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Considerations for Integrating the Graduation Approach within Resilience Food Security Activities

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ABOUT IDEAL

IDEAL is an activity funded by the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) that works to support the United States Government's goal of improving food and nutrition security among the world's most vulnerable households and communities. IDEAL addresses knowledge and capacity gaps expressed by the food and nutrition security implementing community to support them in the design and implementation of effective emergency and non-emergency food security activities.

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Graduating to Resilience/AVSI Foundation

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ACRONYMS

AIGA	Nobo Jatra Alternative Income Generating Activity	ODI	Overseas Development Institute
ARR	Annual Results Report	PEI	Partnership for Economic Inclusion
BHA	Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance	PSNP	Productive Safety Net Program
CBA	Cost Benefit Analysis	RCT	Randomized Control Trial
CGAP	Consultative Group to Assist the Poor	RFSA	Resilience Food Security Activity
CLA	Collaboration, Learning, and Adaptation	REAP	Rural Entrepreneur Access Project
CRS	Catholic Relief Services	SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
CVCA	Climate Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis	SEI	State of Economic Inclusion
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction	TUP	Targeting the Ultra-Poor Graduation Program
EI	Economic Inclusion	USAID	United States Agency for International Development
ELT	Entrepreneurship Literacy Training	USG	United States Government
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization	VESA	Village Economic and Social Association
FFBS	Farmer Field Business School	VHT	Village Health Team
FFP	Food for Peace	VSLA	Village Savings and Loan Association
FSP	Financial Services Providers	WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
G2R	Graduating to Resilience	WFP	World Food Programme
GoE	Government of Ethiopia	RCT	Randomized Control Trial
HDRC	Human Development Resource Center	RFSA	Resilience Food Security Activity
HH	Household	REAP	Rural Entrepreneur Access Project
IDEAL	Implementer-Led Design, Evidence, Analysis and Learning	SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
IGA	Income Generating Activity	SEI	State of Economic Inclusion
IPA	Innovations for Poverty Action	TUP	Targeting the Ultra-Poor Graduation Program
KII	Key Informant Interview	USAID	United States Agency for International Development
L4R	Livelihoods for Resilience	USG	United States Government
MCHN	Maternal and Child Health and Nutrition	VESA	Village Economic and Social Association
MEB	Minimum Expenditure Basket	VHT	Village Health Team
MFI	Microfinance institution	VSLA	Village Savings and Loan Association
MSD	Market Systems Development	WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
MUAC	Mid-Upper-Arm Circumference	WFP	World Food Programme
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation		

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prior to COVID-19, the global prevalence of extreme poverty¹ had been steadily declining with some variations between geographic regions. While there are signs of this downward trend resuming, it is still estimated that an additional 75-95 million people could be living in extreme poverty in 2022, compared to pre-pandemic levels.² In addition to the effects of the pandemic, other drivers of food insecurity and malnutrition include climate change, conflict, and economic slowdowns, all of which are occurring more frequently, more intensively, and in unprecedented combination. Women and girls in particular face distinct vulnerability. Reducing extreme poverty requires holistic and integrated approaches that address the multiple interrelated and chronic deprivations of hunger, malnutrition, poor health, limited education, marginalization and/or exclusion. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) is committed to enhancing the resilience of vulnerable populations around the world. The BHA-funded Resilience Food Security Activities (RFSAs) use an integrated multi-sectoral design to strengthen livelihoods and build people's capacities to better manage stresses and shocks, combat malnutrition, promote economic growth, improve food security, minimize disaster risks, and adapt to climate change.

Over the past two decades, the graduation approach has gained traction as a methodology to help alleviate poverty and build resilience. A carefully layered, sequenced, and integrated household-level intervention, the graduation approach starts with participatory targeting and is based on five core components: 1) mentoring and coaching, 2) consumption smoothing support, 3) savings groups for financial inclusion, 4) training, and 5) livelihoods selection and asset transfer. Graduation programming within RFSAs incorporates additional components such as nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific interventions as well as capacity strengthening for disaster risk reduction. While graduation programming is a leading methodology to “graduate” vulnerable households from food insecurity and extreme poverty into secure, sustainable, and resilient livelihoods, its application within RFSAs has been limited, with a steady expansion in recent years.

Given the synergies between the graduation approach and many of the programming interventions typically included in RFSAs, the Implementer-Led Design, Evidence, Analysis and Learning (IDEAL) activity commissioned a study of prevailing practices in adapting and integrating the graduation approach within RFSAs. This report focuses on three RFSAs—the Graduating to Resilience activity³ in Uganda, the Nobo Jatra activity⁴ in Bangladesh, and the Nuyok activity⁵ in Uganda. Graduation programming within RFSAs can be categorized into two approaches: 1) a “fully integrated” approach where all participants targeted by the RFSAs receive the graduation programming package of interventions, and 2) a “subset” approach where only a subset of RFSAs participants receive the graduation programming package. All three RFSAs in this study implemented all core graduation components, with variations based on local contexts and layering.

Utilizing a qualitative methodology and multi-stakeholder participatory process, the study sought to explore how the RFSAs are adapting and integrating the graduation approach and well this programming is supporting food security and nutrition outcomes. The following learning questions guided the study:

1 Defined as living on less than \$1.90 per person per day, until September 2022 when the World Bank changed it to \$2.15 per person per day. (see: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/factsheet/2022/05/02/fact-sheet-an-adjustment-to-global-poverty-lines>)

2 The World Bank. (n.d.). *Poverty Overview*.

3 Fondazione AVSI (2020, December 3). *Graduating to Resilience*.

4 World Vision. (n.d.). *Nobo Jatra*.

5 CRS. (n.d.). *Long Term Food Security & Resilience in Uganda*.

1. How are graduation components and processes adapted within each context?
2. How are graduation packages layered and sequenced upon other programs and systems?
3. How are graduation pathways shaped in each RFSAs?
4. What evidence exists to show how graduation programming supports nutrition outcomes and resilience in the face of disaster?

Some key findings include:

- Many times, the number of those who qualify for graduation programming exceeds the number that the activity is able to support. RFSAs should be prepared to address what happens to those who meet the screening criteria but are excluded from graduation programming.
- RFSAs that target only a subset of participants for graduation programming may need to consider sequencing and layering within the broader activity. Timely, clear, and transparent communication regarding graduation targeting criteria is essential.
- The importance of adequate staffing levels to support coaching and mentoring should not be overlooked since training and coaching are not the same thing and require different skill sets. Training available to RFSAs graduation participants must be tailored to their specific needs and capacities.
- Asset transfer is one of the more costly elements of the graduation approach. Choices about the amount of the asset transfer, the transfer modality, the timing, and other conditions need to be carefully designed to ensure no harm in achieving the intended goals.
- The amount, duration, and timing of the consumption support needs careful analysis to ensure no harm and should be clearly communicated to all participants, staff, and stakeholders.
- While savings groups and financial literacy training within graduation programming is not that different in RFSAs, special considerations should be applied to cater to the unique needs of the extremely poor. This includes adapting training materials and financial management systems to include low literacy participants as well as bolstering training and participation with mentoring and coaching.

Contextualization of the graduation approach across the three RFSAs offers opportunities to identify capacity and knowledge gaps in integrating graduation programming. However, as the study found, post-graduation support and monitoring are often overlooked yet essential activities for ensuring graduated households do not regress, particularly in the face of severe shocks or stresses. Linking graduation participants to government social safety nets can mitigate the risk of backsliding. Future RFSAs or other food and nutrition security programs with subset graduation programming should consider how to appropriately design and implement an exit strategy for graduation participants to transition and be fully integrated into RFSAs. As graduation programming continues to evolve based on contextual design, there is an opportunity to strengthen the evidence base on context-specific adaptations through rigorous evaluations. Documentation and dissemination of learning from RFSAs will be key.

INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity and poverty are rising at unprecedented levels. In 2018, the World Bank estimated that 652 million people were living in extreme poverty⁶—less than US\$1.90 per person per day.⁷ For two decades, the number of people living in extreme poverty was steadily declining. However, in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the extreme poverty rate was rising prior to the pandemic, nearly doubling between 2015 and 2018. Outside of the MENA region, the global trend of extreme poverty decline was interrupted in 2020 due to economic disruptions linked to COVID-19, rising conflict, climatic shocks, and stresses. In 2020, 97 million people were pushed into extreme poverty.⁸ Global poverty was projected to decrease by about 21 million people in 2021, and in the spring of 2022, poverty rates had indeed begun to decline. However, in 2022, the estimate of additional people still in extreme poverty due to the massive shock in 2020 remains 75-95 million people.⁹

People living in extreme poverty lack both income and assets and typically suffer from interrelated, chronic deprivations, including hunger, malnutrition, poor health, limited education, and marginalization or exclusion. Women and girls particularly affected. Addressing these challenges requires holistic and integrated approaches that tackle the multiple dimensions of poverty, especially for the ultra-poor.

Over the past two decades, the graduation approach has gained traction as a methodology to help alleviate poverty and build resilience around the globe. Starting with participatory targeting, the approach involves a carefully layered, sequenced, and integrated set of time-bound interventions designed to holistically address the multifaceted needs experienced by the poorest. It is broadly acclaimed as one of the most effective means of sustainably lifting those living in ultra-poverty to pass a threshold to self-reliance and sustained food security.¹⁰ The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has begun using the graduation approach within their resilience and food security programming, including several resilience food security activities (RFSAs) funded by the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) and the Livelihoods for Resilience program in Ethiopia, funded by Feed the Future. However, emerging lessons and evidence of the approach's application in USAID-funded programs are under-explored.

