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The case of MUVA Assistentes: Beyond income generation to a new approach for women's empowerment

Paper No. 5

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About this report

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List of acronyms

MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
PATI	Temporary Income Support Program
PSNP	Productive Safety Net Programme
PWP	public works programme
YVW	young vulnerable women

Summary

This paper highlights the case of MUVA Assistentes, a public works programme (PWP) that provided training and mentoring to young vulnerable women (YVW) in urban Mozambique. Our paper draws out the main learnings from the MUVA Assistentes project to inform the design of other PWPs that have women's empowerment as their major aim. We show through our analysis that it is possible for PWPs to achieve women's empowerment, but only if they go beyond a sole focus on income provision through paid work to women. Instead, we argue that if PWPs formulate their theory of change in line with Kabeer (1999)'s notion of empowerment, with its three interrelated dimensions (resources, agency and achievements), women's empowerment through PWPs can be both realistic and long-lasting.

PWPs have always been popular in low- and middle-income countries as tools for poverty alleviation and mitigating high unemployment rates among young people. Given the disproportionate impact of poverty on women and girls, many existing PWPs often include a 'gender' component in their theories of change. A common limitation of such PWPs and theories of change is their overarching focus on providing income opportunities, which they suggest leads to women's empowerment. However, this has not been the case for most PWPs; hence, learnings from a project that has led to substantive empowerment of young women are highly valuable.

The MUVA Assistentes project was a component of the broader MUVA Programme running in urban Mozambique. It provided training to YVW and gave them paid work as classroom assistants in primary schools for one academic year. The project addressed two major problems plaguing Mozambique today: (1) high unemployment among urban young people, especially women; and (2) poor educational outcomes among primary school students. Through a dedicated focus on mentoring the participants, the project supported these women to build soft assets and skills to enable them to realise their future goals and aspirations.

This paper highlights that the MUVA Assistentes project led to three major outcomes: (1) building technical skills; (2) improving opportunities for women's employability in the labour market (while improving public goods); and (3) building soft assets through training and mentoring. Through a close discussion of the experiences of four women participants, we find that the MUVA Assistentes led to an increase not only in income opportunities for YVW, but also in their sense of self-worth and confidence to exercise their agency in achieving their goals. Further, the project also provided a critical public good by working towards improving the quality of classroom outcomes in government primary schools.

We conclude that through building these skills and increasing women participants' self-worth, PWPs can build women's resources, agency and achievements, thereby moving closer to achieving a holistic view of empowerment, which encouragingly extends beyond the PWPs' duration as well.

Key Messages

- **In urban Mozambique, young people are very likely to suffer social exclusion:** over one-third of young people are 'neither in education, employment or training' (NEETs). This figure is particularly high for young women (46 per cent) in urban areas compared to young men (28 per cent).
- **Globally, PWPs are a popular policy tool in addressing unemployment and poverty.** Although many prominent PWPs focus on including more women participants, their approach towards empowerment is often restricted to providing income-generating opportunities for women. The exclusion of broader social, cultural and institutional factors that marginalise women and limit their life choices is significant in holding back PWPs from achieving their goal of women's empowerment.
- **In Mozambique, the MUVA Assistentes project provided paid classroom assistant opportunities to young vulnerable women, taking a holistic view of empowerment.** It provided a unique combination of: (a) building technical skills; (b) providing paid employment; and (c) building participants' soft assets and skills. Although a few other PWPs have attempted this approach, the MUVA Assistentes project did so at a greater scale.
- **The classroom assistant opportunities the project offered were considered socially respectable and aspirational by both the beneficiaries and the wider community in Mozambique** – a unique and effective innovation that could be incorporated into other PWPs, especially in low- and middle-income countries.
- **A post-project survey of MUVA Assistentes participants found that all the women were members of a social network in their communities,** a factor that is key to achieving 'liberating empowerment' (Sardenberg 2016). This finding also emphasises the need for PWPs to align their theories of change to strive towards achieving liberating empowerment that can be more long-lasting and effective.

