



EMPOWERING WOMEN AND YOUTH THROUGH THE GRADUATION APPROACH AND FINANCIAL INCLUSION IN MEXICO

RESULTS, LESSONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

trickle^{up}

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About the Project

Since 1979, Trickle Up has accompanied marginalized populations in pathways out of extreme poverty, and over the last 15 years has been a pioneer in adapting the Graduation Approach for a wide range of vulnerable individuals, households and institutional contexts. The Graduation Approach is a multifaceted, sequenced and timebound approach designed to enable households to significantly and durably strengthen their livelihoods and social and financial inclusion. Trickle Up has collaborated with governments and other institutions to apply learning developed through the Graduation Approach to enhance the integration of extremely poor and marginalized individuals and households into large scale programs, and to introduce livelihood strengthening components into social protection schemes.

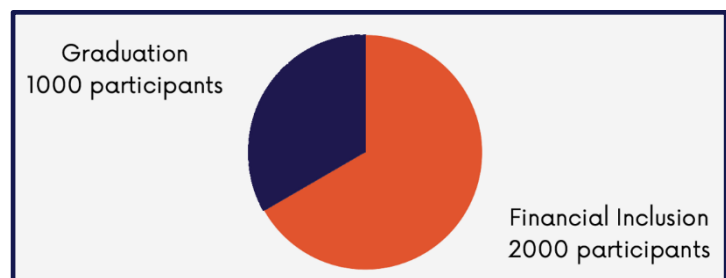
With the support of the MetLife Foundation, Trickle Up delivered a multidimensional intervention with elements of financial inclusion to economically empower vulnerable and marginalized women in Bangladesh, Mexico, and Vietnam. In Mexico, the project *Empowering Women and Youth through the Graduation Approach and Financial Inclusion* was contracted in September 2017, but due to operational and contextual challenges was implemented between July 2018 and May 2021 among indigenous communities in the states of Chiapas and Yucatan. Trickle Up partnered with local NGOs who were responsible for implementing most project components, including Creative Learning, Enlace CC IAP, and AMTEL Chiapas S.C. in Chiapas and Fundación Ko'ox Táani in Yucatan. Culturally, participants included Maya Yucateco (25%), Tseltal (30%), Tsotsil (35%), Tojolabal (4%), Chuj (1%) and Mestizo (4%). 10% were men and women with disabilities.

The project was also designed with a view toward the scalability of the Graduation Approach within government programs as a policy solution to enduring pockets of extreme poverty, particularly among rural indigenous communities, while enhancing the agency of indigenous women. For this reason, a significant project objective was to provide relevant insight for scaling the Graduation Approach, taking into account the specific needs and aspirations of the indigenous women with whom the project worked, the policy environment, and existing government programs at both the state and national levels in Mexico.

This research brief outlines the main results and lessons from this project, emphasizing insights for replication and scaling in the Mexican context. These include targeting and selection methods, coaching models, productive activities, gender issues and empowerment.

Project Design

The project aimed to support 3000 indigenous women between the ages of 18 and 34 and women and men with disabilities. This included 1000 participants living in extreme poverty and 2000 participants with profiles that suggested that they were slightly less poor. In order to promote



economic self-sufficiency, individual agency, and social and financial inclusion, the 1000 extremely poor participants received the full graduation package, which included:

1. Targeting (to select the poorest households)
2. Financial inclusion (developing savings groups, training with the VSLA methodology, and integrating financial literacy)
3. A strong training system (initially composed of seven themes)
4. Implementation of productive activities with seed capital of USD \$350.00 per person (including sustainable livelihood planning and consumption support with backyard crops)
5. Individual and group coaching, including the use of Trickle Up's coaching application, *Echb'eenink* ("accompaniment" in Mayan) to support and reinforce training processes

The remaining 2000 participants (in general poverty) received the graduation components except seed capital, individual productive activity coaching, productive activity planning and quarterly monitoring.

The whole project was supported by continuous monitoring and evaluation, technology and research. This included the use of tablets, the TaroWorks app and the Salesforce platform to gather and analyze project data. The project also undertook an evaluation focused on discerning and strengthening the cultural relevance of the Graduation Approach.

Topics of Enquiry

Trickle Up had established a relationship with Prospera, the previous Mexican governments' national conditional cash transfer and social inclusion program, to jointly explore opportunities for the Approach to address pockets of chronic poverty, by providing more targeted pathways out of poverty. Particular areas of interest included adaptations for indigenous contexts and for effectively facilitating women's economic and social inclusion, given indigenous women disproportionately experience extreme poverty and economic and social exclusion. Prospera's officials were already familiar with the Graduation Approach, given the substantial evidence generated by the first Graduation pilots.¹ Prospera had also engaged in a pilot with Fundación Capital in Guerrero, Mexico, and had expressed considerable interest in the cultural relevance and adaptations for the Graduation Approach for indigenous communities. Prospera officials nevertheless expressed concern about how such an approach could be scaled within their institutional structure, as they did not have a human resource base that matched the profile of coaches. Even though Prospera was being disbanded during the project implementation, potential adaptations of the Graduation Approach to address extreme poverty in Mexico remained relevant for future social and economic inclusion policy interventions. Trickle Up along with the organizations with which it consulted also considered important the effective participation of women in ways that could improve their economic and social agency in their homes and communities.

