# LESSONS ON INCENTIVIZING COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS IN AN INTEGRATED PROJECT

*VSLA/SWAP group members in a savings session in Kanungu district. Photo by Patrick Mayambala.*

This technical note summaries how BRAC as a partner in the CC project has improved a mechanism of incentivizing community volunteers, called Promoters, who move from house to house in the villages reinforcing messages to implement practices and technologies being promoted through the project.

## INTRODUCTION

BRAC Uganda is one of seven consortium members on the USAID Uganda Community Connector (CC) project, an activity which aims to improve the nutrition and livelihood outcomes of poor and food insecure communities among 15 districts of Uganda. BRAC is tasked with establishing and supporting CC savings groups within the targeted communities and increasing their financial literacy and links to microcredit opportunities, along with promoting other CC activities across health, WASH and livelihoods to communities. BRAC uses a village entrepreneur model which engages community members in income-generating market activities, reduces the "handout" mentality among project communities, and provides a channel for businesses to scale up goods produced in rural communities or scale up other socially beneficial goods they would like to see people use. Project volunteers, called *Promoters*, are first trained in retail business and the key CC messages and then are provided with a start-up kit of fast-moving and/or socially beneficial goods ("Goods 4 Life"—G4L) for retail sale to households. Bags might include items such as soap, fortified cooking oils, fortified salt, improved seeds for different crops such as maize or vegetables, solar lamps, renewable energy technologies (fuel-efficient cookstoves), fortified flour for children's porridge, and other goods. Promoters are linked to a supply chain for replenishment of subsidized goods at their own discretion. The first bag is offered for free, but Promoters are incentivized by their profit margins to continue stocking and selling goods.

## THE DEVELOPMENT ASSUMPTION

The introduction of the Promoter approach in CC was based on a key hypothesis for integrated development:

- Promoters would have increased incomes as a result of selling items from the G4L bag, which would motivate them to visit more homes in the community, and, in the process, pass along messages in health, gender, agriculture and nutrition; and
- Through Promoters, hard-to-reach communities would have greater access to low-cost goods that improve the health, wealth and food security status of their families.

In addition, enabling Promoters to sell G4L commodities to fellow community members as a retail businesses is expected to be an effective and sustainable approach of incentivizing volunteers to reach households with needed goods and messages than simply handing them free items, handouts, like bicycles, raincoats, T-shirts as incentives to volunteers.

## QUESTIONING ASSUMPTIONS

The promoter approach was integrated into the design and rollout of CC activities at the community level from the first year, based on its success and acceptability on other BRAC projects and the expectation that it would contribute to the integrated development goals of CC. Midway through the second year of the project, it became clear that BRAC was facing a number of challenges in using this approach to serve CC target populations. These are outlined on the next page:

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The Community Connector Project is implemented on behalf of USAID/Uganda by FHI 360 as the prime and by seven subcontractors: Self Help Africa, Village Enterprise, BRAC Uganda, Communication for Development Foundation Uganda (CDFU), Grameen Foundation, Gulu University, and Mbarara University of Science and Technology.

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*The Integrated Nutrition and Agriculture Project*

PHOTO CREDIT: FHI 360

1. **Working outside of BRAC Branches:** The first and greatest challenge that BRAC and CC faced was the necessity for CC Promoters to operate outside of the BRAC Microfinance Branches, which are based in urban and peri-urban areas. Under this system, the G4L bags are delivered to the BRAC Branches in bulk, stored, and then collected/purchased by Promoters for resale in communities and BRAC Branch Accountants received the payments for the goods and managed the stock. However, the communities (sub-counties) selected for CC project activities turned out to be 50-100 km outside of the BRAC Branch operating areas. Working far from these branches created logistical challenges for the goods supply chain, such as an increase in the costs and transit times for delivering goods to remote communities where promoters could retrieve them; or the need to stock and store larger quantities of goods to accommodate less frequent deliveries, which in turn overwhelmed storage spaces. Delays in the supply chain reduces the motivation and trust of Promoters to engage in G4L.

2. **Supply chain sustainability:** The BRAC approach is intended to retain the same Promoters and other clients over time. However, since BRAC Branches[1] were not available in CC's chosen locations, CC management wanted a sustainable plan for Promoters to continue selling goods after the project was done, which was difficult without an effective and functional supply chain for the goods.