In September 2020, the Implementer-Led Design, Evidence, Analysis and Learning (IDEAL) activity organized a webinar on lessons learned from graduation programming within BHA-funded resilience food security activities (RFSAs).¹¹ The event highlighted unique approaches of, early results, and lessons learned from graduation programming across three USAID-funded programs in Uganda, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh. The virtual event, attended by 167 participants, demonstrated high interest and demand for further learning on this topic. Following the webinar, the presenters and the IDEAL team identified an opportunity to develop a technical report that would augment the event presentation. This report provides a more comprehensive study of prevailing practices in integrating graduation programming across three RFSAs: Graduating to Resilience (AVSI/Uganda), Nobo Jatra (World Vision/Bangladesh), and Nuyok (Catholic Relief Services (CRS)/Uganda).

The report begins with a summary of the graduation approach, followed by a description and overview of the three RFSAs and their application of the graduation approach in different contexts. Next, it presents key findings

6 The World Bank. (n.d.). *Poverty and Inequality Platform*.

7 The extreme poverty rate was updated from \$1.90 to \$2.15 in September 2022 after this report was first drafted. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/factsheet/2022/05/02/fact-sheet-an-adjustment-to-global-poverty-lines>

8 World Bank Blogs. (2021, June 24). *Updated Estimates of the Impact of Covid-19 on Global Poverty: Turning the Corner on the Pandemic in 2021*.

9 The World Bank. (n.d.). *Poverty Overview*.

10 Banerjee et al. (2015, May 15). *A Multi-faceted Program Causes Lasting Progress for the Very Poor: Evidence from Six Countries*.

11 FSN Network. (n.d.). *Field Voices: Emerging Evidence & Lessons on Ultra-Poor Graduation*.

related to the adaptation of the graduation approach for each graduation component, the integration of graduation programming into these RFSAs, followed by early learnings on graduation pathways, and the evidence base for applying graduation in RFSAs. Last, it presents recommendations for RFSAs practitioners and BHA to consider in the design and application of the graduation approach in future RFSAs.

THE GRADUATION APPROACH

The graduation approach is a holistic household-level intervention designed to push households beyond food insecurity and extreme poverty into secure, sustainable, and resilient livelihoods. First used by BRAC in Bangladesh in 2002, the graduation approach has gained traction globally as a leading methodology to address the multidimensional needs faced by the poorest. Graduation programming addresses context-specific barriers that hinder people living in poverty from experiencing social protection; livelihoods promotion; financial inclusion; and social empowerment. The graduation approach has no standardized theory of change, but maintains that the provision of intensive, holistic, and time-bound support will enable participants to “graduate” from extreme poverty and become more food-secure, enjoy sustainable and diversified incomes, increase assets, increase self-confidence, and better manage shocks and risks.¹² Through a layered, sequenced, and integrated intervention, graduation participants receive specific graduation components in a specific order and for a predetermined duration of time, usually 18 to 36 months. Figure 1 provides an overview of the core components frequently included in graduation programming.¹³

- **Participatory Targeting:** One of the ways that graduation distinguishes itself from other livelihoods interventions is its deliberate targeting of the poorest and exclusion of better-off poor households. Moreover, methods that include the community in targeting processes to increase buy-in are often favored.
- **Mentoring/Coaching:** Often described as the “special sauce” of the graduation approach, graduation programs provide ongoing support to participants to assess how they are faring, offer ongoing support, build confidence, and reinforce skills. Mentoring occurs at regular intervals, usually at the household or group level.
- **Consumption Support:** Implementers offer consumption assistance—either in cash or in-kind—to create “breathing space” for participants and meet their basic consumption needs once they join the graduation program. This support helps participants stabilize their consumption levels until they start earning income from livelihood activities.
- **Financial Inclusion:** Graduation programs link participants to safe mechanisms for financial inclusion to help manage risks and build resilience in the face of crisis or economic shock. Programs often support financial inclusion through engagement in savings groups such as Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) or linkages to formal financial services providers (FSP).
- **Training:** Programs offer technical and soft skills training on an ongoing basis to teach graduation participants to manage assets and operate an Income Generating Activity (IGA). Training sessions often include technical skills training related to specific livelihoods, broader business or financial literacy training, or other relevant life skills.
- **Livelihood Selection and Asset Transfer/Employment Support:** Participants receive a cash asset or in-kind asset transfer to “jump-start” an investment in one or more income-generating activity.

¹² Montesquiou et al. (2014, September). *From Extreme Poverty to Sustainable Livelihoods: A Technical Guide to the Graduation Approach*.

¹³ BRAC. (2019, May). *Ultra-Poor Graduation Handbook*.

The graduation approach stands out amongst livelihoods interventions for the poorest largely due to its strong evidence base. Between 2006 and 2014, Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), with support from the Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP) and the Ford Foundation, conducted rigorous impact assessments on six graduation pilot sites. Findings demonstrate that graduation programming reliably leads to income gains (consumption, assets, and revenue), increased savings, greater food security, increased women’s empowerment, and improved health and happiness.¹⁴ A recent evaluation of BRAC’s Targeting the Ultra-Poor graduation program in Bangladesh shows that many impacts are sustained more than seven years after the initial transfer or productive asset.¹⁵



Photo Credit: Graduating to Resilience/AVSI Foundation

Graduation programming is ever-evolving, with increasing variation regarding what programs aspire to achieve. For instance, more graduation programs are exploring scale-up and integration with government social safety nets and social protection schemes. Implementing organizations—including BRAC—continue to innovate and adapt programming to meet the needs of their contexts and diverse target populations. In addition to modifying the sequencing, layering, and duration of graduation components, many graduation programs offer additional interventions beyond the core components to help address specific vulnerabilities that program participants face. Furthermore, the World Bank’s Partnership for Economic Inclusion (PEI) (formerly CGAP, the Consultative Group to Assist the Poor), the globally recognized thought leader in the graduation approach, has started to transition to economic inclusion (EI), rather than traditional graduation programs, which underscores the continuous evolution of graduation programming.¹⁶

14 Banerjee et al. (2015, May 15). *A Multi-faceted Program Causes Lasting Progress for the Very Poor: Evidence from Six Countries*.

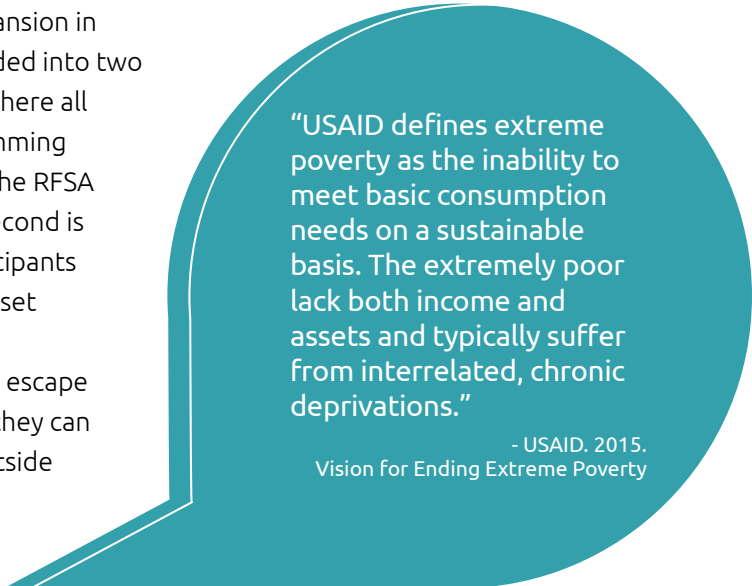
15 Balboni et al. (2015, December). *Transforming the Economic Lives of the Ultra-poor*.

16 PEI describes EI as a “bundle of coordinated multidimensional interventions that support individuals, households, and communities in increasing incomes and assets” EI programs do not necessarily require the five components and is also less strict in regard to the poverty level of participants and may or may not be time-bound. <https://www.peiglobal.org/sites/pei/files/2021-01/The%20State%20of%20Economic%20Inclusion%20Report%202021.pdf>

GRADUATION PROGRAMMING ACROSS USAID RFSAS

USAID's RFSAs aim to strengthen capacities of vulnerable populations around the world to combat malnutrition, reduce morbidity and mortality, promote economic growth, minimize disaster risks, improve food security, and adapt to climate change. RFSAs use an integrated multi-sectoral approach to sustainably improve resilience of vulnerable households and communities with a particular focus on reducing malnutrition, especially for the world's hardest-to-reach people. Given this, RFSAs are a natural avenue for the integration of graduation programming.

While graduation programming has been around since 2002, its application within RFSAs has been fairly limited, with a steady expansion in recent years. Graduation programming in RFSAs is divided into two approaches. The first is a "fully integrated" approach where all participants receive the traditional graduation programming package of interventions. In such cases, the design of the RFSAs is entirely founded on the graduation approach. The second is a "subset approach" where only a subset of RFSAs participants receive the graduation programming package. The subset approach assumes that the poorest households in the community require additional safety nets to help them escape extreme poverty and adopt sustainable livelihoods so they can benefit from the broader set of RFSAs interventions outside of the graduation component. The remaining RFSAs participants receive development interventions that may resemble traditional graduation programming interventions but lack the same strict parameters.



