



BUILDING THE GRADUATION APPROACH INTO SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS

While the past two decades saw spectacular progress in the fight against poverty, more than 10 percent of the world's population – over 750 million people – still lives below the US\$ 1.90 dollar per day threshold (World Bank, 2017). Ending poverty in all its forms everywhere as envisioned in the Agenda 2030 will prove challenging. Not only is reaching the poorest complex, but eradicating poverty sustainably will require integrated, multi-sectoral interventions.[#] The graduation approach, initially pioneered by BRAC in Bangladesh, has often proven effective not only in reaching the poorest, but also in ensuring sustainable pathways out of extreme poverty. This Brief describes how the graduation approach is gathering momentum with governments who are actively looking to ensure social protection systems also build sustainable livelihoods. The brief concludes with ideas for research and experimentation.

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December, 2018

INTRODUCTION

In 1990, more than one-third of the global population lived in extreme poverty¹. By 2015, that share had plunged to 10 percent. Despite dramatic progress, an estimated 750 million people still live below the USD 1.90 per day extreme-poverty threshold (Cruz et al., 2015). Eradicating poverty in all its forms everywhere is at the heart of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Toward that end, SDG #1 calls for the implementation of “nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors” which by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable². In total, five of the 16 SDGs contain targets related to social protection, recognizing its critical role as an accelerator of progress across sectors.

Over the last two decades, social protection has emerged as an increasingly effective set of interventions to reduce poverty and accelerate human development. While individual countries and development agencies’ definitions of social protection vary, the term refers to programs aiming to protect people from poverty due to life cycle risks such as old age, illness, or job loss, and promote human development. Social protection includes non-contributory social assistance, contributory social insurance and active labor market programs such as public work schemes.

Virtually all developing countries have established social assistance schemes in recent years, and several have achieved significant levels of coverage. Brazil’s Bolsa Familia program, for example, covered 14 million households in 2015, or a quarter of the country’s

population. Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Nets Programme covers 8 million people –or 8 percent of the population, and the government is expanding coverage further to include urban areas. It is estimated that the average developing country now has 20 social safety net schemes in place and that the total number of beneficiaries worldwide exceeds 1.9 billion.³

BUILDING COMPREHENSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS

The proliferation of social assistance programs has in large part been driven by evidence of their positive impacts. Cash transfers, in particular, are among the most extensively evaluated social policy interventions. Over 150 impact evaluations for different country contexts demonstrate that cash transfers tend to meet their primary objective of raising household income and consumption, thereby reducing poverty⁴. Very often, they generate important effects beyond increased income: cash transfers have contributed to improvements in health, nutrition, women’s empowerment, and education outcomes.⁵ In some countries, such as Ethiopia and Mexico, cash transfers have had positive effects on farmers’ productivity and investment⁶. There is also some evidence of positive multiplier effects on local economies, although evidence on the macroeconomic impacts of cash transfers is still limited⁷. In some countries, social protection has been at least partly responsible for reductions in inequality.⁸

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[#] The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), officially known as Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a set of 17 "Global Goals" with 169 targets between them adopted by the United Nations General Assembly and articulated in resolution dated 21 October 2015.

[¶] The authors are grateful for careful review from the following: Archibald Edwards, Chief of Social Policy, UNICEF Malawi; Juergen Hohmann, Social Protection Expert, European Commission’s Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO); Nathanael Goldberg, Senior Policy Director, Innovations for Poverty Action; Sandra Grehl, Advisor, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit; Rebecca Holmes, Senior Research Fellow, Overseas Development Institute; Markku Malkamäki, Senior Social Policy Expert, EU Social Protection Systems Programme; Keetie Roelen, Research Fellow in the Centre for Social Protection, Institute of Development Studies; Michael Samson, Director of Research, Economic Policy Research Institute; and Lucy Scott, Research Officer, Overseas Development Institute. Authors also want to thank Katharine McKee and Michelle Kaffenberger, CGAP, and Anne Folan, Anne Folan & Associates, for their input in a previous version of this Brief.

¹ 34.82 percent by headcount in 1990, per <http://data.worldbank.org/topic/poverty>, accessed 22 May 2017

² Sustainable Development Agenda, Target 1.3, from United Nations SDG portal, accessed March 10, 2017.

