

LEARNING BRIEF: Nuyok Activity in Karamoja



Effectiveness of Poverty Graduation in Improving Household Incomes Among Ultra-Poor Women in Napak District

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SERIES

This learning brief is part of a series bringing together experiences and lessons learned from the Nuyok Resilience Food Security Activity (2017–2023). The briefs are designed for practitioners, including local government representatives, civil society organizations, and other actors working on natural resources management, sanitation, and livelihoods-related issues.

ABSTRACT

This learning brief highlights how the Rural Entrepreneur Access Project (REAP)—piloted over a 2-year period in Napak District of Karamoja, Uganda—increased household incomes, food consumption levels, savings, and women’s agency in household decision-making and ownership and control of assets. The findings, conclusions, and lessons learned from this pilot can help a range of practitioners, including local government representatives, civil society organizations, policy makers, and donors engaged in the planning and allocation of resources for sustainable food and nutrition security among ultra-poor populations.

DISCLAIMER

This learning brief is made possible thanks to the support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents of this learning brief are the responsibility of Catholic Relief Services and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

PHOTOS

Nuyok Resilience Food Security Activity, 2023. All photos reproduced with permission.

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ACRONYMS

BHA	Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
REAP	Rural Entrepreneur Access Project
RFSA	Resilience Food Security Activity
SOLI	Standard of Living Index
UGX	Ugandan Shilling
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	U.S. Dollar
WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene

ACTIVITY BACKGROUND

The Nuyok Resilience Food Security Activity (RFSA) sought to build resilience to shocks, enhance livelihoods, and improve food and nutrition security for at-risk rural families in the Karamoja sub-region of Northeastern Uganda. Funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), the activity operated for 6 years (2017–2023) under a consortium of seven implementing partners led by Catholic Relief Services (CRS)—Caritas Moroto, Caritas Kotido, Cooperation for Development, The BOMA Project, Communication for Development Foundation Uganda, and YouthBuild International. The activity reached more than 269,000 at-risk people across 524 villages in four Karamoja districts—Abim, Napak, Nakapiripirit, and Nabilatuk—targeting women, men, and youth. Using a multi-sectoral approach, Nuyok worked to strengthen governance, gender equity, community capacity to manage shocks and stresses, and traditional and diversified livelihood opportunities. Nuyok also focused on improving nutrition, health, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) for pregnant and lactating women, adolescent girls, and children under five years of age.

SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT

Among all Uganda’s sub-regions, vulnerability to poverty is highest in Karamoja.¹ With 64.2% of the population below the poverty line, Napak district is the second poorest district in Karamoja.² The depth of poverty, the negative effects of climate change on agricultural and livestock production, and limited employment and economic opportunities contribute to persistently high rates of food insecurity throughout Karamoja, particularly among women and children.

Income can provide a pathway to women’s empowerment, gender equality, and ultimately, improved household food security. As women gain access to greater income, their household financial contributions increase, potentially resulting in increased household decision-making authority. In a variety of country contexts, women’s control over finances and household spending is associated with expenditure and consumption patterns that benefit their children, such as increased spending on household food, healthcare, childcare, and children’s clothing and education.³ In this way, investing in women’s livelihoods activities can profoundly impact wellbeing outcomes throughout entire families. With this in mind, Nuyok decided to pilot BOMA’s Rural Entrepreneur Access Project (REAP) model of poverty graduation with a cohort of women in Napak district.

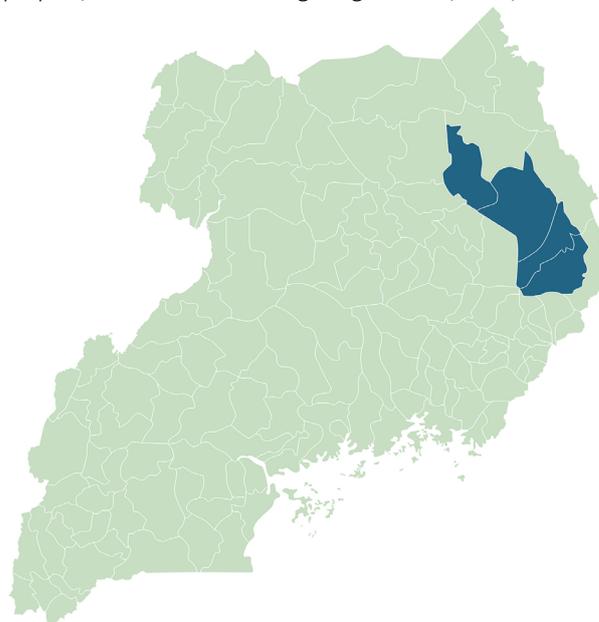


Figure 1. Nuyok’s four project areas highlighted in blue: Abim, Napak, Nakapiripirit, and Nabilatuk.