"USAID defines extreme poverty as the inability to meet basic consumption needs on a sustainable basis. The extremely poor lack both income and assets and typically suffer from interrelated, chronic deprivations."

- USAID. 2015.
Vision for Ending Extreme Poverty

At the time this report was published, there were 20 USAID BHA-funded RFSAs in ten countries. The three RFSAs studied in this report implemented graduation programming either fully or as a subset of the broader activity.

OVERVIEW OF CASE STUDY RFSAS

A brief description of the RFSAs is provided below:

- **Graduating to Resilience:** The activity targets women and youth refugees and host community households living in extreme poverty in Kamwenge district in Western Uganda. It intends to improve food security and nutrition and alleviate poverty by shifting subsistence smallholder farmers to market-oriented, climate-smart farming, increasing levels of knowledge around nutrition, health, and hygiene, and integrating risk management to build the capacity of households and communities to prepare for and cope with health and climate shocks. G2R is a fully integrated approach to graduation programming that utilizes a three-arm randomized control trial (RCT) to test the cost-effectiveness of three variations of the graduation approach. The activity is expected to end September 2024.

- **Nobo Jatra:** The activity aims to improve gender equitable food security, nutrition, and resilience of vulnerable people in Khulna and Satkira districts of Bangladesh through integrated water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), maternal child health and nutrition (MCHN), natural resource management (NRM), and livelihoods interventions. In addition, Nobo Jatra implements the graduation approach with a subset of the greater RFSAs, targeting vulnerable households living below the national poverty lines to enable the extremely poor to benefit more effectively from development interventions within Nobo Jatra and external programs. The activity is expected to end September 2022.¹⁷
- **Nuyok:** The activity aims to build resilience to shocks, enhance livelihoods, and improve food security and nutrition for vulnerable rural families in three districts of Karamoja, Uganda. Working primarily through Mother Care Groups, the activity layers and sequences interventions related to financial inclusion, capacity building, WASH, and agricultural production. As part of its approach to building community capacity to manage shocks and stresses, Nuyok is piloting the graduation approach, which targeted a sub-set of the poorest households using the BOMA Project’s Rural Entrepreneur Access Project (REAP) model.¹⁸ The activity ended June 2022.

Table 1 below provides an overview of the three RFSAs.

TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF THE RFSAS

	GRADUATING TO RESILIENCE ¹⁹	NOBO JATRA ²⁰	NUYOK ²¹
COUNTRY	UGANDA	BANGLADESH	UGANDA
RFSAs Consortium	AVSI; Trickle Up, American Institutes for Research (formerly IMPAQ International)	World Vision; Winrock International	CRS; Caritas; The BOMA Project; Youth Build International; Cooperation for Development
Period of Performance	AVSI; Trickle Up, American Institutes for Research (formerly IMPAQ International)	World Vision; Winrock International	CRS; Caritas; The BOMA Project; Youth Build International; Cooperation for Development
Activity Participants	79,200	856,116	265,391
Graduation Participants	13,929 HHs Two cohorts of 6,600 HHs	21,000 HHs Three cohorts of 7,000 HHs	1,635 HHs
Length of Graduation Programming	30 months for Cohort 1 and 24 months for Cohort 2	24 months for Cohorts 1 and 2 and 18 months for Cohort 3	24 months
Graduation Approach in RFSAs	Fully integrated	Subset	Subset

17 After the time of writing this report, Nobo Jatra received a 2-year extension and will now end in 2024.

18 REAP is an innovative two-year poverty graduation program that provides a cash grant (seed capital to launch a business), sustained training in business skills and savings, and hands-on local mentoring by BOMA Village Mentors to business groups of three women. <https://bomaproject.org/category/reap-rural-entrepreneur-access-project/>

19 Fondazione AVSI (2020, December 3). *Graduating to Resilience*.

20 World Vision. (n.d.). *Nobo Jatra*.

21 CRS. (n.d.). *Long Term Food Security & Resilience in Uganda*.

SCOPE OF STUDY

This report focuses on prevailing practices in integrating the graduation approach across three USAID BHA-funded RFSAs with the overall goal to improve the capacity for effective layering, sequencing, and integration of interventions within resilience, food, and nutrition security programming. IDEAL used a qualitative methodology and multi-stakeholder participatory process, including desk research of relevant materials and 12 key informant interviews, to explore the following areas of inquiry.

TABLE 2: AREAS OF INQUIRY

INQUIRY FOCUS	GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTION
Adaptation of the Graduation Approach	How are graduation components and processes designed, adapted, and sequenced within each context?
Integration of Graduation Programming	How are graduation packages sequenced and layered upon other programs and systems?
Graduation Pathways	How are graduation pathways shaped in each program?
Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning	What evidence exists to show how graduation programming supports nutrition outcomes and resilience in the face of disaster?

FINDINGS

AREA OF INQUIRY #1: Adaptation of the Graduation Approach

This section gives a comparative overview of the diverse approaches RFSAs took to design, adapt, and sequence core graduation components within their specific contexts. At the design stage, graduation programming starts with precise targeting before the implementation of conditional assistance can be delivered. All three RFSAs analyzed in this report targeted poor and extremely poor households.

TARGETING

Participant targeting within RFSAs is typically done at the community level and is based on vulnerability to food insecurity and specifically, malnutrition rates. In contrast, targeting in the graduation approach is done at an individual household level based on the multi-dimensional definitions of poverty and extreme poverty. Participant targeting in graduation programming typically leverages participatory rural appraisal (PRA) processes to build community buy-in and ensure that poverty is appropriately contextualized. In utilizing the graduation approach, RFSAs must create specific parameters that target the extremely poor within the context of general RFSAs programming.

Targeting in all three RFSAs utilized participatory processes to identify graduation households. Additional considerations were made based on poverty status and other relevant context-specific criteria.

All three RFSAs utilized PRA processes to target graduation households based on poverty status, though the methodology utilized depended on local context and program design. Each activity prioritized women-headed households as research on the graduation approach shows that targeting women multiplies benefits for the entire household.²² Participants who cannot engage in income-generating activities, such as the extremely old or individuals with severe disabilities, were not selected.

²² Irven, B. (2020, December 17). *Breaking down Gender Barriers with the Graduation Approach*.; Moqueet, N. (2020, March 9). *Empowering Women to Escape Extreme Poverty*.

Graduating to Resilience used social mapping and poverty wealth ranking (PWR) processes to develop a poverty scorecard²³ based on locally conceptualized poverty classifications. The activity utilized the scorecard to target youth and women from extremely poor refugee and host community households. Participants were randomly assigned to an RCT treatment arm.²⁴ Similarly, Nuyok also used PWR and other participatory exercises to target up to 10% of the most vulnerable women in the community through Mother Care Groups formed in consultation with Lead Mothers and Village Health Teams. Nobo Jatra chose a family and community-centered approach using the PRA tools to target households living below the Government of Bangladesh's lower poverty lines. Additional targeting criteria included women-headed households, pregnant and lactating women, as well as the landless and those living on less than ten decimals of land, and those with few or no productive assets.

Participatory targeting in graduation programming presents some challenges. One such challenge is that the number of those who qualify for graduation programming may exceed the number that the RFSAs are able to support. For example, Nobo Jatra identified 62,137 eligible households but could only accommodate 14,000 (23% of those identified). The rest were assigned to participate in the Nobo Jatra Alternative Income Generating Activity (AIGA).²⁵ This caused confusion amongst program participants, staff members, and other stakeholders regarding eligibility criteria. To maintain trust and prevent undue harm towards host communities, a good practice is to develop effective communication strategies that explain how selected participants are identified and why and how they receive additional support.

GRADUATION COMPONENTS

This section gives an overview of the prevailing practices utilized by the RFSAs for each of the five core components 1) mentoring and coaching, 2) consumption smoothing support, 3) savings groups for financial inclusion, 4) livelihoods selection and training, and 5) asset transfer. Overall, the research found that the three RFSAs implemented all core graduation components with variations based on local contexts and layering. These are outlined below. Graduation programming considerations for future RFSAs or other similar food and nutrition security activities are detailed in the Considerations for Future Programming section of this report.

1. Mentoring and Coaching

Mentoring and coaching are perhaps the most unique component of the graduation approach, as compared to typical RFSAs programming. Referred to as the “special sauce,” it is also one of the costliest components of graduation programming as it entails hands-on support by dedicated program staff who work with participants throughout their graduation pathway. Traditionally implemented at the individual household level, mentoring and coaching sessions offer personalized guidance on essential life skills, like problem-solving, building confidence, facing challenges, and decision-making. Mentors then assess participant progress, advise on behavior change, and facilitate linkages with essential service providers such as healthcare, education, market opportunities and agriculture extension.

Mentoring and coaching methods vary considerably based on the implementing partner, context, and the background of the coach. Graduating to Resilience and Nobo Jatra both offered individual mentoring and coaching where participants were offered bi-weekly sessions throughout the duration of the graduation

23 Learn more about the poverty scorecard here: <https://www.avsi.org/en/news/2019/01/17/g2r-activity-update-3-participatory-rural-appraisal/1730/>

24 See https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00TQ5N.pdf to learn more about G2R's targeting process and lessons learned.