¹ Graduation pilots include randomized evaluations in 7 countries. Among several publications, see: Abhijit Banerjee et al., "A Multifaceted Program Causes Lasting Progress for the Very Poor: Evidence from Six Countries," *Science* 348, no. 6236 (May 15, 2015).

These were also areas in which Trickle Up could add significant insight. Project design drew on Trickle Up's experience adapting coaching models in a range of contexts with municipal, state and national governments in three continents, along with its four local partner organizations varying field staff profiles. It also drew on Trickle Up's 15 years of experience working with Mayan women (and women and men with disabilities) in Guatemala, and 3 years with Mayan communities in the Yucatan in partnership with Ko'ox Táani, along with the local NGO's deep experience with these populations. Recognizing the complexity of assessing how a project responds to the needs and aspirations of indigenous communities, Trickle Up also commissioned El Colegio de la Frontera Sur (ECOSUR) to evaluate the cultural relevance of the Graduation Approach throughout the project life cycle.

Comparison of the full Graduation Approach with a less intensive financial inclusion adaptation focused mostly on the financial inclusion components for less poor participants was also a topic of assessment, given potential implications for cost-effectiveness. Given the unprecedented disruptions caused both Covid-19 and tropical storms Cristóbal, Gama, Delta, Zeta, Eta and Iota during the project period, how the project impacted participants' resilience and coping mechanisms also became a topic of assessment. Lastly, the project enabled the building of relationships with government agencies in order to jointly identify opportunities to address barriers to the full inclusion or productive potential of extremely poor indigenous women within existing programs, by drawing on the lessons from the Graduation Approach.

Evaluation Methodology and Sources

Results and conclusions presented in this report are based on a combination of sources. This includes data collected through Trickle Up's monitoring and evaluation system, the external evaluation conducted by ECOSUR, participants' own experiences, and experiences shared by Trickle Up and local implementing NGO staff through workshops and interviews.

Trickle Up's internal assessment processes included census-level baseline and endline surveys, quarterly monitoring data on participant and savings group performance (all entered through a Salesforce-based monitoring system), reports on progress and challenges submitted quarterly by local implementing NGOs, and 120 longitudinal case studies of participants (40 of which were analyzed in depth). ECOSUR's external evaluation methodology consisted of a quasi-experimental mixed methods evaluation, which employed questionnaires, interviews, and workshops to analyze three areas of project implementation: 1) Planning and Targeting, 2) Component Development and 3) Closure and Continuity of the program. Workshops were held with implementing partners, ECOSUR and other stakeholders, including Chiapas state government officials, to discuss and analyze results, along with regular monthly and quarterly meetings involving all the implementing NGOs. Additional meetings were held with ECOSUR, Mexican government officials, and other relevant project actors.

Limitations of the assessment include some gaps in data collection due to limited access to communities during March to June 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and associated disruption of project activities. Further, this intervention did not include an experimental design, although ECOSUR incorporated a quasi-experimental element into their evaluation. As such, findings and recommendations presented here do not rest primarily on rigorous claims

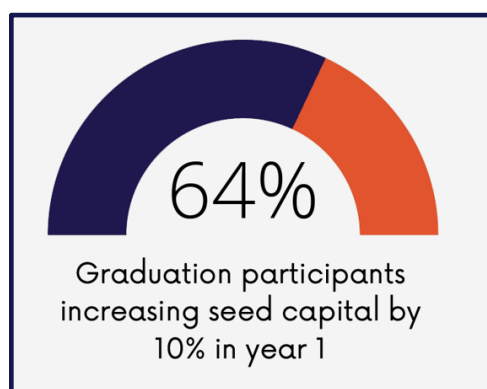
of impact, but rather draw from a range of mixed-methods assessment processes, centering issues related to process and implementation.

Results

Livelihood development Participants in extreme poverty received seed capital and coaching to initiate new productive activities, improving household resilience to economic and climate shocks. Through managing these activities, women also increased economic contribution to their households, built savings, and gained leadership experience.

Through the project:

- The 1000 participants receiving the full Graduation Approach received \$350 USD to implement productive activities. During the first year of implementation, these participant households increased the number of productive activities from 1.6 to 2.8 per household, increasing resilience to shocks through diversified income sources.



