

LESSONS LEARNED ON THE IMPLEMENTATION AND EFFECTIVENESS OF SMALL GRANTS FOR REACHING VERY VULNERABLE HOUSEHOLDS



A household with a clean compound in Ogur, Lira district.
Photo by Benjamin Aisya.

This Technical Note presents critical lessons learned under the USAID Uganda Community Connector Project's small grants program, which engages community groups to reach very vulnerable households that are not otherwise reached by project activities with interventions for nutrition, WASH, health and livelihoods.

The Uganda Community Connector (CC) Project is a community-based, USAID-funded, Feed the Future Initiative. CC is currently working with local governments in 15 districts, nine in the North (N) and six in the Southwest (SW) regions of the country to improve the nutritional status of women and children, and the livelihoods of vulnerable populations through sustainable, integrated nutrition and agriculture interventions at the community and household levels.

As a flagship of the Collaborating, Learning and Adapting (CLA) approach, CC was designed with three distinct phases: pilot (phase I), scale up (phase II), and impact (phase III). Each phase has two project modules (PMs): a learning module and an implementation module. Project modules lay the foundation for an iterative program cycle—allowing CC to continuously assess the causal pathway to project outcomes and adjust programmatic and operational activities as necessary. This iterative cycle enables CC to regularly engage local stakeholders, collect data, identify barriers, and make adjustments to improve implementation. This paper incorporates learning from Project Module 5 (the learning module for Phase III). For more information on the CLA approach within CC, please see Technical Note No. 1 of this series.

CC SMALL GRANTS TO MODEL GROUPS

Most of CC's activities were designed to target existing community groups, such as groups of producers, women, youth, and more.¹ However, recognizing that many of the most vulnerable households are not members of groups, CC has also designed many interventions to expand its reach to non-members. One mechanism which CC uses² for this is the issuance of small (up to US\$2,000) one-time, fixed-obligation grants (FOGs) to "model" CC groups so that they can bring CC interventions to their neighbors.

For a CC group to be eligible for a grant, all member households must have adopted at least 7 of the "CC See10" elements, which are the project's desired, measurable, household-level outputs that lead to or indicate better nutrition, food security and improved financial security.³ CC encourage groups who meet this criteria to prepare an application for how they

EARLY DESIGN AND MODIFICATION

In the CC proposal, the grants were originally intended to provide groups in very remote areas with funding with which they could procure services not otherwise accessible to them, such as extension support from subject matter specialists or services, like transport of agricultural produce, from the business community. Sub-county officials were also meant to be involved in the selection of recipients. With concerns about favoritism in how sub-county officials might select recipients, the collapse of the national extension services, and the identified need for CC to reach vulnerable HHs not already in groups, CC repurposed the grants to instead use model groups to reach HHs outside of groups. Grant recipient groups would themselves be strengthened through implementing the activities, with their savings bolstered from the funding.

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¹ CC groups are the groups of around 30 community members which are the main unit targeted by CC for its activities. These groups include producer groups, savings groups, youth groups, women's groups, and more. Except for youth groups, almost all of these groups existed before CC began, and all are registered as community groups with the sub-country government.

² CC also uses other mechanisms to reach vulnerable HHs not in CC groups, including family life schools (FLSs) and the CC-Village Enterprise (VE) model.

would promote the CCsee10 to at least 300 of their neighbors. With the help of sub-county community development officers, CC reviews the grants and helps make the activities and targets more specific and measurable and awards grants to those determined to be feasible. Each grant typically includes a range of activities, including: promoting building and use of WASH facilities, severe acute malnutrition (SAM) assessment and referrals, growing and distributing seedling for nutritious crops, sensitizing people on improving gender relations, promoting agriculture technologies, and promoting and building time saving technologies (energy-saving cook stoves and rain water harvesting), among others. Since the grants are FOGs, the groups get paid after the group reports achieving a milestone and CC verifies that achievement. Though this money is a reimbursement for the group's time and investment, and so theirs to use as they see fit, CC field staff discuss with the groups about productive ways they could use this compensation.