25 The Nobo Jatra AIGA divided into off-farm and non-farm deals involves partnerships with the private sector for Nobo Jatra to “strengthen and diversify livelihoods to increase assets and income, reduce vulnerability to specific hazards, and help households manage risk.”
USAID. (n.d.). *Nobo Jatra – New Beginning USAID's Development Food Security Activity Annual Results Report (ARR), Fiscal Year-2018 - World Vision Bangladesh*.

intervention. Programs have recently begun experimenting with group coaching and e-coaching as a way of cutting costs, often leveraging group training and or village savings and loan association (VSLA) meetings to add on coaching activities. Based on RCT results for Graduating to Resilience, individual and group coaching were both effective, with lower costs associated with the latter. In most graduation interventions, coaches often have additional responsibilities, such as leading VSLAs or soft skills training sessions.

All three RFSAs offered weekly or monthly group coaching. During group sessions, Nobo Jatra field organizers (coaches) Nobo Jatra checked in with participants on their income-generating activities, offered coaching on decision-making, and tracked graduation criteria. Graduation coaches also facilitated VSLAs and led Entrepreneurship Literacy Training (ELT) for graduation participants. Nuyok mentors visited each REAP business group at least monthly to provide in-person support, monitor progress, and problem-solve issues. Monthly, group-level delivery of coaching was adapted to be cost and operationally efficient given the geographically dispersed nature of communities, while creating a peer support system among participants within their business group and savings groups.

Programmatically, mentoring and coaching are important entry points to address specific resilience and food security goals within RFSAs. Resilience, along with food and nutrition security interventions, were most frequently integrated through the training or mentoring/coaching graduation components. For example, in addition to their core coaching responsibilities, Graduating to Resilience trained coaches integrated sessions on nutrition, WASH, and MCHN into the curriculum. Graduating to Resilience also incorporated specific malnutrition screening and referral mechanisms, where trained coaches could conduct Mid-Upper-Arm Circumference (MUAC) screening during regular household or group coaching sessions. Coaches then referred acute malnutrition cases to government Village Health Teams when appropriate. In the subsequent graduation cohort, Graduating to Resilience shifted its approach to Family MUAC and gave caregivers or parents a MUAC tape and taught them to screen their children themselves. In addition to empowering households, this transition ensured early identification and allowed screening to continue in the context of COVID-19. Meanwhile, Nobo Jatra's ELT included sessions on nutrition, antenatal and postnatal care, climate change and adaptation, natural disasters, and disaster preparedness. Similarly, Nuyok's micro-trainings²⁶, to include girls' education, with crosscutting sessions on MCHN, nutrition, WASH, and sustainability. Future RFSAs integrating graduation programming should continue the practice of leveraging coaching and mentoring to reinforce social and behavior skills.

2. Consumption Smoothing

As a holistic intervention, the graduation approach has generated positive food security outcomes. Graduation programs traditionally incorporate consumption support for program participants, arguing that food insecurity causes significant stress that reduces poor people's ability to take advantage of opportunities and plan for the future. Consumption smoothing is typically provided to extremely poor households for a finite duration to alleviate the risk of negative coping mechanisms (e.g., liquidating productive assets or taking out loans to buy food), in periods of scarcity. This enables them to focus on setting and meeting longer-term goals as part of the graduation approach. While leading practice considers consumption smoothing a core component of the graduation approach, each program must regularly modify this component based on local needs.

As with most graduation programming, the needs assessments in all three RFSAs informed consumption support amount, duration, and modality. It identified food security and nutrition needs, defined the amount

26 [The BOMA Project's](#) goal is to end extreme poverty in the drylands of Africa through the Rural Entrepreneur Access Project (REAP), a unique and rigorous graduation approach designed to address the unique challenges of the communities they serve. REAP helps pastoral families by mapping the barriers to overcoming extreme poverty and then implementing a series of sequenced interventions with a defined exit strategy.

of food necessary to support participants and determined their minimum food expenditure basket. Graduating to Resilience layered consumption support within a donor-led activity. All graduation participants received a monthly consumption support transfer of US\$25 for host community members and US\$30 per month for refugees for the first year of implementation to allow households to meet their urgent and basic needs. The World Food Programme (WFP) covered most of the funds towards consumption support for refugee participants and Graduating to Resilience covered the remaining amount. Consumption support was offered through mobile money, transferred directly from Stanbic Bank. To help facilitate access to mobile money, Graduating to Resilience provided each participant with a mobile phone and SIM card.

Similarly, Nobo Jatra graduation participants received US\$12.50 per month through mobile money to compensate for the costs associated with participation in the ELT. The duration of the consumption support coincided with the duration of ELT, which changed from nine months to six months during the intervention. Graduation participants were excluded from receiving additional consumption smoothing support offered through the Nobo Jatra RFSAs, such as that provided to pregnant and lactating women. Further research is needed to understand the differences between the consumption support explicitly for graduation participants and consumption smoothing in the typical RFSAs. Nuyok participants each received US\$20 per month for four months through mobile money transfers. The amount represents a percentage of the value of the Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB), or the cost of critical food, hygiene, and other items required by a household to meet their basic needs over the course of a month. Nuyok was originally designed not to include consumption support, as it was provided through government transfers and the RFSAs would cover support during the lean season, but the donor later asked them to include it. However, after the shift to from government-led to internal consumption support, they faced challenges starting consumption smoothing support and it ultimately did not coincide with the lean season. Future graduation programming within RFSAs must maintain strong coordination and planning to ensure timely and continuous support to meet food security needs and reduce the risk of hunger and malnutrition for graduation participants.

All three RFSAs faced challenges securing the use and adaptability of technology for consumption smoothing. Future graduation programming must consider graduation participants' technological needs and capacities. Nuyok participants experienced challenges in operating the mobile money accounts, requiring Nuyok mentors to carry out close follow-up to ensure participants could access funds. Graduating to Resilience participants faced challenges registering for mobile money accounts due to inadequate identification. As a result, 25% of participants were unable to use this modality and instead were given a prepaid agent card. Nobo Jatra utilized the mobile money platform bKash to transfer funds. However, 21% of graduation participants—many of them women—did not have their own SIM cards. In response, the RFSAs allowed spouses to receive the transfer directly to their SIM cards. This potentially reinforced harmful household power dynamics where women experience reduced economic independence and decision-making authority. Inaccessible or inadequate technology can unduly burden—or even harm—participants. Graduation program design must ensure participants have reliable and equitable access to technology if they are a key modality used for consumption support.

3. Financial Inclusion

Financial inclusion within graduation programming and RFSAs typically entails helping participants establish individual savings to build social capital, assets that help them meet their long-term economic goals. When possible, graduation programming supports the development and formalization of savings and loan groups. Across the three programs, graduation participants established savings groups as one of the initial programming components. Groups were offered extensive financial literacy training and direct linkages to formal financial services providers (FSP), microfinance institutions, and local cooperatives to increase financial sustainability for participants.

In addition to registering graduation participants with a bKash mobile money account, through which consumption support and asset transfers were offered, Nobo Jatra encouraged participants to join a VSLA. Nobo Jatra originally began VSLA engagement three to four months into the graduation activity, however, noting the positive effects of social cohesion and early access to savings and loans, Nobo Jatra adapted the intervention and now commences VSLA with the onset of graduation programming. Each VSLA is provided with a local group savings account and receives financial literacy from the FSP. VSLAs were also invited to formalize through the organization of VSLA cooperatives registered through the government. Nobo Jatra's lending partner faced system and policy barriers to entry for program participants. The RFSAs are now working with BRAC Bank to lend to VSLA cooperatives using the DreamSave Application. RFSAs must identify alternatives for participants who may be ineligible for formal financial services. Developing group accounts through VSLAs has reportedly been successful in many contexts and programs.

While savings groups have been effective across all RFSAs, the COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges to this model. COVID-19 restrictions in host communities restricted gathering sizes at times, forcing RFSAs to identify other solutions that preserved the social and financial benefits of group savings. Graduating to Resilience was able to pilot the digitization of VSLA meetings and record-keeping through the fintech Ensibuko, who also works in partnership with Opportunity Bank. The digitization of VSLA records means VSLA groups and individual participants will likely develop credit histories that will improve access to individual- and group-level savings and loan products through Opportunity Bank and other FSPs. Beyond COVID-19, Nuyok contended with seasonal climate shocks that prompted participants to engage in seasonal (and sometimes permanent) migration as an adaptation strategy. This impacted participant attendance and participation in savings groups. As climate-related shocks and stressors are projected to increase, future RFSAs must identify alternative solutions to the in-person savings groups model.

4. Training

Market assessments done at the planning stage determine potential livelihood pathways for graduation participants to choose from. Implementers help participants select one or more pathway(s) fitting their interests, capacity, and proximity to markets. Livelihood options include an array of activities in agriculture (on-farm and off-farm), non-farm entrepreneurship, and wage employment. Graduation programming also goes beyond the usual training and market linkages offered by RFSAs to provide tailored training and in-kind or financial support to jump start IGAs. For instance, participants also received context-specific health, nutrition, WASH education and more during this time. While the scope and content of training varied across the three RFSAs, savings groups are an important platform for delivering training.

