

Lifting the Whole Village: Evidence from a Low-Cost Universal Graduation Approach Program

KEY FINDINGS

- **A universal livelihoods model can deliver sustained improvements in economic wellbeing across the wealth distribution.** Providing integrated support to all households in a village led to gains in income, assets, consumption, and resilience among both poorer and relatively better-off households.
- **Lower-cost delivery does not imply smaller impacts.** Despite substantially lower per-household costs than traditional Graduation programs and large one-time cash transfers, the universal model generated gains of similar magnitude across multiple dimensions of wellbeing.
- **Concerns about increased competition under universal delivery were not borne out.** Households across the wealth distribution experienced gains through different pathways rather than crowding into one economic activity.
- **Benefits extended beyond income and assets.** In addition to economic gains, the program improved households' ability to maintain higher consumption during the lean season and was associated with better health, mental wellbeing, and community trust.
- **Context matters for replication.** The program was implemented in rural settings where smallholder agriculture is the main source of livelihoods and markets are limited but functional. Impacts may differ in contexts with different economic structures, land access, or market conditions.



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Abstract

This brief summarizes evidence from a large-scale randomized evaluation of Raising The Village's (RTV) universal livelihoods program in Uganda. The program builds on core elements of the Graduation Approach but delivers them to all households in a village using community-based delivery and smaller productive asset support. Nearly three years after program start, results show improvements in income, wealth, and consumption across the wealth distribution. These gains were achieved at a fraction of the cost of traditional Graduation programs and large one-time cash transfers, suggesting that a universal livelihoods approach can deliver comparable impacts at substantially lower cost in appropriate rural contexts while maintaining a high benefit-cost ratio.

INTRODUCTION

The Case for a Universal Approach



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Global progress in reducing extreme poverty has stalled. More than 830 million people worldwide remain extremely poor¹, increasingly concentrated in rural Sub-Saharan Africa, where livelihoods depend on low-productivity smallholder agriculture. Climate change, economic shocks, and reductions in foreign aid threaten to push millions more into destitution.

Policy responses have largely relied on two approaches: cash transfers and Graduation programs. Both are supported by rigorous evidence. Cash transfers are relatively easy to implement and scale but often generate limited long-term gains once transfers end. Graduation programs, by contrast, typically deliver a package of modest consumption support (either in cash or in-kind), cash asset support, productive inputs, and training designed to help households build sustainable livelihoods and escape poverty traps. While these programs have demonstrated sustained impacts, their high cost and operational complexity make them

difficult to scale. Efforts to adapt Graduation models into lower-cost, “lighter-touch” versions are ongoing, with evidence to date showing mixed results.

Raising The Village’s livelihoods program offers an alternative: a low-cost “universal graduation” model that focuses on poor rural communities and provides support to all households within those villages, rather than selecting only some ultra-poor households as in traditional Graduation programs. The model reduces costs by shifting from intensive, household-level delivery to village-level support and by providing smaller initial transfers per household. However, this design raises key questions: can a lighter-touch universal approach generate impacts large enough to help the poorest households escape poverty, and does delivering the same intervention to all households at the same time increase competition in village economic activities, limiting gains for the poorest households?

¹ Jonas Helth Lønborg, Martha Viveros, R. Andres Castaneda Aguilar, Christoph Lakner, Gabriel Lara Ibarra, Minh Cong Nguyen, and Daniel Gerszon Mahler, “September 2025 Global Poverty Update from the World Bank: New Data and Regional Classifications,” World Bank Data Blog, September 30, 2025, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/september-2025-global-poverty-update-from-the-world-bank--new-da>.



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The Raising The Village (RTV) Model

The Raising The Village (RTV) program is a universal livelihoods intervention that adapts core elements of the Graduation Approach while delivering support at the village level rather than targeting individual households. Implemented over a 24-month period, the program provides integrated support to all households in participating villages, with all adult household members expected to participate.