As of August 2015, CC has signed 129 grants with groups, each ranging from US \$500 to US \$2000. If each group reached 300 non-CC HHs, CC could potentially reach over 40,000 additional HHs.⁴ CC plans to sign grants worth over US \$750,000 by the end of project, which would add up to over 100,000 additional HHs reached. However, grant groups are unlikely to achieve all of their milestones (CC estimates a completion rate of between 60 to 80%) and the quality and effectiveness of these interventions is uncertain.

LESSONS ABOUT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE MINI-GRANTS TO SMALL GROUPS

This approach of providing such small performance-based grants for model groups to implement project activities is quite new. Because of this, CC has been continuously monitoring issues that arise and adapting the activities accordingly. For instance, after a few months of running the grants program, CC found the internal procedures for competing the grants were too onerous and complex for the groups, resulting in a time-consuming and slow-moving application and award management process. In February 2015, CC simplified the application and selection process, and put in place project staff at the regional level to facilitate the process. These changes led to a doubling of the number of awards made per quarter and a 50% reduction in the timeframe for award grants, i.e. around 2-3 months before the changes to 1-1.5 months after.

To further this learning and understand better how grants could be more effectively implemented to achieve the intended results, CC included grants as one of four topics selected for learning studies in Program Module 5.⁵ Between April and June 2015, CC interviewed grant recipients (group leaders for 17 out

of the 141 groups, randomly selected) and surveyed the neighbors they were tasked with reaching (six for each of the 17 sampled groups). From these interviews and surveys CC learned more about the challenges that are limiting the effectiveness of such small grants as well as potential areas for improving them.

From what the group leaders and neighbors recalled, grantee groups were most actively doing the following:

- Teaching neighbors how to build WASH facilities: tippy taps, drying racks, and garbage and compost pits; and sensitizing them on WASH practices: handwashing, compound cleanliness, etc.
- Sensitizing neighbors on fruit and vegetable growing
- Producing and distributing seedlings for nutritious crops
- Screening for malnutrition and sensitizing people on accessing maternal and child health services (this was primarily mentioned by the grantee group leaders, but not often recalled by beneficiaries)
- Sensitizing people on savings and the agricultural income generating activities promoted by CC

BARRIERS TO OUTREACH REPORTED BY GROUP LEADERS

Grantees discussed four types of barriers limiting the effectiveness of their grant funded activities: a) households not having the ability to adopt the behaviors and technologies being promoted; b) households not being receptive to the grant groups as service providers; c) geographic and environment conditions; and d) delays in payment of grants or failure to earn the payment. These barriers are discussed in more detail below:

Households not having the ability to adopt the behaviors and technologies being promoted

Grant groups' leaders report that many people do not have the capacity to be able to adopt (and maintain) what is being promoted, for example: lack of knowledge or ability to understand, language barriers, trouble maintaining practices after initial adoption, limited power in decision making for women, low capacity to construct, or general resistance to change. CC has clustered these barriers because - at their root - they are limitations on the efficacy of the promotion activities, which may in turn be due to weaknesses in the methods being employed or the capacity of the grantees to effectively implement the methods. While CC does not expect 100% of households reached to adopt what is being promoted, project partners generally agree that there is room for improvement in the capacity of the grant recipients and methods being used, especially in order to get households to better value the promoted changes. Some grantees reported that households may not have the time or resources to adopt what is promoted, but given that all the changes being promoted are designed as simple doable actions, CC suspects that this may be more an issue of households not valuing what is being promoted.

³ These 10 elements were selected based on existing evidence and in consultation with key stakeholders to reflect improved household nutrition and agricultural production, household livelihood activities, general hygiene and gender equitable practices. For more information on the CC See10, please see Technical Note No. 6 of this series.