THE REAP MODEL OF POVERTY GRADUATION

REAP is a poverty graduation model specifically tailored to women living in extreme poverty in remote and rural drylands of Africa. These women tend to have inadequate infrastructure, limited employment opportunities, and long-standing reliance on pastoralist livelihoods—which are increasingly vulnerable to climate change. REAP enrollment offers participants a set of sequenced, layered, and integrated interventions; namely, a cash transfer (Jump Grant) to start a small business group to generate income, a consumption stipend, membership in a savings group, as well as regular

- 1 Republic of Uganda Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (2023). *Poverty Status Report: Jobs, informality and poverty in Uganda: Insights on performance before and during COVID-19.*
- 2 Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) (2019). *Poverty Maps of Uganda: Mapping the Spatial Distribution of Poor Households and Child Poverty Based on Data from the 2016/17 Uganda National Household Survey and the 2014 National Housing and Population Census.*
- 3 Quisumbing, Agnes R., & Maluccio, John A. (2000). *Intra-household allocation and gender relations: New empirical evidence from four developing countries.* International Food Policy and Research Institute.

mentorship and training in financial, business, and life skills. The step-by-step components of the model are summarized in the next section.

From January 2018 to June 2019, Nuyok enrolled 1,635 ultra-poor women in the REAP pilot, including those from the Iriri, Lotome, Ngoleriet, Matany, Lokopo, and Lopei sub-counties of Napak District. Nuyok hypothesized that if REAP provided an appropriate combination of social and economic interventions to enable women and their households to graduate out of extreme poverty, then these women would achieve improved social standing and engage in sustainable livelihoods, leading to increased household food security, investment in human capital, and resilience to shocks.

REAP Step-by-Step Approach

1. Targeting, community buy-in, and baseline survey: Nuyok employed three methods of targeting: participatory rural appraisal (with community-based wealth ranking processes); the Participant Targeting Tool (an inclusion/exclusion ranking tool adapted specifically for Napak with community input); and REAP Location Committees, which facilitated community buy-in and helped achieve balanced representation. Each Location Committee included a female business role model, a woman councilor, the local councilor I, a female opinion leader, the parish chief, and a religious leader. Each of the REAP participants identified two participants of their choice based on character, reputation in the community, and location in which they could easily work in a group of three people.

2. Mentoring and coaching: During the targeting phase, village mentors were identified from the local community by Caritas Moroto, a Nuyok implementing partner that covered Napak District. The mentors helped form business groups of three qualified women, delivered initial training on basic business skills, and guided the groups in forming business plans (i.e., a Jump Grant application), each of which included a description of the business, projected start-up costs, a budget, and a savings plan. Mentors visited each business monthly during the 2-year program, offering instruction, mediation, and advice.

3. Cash transfer: For 4 months (during the most critical period of the lean season), Nuyok distributed consumption stipends of \$20 in U.S. dollars (USD) to each of the 1,635 REAP participants.

This served as a cash safety net, enabling participants to access basic needs during the lean season and allowing them time to establish and stabilize their businesses. Each group received a seed capital Jump Grant of \$200 USD to start their businesses. An additional performance-based conditional cash transfer of \$100 USD was given to 445 business groups (1,335 participants) out of the initial 545 groups (1,635 participants) following a successful progress report by the village mentor 6 months after the initial grant. Those who did not qualify were dropped from the REAP program. Qualification for the performance-based additional grant was based on three criteria: (a) average total business value for the last 3 months (at the time of assessment) grew by 25% to 937,000 in Ugandan shillings (UGX) (\$253 USD); (b) at least two participants were still active within the business at the time of assessment; and (c) business group members continued to work collaboratively, defined as “not keeping stock separately or selling separately” as an operational strategy.

4. Financial and life skills training: Mentors delivered micro-training on financial skills, life skills, WASH, and nutrition during savings group meetings. These training sessions continued throughout the 2-year intervention, covering a variety of financial and life skills topics including borrowing and lending, planning for long-term expenses, household decision-making, the importance of children’s education, and health and social messaging modules.

5. Savings and access to credit: Once businesses were established, mentors assembled four to five business groups from nearby locations into savings associations whose members met regularly to deposit or withdraw savings, using a shares-based method. Savings contributions were then used as a source of credit, in line with established guidelines and lending rules, for business expansion and individual interest-bearing loans.



REAP participants reported a six-fold increase in average household income as a result of their income generating activities (from \$5 USD at baseline to \$31.50 USD at endline).