³ Honorati, Gentilini, and Yemstov (2015)

⁴ World Bank (2011)

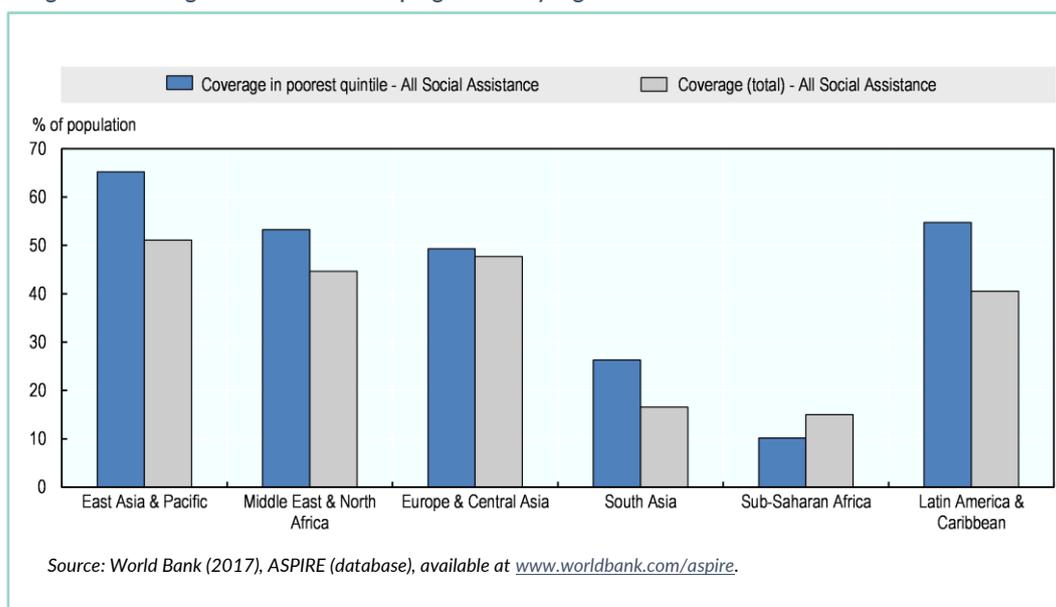
⁵ See Bastagli, F., Hagen-Zanker, J., Harman, L., Sturge, G., Barca, V., Schmidt, T. and Pellerano, L. (2016) Cash transfers: What does the evidence say? A rigorous review of impacts and the role of design and implementation features. London: ODI.

⁶ Hoddinott et al., (2015); De Janvry and Sadoulet (2015)

⁷ Mathers and Slater (2014)

⁸ Holmes, Hagen-Zanker and Vandemoortele (2011)

Figure 1: Coverage of social assistance programmes by region



A number of countries have recognized the need to integrate the diverse social assistance programs they have into comprehensive and coherent social protection systems. In many countries, social protection programs are scattered across multiple ministries or agencies, with offices devoted to particular constituencies, geographies or interventions. It is not uncommon for different institutions to operate without formal coordination mechanisms, resulting in fragmentation. This makes it cumbersome for people to find out which programs they are entitled to and enroll. Systems-building usually begins with the formulation of a social protection policy or strategy, which lays out a vision for integrating different schemes. Currently, more than 77 developing countries have a social protection policy or strategy in place.^{9,10}

The SDGs' call for social protection floors refers to basic social security guarantees that ensure universal access to essential health care and income security at a nationally defined minimum level and progressive achievement of higher levels of protection within comprehensive social security systems.¹¹ Social

protection floors allow very poor and vulnerable people to engage in economic activities while having their household's essential food security, healthcare and education needs met.

Despite the expansion of social assistance programs, overall coverage levels remain low, especially among the poorest. Figure 1 above contrasts social assistance coverage rates by region for the total population and the poorest quintile. In South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, less than one-third of the extreme poor are covered by social assistance¹². In Sub-Saharan Africa, social assistance coverage is lower in the poorest quintile than for the population as a whole, highlighting the challenge of reaching the poorest. The reasons for this are complex and beyond the scope of this Brief, but progress towards SDG1 will require closing this gap.

