The Hunger Project.

Post Self-Reliance Evaluation of Epicenter Strategy.
Recommendations and Responses.
2020.

Context of Study.

The Hunger Project (THP) requested MDF Training and Consultancy BV (MDF) to carry out a Post Self-Reliance Evaluation Study for THP Epicenter Strategy for Gender-Focused, Community-Led Development Program (referred to as the program hereafter) in Ghana and Malawi. Two epicenters were selected for this evaluation, one in Nkawanda, Ghana, and another in Ligowe, Malawi.

This study is a part of THP's commitment to providing a critical framework for delivering on its organizational mission. One of the noteworthy manifestations of this is systematic learning from outcome evaluations conducted since 2012, which adds to THP's ongoing monitoring and reporting at the output level. With this evaluation, THP goes a step further by conducting the first post-self-reliance evaluation to learn from and report on the impact of the THP program.

Lessons Learned.

As noted by the authors of the study, the following five lessons can be derived from the findings:

1. Training that targets skills and attitudes pays off in terms of achieving sustainable behavioral changes;
2. Animators are motivated by capacity development opportunities. In their absence, encouragement and other stimuli work in keeping a smaller committed group engaged;
3. A combination of improved farming practices and loans produces effective results in terms of increased yield and increased motivation of farmers;
4. Microfinance (loan) programs become vulnerable in the post self-reliance stage, and their poor performance in turn negatively affects a number of result areas, including WEI;
5. The placement of the epicenter building contains a dilemma: while the clinic and model plots/gardens should stay close to the areas with the most vulnerable and poor, the epicenter IGAs require being nearer to the consumers/users of the IGA services who are not necessarily the most vulnerable and poor. Professionalization of the epicenter as an organization increases its chances of successful fundraising, contributing to the sustainability of the epicenter activities.

Major Findings from the Study.

Based on the analysis of data collection results and inputs from sense-making events, the following findings were drawn regarding THPs program effectiveness, impact and sustainability.

Program Effectiveness and Impact

Program Strengths	Program Weaknesses
Positive trends in declining poverty and hunger are undoubtedly linked to the program's effectiveness in improved land productivity, which has been outstanding (almost 100% ex-post) in both epicenter areas.	Conflicting results between epicenters implies that training in WASH/hygiene practices in the absence of (or solutions for) durable latrines has an insufficient impact on access to sanitation facilities.
Enrollment in primary and secondary education has seen impressive results continued in both epicenter areas, attributed to an enabling of families to pay schooling fees due to increase in income/ reduced poverty.	There has also been a slight decrease in access to safe and drinking water in both epicenter areas, although the proportion of the population who have access to drinking water is higher than the regional averages
The program has observed long-term effects of girls' empowerment, marked by a significant decrease in child marriage. An overall effectiveness in empowering women was noted in Nkawanda by improved attitudes toward gender equality.	The study noted a declining proportion of women accessing financial services ex-post – in turn triggering a significant drop in leadership, the time dimension of the WEI and WASH results.
In both Ghana and Malawi, the epicenters included in the study continue to function as mechanisms for community-led development. The infrastructure of both epicenters continues to work, committees function with women holding leadership roles, and new community-initiated projects have been	Fewer women believing in their leaders successfully addressing community concerns shows that program efforts have been more impactful in the household domain and less in the public one.

Program Strengths	Program Weaknesses
implemented. The number of people who are motivated, confident, and self-reliant to improve their lives and their communities has been gradually growing.	

Program Sustainability

Program Strengths	Program Weaknesses
The extent to which the progress has been achieved varies per goal. Most positive trends have been seen in achieving goals of (a) improved access to and use of health resources and (b) improved literacy and education, which appear sustainable due the combination of improved economic status of families and behavioural changes around nutrition, hygiene and sexual and reproductive health.	The progress in reaching the goal of improved access to safe and drinking water and sanitation facilities might fade out or (further) decline in the long run based on the argument that sustainable behavioral changes might be insufficient unless they are combined with functional basic infrastructure or alternative low-cost solutions in its absence.
Continuous support from community leaders to epicenters and the dedication of animators and boards has resulted in communities initiating and implementing projects, despite struggling with the challenges of access to water and sanitation and women's empowerment like in Ligowe, with the reduced yet still high incidence of poverty.	Progress in community mobilization has been gradual and marginal, and therefore it risks going unnoticed unless deliberate efforts are made to capture and celebrate it.
In order to improve overall sustainability and resilience of communities, attention must be given to including youth in community mobilization and addressing climate change.	The positive trends in the reduced incidence of poverty, the reduced prevalence of hunger and malnutrition and improved land productivity also seem fragile in the long run, in the absence of stronger resources and more adaptive strategies to factors such as climate change and access to external markets.
	While the goal of having empowered women and girls in rural communities has seen a positive trend, the individual changes have not yet reached a critical mass to become transformative, and therefore sustainable.

