

INSIGHTS INTO PREVENTING BACKSLIDING IN OVC PROGRAMS

OVC Graduation Brief Series: 4 of 4

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Key Messages

1. Despite meeting graduation criteria, certain households, including those within PEPFAR's highest-priority targeting groups, are at greater risk of backsliding into a pre-graduation state of vulnerability than other households.
2. Programs using a "responsible graduation" approach require households to achieve and maintain graduation criteria for fixed period before they officially graduate. This approach may help ensure that outcomes are sustained over time.
3. Implementers consider economic strengthening (ES) to be a critical component of sustainable graduation, but ES is often not available to all program participants.
4. To prevent backsliding, implementers suggest building partnerships within the community and pairing resilience-building ES interventions with social support and network strengthening interventions.

This brief is the fourth in our *OVC Graduation Brief Series*, which discusses the challenges faced by OVC programs in defining realistic, achievable minimum benchmarks for economic strengthening (ES) as well as sequencing interventions in order to prevent graduated households from backsliding, or returning to a pre-graduation state of vulnerability.

Objectives

We conducted key informant interviews (KIIs) with seven implementers of OVC programs to determine how programs prevent backsliding

and promote sustainability of program gains. Our specific research questions included:

- What are the features of a program that make its outcomes sustainable?
- What are household characteristics most associated with resilience or backsliding after graduation?

Methods

Between September 1 – 20, 2017, ASPIRES conducted seven KIIs with representatives from six OVC programs in four countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Interviewees were selected based on the recommendations of USAID’s OVC Technical Working Group as recent OVC programs using graduation approaches. Interview data was transcribed and analyzed using thematic coding in QSR NVivo 11.

These services are delivered using household-centered approaches, including individual case management and home visits provided by professional staff and/or volunteers.

BACKSLIDING

Preventing Backsliding

Since economic stability underlies stability in other wellbeing outcomes, graduation in OVC programs should ideally move participants out of a poverty trap, as BRAC’s model has been purported to do. However, evidence is limited on how to permanently move beyond these poverty traps. Respondents could not quantify specific levels of achievement that yield sustainable outcomes. Instead, respondents suggested indeterminate improvements in common household economic indicators – like income, assets, and savings –are useful in sustaining outcomes post-graduation. It is unlikely that a single metric will serve as a predictive threshold for all program participants. Even BRAC has advised that graduation should not be considered a permanent “threshold” that households cross, at which point they are no longer susceptible to return to poverty.

Practitioners agreed that some households that meet graduation criteria and exit from an OVC program may still be at risk for backsliding. Most programs were still in an implementation phase at the time of interview and did not have specific figures on rates of backsliding. However, respondents shared important insight on their program’s strategy for preventing households from backsliding.

Notably, SCORE uses a “responsible graduation” approach, meaning that households only graduate when they are able to sustain

Better Outcomes (2015 – 2020) Uganda	Massimo Lowicki-Zucca Chief of Party WorldEducation/Bantwana
SCORE (2011 -2018) Uganda	Rita Larok , Chief of Party AVSI Foundation
STEER (2013 – 2018) Nigeria	Halima Dikko , Deputy Chief of Party Save the Children
Turengere Abana (2012 – 2020) Rwanda	Adeline Manikuzwe , Technical Director FXB International
Twiyubake (2015 – 2020) Rwanda	Juste Kayihura , Director of Economic Strengthening Tona Isibo , Director of Monitoring, Evaluation, Results, and Learning Global Communities
Yekoeb Berhan (2011 – 2016) Ethiopia	Michael Haddish , ES Officer Pact

Box 1. OVC Programs and Key Informants

Findings

PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

We examined six OVC programs in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Uganda. These programs featured an integrated set of interventions typical of large-scale USAID-funded OVC programs, including linkages to HIV and other health services, psychosocial support, ES, nutrition, education support, and other services.

program gains. In this approach, households must continue to meet graduation requirements during a one-year pre-graduation before they are officially graduated from the program. This approach also entails formal follow-up on graduated households and re-enrolling or providing linkages to households that have fallen behind. In MEASURE Evaluation's program evaluation of SCORE, integrated family strengthening, including coaching, home visits, and the ability to cope with shocks were crucial elements in preventing backsliding. SCORE's COP emphasized the need to teach their predominately rural beneficiaries farming skills to strengthen households' abilities to withstand economic and environmental shocks. Households often depend on their networks to get through challenging times, but building individual skillsets also provides beneficiaries with the tools to adapt and survive.