Core Program Components

RTV addresses multiple dimensions of poverty through five integrated components:

AGRICULTURAL INPUTS & TRAINING

Households receive tailored packages of improved seeds (beans, groundnuts, maize, vegetables, and fruits) and tools, based on local soil and weather conditions, community consultations, and guidance from agricultural technical experts.

THE "PASS-ON" LIVESTOCK MODEL

All households receive livestock management training. A subset of households—approximately 40 percent, prioritizing women and youth headed households—receive small livestock along with starter inputs including vaccines and feed. These households pass on the first female offspring to another household in the village, allowing livestock assets to spread gradually and reducing the need for large upfront transfers.

SAVINGS GROUPS

Village Saving and Loan Associations (VSLAs) are established to support asset purchases, livestock acquisition, and business creation, fostering financial inclusion and collective action.

HEALTH AND SANITATION

Shallow wells provide clean water access, while water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) training covers hygiene practices such as building handwashing stations near latrines and boiling water.

MINDSET CHANGE

Four training sessions focus on self-efficacy, financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and gender equality.

What Makes RTV Different and More Affordable?

RTV differs from traditional Graduation programs in both the size of the initial transfer and how it is delivered. Rather than providing a large one-time asset or cash transfer to each targeted household, RTV provides smaller catalytic inputs to all households and focuses on increasing household production and financial inclusion through village-level systems. Assets accumulate gradually through productivity gains and reinvestment, rather than mainly through large upfront transfers.

RTV's universal, village-based delivery model keeps costs low while maintaining regular engagement. As a universal program, RTV also eliminates the need for complex household targeting, avoiding the administrative costs of eligibility assessments while reducing exclusion errors, stigma, and social tensions that often accompany selective assistance in settings where households frequently move into and out of poverty.

Training takes place collectively at the village level and is complemented by household coaching visits and community mentorship. Staff conduct a limited number of household coaching visits (up to 4 visits) over the program period to reinforce key practices, with ongoing support provided through volunteer village committees for agriculture, livestock, and sanitation. Organizing delivery at the community level allows a small number of staff to support multiple villages while keeping follow-up consistent.

Together, these choices translate directly into lower costs. For example, the six Graduation programs evaluated in Banerjee et al., (2015) cost, on average, USD 3,612 per household (2014 USD Purchasing Power Parity (PPP))², driven by large asset transfers, intensive individualized coaching, and targeting. In contrast, RTV costs approximately USD 288 per household (2014 USD PPP), with direct asset transfers of about USD 111 per household (2014 USD PPP), while maintaining a comprehensive package of support.³

PER-HOUSEHOLD COST COMPOSITION:

RTV vs. Targeting the Ultra Poor (TUP) Benchmark – Banerjee et al. (2015)

COST COMPONENT	RTV PROGRAM	GRADUATION PROGRAMS <i>Average, Targeting the Ultra Poor Benchmark – Banerjee et al. 2015</i>
ASSET/INPUT TRANSFER	111 Includes household and village asset transfers, seeds, livestock, and food stipends	1,064 Includes asset cost and food stipends
PERSONNEL COSTS	50 Includes staff salaries, training, travel, and materials	2,026 Includes salaries of implementing organization staff, materials, training, travel costs and other supervision expense e.g. beneficiary selection
INDIRECT COSTS	118 Includes local and international support, office costs, and fundraising	450 Includes local and international overhead costs
START-UP COSTS	9 Includes village identification, needs assessments and data collection	73 Not described
TOTAL COST PER HOUSEHOLD	288	3,612

NOTES: All costs are reported per household in 2014 USD PPP (Purchasing Power Parity).

² More recent Graduation programs have been reported to cost significantly lower—with some government-led programs in the Sahel costing between USD 430–584 per participant (Arévalo-Sánchez et al., 2024). The comparison presented here is made with the original six Graduation pilots, as their published cost data and standardized methodology allow for a more rigorous and consistent basis for comparison.