⁴ These HHs are not profiled and included in CC's M&E system.

⁵ CC is split into six program modules; three learning modules (1, 3, and 5) and three implementation modules (2, 4, and 6).



A young mother harvests papaya from near her homestead.
Photo by Patrick Mayambala.

Households not being receptive to the grant groups as service providers

Grant group leaders report that other households are doubtful or wary of their intentions. Households may be accustomed to formal outreach workers and visits from village health teams, but do not recognize their neighbors as official outreach workers. Some households also had the expectation that CC would provide handouts and so are suspicious about why a group may be receiving a “grant” but not giving money or goods to households. In a context where signing something is strongly associated with receiving something, this perception is aggravated when grantee groups request households to sign documentation (the project uses signatures as proof that goals are being met) but don’t distribute any goods or funds to them. This leads to the perception among households a grantee group is having them sign, but keeping the things they were supposed to distribute.

Geographic and environment conditions

Since CC operates in the most remote sub counties and villages, the distances and terrain that grantees need to travel in order to reach households can be very far, with no guarantee that they will find the relevant household members at home. The frequent groups meetings which are required to coordinate and accomplish the additional tasks agreed to under the grant can also become burdensome when people have to travel such distances. Other physical and environmental conditions limit the viability of the technologies and practices being promoted, such as seasonality and drought conditions that affect fruits and vegetables; or rocky, sandy and wet soil that make it difficult to construct WASH facilities. CC’s annual household survey has revealed that the predominant reason for not growing nutritious foods year-round was inability to grow in the dry season.

Delays in payment of grants or failure to earn the payment

Finally, an important barrier which some group leaders raised in interviews was the extensive time it took to be paid for activities/accomplishments, or cases where groups were unable to accomplish deliverables and so were not paid at all. The time it takes for groups to be paid is a result of the onerous

process that is undertaken to verify and document that the activity was completed, including time spent correcting errors often found in grantee documentation. Though the process is explained to groups at the onset, getting payments a few weeks or months later than originally anticipated can have a significant impact on poor group members. Groups are also not paid until they fully complete a milestone, which is defined as meeting 100% of the target – yet below-100% accomplishment of a target is a common occurrence for all the various reasons discussed above. This all-or-nothing arrangement makes CC grants a potentially risky proposition for poor groups.

VARIATIONS MADE BY CC ON THE CORE GRANTS MODEL, AND THEIR LESSONS

Larger grants to very small CBOs are easier to administer, can reach more households and allow for better quality assurance measures, but lack the additional benefits of strengthening and investing in groups. CC also awards fixed-obligation grants to small, local CBOs to promote the CCsee10 among non-CC households. CBO grants are up to \$20,000 and have higher targets to achieve. As of August 2015, CC awarded seven grants to CBOs (originally nine, but two were closed for non-performance and compliance issues). Since CBOs have larger grants with larger targets, there are economies of scale for grants administration. However, since these are small CBOs they have high needs for institutional capacity building.

Larger grants to a cluster of groups in the same area and with the same interest requires more capacity building support than a single group grant, but can accomplish more. Where groups are in the same geographical area and anchored to a local institution such as a church, a Savings and Credit Cooperative or a vocational school, CC has helped organize them into clusters and provided larger grants of up to US \$5000, which are easier to administer and have higher targets than the smaller grants. CC helps these clusters establish a board, open an office, open a bank account, and provide other organizational capacity building support. This approach has been taken mainly with youth groups, where three clusters have been awarded so far. Given the larger size and more sophisticated organizational structure, these clusters require more capacity building support than a single group grant, but can accomplish more.

