setting smart goals, household planning, savings, sharing household responsibilities, preventive health and WASH created a big impact in my household."
>
> *Refugee participant*

appreciate specific roles and responsibilities, which were reinforced throughout the coaching process.[31]

Incorporated key coaching themes based on changing context. Given the holistic nature of the intervention and the emphasis on household-level benefits, there was an underlying assumption that children of participants would be better off because of their household's participation in the Activity. However, a study conducted by the external evaluator, IPA, found **that the Activity had no impact on children's cognitive, motor, language, or social-emotional development.** This finding indicated that despite positive household-level impacts on assets, income, consumption, and food security, the benefits of the Activity did not appear to flow down to children in a way that positively affected their development. Based on this finding, the Activity **added parenting themes into the coaching modules, focusing on improving parent and child relationships within the household**.[32]

Coaching Tools and Approaches

Based on formative assessment data, lessons learned from working with populations with low literacy levels, and experience from integrating digital messaging, the Activity made the following adaptations to the coaching tools and approaches to ensure the Activity was designed to be accessible to participants.

Used visual tools to accommodate low literacy levels. Goal setting is an essential element of the graduation approach and helps participants to develop a sense of ownership over their progress and development. Coaches work with households to first self-assess their circumstances, identifying barriers and opportunities; identify and define their short- and long-term goals; and then develop an action plan with key steps toward achieving those goals. To aid in this visioning exercise and to accommodate the low literacy levels among participants (60 percent of participants had only completed lower primary school and 30 percent of participants had not completed any schooling), the Activity **adapted and incorporated easy-to-use, visual tools including the graduation map and the household self-reflection tool into the coaching curriculum.**

> This graduation map has been instrumental in guiding me on to plan for my household. Utilizing it, I structured plans for my business, outlined strategies for our family's nutrition, savings, and meeting basic needs. The emphasis on setting smart goals has enabled me to establish and adhere to a well-defined plan.
>
> *Host community participant*

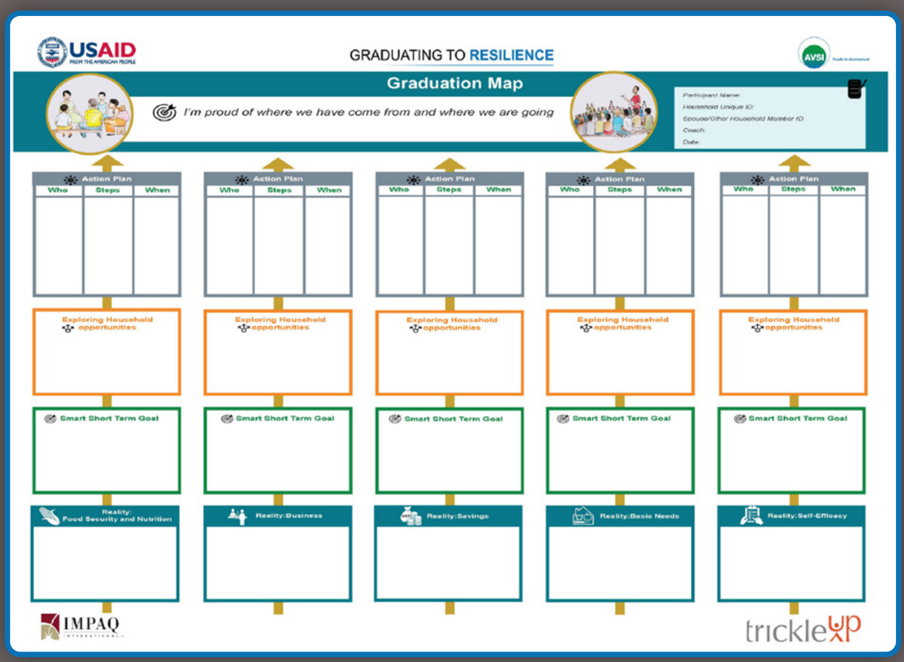
The graduation map is a visual tool representing the five Activity pathways to building household-level resilience: food security and nutrition, savings, business, basic needs, and self-efficacy (Exhibit 4). Using the graduation map, households set specific, measurable, achievable, relevant,

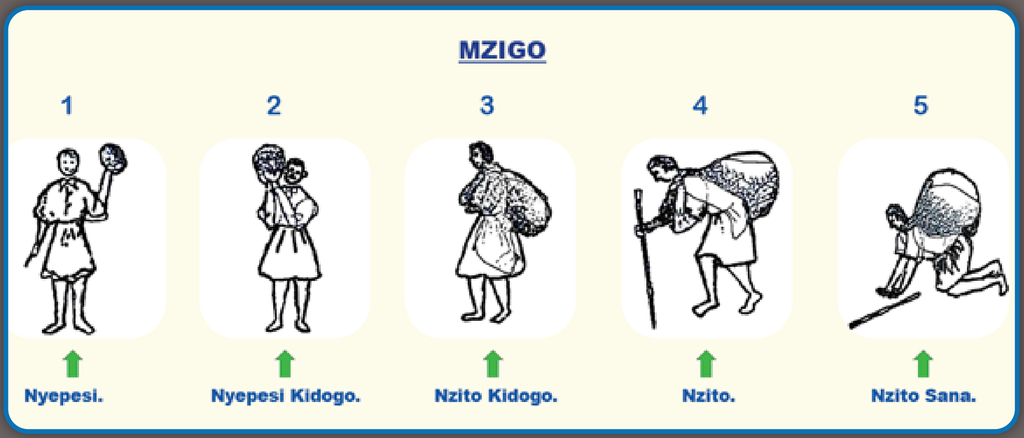
[31] Graduating to resilience: Gender transformative coaching & programming in Cohort Two.

