

Graduating out of Extreme Poverty in Malawi

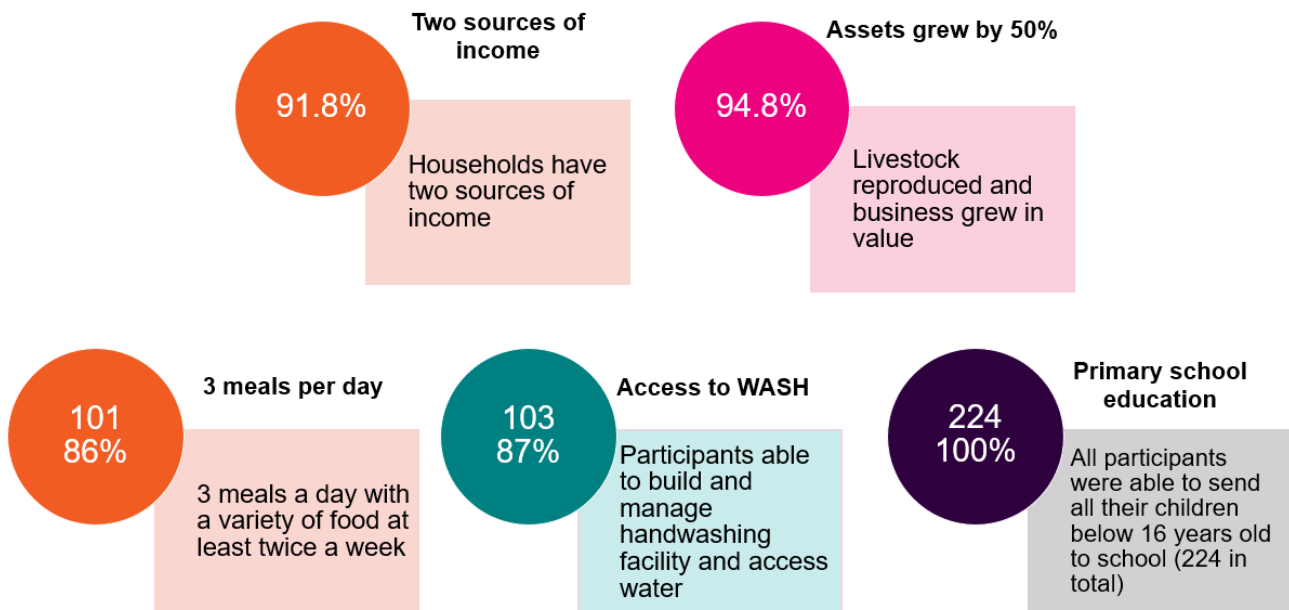
Inaugural Cohort Completes Two-Year Rural Graduation Program, September 2024

GRADUATION IN MALAWI: “*Usiwa watha!*” “Poverty has ended!”



For more than fifty years, Opportunity International has been driven by our North star: providing the chance for people living in the deepest poverty to create sustainable livelihoods. Certainly not easy work and never a “quick fix,” people often ask about the results of fighting poverty one family at a time.

Thanks to the faithful focus of families in Malawi and the unflagging support of Opportunity’s team of experts, we are grateful to share the results of our first cohort of graduates from the Rural Graduation program in Malawi: **more than 100 families have “graduated” from the lowest level of poverty and are on a path to sustainable livelihoods.**



In 2022, we launched the first Rural Graduation cohort of 120 families in Blantyre, Malawi—preceded by six months of planning, partnership- and community-building, and selection of families—and in April 2024, celebrated the graduation of **88%** of the original participants—with an extension through December 2024 to support the remaining 12%. To graduate successfully, participants had to demonstrate significant improvements in their initial conditions and meet the criteria in four areas: **food security, economic resilience, basic rights/services, and community connections.**

The program supports families living in the deepest poverty, struggling to meet basic needs like food and shelter. Many participants lack social protection, are allowed no voice in the community, and have no productive assets. Select initial demographics for the first cohort of Malawi Rural Graduation included:

- 100% surviving on less than \$1.25/day (ultra-poverty)
- 92% female head of households
- 89% no access to financial products or service
- 75% between 19-39 years old (25% over 40)

The Graduation program fits well with Opportunity International’s proven three-pronged model of access to **financial services, training, and support**; we tailor it for those who are living at the lowest levels of poverty imaginable.

- **Access to financial services:** Guide creation of savings groups and provide direct access to convenient formal or informal financial services
- **Training:** Provide financial education and literacy, business management training (including how to care for assets like pigs and goats), training on health/hygiene for the family, life planning/skills training
- **Support:**
 - Livelihood promotion: Asset transfers (for instance, pigs or goats) for income-generating livelihoods
 - Social protection: Consumption support, crisis relief, and access to essential services such as health and education
 - Social empowerment: Regular check-ins and life skills training to enhance resilience and promote social inclusion

Crucial to the success of this deeply client-centric program are the community-based case workers. Each case worker supports 20 households. They help families stay on track in making substantial life changes, provide links to services not provided by the program (such as Abwenzi Rural Health Insurance), and provide psycho-social care. The program works with government, community leadership, and development structures to ensure alignment with the district and community development plans. The impact of this program goes beyond the participant, as all family members play key roles in improving their quality of life.