Overall Recommendations and Strategic Questions.

The evaluation study presented the following recommendations, highlighting areas that require strategic rethink from THP management:

Recommendation	Response and Plan
Recommendation 1: Continue targeting behavioral changes through training in areas of farming practices, nutrition, hygiene, and sexual and reproductive health. Pay particular attention to attracting young people.	**Lesson Learned**: While THP has developed youth specific programming, it is still in its early phases. We acknowledge the need to track and expand youth engagement as a critical area of growth. **Next Steps:** Pilot projects completed in THP-Benin and underway by THP-Malawi (BMZ Youth Empowerment Project) and THP-Zambia (partnership with NGO Restless Development) specifically target youth engagement. Results from these pilots will support the documentation and evaluation of best practices on youth engagement, learnings that will inform changes to general program strategy. Early observations from these pilots indicate effective youth-centered programming must address key areas of interest for youth participants, such as sustainable income generation. THP will continue to create youth centered programs that target behaviour change, modeling the success of the aforementioned pilots in the

Recommendation	Response and Plan
	areas of community-youth engagement, agriculture and income generation.
Recommendation 2: Develop capacities for market analysis and business planning to boost the profitability of epicenters' IGAs. Focus earlier on and more professionally on fundraising and business development strategies for epicenters.	**Lesson Learned:** Consistent with field observations reported across other self-reliant epicenters, the need for improved and sustainable IGAs has been noted by epicenter leadership as a primary challenge to maintaining community-led activities, post self-reliance.
Related Strategic Questions: In the knowledge of the microfinance program becoming vulnerable post-reliance, is there a need for continuous capacity development of animators regarding how to ensure sustainable IGAs and fundraising for such development? How can serving the most marginalized and poor be combined with ensuring that the epicenter IGAs attract customers?	**Next Steps:** THP will explore the strengths and weaknesses of the current IGA strategy by 1) conducting an internal case study of IGAs across self-reliant epicenters, 2) developing epicenter peer-learning mechanisms, and 3) adapt its sustainability planning criteria at the community level to focus more on diversifying income streams. Improvements to the sustainability planning criteria may include: professional and business skill development for epicenter leadership with attention to epicenter-focused IGAs; workshops on effective leveraging of new/ existing partnership; and applying for external funding.
Recommendation 3: For the goals where behavioral changes need basic infrastructure to make transformative changes, work on the missing elements by (a) enriching or (b) combining your programs, (c) building in-country partnerships earlier on with complementary initiatives, and/or (d) advocating for government support to provide basic infrastructure.	**Lesson Learned:** Despite successful behavioral interventions, the findings suggest that the epicenters included in the study are not resilient to changes in elements beyond the immediate control of the community (e.g., ongoing infrastructure needs, climate-related threats and access to larger systems/ institutions for economic growth). This challenge points to a possible fragility to gains in key strategic areas such as poverty reduction, prevalence of hunger and improved land productivity, despite the positive trends observed.
Related Strategic Question: How can the WASH results be made sustainable including solutions as an alternative to delivering infrastructure (e.g. rainwater collection)?	**Next Steps:** Understanding THPs focus on behavioral change and limitations in addressing all resource needs, next steps will explore the expansion and improved use of strategic partnerships by epicenter leadership post self-reliance, focusing on in-country partnerships and government support to fill in resource gaps. Establishing local partners that specialize in these gaps is agreed upon as a more sustainable strategy that compliments THPs mobilization approach. Moreover, THP has sought to address these elements through its convergence model[1] as well as larger national advocacy work.

Regarding access to water: drilling boreholes, as an example, is recognized as an expensive and substantial portion of the epicenter budget, next to other construction costs. Beyond this study, communities have noted an inability to fund the maintenance of infrastructure post self-reliance, often reverting to contaminated water sources. Reviewing these findings, THP will re-examine this strategic area for positive outliers to inform successful and sustainable community led water management systems. |
| **Recommendation 4**: Strengthen achievements in agriculture with a value chain approach and combine own programs with those of other organizations addressing climate change.