³ RTV costs were deflated to 2014 values using the World Bank annual headline consumer price inflation and then converted to 2014 PPP using the World Bank annual PPP conversion factor for Uganda (Ha et al., 2023). The RTV program costs USD 339 in 2023 PPP per household, with direct asset transfers of USD 130.86 2023 PPP per household.

Evidence of Impact

FINDINGS FROM A LARGE-SCALE RANDOMIZED EVALUATION

Researchers, in partnership with IPA, conducted a randomized evaluation across 335 villages in Uganda. Villages were combined into 114 groups, with about three villages per group. Half of the groups were randomly assigned to receive the RTV program, and half were in a comparison group that did not receive the program. The study followed approximately 3,600 households over a three-year period. Outcomes reported here come from an in-person survey conducted about one year after the program ended and a phone survey carried out during the lean season approximately 20 months after the program ended.

The randomized design provides rigorous evidence on the effects of the RTV program. While context-specific, the study setting reflects key features common across rural Sub-Saharan Africa, making the findings informative for similar contexts.

Over this period, households in RTV villages changed how they earned income, built assets, and managed risk. Rather than relying primarily on subsistence farming supplemented by low-paid casual labor, households increasingly invested in their own farms, livestock, and small businesses, leading to improvements in income, wealth, consumption, and resilience across the wealth distribution.

Income and livelihoods expanded through multiple channels. On average, monthly household income in participating households increased by 26 percent (USD 40, 2023 PPP). This income growth was driven by multiple channels, with farm income providing about half (approximately USD 20, 2023 PPP) of the total gain. This increase in farm income stemmed from both higher yields and greater diversification in crops. Non-farm enterprise profits contributed approximately one-third of the income gain, driven by an increase in the number of enterprises rather than higher per-firm profitability.

These income gains led to increased ownership of long-term productive assets, higher savings, and greater overall wealth. Participating households experienced a 31 percent increase in total non-land wealth (USD 389, 2023 PPP), with nearly half of this growth driven by expanded livestock holdings, including both program-transferred and newly acquired animals. Beyond livestock, households also invested in other longer-term assets—such as furniture, farm equipment, and home improvements—suggesting that higher incomes were not only used for immediate consumption but also for productive and stability-enhancing investments. Savings increased by 30 percent, largely through greater participation in village savings groups that were larger, more active, and better capitalized than those in comparison villages. Taken together, the rise in assets and savings indicates that income gains supported durable wealth accumulation rather than short-term gains alone.



Photo Credits: Raising The Village



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Consumption improved, particularly food security.

Monthly household consumption increased by 10 percent (USD 59 in 2023 PPP), primarily driven by greater consumption of own-produced food and a more diverse diet across additional food groups. Importantly, these gains were even more pronounced during the lean season, with consumption rising by 38.8 percent, highlighting households' improved ability to smooth consumption throughout the year. As a result, households were significantly less likely to reduce meal sizes or skip meals during periods of hardship, demonstrating a strengthened capacity to meet basic nutritional needs consistently.

The program also strengthened resilience during the lean season.

In non-participating villages, consumption poverty nearly doubled from 35 percent post-harvest to 65 percent during the lean season. In contrast, RTV-participating villages saw a smaller increase, reaching only 39 percent consumption poverty during the lean season, indicating that the program helped households smooth consumption and remain more resilient during the lean season.

Underlying these changes was a shift in how households used their labor.

Households reduced reliance on casual wage work and reallocated time toward their own farms, livestock, and businesses. On average, work increased by 3.3 days per month, with a marked shift away from casual labor toward household enterprises.

All households benefited, and concerns about village-wide competition did not materialize.