In June 2024, over 300 people came together outside a rural school to celebrate the completion of the two-year Graduation program—and to celebrate a brighter future for so many local families.

LESSONS LEARNED

The complexity of an intervention based on multi-dimensional poverty has its challenges to achieve real, long-term change. Our staff carefully monitored and evaluated the experience of Malawi's first Graduation cohort. The findings below will impact the experience of future cohorts:

- ▶ *Caseworkers are key:* Weekly visits and trainings by caseworkers help build strong and healthy bonds with the participants, improving their chances at achieving results. Additional staff including more project officers and supervisors would strengthen future cohorts.
- ▶ *Mindset:* Vision building lessons are deeply effective at changing and shaping the mindset of participants, encouraging them to focus on the future rather than the short term.
- ▶ *Secondary beneficiaries:* Children under 16 benefit from the opportunity to attend school; older children also benefit if they can attend second school and colleges thanks to a more stable family environment.
- ▶ *Role models:* Households who are not participating in the project begin to emulate participating households—for instance, adding hand washing facilities and latrines and improving home cleanliness.
- ▶ *Partnerships:* Governments—local and country—are key to offering training to staff to ensure quality training across projects in Malawi. Other NGOs and stakeholders can help in the implementation of activities in areas of their expertise.
- ▶ *Climate shocks and natural disasters:* Cyclone Freddy occurred during the cohort's critical work of building up their livelihoods and homes. While the historic, deadly weather event destroyed many assets, we collaborated with relief and health agencies to address immediate needs. A Recovery Lending Fund was created to capitalize established savings groups, replace productive assets, and rebuild homes.
- ▶ *Applying fiscal management:* If participants do not manage consumption support well, business capital may be used to meet daily home demands, which of course lessens the impact and viability of the business. Continued training in financial education and budgeting is crucial.



MEET GRADUATE ELINA

(Excerpt from [blog](#) written by Opportunity International Vice President of Communications Joe Dutra)



Elina was one of those unlucky enough to face the worst of Cyclone Freddy. Her hillside home was all but washed away in the days of rain, and she lost many of the resources she had accrued in the early months of the program. Thanks in part to other local program members and Opportunity International, Elina and her family received enough materials and support to rebuild her home quickly—and build it even stronger than it had been before the cyclone.

A year and a half later, Elina and her family have been able to build a latrine, grow a pumpkin garden, and raise five goats. With the starting resources from the program and the proceeds from her garden, she has begun developing a mind for commerce and a plan to expand her business.

Today, she obtains much of her money through buying and selling dried ground nuts and maize. Elina's intuitive know-how and resilience have been fundamental to her survival for her whole life, and thanks to the program's support, she can now use those qualities to find markets for her produce and establish a pathway to prosperity for her family.

COHORTS TWO AND THREE

Thanks to the tireless efforts of our staff on the ground in Malawi—including nurturing local partnerships, gathering learnings from the first cohort, and continuing to identify potential families for future participation—and our generous supporters, in the summer of 2023 we launched a second cohort of 200 households, and in early 2024 started a third cohort of 120 families.

OUR GRATITUDE

We are filled with gratitude for the people we serve and for people like you who make that work possible. We hope you feel our celebratory spirit as we conclude the journey of the first cohort of 120 families in Malawi who participated in Opportunity's Rural Graduation program—families who, two years ago, were challenged to provide the most basic necessities like food and shelter; families who now have the training and support to work their way out of poverty one opportunity at a time. Thanks to our clients' unstoppable perseverance, our staff's client-centric expertise, and the generosity of our supporters, we are breaking the bonds of intergenerational poverty, one family at a time.

A traditional graduation offers the opportunity to celebrate accomplishments at one moment in time. For families in Malawi, this graduation truly means continuing to walk on a path that changes the trajectory of their lives and the lives of their future generations.
Thank you for being on this path with the people of Malawi.

APPENDIX

GRADUATION MODEL

The Graduation program offers a long-term solution whereby families living below the extreme poverty mark of two dollars a day—truly living in subsistence mode—receive support to secure food; start one or two income-generating businesses; learn basic financial skills; benefit from mentorship and community linkages—support that will pave a holistic, viable path out of poverty.

The Graduation model consists of the systematic, sequenced implementation of a series of components that help people in extreme poverty to "graduate" by improving their living conditions over a period of 18 to 36 months. Among the main components are a time-limited security stipend, savings, technical training, transfer of assets, and coaching in basic skills. . Most candidates for Graduation are women with dependents or persons with disabilities who lack reliable access to basic needs like food and water.

The Graduation program fits well with Opportunity International's **core model of financial services, training, and support; we tailored it for those who are living at the lowest levels of poverty imaginable**. We have witnessed the powerful impact of Graduation in Haiti; we recently completed our first cohort of Graduation in Colombia.

Graduation Pillars

PATHWAYS OF OPPORTUNITIES