Choices about how to expand social protection coverage are inherently hard: policy-makers need to manage complex trade-offs in allocating scarce resources. Finance ministries often object to the establishment of long-run entitlements

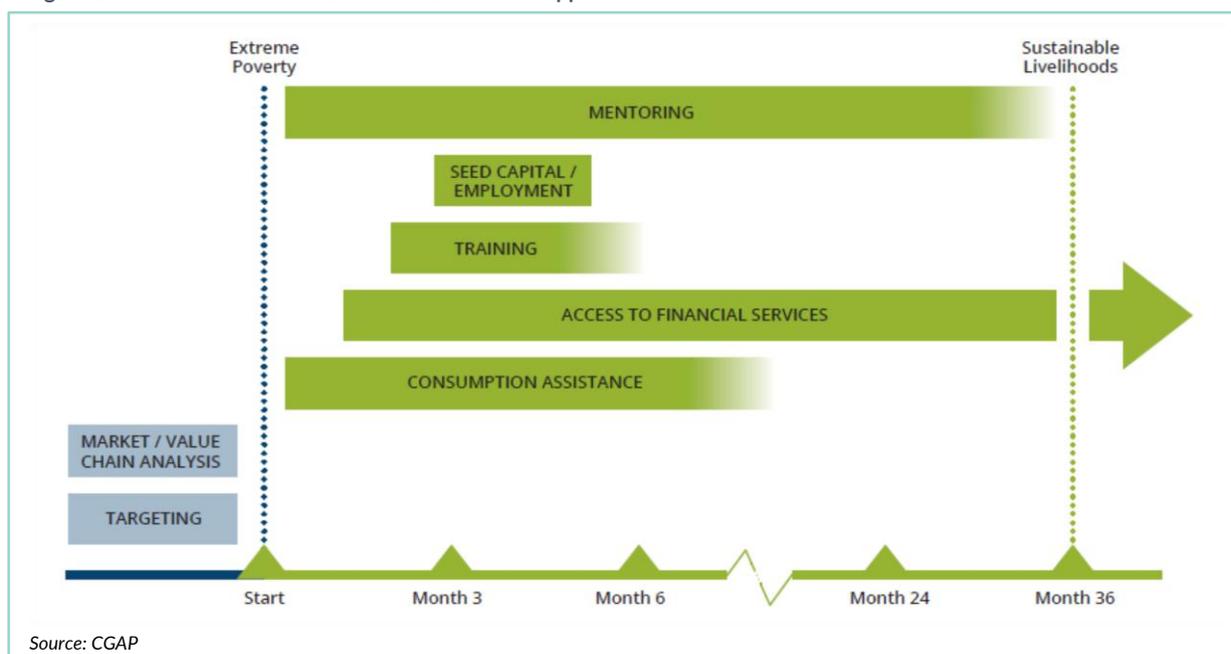
⁹ Honorati, Gentilini, and Yemstov (2015)

¹⁰ Although there is variation across countries, the term social protection system usually refers to a framework whereby the three pillars of social protection—social assistance, social insurance, and labor market programmes—are to some extent integrated or at a minimum coordinated. Integration usually involves creating linkages between different programmes under each pillar of the social protection system, for example, combining different food security transfers within the social assistance pillar. Integration can also happen across pillars. For example, at the administrative level, different social protection schemes can share data and monitoring systems. At the operational level, social protection schemes often share enrollment and delivery systems, and at the policy level, a single institution might be required to coordinate social protection activities across sectors and ministries.

¹¹ ILO, The Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102) & Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202)

¹² Honorati, Gentilini, and Yemstov (2015)

Figure 2: The Graduation into Sustainable Livelihoods Approach



when public finance is limited. One approach, which has gained considerable traction in recent years, is the so-called “graduation” approach. While the notion of “graduation” is somewhat contested in the social protection community, this brief will attempt to explain what the graduation approach is, and how it can meaningfully support social protection system-building with a focus on the poorest. It will argue that social protection practitioners can capitalize on policy-makers’ enthusiasm for “graduation” to design multi-sectoral schemes, which have been demonstrated to sustainably improve the livelihoods of the poorest. It will also discuss the limitations and risks of relying exclusively on graduation-type programming.

As will be elaborated throughout this Brief, the graduation approach—a time-bound, multi-pronged set of interventions targeted at extremely poor households—is emerging as an effective strategy to provide sustainable pathways out of poverty. The graduation approach combines multiple elements (e.g. cash or in-kind transfers, training, access to financial services, asset transfers, mentoring) into a coherent package (see Figure 2). The approach focuses on consumption assistance in the short-term, and longer-term coaching to build sustainable livelihoods. Governments have become increasingly interested in the graduation approach for its impact across different dimensions of inclusion.

WHAT IS GRADUATION AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

Graduation refers specifically to graduation from extreme poverty and into sustainable livelihoods: it indicates meeting a certain context-specific threshold beyond which the probability of slipping back into (extreme) poverty is significantly reduced, and continued upward mobility is likely. It does not imply exit from a social protection system or other social programs. Rather, graduation relies on effective social protection systems combining social assistance, social insurance, and labor market programs to ensure that people don't slip back into poverty. Graduation programs can provide a means to improve livelihood opportunities of some targeted groups within social protection systems.