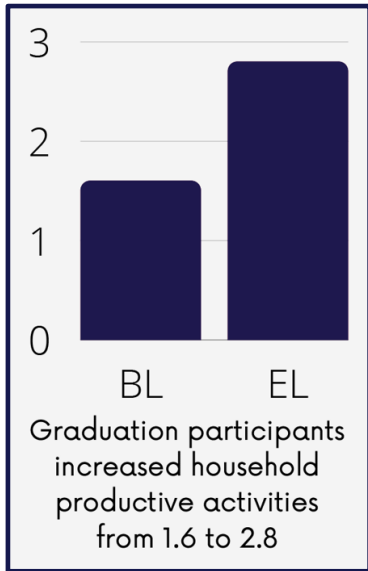
- 64.4% of participants receiving the full Graduation Approach increased their seed capital by 10% during the first 12 months of project implementation through earnings from livelihood activities.
- 53% of participants initiated productive activities that they had not previously undertaken.
- 80.8% of participants receiving the full Graduation Approach increased their economic contribution to the household through the project, compared to 50.4% of those receiving only the financial inclusion elements.

Financial inclusion, including access to savings and low-interest credit through savings groups, strengthened participant resilience. In case studies, participants reported financial inclusion as a key element that helped them survive the economic shocks of the pandemic and hurricanes of 2020-2021. Participant contribution to household expenses, leadership experience and participation in savings groups, and financial literacy also built their sense of empowerment. Results include the following:

- At baseline, only 5.4% of participants had savings in cash. 23.9% had savings in cash or kind, compared to 100% of participants who through the project saved in cash through their respective savings groups. Participants receiving the full Graduation Approach, including seed capital, saved on average \$1605 MXN (\$80 USD) in total. Those in the financial inclusion focused arm saved an average of \$1001 MXN (\$50 USD). Given the Graduation participants were initially

Average amount saved per Graduation participant
\$80 USD

Average amount saved per Financial Inclusion participant
\$50 USD

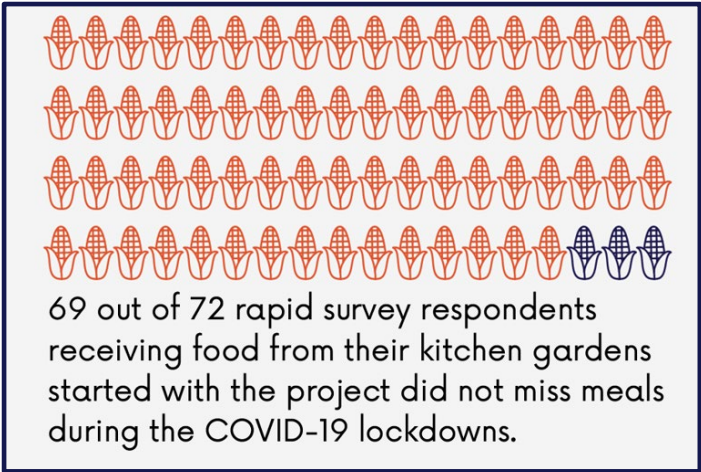


poorer than the others, this points to the importance of livelihood inputs in supporting saving, but nevertheless such supports are not essential for most participants in the latter group to develop a savings habit. However, while the commitment to continue saving following the shocks of the pandemic and tropical storms was apparent in both groups, the participants that had not been able to develop livelihood activities in the financial inclusion arm reported struggling more to reestablish savings.

- 96.3% of participants receiving the full Graduation intervention continued with a second savings cycle. 77.1% of participants receiving a partial intervention did the same. Data reflects that many participants stopped saving, or used their savings, during the first Covid-19 lockdowns and to cope with the hurricanes, but then resumed saving once their situation

had stabilized. Despite this, continued participation and savings results suggest that participants valued savings and participation in savings groups, and had sufficient resilience to continue to do so. Qualitative data also suggests that many participants highly valued being able to draw on their savings to meet basic needs during these crises, which did heighten their appreciation of accumulating savings. 92% of participants interviewed by ECOSUR reported that they had a plan for how they would like to use their savings.

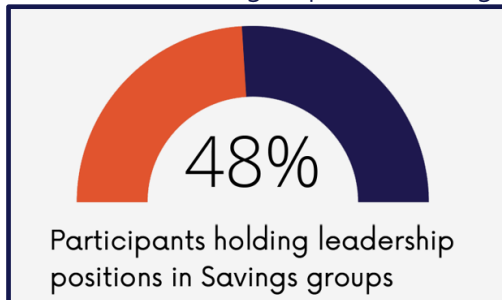
Food security While the Household Hunger Scale results at baseline demonstrated that most participants were not facing severe hunger, at time of application Prospera was still functioning, and many participants reported that they received and used these cash transfers to buy food. The project sought to address seasonal hunger caused by climate change (prolonged droughts, flooding, or unusually low temperatures), limited access to cultivable land, and seasons with multiple cash demands. In addition to the positive impacts of savings and income generation on food security, the project provided training on nutrition, hygiene, identifying wild edibles, and cultivating kitchen gardens to help families make the most of available space and resources to produce nutritious food for household consumption. The project also fostered support networks (including food exchanges and native seed banks) to support participant food security and self-sufficiency. These elements helped participants maintain and improve their food security despite the pandemic and the 2019 closure of Prospera.



