STATE OF PRACTICE

Savings Groups and the Dynamics of Inclusion—Main Findings

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COVER IMAGE: SEED EFFECT


THE BOMA PROJECT

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SEED EFFECT

1 Introduction

Savings Groups (SGs) provide access to basic financial services in underserved markets, and contribute to both financial inclusion and broader development objectives. The community-managed model requires minimal infrastructure and no long-term investment; and reaches poorer and more vulnerable populations than formal financial service providers (FSPs).

Over the past 25 years, development organizations have mobilized about 700,000 SGs in marginalized communities across 75 countries (VSL Associates 2016) and a recent systematic review of the evidence concludes that SGs have a positive impact on household savings, access to credit, asset accumulation, consumption, business investment and social capital (Gash 2017).

Recent evidence, however, suggests mixed results of SG programs in targeting and reaching more vulnerable populations,[1] and no attempt has been made to date to summarize the global outreach of SGs with respect to specific populations or target groups. Building on an extensive desk review, as well as key informant interviews with diverse sector stakeholders, this state of practice report provides a comprehensive overview of SGs and the dynamics of inclusion, and describes effective and promising strategies, approaches and tools to improve the outreach and outcomes of SGs among marginalized populations. The report identifies lessons and good practices – including smart targeting and outreach strategies, and straightforward adaptations to project design and SG methodology – that enable SG interventions to better reach and serve the world's most vulnerable people, and provide them with the knowledge and skills they need to live the lives they have reason to value (Sen 1999).[2]

This state of practice report provides a comprehensive overview of the inclusion of vulnerable populations in SGs. The report examines both the ***state*** of inclusion – the extent to which specific populations participate in and benefit from SGs – as well as the ***process*** of inclusion – the set of policies, approaches and tools to effectively reach and serve these populations.

The main findings of the report are summarized below.

[1] Gash and Odell's (2013) review of seven RCTs finds that 34-81% of SG participants are below the US$1.25/day poverty line, and that "SG members tend to be relatively wealthier and more socially and financially active than non-members."
[2] For informative discussions of the capability approach to development, see Crocker (2008) and Robeyns (2016).

2 Main Findings

2.1 Poverty

Many studies report that SGs have a positive effect on savings and access to credit, as well as the quantity and value of household assets (Gash 2017). And some studies also suggest that SGs can reduce poverty and increase income, as members use loans or dividends to invest in income-generating activities (Gash 2013, 2017).

Reaching very poor communities and households is an explicit objective of most SG initiatives. Questions remain, however, regarding the poverty inclusion of SGs and how interventions can be structured for improved poverty outreach.

Barriers to participation include self-exclusion, and explicit or implicit exclusion by target communities and development organizations. Ultra-poor households may self-exclude because they lack money to save – or believe they do – and do not see themselves as similar enough to those who are already members. Savings Group interventions may, explicitly or implicitly, dismiss poorer community members by targeting more economically active households, failing to identify poorer community members, failing to encourage the poorest to attend community information meetings, or applying inappropriate messaging, community meeting spaces and meeting times. Program design can reduce poverty outreach by moving field staff to new project areas prematurely rather than investing more time and resources in existing areas to deepen poverty outreach.

Nevertheless, ample experience demonstrates that improved poverty outreach can be achieved through appropriate targeting strategies, pro-poor project designs, and more flexible group policies. Poverty inclusion may be achieved through a combination of ***geographic targeting, inclusive saturation,*** time, patience, and a tolerance for inclusion of non-poor members. In contrast, the ***rapid*** or ***exclusive*** inclusion of the ultra-poor requires specific targeting strategies, customized messaging and flexible group policies. The barriers to participation by the ultra-poor may also be reduced – and the impact augmented – through conditional or unconditional cash or asset transfers, mentoring and life skills trainings.

KEY LESSONS

1. **Savings Groups reach the poor and ultra-poor to various extents. The appropriateness and effectiveness of targeting strategies depends on project objectives and resources;**
2. **Inclusive saturation, in which areas of high financial exclusion are saturated with SGs, can reach the poorest members of communities over time;**
3. **Given proper training, appropriate fee structures and time, community-based trainers can reach the poorest just as well as paid project staff;**
4. **Consumption support and supplemental skills trainings provide incentives and means for ultra-poor households to participate in and benefit from SGs; and**
5. **Recent experience indicates that flexible attendance, savings, and lending policies can encourage SG participation by ultra-poor members.**

MERCY CORPS

2.2 Age

Globally, there are approximately 1.8 billion young people (adolescents and youth) between the ages of 15 and 24, and 90 percent live in less developed countries (Das Gupta et al. 2014). In most developing countries, young people represent more than 30 percent of the working-age population; and many of these countries face challenges in absorbing young men and women into the education system and eventually the labor market.