The graduation approach is a multi-pronged set of interventions aimed at moving extreme-poor or otherwise very vulnerable individuals into economically sustainable livelihoods within a defined period of time, generally 18 to 36 months.¹³ It begins with consumption assistance, either in-kind or as cash. The graduation approach complements cash with integrated tailored services, sometimes referred to as a “big push”.

¹³ This section discusses the classic graduation approach pioneered by BRAC in Bangladesh and implemented at the ten CGAP-Ford Foundation pilot sites between 2006-2014. As discussed in this Brief, numerous projects are underway around the world which adapt one or more of the elements of classic graduation approach whether to contain costs or in response to other circumstances.

Figure 3: Graduation programming is scaling up rapidly



The aim is to build sustainable livelihoods through transfers of productive assets or seed capital, training and coaching. These are complemented with technical skills training in a livelihood for which a participant has shown some aptitude or interest. Finally, regular, intensive one-on-one mentoring throughout the program helps build the participants' confidence and persistence. Qualitative research has demonstrated the importance of coaching and mentoring to increase social capital and break the isolation of social marginalization. Links to public services and information empower participants to demand and access services. Training in business and life planning increase confidence. In addition, programs usually facilitate access to safe and affordable financial services (especially savings), and strengthen cash management skills. All together, these interventions strengthen agency, especially for women¹⁴.

EVOLUTION AND IMPACT

BRAC launched its "Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction/Targeting the Ultra Poor" (CFPR/TUP) program in 2002. Although BRAC had long been a leading provider of microfinance in Bangladesh, their insight was that financial services were more useful for the poor rather than the extreme poor. The CFPR/TUP program, provided so-called "ultra-poor" households with an integrated suite of services beginning with consumption assistance (usually in the form of a small cash transfer). Today, the program has gone on to create lasting positive impacts for more than half a million extremely poor households in Bangladesh alone.¹⁵

Among many other observers, CGAP and the Ford Foundation were impressed by CFPR/TUP's success. They designed a global pilot program including eight countries (Ethiopia, Ghana, Haiti, Honduras, India, Pakistan, Peru, and Yemen) chosen for their geographic and cultural diversity. The pilots, largely in rural settings, ran from 2006-2014 under the leadership of a diverse range of NGOs. Researchers from Innovations for

¹⁴ Roelen and Devereux, not published

¹⁵ The 2016 follow-up to a randomized evaluation by Bandiera et al. (2013) finds positive impacts on employment, income (37 percent increase in earnings), assets (household asset value more than doubled), savings (cash savings increased nearly nine-fold), and consumption (9 percent increase in per-capita nondurable consumption) that are sustained after two years from the end of the intervention (four years after the asset transfer).

Poverty Action and the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab conducted randomized control trials (RCTs) at six pilot sites and documented increased incomes and household consumption at all but one site.

The RCTs demonstrated statistically significant impacts on consumption (7.5 percent increase in food consumption), beneficiaries' productive assets (15 percent increase), and savings (96 percent increase) one year after the program ended (that is, three years after the assets were transferred and training was conducted). Impact assessments also show that beneficiaries spent more time working, went hungry on fewer days, experienced lower levels of stress, and reported improved physical health. New results from one of the CGAP-Ford Foundation sites in India six years after the end of the program revealed even greater impact, with a doubling in per capita consumption compared with the three-year mark.¹⁶

SCALING AND INTEGRATION INTO SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS

Governments around the world are now exploring how to scale the graduation approach to foster economic inclusion of the poorest within the context of social protection systems.¹⁷ Integrating the graduation approach into social protection systems includes a set of three inter-related challenges:

- The identification of individuals who could benefit from “graduation”-type interventions, as opposed to those for whom traditional social assistance is more appropriate;
- Establishing an appropriate portfolio of complementary interventions (e.g. livelihoods training, public works) for different vulnerable populations, on top of basic social assistance;
- Articulating different interventions to ensure that individuals can move between schemes as their needs and circumstances change.

The design of delivery models for the graduation approach at scale remains a work in progress, with

implementers all over the world creating, testing, and refining different ideas. Among government-led efforts, the delivery models that have been implemented to date fall primarily within three broad categories: (1) Adding a livelihood component onto existing social assistance programs; (2) using the graduation approach to link existing social protection and poverty reduction interventions; (3) using the graduation approach to build the foundation of a future social protection system in fragile contexts.