[32] USAID, IPA, & Save the Children. (2023). The impact of a graduation program on child development in refugee and host communities in Uganda. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00ZXHT.pdf

and time-bound (SMART) goals for each of the pathways. Participants used text, drawings, or a combination of both to outline the specific steps needed to achieve their goals along each pathway. Guided by the coach, households regularly reviewed and updated their graduation maps, tracking progress using the household self-reflection tool, which allowed participants to use a visual Likert scale to track progress against their goals. Based on this tracking, households made necessary adjustments to plan for and achieve their short- and long-term goals. According to participant feedback, **these visual tools helped households by simplifying the goal-setting process and fostering collective planning and action within families.** Furthermore, the Activity found that 37 percent of Cohort One participants continued to use the graduation maps for goal-setting 18 months after implementation ended, reinforcing their utility.

Exhibit 4. Graduation Map and Burden Scale





In addition to the graduation map and household self-reflection tool, which were **used by all coaches, the Activity also used a picture-based burden scale, the *Kagugu*, as part of the G-IPT module** (Exhibit 4). Typically used to assess the burden that participants feel as relates to their mental health, the Activity adapted the concept of the burden scale, originally used by Strong Minds an organization working in Uganda focusing on mental health programming, using pictures to have participants identify and rank their mood and perceived burden on a scale from one (low burden) to five (high burden). **Using the visual burden scale, participants commented that they were able to identify the severity of their problems more easily.**

Added a digital module to mobilize male participation and reinforce gender topics. Although the Activity saw nominal improvements in attitudes and perceptions around gender equality during Cohort One implementation, participants noted that there was a need for greater male engagement, particularly in coaching sessions. This was especially important given that many participants identified coaching sessions as the most influential factor in changing gender norms. Low male engagement was largely a result of **misconceptions around the purpose of the Activity and misunderstanding of the woman-plus-household approach.** To mitigate this challenge in Cohort Two, the Activity more **intentionally targeted males for participation through greater sensitization including sending messages to participants and spouses through tele-rivet.** These messages served as a reminder for upcoming coaching sessions, encouraged male household member participants, and included key gender topics from coaching. During an after-action review conducted after the first year of Cohort Two implementation, coaches indicated that more spouses were attending coaching sessions compared to Cohort One, which made it easier for them to deliver coaching topics and relieved pressure on the primary participant, who previously was seen as the one responsible for making all household improvements.[33]

2 Linkages and Referrals

Graduation Component Description

Although graduation programs provide intensive services to households to help them increase their economic well-being, given the time-bound nature of the intervention, it is essential that graduation programs **link households to existing social assistance and protection systems so that they can continue to access services beyond the life of the program.** Depending on the context and the needs of the households, this may include linkages to health, nutrition, education, financial, and market actors. **Linkages may be to government, nongovernmental, or private sector actors.**

[33] Graduating to resilience: Gender transformative coaching & programming in Cohort Two.

How the Activity Adapted

To facilitate linkage and referrals, the Activity conducted an extensive service provider mapping exercise to identify the existing referral points and mechanisms within and around the Rwamwanja refugee settlement. Using the data collected, the Activity created a map of all service provider locations and types of services available. **This map was disseminated to all Activity staff and key stakeholders in the region to facilitate communication, improve synergies, and enhance the referral process between all groups operating in the project area.** The service provider mapping and related information also served as a critical tool for the coaches, who used it to help households access the services they need, thereby helping to achieve project outcomes and enhancing the sustainability of outcomes. The Activity **continuously added to and built upon the roster of existing service providers throughout implementation and used it to inform additional linkage and referral activities,** most notably, to link participants to market sectors actors and financial institutions.

Organized market events to facilitate linkages to private sector actors. The Value Chain Assessment (2018) conducted during the refine and implement period revealed that households have little access to market information. Although Ugandan households reported receiving some of this information from formal sources, refugee households tend to access and use information obtained through informal channels, such as friends and family. Lack of information on market prices and quality expectations prevents households from selling their output and creates an atmosphere of mistrust among buyers and sellers. In addition, households also lack access to agricultural inputs, such as organic herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers, which could improve their productivity and output.[34] In response to these constraints,

KEY RESULTS

LINKAGES & REFERRALS

181 Market Actors
Engaged

91% Households
With access to improved output markets

92% Households
With access to improved agricultural inputs

2 Market Events
Organized to connect participants with market actors

386 Participants
Accessing critical services

The Activity organized two four-day market events bringing together more than 30 private sector companies to each event to showcase and demonstrate their products and services. More than 13,800 people attended the events including Activity participants as well as other community members. Through the event, participants connected with suppliers and other market actors. Photo: AVSI

[34] USAID and AVSI, Value Chain Assessment: Maize, Beans, and Groundnuts (Graduating to Resilience), 2019. https://tinyurl.com/27uey5tu

> One of our group members had a malnourished child and the child was referred to Rwamwanja...and as of now the child had fully recovered.
>
> *Refugee community participant*

the Activity **designed and organized a four-day market event to connect households to input suppliers.** Using value chain assessment information and participant business plan data, the Activity selected input suppliers, service providers, and output market actors based on the enterprises selected by the participants, including fintech, energy, and agriculture, among others. The Activity **timed the market event so that it took place one month before the asset transfer so that participants could leverage the infusion of capital to purchase products and services identified through the market event.** Through the market event, 1,774 participants (1,071 refugee participants and 703 host community participants) were linked to suppliers. These linkages extended beyond the market event with participants continuing to connect and link with market actors they had connected with after the event.