Young people are disproportionately excluded from financial markets. In 2017, 72 percent of adults worldwide had an account at a financial institution, compared to only 56 percent of young people. In Sub-Saharan Africa, youth financial exclusion is more severe: only 37 percent of young people have an account at a financial institution (Global Findex 2018).

Savings Groups are "an effective, scalable way to give young people access to the financial services and skills they need to support themselves" (Plan International, Barclays, and CARE 2016), including planning, saving, decision making, and other life skills. Despite the large, unmet potential demand for financial services by youth, the outreach of SGs to young men and women remains limited.

The main barriers to the effective participation of youth in SGs are low and irregular income, migration and various psychological biases – including ***availability bias, status quo bias,*** and ***hyperbolic discounting.*** Reaching youth starts with leveraging their peer networks, and consulting with their parents and other adults in positions of authority in project coverage areas. Peer-to-peer outreach is most effective because youth are more likely to listen to each other and adopt practices that they observe among their peers. To secure permission from caregivers and build support for Youth Savings Groups (YSG), parents and community leaders should be consulted and sensitized. Mobilizing youth takes longer; youth-focused initiatives require patience and should incorporate longer periods for group mobilization in their workplans.

KEY LESSONS

1. **Engaging youth leaders in project design and outreach can increase project ownership by youth and improve the mobilization of young men and women;**
2. **The effective mobilization and retention of youth requires engagement of family, caregivers, and social networks;**
3. **Youth Savings Groups (YSG) should be sensitive to the schedules of young men and women, meeting at times and places convenient to them;**
4. **More homogenous YSGs are composed of members that generally share similar goals and are more likely to have a common vision, compared to more heterogeneous groups;**
5. **There are mentoring advantages to combining adults and youths in the same groups, or in pairing adults with YSGs; and**
6. **The promotion of YSGs outside schools is more inclusive of out-of-school youth and may improve group sustainability, but in-school YSGs can better integrate the associated skills building into the school curricula.**

2.3 People with disabilities

Disability is “an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions,” including problems in body function or structure, difficulties executing tasks or actions, and problems participating in life situations (World Health Organization n.d.). Worldwide, over one billion people – about 15 percent of the global population – live with a disability (World Health Organization 2011). Eighty percent live in developing countries, where disability is correlated with lower levels of education, health, and income. People with disabilities are more likely than others to suffer from poverty, and to lack opportunities to generate income: globally, 82 percent of people with disabilities live on less than $1/day; and in low- and middle-income countries, 80-90 percent of people with disabilities are unemployed.

Given the greater incidence of poverty and unemployment among people with disabilities, economic strengthening programs must employ deliberate efforts to include them and meet their unique needs – studies in Kenya and Rwanda indicate that people with disabilities are significantly underrepresented in SGs (Seifert 2016).

Stigmatization of people with disabilities is the principal barrier to their participation in SGs, and highly correlated with another factor of exclusion – inaccessibility. Overcoming attitudinal barriers among senior management and field staff of development actors is a significant challenge to the inclusion of people with disabilities in international development – including SGs. But once the principle of disability inclusion is identified by implementing organizations as a strategic priority, reasonable accommodations to foster inclusion generally require only 7% of program budgets, and hiring staff with disabilities adds only another 3% to administrative costs for most programs (Heinicke-Motsch and Sygall 2003).

The most effective approaches for disability inclusion in SGs include: 1) community sensitization and intentional mobilization of people with disabilities; 2) partnerships with local organizations that already work with people with disabilities; 3) disability-sensitive questionnaires to identify people with disabilities, without stigmatizing them; 4) the provision of reasonable accommodations; and 5) mainstreaming of disability-inclusive SGs by bringing people with disabilities into SGs first, and working to ensure that they remain the majority members, once they have invited others to join.