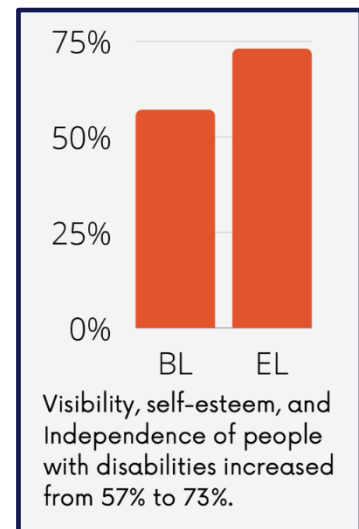
- Savings, kitchen gardens, and access to credit through savings groups helped participants manage money and harvests to prepare for lean seasons, which they experienced during the pandemic and hurricanes, when crops were lost, market access was difficult, and agricultural jobs scarce.
- In a rapid survey conducted in July and August 2020 of 139 participants that field staff were able to contact in mid-2020 about the impacts of Covid-19, 47% of households reported that they had difficulty meeting their food needs. According to the survey, the most important coping strategies included: eating wild foods, low interest loans, buying on credit in stores, and selling productive assets. 69 out of 72 survey participants who were receiving food from their gardens did not miss meals during the lockdown period. Many savings groups reported adapting rules to help participants access savings or loans to meet family food needs during the pandemic. In the rapid survey, VSLA loans taken in the four months prior were overwhelmingly used to buy food. This was both during the pandemic and the scarce period before the harvest. These coping strategies contributed to spouse and participant buy-in to the value of savings groups and motivated continued participation.

Empowerment Project elements are designed to holistically equip women to recognize and claim their rights amidst gender inequalities and violence, and build self-esteem and leadership qualities. Active participation in savings groups, ownership over productive activities, and contribution to household income together form the basis for women to build connections with other women in their community, improve self-esteem, and make decisions, starting in their households. These project elements also contributed to protection of rights and promotion of visibility for people with disabilities, who made up 10% of participants.

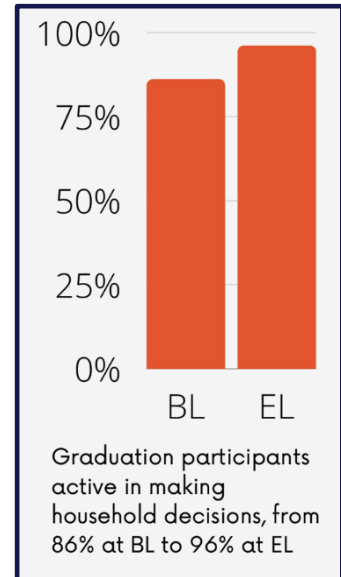
- 48.2% of participants occupied a leadership role in their savings groups. The project promoted the active participation of women regardless of literacy status; 27.6% of illiterate participants had occupied a leadership role within their groups, according to ECOSUR. According to qualitative data collected



through case studies, savings groups created an important space for building relationships, discussing and resolving problems, and putting lessons about rights and teamwork into practice. Leadership experience and social inclusion in the groups helped equip women to take a more active role in sharing opinions and making decisions in the household.



- 96% of participants receiving the full Graduation implementation became active in making decisions in the household compared to 86% at the baseline. According to case studies, selecting, carrying out, and generating resources for the household through productive activities helped elevate participant decision-making within the household. Participant access to savings and loans during the lean seasons, hurricanes, and pandemic during the project also contributed to family member buy-in to the project.



Key Lessons and Recommendations

The following results and recommendations include those which Trickle Up believes are most valuable to future interventions, partners, governments, and the community of practice, with emphasis on lessons learned about the cultural relevance in indigenous contexts and scalability of the Graduation Approach in Mexico.

Targeting, Selection and Retention

The targeting and selection process utilized participatory wealth ranking exercises, accompanied by social mapping and transect walks, in order to engage community members in identifying locally relevant indicators of poverty, and the households in their community that fell into defined poverty categories. This was followed by household level verification of wealth and vulnerability by project staff using poverty scorecards adapted to the context. Engaging communities in the targeting and selection process was important for drawing on their local knowledge while also building transparency into the selection process. Nevertheless, a number of challenges were encountered in selecting, engaging and retaining participants, including distrust of outsiders and negative experience in prior projects, which caused delays in timelines from the outset. Over the course of the project, 22% of participants dropped out for various reasons, including an expectation of handouts. Attrition was likely exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Implementing organizations developed strategies to build trust in communities from the outset, which included the following:

Commencing with small demonstration groups proved useful in Yucatan. This involved starting savings groups with people who were willing to participate even if the groups were not large enough to be economically viable in the long run. This then helped to build trust and an appreciation of the value of the program among other community members who were initially hesitant to join. This strategy also requires some flexibility in project timelines.