3 Financial Literacy and Training

Graduation Component Description

Savings is an essential tool for building household-level resilience and helping participants expand their income-generating activities. Given the importance of savings, graduation programs focus on **providing financial literacy training** at the beginning of the program, introducing households to the benefits and mechanisms of savings.[35] Following initial financial education, a program begins working with participants to help **instill a culture of savings.**

A program's approach to savings is highly dependent on the context, including participants' financial literacy levels and existing culture and mechanisms around savings. In some contexts, graduation programs may need to establish savings groups, whereas in other contexts, the program may seek to work through existing structures. As such, a program's savings approach **may focus on individual savings or, as is more common, group savings.** Group savings may take the form of self-help groups, village banks, or VSLAs, among others. Programs may make the savings component compulsory or elect to focus on voluntary savings. Many graduation programs also **facilitate access to credit, typically near the end of the program and targeted at households that seek to expand their businesses.**[36] Saving, particularly that done through a group savings model, is an **essential element to promoting social integration** between the participants and the community at large. Savings groups often serve as a support network that participants can tap into should they experience a shock or hardship.[37]

[35] BRAC Propel.
[36] PEI Graduation Technical.
[37] BRAC Propel.

KEY RESULTS **SAVINGS & FINANCIAL INCLUSION**

554 Groups
13,267 Individuals Engaged

US $1,828,295
Cumulative savings

93% Households
With savings worth 2 months+

100 Groups
With bank accounts

US $276
Average savings per household

How the Activity Adapted

Based on early feedback from stakeholders involved in the Settlement's Livelihoods Coordination Working Group that indicated that **a large number of refugees were already engaged in savings groups, specifically VSLAs, the Activity selected to work through VSLAs to increase participants' access to financial products and services.** A VSLA is a member-managed financing mechanism comprising 25 to 30 people who come together and save on a weekly basis. The minimum saving amount, set by the group, is usually 500 UGX (about $0.10) to 2,000 UGX (about $0.50). After a few months of building up the level of savings, the group is able to make loans. Loan sizes typically range from 20,000 UGX (about $5) to 100,000 UGX (about $27) and are payable in four to 12 weeks. The interest rates that the members pay on loans are set by the group. Interest rates on loans range from 3 percent to 10 percent per month, and members benefit from these returns on their savings. Groups also have a social welfare fund that the members contribute to; this is used to cope with shocks such as deaths and illness. The fund is effectively a self-insurance scheme.[38] The Activity collaborated with participants to establish new VSLAs and piloted and scaled up an approach to link VSLAs to formal financial institutions.

Established new VSLA groups to promote a culture of savings. During the refine and implement period, the Activity conducted an initial VSLA Assessment (2019) with a sample of VSLAs in Rwamwanja and the surrounding host community to understand VSLA group functionality in the area, how effectively they were operating, and if the Activity should work with existing VSLAs or establish new ones.[39] The assessment found that VSLAs suffered from challenges including **inconsistent savings, high default rates, poor management structures, low capital accumulation that limited lending potential, and informality and lack of registration.** In light of these findings, and because of the RCT

Financial Literacy Topics

- Savings
- Debt Management
- Budgeting
- Financial Services
- Financial Management
- Retirement Planning
- Investment
- Insurance

[38, 39] Programming Guide.

design that required that participants be randomized into groups as opposed to the self-selection principle, the Activity determined that it was **necessary to establish new VSLAs through which the Activity would engage**. The Activity sought to address these challenges in the newly formed VSLAs **by providing training and assistance across several organizational and management functions.**

The Activity collaborated with fintech companies and banks to help VSLAs digitize, convert non-digital transactions into a digital record format, and digitalize, use a digital application to connect to a financial service provider. Photo: AVSI.

- First, the Activity assisted each VSLA in drafting and implementing internal rules and regulations to provide a legal framework.
- Second, the Activity trained VSLAs in effective management structures, including assisting them to elect and install leaders toward self-governance.
- Third, the Activity provided financial literacy training to members and later conducted a VSLA Maturity Assessment to determine which groups qualified for linkages to formal financial institutions.[40]

Digitization and digitalization of VSLAs to enhance security and link to formal financial institutions. The initial VSLA Assessment (2019) found that 58 percent of VSLAs had experienced a financial loss due to theft of group savings. Furthermore, the initial assessment found that 44 percent of VSLAs had an established relationship with a formal financial institution.[41] Based on this, the Activity determined that **promoting linkages between VSLAs and formal financial institutions could further secure members' savings,** reducing the likelihood that an individual forgoes membership because of security concerns while **providing VSLA members with another potential avenue to secure credit.** The Activity reviewed the post distribution monitoring data, facilitated a mapping of mobile money service providers/agents, and determined that there was sufficient infrastructure and interest to help VSLAs digitize their savings (refer to textbox for definition). The Activity collaborated with fintech companies to conduct extensive sensitization sessions with all VSLAs to introduce them to the benefits of digitizing their records, the mobile application, and the process for digitization. With the goal

Defining Digitization and Digitalization

- **Digitization:** The act of converting something nondigital into a digital format that can be used by a computing system. For VSLA groups, this is primarily shifting from using a paper-based ledger book for records to using a digital record-keeping system, typically facilitated by a fintech.
- **Digitalization:** Linking a digital application to a financial service provider. Although there are varying definitions, here we are referring to the process of a VSLA group opening a bank account, having their mobile money number linked to the bank account, and being able to have members contribute to the group account and access funds with mobile money, facilitated by a fintech and mobile network operator using a three-digit PIN for the executive.