HUMANITY INCLUSION

KEY LESSONS

1. **Savings Groups can empower people with disabilities, and reduce the suffering caused by stigmatization;**
2. **Savings Groups are appropriate economic strengthening interventions for people with disabilities, increasing their income, saving, consumption, wellbeing, and happiness;**
3. **Few SG programs systematically target people with disabilities, leading to their underrepresentation in SGs;**
4. **For disability inclusiveness, SG programs should leverage local organizations of people with disabilities, participatory methods, and sensitive questionnaires, to identify and reach people with disabilities;**
5. **No concrete conclusions can be drawn about the advantages of forming mixed or disability-only SGs, but disability-inclusive development organizations recommend including people with disabilities in mainstream SGs; and**
6. **To empower people with disabilities, development organizations can form groups led by people with disabilities, and later advise groups on whether to extend membership to trusted community members without disabilities.**

2.4 Women's financial inclusion and gendered outcomes

From 2011 to 2017, the percentage of women in developing economies with an account at a financial institution increased from 37 to 59 percent (Global Findex 2018). Despite the almost universal gains in women's financial inclusion, a persistent gender gap remains: over the same period, the difference in account ownership between men and women increased from 7 to 9 percent. Furthermore, the financial inclusion gender gap extends beyond account ownership: even among those who are financially included, women's accounts are more likely to be dormant (Microfinance Gateway 2016).

Women are disproportionately excluded from financial markets for several reasons. First, legal, regulatory, and cultural barriers forcibly exclude women in many countries. In a study of 173 economies, the World Bank found that 90 "had at least one law impeding women's economic opportunities" (cited in Lewis, Villasenor, and West 2016). In some settings, lack of female points of contact in banks and other financial service providers prevent women from accessing formal services. Poverty and physical inaccessibility present other challenges: gender gaps in income preclude many women from maintaining minimum required balances, and mobility constraints prevent many rural women from traveling great distances to bank branches or cash points. And finally, women's financial inclusion is further thwarted by gender gaps in financial literacy, as well as basic literacy and numeracy (Lewis, Villasenor, and West 2016; Microfinance Gateway 2016).

Given these limitations in access to formal financial services, SGs are among the predominant financial service providers available to women, particularly the rural poor. Globally, about 80 percent of SG members are women, and a systematic review of the evidence (Gash 2017) concludes that SGs – in combination with other development inputs – can contribute to women's economic empowerment.

Both men and women face barriers to joining and benefiting from SGs. Men's principal barrier is self-exclusion, while women – who tend to be early adopters of SGs – may experience unintended consequences of participation including time poverty, stress related to household financial management, and lack of male partner or family support. Not only can the lack of financial or moral support from male partners prevent women from joining, withdrawal of male support can force women to drop out of the groups they have joined (Rodway, Nussey, and Harris 2016).

Actively promoting SGs with men can change men's attitudes towards participation by their female partners and dependents. In fact, with proper guidance, bringing men into SGs, whether as members or as positive contributors to their partners' membership, can improve gendered and household-level outcomes. Regardless of gender outreach targets, development organizations should sensitize both men and women in target communities to SGs, and the mechanisms and benefits of household participation.

In particular, properly designed gender dialogues not only improve men's attitudes towards their female partner's participation but can prompt them to change their behavior at home, including reducing their propensity for violence and prompting them to provide more support for child care and other domestic duties. Such behavioral changes can improve the experience and outcomes, for both men and women, of household participation.

KEY LESSONS

1. **While women are generally early adopters of SGs, male participation increases over time through demonstration effects;**
2. **While SG initiatives may initially target women to address gender gaps in financial inclusion, groups should be permitted to decide whether and when to extend membership to men;**
3. **Savings Groups combined with gender dialogue discussions that involve male partners, are more effective at empowering women members, compared to group membership alone;**
4. **Benefits of gender dialogue include improvements in men's attitudes toward their female partners' SG membership, reductions in IPV, and participation in and provision of more domestic support; and**
5. **Much broader and more rigorous research is required to generalize the conditions under which SGs contribute to women's empowerment, including economic, social, political and reproductive spheres.**

WORLD VISION

2.5 People living with or affected by HIV

HIV and other illnesses cause disproportionately severe financial burdens for poor families. A study of the financial burden of HIV care in Indonesia demonstrates that people living with HIV (PLHIV) direct 68-96 percent of their monthly expenditures toward HIV care, "indicating a substantial financial burden for many ART patients" (Riyarto et al. 2010).

To mitigate this effect, household economic strengthening (HES) has become a core component of programming related to health and orphans and vulnerable children (OVC). Savings Groups have emerged as one option to provide people living with or affected by HIV with improved access to financial services and social support – the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) has adopted SG promotion among its core economic strengthening interventions (Birx 2014).