Instead of crowding into one activity, households specialized based on their starting conditions. Poorer households were more likely to start new activities—especially livestock rearing and small non-farm businesses—often supported by savings groups and pass-on assets, while better-resourced households mainly expanded and strengthened the activities they were already engaged in. This diversification meant households could improve their livelihoods through different pathways rather than competing for the same opportunities. Welfare gains—measured by income, wealth, and consumption—were seen across all groups, including the poorest households and those with lower levels of education. The program was also effective across different types of villages, regardless of population size, market access, or initial levels of inequality.

Finally, the benefits extended well beyond economic outcomes.

Households experienced clear improvements in physical health, with adults better able to carry out daily activities and work. Children also benefited: younger children were less likely to suffer from common illnesses, and school-aged children—especially girls—missed fewer days of school due to sickness. These health improvements were larger than those observed in other Graduation programs, likely reflecting the program's stronger focus on health and hygiene alongside economic support. Improvements in physical health were accompanied by gains in mental wellbeing. Households reported lower stress and fewer symptoms of depression. At the community level, participating villages showed higher levels of trust, cooperation, and engagement in local decision-making, suggesting reduced social frictions under a universal approach.

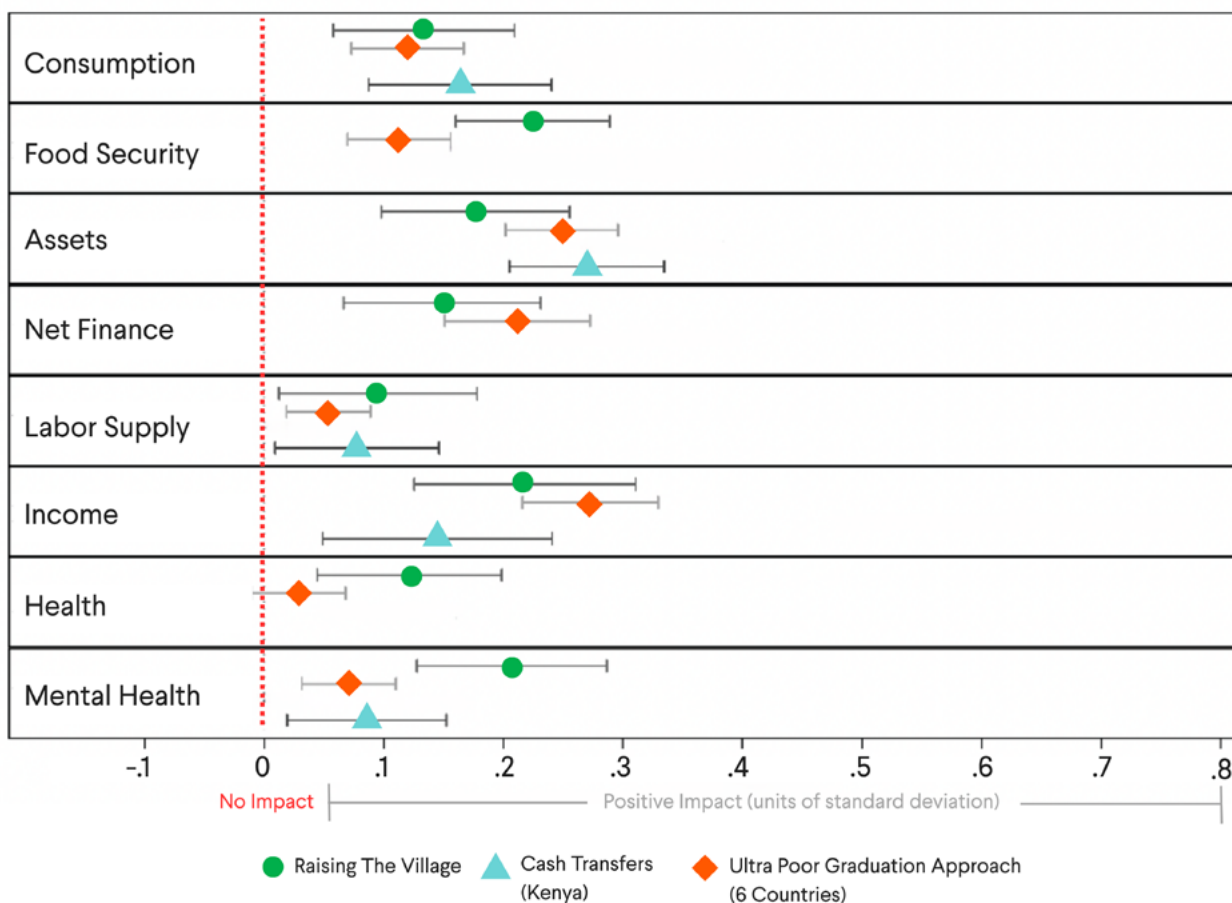
COMPARISON TO IMPACTS DOCUMENTED IN CASH TRANSFER AND TRADITIONAL GRADUATION PROGRAMS