[40, 41] VSLA Assessment, 2019.

of linking VSLAs to formal financial institutions after the digitization process was completed, the Activity conducted a VSLA maturity assessment with all 288 VSLA groups in Cohort Two to determine their readiness for bank linkages. The assessment found that 100 percent of the VSLA groups qualified for bank services, with 119 (41 percent) rated excellent and 169 (59 percent) good. In preparation to link the groups to financial institutions, the Activity engaged banks to sensitize and orient VSLAs about their financial services, products, and account opening requirements. As of August 2023, **99 percent (286) out of 288 groups were sensitized; 169 (59 percent) VSLA groups opened accounts with the banks** including with Opportunity Bank, Bank of Africa, Equity Bank, and KYAPS; and **three VSLA groups received loans amounting to $2,933 (11,000,000 UGX).**

> "I met my basic needs; I am able to save and take loan from VSLA because the general assembly trust me, and I can't fail to pay them. I use VSLA to pay school fees."
>
> *Host community participant*

Lesson's Learned and Recommendations for Digitization and Digitalization Efforts

Digitizing and digitalizing VSLAs is a complex process, particularly for first-time users in rural communities. While digitization and digitalization can expand the financial security and capacity of VSLAs, the associated challenges participants face may prevent VSLAs from realizing this potential. Insufficient trainings, lack of coordination among stakeholders, and inadequate understanding of VSLA needs and capacities poses challenges to these efforts. Implementers looking to enhance and scale up the digitization process should:

- Introduce digitization and digitalization to VSLAs from the beginning when VSLAs are established.
- Adapt the Know Your Customer model to better understand the needs of VSLA members before implementation.
- Provide structured, phased, and consistent training to support VSLAs transition to digital systems.
- Involve local government officials and stakeholders to drive local ownership and sustainability.

To learn more about how the Activity piloted the digitization and digitization of VSLAs, read the full technical brief here.

Graduation Component Description

The graduation approach provides participants with **short-term consumption support to help households meet their immediate food security needs.** This support serves as a buffer allowing households to focus on using their productive assets to strengthen their livelihoods and long-term earning potential. Consumption support is provided for a **fixed amount of time to prevent participant dependency.** The fixed time period is communicated to participants at the beginning to prevent feelings of resentment. The length of time consumption support is provided depends on the context and can **range from two months to two years.** Various factors—including program resources, food prices, seasonality of need, and how long it is estimated it will take for households to see returns on their income generating activities—are considered when determining length of consumption support.[42] Depending on the context, **consumption support can take the form of a cash grant, staple food item, or a combination of both.** In contexts where participants have access to markets, cash grants may be sufficient, whereas the provision of food items is more appropriate when food availability and access are a challenge.

How the Activity Adapted

The Activity provided cash-based consumption support to all participants based on need, market prices, and family size. The Activity provided support for a 12-month period and piloted different delivery mechanisms based on participant preference and context.

Monthly consumption support to all participants for a 12-month period. Understanding the challenges that households have in meeting needs consistently throughout a given month or year because of fluctuating circumstances such as school fee payments and seasonal flows of expenses and income, the Activity decided to provide consumption support for 12 months. By providing predictable monthly installments, the consumption support was meant to increase household decision-making power and control, enhance human dignity by avoiding the degradation of queuing for food, and enable households to focus on building stable livelihoods. The Activity **provided consumption support to each participant household based on the difference between their actual income and consumption**

> I used the money to buy food we do not produce at home...and this supported us to have a balanced diet
>
> *Host community participant*

[42] PEI Graduation Technical Guide

(identified through the baseline survey) **and the food minimum expenditure basket** (calculated by the World Food Program and determined by the market price for food staples). The amount each household received was determined based on the number of household members. Refugee households received about $4 (18,000 UGX) per household member per month for 12 months, whereas host community households received about $5 (15,000 UGX) per household member per month.[43]

KEY RESULTS **CONSUMPTION SUPPORT**

43,961 Participants
Provided with consumption support - cash for food

96% Children
Achieving minimal meal frequency

US $3,398,434
Provided in consumption support

99% Households
Consume a balanced diet

86% Households
With acceptable food consumption score

Tested physical and mobile money distribution mechanisms. Findings from the Financial Service Provider Assessment indicated that **participants had a preference to receive consumption support via electronic cash transfer.** This was because of several factors, including lower operational costs, sustainability for unbanked clientele, convenience for recipients, security of transfers, cost effectiveness, ease of implementation, and gender responsiveness. However, because of factors including difficulties in acquiring SIM cards, particularly for refugees, the Activity piloted three different transfer approaches: physical cash distribution, prepaid cards, and mobile money.[44] Given the risks associated with physical cash, the Activity quickly transitioned to the prepaid cards, which only partly solved the challenge, as this method is dependent on mobile money and bank agents, of which there were often few in the targeted locations. The Activity therefore aimed to move all participants to mobile money via cellphones. Based on findings from a Phone Ownership Assessment conducted by the Activity in Cohort Two, which found 40 percent of participants owned phones, the Activity **provided basic feature phones to all participants for the purposes of transitioning to mobile money for consumption support.** To ensure that all participants could access the mobile money transfers, the Activity partnered with the National Identification and Registration Authority to register and support host participants in acquiring national identification cards, and with the Office of the Prime Minister to complete the Refugee Registration process for refugee participants. The Activity also worked with MTN to help all participants complete the SIM card registration process, which is needed to access mobile money.

[43,44] Programming Guide

Graduation Component Description

A key tenant of the graduation approach is to empower participants to **develop sustainable livelihoods that will help lift them out of poverty and build their resilience capacities to overcome shocks and stressors in the future.** Although the consumption support and asset transfer provide tangible resources that can be used to improve participants' economic well-being, technical skill training is essential to ensuring participants develop skills and knowledge to leverage those tangible assets for long-term gains. Technical skills training should be **based on market-driven economic opportunities** and, depending on the context, may mean formal employment, when opportunities exist, or self-employment, when the labor market is more limited.