I. Introduction

For several decades, social protection initiatives have been popular policy tools for poverty reduction and income generation among vulnerable households in low- and middle-income countries (Zimmermann 2014). Although these initiatives have primarily focused on poor households and impoverished communities, many social protection initiatives have had a special focus on women and girls, as they are disproportionately vulnerable due to lack of capital, high wage differentials, gendered work norms (bearing the responsibility for childcare) and exclusion from basic services (GSDRC 2019).

Initiatives increasingly specify women's economic empowerment as an explicit aim. However, such initiatives – especially public works programmes (PWP) – usually aim to increase income levels of beneficiaries (who are mostly women), and seldom make development of skills and employability in the labour market their key aim. This paper argues that these programmes aim for, and therefore achieve, a very narrow path to economic empowerment, which entirely focuses on income.

It is in this context that the Mozambique-based women's economic empowerment programme (MUVA) becomes relevant for this paper's analysis. MUVA is a programme that works with young women and girls in urban Mozambique. It tests solutions to reduce the barriers that limit women's access to decent work, while also looking at ways that women's economic potential can provide broader benefits to local communities and the country. This paper focuses on MUVA Assistentes, a project under the broader MUVA programme, which provided training and mentoring to young vulnerable women (YVW) in urban Mozambique and offered them paid work as classroom assistants in primary schools for one academic year. The provision of paid work supported these women to exit poverty.

The secondary aim of the project was to create a social asset – in this case, an improved classroom experience for primary school children studying in overcrowded classrooms. While data is available on the creation of this social asset, it will not be the focus of this paper.¹ The paper takes the MUVA Assistentes project as a case study to demonstrate a new and unique direction that PWP can take to achieve women's empowerment. MUVA Assistentes shows that it is possible to go beyond the generation of income and poverty reduction towards achieving the goal of women's empowerment in a more holistic manner. The project was designed as part of an intensive testing of 20 approaches to women's economic empowerment. It implements the three cross-cutting dimensions of female economic empowerment that were the MUVA programme's main focus areas: (1) technical skills, (2) opportunities and (3) soft skills.

This paper takes a wider view of women's empowerment as not merely labour market participation leading to an increase in their resources, but importantly, an increase in women's agency and their achievements (Kabeer 1999). It shows that through the MUVA Assistentes project, there was an increase in women participants' sense of self-worth and confidence to exercise their agency towards achieving their goals – whether that was furthering their education or moving towards more skilled jobs such as teaching. While there is data relating to the educational achievements of students who benefitted from having classroom assistants (*assistentes*) in the classroom, this paper takes these achievements as secondary outcomes of the project and therefore does not examine them.

For this paper, we followed a two-pronged methodological approach. First, we carried out an extensive review of the literature on women's empowerment, as well as existing public works and social protection programmes in different countries. Second, we conducted a secondary

¹ In Ghana, too, the Teacher Community Assistant Initiative undertook a similar exercise to train assistants to help with overcrowded classrooms, with an endline evaluation assessing a positive result in children's numeracy and literacy skills. However, it was discontinued after a short period due to institutional developments (Hodges 2022).

analysis of documents such as MUVA Assistentes project summaries and reports, a participatory evaluation report (photovoice methods) and interview transcripts of 20 women participants (from the photovoice evaluation of the 2017 cohort). A research assistant at the Institute of Development Studies translated the transcripts from Portuguese to English and then analysed them further. From these 20 transcripts, for the purposes of this paper we randomly chose four women – Alina, Almina, Minelia and Zuhura – and decided to focus on them to ensure adequate representation of the women’s perspectives and how the project led to change in their lives or not.²

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: section 2 highlights relevant debates and conceptualisations of women’s empowerment, which we use in the paper; in section 3, we give an international overview of PWP in terms of their aims and theories of change; in section 4, we discuss in depth the MUVA programme, its objectives and outcomes and results; in section 5, we place the MUVA Assistentes project in relation to the international literature on PWPs, drawing critical lessons from this analysis that other PWPs can learn from (the focus is on learning innovative new methods, such as those piloted by the MUVA Assistentes project, to achieve women’s empowerment); and in section 6 we present our concluding arguments and recommendations for future gender-oriented PWPs.