- 6. Linkages:** With support from program staff, mentors guided business and savings groups to access appropriate formal/mobile financial services, government services, market opportunities, and other non-governmental organization offerings, including providing agricultural inputs to members.

Box 1. Graduation Criteria

REAP participants were considered “graduated” at the end of the 2 years if they met at least four simple criteria across the following categories:

Food security, measured by:

- The proportion of households that reported no child going to bed without an evening meal in the last month.
- The proportion of households that reported adults consuming at least two meals a day in the last week.

Sustainable livelihoods, measured by:

- The proportion of households with two or more sustainable sources of income which have no negative impact on the environment.
- The proportion of participants that reported the value of their REAP business being at least 25% higher than the total conditional cash transfer.

Shock preparedness, measured by:

- The proportion of participants participating in a savings group and having savings.

Human capital investment, measured by:

- The proportion of households that reported primary school-age children attending primary school.

ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE REAP APPROACH

Nuyok administered BOMA’s Standard of Living Index (SOLI) survey to participants at two key points in the program: the first in October 2019 during enrollment, to gather baseline data, and the second at endline in July 2022. Together, these surveys helped Nuyok assess the effectiveness of the REAP approach in lifting participants out of poverty and increasing their food and nutrition security.⁴ The survey included questions regarding participants’ household income, savings, household decision-making influence, livestock ownership, enrollment of children in school, food security, healthcare use, and spending. For the quantitative data, Nuyok collected a total of 455 samples, representing an 87% response rate. Additional qualitative data was collected through 13 focus group discussions (FGDs). Nuyok notes that conducting the surveys at different periods of the year—with baseline at harvest time and endline during the lean season—is a limitation of this study and likely influenced the



A REAP participant measures out a cup of beans for customers at the small food shop she established through participating in the pilot.

⁴ Orwa, A., & E. Ouma (2022). *Effectiveness of REAP Poverty Graduation Model in Improving Household Incomes Among Ultra-Poor Women. Endline Report*. Produced by CRS, The BOMA Project, and Caritas Moroto Dioceses under the USAID/BHA-funded Nuyok RFSA.

observed results.

Impacts and Results

Results from the endline survey confirmed that since joining REAP in 2019, participants significantly improved their capacity to provide for their families, to ensure food security for their households, and to respond to shocks. The Nuyok REAP cohort reported an increase in average household income from 18,620 UGX (\$5 USD) at baseline to 116,704 UGX (\$31.50 USD) at endline. Household food consumption scores rose from an average of 27.7% at baseline to an average of 30.8% at endline and savings grew more than tenfold. Participants also experienced an increase in decision-making authority and agency within their households and their communities.

The passing/graduation rate for food security, based on the two criteria selected, stood at: (a) 62% for the proportion of households that reported no child going to bed without an evening meal; and (b) 72% for the proportion of households that reported adults consuming at least two healthy meals of diversified food a day. The graduation rate for sustainable livelihoods—the proportion of households with two or more sources of income; and the proportion of participants that reported the value of the REAP business being at least 25% higher than the total conditional cash transfer—was 69% and 46% respectively. The graduation rate for shock preparedness—the proportion of participants who are members of a savings group and who have savings—was 97%, a significant improvement from the 22% reported at baseline. Also reported was average cash savings, which amounted to 88,265 UGX (\$23.90 USD) at endline, up from 6,395 UGX (\$1.70 USD) at baseline. The graduation rate for the human capital investment criteria (the proportion of households that reported primary school-age children attending primary school) was 39%. The overall passing/graduation rate computed from the thematic areas of food security, sustainable livelihoods, shock preparedness, and human capital investment set for REAP participants was 60%.



A majority of REAP business groups (54.5%) used their cash transfers to set up small shops like this one, selling snacks and other small food items.

Female participation in income-generating activities, such as livestock rearing and cash crop farming, also significantly increased.

At endline, 40% of surveyed women reported having participated in livestock rearing, an increase from 14% at baseline. Out of that 40%, approximately 86% reported having some decision-making authority over how their earnings would be used. Women's engagement in joint decision-making on the allocation of food resources increased from 26% at baseline to 37% at endline, and from 28% to 40% on health-related issues. Yet during FGDs, some participants reported having experienced violence from their husbands because of their participation in REAP.

Overall, the REAP program successfully met its immediate goal, enabling improved household access to healthy foods through increased income. Participants reported high satisfaction with the trainings and other aspects of the intervention, crediting it with helping them to improve various aspects of their lives, such as social and human capital investments, savings, gender equity, and livelihood strategy diversification.

