

## CSOs and the Fight Against Poverty: Promoting the Active Participation of People Living in Extreme Poverty in the Design and Implementation of Programmes and Policies

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The realisation of the global commitment to the eradication of poverty relies on a diversity of actors collaborating and contributing to this vision. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) play a critical role in achieving poverty eradication given their close proximity to the issues and extensive experience designing solutions with and for marginalised communities. The wealth of experience, expertise, and evidence from CSOs has the potential to strengthen the design and development of programmes and policies by global, regional, and national policymakers if fully leveraged.

BRAC is committed to strengthening civil society as a key actor in poverty eradication and as a critical partner for government actors and government partners through greater collaboration and knowledge transfer. BRAC first emerged in Bangladesh in the early 1970s in response to the devastating impacts of natural disaster and the Bangladesh War of Independence. Since the founding, BRAC evolved from emergency response and has designed some of the most impactful and sustainable poverty reduction programmes nationwide, spanning health, education, livelihoods, microfinance, human rights, and WASH. The success of BRAC is largely due to the strong roots in the communities and the commitment to learning, evidence, and innovation which has resulted in one of BRAC's most well-known initiatives, the Graduation approach<sup>1</sup>, which has been adapted by more than 100 partner organisations in nearly 50 countries, reaching approximately 14 million people.<sup>2</sup>

The Graduation approach was developed after BRAC staff - who worked directly with people in the poorest communities - learned that a popular development programme was not as impactful for people in extreme poverty as it did not adequately address their multidimensional needs. BRAC worked closely with the communities to design and develop the Graduation approach which has since been proven to break the poverty trap for people in extreme poverty for the long-term. Given the potential for ending extreme poverty through the large-scale adoption of the Graduation approach, BRAC Ultra-Poor Graduation Initiative continues to build on our community-centred approach by bringing our expertise and evidence to influence our own programmes and policy design as well as those of our global, regional, and government partners.

BRAC's experience implementing Graduation in Bangladesh and scaling it nationwide over two decades, and then internationally through BRAC and partner adoption, contains a powerful

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<sup>1</sup> [Ref: BRAC UPGI (2020) What is Graduation? <https://bracultrapoorgraduation.org/what-is-graduation/#about-the-approach>]

<sup>2</sup> [Ref: World Bank Partnership for Economic Inclusion (2021), State of Economic Inclusion Report. <https://www.peiglobal.org/state-of-economic-inclusion-report-2021>]

example of how people in extreme poor communities can directly inform and participate in inclusive programmes and policies. As the global community considers how we recover and rebuild from a devastating global pandemic, global actors have the opportunity to develop sustainable and impactful programmes and policies by working closely with CSOs to centre evidence and community-based learnings and solutions in global, regional, and national strategies and systems. The best efforts and intentions around ending poverty risk falling short if we continue to fail to centre the perspectives and knowledge of people experiencing extreme poverty and the CSOs closest to the work.

### **Designing the Graduation Approach with and for the Community**

In addition to very low incomes, people in extreme poor populations face social, economic, political, and cultural barriers that result in marginalisation and vulnerability. They are often chronically food insecure, geographically isolated and excluded from the community, vulnerable to health and natural shocks, disconnected from mainstream social protection services and traditional development programmes, and have limited access to markets. To address these multidimensional needs, Graduation applies a holistic approach based on four core elements: meeting participants' basic needs, income generation, finance support and savings, and social empowerment.

Due to the close work with the community in designing the intervention, the Graduation approach has been proven to lead to sustainable livelihoods and long term resilience<sup>3</sup> for the vast majority of participants. In BRAC's Graduation programme in Bangladesh, 93 percent of participants experienced sustained benefits more than seven years after the programme ended. This included a 37 percent increase in earnings, a nine percent increase in consumption, a ninefold increase in savings rate, and a twofold increase in household assets and access to land for livelihoods.<sup>4</sup>

The philosophy of the approach is rooted in empowering households experiencing extreme poverty and local communities to break the poverty trap through a holistic set of interventions that support an increase in agency and opportunity. BRAC's Graduation approach avoids viewing participants as "the poor"- an externally defined term that identifies people by their poverty and often as passive recipients of aid - but rather recognises individuals as powerful agents of change and self-empowerment with the right to realise their full potential. This ethos is borne out in the design of the programme, developed through rigorous evaluation with an emphasis on engaging extreme poor communities at various stages of decision making to adapt the programme to their specific needs and context.

