In Mali, Saving for Change enables very poor members of the community to form self-managed Savings Groups, bringing basic financial services to remote areas not served by microfinance institutions.

The Learning Initiative is generously co-funded by:

The MasterCard Foundation

Other Programme Development and Research Partners:
Freedom from Hunger
Oxfam America
Stramme Foundation

For further Information:
Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) 1-3 Avenue de la Pâix 1202 Geneva Switzerland Tel: +41 22 909 7200 Fax: +41 22 909 7291 E-mail: info@akdn.org Website: www.akdn.org

The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is a group of private development agencies working to empower communities and individuals, often in disadvantaged circumstances, to improve living conditions and opportunities, especially in Africa and Asia. Its agencies work in over 30 countries for the common good of all citizens, regardless of their gender, origin or religion. Its underlying impulse is the ethic of compassion for the vulnerable in society.

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The Learning Initiative

Lessons Learnt

The Mali experience illustrates that SGs provide a powerful platform for adding education. To keep costs down, field workers can provide the education during their regular visits to the groups rather than schedule additional visits. For success, the education must be simple, short and relevant to local realities. It must be tailored to the local context through basic market research that considers available health services, member knowledge and practices, and the capacity of the “teachers.” Training SG members (such as replicators) to train groups can greatly lower the costs and increase chances to sustain the education. More work is required to ensure the right tools and incentives are in place for replicators to do so successfully.

Brief based on research conducted by Freedom from Hunger, written by Laura Fleisher Proaño and Kathleen Stack in October 2010.

Given the high incidence of malaria, the cost of treatment and lost time at work, as well as limited knowledge about malaria prevention and treatment, Saving for Change uses SGs to deliver malaria education to members to enhance the impact of the programme. The Mali experience illustrates that SGs provide a powerful platform for delivering education.

Savings Groups

Savings Groups (SGs) refer to self-managed community-based groups that provide their members access to basic financial services. SGs are composed of 15 to 25 self-selected individuals who meet regularly (usually weekly or fortnightly) to save and, if desired, borrow for short periods, paying monthly interest at a rate set by the group. After approximately 12 months, all savings and earnings are distributed back to group members (often referred to as a share-out). The earnings usually are distributed in proportion to their savings. SGs respond directly to the unmet financial services needs of the remote and rural poor by providing: i) a secure place to save; ii) the opportunity to borrow in small amounts and on flexible terms; and iii) affordable basic insurance services. SGs aim to increase household financial assets and to decrease household vulnerability to financial and other shocks.

SGs are a simple, transparent, cost-effective and sustainable means of providing entry-level financial services to people who are too poor or isolated to be served by other financial service providers. For this reason, they are being actively promoted by leading international development agencies including CARE, Catholic Relief Services, Oxfam America, the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF), PLAN International, Freedom from Hunger and others including national and local partners. The number of SG members has grown rapidly to about three million people at the end of 2009, mostly in Africa, but with increasing numbers in Asia, including Central Asia, and a few in Latin America. SGs are complementary to other financial services; some SG members also use financial services from other providers.

Learning Initiative Objectives

This research study is one of a series of studies sponsored by AKF’s Savings Groups Learning Initiative funded by AKFC and The MasterCard Foundation. The Initiative examines how SGs are used as a platform for development activities and how linkages to other services take place and with what benefits to group members. It considers how financial services combined with other development activities add value for individual members of the groups, for the groups as entities in themselves, for the agencies facilitating SG development and offering the linked activities, and for the wider community.

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The addition of health education to community financial services groups not only helps members to address their health needs, but also supports health providers in reaching remote areas and populations that are currently difficult and expensive to access.

When SGs have completed the initial training in organization and management of the group, malaria education begins. Combining SGs and malaria education tackles a number of problems of the poor: ill health, lack of productivity, and loss of income due to health costs.

The Initiative also explores the sustainability and replicability of SGs, thus examining long-term access to financial services for the poor.

Context

Saving for Change is a highly replicable savings-led microfinance programme developed by Freedom from Hunger, Oxfam America and Stromme Foundation. Saving for Change enables the very poor to form self-managed Savings Groups (SGs) and participate in simple, relevant, high-impact education on malaria.

The programme brings basic financial services to areas that are typically beyond the reach of microfinance institutions. In doing so, it creates sustainable, cohesive groups that provide loans and savings services, and tackles social issues facing their members and their communities.

Saving for Change is reaching more than 300,000 members in more than 13,000 SGs in Mali as of June 2010.