COVID-19 and Security-related Challenges

The mobility restrictions imposed to contain the COVID-19 pandemic and the resurgence of insecurity (cattle raids) negatively impacted economic activities throughout the region, including the livestock market system and other business operations. As of the time of the endline survey in October 2022, the pandemic and security concerns had contributed to the failure of 18% of the businesses established by REAP participants. However, 82% of the original businesses were still operating. The following comments, shared during FGDs, are illustrative of how the REAP participants experienced these challenges in their operating environment.

“COVID-19 also made it difficult to transport food to the markets for customers to purchase, so this

posed a big problem to us and our business.”

“Another issue that is making it hard for us to operate our businesses is the problem of insecurity. We sell at daytime, but during night the thieves follow us demanding what we sold during the day.”

“For us, we started with a sorghum business. Then, from sorghum we tried livestock. However, insecurity made it difficult for us to continue with a livestock business and so we abandoned it and started selling bedsheets.”

“We realized that we needed to do something else apart from selling livestock because we feared that raiders might take all our cattle and leave us with nothing.”

The rampant cattle raiding in the region led participants to diversify their income generating activities. According to FGD participants, it is no longer tenable to rely on livestock selling alone. The groups adjusted their businesses accordingly. At exit, a majority of groups (54.5%) were running small shops (kiosks/dukas) as their primary business; others were engaged in cereal banking (30.9%), selling livestock (10.8%), and running clothing businesses (1.0%). Bars, butchers, grocers, and hotels accounted for less than 1% of the groups' primary businesses.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **The disbursement of the start-up grant, combined with a consumption stipend, was an important aspect of the REAP model that should be replicated in the design of future poverty graduation programs.** The second, performance-based grant enabled the program team to assess the progress of the new businesses, and to target investments to those business groups that were most motivated and likely to succeed. The distribution of the consumption stipend during the lean season also proved successful in supporting participants to protect their working capital, thereby permitting time for businesses to stabilize and grow. Practitioners should consider replicating this model of grant disbursement, protected by a consumption stipend, when engaging ultra-poor populations in future poverty alleviation programs.
- **Male engagement is critical to the success of women's empowerment programming.** Despite improved peace and harmony within some REAP households, the FGDs revealed a need for increased male sensitization on female empowerment, gender-based violence, and household dialogues. For this reason, future poverty graduation interventions that empower women should be coupled with activities that promote positive household relations. Practitioners should conduct a Protection Risk Analysis at the start of any women's economic empowerment intervention, develop mitigation measures for the identified risks, and monitor these closely throughout implementation. The Male Change Agent approach implemented by Nuyok is a good example of a complementary activity. Via this approach, Nuyok trained male champions to promote gender-sensitive practices with a focus on shared workload, decision-making and non-violence to challenge gender inequities within communities and bring about positive behavior change in health and nutrition practices. Practices should consider intentionally targeting some of the spouses or older men in the REAP participants' households as Male Change Agents.
- **In unstable contexts, it is critical to integrate conflict sensitivity in the design and adaptation of livelihoods interventions.** Tailoring the type of start-up business to fit the operating environment—and adapting the business model as the context changes—is critical to minimize risks and protect investment, particularly in situations of insecurity. For example, as incidences of cattle raiding increased, REAP participants found success in diversifying their businesses away from livestock rearing. In conflict-affected areas, practitioners should support participants to invest in goods and commodities that are less vulnerable to insecurity.
- **Collaboration with local institutions and private sector actors is key to sustainability.** Though REAP implementation was led by a local organization, Caritas Moroto Diocese, many of its staff were funded by the program. As is often the case, institutional memory is lost unless the local partner embraces the approach, identifies additional funding, and is able to sustain it. For sustainability purposes, it is recommended that practitioners implement REAP in conjunction

with local institutions so they can continue training participants on income-generating activities and business management, thereby enhancing income diversification and increased earnings after the close of the program.

- **Additional financial support may be needed to address persistent food consumption gaps in some households.**

The REAP endline assessment showed that, despite significant improvements in household food security since baseline, some households still had large food consumption gaps. Future programs that scale up the implementation of the REAP model should consider increasing the amount of the consumption stipend and/or the start-up grants to address this issue. Further piloting and iteration of the approach will be necessary to determine the appropriate level of support for a given population and context.

- **Further investigation of barriers to school attendance.** Lack of funds was mentioned by 78% of the respondents as the cause of low levels of school attendance and high dropout rates. Surprisingly, less than 6% of respondents mentioned COVID-19 as the cause, despite the fact that schools were closed for an extended period due to the pandemic. These results suggest that financial barriers to school attendance warrant further investigation if future REAP implementers are to successfully enhance school attendance in Napak District.



REAP business group member winnowing harvested corn.