Related Strategic Question: How can THP link agricultural to value chains proactively and in a community-led manner? | **Lesson Learned:** THP must establish to what extent it can have a role in this field, as agriculture and value chains are highly dependent on specific local markets and their context, with multiple local actors involved. To carry out proactive efforts that link agriculture with value chains requires a broader consideration on how that adaptation fits within THPs strengths as well as its evolving mission.

Next Steps: Specially funded agriculture projects in Uganda, Ghana and Malawi have developed successful models for linking epicenter agriculture and value chain production. These projects show promise for scaling up their approaches, not only within the |

---

[1] This theory of change posits that the convergence of top-down efforts, mostly focused at the national level of countries, and bottom-up efforts where community voice and agency are mobilized, will create systemic change, which will enable achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Recommendation	Response and Plan
	epicenter framework but also by other organizations practicing a CLD approach in agriculture. THP will continue exploring new and implementing known best practices in this strategic area, reviewing the outcomes of ongoing agriculture projects and scale up communication of successful implementations.
Recommendation 5: Strengthen WEP to create a critical mass of women for transformative change. Promote the discussion among men and women on how they can empower each other and organize themselves in the program from early onwards. **Related Strategic Question**: How is it possible to move from individual-/household-level achievements/successes to more collective ones to create transformational change (for the whole community)?	**Lessons Learned:** The study noted overall positive outcomes in the area of 'empowerment of women and girls' and 'minor' declines in women's leadership, assumed to be driven by an overall decline in income observed in both epicenters. Still, concerns regarding the sustainability of these outcomes indicate impact that is 'deep but note widespread.' Key to improved sustainable progress is effective outreach to a critical proportion of the community in order to ensure lasting impact of the WEP. **Next Steps:** Next steps will include 1) A refocusing of the 'success indicators' for this program measured at individual level to community level (including critical mass building and the socio-structural changes it ignites); 2) Increase understanding of and efforts toward building and measuring agency in 'women as a community' through the empowerment process for individual women; 3) Cross learning events and dialogue facilitated between THP-Africa and other Program Country leadership teams to share successful program strategies in the widespread outreach of women leaders, building and measuring collective agency, and individual women's empowerment, as seen through examples such as THP-India's EWR strategy.
Recommendation 6: To place gradual changes in community mobilization under the limelight, make a deliberate effort to stimulate self-reflection as well as defining and celebrating successes and champions of change in community mobilization.	**Lesson Learned:** While THPs epicenter strategy denotes a phasic progression, implying mobilization (i.e., Phase 1) concludes early on, shifting this concept from a 'phase' to an ongoing practice throughout the strategy may better promote and sustain widespread progress into self-reliance. **Next Steps:** Currently, celebrations (i.e., events acknowledging the collective achievement of the epicenter community) occur primarily at the end of the epicenter strategy and if funds are available. Restructuring these events from 'occurring once and if possible' to more frequent opportunities to self-reflect and build collective identity around the epicenter may improve the actual and felt impact of THPs efforts. This can come in the form of more community sense-making workshops, data presentation/ walks and smaller but more frequent celebrations where achievement and areas of growth can be highlighted.
Recommendation 7: Continue with ex-post evaluations. Start with the HH survey and after its analysis leads to discovering areas with answers to "why" questions needed, employ MSC story collection and analysis or other complexity-aware methods like outcome harvesting to address them. Conclude with a sense-making event for joint analysis and action planning. To maintain consistency, consider adjusting methodologies for mid- and end-line evaluations.	**Lesson Learned:** While this study provides a unique source of insights, we cannot draw generalizable conclusions from its results as it does not include a representative sample of the 47 self-reliant epicenters across 8 African countries. In order to build a conclusive body of evidence supporting THPs sustained efficacy, and continue improving its current program strategy, it is crucial for more data monitoring and evaluation of self-reliant epicenters to occur. **Next Steps:** Under the current methodology for impact level data (i.e., household evaluations), qualitative data collection occurs concurrently with the quantitative and cannot effectively ask 'why' based on the survey results, as suggested. While adjusting the order of data collection may be logistically challenging, THP is already integrating 'complexity aware' methods such as MSC in place of traditional focus group discussions during base-, mid- and endline studies. Our plan is to continue integrating the suggested methods, as well as expand the scope of 'sense-making' strategies to include the spectrum of organizational stakeholders (e.g., field staff,

Recommendation	Response and Plan
	program leadership, fundraisers, community partners themselves, etc.). In addition, THP will continue pursuing funding and developing strategies for post self-reliant monitoring and evaluation.