Closing the Gap: What Graduation and Climate Practitioners Are Learning From Each Other

Reflections from ***'Closing the Gap: Practitioner Insights on Graduation & Climate Integration'****, a roundtable hosted by* End Ultrapoverty: A Global Collaborative *and* Innovations for Poverty Action.

Background

On June 30th, End Ultrapoverty: A Global Collaborative (EUP) and Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) convened organizations working at the intersection of Graduation approaches, climate adaptation, and nature conservation — EUP members BOMA, CARE, Danish Refugee Council, and Village Enterprise, 100Weeks — for a practitioner roundtable.

Building on a year-long effort by EUP to increase collaboration between the Graduation and climate/conservation communities, the session brought together forty-four implementers coming at this intersection from both directions: some are Graduation practitioners asking how to integrate a climate or conservation lens, others are conservation and climate organizations exploring what Graduation approaches can offer their work. The group set out to explore three questions:

- *How do we as Graduation and climate and conservation actors intersect in our work?*
- *Do our approaches reinforce each other?*
- *Where are the remaining gaps?*

For decades, the Graduation model has been one of the best evidence models for lifting the ultra-poor out of extreme poverty through a sequence of assets, training, financial inclusion, and coaching. But standard poverty-reduction programs are increasingly running up a down escalator: gains in household income and food security run the risk of being eroded, and sometimes reversed, by climate shocks and ecosystem degradation. As IPA's Framework for Defining & Operationalizing a Climate and Nature-Positive Lens to Graduation notes, households risk falling back into extreme poverty not because the program failed, but because the environment they graduate into is changing.

And the reverse is also true — the households that conservation and climate organizations work with are often the same ultra-poor communities whose livelihoods depend most directly on natural capital: soil, forest, water, fisheries. Their vulnerability and ecosystem health are not separate challenges.

Why Climate and Nature-Positive Graduation

IPA's Climate & Nature Positive (CNP) Framework defines applying a "climate and nature-positive (CNP) lens" to Graduation rather than "green graduation." This phrasing emphasizes adapting programs to climate and environmental risks and realities, rather than suggesting they are fully "climate-proofed.""Green" language can be vague and risks overpromising; applying a CNP lens signals concrete, context-specific design choices or impacts. As Graduation programs serve populations who have contributed very little to global greenhouse gas emissions, this framework primarily focuses on integrating climate adaptation and nature- positive livelihoods rather than emphasizing emissions reduction. IPA defines the CNP lens as multidimensional support packages that enable poor and climate-vulnerable households to achieve sustainable, resilient livelihoods by (a) reducing climate risk and vulnerability, and (b) aligning livelihood trajectories with nature-positive development, in line with IPCC climate-resilient development pathways.

To ground the discussion, IPA uses a simple typology for how Graduation programs currently interact with the environment: **maladaptive** programs, where livelihood choices inadvertently increase climate exposure or accelerate ecosystem degradation; **indirectly adaptive** programs, which build resilience through savings and social capital without explicit environmental designs; and **directly adaptive** programs, where asset menus, coaching, and financial tools are intentionally designed around local climate and ecosystem diagnostics. The sector's collective goal is to eliminate the first category entirely — and the group was candid that most existing programs, including several represented in the room, likely sit closer to "indirectly adaptive" than "directly adaptive" today.

Where Approaches are Reinforcing Each Other

Organizations described how their work in climate and graduation is reinforcing each other and shared emerging results.

Village Enterprise (Uganda): Isaac Obongo, Technical Advisor — Conservation, Climate Change Adaptation & Resilience, described how the organization uses Human-Centered Design (HCD) and localized stakeholder mapping to build partnerships with specialized conservation actors to implement targeted solutions. Operationally, Village Enterprise integrated environmental concepts into their training and mentoring curricula and instituted **Minimum Business Standards**. These standard protocols act as operational guidelines to evaluate micro-grants, ensuring that participant businesses do no harm to local ecosystems. Near Kibale National Park in Uganda, they partner with wildlife authorities to mitigate human-wildlife conflict by educating communities and providing alternative, non-extractive income avenues, which has successfully reduced poaching risks.

CARE (Kenya/Tanzania): Ann Vaughan, Associate Vice President — Resilient Futures, discussed CARE's Resilient Futures programming, which centers on Eco-Village Savings and Loans Associations (Eco-VSLAs). In a formal alliance with the World Wildlife Fund, CARE has layered conservation practices onto traditional women's savings structures — members are trained to screen their own micro-enterprise investments and collectively decline loans for practices that harm the local environment. Vaughan was candid that, like most programs in this space, the ecosystem-level effects of this model — water flows, soil health — haven't yet been systematically tracked, even as income gains are visible.

BOMA (Kenya): Paul Bolo, Research & Learning Manager, walked through BOMA's REAP for Climate Resilience model: enterprise screening for environmental responsibility, climate resilience, and commercial viability; area-based targeting through village profiling and resource mapping; group-based enterprises designed to address women's time poverty; and asset transfers toward resilient businesses like apiaries. Midline data collection shows green enterprises under the REAP program have not consistently outperformed standard ones on profit, growth, or risk, and in some cases have proven more capital-intensive or slower to mature. That's not a failure — it's the reason BOMA built its learning agenda around exactly this uncertainty, tracking whether green options can match standard Graduation businesses on income before assuming they will. Endline findings are forthcoming and will shed light on the maturity of these businesses and their potential impacts on income at the end of the program.