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<sup>3</sup> [Ref: BRAC UPGI (2020), *Impact and Reach of BRAC's Graduation Approach*. <https://bracultrapoorgraduation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BRAC-Graduation-Impact-and-Reach-Brief.pdf>]

<sup>4</sup> [Ref: London School of Economics International Growth Center (2015), *Transforming the economic lives of the ultra-poor*. [https://www.theigc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/IGCJ2287\\_Growth\\_Brief\\_4\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.theigc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/IGCJ2287_Growth_Brief_4_WEB.pdf)]

## **Participatory Design and Targeting**

From the earliest stages of programme development in the early 2000s, BRAC took a deeply collaborative approach with researchers from BRAC's independent research division. Through an action research approach which required programme and research staff to co-create and develop the programme, programme managers were able to develop a deep appreciation for the importance of research to inform strong programme design, while researchers developed a deep operational understanding of the programme that helped them identify which questions to pose and evaluate.

Central to the programme's success is the emphasis placed on engaging communities in extreme poverty and local partners through focus group discussions and other methods in order to understand and account for local contextual characteristics of poverty in programme design. Participatory targeting methods such as Participatory Wealth Rankings (PWR) and Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRA) were used to engage communities in the contextualisation and design phase. BRAC learned that when combined, these participatory methods were the most effective ways of identifying people in extreme poverty because they combined local knowledge on poverty with academic and programmatic conceptions.<sup>5</sup> Action research revealed that BRAC had to be especially sensitive to village dynamics - for example, asking questions in a particular manner during the poverty wealth ranking about how to classify the wealth of households could significantly affect who was identified by the programme as being the poorest people. As programme staff refined their selection techniques, this knowledge was carefully transferred as the programme gradually scaled. BRAC also learned that this participatory approach was key to building community buy-in for the programme, focusing intense resources on households that were previously marginalised.

## **Engaging Participants in Implementation**

The critical role of research in programmatic decision-making, particularly qualitative methods that enabled collecting participant perspectives to generate deeper insights into programming effectiveness, enabled BRAC to be more adaptive and iterative and ultimately more responsive to community needs compared to other implementing organisations. While quantitative studies are most often cited to demonstrate the effectiveness of Graduation, qualitative studies played a greater role in generating the insights needed for the programme to make adaptations and remain effective for people living in extreme poverty. These were particularly informative for programme staff who needed to understand why the programme worked well for some and not for others. These findings gave substance to the heterogeneity of effects, and enabled the programme to address them-for example, in-depth qualitative study revealed how spousal relationships could have an important role on how people take care of productive assets and need to be taken into consideration in programme design.

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<sup>5</sup> [Ref: CFPR-TUP Working Paper Series No. 1, 2004, p.32, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B3Hf73-9s8zGeEtqeFc2aGxnX1k/view> ]

Through the programme's adaptive components, participants are able to regularly input on adaptations to their specific needs beyond the design phase. The programme pairs participants with a dedicated coach or mentor who not only tracks and monitors their progress through the programme, but also provides vital support and coaching on life skills, savings, business management, and livelihood training. Coaches also support participants to select and take on the challenge of learning new skills, facilitate participation in group learning, and participation in social solidarity committees in the local community to elevate their voice and integration within their communities. In addition, coaches connect participants to government programmes like health services and insurance, help ensure participants build resilience against unexpected shocks through engaging in savings groups, diversifying revenue streams and avoiding negative coping mechanisms (such as selling off productive assets). Combined, these aspects of the programme have a transformative and visible impact on participants' confidence and ambition for the future.