STEER does not officially monitor graduated households, but case managers conduct informal monitoring while working in their communities. No households had been reported as having backslid, which the Deputy COP attributed to STEER's role in building beneficiaries' social capital, growing household assets through savings groups (SGs), and encouraging households to retain protective or productive assets to rely on in time of need. STEER also attributed the lack of observed backsliding to the program's deep involvement and relationship-building with other community structures.

Yekokeb Berhan's ES Officer also emphasized linkages with community structures as a key to prevent backsliding. Yekokeb Berhan linked participants with cooperative promotion offices, urban job creators, food security agencies, and

savings and credit associations for post-graduation support.

Turengere Abana uses SGs and cooperatives as platforms for informal follow-up. Within these structures, members help one another to ensure no one is left behind. This sentiment was further emphasized by Twiyubake's Director of ES, who explained how social cohesion within one's savings group was sustained even after graduation, providing necessary support to prevent backsliding.

When asked to consider the most important program components for sustainable graduation, all respondents offered some element of ES as a critical component. SGs were mentioned by Better Outcomes and Twiyubake. Technical schools and vocational training were also identified as important components in Twiyubake and Yekokeb Berhan, the latter of which used participation in these services to develop graduation transition plans based on linkages to potential employers within the community. Turengere Abana and STEER respondents discussed the importance of ES in general to economically empower caregivers, support them to build their finances, and encourage them to make decisions that meet their family's basic health, education, and protection needs. However, we found that not all households enrolled in OVC programs are receiving ES services, with ES participation rates ranging from 20 to 100% of households.

Turengere Abana, SCORE, and STEER respondents described how ES was necessary but not sufficient for sustaining program gains. Instead, multi-sectoral program components worked together to drive program success. Because of the multi-dimensional nature of

OVC programs, it can be challenging to assess the direct effect of an individual component, as MEASURE Evaluation found in their final evaluation of SCORE. However, studies have shown that life skills and family strengthening (FS) interventions, like parenting training, are critical to graduating households and avoiding backsliding. For example, in SCORE, FS had a significant effect on moving households out of the highest level of vulnerability, while ES did not (SCORE, 2016). Parenting was a particularly important element of FS, as it was associated with a significant reduction in child abuse and neglect. FS and life skills for adolescents were incorporated in response to unmet need after the program was launched, leading SCORE's COP to lament that they were not immediately available given their importance in moving households toward graduation. Life skills training also played a critical role in Yekokeb Berhan.

Most Likely to Backslide

Despite best efforts to prevent backsliding among all program participants, respondents identified certain high-risk households that are generally more likely to backslide than others. Families in severe poverty or states of vulnerability at enrollment are more likely to experience backsliding than their lower-risk counterparts. These households often require additional resources merely to elevate them to the baseline levels of other households. This includes households with chronically ill family members or those with severe disabilities.

Turengere Abana, SCORE, and STEER respondents noted that HIV-positive households may be more likely to backslide, particularly if the caregiver is chronically ill.

Household characteristics associated with backsliding:

- **Severe poverty at enrollment**
- **Chronically ill, elderly, child, or disabled head of household**
- **Large family size**
- **Unreliable income source**
- **Experienced multiple shocks**

SCORE provides limited subsidies, which often go to severely ill or disabled households and typically require referrals to more intensive social support services. These households might suffer setbacks that permanently limit their capacity to become economically-active and may require long-term financial support beyond what SCORE is designed to provide. SCORE's COP identified such households as a poor fit for SCORE's strategy of economic empowerment and unlikely to graduate with sustained outcomes.

In Turengere Abana and STEER, households with large families may also be at greater risk for backsliding. For example, Turengere Abana experienced cases where large families cannot afford to send all children to school, which is a requisite for graduation. In these cases, the program may graduate specific children but delay graduation for the entire household until all children are regularly attending school. If households were graduated based on a quorum of children in school, they may not sustain their graduation status in the long term. STEER also noted that households that are not well-established, including seasonal farmers and petty traders, are vulnerable to backsliding. This may be linked to their ability to withstand

shocks. An unpublished case study examining resilience among families in the Higa Ubeho OVC program in Rwanda found that certain households experiencing shocks also saw reductions in their household resilience index over time. These households did not have effective coping strategies for either health, social, environmental, or economic shocks, which limited their ability to fully recover.

Community Structures Make Sustainable Graduation Possible

All respondents agreed that working with local government, establishing participant linkages to community resources, and building social capital in implementation communities are key to preventing backsliding. The SCORE evaluation noted that government stakeholders were pleased with the amount of engagement they had with SCORE and that this interaction fostered more effective implementation. Better Outcomes also depends heavily on working with local government, aiming to work with up to 2900 volunteer parasocial workers in coordination with local community structures.