Where appropriate, organizations **may consider working with groups rather than individuals to amplify potential earnings and minimize individual risk.** Based on the specific market conditions and the value chains identified as having the most likelihood of promoting increased economic activity, organizations **design and deliver intensive skills training covering technical skills** of selected livelihood (e.g., crop production, animal husbandry), business planning and management, and, as needed, financial literacy.[45]

How the Activity Adapted

Developed the Farmer Field Business School Model. The Labor Market Assessment (2019) conducted during the refine and implement period indicated a strong interest in business pursuits, with 48 percent of respondents in the refugee settlement and 34 percent of respondents in the host community expressing an interest in gaining business skills. Although households expressed an interest in business pursuits, the Rwamwanja refugee settlement and surrounding host community are very rural areas with a heavy agrarian reliance. As such, regardless of the enterprises selected by participants, it was critical to improve households' agronomic skills whether as a business or for household food security. Based on these findings, the Activity adapted the traditional farmer field school approach incorporating components of the Farmer Business School model by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. This **adapted approach is called the Farmer Field Business School Model because it combines on-farm**

> "Our households have been able to produce food both for household consumption and sale of surplus using knowledge on good agronomic practices which were taught during the Activity tenure."
>
> *Host community participant*

[45] BRAC Propel.

business management and entrepreneurship training with traditional agronomic training.

Contextualized livestock study enterprises based on participant interest. Cohort One business coaching and post distribution monitoring data found that several participants had started livestock-related business or acquired livestock after their VSLA share-out despite not having received any prior training on them. Those who engaged in livestock raising struggled with animal diseases and access to vet supplies. Similarly, the Value Chain Assessment (2021) and Labor Market Assessment (2021) conducted at the end of Cohort One found that both refugee and host community households were interested in raising livestock (35 percent and 34 percent, respectively). Specifically, participants felt that goats were highly profitable both because they can be easily transported and sold at the market, or if not sold at the market, can be eaten or shared with neighbors. There was a similar interest in raising pigs, particularly among refugee participants, because they are less susceptible to disease than other value chains such as chickens; they reproduce once a year, so profits continue to come in over time; and they are easily sold directly to people in their homes. These findings were further confirmed in the profitability analysis conducted by the Activity. Based on this information, the Activity **selected**

KEY RESULTS — **LIVELIHOOD SKILLS TRAINING & SUPPORT**

554 Groups
13,267 Individuals Engaged

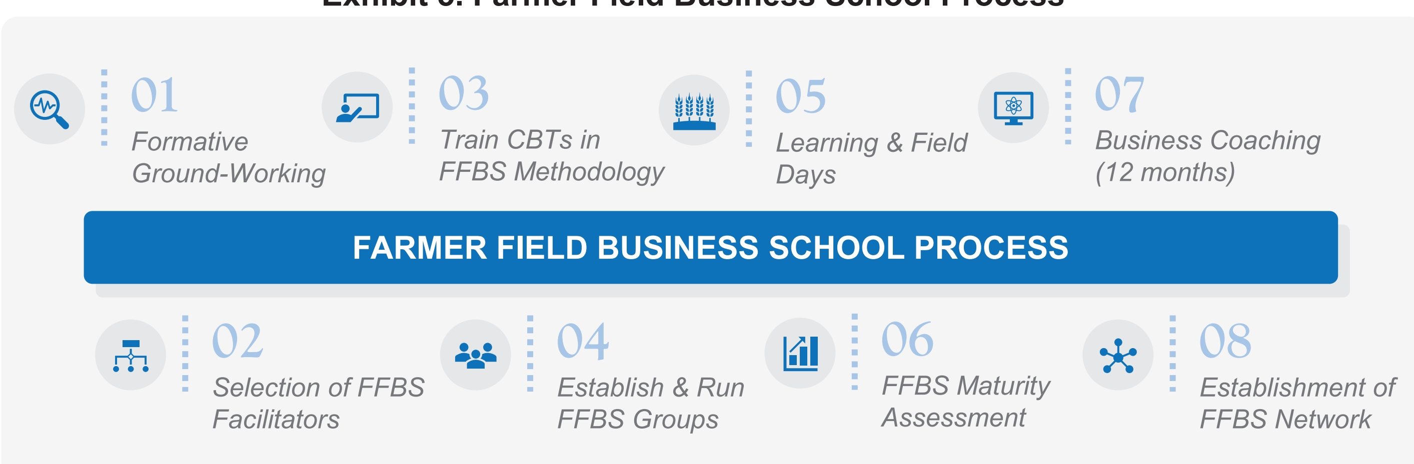
13,637 Hectares
Under improved agricultural management practices

366 (66%) Groups
Assessed as mature

Crop + Livestock
Maize, Beans, Potatoes, Groundnuts, Cassava, Pigs, Goats

9,254 Farmers
Implementing climate risk reducing actions

Exhibit 5. Farmer Field Business School Process



goats and pigs as the livestock-based farmer field business school enterprises for learning. Participants were given an option of learning about pig or goat rearing in addition to crop choices.

