The Ultra-Poor Graduation Approach

In 2002, BRAC pioneered the Graduation approach in Bangladesh through the Ultra-Poor Graduation program (UPG) (formerly known as Targeting the Ultra-Poor (TUP)). The approach, which includes a comprehensive, time-bound, and sequenced set of interventions, was designed to meet the multidimensional needs of extreme poor households that were not reached by traditional development programs. BRAC’s Graduation approach aims to build the resilience of these households through interventions in four foundational pillars: social protection, livelihoods promotion, financial inclusion, and social empowerment.

The success of the UPG program was proven by a 10-year randomized controlled trial (RCT) conducted by the London School of Economics and partner institutions. The evaluation found that 93 percent of participants experienced a significant increase in income, consumption, savings, and ownership of productive assets. Furthermore, these gains persisted 10 years after joining the program.¹ The initial success of the UPG program led to the launch of a global initiative by the Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP) and the Ford Foundation to test the Graduation approach outside of Bangladesh through pilots in eight countries. RCT results from the CGAP-Ford Foundation pilots showed significant outcomes in asset value, consumption, and savings. This proved that the Graduation approach can achieve positive impacts for the world’s poorest people in diverse global contexts.

Through BRAC’s Graduation program in Bangladesh and pilots in Afghanistan, Pakistan, South Sudan, and Uganda, over 2 million households were placed on an upward trajectory out of extreme poverty. Globally, stakeholders including government entities, multilateral institutions, and NGOs continue to adopt and scale the Graduation approach. Today, Graduation has been implemented in over 40 countries around the world, impacting over 3.1 million households, or 14 million people. It is projected that with sufficient funding, over four times as many households could be reached by 2030.²

The Ultra-Poor Graduation Initiative

Increasing global interest in Graduation led to a high demand for BRAC’s technical assistance to adapt the approach to diverse contexts. Between 2007-2016, BRAC leveraged its operational knowledge in Bangladesh to provide informal technical assistance to partners implementing the CGAP-Ford Foundation Graduation pilots and more formalized support on government-led pilots in Kenya and the Philippines. BRAC’s technical assistance includes five areas of work - assessment, design, planning, implementation oversight, and learning and evaluation.

In 2016, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed by BRAC International, BRAC UK, and BRAC USA to establish the Ultra-Poor Graduation Initiative (UPGI) housed at BRAC USA. Its purpose is to expand the reach and impact of the Graduation approach by building the capacity of other stakeholders to implement the approach through technical assistance and advocating for broader adoption of Graduation.

Since its founding, UPGI has delivered technical assistance to 10 governments and a large INGO, in partnership with multilateral institutions such as the Asian Development Bank, IFAD, UNHCR, UNICEF, and the World Bank. UPGI’s technical assistance is designed to meet different needs, such as assessing the suitability of Graduation for a new context, designing and adapting interventions, overseeing implementation, and conducting evaluations to strengthen Graduation programs globally.

Enabling Factors for Success

UPGI’s global success is largely dependent on several enabling factors:

• The robust body of evidence backing Graduation, including the longitudinal study of the UPG programme in Bangladesh and evaluation of the CGAP-Ford Foundation pilots contributed to willingness by global stakeholders to adopt the approach. This led to the increased demand for technical assistance and advocacy support from BRAC UPGI.

• BRAC UPGI has benefited from the extensive implementation experience of the UPG programme in Bangladesh through rich cross-learning and coordination in order to develop an adaptation methodology to support Graduation programs for different contexts and stakeholders. The methodology is rooted in the four pillars of Graduation, social protection, livelihoods promotion, financial inclusion, and social empowerment, and allows contextualization of Graduation interventions while ensuring quality and rigor of the approach.

• BRAC UPGI’s technical assistance process, which includes five areas of work, is flexible and tailored to the country context and stakeholder needs. This enables UPGI to design Graduation interventions that leverage local expertise and resources and build sustainable programs targeted towards extreme poor households. BRAC UPGI’s needs-based methodology has been instrumental to its success in partnering with governments and multilateral institutions.

• Many governments have already dedicated resources to serving the poorest communities. Existing social protection instruments such as cash transfers, incorporate elements of Graduation, but they often fall short of reaching the most vulnerable communities and achieving transformational impact. BRAC UPGI provides a framework for convergence, coordination, and enhancement of existing government initiatives to make them more transformative, cost-effective, and better able to reach those living in extreme poverty.

• BRAC UPGI is dedicated to sustained partner engagement and capacity building to ensure local partners are prepared to deliver Graduation at a high quality. Where possible, UPGI prioritizes building local staff presence to strengthen its ability to troubleshoot challenges as they arise and maximize program impact.

Moving Forward with the Audacious Project

With the success of its technical assistance and advocacy work, BRAC UPGI is now strategically placed to shift its focus toward partnering with agents of scale to maximize impact for extreme poor populations. In 2020, BRAC UPGI won a multi-year grant from the Audacious Project, organized by TED, to partner with governments and scale Graduation programming to lift 21 million people out of extreme poverty by 2026. This will be accomplished through a combination of technical assistance to governments, capacity-building of local partners, advocacy with government stakeholders and local voices, and testing innovations in Graduation.

To reach this goal, BRAC UPGI aims to shape dialogue to influence action. At the global level, BRAC UPGI will:

• Educate and influence diverse global stakeholders to increase awareness and funding for Graduation programs.
• Create awareness and influence through targeted and selective media.
• Support global learning on Graduation by generating evidence on effective government implementation of the approach and convening government stakeholders from different countries to observe effective programming.

BRAC UPGI is also working on the ground in key countries to support government adoption and scaling of Graduation. At the country level, BRAC UPGI will:

• Grow technical expertise to develop highly adapted and contextualized approaches to address the unique vulnerabilities of the extreme poor in different countries and regions.
• Collaborate with government partners to work toward nationwide systems change informed by local knowledge and technical expertise.
• Strengthen the capacity of governments and partners to design and deliver holistic programming that builds on global learning and best practices to effectively address the needs of the poorest and restore their agency to determine their futures.

Through these efforts, BRAC UPGI aims to deliver systems change on how extreme poverty is addressed globally and move the global community closer to achieving SDG 1, to end poverty in all its forms.