- (1) **Adding productive livelihoods features on to existing social assistance schemes:** Ethiopia, Peru (see box), Paraguay, and Colombia are adding graduation-inspired productive livelihoods components onto existing social assistance programmes.¹⁸
- (2) **Using the graduation approach to integrate existing social protection interventions and services:** Building social protection systems – creating coherent linkages between social assistance, social insurance and labour market interventions to extend appropriate levels of coverage to all stages of the life cycle – is administratively very complex, especially when it involves linking existing schemes that are managed by separate institutions. Several countries are using the graduation approach to build linkages among social assistance programmes for the poorest. Indonesia and the Philippines, for example, are working towards integrating their poverty-targeted programmes so that people can access comprehensive packages of services, which are intended to help them move out of extreme poverty. The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is pursuing this model as well, combining services it already delivers (shelter and food aid, psychological support, productive livelihoods or job training) to displaced persons into comprehensive, graduation-like packages of services¹⁹.
- (3) **Graduation programmes as the seed for future social protection systems in fragile contexts:** There has been much discussion about ways of linking social protection and humanitarian aid in fragile settings. Experiments suggest that graduation might also be a suitable model for

¹⁶ See Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo, Raghavendra Chattopadhyay, and Jeremy Shapiro (2016). “The Long-term Impacts of a “Graduation” Program: Evidence from West Bengal”

¹⁷ Michael Samson, Unpublished interview, October 2017

¹⁸ Even within the extreme-poor segment, there are especially vulnerable people (e.g., the very old, the chronically ill, people with significant responsibilities of care for children or other family members) who may not have the capacity or necessary time to succeed in the graduation approach and will need ongoing social assistance.

¹⁹ Ayoubi et al. (2017)

fragile contexts. These schemes can be implemented in coordination with NGOs to overcome capacity challenges and/ or accessibility issues in fragile settings. If designed with (future) social protection system-building in mind, identification processes, data-bases and monitoring arrangements can become building blocks for larger programmes (Chandry, Ledlie and Penciakova, 2013).

It is important to note that regardless of the delivery model, all governments have tailored their graduation programs to fit local contexts and institutional realities. For example, multiple adaptations exist of the life skills mentoring component, which requires mentors with a mix of technical and interpersonal skills, making it the hardest element to scale. Colombia and Mexico are pursuing a technology solution, developing a core coaching curriculum that can be delivered via electronic tablets. Technology did not replace human coaches but allowed each coach to cover more households. Peru was able to combine mentoring and technical skills training, which are usually delivered separately: its largely rural agricultural development program delivered technical training via the most respected elder farmers in the communities. By virtue of the esteem they commanded, these village elders could form the necessary bonds with participants to deliver mentoring support along with technical agricultural skills. The availability of people who could deliver two elements of the graduation approach significantly improved the cost-effectiveness of the scale-up. Even where governments do not adopt the full graduation approach, they can integrate some elements, for example providing lump sums for investments in addition to cash transfers, or adding financial inclusion to livelihoods programs.

THE LIMITS TO GRADUATION

The graduation approach is being widely discussed and many governments are testing its implementation inspired by strong evidence of its effectiveness. While the approach can build sustainable livelihoods, several factors limit its successful implementation. These include:

- Limited governmental implementation capacity, especially the last mile of service-delivery;
- The high costs of implementation;
- Meso-level constraints -- limited markets, poor infrastructure, scare and low quality social services, especially health care and education;
- Restricted governmental fiscal space.

Carefully designed graduation schemes recognize these constraints and embed risk mitigation mechanisms in their interventions. Alternatives to governmental outreach with participants have included using NGOs, extension workers and volunteers. Cost reduction measures include using technology to replace regular face-to-face meetings with participants and sequencing training for greater absorption of skills.

Meso-level interventions such as building markets using value chain analysis and encouraging private sector involvement, using public works to improve local infrastructure, promoting non-formal education and training, and developing more responsive disaster management are some of the ways that address these constraints.