Turengere Abana and Twiyubake are fully embedded in a national OVC strategy that begins at the central level with the Rwanda National Commission for Children (NCC). All OVC programs work with NCC, meeting quarterly to provide support and determine additional assistance required for graduating households. The NCC's list of vulnerable households is validated every two to three years through community visits and programs like Turengere Abana and Twiyubake.

Turengere Abana also noted that local leaders are crucial for identifying beneficiaries, and that

other village- and district-level stakeholders provide necessary supplemental support to beneficiaries. Twiyubake's Director of ES observed that OVC programs provide a platform for building and strengthening community capacity to care for OVC through referrals and linkages. Twiyubake also aims to foster community engagement and social inclusion, encouraging people to seek the health and social support they need, under the premise that social cohesion created through the OVC program is sustained after graduation.

Yekokeb Berhan is also deeply embedded in their communities and depends heavily on volunteer committees. For example, community committees are voluntary coalitions that prevent social problems and improve adverse conditions, primarily for children. Community care coalitions are volunteer structures recognized by the National Social Protection Policy that solve social and economic problems. Yekokeb Berhan's volunteer case managers conduct vulnerability assessments that must be approved by one of these institutions, which then work with implementing partners to designate a vulnerability category for each household. Yekokeb Berhan's ES Officer noted that this process only functions when there is buy-in and trust from these community organizations. They gain support for their interventions by creating awareness and building a shared vision with their local counterparts. The community functions as an important support element for beneficiaries both before and after graduation.

STEER's programming involved collaboration between community case managers, child protection (or ward development) committees (CPCs), and community leaders or

gatekeepers. CPCs, which have protection, education, and ES sub-committees, oversee all community projects and are informed by case managers on the needs of specific households. These structures continue to identify services and provide referrals after a household graduates from STEER, which prevents backsliding. In turn, STEER provides capacity building for these community committees to identify and serve vulnerable households. STEER also works with state education boards and child protection committees to identify children who should be in school and strategize ways to keep them enrolled. For example, STEER uses block grants to renovate schools with a high volume of beneficiaries. These investments improve beneficiaries' ability to thrive and sustain program gains.

Case managers themselves are an integral part of the community structures that respondents considered important for sustainable graduation. Despite the challenges of training, managing, and retaining a large volume of case managers, respondents and local governments underscored that volunteers were from the community and were therefore likely to remain there, continue to share their skillsets, and provide essential services to beneficiaries and graduates. There was a sense that volunteers wanted to give back to their communities since many were current or past beneficiaries.

Discussion

BACKSLIDING

Because programs featured in this assessment were still being implemented at the time of the interview, respondents could not offer statistics on the rates of backsliding in their programs.

Comprehensive evaluations and tracer studies will be necessary to investigate the extent and causes of backsliding among graduates. However, respondent insights and available reports suggest that ES and social support interventions were important for sustaining program gains beyond graduation. MEASURE Evaluation's assessment of SCORE also found ES and social support (family strengthening) to be essential elements of OVC programming. Equally important to the services provided prior to graduation, respondents emphasized linkages to resources in the community as crucial for sustaining outcomes beyond graduation.

Another notable theme touched on the tension between targeting vulnerable households that implementers perceive as being more likely to backslide. That is, child- or elderly- headed households, large families, and those devastated by HIV may be at a higher risk for backsliding into a state of vulnerability after graduation. As SCORE's COP noted, these households often require much more intensive support than resource-constrained OVC programs are able to provide. Conceptually, it is reasonable that households starting at a more severe level of vulnerability will have farther to rise than less vulnerable counterparts and need to surmount various obstacles to maintain program gains. However, this raises questions about the meaning of "responsible graduation" and what that looks like for households starting from extreme vulnerability. It underscores the need for a graduation process that closely monitors sustainability for all beneficiaries once benchmarks are achieved and appreciates that the time for meeting these benchmarks will not be universal. Moving toward a tiered classification approach may allow for more

Careful progress tracking of the most vulnerable households. Programs might also need to temper expectations of extremely vulnerable households in terms of their timeline to graduation, particularly in programs that do not have tiered vulnerability classifications.

These findings also underscore the importance of household resilience to economic, health, and environmental shocks in protecting against backsliding. Unfortunately, the risk of experiencing some sort of shock is high in these programming contexts. ES interventions provide households with strategies for managing such shocks, and yet ES interventions are not provided to all households within OVC programs.