Some graduation participants received a modified version of the training provided to other RFSAs participants outside of the graduation component e.g., to align the curriculum with the graduation activity timeline. For example, while all Nobo Jatra participants received Entrepreneurship Literacy Training (ELT), graduation participants were given more intentional support that fed into IGA or AIGA pathways. ELT was facilitated in conjunction with VSLA meetings and led by field organizers. The graduation-specific ELT included topics on entrepreneurship and business (IGA selection, budgeting, etc.), technical training related to specific IGAs (poultry, tailoring, etc.), and life skills (self-awareness, decision-making, etc.). Participants also engaged in training on WASH, food security, and nutrition. External trainers (extension agents or service providers) were brought in for specific technical sessions and graduation participants could opt out of those not pertinent to their IGAs. Training was also adapted for lower literacy participants.

All three RFSAs provided robust livelihoods training supplemented with the coaching curriculum and financial literacy training. Graduating to Resilience implemented Farmer Field Business Schools for all graduation participants to engage in nutrition-sensitive agricultural practices. The activity trained all participants on

climate-smart and eco-friendly farming techniques and emphasized the value of growing economically viable and nutritious crops such as beans, maize, and groundnuts. Sessions were conducted with groups undergoing a full planting season. Nuyok separately hired community-based trainers and business coaches to provide training to REAP business groups on basic business skills. They also delivered monthly trainings covering life skills, girl-child education, and financial literacy topics around savings groups. If mentors were unable to deliver more specialized livelihoods training, Nuyok identified external partnerships with the local government, private sector, and other NGOs and community-based organizations. Trainings in graduation programming are meant to be adaptable and applicable to the geographic, cultural, programmatic, and sectoral context.

5. Livelihood Selection and Asset Transfer

Asset transfers in support of livelihoods transformation are essential to graduation programming. To help graduation households engage in sustainable livelihoods, participants receive an asset transfer to invest in one or more IGAs. However, RFSAs have noted that despite the provision of suggested or supported IGAs, it is ultimately up to participants to choose the IGA they invest in, or whether to invest their asset transfer in an IGA at all. Depending on the program, asset transfers may be offered in-kind (such as livestock and feed or inventory for retail) or cash-based. Asset transfers must be large enough to help a household jump-start its IGA and may be offered in one lump sum or through two or more installments. The utilization of cash helps build autonomy and ensure that participants can procure high-quality assets once participants have started their income-generating activities. The transfer of substantial productive assets, though conditional on livelihood selection and training, is one of the more costly components of the graduation approach.



Photo Credit: Nobo Jatra World Vision Bangladesh

Graduating to Resilience and Nobo Jatra issued mobile money to each graduation participant after completing technical training. Graduating to Resilience randomized the receipt of an asset transfer. Two RCT arms received a one-off asset transfer of US\$300 through mobile money after the technical training (around month seven of the graduation intervention). The third arm received no asset transfer and instead utilized loans from their savings groups. Results indicate increases in value of productive assets, income, consumption, food security, and subjective well-being among both refugee and host community treatment groups with the asset transfer compared to those without. Interestingly, Graduating to Resilience found that while many participants developed a business plan to utilize the asset transfer for off-farm IGAs, upon completing (mostly agricultural focused) technical training, many participants ended up investing in farming-based IGAs or livestock. For Nobo Jatra, graduation participants received US\$188 in start-up capital for their IGA via mobile money transfer following the ELT course. Graduation participants also had the option to join Nobo Jatra-supported producer groups or AIGA groups.

Alternatively, Nuyok provided cash transfers through the BOMA Project's recognized three-person business group model.²⁷ BOMA mentors assembled business groups of three qualified graduation participants, primarily women, to help them launch their businesses. In Nuyok, groups received US\$200 in start-up capital and then received a second grant of US\$100 contingent upon effective use of the initial funds and participation in the other program components. The group approach—in which the asset transfer is provided to three participants rather than one—maintains the asset transfer while reducing the cost per person. The group approach also means women can share business responsibilities, reducing the time burden for each participant. An evaluation of BOMA's model showed that group business incomes were more diverse and stable through the duration of the graduation program leading to greater overall resilience and financial gains. However, group ownership of assets within graduation can present various risks and must be monitored to maintain social cohesion and prevent conflict.²⁸

RFSAs can work to encourage participants to diversify their IGAs, exploring both on- and off-farm opportunities to manage risk. RFSAs already conduct market assessments as a part of their processes,²⁹ but further contextual analysis will engender better design and execution of asset transfers and livelihoods selection components. For example, Graduating to Resilience partnered with IMPAQ and Trickle Up to conduct labor market and value chain assessments to understand current and future livelihood opportunities for Ugandans and refugee households living in the target communities. They also identified appropriate technical skills and value chains with potential for raising household incomes. The assessments uncovered that while participants pursued similar livelihoods, the ability to engage in livelihoods activities and selection was different between refugees and Ugandans. This finding led Graduating to Resilience to adapt their interventions according to different groups' needs to promote greater resilience and impact.³⁰ Graduating to Resilience continued conducting similar assessments throughout the activity lifecycle. Given their ability to understand key economic sectors, future graduation programming within RFSAs should consider utilizing market assessment results to better support graduation participants in livelihoods decision-making.

27 BOMA Project. (n.d.). *Our Model*.

28 BOMA Project. (2019, June). *Profit Financial Graduation Endline Report*.

29 At the time of the publication, no further information was available on the specific market assessments each RFSAs conducted.

30 For more information on G2R's labor market and value chain assessments, please visit [Graduating to Resilience Labor Market Assessment, 2018](#)

ADDITIONAL COMPONENTS

- **Nutrition-Specific and Nutrition-Sensitive Interventions**

Addressing malnutrition is key for BHA, so RFSAs typically include appropriate nutrition-specific and/or nutrition-sensitive interventions to enhance nutrition outcomes. All three RFSAs incorporated nutrition-sensitive interventions into their coaching or training curricula, alongside other nutrition-specific interventions. Traditional graduation programming includes interventions targeting the underlying, interconnected causes of malnutrition, linked to WASH, nutrition-sensitive agriculture, and empowerment of women and girls, and others. Notably, the three RFSAs offered some nutrition-specific and sensitive interventions not commonly found in traditional graduation programming. For example, Graduating to Resilience trained participants on the value of consuming nutritious crops and trained coaches and households on the management of severe acute malnutrition. Nobo Jatra and Nuyok included trainings for their participants on antenatal and postnatal care and MCHN. Nutrition-sensitive interventions must be combined with nutrition-specific interventions to adequately address malnutrition. Implementers should consider interventions that promote breastfeeding, complementary feeding and management of severe acute and moderate malnutrition, and increase uptake of essential micronutrients. A study conducted on the effects of BRAC's Targeting the Ultra Poor (TUP) program on long-term nutritional outcomes showed that, because child malnutrition is often caused by weak maternal and childcare practices, nutrition-specific interventions like the provision of fortified food for undernourished households, nutrition behavior change training, and communication through the mentoring and coaching component, incorporated into the graduation approach decreased child malnutrition significantly among participant households.³¹ As more RFSAs adopt the graduation approach, opportunities exist to explore effective strategies for incorporating nutrition-specific and sensitive interventions into graduation programming.

- **Capacity Strengthening in Risk Mitigation**

RFSAs typically work with populations that are highly vulnerable to climatic shocks and stresses such as drought, floods, diseases outbreaks etc. Sustainable escapes from extreme poverty require reducing vulnerability to shocks and stresses. RFSAs integrated disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies in their graduation programming through coaching and training sessions and climate-smart agricultural techniques lasting beyond the graduation intervention period. For example, Graduating to Resilience employed a full-time Environment Officer to ensure that climate resilience was integrated through programming. Through its farmer field business schools (FFBSs), all Graduating to Resilience participants are trained on climate-smart farming techniques. Nobo Jatra adjusted its ELT to include sessions on climate change, climate change adaptation, natural disasters, disaster preparedness, and business adaptation during climate change. This was key given the salinity of much of the soil and increasing frequency of cyclones in the area. In addition, all graduation households developed Disaster Preparedness Plans with Nobo Jatra RFSAs DRR component staff. Nuyok sought to improve community resilience to shocks and stresses. The RFSAs supported disaster management committees at the sub-county and village levels to develop and integrate disaster management plans and mentored committees on their roles and responsibilities in disaster risk reduction, natural resource management, and early warning. Village disaster management committees held monthly meetings and peer to peer learning to sensitize their communities to DRR practices. As more frequent and severe climate events continue to disrupt livelihoods, especially low-income households engaging in agriculture, efforts to build climate resilience are fundamental to achieving food security and nutrition outcomes.

31 CGAP. (2016, July 28). *Reducing Malnutrition through the Graduation Approach*.

AREA OF INQUIRY #2: Integration of Graduation Programming

A key feature of the traditional graduation approaches is time-bound, sequenced, and layered interventions. Through precise targeting, the graduation components are carefully sequenced and layered to systematically address the multiple constraints and choices that extremely poor households face. This section discusses how the three RFSAs in this study sequenced and layered the components in their respective graduation approach.

SEQUENCING OF INTERVENTIONS

Traditional graduation programming begins with consumption support to help participants reliably meet basic food security needs so they can focus on longer-term livelihood strategies. Once those basic needs are met, participants engage in savings groups to develop financial literacy, cope with shocks, pay school fees, acquire assets, fund small-scale economic activities, and build social capital. At this point, participants are helped to identify sustainable livelihood options that suit their interests and aptitudes and stimulate local markets. They then receive an asset to help launch that livelihood and related technical skills training. To support personal well-being and increase soft skills, graduation participants receive intensive personalized life-skills coaching concurrently.