Table 1. Examples of the three broad types of government graduation government models

<p>(1) Linking social assistance with livelihoods: Peru's Haku Wiñay program</p>	<p>A decade before creating its graduation program known as Haku Wiñay, Peru had started a conditional cash transfer (CCT) scheme for the extreme poor through its Juntos program. But policymakers recognized that the transfers alone were insufficient to address extreme poverty.²⁰ The Peruvian Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion created Haku Wiñay by adding the elements of the graduation approach onto an existing program aimed at enhancing agricultural productivity. Thanks in part to the existing Juntos platform, which delivered cash grants, Haku Wiñay was able to reach 90,000 extreme poor families in primarily remote mountain and jungle regions. Haku Wiñay added elements such as asset transfers, skills training, savings mobilization, and life skills coaching for the poorest beneficiaries of the Juntos scheme.</p>
<p>(2) Integrating poverty-targeted schemes: the Philippines' "convergence" strategy</p>	<p>Philippines' Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) is responsible for implementing several large-scale social protection and poverty reduction programs. DSWD is working towards a "convergence strategy" by linking three of its existing programs and adding a coaching component to create a "graduation" pathway towards full economic and social inclusion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Pantawid Pamilya Pilipino Program which provides conditional cash transfers to 4.2 million poor households with children; • The Kalahi-CIDDS National Community-Driven Development Program (KC-NCDDP), which is projected to serve 2.4 million households by 2019 and aims to foster citizen involvement in local planning and budgeting to ensure greater transparency and accountability of development projects; • The Sustainable Livelihoods Program, which already includes some of the core components of the graduation approach, such as skills training, seed capital, loans, and market linkages for people to start business activities that can eventually generate sustainable livelihoods.
<p>(3) Graduation in fragile settings: MISFA's Targeting the Ultra-Poor Program in Afghanistan</p>	<p>Despite relative progress and improving macroeconomic stability, poverty and insecurity remain a challenge for Afghanistan. Nearly half the people in Afghanistan live under the poverty line and an estimated 45% of the population is unable to purchase sufficient food to guarantee the minimum food intake of 2,100 calories per day. The Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan (MISFA) piloted the graduation approach in 2010 in three districts of Bamyan. Based on the success of the pilot, MISFA replicated the project with CoAR, a national NGO, with some design adjustments. Now, MISFA and several other partner NGOs are starting to implement graduation projects in other parts of Afghanistan. There are very limited poverty reduction programmes and/or social assistance schemes to build on, hence MISFA and its partners implement all programme components: consumption assistance, asset transfers, specialized training in health, livelihoods, financial literacy, and coaching.</p>

²⁰ From 2011 to 2013, Arawiwa, a Peruvian microfinance institution, and the Peru office of the NGO PLAN International partnered in the implementation of one of the 10 CGAP/Ford Foundation Graduation pilot programmes. The pilot delivered the full "classic graduation" model to 800 households in the Cusco region and its success, documented by a randomized control trial led to strong interest from the government in adapting and scaling the graduation approach.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Graduation is not, and was never intended to be, a substitute for effective social protection programmes. As the examples in this brief demonstrate, graduation approaches can strengthen the performance of social protection systems by promoting economic inclusion among the poorest. This is particularly relevant in contexts where fiscal constraints do not allow for universal social assistance schemes to be put in place in the short-term. Progressively building comprehensive social protection systems including social assistance, social insurance, and labour market programmes is critical for more inclusive economies and societies.

Governments and graduation practitioners continue to test innovations related to the graduation and social protection systems. As they continue to experiment, the following questions should become the core of a joint innovation and learning agenda:²¹

- How can governments and other stakeholders most effectively operationalize the model?
- How can graduation approaches be better incorporated into social protection systems to enhance their effectiveness?
- How can linkages between graduation and other social assistance and insurance schemes be strengthened to sustain poverty and vulnerability reduction?
- How can the model best link up with existing government services?
- How can the model be implemented effectively in different country contexts?
- For graduation programs operating at regional or other sub-national scale, what external factors—economic, social, environmental, security—are necessary and sufficient for effective implementation?



²¹ See: http://www.microfinancegateway.org/sites/default/files/announcement/pei_brochure.pdf.

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The Partnership for Economic Inclusion (PEI) is a new global multi-stakeholder initiative hosted by the World Bank's Social Protection and Jobs Global Practice that brings together leaders of the global graduation movement and those working in similar targeted economic inclusion programs. PEI provides policy guidance, innovation testing, tools, technical assistance and capacity building based on emerging good practices and standards. It also works to ensure a strong evidence base on impact, sustainability, and cost-effectiveness.

PEI's mission is to accelerate the innovation and large-scale adoption of effective, scalable household-level economic inclusion programs including the "graduation approach," which provides an intensive, time-bound package of support enabling poor and vulnerable households to build sustainable livelihoods and increase their income, assets, and resilience.

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