Offering workshops on themes of special interest to potential participants provided a good entry point for engaging communities and building trust, without initially requiring further commitment from people.

Working with organizations or staff that had prior experience in project communities facilitated the targeting process, as they were generally able to build rapport and trust more quickly. It was particularly important to have staff who were native speakers of the local Mayan languages (see also section on Coaching). In some cases, prior experience was also helpful in building new connections with local leaders.

In the targeting process, dedicating more time to involve community authorities, engage in consultation, and establish mutual respect and trust, was essential. This was especially important in contexts where authorities might expect to receive money or goods in exchange for accepting the project.

Additional recommendations for successful selection and retention throughout the project in this context include the following:

Targeting young women is important given their potential, but pragmatically it is important to also enable engagement of some older women, to build trust and stability and address tensions. The project targeted young women (defined as aged 18-34)² because they are often overlooked by other programs due to their “productive and reproductive characteristics” according to ECOSUR. However, this selection strategy produced some tensions as community members did not generally accept age as a valid factor for determining eligibility, compared to an individual’s socio-economic status and her interest and commitment. For this reason, field staff in some cases enabled the participation of women over age 34 in the groups, although only as “volunteers.” These weren’t counted among the official participant numbers. ECOSUR also found that incorporating some older women helped lend stability to the savings groups and trust in the project overall. For future projects it is therefore recommended that a primary focus on younger women be maintained, but with flexibility to integrate a minority (such as 20-30%) of participants outside of the age range.

Remote communities tend to have disproportionate levels of extreme poverty and vulnerability, but also require adjustments in timelines and budgets to enable required support. Providing support and accompaniment to isolated villages, not surprisingly, required more time and effort on the part of staff, yet these were often the communities where there was more need and complexity. In order to avoid geographic exclusion of isolated villages and ensure they get the support they need, timelines to account for staff transportation and security needed to be adjusted. Planning for differentiated timelines and associated budgets based on ease of accessibility (and also complexity of social issues), should ideally be factored into the design.

A higher proportion of participants who only received the financial inclusion inputs dropped out than in the full Graduation participants (25% financial inclusion vs. 16% Graduation). This was partially due to malcontent generated from not receiving seed capital, meaning communication needs to be managed very carefully when not all participants receive the same inputs. Varying inputs based on socio-economic position is arguably more cost-effective, however the unrealized expectation that they would receive seed capital due to communication between groups led to dissatisfaction. This concern was lower among local

² The age range did not apply when including participants with disabilities or their support person.

implementers who explained the reasons for the differing inputs clearly and transparently and effectively engaged communities in the decision-making.

Coaching Models

Coaching is a key component for providing and reinforcing training, supporting participants with livelihood planning, providing motivation and encouragement, monitoring the use seed capital and the progress of participants' livelihood activities, and providing general technical assistance and troubleshooting support at both the group and individual level. Coaches initially attended all savings groups meetings twice per month, and then reduced their support to monthly visits, and at the end of the cycle, to twice per quarter. Most conducted bimonthly individual household visits, which they also gradually reduced toward the end of the project.

While a critical program component, coaching is also the most challenging Graduation Approach component to deliver and scale with quality. The project incorporated natural experiments in coaching models primarily during the pandemic lockdowns that drew on the varying profiles and capacities of its implementing partners. Findings and recommendations from this experimentation are considered below, along with other observations related to scalability and effectiveness.

Engaging indigenous women who are originally from rural communities as coaches provides highly valuable local knowledge, enhances trust, and facilitates communication. However, there are advantages to engaging women who no longer reside in their villages, as they tend to have greater ability to promote deeper transformations in gender norms and expectations. One NGO's technical teams comprised indigenous women who were originally from communities similar to those of the project area and spoke languages of the participants. They demonstrated high levels of empathy for participants experiencing extreme poverty and intuitive knowledge about gender inequities affecting participants. Most had left their communities for education and then employment, and in doing so challenged or broke with traditional gender roles. This enabled them to serve as important role models for many participants. However, having divergent expectations from the norm led many such coaches to decide to not return to live in their communities of origin. While many Graduation programs have engaged people who are from and live in project communities as coaches as a means to reduce costs and increase scalability, these factors need to be balanced against the higher likelihood that such staff will find it more difficult to embrace or promote more transformative perspectives on gender roles, given they are immersed in local context.

