

## Graduation in OVC Contexts and Programming: Defining the Terms together in Washington, DC

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On Tuesday, July 12, 2016, the OVC Task Force and AVSI-USA co-sponsored an event entitled “From Vulnerability to Resilience: Promoting Graduation in OVC Programs.” The event was designed to facilitate a dialogue among practitioners and with policy-makers and researchers with the goal of taking stock of how graduation approaches to OVC programs<sup>1</sup> are being used today, what the variations in application of the model look like and what results are emerging.

The organizers laid out to the group of 65 participants representing a number of NGOs and donor agencies a preliminary task of clarifying the **definition of graduation in terms of OVC programs**. As implied in the event title, the dialogue began from a shared framework that the goal of OVC programs is to reach highly vulnerable children and their families and facilitate their transition to greater well-being and stability, with the ideal goal of resilient households providing the conditions for children to thrive.<sup>2</sup> OVC programs have evolved over time and now incorporate economic strengthening of the household has a key element of the effort to build coping and caring capacities of caregivers of children affected by HIV/AIDS.

Central to the structure of the event were two project presentations. These presentations explained how the implementing organizations, AVSI Foundation and FXB, are utilizing graduation concepts and putting them into practice, as well as the results which have emerged.

From the first discussion guided by Jason Wolfe of USAID, it was clear that while a number of central concepts of the graduation approach are clear and shared, there are differences in opinion as well. One axis of debate was around whether graduation is a project-specific concept that involves a clear threshold that a person or household must pass in order to graduate from direct project support, or to a less intense level of support. Alternatively, graduation could be considered as a vision of the ideal end-state of empowerment, self-sufficiency and the capacity to access the services that a person or household needs to maintain a satisfactory level of well-being.

The AVSI SCORE project in Uganda has operationalized the graduation model as a programming tool, intrinsically linked to the project’s case management system and on-going vulnerability assessment. In SCORE, a household graduates when they demonstrate reduced vulnerability across a number of domains and successfully over at least 2 years. Resilience is

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<sup>1</sup> OVC refers to Orphans and Vulnerable Children and has become widely used since the launch of the President’s Emergency Program for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) in 2004 to refer to programming that responds to the needs of children left orphaned due to the AIDS epidemic or otherwise directly affected by the disease (e.g. children living in a household with an HIV+ adult) and those made vulnerable to HIV or its socio-economic effects in areas heavily affected by HIV/AIDS. OVC Programs therefore place emphasis on the well-being of children affected in some way by HIV/AIDS.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of “vulnerability” was not discussed in detail during the event, but the need to continue to define and state clearly the definition and measures in use was raised by USAID and implementers. The concept of “resilience” was defined for the group later in the day by Greg Collins, Director of the Center for Resilience at USAID. For USAID, ‘resilience is the ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth.’

used to define the status of a household who has graduated and maintained the same reduced level of vulnerability for at least another year.

The FXB Village model in Rwanda and elsewhere uses a classic approach to graduation<sup>3</sup> in which the program is designed with an end-state of empowerment and self-sufficiency in mind, and with gradual reduction in project inputs over time. Graduation does not refer to satisfaction of certain conditions, but to the general theory of change underpinning the capacity building approach and gradual weaning of project support.

Despite these differences in how graduation concepts shape program design, there were a number of areas of agreement and consensus. These include:

- The idea that the graduation approach refers to a capacity building or skills transfer approach that operates within a long-term and holistic perspective.
- The necessary premise is that direct project support will not continue forever and that even the most vulnerable households can strengthen their coping strategies through a combination of activities (linkages, social networks, savings, income diversification, etc).
- The ultimate goal of the graduation approach is not an unrealistic vision of a household who is no longer in need of any direct services, but instead one who is stable enough to provide consistently for the basic needs of household members and capable of accessing the services and support mechanisms available and as needed.
- In an OVC context, the graduated or resilient household will have knowledge of HIV status, awareness about prevention, treatment and care, access to services, and support for adherence.

Areas of difference between the projects which opened up useful points of discussion which included the following open questions:

- Are cash or asset transfers essential for a graduation model which targets the most destitute? Are the psychological gains and cost savings of the SCORE model (which did not have a standard asset transfer as the first step) enough to counter the dominant claim that the poorest of the poor will always need a one-time boost of an asset transfer or consumption support in order to get out of the poverty trap and vicious cycle of low capital livelihoods and sub-optimal investment in human development?
- How much can or should a graduation model adapt to the needs of individual households in terms of their asset or risk portfolio? Would such customization, such as that used in the SCORE model, increase costs or improve cost-efficiency and cost-benefit ratios?
- Should graduation always be defined in terms of households as the unit of analysis, or does this risk overlooking individuals and children with particular needs?
- How important is a time-bound project horizon for graduation, or should there be more flexibility in terms of how long a household will need project support before graduation? Are there benefits to the FXB model which operates on a clear 3-year timeline, or stronger justification for the SCORE model which adjusts to the needs and progress of individual households?