Like many other aspects of graduation programming, the sequence of components is subject to context. . Differences in targeting and market analysis can cause sequencing to vary across graduation programming. Another factor that can affect sequencing is the layering of interventions when targeting specific subsets of participants; the strategies for doing so can fall short, with inadequate depth and breadth of coverage. As such, graduation programming offers opportunities to leverage lessons on sequencing and layering of interventions at household level.

While component sequencing was fairly standard across the three RFSAs, each made additional adaptations throughout the intervention to fit the contexts and needs of graduation participants. For example, Graduating to Resilience largely focused on agricultural IGAs and ensured that the training and asset transfer components preceded the planting season. Additionally, evaluation data showed that gender and conflict management were more pressing than nutrition coaching, so Graduating to Resilience sequenced programming as such. Nobo Jatra, upon seeing the positive effects of VSLA engagement and coaching, re-ordered its sequence so that both components commenced at the beginning of programming, rather than later. Due to delays providing consumption support, Nuyok prioritized delivering financial inclusion after asset transfers, rather than before to ensure participants did not redirect consumption support away from meeting basic needs or turn to negative coping mechanisms. Continuous reflection and learning are essential to designing and implementing the graduation approach within resilience and food security programming. Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) and Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) teams can assess and adapt component sequencing to bolster the effectiveness of the graduation intervention and respond to target community needs.

LAYERING OF GRADUATION PROGRAMMING

Layering refers to how a set of sequenced interventions are built upon each other to ensure complementary and sustained impact. Across the three RFSAs, two forms of layering were observed. The first one layered the graduation activity within the broader RFSA in instances with only a subset of targeted participants included in the graduation sub-activity. The second form layered graduation interventions—either as a subset of the broader RFSA or fully integrated graduation programming—upon external development and humanitarian initiatives to strengthen sustainability and impact. However, future implementers must anticipate the operational and programmatic challenges to layering within graduation programs. Ultimately, implementers must be intentional when layering graduation programming with other interventions.

1. Internal Layering

Strategic internal layering requires a systematic approach to link graduation participants to other interventions within the broader RFSAs during or after the graduation programming phase. Creating a do-no-harm strategy to protect graduation participants from negative externalities (such as time poverty) is also key. Nuyok and Nobo Jatra, two programs that targeted graduation participants within a sub-set of the greater RFSAs, gave graduation participants access to some of the broader RFSAs interventions. In some cases, both graduation and non-graduation participants received the same interventions. However, graduation participants generally obtained a more holistic and defined set of sequenced and time-bound interventions.

While Nobo Jatra developed several opportunities for graduation participants to benefit from various interventions, it faced challenges integrating graduation participants into broader RFSAs programming. For example, most graduation participants were operating IGAs at a scale that was too small to truly benefit from engagement in the RFSAs's Agriculture and AIGA producer groups. While the activity had anticipated that approximately 50% of graduation participants would transition into these producer groups upon graduation, key informants noted that a gap between the extremely poor graduation participants and their poor counterparts, making a transition into producer groups unlikely.

Future RFSAs with a subset graduation programming should consider how graduation participants could be better linked to and benefit from RFSAs activities as part of graduation programming. Additionally, RFSAs should evaluate how to appropriately design and implement an exit strategy for graduation participants to "graduate into" or transition fully into other interventions within the RFSAs. Operationally, engagement with the greater RFSAs staff should be clearly defined and coincide with the objectives of the graduation program.

2. External Layering

External layering can take place through government, private sector, or other donor-funded programs and NGOs. RFSAs can collaborate with external partners to layer graduation components onto other ongoing humanitarian and development programming. RFSAs must coordinate objectives, activities, and indicators for measuring the performance of graduation participants with external actors. This rarely takes place and there remains limited evidence on best practices. Evaluations of past graduation programming may consider exploring this area of research further to inform future programming.

Government: All three RFSAs linked graduation participants to government extension services. Graduating to Resilience utilized linkages to government agriculture and veterinary extension services for training, as well referred participants to government Village Health Teams who addressed cases of acute malnutrition. Nobo Jatra RFSAs participants, including graduation participants, were given access to government extension services. They also received information on government-funded social safety nets, such as those supporting pregnant and lactating women and allowances for widows. Nuyok linked business groups to government development departments, such as the Commercial Office, to ensure they have access to market information and business opportunities.

Donor-funded programs/NGOs: The three RFSAs had limited collaboration with other donor-funded programs and NGO activities. Graduating to Resilience utilized some linkages with USAID's Power Africa program on energy-related interventions for solar power in targeted communities.

Private Sector: All three RFSAs facilitated linkages with the private sector. Private sector linkages have proven important for greater scale, sustainability, and effectiveness of programming.³² In addition to financial linkages, Graduating to Resilience engaged the private sector to provide participants with quality, affordable agricultural inputs for climate-smart agriculture (e.g., drought-resistant seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and animal medicines). They also held an event that connected larger buyers with small-holder farmers. Nobo Jatra used private sector linkages for financial inclusion and access to financial services. They also sought to improve health and nutrition behaviors through a partnership with one of the largest pharmaceutical companies in Bangladesh. The company trained village agents on health and hygiene awareness, product knowledge, and basic business skills. The village agents, in turn, provided messaging and sold products, including to graduation participants through VSLAs. Nuyok targeted mature/graduate business groups companies and is exploring options with banks and other microfinance institutions.

External linkages should align with participant needs and market demands, established early and continued after the graduation program ends, and communicated regularly so households have the knowledge and resources needed to continue building resilience.

LIVELIHOODS FOR RESILIENCE CASE STUDY

To better support participants' access to food, Livelihoods for Resilience innovatively implemented a Market Systems Development (MSD) Approach alongside its graduation programming. In addition to providing push interventions through the graduation approach, L4R developed pull interventions that aimed to build an enabling environment that supports the resilience of its graduation households through increased access to markets, inputs, and information, such as climate forecasts. Most notably, L4R invested in developing last-mile service delivery by local entrepreneurs such as agro-dealers and feed franchisees to ensure that graduation participants could access high-quality inputs. Through its Innovation Fund, L4R tested numerous approaches to buy down risk for the private sector and encouraged them to supply participants with affordable inputs in reasonable quantities. The project has also worked closely with FSPs to support financial products tailored to the needs of poor rural households.

The activity also linked Village Economic and Social Associations (VESAs) to microfinance institutions, which were leveraged as a form of loan guarantee to buy down lenders' risks (the specific microfinance institution (MFI) relationships and operations varied greatly based on geography and Implementing Partner). L4R has also provided capacity-strengthening support to MFIs to enable them to expand in underserved areas.

³² Resonance Global. (n.d.). *Project Profile: Supporting Private Sector Strategy and Relationship Development for the USAID Bureau for Resilience and Food Security*.

AREA OF INQUIRY #3: Graduation Pathways

This section explores how the three RFSAs addressed graduation criteria, graduation pathways, and “graduating out of” RFSAs.

The term “graduation” suggests that in graduating from extreme poverty, participants have passed a threshold where the probability of slipping back into extreme poverty is significantly reduced. However, graduation participants are often the most vulnerable of the poor and can still backslide into poverty if persistent shocks inhibit their trajectory. As such, it is important that graduation programming establishes pathways that support household resilience long past the program’s conclusion.

All three RFSAs assessed progress by establishing a list of criteria participants must meet to graduate from extreme poverty given their context. Like participant targeting criteria, the RFSAs developed graduation criteria and measured participants’ livelihoods, assets, food security, and savings, as well as relevant social, nutrition, and disaster preparedness indicators. Participation in all three RFSAs was time-bound, rather than defined by reaching graduation status. Graduation interventions continued even if participants met graduation criteria prior to program end. In the same way, participants could no longer receive graduation interventions if the program ended before participants met graduation criteria. Graduation programs may retain participants for a set duration and to “graduate” them upon attainment of graduation criteria, though data is not available on the frequency of each scenario. Beyond RFSAs, many graduation programs face constraints due to the time-bound design of each of the graduation components. Further research on the potential implications of time-bound participation in graduation programming may be worth exploring.

Table 3 below outlines graduation criteria and terms for graduation across the three programs.