The magnitude of impacts observed under the RTV program is comparable to those documented in evaluations of both large one-time cash transfers and traditional Graduation programs. Across core outcomes—including income, consumption, and asset accumulation—the estimated effect sizes fall within the range reported in multi-country evaluations of targeted Graduation interventions, such as those summarized in Banerjee et al. (2015), and are broadly aligned with impacts observed in large-scale cash transfer programs.

This comparison underscores an important implication for policy and scale: similar economic and livelihood gains can be achieved through a universal, village-level approach at a substantially lower cost per household. In contrast to traditional targeted Graduation programs that focus on a subset of ultra-poor households, the RTV model delivers benefits across the full distribution of households within poor rural villages, expanding coverage without diminishing impact.

Graph 1:

COMPARISON TO AVERAGE IMPACTS DOCUMENTED IN OTHER PROGRAMS



Source: Mahreen Mahmud and Emma Riley, “We’re All in This Together: Experimental Evidence from a Universal Livelihoods Program.” <https://bit.ly/4cQ7Ala>

Cost-Effectiveness: High Returns at Low Cost

Given its low per-household cost, the RTV program delivers high economic returns relative to investment. Combining program costs with measured gains in consumption, and assets, the evaluation estimates a return of 271 percent within three years.

This implies that for every USD 1 invested, households gained approximately USD 2.71 in economic benefits over the evaluation period. These estimates are conservative. They account only for benefits realized within the first three years, assume zero benefits in the first year and exclude potential longer-term gains, as well as improvements in health, mental wellbeing, and social cohesion that were observed but not monetized.

The RTV program is shown to be an exceptionally cost-effective intervention, especially when benchmarked against comparable initiatives over similar time horizons. The program's three-year benefit–cost ratio is 271 percent. This ratio is higher than those found in other studies: it is between four and eleven times larger than the benefit–cost ratios of comparison programs, including the Graduation Approach (which averaged 23 percent to 65 percent) and large one-time cash transfers (65 percent).

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Implications for Policy and Scale

The findings suggest that a universal, village-level livelihoods model can generate comparable economic gains at substantially lower cost than traditional Graduation programs or large one-time cash transfers. By combining modest initial transfers with community-based delivery, the RTV program challenges the assumption that effective livelihoods interventions must rely on high per-household spending and strict targeting.

At the same time, the results should be interpreted in light of the implementation context. The program was delivered in rural communities, where livelihoods are largely based on smallholder agriculture, with households typically cultivating less than one acre of land and facing limited but functional market access. In these settings, agriculture plays a central role in both subsistence and income generation, which likely shaped how households used program support to invest in productive activities. This suggests that while the model shows strong potential for scale in similar poor rural contexts—particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa—adaptation may be needed in areas with different livelihood structures, land access, or market conditions.

For policymakers facing tight budget constraints and seeking solutions that are both effective and scalable to address poverty, the evidence suggests that universal, village-level approaches warrant serious consideration.

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