Providing in-kind grants to small groups is a more simplified and effective way to support very vulnerable households in starting small businesses. One of the CC activities specifically targeting very vulnerable households (mainly groups of youth and teenage mothers) is a business incubation and mentorship program under which CC provides a business team comprised of three people with two installments of goods as “business start-up kits”. The teams receive these after they have successfully progressed through the various modules of the CC business training, planning, and mentorship program and have developed a business plan. Since CC is purchasing the goods or

services on behalf of the recipients, it is CC staff that handle the paperwork and the burden of obtaining paperwork from the recipients is eased. The first downside of this approach is that CC is limited in the types of goods and services it can purchase, and so there are certain business teams which need to use their own savings to purchase the goods or services. The second downside is that this approach is limited to work with only very poor households and only on a one-time investment basis, otherwise the project runs the risk of being perceived as continually giving handouts.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CC

Based on discussions of the findings among CC partners...

The process currently being used for administering grants is not well suited to such small grants for groups: it is confusing to community members, has administrative and financial burdens which are beyond what groups have the capacity to handle, the process is slow, and it leads to mistrust within and among groups and households. While the project has made recent changes to address these issues, the following are opportunities for further improvement of the grant process:

- Adaptation of the grant-making tools to be more appropriate to these types of groups. The current pay-after-performance FOG mechanism – while easier to administer – may place undue financial burdens and risks on cash-poor groups and create problems within the group. To address this, CC has started funding groups for early-stage milestones so that groups are essentially advanced funds for other milestones. CC is also exploring whether in-kind grants or a mix of in-kind and pay-for-performance would be more effective.
- Streamlining of the verification procedures to reduce the level of effort required by CC staff and accelerate the overall process.
- Better communication and expectation management with groups, including provision of a simple how-to document in the local language which the group could refer⁶.
- Engage local leaders to help mitigate or address issues of mistrust or potential fraud among groups.

Groups often do not have adequate capacity for managing the grants and have variable capacity to

effectively promote different elements of the CCseeI0. CC expects that the additional support from grants officers and measures taken to streamline the grants process will help groups with capacity issues, but this will not change the fact that explicit, upfront training and capacity building will likely always be needed for groups. One clear area for improvement is focusing on ensuring that grants are tailored for what groups can do well. For example, CC groups generally seem well-suited for promoting tippy taps and drying racks, conducting seedling multiplication, mobilizing for child health days, and conducting general sensitization on the CCseeI0. However, in many areas there seem to be issues of quality of the outputs, e.g. weak group dialogue facilitation, fruit trees dying, tippy taps in disrepair, lack of understanding of health messages, and so forth. These issues of quality could be addressed by either selecting groups with more pre-existing capacity and interest, or by providing groups with more capacity building in areas such as leadership, coordination, and facilitation.

While CC can verify that groups are achieving their grant outputs, it remains unclear as to whether groups are reaching vulnerable households, and if they are, whether there is change in those households. This issue has multiple dimensions.

- First, to ensure groups are reaching very vulnerable households (and not, for example, just their friends and relatives), CC needs to be more active in managing the household selection and targeting process. This could be done either by developing and providing to grantees more specific and verifiable criteria for household targeting, or by having grantees work with local leaders using a technique such as community poverty mapping.
- Second, the pay-for-performance incentives stop upon completion of the activity, leaving grantee groups with little incentive to follow up on adoption of activities and/or provide additional inputs after the grant period has ended, e.g. ensuring ongoing survival of seedlings or the maintenance of tippy taps and drying racks. Given the small size of the grants, ensuring adoption may not be a realistic expectation, so CC may want to view these grants primarily as a means to further disseminate messages.
- Third, and perhaps more fundamentally, there are limitations on the extent to which CC can monitor and evaluate grant effectiveness. Since the households which are intended to be reached through the small grants are not profiled and added to CCs monitoring database, we do not have baseline data or a means to track adoption of the CCseeI0 by these households. To be able to answer questions of effectiveness of grants in all these dimensions, there is a need for a more complete assessment of what these grants have and have not been effective at accomplishing.

⁶ There are 17 local languages used across the 15 districts which CC covers.