The community promoters (*promotoras*) coaching support model facilitated communication and helped build trust, but care needs to be taken to not replicate asymmetric power relations. One implementing organization in Yucatan recruited women from project communities to act as community promoters, helping to build trust and engagement with participants. This was especially necessary when coaches were male and/or did not speak Maya Yucateco. However, since *promotoras* were not full-fledged coaches with the training and responsibility this entailed, this model had the potential drawback of replicating asymmetric power relations between lower-paid local staff and external, mestizo, coaches with more technical training, who retained most of the authority. In Trickle Up's experience, working directly with women indigenous language speakers as coaches was more effective in balancing responsibility and connecting with participant needs, understanding their perspectives, and serving as role

models as nonresidents of project communities. As noted previously, there were advantages in terms of capacity, worldview and serving as a role model that came from having coaches who did not reside in project communities. One way to balance the transformative potential of young indigenous coaches with a university education without losing the link with the community that a young woman who still lives there has, is to train future coaches from among savings groups leaders via additional workshops, exchanges with other savings groups, and other activities to strengthen their participation and leadership potential, rather than hiring *promotoras*.

Supporting participants to take on more responsibility within their groups can enable the creation of leadership development opportunities among participants, while also supporting project implementation. The project provided training and coaching related to women's leadership, and promoted women's leadership opportunities within their savings groups. 48% of participants occupied a leadership role in their savings groups, according to ECOSUR's research. While this provided an important experience for women, their lack of prior leadership experience made building savings groups' leadership committees initially quite difficult, and it is therefore important to be intentional in promoting rotation and providing guidance to help build leaders within the group. The project did not provide explicit opportunities for leadership development beyond the groups, which could be achieved in future projects by promoting more systematic leadership development including progressively increasing responsibilities, adding targeted exchanges between groups, and opportunities for participation in other fora for participants who show interest in and inclination to leadership roles.

By working in small teams, coaches were able to diversify their skill sets and improve accountability. However, this model requires further assessment of the cost-effectiveness and impact on coach-participant relationships. Two organizations had staff with stronger technical skills related to livelihood development and food security, while another's staff had more experience dealing with complex social issues such as gender relations and building leadership capacity. It was difficult to find coaches with both skill sets, and there were pros and cons to both. For example, coaches with more experience in agriculture were better able to support participants in establishing nutritional gardens, despite the training provided by the project to all coaches. To address this, one organization formed multidisciplinary pairs or three-person "brigades." Each brigade had coaches with a combination of both technical and social skills, and they also combined women and men and ensured that at least one person in each brigade was a speaker of the relevant Mayan language of the area. This model was developed partly in response to a limitation that not all this NGO's coaches were Mayan speakers, and half of them were men. This model also allowed for more fluid discussions and balanced workload during sexual and reproductive health trainings, where participants were not comfortable discussing topics with male staff. Local authorities were often reticent to engage with female staff, which this model also helped to address – although it is also important to insist on the authority of women staff to represent the project. Given the difficulty of finding coaches with all the desired profile attributes, this is a model worth exploring more in the future. This organization's coaching results were good based on the results in achieving project goals, and positive feedback from participants themselves. This pairing also helped to ensure some continuity when there was staff turnover. There was arguably also more accountability regarding staff performance. However, this model is also potentially less efficient, given the duplication of effort, and this NGO managed costs by providing monthly instead of

biweekly household visits. These tradeoffs, as well as the model's impact on coach-participant relationships, are worthy of further testing.

Digital tools proved useful in supporting coaching and monitoring, and enabling ongoing support particularly during the pandemic. However, groups that had no access to phones or phone service were at a significant disadvantage. Trickle Up had developed a digital application, called *Echb'eenink* ("accompaniment" in Mayan) to support coaches through a series of ten interactive modules that coaches could use with participants and their family members. It also utilized a Salesforce-based monitoring system which was activated on the same tablets provided to all coaches. These tools enhanced the efficiency and quality of program implementation. These tools, together with Trickle Up's web-based training platform, were helpful in facilitating some continued coaching support to communities during the Covid-19 lockdowns. For the majority of communities, however, coaches were not able to visit for long periods of time, and in these cases used phone calls and WhatsApp messages (including videos) to provide both Covid-19 related information, and to provide some continuity in coaching. The latter included supporting participants to adjust their livelihood plans to the changed context, and advising groups on means to continue while respecting social distancing regulations. However, those groups that did not have members with access to phones were largely isolated from support. Supporting participants to identify how they can access phones, or subsidizing the provision of one phone per group when no members have access to phones, should be considered for future projects.

Livelihood Activities and Cultural Context

Developing income-generating, profitable, and sustainable livelihood activities is at the center of the Graduation Approach. To ensure sustainability and transformation, targeted coaching to support inclusion into cash markets (whether participants received seed capital or not), additional workshops or trainings of special interest to participants, and culturally relevant household activities should also be taken into account.