Refined agricultural study enterprises according to business viability. Based on the findings from the Value Chain Assessment (2019) conducted during the initial refine and implement period, the Activity focused on the groundnut, maize, and beans value chains during Cohort One, as they were deemed the most likely to create profit for participants. However, the Value Chain Assessment (2021) conducted at the end of Cohort One determined that although groundnuts may continue to be a valuable value chain, given the greater potential for profitability and return on investment from cassava and potatoes, the Activity decided to **focus on the cassava and potato value chains during Cohort Two as opposed to maize and beans.**

KEY RESULTS **BUSINESS COACHING**

11,796 Households
Reached with business coaching

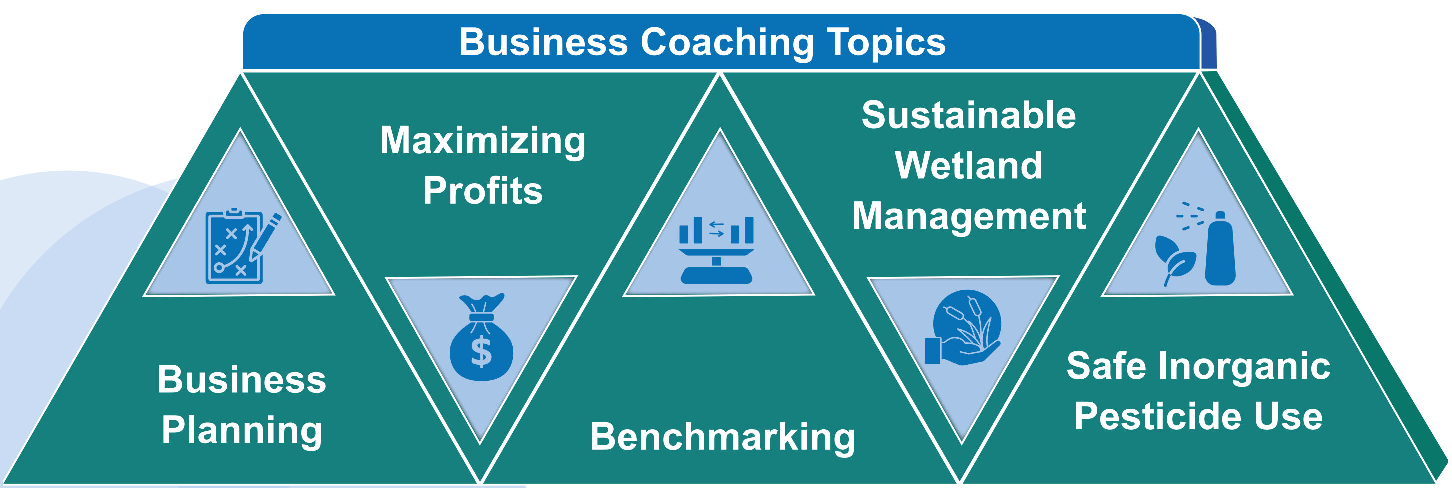
96% Households
Diversified their businesses

61% Households
Diversified their incomes

378 Groups
Started group businesses

10,397 Business Plans
Developed by participants

Provided business coaching to further strength enterprise interest. Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) face many challenges from start-up to full-scale growth. Although Uganda is ranked as one of the most entrepreneurial countries in the world, a 2004 study by Makerere University Business School indicated that MSMEs have a 50 percent failure rate. The top four reasons listed for business failure in Uganda were lack of demand, rigid owners, inability to manage growth, and



Groups of farmers met weekly to learn about production and marking challenges based on their selected crop and livestock enterprises. Photo: AVSI.

poor accounting. The success rate of new businesses is not only dependent on the market forces and their entrepreneurial abilities but also being able to access the right support and technical know-how at the right time.[46] Understanding these challenges and wanting to further respond to participants' interest in enterprise development, the Activity developed a structured business coaching approach, which it piloted in Cohort One. **Business coaching provided ongoing support to all participant households to help start or grow their business ventures, on- or off-farm, for 12 months upon the completion of farmer field business school.** This timeframe would ideally allow participants to carry out two to three business cycles depending on their enterprise to ensure they are confident in continuing to manage and expand their businesses to promote greater self-sufficiency and resilience. The Activity adopted the GROW Approach—Goal, Reality, Options, and Way Forward—which coaches and CBTs used to guide households through a self-reflection process to understand and track the progress made in achieving the household business goals. Business coaching started with a diagnostic of the participants' business and included coaching on mandatory business topics, weekly supervision and support provided by the CBTs, and quarterly business visits. Following the 12-month business coaching period, participants were connected to additional support provided by the private sector. At the end of Cohort One, the Activity found that

[46] Graduating to Resilience Programming Guide.

96 percent of the businesses that received business coaching were surviving and were demonstrating good business practices. Based on the success of the approach, the Activity refined the business coaching approach in Cohort Two.

Incorporated digital literacy into technical training. Leveraging the Activity, during Cohort One, AVSI and TrickleUp partnered with the World Bank on the Addressing the Gender Digital Divide through Context-specific Digital Skills Training Programs (EQUALS) to pilot a digital literacy program with 208 participants across 12 VSLAs. This pilot EQUALS program tested two digital literacy delivery approaches: (a) training delivered through short, animated videos only; and (b) training delivered through short, animated videos plus follow-on support from a trained facilitator using a structured paper-based curriculum. The digital literacy curriculum included 15 mini-animated videos covering topics including smartphone basics, introduction to MTN/Airtel Mobil Money, risks and benefits of your smartphone, and introduction to MobiPay and Agrobase. The pilot found that **the animation video plus approach was more effective in equipping women with basic digital literacy skills and improving mobile phone usage.**[47] The EQUALS pilot also found improved communication, increased social connections, female participant sense of independence, improved business performance, increased access to weather and market information, improved quality of business products, and improved self-esteem after the digital literacy training. Based on the findings from the EQUALS pilot in Cohort One, the Activity **incorporated digital literacy as a topic in the technical training curriculum for Cohort Two.**

Recommendations for Incorporating Digital Literacy Training

- **A mix of training techniques** (video modules paired with in-person training) should be used to enable greater understanding, uptake, and use of digital tools.
- **Digital literacy and skills training** should be integrated into the coaching curriculum.
- **Sensitization of household members** is critical to ensure female participants have ownership and agency over their phones.
- In low literacy contexts, **basic literacy training** can increase participants' confidence and use of digital tools.
- **Direct coordination with service providers** is recommended to ensure successful uptake of devices and troubleshoot issues.