During market research in Mali in 2010, SG members in all focus groups mentioned malaria as the most frequent illness in the community. While malaria affects every age group, and both men and women, it is especially severe among pregnant women and babies, where seizures are very frequent. And, among the illnesses that lead to the highest treatment costs is severe malaria which costs 10,000 FCFA or more than $20 per episode.

In 2010, Freedom from Hunger conducted impact studies with 40 randomly-selected Saving for Change SG members in Mali and an alarming 70 percent of the women interviewed had endured the death of at least one child and/or their husband. Malaria was the most common cause of these deaths.

Given the high incidence of malaria, the cost of treatment and lost time at work, as well as limited knowledge about malaria prevention and treatment, Saving for Change uses the SG platform to deliver malaria education to members to enhance the impact of the programme.

Leveraging SGs for Malaria Education

In Mali, 10 NGOs employ hundreds of field workers, called animators, to organize and train SGs. These animators visit the groups weekly, fortnightly or monthly during their first year. When the SGs have completed the initial training in organisation and management of the group, malaria education begins. The malaria education is delivered during six regular visits of the animator. During these six group meetings, highly interactive, guided “Technical Learning Conversations” are held that last about 30 minutes each.

The learning conversations are adapted to the local context with information from basic market research. They engage participants to reflect on malaria prevention and treatment through stories, pictures, and exchanging their personal experiences. All SG members receive a “Malaria Reminder Card,” a pictorial reminder for the women and their families of the cause, symptoms, treatment and prevention of malaria. The learning conversations result in new knowledge about malaria, and motivation and commitments to adopt new practices to prevent and treat malaria. The learning activities work for literate and illiterate groups alike.

It takes three days to train a group of animators and their supervisors in adult education methods and the basic technical information on malaria. A Malaria Training of Trainers manual has been developed by Freedom from Hunger to guide this training. The manual can be used repeatedly by an organization to train new batches of animators. A companion Facilitator Guide contains the scripted 30-minute learning sessions for animators to use to teach the SGs.

By piggybacking education onto the regular visits of the animators to SGs, the cost to deliver malaria education is marginal. The same animator that trains and supervises the SGs offers education to the groups at the same time and place they regularly meet. Because the Technical Learning Conversations are designed to be easy to use for animators of different skill levels, a health specialist is not required to deliver them.

Outcomes

Combining SGs and malaria education tackles a number of problems of the poor: ill health, lack of productivity, and loss of income due to health costs. A randomized control trial in Freedom from Hunger programs in Ghana found that malaria education delivered through credit and savings groups increased knowledge about the causes, treatment and prevention of malaria among members leading to the increased use of insecticide-treated bednets, one of the most powerful means for preventing malaria in Africa.

Financial gains made from participation in SGs can be undermined by the cost of illness. It is well documented that the costs of illness disproportionately impact the poor, often resulting in the sale of assets and increased debt. In 2002, a northern Ghana study by Akazili found that malaria costs were one percent of rich households’ income and 34 percent of the incomes of poor households.

The major costs were in time lost from productive activities to travel to distant health facilities and wait for care, and the high costs of treatment.

Malaria education can reduce these financial and health costs. In 2010, focus group discussions with Saving for Change SGs in Mali showed that members who received training about malaria had good knowledge about the transmission and the prevention of the disease. The use of insecticide-treated mosquito nets was the method most often mentioned by the women in all the focus group discussions as a means of protection against malaria.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that more women and their family members now recognize the importance of sleeping under the nets. The potential to reduce the physical and financial hardship of this terrible disease through education of SGs is enormous.

Sustainability and Scale

An animator in Mali serves an average of 71 SGs of 15 to 25 members each. And, in Saving for Change, participating NGOs train SG members to become “replicators”. These village women then form new SGs on their own.

To keep costs down, field workers can provide the education during their regular visits to the groups rather than schedule additional visits. For success, the education must be simple, short and relevant to local realities.

The Malaria Reminder Card is a pictorial reminder for women and their families of the cause, symptoms, treatment and prevention of malaria.
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**Conclusion**

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Research Partners:
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For further Information:
Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN)
1-3 Avenue de la Pépinière
1202 Geneva, Switzerland
Tel: +41 22 909 7200
Fax: +41 22 909 7291
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AKF SAVINGS GROUPS LEARNING INITIATIVE

Saving for Change: Savings Groups as Platforms for Malaria Education in Mali

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