Respondents were particularly wary of environmental shocks. In Higa Ubeho in Rwanda, 30% of participants who experienced economic decline cited an environmental shock. These types of shocks are of growing relevance given global climate change and the projected effects on weather patterns and intensity. Farmer field schools were touted as promising ES interventions that teach more sustainable production practices, helping to increase crop yields and reduce food insecurity. SCORE, in particular, relied on agricultural interventions to promote resilience for their predominantly rural households. However, SCORE's COP noted that all households were susceptible to environmental shocks given that failures in the field directly affect the marketplace. Health shocks are also a common cause for backsliding. All OVC programs addressed HIV in some capacity, mostly by referring households to providers for testing and treatment. Only Twiyubake discussed enrollment of participants in a health insurance

scheme as a major programmatic goal. Even where basic health care is covered at no cost, the ancillary cost of care or uninsured episodes can leave households with catastrophic out-of-pocket payments. Where health insurance schemes are unavailable, OVC programs could work to implement SG-based health savings accounts, community health pots, or other forms of savings specifically earmarked for health-related expenses.

Despite the importance of ES in coping with shocks, evidence from SCORE suggests that sometimes the most important constraint to economic resilience is not lack of savings or training, but rather non-economic issues related to family dynamics. FS, for example, was a statistically significant component in preventing backsliding in SCORE's evaluation. Integration of comprehensive services was viewed as critical to program success, underscoring how resilience requires appropriate economic and non-economic coping strategies. These interviews suggest that large-scale access to ES interventions, in addition to other social support, will support this goal.

Moreover, social capital was consistently described as a powerful tool to promote resilience and prevent backsliding. SCORE's COP discussed how people use their networks to survive during challenging periods. Twiyubake's ES Director also noted how social cohesion serves as a life preserver, allowing graduates to feel engaged and supported after they move on from the OVC program. Existing community structures, such as STEER's child protection committees, continue to provide support and referrals after graduation. In each program, community structures were essential to sustainability since they could provide much-

needed resources after graduation. This implies that OVC programs expect some segment of households to require additional services even after they have graduated. Households may not be completely self-sufficient, but instead know where to access these additional resources to get back on track. Because of the emphasis placed on community structures, it is clear that successful OVC programs are those that engage local governments and institutions from the start, building trust and creating a shared sense of responsibility for the beneficiaries in their communities.

Interviewees emphasized the importance of comprehensive programming to OVC program success, while also acknowledging the challenge of implementing such programs with limited resources. These challenges may be amplified by the expanded focus of PEPFAR programming for OVC. PEPFAR 3.0 has affected the focus of OVC programs in several ways: 1) geographical focus on areas most affected by HIV; 2) increased focus on populations directly affected by HIV; and 3) focus on four outcome areas to ensure children are safe, stable, schooled, and healthy. OVC programs are also expected to reach a much larger scale than in the past, which explains the increased reliance on a cohort of community volunteers to administer programs to beneficiaries. As the Better Outcomes COP noted, the “courageous gamble” of relying on community structures and large numbers of volunteers creates a tension between quality and coverage. Furthermore, aspects of programming that are not considered “core” in the PEPFAR guidance are being de-emphasized. SCORE’s COP described how elements may fall out of focus in programs facing pressure to reach high target numbers of

beneficiaries, such as legal support and WASH, were essential to other programmatic outcomes, including those related to economic stability, health, and nutrition.

Conclusions

There is little data on what prevents backsliding at the household level. However, interviewees consistently pointed to the importance of linkages with community structures to carry on their work. Ultimately, program graduates are still vulnerable to shocks, which is a major cause of backsliding. Resilience-building ES interventions that address common shocks, paired with social support and network strengthening interventions, are crucial for sustaining program gains. Going forward, these interventions may need to more comprehensively address climate change. As growing PEPFAR targets force programs to prioritize certain interventions, our interview findings suggest that ES is important for sustaining project outcomes. Given that ES is not implemented uniformly across programs, donors should encourage implementing partners to adequately incorporate ES into their programs at all vulnerability levels and define realistic benchmarks based on the type and intensity of ES services provided.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To avoid backsliding, we recommend that implementers continue to emphasize relationship-building with local partners and provide linkages to community resources. Participants should be aware of these resources so they can be accessed in times of need. We also recommend that OVC programs expand access to comprehensive ES services.

NEXT STEPS FOR RESEARCH

Evidence-based guidelines on backsliding require additional research. Retrospective studies that follow up on participant outcomes after graduation are needed to understand if outcomes are sustained and to identify components, or combinations of interventions, that promote sustainability. Qualitative study should examine why backsliding occurs and what households need to return to less vulnerable levels. Rigorous evaluations will generate evidence on reasonable benchmarks, especially if they are conducted using a common set of outcome indicators.

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