The concerns that emerged in the discussions about application of the graduation approach to OVC contexts and in general when looking at the available data, included the following:

- Particularly when we are talking about HIV affected households and severe vulnerabilities, is there a risk that we graduate households too soon, maybe

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<sup>3</sup> A “classic” approach to graduation might be considered one that has been developed by BRAC and promoted by the CGAP/Ford Foundation Graduation Pilots. <http://www.cgap.org/topics/graduation-sustainable-livelihoods>

overlooking risk factors that have not been adequately solved? Can we be sure that our assessment tools are adequately calibrated and sensitive enough to not be skewed entirely by economic factors?

- Are graduation models taking into account the macroeconomic context in which they are operating enough to really be able to claim resiliency?
- Are graduation models currently aware and sensitive enough to risk factors and potential shocks, and strategic enough in building resilience capabilities (absorptive, adaptive and transformative)?
- Are we confident that this holistic approach to OVC care, reduction of HIV transmission risk factors and community strengthening is really the most cost-effective and long-term sustainable approach? Does it beat cash transfers in all or most situations?
- Are the operational definitions of vulnerability clear enough to allow graduation programs to truly set baselines and measure success towards resilience?

Event participants were eager to understand these complex terms and the presentation of two project examples created a very useful platform for discussion and debate. The conversation introduced new concepts to the discussion such as “**HIV sensitive graduation**” which may imply a useful category of graduation programs that have specific targeting procedures, interventions and measurement tools specific to HIV affected contexts and households. Also, the idea of “**responsible graduation**” was mentioned as a reminder that the long-term needs and rights of the poor be carefully considered and accounted for, and that the celebration of shorter term graduation results not lead implementers to overlook deeper sources of vulnerability.<sup>4</sup> “**Backsliding**” was a phenomenon mentioned in the project examples and by USAID funded research on poverty dynamics. The concept highlights the non-linearity of pathways out of poverty and graduation and puts into perspective the vulnerability of those households who might succeed in crossing a threshold but remain unstable and vulnerable to shocks.

The enthusiasm to understand the conceptual framework, practical applications, evidence base and even areas of concern related to graduation was palpable and encouraging. The event also served as an occasion to gather together updates on related work being carried out by different organizations.

An initial list of such efforts would include:

1. PEPFAR OVC Technical Working Group, guidance on targeting for OVC programs (under the guidance of Beverly Nyberg, soon to be handed over to the PEPFAR OVC TWG)
2. 4Children project review of case management and graduation programs (Aften Beeler, CRS)
3. 4Children case management case studies, including one on SCORE (Suzanne Andrews, CRS)
4. ASPIRES research on vulnerability measures and definitions (Whitney Moret)
5. Freedom from Hunger development of Graduation training curriculum for USAID (Jessie Tientcheu and Walt Colt)
6. Trickle Up impact evaluation of graduation pilot in Burkina Faso (Jo Sanson)
7. Trickle Up adaptation of graduation models with particular sub-populations such as refugees and persons with disability (Alexi Taylor-Grossman)

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<sup>4</sup> “Responsible graduation” seems to be a newer concept being developed by the Center for Social Protection, and is being defined as “implementing graduation in such a way that livelihoods are strengthened and supported, while ensuring the right to social protection is not violated.” Source: Center for Social Protection Newsletter No.35, July 2016.

## Annex 1: Draft Outline of Necessary vs Adaptable Conditions for OVC Graduation Programs

### Elements of Graduation Model for OVC context (not purely economic outcomes)

Necessary elements	Adaptable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Economic strengthening services at the core, with sequencing of interventions and focus on savings and financial skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Asset transfer and consumption support for the most destitute</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vulnerability analysis and risk mapping at the household and individual level at the start</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Length of time and flexibility for early graduation</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clearly defined threshold for eligibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clearly defined threshold for graduation at household level</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Case management and some form of case plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Degree of customization of household care plans</li> <li>Frequency of touchpoints and delivery model</li> <li>Delivery model</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gradual reduction in direct support</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gradual increase in self-reliance and linkages with other services</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Heavy emphasis on capacity building, coping mechanisms, information and access to services</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Post-graduation follow-up and continued access to support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Length of follow-up support</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clear end state in mind which involves capacity to seek and access services</li> </ul>	