In a survey of the experiences of people living with or affected by HIV in SGs in Africa, Vanmeenen (2010) argues that SGs can increase the food security and social capital in affected communities, support critical needs through the group social fund, and serve as good platforms for add-on trainings, including HIV education and awareness. In South Africa, Barber (2011) posits that the principal benefits are consumption smoothing and improved coping mechanisms: HIV-related and other expenditures "do not closely track income flows," but "stable levels of consumption [seen among SG members] suggest that [people living with or affected by HIV] are more protected from insecure and volatile flows of income and are thus more able to meet basic needs. Results indicate that the impact of adverse shocks has been cushioned and coping strategies strengthened, thus overall vulnerability to poverty has decreased among participants." In a review of studies, Gash (2017) identified myriad benefits to SG membership for people living with or affected by HIV: increased savings, better social relations, increased independence, and better environments; but mixed effects for prevention of risky behaviors, and only small positive effects on ART adherence, viral suppression, and mortality.

People living with or affected by HIV face significant barriers to participation in SGs, particularly in relation to targeting and outreach. The exclusive targeting of people affected by HIV risks exposing the HIV status of potential participants – and may exacerbate stigmatization. But geographic targeting alone, which can help preserve the privacy of people living with or affected by HIV, risks missing – and therefore excluding – members of the target population.

The deliberate inclusion of people living with or affected by HIV starts with leveraging partnerships with local institutions that have pre-established relationships with the target population, in combination with community sensitization. In some cases, initial SG promotion can take place at treatment centers, with information on local SGs that exist in their home areas. As with other vulnerabilities, SGs in HIV projects should provide add-on services such as financial education, HIV education, and basic business skills, given the difficulties that people living with or affected by HIV can have earning regular incomes.

KEY LESSONS

1. **Reaching sensitive target groups through partnerships with health clinics, clubs, or associations, is more efficient and less invasive than individual targeting;**
2. **Community outreach to promote inclusive SGs can reduce the stigmatization of people living with or affected by HIV; and**
3. **Savings Groups for populations living with or affected by HIV should be combined with HIV sensitization and education, financial education, and other relevant life skills and business trainings – for the community at large.**

CHARS LIVELIHOODS PROGRAMME

2.6 Smallholder farmers

Agriculture is crucial to economic growth, accounting for one-third of global gross domestic product in 2014 (World Bank 2018). Agricultural livelihoods programming principally targets rural, smallholder households, which tend to be poor and financially excluded due to their vulnerability to changes in weather patterns, climate shocks, and variable global commodities prices. Globally, the World Bank estimates that 78 percent of poor people live in rural areas and work mainly in agriculture (World Bank 2014), and agriculture is the main livelihood of 65 percent of poor working adults. "If you care about the poorest, you care about agriculture... Investments in agriculture are the best weapons against hunger and poverty," explains Bill Gates, Co-Chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation n.d.).

While there is no global data on smallholder financial inclusion, a 2018 CGAP survey of approximately 1,800 smallholder households across six countries reports that smallholders are disproportionately excluded from financial markets – with formal financial sector participation ranging from 7 percent in Mozambique to nearly 50 percent in Tanzania. The study also reveals that a small proportion of financially excluded smallholders have access to SGs – from 5 percent in the Ivory Coast to 22 percent in Uganda.

Smallholder farmers are financially excluded due to several reasons, including the risks related to infrequent and erratic income from crop sales, sporadic casual labor opportunities on other farms, marginal off-farm small businesses, and occasional remittances. Smallholders require significant cash at specific times of the year – planting and harvesting – and represent a market segment with significant co-variant risks that are difficult to diversify or mitigate, including sector-wide crop failures due to inclement weather and pests. Finally, smallholders' financial needs extend to off-farm IGAs, complicating the process of designing adequate financial products to meet their needs (Anderson and Ahmed 2016).

Diversification of income-generating strategies among smallholder SG members can mitigate the pressure on group loan and social funds arising from the covariant demand for savings and credit. In its smallholder diaries study, CGAP found that most households had varying degrees of diversification in their income sources, and "the wide range of [smallholders'] income sources outside of crop and livestock production did dampen the effects of the agricultural cycle on the sample households" (Anderson and Ahmed 2016). Nevertheless, income diversification is not always possible in farming communities – and smallholder households remain vulnerable between harvests.

Seasonality effects can also be mitigated by encouraging the adoption of flexible and seasonally appropriate policies relating to savings and credit, as well as scheduling of dividends or share-outs. Minimum savings requirements can be increased during harvest periods and reduced or eliminated during lean seasons. Share-outs can be timed to coincide with agricultural cycles, and meeting frequency can be reduced during lean periods in recognition of members' reduced demand for savings.