100Weeks (Rwanda/Zambia): Bethan Kell, Program Manager — Rwanda, described an RCT in Rwanda studying the isolated ecological and sociological effects of cash-only versus cash-plus interventions in areas prone to resource extraction, along with early exploration of cash transfers as compensation for displaced communities through outcome-based financing. In Zambia, 100Weeks is integrating the Four Returns Framework into its curriculum, training groups to identify shared landscape interests and adopt agroforestry practices.

Across these examples, leadership by women in local climate and natural resource committees kept surfacing as a concrete lever for closing the gender and time-poverty gap that environmental degradation drives — as water and fuel become scarcer, the labor burden falls disproportionately on women, pulling them from economic and educational opportunities. Several panelists pointed to protecting women's land rights and financial leadership as a precondition for any climate-adaptive design to hold.

Getting Creative on Measurement

Proving environmental impact requires moving past traditional consumption-and-savings metrics. If an enumerator asks a participant whether they've been illegally logging or poaching, the answer is almost always "no," out of fear of repercussions. To circumvent self-reporting biases, organizations are combining sociological data with creative, objective field methods:

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The "Forest Walk": Enumerators physically walk designated community pathways to observe and log charcoal-burning spots, fresh tree-cutting, and sand-harvesting.[1]

Third-Party Ecological Data: Using satellite imagery, remote sensing, and ranger patrol logs to track objective indicators like snare counts and forest canopy health.[2]

Attitudinal and Perception Scoring: Developing standardized survey toolkits to evaluate shifts in community attitudes and feelings toward local conservation laws and protected spaces.[3]

Agricultural Yield Tracking: Measuring localized increases in smallholder crop productivity as a direct proxy for the successful adoption of climate-smart farming techniques.[4]

The Evidence Problem Behind the Funding Problem

The conversation kept circling back to a harder problem underneath the funding problem: evidence.

The challenge is a practical one — many of the community- and landscape-scale conservation practices this group knows are investable and need patient capital, because they take years to mature. That raises the real question for NGO partners: how do donors engage in the conversation and structuring around blended finance to help fill the need for concessional capital?

As reflected in a past study into climate financing opportunities, without a robust evidence base tying livelihoods work to clear ecosystem outcomes, funders rarely have this appetite. Until the sector has rigorous evidence connecting Graduation programs to landscape-level ecosystem indicators, mobilizing blended finance at scale will remain difficult. Climate finance mechanisms generally don't fund "micro" projects; they require the scale and data rigor that only aggregated, landscape-level strategies can provide.

Where Do We Go From Here

The roundtable was not intended to resolve these tensions but to explore promising practices, remaining gaps, and lessons learned. But a few shared commitments emerged from the discussion: continuing to feed practitioner experience into EUP's forthcoming Climate and Coaching Guide, and treating the evidence gap on landscape-level ecosystem indicators as the shared prerequisite for unlocking blended finance. As one panelist put it, the conversation won't move past this chokepoint until that evidence exists. Panelists also shared some of the most important lessons they have learned.

1. Patience is important: It takes time to be able to observe these outcomes. Evaluators should consider doing post-assessments.
2. Community-based Approaches: Nature-positive outcomes are best attained when the community works together. It tends to consolidate the gains as opposed to a household-based approach. In addition, it is key to increase the agency of these communities to take up these interventions on their own.
3. Effective and Intentional Gender Inclusion: Support women to be able to engage in setting up systems so that women have both the right to participate and are encouraged to participate in a meaningful way,

[1] Utilized and shared by BOMA
[2] Utilized and shared by Village Enterprise
[3] Utilized and shared by 100Weeks
[4] Utilized and shared by CARE

including working with men and boys. Use community organizing to increase multi-sectoral women leadership.

4. Leverage and Fund Indigenous Knowledge: There is so much knowledge at the community level - people understand their environment. Advocate for local leadership and for funding to go directly to the local community.

Conclusion: The Rational Choice for Extractive Survival

We have to confront a hard reality: for a family living in ultra-poverty, seeking income from extractive practices is an economically rational choice until a viable, nature-positive alternative exists. If we continue to separate “nature” from “poverty,” we are simply funding a revolving door of vulnerability. And without a stronger evidence base, the climate finance the sector needs to scale this work will remain out of reach — evidence generation isn't a side project, it's the precondition.

The cases and conversations from this roundtable suggest that climate- and nature-positive Graduation isn't a niche adaptation. It has the potential to be part of the solution — but only if the sector is honest about how much is still unproven, and treats that honesty as the starting point for the next round of evidence-building, not an obstacle to it. EUP looks forward to continuing to facilitate dialogue and collaboration between Graduation and climate/conservation actors, in order to learn from each other and mobilize our collective expertise and resources.

Special thanks to roundtable panelists

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