Culturally significant livelihood activities should be considered during the productive activity planning process, but assessments of profitability are essential for driving investments. Trickle Up found it valuable to integrate and acknowledge culturally relevant activities in the productive activity planning process. However, it is also important to evaluate the extent to which these activities have potential to create pathways out of poverty for participants. For example, cultivating corn is an important household activity for supporting food security and holds cultural significance for Mayan households. However, high risks, low selling prices, and dependence on land tenancy mean that it has a low likelihood of enabling sustainable pathways out of poverty. Accordingly, coaches found it useful to have clear profitability targets (20% in first year), along with risk assessments, to guide the livelihood planning process. This process sometimes led participants to reconsider initial plans, as did the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Most participants also took part in some type of culturally significant artisanal work (embroidery, weaving). These activities were viable as productive activities when there was an opportunity to further commercialize them (finding markets for direct sales to consumers and/or building or purchasing better infrastructure for making artisan goods, i.e., looms, machines, extra space in the house).

Balancing a woman-focused with a whole of household approach to livelihood planning is important for supporting women's agency while also strengthening the household's economic base and engaging men. Graduation programs differ in the ways they engage individuals or households as their unit of engagement. In this project, women (and some men with disabilities) were the primary project participants. While coaches were instructed to engage with other household members, particularly husbands, to build trust and buy-in, the livelihood planning process centered around activities that the women participants themselves could manage and "own." This had the advantage of promoting women's economic autonomy, often translating in increased decision-making in the household, which saw a 10% increase from baseline to endline. The extent to which the project should seek to directly support other household activities, beyond those managed by the primary participant, was a topic of debate. For example, staff generally discouraged investment in agricultural activities – beyond the kitchen gardens that the project promoted for enhancing nutritional outcomes – because they tend to be dominated by men. However, taking a holistic view of households' livelihood strategies has the potential to amplify productivity gains, including supporting non market-oriented activities like food production as one part of a livelihood portfolio, for example through training in climate resilient techniques. Such engagement could also create more opportunities to engage men in nonthreatening ways early on in the project, which can support addressing gender norms later in the coaching and training process. However, expanding the livelihood planning mandate and subsequent technical support also requires a greater time commitment from project staff and expanded technical expertise requirements (or referrals to extension services), which all have budgetary implications. Such tradeoffs need to be balanced in future projects, taking into account fiscal constraints.

Integrate participatory methods for identifying and revisiting graduation criteria together with indigenous women. Trickle Up involved groups of participants in identifying graduation criteria, which are used to manage and assess progress throughout the project. However, their experience of being in the project, and changes to external context, meant that their concept of graduation, and hence the project's as well, needed to evolve. For example, while diversification of livelihood activities (through starting a second, or third activity) was initially a project goal, it turned out to be less important to most participants than establishing and expanding the initial productive activity initiated with seed capital, or expanding upon an activity they already had prior to project implementation in cases without seed capital, such as artisan work. During the pandemic, savings groups prioritized the food security and health of members and their children and families, affecting consistency and amounts saved, but creating an important safety net for members. While this was an expected outcome of the project, it had not been clearly articulated as a graduation criterion. Even though 55% of participants in the full graduation arm and 69.2% in the financial inclusion group did not meet the first cycle savings target due to the difficult context, participants reported that having established a savings habit and having support from their savings groups was very significant. Those who did reach the savings goals did so to a degree well above project targets. Establishing indicators together with participants to reflect their sense of well-being, and engaging them to review and adapt them over time as their contexts change, are important for both supporting participants' own reflection and for ensuring that program management remains relevant to their realities.

Entry points for Enhancing Inclusion and Pathways out of Poverty at Scale

In Trickle Up's experience across the globe, there are a number of different entry points for using the logic and lessons from Graduation programs to address gaps in inclusion and to enhance livelihoods by addressing policy or practice gaps in public programs. Social programs in Mexico are still evolving under the current government, however, a number of important opportunities were identified through the project for addressing the needs and aspirations of indigenous women and their households and greater scale.

Coordinated livelihood planning, training and regular mentoring and accompaniment has the potential to significantly increase the productive investment of funds provided by state agencies. Some government programs, particularly those administered by the Ministry of Gender Equality have recently provided grants to women with the objective of helping them start or expand livelihood activities. However, officials from this Ministry have indicated that, while they may have had funds for conditional transfers to women, they have encountered challenges in contracting technical teams to provide coaching and accompaniment to productive activities for terms longer than six months. Additional difficulties include training and recruiting coaches with the right profile in such a timeframe. In past experiences, profitability margins and small business sustainability has been significantly lower than those which Trickle Up project participants have achieved, and the Ministry has found it challenging to support productive activity planning and accompaniment. Providing structured, timebound accompaniment and training to women has been demonstrated to increase women's capacity and inclination to invest funds productively, particularly given contexts in which they expect handouts. This was the case even though Trickle Up's grant amounts were significantly less than those provided by some government programs. Given that state governments in Mexico are already investing capital in such programs, either complementing them with social inputs like coaching through allied programs, or reallocating a portion of the capital to provide coaching support would likely result in more cost-effective and sustainable outcomes.