Programme staff also connect participants with local Village Social Solidarity Committee (VSSC) initiatives, which are instrumental in promoting social integration of participants in their communities and mobilising resources to provide support. The committee serves as a platform for participants to build social networks and leverage community ties, and continues to exist well beyond the Graduation life cycle. These community-led supports have proved essential during the COVID-19 pandemic, with committees delivering awareness-raising information, providing emergency support, and advocating at local levels to avail government support or relief support from other sources.<sup>6</sup>

### **Commitment to Participant-Informed Adaptation and Iteration**

In spite of the programme's high level of success as of 2015, as validated by RCT results by independent researchers at the London School of Economics, BRAC maintained its commitment to reassessing community needs and the local context and engaging communities in programme validation. BRAC realised that as of 2016 the core characteristics of households living in extreme poverty in Bangladesh had been transformed by a decade of consistent national economic growth and government expansion of public services. In response programme managers convened to begin the process of re-configuring BRAC's flagship Graduation programme.

The aspects of the programme that needed to remain constant were 1) a focus on reaching people living in extreme poverty, and 2) delivering a package of interventions that would socially and economically empower participating households to develop sustainable livelihoods. Once again, BRAC researchers supported a deeply participatory process that engaged stakeholders at all levels from participants to field officers up to senior management informing and participating in consultation, design workshops, field testing, and evidence reviews.

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<sup>6</sup> [Ref: BRAC (2020), *COVID-19: A Universal Humanitarian Crisis of Catastrophic Proportion*. <https://bracultrapoorgraduation.org/covid-19-response/> ]



Figure 1: Ultra-Poor Graduation programme Redesign Process – 2016-2017

As part of the process Head Office programme staff made field visits to three regions of Bangladesh to conduct assessments in the field and to consult with local staff. During these visits, staff explored local markets and met with organisations working in the livelihoods sectors to understand enterprise options better. The visits were also an opportunity to consider the viability of new targeting and selection criteria shared in the research stage. Programme staff talked with potential participants regarding their preferences on enterprise options, savings options, and loan repayment systems.

As field staff possess the richest insights on programme effectiveness due to their proximity to the impact community, BRAC consistently ensures these learnings are known beyond the field staff and across various levels of management. Regional managers, who spend three weeks in a month in field offices, and one week in the Head Office in Dhaka, are able to collect observations and identify patterns drawing from all field locations to be considered and addressed by senior management based at the Head Office. For example, anecdotes from programme officers who were working directly with households in 2017 suggested that a large portion of households identified as participant group candidates were self-excluding themselves from the programme. The programme’s monitoring and evaluation department found the self-exclusion rate of eligible households was 30%. To address this, senior management reduced the expected repayment rate for soft loans for asset packages for the participant group down to 80% of the value, which subsequently brought the self-exclusion rate down to 15%.

Lessons from these experiences have since been applied to how BRAC works with governments to design and scale Graduation programmes in contexts around the world.

### **Scaling the Graduation Approach in New Contexts**

BRAC UPGI drew heavily on learnings from the Bangladesh programme to begin expanding the reach and impact of the Graduation approach in 2016 through advocacy and technical assistance to governments, multilateral agencies, and NGOs.

As BRAC sought to apply the Graduation approach developed in Bangladesh to new contexts and operational arrangements, the organisation maintained a consistent emphasis on engaging local communities and partners and leveraging local knowledge and understanding of the issues in order to inform the development of highly contextualised Graduation programmes to address extreme poverty.

BRAC's technical assistance begins with the conducting of comprehensive assessments with local partners to analyze the multiple vulnerabilities faced by communities in extreme poverty in that community. The assessments cover three broad areas, contextual analysis and stakeholder mapping, livelihoods and market assessments, and vulnerability assessments based on the perspectives of those experiencing extreme poverty, as well as local civil society actors experienced in addressing extreme poverty.