3. **Time constraints of field staff:** In order to address the distances, the project's field level staff, called Community Connector Officers (CCOs), were selected to manage the supply chain of goods to Promoters, including delivery of goods, receiving money, and placing orders – effectively taking on the role of the BRAC Branch Accountants. Heavy time constraints and too much demand on the CCOs' time made this design unfeasible. BRAC also had no easy way to monitor the CCO's working outside of the BRAC Branches.

4. **Over-recruitment of promoters:** The BRAC Promoter approach relies on one Promoter per 100 people, which gives them enough households to sell their goods. However, through CC program design, a promoter was selected from each community group and the result was one Promoter per group (25 households). This resulted in over-saturation of Promoters and it made it difficult to find enough market for their goods and hence difficult to incentivize them.

5. **Piloting Promoter goods in new areas:** Since BRAC had never implemented in communities that are remote and far removed from urban and peri-urban BRAC branches, it was difficult to predict what goods would be demanded in these remote areas and the logistics of replenishing the supplies. It took the project more than 6 months to find-out what sells and what does not. Studies on product-needs from target communities did not seem to match the demand of goods when provided by Promoters. In addition, under the BRAC model there are very few restricted products compared to USAID-CC; particularly pharmaceuticals and agricultural products, which are restricted goods under the CC contract.

6. **Slow uptake of fuel-efficient cookstoves:** Selling prefabricated or building fuel-efficient cookstoves is one of the items/services in the Promoter bag, and they improve the health of women and children and reduce the workload through reduced smoke from cooking fires, and reduced time spent gathering firewood. In Nebbi and Ibanda, these stoves were not taken up quickly by project households.

7. **"Handout" mentality:** In these remote communities, because of previous history, there was a strong expectation from the groups and household members of "free goods"/ handouts and many did not see why the local Promoters were selling the goods, and refused to buy them. It took periodic and consistent sensitization by local leaders for communities to accept that goods (e.g. seeds, solar lamps, items for energy saving stoves, etc.) were for sale, and not for free.

## THE LEARNING AND ADAPTATION PHASES

BRAC and CC undertook a learning activity that included reviewing BRAC methods, dialogue with Promoters and Community Connector Officers, and focus group discussions with community group's representatives. Some of the information was used to understand the challenges stated above but most was used to learn how to address some of the challenges while keeping in mind the integrated nature of the project and characteristics of the communities where CC works.

Given the challenges faced, CC opted to pilot a modified Promoter/G4L approach (shown in Table 1) in Kabale, Ibanda, Nebbi and Oyam before scaling up in any other areas. In September 2014, the project decided to scale up this modified approach to Kanungu, Kamwenge, Pader and Agago. The learning opportunities observed and addressed, and their outcomes, are discussed in the table on the next page.

[1] In the BRAC Promoter approach, the BRAC branches acts as wholesalers where the entrepreneurs get subsidized goods and are able to compete (in terms of price) with local traders selling similar goods.

**TABLE 1: LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES**

| CHALLENGE | HOW CC RESPONDED | OUTCOME |
|---|---|---|
| Working outside of BRAC Branches and time constraints of CC field staff | Hired Community Organizers to be seated in BRAC Branch Offices (or CC regional offices) to directly manage the Promoters and the supply chain of G4L bags. | Hiring Community Organizers worked extremely well. The supply chain of G4L vastly improved, and Promoters were willing to take on other tasks on the project. |
| Sustainability | Linked Promoters directly to BRAC Agriculture and Health Branch Offices for replenishment of goods. Community Organizers now source goods from the Branch Offices, and these will remain in existence long after the close of CC, allowing Promoters to continue accessing goods. | This worked moderately well. Community Organizers are now able to access seeds and other goods from the BRAC Branches, but there have been stock-outs of soap and other fast-moving goods as it is difficult for to plan for the needs of CC Promoters as well as others. In addition, for CC Promoters residing in more remote villages, the supply chain system still relies on CC vehicles and/or motorbikes to transport larger orders of goods to CC Promoters. |
| Over-recruitment of Promoters | The project proposed to reduce the number of overall Promoters from ten per parish down to four. In addition, the project gave Promoters additional responsibilities for supporting field activities such as Family Life Schools (FLS) and establishment of CC model homes in the communities. | Some communities in the southwest protested the reduction of Promoters, and so in these areas the number of Promoters per parish was not reduced. In hindsight, the project should have been more conservative in its recruitment of Promoters.<br>In the north, local community and parish leaders bought into the idea of reducing Promoters and supported the meetings to sensitize communities on these changes. As a result, the reductions took place smoothly.<br>Adding responsibilities to the Promoter role was a positive change, and enabled Promoters to gain more trust from the communities they were serving. |
| Piloting Promoter goods in new areas | Consultations were undertaken with the District Agriculture Department and sub-county officials to find out which products (e.g. seeds) were in demand. Historical procurement trends from Promoters also helped find goods that were selling well in the target communities. | Conducting market surveys was absolutely necessary to understand the demand in new areas, but in the second phase, we used a much simpler analysis of buying behaviors from the Promoters to understand client demand and plan for supplying new Promoters. |
| Slow uptake of fuel-efficient cook stoves | In Ibanda, the Community Organizer recognized the issue and took the initiative to cluster Promoters into teams of 5 to build cookstoves together to increase production as well as promotion of the approach. | Cookstoves are now very popular and very well-appreciated in Ibanda, as a result the project is also greatly appreciated within the district. Introduction of cookstoves by CC has reduced firewood-usage for cooking by 50%, and has improved overall health of household members.<br>In Nebbi, there were certain parishes were the uptake was high and these turned out to be parishes where households had to purchase firewood directly at a high cost – thus the appeal of the fuel-efficient stoves was great. In other areas, it was ascertained that the low uptake was likely due to different cooking customs/approaches that made cookstoves less attractive. |