Integration of holistic livelihoods support into programs aimed at enhancing the position of women or people with disabilities in their households and communities can amplify results. Economic strengthening provides the material foundations for excluded individuals to build autonomy, as well as a relatively non-threatening entry point for addressing more complex issues related to social norms and stigma. Inputs to strengthen livelihoods can build off social program elements, such as self-esteem strengthening and life planning exercises. Savings and loan groups also provide appropriate forums for initiating discussions and actions related to challenging social norms, and can be a first entry point for inclusion of otherwise marginalized women and people with disabilities. Based on Trickle Up's experiences working with governments in other countries, many of the components from Graduation programs often already exist within Ministries or programs aimed at empowering marginalized groups – including livelihoods, financial and social inclusion elements – and by sequencing and coordinating them into a clear graduation pathway, their collective results can be much greater than the sum of their parts.

Promoting women's financial inclusion is important and worthwhile and can provide a useful foundation for engagement, but on its own does not necessarily create transformative change and pathways out of poverty. Qualitative data suggests both extreme poor and general poor

participants benefited from the savings, credit, and social networks available through savings groups, particularly during the pandemic. Young women expressed that prior to savings groups, they had no or minimal access to credit due to age, gender, and poverty status, and only 5.4% had savings in cash at project start. Participants found the savings groups a key space for connecting with other women in their communities, assuming leadership roles, and resolving personal problems. However, participants who also received seed capital and accompanying livelihood planning support and follow-up through coaching, had a significant advantage in starting or expanding livelihood activities. Participants in the financial inclusion arm were more likely to drop out of the savings groups and faced challenges in developing productive activities, particularly when confronted with the economic shocks of the Covid-19 pandemic and hurricanes. Staff expect that providing systematic livelihood planning support, training and mentoring, could have significantly increased the success of the less poor participants, but for the very poorest an injection of capital is important to enable them to jumpstart their livelihoods. Therefore, complementing existing financial inclusion programs with livelihood components has the potential to both enhance the sustainability of outcomes of those programs, while also providing a more viable trajectory out of poverty.

Empowerment of People with Disabilities

People with disabilities face multiple factors of exclusion and vulnerability in southern Mexico. Many are not allowed to study or work, or in extreme cases, interact with people outside their home. The project provided an inclusive space for participation of people with disabilities, who succeeded in developing productive activities and actively participated in savings groups.

Training within savings groups is an essential factor in eliminating existing prejudices and ensuring the inclusion of people with disabilities. The training on disability rights and human development contributed significantly to improving the self-esteem of these participants, but also created space to talk openly about these issues within groups. This helped sensitize group members about challenges, foster openness to working with people with disabilities, and reduce or eliminate existing prejudices, which allowed for positive, respectful interaction.

It is necessary to seek ways to engage government institutions that can provide direct services to people with disabilities and support people to strengthen their participation and pathways out of extreme poverty. The gap in ensuring access to health services for people with disabilities remains wide in Mexico, and coaches needed more training to know how to best support or refer participants to specialized health or rights support services. Despite improved income, decision-making capacity and social participation through the project, participants with disabilities still lacked access to health services, since these are scarce or non-existent in the communities. Accessing specialized medical services requires costly travel beyond towns to medium sized cities. Travel, in addition to the challenges of daily life, often required a support person or family member assistance. Future projects aimed at supporting people with disabilities should deliberately include such support people as full participants as well, so they can also receive the full benefits of the project.

To best support participants with disabilities, technical teams require additional specialized training on disability and disability rights to better facilitate participation, transportation, and communication with people with disabilities and their families. Coaches found it challenging

to convince families to allow members with disabilities to participate in the project, and at times, the participants themselves, given low levels of self-esteem at outset. During project implementation, transportation to meetings for participants with disabilities was sometimes a challenge, as was developing strategies for communicating with and best supporting participants with disabilities during savings group meetings. Coaches, support people and other project participants prioritized including participants with disabilities, but could use more specialized training. Given the positive results and impacts on the lives of participants with disabilities, future projects should consider expanding attention to this population.

Concluding Remarks

In this report we have presented a summary of the main results, lessons and challenges of the project *Empowering Women and Youth through the Graduation Approach and Financial Inclusion* in Mexico, drawing from Trickle Up's internal monitoring and evaluation system, ECOSUR's external cultural relevance evaluation, staff and partner organization experience, and case studies with the participants themselves. This project has provided many lessons and raised important questions upon which we continue to reflect, and that provide beneficial insight both for our own future interventions and those of the Graduation community. In the context of this project, the Graduation Approach proved to be a valuable one for empowering young indigenous women and people with disabilities in their pathways out of poverty. Through this project, participants moved from conditions of extreme poverty and vulnerability, to a state of considerably higher social and economic resilience, with the financial practices, sustainable productive activities, and confidence necessary to face and overcome the initial stages of the global pandemic, the deep economic crisis it brought with it, and six consecutive hurricanes and their devastating effects.

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