With appropriate adaptations in program design and group policies, SGs can provide smallholder farmers with needed financing, and can further serve as platforms for the delivery of agricultural, marketing and business trainings; as well as an opportunity for collective input purchasing and production marketing.

KEY LESSONS

1. **Extreme income seasonality and covariant risks are barriers to community-based microfinance in farming communities;**
2. **Savings Groups composed of smallholder farmers can be leveraged for the delivery of agricultural and other extension services; and**
3. **In cash-poor rural economies, development organizations can support smallholder SGs by facilitating relationships with financial service providers and the private sector.**

MERCY CORPS

2.7 Forcibly displaced people

Forced displacement is "the forced movement of people from their locality or environment and occupational activities due to conflict, persecution, violence, or human rights violations" (Zimmerman, Weisert, and Albert 2017). Forced displacement increased by over 10 million people in 2016 – yielding a total of 22.5 million refugees, 40.3 million internally displaced people (IDP), and 2.8 million asylum seekers by the end of the year (UNHCR 2017). As of 2014, more than 10 million refugees were in protracted exile, "with the average length of exile approaching nearly two decades" (Easton-Calabria and Omata 2016).

Among the vulnerable populations discussed in this report, forcibly displaced people (FDP) suffer uniquely from being physically uprooted from their homes and forced to live elsewhere, often among strangers who may speak different languages. Many FDP have lost all livelihood and productive assets, limiting their ability to undertake economically productive activities, and rendering them dependent on humanitarian aid to meet their individual and household needs. Furthermore, FDP face barriers to paid work and financial services due to lack of legal residence and formal identification.

Extensive, long-term forced displacement of people, coupled with the humanitarian aid sector's focus on fostering FDP self-reliance through skills training for wage employment or self-employment (Easton-Calabria and Omata 2016; Jacobsen and Fratzke 2016), presents a unique opportunity to scale up SG interventions among refugees and IDPs.

Savings Groups can expand access to basic financial services among FDP, since they do not require legal identification, collateral, or infrastructure investments. But barriers to membership include mobility, as well as legal and practical constraints to income-generating activities. Security concerns and weaker community bonds in FDP settlements pose further challenges to SGs in target communities. And assumptions and prejudices regarding FDP among host country nationals and NGO staff can reduce the willingness of development actors to invest in the promotion of SGs in FDP settlements.

The successful promotion of SGs in FDP communities requires strategies that build social cohesion, address security concerns and the risk of spontaneous repatriation or resettlement, and foster host community acceptance and participation. Effective practices include: 1) the engagement of host communities and governments; 2) adaptations to group training and policies that enable groups to manage member exit effectively and transparently; and 3) enhanced provisions for the security of group assets.

KEY LESSONS

1. **Many FDP already have experience with informal savings and lending, and therefore embrace SGs when offered the opportunity to participate;**
2. **Due to the high mobility of FDP, SG cycle lengths should be reviewed and adapted as appropriate;**
3. **Because some FDP repatriate or move on with little warning, a practice share-out meeting, and some form of SG methodology highlights sheet or booklet placed in the cash box, can help groups manage unplanned departures; and**
4. **Appropriate cash-safety adaptations are advisable in low-security settings, such as refugee camps and border towns.**

4 Conclusions

Expanding the outreach of SGs to more diverse and vulnerable populations contributes to financial inclusion and broader development goals.

Savings Groups provide access to basic financial services in underserved markets – countries and regions characterized by low formal financial sector participation. They require minimal infrastructure and operate in marginalized and remote communities where formal financial services may not be viable. In addition to the direct delivery of basic financial services, SGs improve the financial capabilities of members and represent a pathway to formal financial inclusion in underserved markets. And a recent systematic review of the evidence (Gash 2017) concludes that SGs, in combination with other development inputs, contribute to broader development goals – specifically Sustainable Development Goals related to poverty (SDG1), hunger (SDG2), health (SDG3), gender equality (SDG5) and income (SDG8).

This state of practice report discusses the dynamics of inclusion in SGs, with respect to multiple vulnerabilities and target populations: poverty, age, disability, people living with or affected by HIV, gender, smallholder farmers, and forcibly displaced people. The report examines both the barriers to inclusion as well as effective strategies, practices, and tools to increase SG outreach and improve outcomes for vulnerable populations.

Targeting and outreach

Effective outreach and targeting strategies to identify and mobilize vulnerable populations include: geographical targeting with inclusive saturation; surveys and participatory methods; community outreach; and group targeting through the existing clienteles and beneficiary lists of partner organizations and government.