KEY RESULTS — APPRENTICESHIP PILOT PROGRAM

220 Participants
Enrolled in apprenticeship program

70% Participants
Completed apprenticeship training

57% Participants
Employed or retained

15% Participants
Earn average monthly income of 150,000 UGX ($40)

18% Participants
Earn monthly income between 100,000-150,000 UGX ($27-$40)

[47] USAID and AVSI, Graduating to Resilience: Digital Adaptations & Participant Results, n.d. https://tinyurl.com/wymsy9zs

The Activity reviewed and adapted the EQUALS curriculum for the basic feature phones that were provided to all participants in Cohort Two.

Added apprenticeship program to better meet the needs of youth participants. The Youth Assessment conducted at the end of Cohort One (2021) found that both primary and nonprimary youth participants' goals were highly focused on livelihoods. Although all youth had goals related to starting a business, only nonprimary participant youth, both female and male, described wanting to be in wage labor. However, these **youth also faced significant barriers to employment, including, most notably, a lack of relevant marketable skills.** Youth also noted goals related to completing formal education, which they perceived as also presenting barriers to employment. Based on this finding, the Activity decided to pilot a youth apprenticeship intervention in Cohort Two. Using the **Earn As You Learn apprenticeship model,** which was first tested by AVSI in 2009 under the Women's Income Generating Support Program and then scaled under the USAID-funded SCORE Activity, **participants gained relevant skills through on-the-job training in market relevant trades including hairdressing, tailoring, motor vehicle mechanics, welding, and motorcycle mechanics.**

Lessons Learned: Apprenticeship Program

Although 801 participants expressed initial interest in the apprenticeship program, only 220 enrolled. This is likely due to the fact that participants were required to use a portion of their asset transfer to enroll in the program. Although many participants were initially open to the idea, once the asset transfer was completed, they decided to use it for other purposes. To mitigate this issue, future programs should consider:

- Deducting the cost of the apprenticeship enrollment from participants' asset transfer prior to transferv to help promote follow-through.
- Integrating apprenticeship into the core technical skill training prior to the asset transfer to help encourage and further sensitize participants to the benefits and requirements of the apprenticeship model.
- Targeting participants for the apprenticeship program based on their business plans to ensure their selected livelihood has a corresponding apprenticeship role available.
- Engage spouses and other family members more strongly in orientations to reinforce importance of apprenticeship.

Graduation Component Description

The asset transfer is one of the unique components of the graduation approach. Typically provided at the beginning of programming prior to training, the asset transfer provides **immediate capital to support participant households to engage in economic activities.** Whereas consumption support helps households smooth consumption and meet their basic needs, the asset transfer is intended to expand households' purchasing power, providing capital to engage in or expand their income-generating activities. This immediate infusion of capital allows households to **build on existing assets** rather than losing those that they already had. Additionally, it helps participants to **focus on long-term income generating activities**, reducing the need to engage in subsistence livelihoods. Asset transfers may take the form of **grants or cash transfers** for populations that are extremely vulnerable, or as **soft microfinance loans** for better off households.

How the Activity Adapted

Provided asset transfer to all households. As part of the RCT, the Activity tested the cost-effectiveness of the asset transfer in Cohort One. During Cohort One, the Activity provide a one-time cash transfer to 4,425 participant households. The Activity used data from the initial Labor Market Assessment (2018) conducted to determine the average cost of business startup. This cost was validated through reviewing participants' budget plans. The asset transfer was provided as a **one-time cash transfer** sent electronically via mobile money to the heads of households in the amount of roughly $300 (1,010,000 UGX) approximately seven months into programming to align with the second agricultural production season. Based on results of the Cohort One RCT, which found that **households with an asset transfer graduated marginally faster than their counterparts** that had to rely on savings to build up their business initiatives, the Activity decided to **provide all participant households with the asset transfer during Cohort Two.**

Participants use the one-time cash transfer to start or expand their businesses. Coaches work with participants before the asset transfer is distributed to put together a business plan for how to allocate the funds. Photo: AVSI.

Distributed asset transfer after completion of technical training and business plans developed. The Activity provided the asset transfer to participants seven months into implementation after they had received technical training in business skills and agriculture and had developed

[48] G2R Cohort One Gender Assessment

a business plan that had been vetted against key parameters, including environmental protection, sustainability, and protection and safeguards. By providing the asset transfer after initial business training had been completed, the Activity was able to work with the participants **to ensure they had a well-developed plan for how to effectively use the asset transfer and leverage the capital to make strategic investments to grow their income.** According to the post distribution monitoring data, the majority of households used the asset transfer to start businesses (98 percent) or diversify existing businesses (96 percent).

KEY RESULTS **ASSET TRANSFER**

11,111 Households
Received asset; business startup-cash

US $3,205,081
Asset - business startup cash provided

87% Households
Own businesses

96% Households
Diversified their businesses

52 Business Types
Off/On and non-farm

Provided mobile phones to bridge the gender digital divide and facilitate the use of mobile money. The EQUALS Cohort One assessment found 40 percent of participants had access to mobile phones. The Gender Assessment (2021) conducted at the end of Cohort One further revealed that although mobile phone use among participants increased over the course of Cohort One, **ownership and decision-making around mobile phone use was largely driven by male household members.** Specifically, although mobile phones are typically shared within households, women reported being less likely to be the one responsible for deciding to own a mobile phone when compared to men. In addition, female participants were also more likely to report facing barriers to using mobile phones such as limited **understanding of the devices** and of technology vocabulary. Participants noted that access to mobile phones could improve women's ability to participate and manage household funds and could enhance women's farming and business activities by facilitating access to information about extension services, crop and input prices, and weather.[48] Based on the findings from these two assessments, the **Activity distributed mobile phones to all households in Cohort Two** as part of the asset transfer. The Activity **targeted the female primary participant as the recipient and owner of the phone to help promote female involvement in financial decision-making processes.**

> I was given an asset transfer that acted as capital for my business (retail shop) and used part of that money to finish a house.
>
> *Host community participant*

Recommendations

Over the seven-year implementation period, the Activity tested, refined, and implemented different design elements, implementation approaches, and operational structures to contextualize and adapt the graduation approach to the context in Uganda. Based on this experience, the Activity presents the following recommendations for implementing organizations, donors, and governments that are interested in adapting the graduation approach in other contexts.

