

Coaching in the Ultra-Poor Graduation Approach

What is Coaching?

In BRAC's Graduation approach, coaching is an integral component that cuts across all four of its [foundational pillars](#) (livelihoods promotion, social protection, financial inclusion, and social empowerment) that collectively enable a household to build its resilience and uplift themselves out of extreme poverty. Coaching takes the form of regular touchpoints between participants and program staff and is critical in boosting their confidence, guiding on livelihood management, resolving challenges, adopting positive behavior, and monitoring household welfare. Coaches go beyond casework or case management by instilling hope and helping participants translate their vision of a future out of poverty into realistic steps.

How is Coaching Delivered?

While coaching can vary in delivery mechanism and frequency based on the context, it is one of the key features that makes Graduation different from traditional development programs targeted towards vulnerable populations. BRAC's Graduation approach typically includes a combination of individual and group coaching. Individual coaching, delivered at the household level, provides tailored support, critical to participants facing personal challenges that might be too sensitive to share in a group, such as unequal workloads or gender dynamics at home. It also allows staff to follow up on and observe issues such as children's school attendance, health-seeking behavior, nutrition and hygiene practices. Group coaching is ideal for exchanging knowledge with peers



A typical group coaching session in the Philippines (BRAC 2020)

“

I really appreciate the field officers coming to my house every week, especially during the crisis when it was risky for them. It made me feel like I had support during a very difficult time.”

-Mahmood | Graduation Participant in Yemen

and raising awareness on social and health issues such as children's education, family planning, maternal and child health, among others.

What Makes Coaching Successful?

Whether it is a government extension worker, community volunteer, or recruited staff, Graduation requires dedicated staffing capacity to fulfill four main roles associated with coaching: (1) mentor participants, (2) train on key topics such as livelihood management, business skills and household budgeting, and other life skills, (3) link households to government and community resources, and (4) monitor progress of households. In addition to educational and professional qualifications that vary based on context, BRAC identifies soft skills as being critical to the success of coaching. This includes deep contextual knowledge, strong interpersonal skills, and ability to handle sensitive issues related to gender. Building mutual trust and respect is crucial to this delicate relationship.

Intensive and tailored training is critical to equip coaches with the capacity and knowledge to motivate participants and boost their confidence. Training for coaches should be easily accessible and understandable for individuals of varying educational levels and should be highly interactive. In addition to upfront training, refresher training should be delivered to reinforce key lessons. In the [PROFIT Financial Graduation program](#), funded by IFAD and the Government of Kenya, BRAC Ultra-Poor Graduation Initiative (UPGI) and local partners trained coaches on key skills such as active listening, good communication, showing empathy, encouraging without judgment, eliminating gender bias,

and building trust. These lessons were reinforced through the program to ensure they became second nature to the coaches. Coaches are the linchpin of any successful Graduation program and therefore their recruitment is critical. Typically, the most successful coaches will have an advanced degree, previous relevant interpersonal and technical experience, and specific knowledge of the nation and local context. Furthermore, coaching trainings should be easily accessible and understandable for individuals of all levels of education, prioritizing intuitive visuals and group work over lengthy and wordy lectures. In BRAC's Graduation Approach, training is delivered in both upfront and through refresher trainings.

The Impact of Coaching

To echo Graduation scholars, the transformative potential of regular coaching and mentoring around life skills must be emphasized and is "perhaps the most critically successful factor for the Graduation Approach" or "the X-factor". Implementers consistently identify coaching as one of the most critical success factors for the Graduation approach. Participants from various Graduation programs have reported significant changes in their confidence and morale as a result of the support they receive from the coaches. Scholastica Nadu, a participant of the PROFIT Financial Graduation program in Kenya, reflected, "Before this program, I had very low self-esteem and lacked the confidence when interacting with other members of the community. Now I feel respected and more dignified."

It is this change that motivates many staff to believe in the power of coaching and leverage it for the benefit of all participants. It is certainly one of the most rewarding aspects of Susan Mukei's job as a Field Officer in Kitui county, Kenya. "Empowering a community member and witnessing their improvement in life is a critical and primary goal of my job and that's why I love it," she says.

Examples of Successful Coaching

In the PROFIT Financial Graduation pilot in Kenya, constant follow-up and monitoring from coaches ensured positive financial and social gains. Not only did coaches empower women to graduate, but they simultaneously encouraged men in the community to support the economic empowerment of women. Some participating households experienced shifts in gender dynamics resulting from participation in the program, leading to household disputes. The coaches were equipped with the necessary training to help mediate these conflicts.

In a Graduation pilot led by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) in the Philippines, highly qualified and trained coaches were able to rapidly adapt coaching methodologies to provide critical support to Graduation participants during the COVID-19 crisis. Coaches delivered support through a mix of remote and socially distanced coaching and coached participants to manage risks to their livelihoods and rebuild their savings.

In another recent program in Rwanda, community-led committees elected role models to serve as volunteer coaches. This facilitated community ownership of the Graduation program.

