The Impact of a Graduation Program on Livelihoods in Refugee and Host Communities in Uganda

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Sector(s): Finance, Labor Markets, Social Protection

Fieldwork: Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA)

Location: Uganda

Sample: 11,000 households in 132 villages

Initiative(s): Crime and Violence Initiative (CVI)

Target group: Rural population Refugees

Intervention type: Social protection COVID-19 response Graduation approach

AEA RCT registration number: AEARCTR-0004080

Partner organization(s): USAID, Association of Volunteers in International Service (AVSI)

Evidence from multiple contexts suggests that the Graduation approach, which provides holistic livelihood support for ultra-poor households, has lasting positive impacts on a range of outcomes. However, graduation programs are relatively expensive because of the intense level of support they offer. The costs pose a challenge for governments that want to implement the approach at scale. More research to disentangle which particular components drive the program impact could help implementers design less expensive, more cost-effective models. In Uganda, researchers working with USAID are conducting a randomized evaluation to better understand the effectiveness of several variants of a graduation program focused on improving nutrition and self-reliance among populations in and around a refugee settlement.

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As of 2015, over 736 million people worldwide lived on less than $1.90 per day. People living at this level of income face numerous obstacles to improving their well-being. Previous research from six countries found that the Graduation approach, which aims to confront these obstacles simultaneously by combining a series of six components designed to help recipients build new livelihoods, had positive impacts on a wide range of outcomes after three years. While the Graduation approach has been successful, it is expensive for many governments to implement. Less is known about the relative costs and benefits of individual standard components of Graduation, which typically include cash grants, asset transfers, skills training, individual coaching, access to savings groups, and basic healthcare. This project aims to identify cost-effective strategies of providing a graduation program in both a refugee settlement and in the communities surrounding it.

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Many residents of Western Uganda's Kamwenge District, where this evaluation takes place, face chronic food insecurity. The Kamwenge district hosts the Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement, where approximately 57,000 refugees from the neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo live. At the beginning of the evaluation, these refugees were nearing the end of their eligibility for food assistance. The primary goal of the graduation program in this setting is to improve food and nutrition security and self-reliance among extremely poor households in both the Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement and in the surrounding area.

The Graduating to Resilience program is designed to address this insecurity. With support from USAID's Office of Food for Peace (FFP), the AVSI Foundation, along with Trickle Up and IMPAQ International, are implementing the program for 13,200 households in Western Uganda from 2017-2024.

Congolese family living in the Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement in Uganda.

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Researchers are working with AVSI Uganda, USAID, and Save the Children to conduct a randomized evaluation to compare the cost-effectiveness of different variations of graduation programming (including a full graduation program and lower-cost versions) on consumption, assets, food security and other measures of wellbeing for refugees and host communities.

Following an eligibility verification exercise, a total of 11,000 households are participating in the evaluation—5,500 households across 44 villages in the Rwanwanja Refugee Settlement and 5,500 households across 88 villages in the surrounding area.

Half of all villages will be randomly assigned to participate in the Graduation program; the remaining half of villages will not implement any Graduation program and will serve as a comparison group. Within villages receiving the program, eligible households will be randomized into four groups: three groups that vary in the level of support provided by the Graduation program variants and one comparison group. By comparing households living in program villages that are not randomly assigned to participate in the Graduation program and households in comparison villages where no one participates, researchers will be able to measure whether the impact on participating households spills over to their neighbors who do not participate.

The full description of graduation variants and their distribution is as follows:

1. *Full Graduation Group (2,200 households)*: Participants in this group will receive a full graduation program, consisting of an initial cash asset transfer, consumption support in the form of continuing cash transfers, the establishment of village-level savings groups, and ongoing coaching and support at the individual household level.
2. *Group Coaching Graduation Group (2,200 households)*: Participants in this group will receive all components. However, in place of individual household-level coaching, these participants will receive coaching in group meetings of around 30 households, in order to evaluate whether this lower-cost model can retain the effectiveness of the existing model.
3. *No Asset Graduation Group (2,200 households)*: Participants in this group will receive all components of the Full Graduation Group, with the exception of the asset transfer.
4. *Within-village comparison group (2,200 households)*: In each village that receives a graduation variant, a group of households will not receive the intervention. At the end of the study period a second cohort of households from among this group will participate in a graduation program informed by the results from the first round of programming.
5. *Across-village comparison group (2,200 households)*: In the comparison villages, no households will receive an intervention.

Baseline and follow-up surveys will measure households' food security, nutrition, income, assets, and a range of other outcomes over a 30-month period. Researchers included an additional round of phone-surveys to measure the downstream effects of the intervention on participant's resilience to the impacts of Covid-19.

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Evaluation ongoing; results forthcoming.