TABLE 3: GRADUATION CRITERIA ACROSS RFSAS

ACTIVITY	GRADUATING TO RESILIENCE	NOBO JATRA	NUYOK
Graduation Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No HH member reduced or skipped meal in last month All HH's meals contained foods from three food groups GO, GRO, GLO in last week More than one source of income by more than one HH member Improved structure School attendance HH access to healthcare services in last three months Drink safe water Access to hand washing facility and soap Savings amount Social capital to solve HH problems Can set and achieve goals to improve well-being of HH 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimum two sources of income Had three square meals in the last year Household owns productive assets Households have kitchen gardens Cash savings in an active savings account with a formal financial institution Use of a sanitary latrine and safe drinking water Practicing knowledge on disaster preparedness Conditional: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No child marriage in the household School-aged children are going to school Eligible couples adopt family planning method 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No child going to bed without an evening meal Household members eat two meals a day Productive asset base/ value of the REAP business is 25% higher than the total of original cash transfer Participant can access multiple productive assets (i.e., a business, livestock) Member of a savings group (with formal constitution and credit and loan protocols), has access to credit, and a minimum of US\$80 in committed savings (as a proxy for sufficient savings to withstand missed or delayed rains) All eligible primary school-aged girl children are enrolled in primary school
Graduation Terms	Must have at least eight of eleven criteria marked as green and three as yellow, for three consecutive assessments in a row	Achieve 80% of the essential criteria	Meet all six criteria
Graduation Rates	73%	91.5%	76%

Beyond meeting graduation criteria, the continued success of graduated households depends on the presence of effective support services which reinforce a household's pathway out of poverty. These include access to financial institutions complementary development programs, or government social protection programs. All three RFSAs anticipated that graduation participants would be better positioned to benefit from external programs upon graduation. Each RFSAs designed VSLAs with an eye towards sustainability beyond the program and equipped graduation participants with tools to continue engaging in these groups post-graduation. Nobo Jatra embedded community-based economic and market development facilitators, who were members of VSLAs, to continue service delivery to the graduation participants through VSLAs and other activities. Graduating to Resilience and Nuyok anticipated that the VSLA groups they established would be eligible for grants from the Government of Uganda which frequently offers grants to established and functional women's groups. Private Sector Providers were available in targeted communities through the Nuyok activity and will continue to provide services (such as deworming) for a fee. It is possible that upon graduation program completion, VSLA groups will have access and may pay for these services, in addition to applying for group grants from the Ugandan government.

AREA OF INQUIRY #4: Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning

RFSAs typically have extensive monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning systems. Performance monitoring often entails tracking a wide range of both qualitative and quantitative indicators to measure outputs and evaluate impact. While robust evidence exists to show the effectiveness of the graduation approach, evidence of its sustainability in advancing food and nutrition security, is still emerging. As more RFSAs integrate graduation within their programming, there will be more opportunities to learn from its successes, challenges, and opportunities in improving resilience and food and nutrition security.

All three RFSAs worked with external partners to conduct comprehensive household-level evaluations. Nuyok’s baseline evaluations captured data on food consumption scores and Graduating to Resilience gathered detailed data on child nutrition, women’s nutrition, and anthropometry. RFSAs also conducted regular (weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly) household-level monitoring to assess participant progress against the graduation criteria and VSLA performance.

All three RFSAs measured progress across specific food security and nutrition indicators, including—but not limited to—status of food security, the presence of kitchen gardens and two full meals per day in households (Nobo Jatra), minimum acceptable diet for children and dietary diversity for women (Graduating to Resilience), and Household Dietary Diversity Scores and prevalence of healthy weight for women and children (Nuyok). While it is too early to draw any decisive conclusions on the impact of food security outcomes on the sustainability of graduation programming within RFSAs due to the unavailability of endline results at the time of this paper, preliminary data is promising.

The following tables include select data points extracted from each of the RFSAs’ respective evaluations. The data presented only captures data collected on the programmatic graduation interventions.

Table 4 highlights select food and nutrition security data from RFSAs Evaluations.

TABLE 4: EVALUATION DATA COMPARISON- FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY

RFSAs	EVALUATION DATA
Graduating to Resilience ³³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 96% minimum meal frequency for children 6-23 months compared to 27% at baseline 91% prevalence of exclusive breast-feeding of children under six months compared to 22% baseline (Refugee: 96%; Host: 84%)
Nobo Jatra ³⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 81.7% of households were food secure compared to 14.9% at baseline 83% of households had kitchen gardens, were growing up to 5 kinds of vegetables, and were selling surplus at local markets
Nuyok ³⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 97% of participants report that none of their children had gone to bed hungry in the last 30 days; at baseline, 66% of children had gone to bed without an evening meal in the last 24 hours 96% of respondents had at least two meals per day in the last 30 days; at baseline, 42% of respondents had zero or one meal in the last 24 hours

33 Unless otherwise noted, data presented in this section on G2R was collected by external evaluator IPA as part of baseline and mid-line RCT data collection.

34 Unless otherwise noted, data presented in this section on Nobo Jatra was collected by learning partner Human Development Resource Center as part of baseline and endline data collected on Cohorts 1 and 2.

35 Unless otherwise noted, data presented in this section on Nuyok is based off monitoring data, approximately 18 months into the graduation program intervention.

Table 5 highlights the evaluation data that graduation programming had on livelihoods, including income-generating activities, income, and productive assets.

TABLE 5: EVALUATION DATA ON LIVELIHOODS

RFSA	EVALUATION DATA
Graduating to Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All treatment arms have statistically significant increases in the value of productive assets Productive asset ownership is US\$157 higher in the Empowerment Arm (no asset transfer) than in the control Productive asset ownership is US\$254 higher in the Standard Graduation Arm than in the Empowerment Arm
Nobo Jatra	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Average number of income sources is 3.2 compared to 2.6 at baseline Average monthly income is US\$94.20 compared to US\$84.20 at baseline Twofold increase in productive assets such as poultry, livestock, sewing machines, and tools
Nuyok	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 64% of businesses have increased by 25% in business value 97% of households have at least two sustainable sources of income

Table 6 highlights the evaluation data that graduating programming within RFSAs have on participants' savings, which is primarily supported through VSLAs and linkages to formal FSPs, where appropriate.

TABLE 6: EVALUATION DATA ON SAVINGS

RFSA	EVALUATION DATA
Graduating to Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Savings group contribution is US\$60 higher in the Empowerment Arm than in the control Savings group contribution is US\$17 higher in the Standard Graduation Arm than in the Empowerment Arm
Nobo Jatra	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 99.5% of households had savings (formal or informal) compared to 36.5% at baseline 88.1% of households had access to formal financial services, compared to 15.9% at baseline
Nuyok	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All active Nuyok participants are members of Savings and Lending Groups; detailed savings data was not yet available

ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

RFSAs integrated CLA approaches to ensure responsive, intentional adaptive management practices and support increased knowledge and learning on the effectiveness of graduation programming. Nuyok planned a CLA workshop for all activity collaborators, drafted knowledge management strategies that include the use of digital data platforms, and refined its learning agenda. Nobo Jatra, with support from former learning partner Human Development Resource Center (HDRC), conducted a quantitative and qualitative review of Cohort 1's performance against graduation criteria, which influenced program adaptations for Cohort 2. HDRC also led a component-level process documentation based on Cohort 1 and Cohort 2, which directly informed the design of Cohort 3. One stakeholder noted that implementation of the sub-set graduation program within a broader RFSAs allowed for more learning and adaptation than they have seen in many stand-alone graduation programs, where programming tends to be very focused on cost-saving and the bottom line.

Graduating to Resilience developed a comprehensive learning agenda dedicated to the graduation approach. Some learning questions related to the broader graduation community of practice (*How to scale the graduation approach?; How to combine humanitarian and development components to lead to self-reliance and resilience?*) while others were specific to the Graduating to Resilience activity (*How to mitigate and address gender-based violence?; How have gender dynamics changed?; What effect does consumption support have on intra-household dynamics, basic needs, and participation in other activity components?*). Led by learning partner American Institutes for Research (formerly Impaq International), Graduating to Resilience also assessed data quarterly and biannually to inform activity learning and implemented several qualitative assessments to address themes as they arose. Graduating to Resilience used a decision-tracker tool to capture any decisions and adaptations made.

EXTERNAL EVALUATIONS & RANDOMIZED CONTROL TRIALS

Graduating to Resilience and Nobo Jatra partnered with external organizations to conduct evaluations on graduation programming. Through an RCT led by Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), Graduating to Resilience³⁶ is testing the costs and impacts of the asset transfer and group versus individual coaching, and the adaptability of the graduation approach to refugee contexts. As part of its original design, and in response to the Legacy FFP request for applications, implementers are also running Graduating to Resilience in two cohorts, designed with a 6-month refinement phase between interventions. During the current Refinement phase, Graduating to Resilience is adjusting each treatment arm and implementation process based on qualitative and quantitative evidence collected from Cohort 1. For example, all graduation participants will receive a new mental health intervention through group interpersonal psychotherapy. Outcomes from the RCT will provide valuable evidence to help donors and implementers better understand the optimal package of cost-effective interventions. Graduating to Resilience has also studied the effect of COVID-19 on graduation participants, including a two-phase context assessment highlighting how different treatment arms have responded to the pandemic.



Photo Credit: Nobo Jatra/World Vision

³⁶ See this blog for an overview of the RCT arms: <https://www.avsi.org/en/news/2019/01/10/g2r-activity-update-2-graduation-approach/1729/>

Nobo Jatra has partnered with the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and BRAC to research how layering and sequencing graduation with cross-sectoral interventions in WASH, DRR, and MSD strengthen the resilience of graduation participants. The research team is evaluating: 1) cross-sectoral integration and factors enabling the layering and sequencing of graduation with MSD, WASH, and DRR services within Nobo Jatra, 2) the absorptive and adaptive resilience capacities of individuals escaping poverty in rural Bangladesh, and 3) how layering and sequencing of MSD, DRR, and WASH services with graduation have impacted the food security, graduation results, and resilience capacities of graduation participants over time. Learning products are not yet publicly available. Though not an RCT, Nobo Jatra has fashioned an evaluation for its Cohort 3 after Graduating to Resilience 's evaluation, utilizing similar approaches for three treatment arms.