## MOVING BEYOND THE CURRENT ADAPTATIONS

CC has also identified a number of other promising adaptations to interventions to improve the impact, effectiveness and sustainability of activities.

**Link Promoters in the very remote districts of Kasese, Pader and Agago to organizations that will remain established beyond the life of CC.** CC has established partnerships with B-Box in Kasese and GIZ in Pader and Agago to link Promoters to more permanently structured opportunities for village entrepreneurship, to businesses themselves and to UNICEF-supported organizations. In addition, if Promoters have some assurance that they will be benefitting from sustainable income-generating opportunities (such as the G4L bag), free training, and mentorship over the longer term, they are more likely to carry out program activities. The local partner organizations linked with Promoters also benefit from this arrangement as they increase their access to a trained and self-motivated workforce.

**Support selected Promoters to become agricultural inputs dealers:** In Nebbi, Lira, Ibanda, and Oyam, CC has supported Promoters to expand into small agricultural inputs dealers, accessing unsubsidized goods from a supply chain other than BRAC's. Some Promoters have opened small shops (kiosks) as agro-suppliers in their community. This adaptation appears to address the issue of sustainable access to a supply chain, while at the same time making agricultural inputs available to even remote communities.

**Provide Promoters with an asset package instead of G4L bag:** CC could explore a model of rewarding high-performing Promoters (i.e. those who reach a high number of households with CC messages, and those who have supported a high number of households to become CC models) with key productive "asset goods" free of charge to boost their income or production. Asset goods could range from improved seeds for the season, a drip irrigation, a plough, etc.

*A VSLA group holding a meeting to save in Nyamarebe, Ibanda district. Photo by Maymie Tegart.*

## LESSONS FOR CC AND OTHER PROJECTS

- Promoters or village entrepreneurs are effective in spreading socially beneficial products in remote communities at minimal cost. If you have a socially beneficial, easily-marketable product, you can effectively scale-up sale of this product within communities using village entrepreneurs.
- Village entrepreneurs can be ideal conduits for introducing new innovations or accelerating the uptake of existing ones in communities! Entrepreneurs can also generate high demand in communities for products: new varieties of seeds, organic fertilizer, improved breeds of animals, multiple micronutrient, sanitary pads, etc..
- Take time to truly understand what about a particular commodity or innovation really appeals to communities, and how existing commodities or innovations can be made more appealing, keeping in mind these factors may change over time. For example, how do we make cookstoves more attractive to buy? CC found that households were not necessarily willing to pay for cookstoves in order to reduce firewood usage; but they were willing to pay for something that would cut down on the amount of time they spent cooking.
- Selling goods rather than giving them away establishes a more sustainable source of productive assets and reduces dependency.
- Managing multiple objectives can be difficult when working with village entrepreneurs. For maximum impact, it is best to decide early in a project how you will prioritize your objectives rather than attempting to accomplish everything at the same time or level with village entrepreneurs. For example, will you focus on having active community volunteers? Upscaling socially beneficial goods? Trying to reduce handout mentality? Then plan for and coordinate the goods, the marketing strategies, the prices, targets and other activities around these objectives.