Build in Flexibility from the very beginning

This includes flexibility in **activity design, implementation approach, and in operational structure.** Over the seven-year implementation period, the Activity tested different adaptations, small and large, to identify what worked and, even more importantly, what didn't work in this context. The Activity was able to build in this adaptability because of a supportive and flexible donor. BHA provided the Activity the space to test out and adapt different approaches, all while providing technical guidance and support as needed. This flexibility was made possible by the availability of relevant and timely data and information, including that generated by the Activity, collected by the external evaluator, IPA, and from intentional context monitoring. Lastly, **flexibility was embraced and facilitated by the leadership team**, which encouraged staff to identify areas of success and gaps to ensure that the Activity was continually reflecting on and aligning Activity design and implementation with participant needs and contextual realities.

The Activity collaborated with USAID throughout the implementation period to identify areas where new interventions and approaches could be piloted and scaled. Photo: AVSI.

Design a robust M&E and collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) system to support adaptive management.

The Activity **drew on data from a variety of sources both formal and informal and internal and external.** These data were essential to monitoring implementation progress and the rapidly changing context. The Activity was able to leverage these different data and use them to make timely decisions because it built a robust M&E and CLA system from the beginning, including **allocating sufficient financial resources to data collection and analysis**, including resources for research and assessments; **hiring qualified M&E and CLA staff; building a comprehensive management information system; integrating set and ad hoc opportunities to reflect on data** and learning and adapt programming; and providing **continuous capacity building and training** to field staff to ensure consistency and data quality.

Incorporate evaluation and research activities strategically to test, assess, and adapt specific components while maintaining flexibility.

The Activity made use of various research and evaluation methods throughout the seven-year period, including an RCT, formative assessments, and performance assessments to better adapt and adjust programming based on changing needs. It is important to strategically design each research and evaluation effort, considering the key outcomes of interest and tradeoffs between different methods, including tradeoffs in rigor, fidelity, and feasibility. **The RCT design rigorously tested the effectiveness of different variations of the graduation approach**, notably, the effectiveness of the asset transfer, different coaching models, and the integration of G-IPT. The Activity was able to test these different approaches by structuring the intervention into two cohorts, using the control group for Cohort One as the intervention group for Cohort Two. This allowed the Activity to contribute to the broader evidence base around the effectiveness of the graduation approach. Although the Activity was able to effectively adapt and adjust over the course of the implementation period, it is important to note that there are limitations to adaptive implementation when the program includes an RCT. In the case of the Activity, there were several constraints that limited the Activity's ability to adapt due to the need to maintain the fidelity of implementation. For instance, the randomization of G-IPT meant that groups were mixed with those who were experiencing symptoms of depression and those who were not experiencing such symptoms. This may have limited the effectiveness of the G-IPT intervention because those who were experiencing symptoms may have been less likely to share their hardships with community members who they perceived as not experiencing similar hardships. The Activity conducted nine formative assessments during the two refine and implement periods. These **assessments were critical to understanding the operating context and allowed the Activity to make adaptations to the intervention design based on the changing context and the needs of the participants.** The Activity also conducted performance assessments to better understand key components of the intervention. These assessments tended to be more qualitative in nature and explored performance monitoring data rather than RCT data. Although these assessments are limited in their ability to definitively attribute changes to the Activity, they provide critical insights in the participant experience. Donors and implementing partners should consider if and how to appropriately use different research and evaluation approaches, including RCTs, formative assessments, and performance assessments, when seeking to pilot or test new components or adaptations of the graduation approach. Careful **consideration should be given to what adaptations are being testing and how to structure the research and evaluation design to allow for flexibility while maintaining methodological rigor.**

Invest in staff capacity building.

Given the intense nature of the graduation approach, the success of implementation hinges on the relationships and trust that staff, specifically coaches and CBTs, can build with the participants. This was reiterated across both cohorts as participants noted that coaching was one of the most influential components of the Activity. The Activity found that when recruiting staff for roles, specifically coaches, there is less of a need to focus on specific education requirements or years of experience, but rather it is more important to find a “trainable” coach, someone who is willing to learn. The Activity invested substantial resources, both human and financial, in **ensuring that staff at all levels were properly trained on the graduation approach and the specific implementation strategies** the Activity employed. Investing in training staff to instill an in-depth and common understanding of the goal of the Activity at a high level so that they can provide the needed support to the households is essential to ensuring success. Furthermore, when staff have a common understanding of the goal, they are **better able to report back to leadership about if/where challenges are being encountered** so that the Activity can be adjusted as needed.

ITALY

Via Legnone 4, 20158 Milan, Italy

Tel: +256 312 501604 | Fax: +39 02 67 49 00 56

Email: milano@avsi.org

www.avsi.org

AVSI FOUNDATION IN UGANDA

Plot 1119 Ggaba Road

P.O. Box 6785, Kampala, Uganda

Tel: +256 312 501604

Email: communication.uganda@avsi.org

AVSI-USA DC AREA OFFICE

8730 Georgia Avenue, Suite 512

Silver Spring, MD 20910

Tel: +1 301 589 9009

Email: infoavsi-usa@avsi.org

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