The contextual analysis and stakeholder mapping, and the livelihoods and market assessments, engage local actors who are deeply familiar with delivering and designing poverty reduction services and programmes. The vulnerability assessments directly engage households and the communities living in extreme poverty, and play the greatest role in informing the programme design. These serve to build a profile of extreme poor households and the specific challenges, barriers, and opportunities that these communities face. These assessments build a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the lives of households and families based on their own experiences, ranging from economic opportunities and market accessibility to shock exposure and access to services, including quality healthcare and educational opportunities for children.

These assessments are designed, approached, and conducted with the local context in mind to align with cultural norms and expectations. For example, maintaining separate focus group discussions with women and men often enables both genders to speak openly about specific challenges they face and perceptions they hold which can surface critical information for programme design. This was the case in a village in Lesotho, where the safe space provided by a women's only focus group revealed that a common challenge was for husbands to migrate for work, have second families, and stop supporting them and their children - revealing additional vulnerabilities and responsibilities women households face that had major implications for programme design recommendations.

### **Ensuring Inclusive Implementation**

The coaching and mentoring component is a critical component of the Graduation approach as it ensures that the perspectives and experiences of people living in extreme poverty remain engaged during implementation and inform programming and iteration during the programme cycle. Programme participants are regularly engaged by a mentor or coach who are able to maintain an understanding of challenges or shocks they face that threaten to hinder their progress, and respond accordingly. This not only ensures that programme participants are fully benefiting from the programme, but it also provides agency during the implementation phase by shifting away from a relationship where programme participants are passive recipients of programme inputs and towards our belief that programme participants are critical actors in the programme.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when a halt in movement and economic activities threatened the livelihoods of participants of the Philippines' Department of Labour and Employment (DOLE) Asian Development Bank (ADB) Graduation programme, project coordinators shifted from in-person visits to remote check-ins. These touchpoints enabled them to conduct rapid

assessments and deliver tailored support in light of emerging vulnerabilities. Throughout the lockdown, adaptations to the programme in response to information shared directly by programme participants enabled 67% to continue operating their livelihoods during the quarantine period<sup>7</sup>. The DOLE pilot, which ended in 2020, generated powerful lessons that will inform the Philippines Government's National Human Development and Poverty Reduction Cluster (HDPRC) to integrate principles of Graduation in the National Poverty Roadmap and the National Livelihood Framework, as well as BRAC UPGI's work moving forward.<sup>8</sup>

### **Applying Programmatic Insights to Policy and Systems Change**

BRAC recognises the role learning, innovation, evidence, and localisation has played and continues to play in our ability to deliver the most impactful programming for communities living in extreme poverty. BRAC also recognises that our global commitment to ending extreme poverty relies on systems change and collaboration across actors as no one entity or one programme can make a global impact on their own.

BRAC UPGI's five year strategic vision<sup>9</sup> focuses on bringing our evidence and learning to influence and contribute to global, regional, and national policies and programmes to ensure these systems adequately and effectively address the needs of people in extreme poverty for the long-term. BRAC UPGI's strategic vision brings together both high-level partnerships for scaling as well as evidence and insight from locally-based communities to ensure our programme and policy recommendations always remain rooted in experience on the ground for what is needed to end extreme poverty. To ensure global, regional, and national policies, programmes, and strategies effectively and sustainably tackle extreme poverty, the evidence and experience of CSOs working closely with impact communities must play a central role from the design to the implementation of these policies, programmes and systems.

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<sup>7</sup> [Ref: BRAC UPGI (2020), *Adapting the Graduation Approach in the Philippines*. <https://bracultrapoorgraduation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/PH-COVID-bulletin-3.pdf> ]

<sup>8</sup> [Ref: BRAC UPGI (2019), *Mainstreaming Graduation into Social Protection in Asia*. <https://bracultrapoorgraduation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Mainstreaming-Graduation-into-Social-Protection-in-Asia-1.pdf> ]

<sup>9</sup> [Ref: BRAC UPGI (2020), *BRAC UPGI Strategic Vision*. <https://bracultrapoorgraduation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Strategic-Vision-Brief.pdf> ]