POST-GRADUATION PROGRESS

The experiences of the RFSAs offer important opportunities to identify emerging promising practices, capacities, and knowledge gaps in integrating graduation programming. Few systems were in place to monitor or support graduation participants across all three RFSAs and the available information showed each RFSAs approached this differently. Graduating to Resilience is exploring follow-on monitoring of successful and unsuccessful cohorts of graduates 6-12 months post-intervention. The complementary RCT will conduct ongoing evaluations. Nobo Jatra does not have a formal procedure for follow-up but did conduct a spot check on a random sample of Cohort 1 VSLAs to see how they are faring post-program. Meanwhile, Nuyok will continue to monitor REAP households that have graduated one year after graduation or until the close of the activity. Future programming within RFSAs should implement long-term methods for monitoring graduation participants to understand the overall effectiveness of graduation programming and its greater impacts on resilience and food security.

CONCLUSION

This report provides a comparative review of three distinct RFSAs—the Graduating to Resilience activity (AVSI/Uganda), the Nobo Jatra activity (World Vision/Bangladesh), and the Nuyok activity (CRS/Uganda) and how they have adapted the graduation approach to help address resilience and food security among poor and extremely poor households. Despite considerable variations in structure and design, each activity has designed effective graduation programs ensuring participants receive a distinct number of interventions sequenced over a specific duration.

Given the limited data available at the time the study was conducted, this report relies primarily on qualitative data collected during key informant interviews and a desk review of relevant materials from USAID-funded implementing partners. It is important to note that RFSAs are at different stages of their respective project cycles, thus lessons learnt on RFSAs' integration of the graduation approach are still nascent and emerging. Despite this limitation, learnings from accessible data did allow for comparative overview, providing some prevailing practices to strengthen design and implementation of RFSAs with integrated graduation programming. The broader graduation community of practice continues to grapple with the questions and challenges this report poses. As such, continued innovation in this space will make important contributions to the ongoing dialogue on graduation and economic inclusion programming. Further research as well as recommendations are reflected in the final section of the report, Considerations for Future Programming.

Graduation is not simply defined as meeting certain programmatic criteria; it is also the ability for households to have more agency over their future. Increased self-confidence and optimism for the future are key to long-term success beyond the short duration of the graduation activity, enabling participants to sustain and continue to build upon tremendous gains. There is now broad recognition that “graduation” is not a one-off event but needs to be a continuous process to enable vulnerable households withstand and thrive in the face of emerging shocks and stresses. Integrating the graduation approach in RFSAs provides opportunity for examining effective strategies for supporting targeted households post-graduation including the impact on reducing malnutrition in the long-term. Implementers must keep in mind that “graduation” is not synonymous with a threshold past where households are suddenly resilient to the pressures of poverty.

The graduation approach is a proven strategy designed to lift people out of extreme poverty and promote economic inclusion. It does so through a combination of precise targeting and conditional assistance delivered in a series of carefully sequenced interventions. The approach is grounded in microeconomic and behavioral research into the challenges and choices that extremely poor people encounter. As graduation programming continues to evolve, additional and more rigorous research is required to better understand how the contextualized integration of graduation approach in USAID-funded RFSAs influences resilience and sustainability of food security and nutrition security outcomes.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE PROGRAMMING

The three RFSAs analyzed for this report provide well-rounded examples of different ways in which graduation programming has been adapted to support resilience and food security objectives. As more RFSAs complete their endline evaluations, there will be more evidence to make direct comparisons between graduation programs or clear assessments regarding the effects of the program adaptations on resilience and food security outcomes and the sustainability of graduation programming. This section provides an overview of key considerations from the study and offers recommendations for donors and implementing organizations to consider going forward.

TARGETING

- To the extent possible, targeting for graduation programming at the household or community levels should be participatory in nature and determined based on contextually appropriate definitions of poverty or extreme poverty.
- Targeting may identify a larger number of participants eligible than the RFSAs can accommodate through the graduation program. Future implementers should be prepared to address what happens to those who meet screening criteria but are excluded from graduation programming and communicate next steps. RFSAs may opt to focus on or prioritize inclusion of extremely poor households with specific nutrition needs or considerations, such as pregnant and lactating women.

MENTORING/COACHING

- Acquire ample, diversely skilled staff for mentoring and coaching positions. Mentors and coaches must be well versed in the multidimensional needs of the extremely poor and the specific challenges and constraints of adult learners with varying capacities.
- Size, duration, location, and content matter when designing individual and group sessions. The goal of coaching and mentoring is primarily to boost confidence and monitor participants' wellbeing, so interventions must be informed by participants' needs.
- Mentoring and coaching interventions are costly. While smaller groups of participants are optimal, staffing costs may be higher. The duration of mentoring and coaching assistance, distance, and remoteness of locations where participants live may affect the cost and quality of programming.³⁷

CONSUMPTION SUPPORT

- The amount, duration and timing of the consumption support needs careful analysis and must align with no-harm principles. This reduces the risk of graduation participants engaging in negative coping strategies. Terms of consumption support should be clearly communicated to all participants, staff, and stakeholders.
- Guarantee all graduation participants have the appropriate technology to access mobile money for cash transfers. Troubleshoot any issues and identify alternatives immediately to ensure that all participants receive a timely transfer. Leverage systems already in place through the RFSAs.

FINANCIAL INCLUSION

- To ensure sustainability, conduct more research on the impact of linking graduation participants with financial service providers and the effects on markets and service delivery.
- Connect graduation participants to formal financial services with support and direct collaboration with financial service providers to help overcome barriers to financial inclusion and ensure sustainability. Evaluate the impact of external shocks and stressors (i.e., climate, conflict, health) on savings groups, like VSLAs. Identify solutions that preserve and sustain the financial and social benefits to graduation participants.

³⁷ For more lessons learned on mentoring and coaching, refer to this publication: https://seepnetwork.org/files/galleries/Mentoring_Coaching_200728v8.pdf

TRAINING

- Tailor training based on the needs, literacy, and numeracy of graduation participants. Employ adult and applied learning methodologies and adaptable training schedules that address the potential constraints of participants, especially women and mothers. Take into consideration location and time, offer childcare services, and leverage times when participants already gather, such as VSLAs.
- Develop appropriate training materials and manuals, and a structured training delivery system to support the cascading of training from technical staff to front-line staff to participants.
- Integrate counseling and psychosocial support services at the beginning of implementation. Participants may have endured traumatic circumstances which influence their ability to cope with and overcome challenges. Exercise care and support their overall well-being to help them build self-confidence.
- Include graduation coaches and mentors to play a supporting role in training efforts. They can reinforce key training messages and the application of new knowledge and skills to promote behavior change.

ASSET TRANSFERS

- Asset transfers are designed to jump-start entrepreneurship based on identified market opportunities. While some graduation interventions offer an asset transfer in-kind, most lean towards cash.³⁸ Choosing the asset transfer amount, the modality to be used, the timing of delivery, and the conditions to receive an asset transfer can be complicated. Market assessments should determine asset transfer amounts.
- Since asset transfer requires more investment than other aspects of the graduation approach, it must be thorough and intentional from design to implementation. Some programs have experimented with not providing an asset transfer and evidence is still emerging on the effectiveness of alternative arrangements, e.g., linking graduation participants to financial service providers so they can access credit for start-up capital.
- While group-managed assets work in some instances, the approach has an inherent risk when group cohesion is threatened. It is important to let group ownership emerge organically instead of being formulated by the program.

MONITORING, EVALUATION, RESEARCH, AND LEARNING

- Explore opportunities to understand how program structure—whether graduation is fully integrated into a RFSAs or as a subset of a broader RFSAs—influences program design, costs, scalability, and outcomes. Although all three RFSAs have food security indicators, at the time of this report no endline evaluations were available.
- Document adaptive management processes to evaluate approaches to graduation program design, sequencing, and layering within RFSAs. Use lessons learned to inform decision-making, adapt programming, and increase knowledge and learning on the effectiveness of graduation programming.
- Future programming should identify methodologies for tracking and supporting graduation participants after programs end to understand the overall effectiveness of graduation programming and its greater impacts on resilience and food security.

LAYERING

- Explore how graduation participants could be better linked to and benefit from RFSAs activities and technical expertise (i.e., nutrition, DRR) as part of graduation programming, not just as a result of RFSAs programming being implemented concurrently.
- Identify opportunities for graduate participants to transition into other RFSAs programming after the graduation program ends. Address potential financial capacity gaps between RFSAs and former graduation participants by developing internal layering systems to support ongoing resilience amongst graduation participants.

³⁸ See <https://www.calpnetwork.org/> for more information on the use of cash.

- Limited evidence exists on the impacts of layering graduation programming on external development and humanitarian activities from the public and private sectors and other NGOs. Future programming should evaluate the opportunities and challenges of external layering and the effects on graduation participant outcomes.

GRADUATION DURATION AND POST-GRADUATION SUPPORT

- Engaging external stakeholders early to map out the entry points for coordination in supporting graduation participants is critical. Adaptively manage these relationships during and after a RFSA ends. Ongoing linkages with the private sector and government services fostered through graduation programming is considered one of the main ways that graduation programming ensures participants' ongoing resilience post-graduation. Linking graduation participants to government social safety nets can mitigate the risk of backsliding. Future programs should consider how to appropriately design and implement an exit strategy for graduation participants to "graduate into" RFSA programming.
- While most programs retain participants for the full length of the graduation programming, evidence shows that the length of time it takes an individual household to "graduate" can vary. Programs thus need to consider having mechanisms to monitor individual trajectories and tailor programming duration according to progression of each household.

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