Geographical targeting and inclusive saturation has been shown to effectively expand access to SGs by the most vulnerable community members – including the ultra-poor, smallholder farmers, people with disabilities, and people living with or affected by HIV – without excluding other community members. In some contexts, more comprehensive group or individual targeting may be required. Group targeting includes leveraging government, health clinic, or local implementing partner lists, while individual targeting can involve proxy means tests or specialized tools – such as the Poverty Probability Index (PPI)[3] – or participatory rural appraisal or wealth ranking, combined with onsite verification. The report discusses, in detail, the relative advantages and limitations of targeting methods; and SG initiatives that aim to serve specific populations, households or individuals often employ various approaches, and triangulate results.

Design and implementation

Project designs are shaped by contextual factors, as well as the goals of funders, development organizations, and the specific needs and characteristics of the target population. Stand-alone SG projects can appeal to a wide range of community members. For particularly vulnerable populations to participate in and benefit from SGs, additional inputs may be required – such as health services, counseling, or training in life skills or improved agricultural methods. Development actors can therefore supplement group formation and training with complementary services, or integrate SGs into multi-component projects, which already include these services. Indeed, graduation programs that exclusively target the ultra-poor and provide them with cash or asset transfers, as well as mentoring and training, have shown success in reaching these populations, and in lifting them out of extreme poverty.

Project outcomes can also be improved by involving participants in project design, outreach and monitoring, and by providing them with means to communicate their needs and interests to project management throughout the project period.

Group policies and practices

The inclusivity of SGs can be enhanced by adaptations to group policies and practices. Flexible savings policies and loan terms, and the elimination of minimum savings requirements and penalties, better accommodate the more irregular income of vulnerable populations, as well as their increased vulnerability to economic and non-economic shocks. Practice share-outs held during the training period, and instructional aides can mitigate the risks associated with member turnover – common among FDP. And flexible meeting times and training schedules facilitate participation – particularly by smallholder farmers, women and young people – as do accommodations to meeting spaces and training methods to meet the specific needs and limitations of target groups, such as people with disabilities. To foster effective participation by members of vulnerable populations in SGs, while maintaining the principle of member self-selection, SG initiatives can start by exclusive targeting; and then, once groups are up and running, encourage members to invite other, trusted community members to join.

[3] More information on the PPI can be found here: https://www.povertyindex.org/.

ANDREAS PEHAM

Looking ahead: The inclusivity of Savings Groups and post-project sustainability

Several studies indicate significant levels of spontaneous SG replication, group-to-group training, and membership growth and turnover over time, beyond project periods. For instance, in Uganda, Mine et al. (2013) identified nearly two spontaneously formed groups for every group trained by project staff. A post-project evaluation of Pact's Women's Empowerment Program in Nepal, conducted seven years after the project had ended, identified 425 new groups in the project area, with 11,000 new members (Valley Research Group and Mayoux 2008).

The long-term inclusivity of SGs, therefore, depends on post-project group formation, local ongoing support services (e.g. community members capable of providing technical assistance as required, or producing passbooks, ledgers or cashboxes), group practices and established norms in target communities. In fact, a study of a Peace Corps project in Ecuador ten years after its end found high rates of both SG sustainability and replication; poverty rates among members, however, were low – and some groups "were entirely formed of people of a high economic status" (Fleischer-Proano, Gash, and Kuklewicz 2011).

In recent years, development organizations have adopted various approaches to promote group formation and the provision of local support services to SGs beyond project periods – including volunteers, fee-for-service trainers, faith-based organizations, financial service providers, and the delivery of messaging and materials within target communities to catalyze spontaneous group formation. Community-based trainers, in particular, have proven to be an effective and efficient mechanism for group formation; and some evidence suggests that poverty outreach is not compromised by private service providers. In fact, Stuart (2017) reports that fee-for-service trainers in Burkina Faso, Senegal, Tanzania and Zambia tend to deepen poverty outreach over time as they gain experience and saturate their respective working areas. Nevertheless, evidence remains limited and the degree to which market actors reach and effectively serve vulnerable populations after project closure, is uncertain.

In conclusion, this report assesses the state of inclusion of SGs and the implications for financial inclusion and broader development outcomes. The existing body of evidence provides lessons with regards to the challenges and effective strategies to identify, mobilize and serve specific target populations – including the need for continued experimentation and the more systematic collection of disaggregated membership data.

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