2. Women’s empowerment: relevant debates and frameworks

Given that the MUVA programme’s objectives are about women’s and girls’ empowerment, it is important to discuss our understanding of empowerment from different contexts. Women’s empowerment is a much contested and debated concept. Many feminists argue that its complexity lies in the fuzziness of the concept itself (Kabeer 1999: 437). Nonetheless, we focus on two different conceptualisations of empowerment: (1) Kabeer’s notion of empowerment (1999), which can be thought of as having three interrelated dimensions (resources, agency and achievements); and (2) Sardenberg (2016)’s work on the critical difference between liberal empowerment and liberating empowerment.

According to Kabeer (1999), the notion of empowerment refers to the processes by which people acquire an ability to make choices they have been previously denied, entailing a process of change. For instance, someone who exercises significant choice in their lives is powerful, but they are ‘not empowered’ in Kabeer’s terms because they were never disempowered in the first place, never having been unable to make those choices.

Thus, Kabeer’s notion of empowerment is primarily about change, which emphasises the expansion of people’s ability to make choices. This ability to exercise choice incorporates three interrelated dimensions: resources (defined broadly to include not only access to, but also future claims on, material and human and social resources); agency (including processes of decision making, as well as less measurable manifestations of agency such as negotiation, deception and manipulation); and achievements (wellbeing outcomes) (ibid.: 437–38).

The first dimension of power relates to resources, which include not only material resources in a conventional economic sense, but also the various human and social resources that serve to enhance the ability to exercise choice. Resources in this broader sense of the word are acquired through a multiplicity of social relationships conducted in the various institutional domains that make up a society (such as family, market and community). The second dimension relates to agency – the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them. Agency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation

² Although this paper has been written drawing on the evaluation of experiences of 20 women in a particular cohort, we have evaluation data for over 300 women participants from different cohorts.

and purpose individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency or 'power within' (ibid.: 438). While agency tends to be operationalised as 'decision-making' in the social science literature, it can take a number of other forms, such as bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion, and resistance, as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis. It can be exercised by individuals, as well as by collectives (ibid.)

Resources and agency together constitute what Sen (1985) refers to as capabilities: the potential that people have to live the lives they want and to achieve valued ways of 'being and doing'. Sen uses the idea of '**functionings**' to refer to all possible ways of 'being and doing' that are valued by people in each context; and '**functioning achievements**' to refer to the ways of being and doing that are realised by different individuals. Overall, Kabeer (1999: 452) argues that when women's empowerment is measured using an indicator, it is not possible to establish the meaning of that indicator, whatever dimension of empowerment it is intended to measure, without reference to the other dimensions of empowerment. For any indicator of women's empowerment, these three dimensions – resources, agency and achievements – are indivisible in determining the meaning of an indicator and hence its validity as a measure of empowerment.

Sardenberg (2016) frames the discussion of empowerment around its overall aims and objectives by differentiating between liberating vs liberal empowerment. These terms may sound similar at first instance, but there is a compelling difference between them. Sardenberg argues that the '**liberal empowerment**' approach regards women's empowerment as an instrument for development priorities, be that eradicating poverty or building democracy. This approach is consistent with liberal ideals such as individual growth, but from an atomistic perspective; that is, based on the notion of the rational action of social actors based on individual interests (Romano 2002).

This form of empowerment emerges from liberalism, which is deeply linked with neoclassical economics. Application of neoclassical theories has produced policies such as structural adjustment, privatisation and so on, which have had a significant impact on women in the global South. Feminists from the global South have heavily criticised such policies (Lind 2002; Elson 2002; Whitehead 2005). Thus, liberal empowerment is an approach that depoliticises the process of empowerment by taking power out of the equation. Instead, its focus is on technical and instrumental aspects that can supposedly be 'taught' in special training courses.

The second approach, '**liberating empowerment**', prioritises power relations as a category of critical analysis. Women's empowerment is regarded on 'intrinsic grounds' (Kabeer 1999) as the process by which women attain autonomy and self determination; and as an instrument for the eradication of patriarchy – a means, and an end in itself. Thus, although feminists also aspire to end poverty and wars, and build democratic states, from this perspective the major objective of women's empowerment is to question, destabilise and eventually transform the gender order of patriarchal domination. Such an approach is consistent with a focus on women's organising – on collective action – but does not disregard the importance of women's empowerment on a personal level (Sardenberg 2016).

3. A brief review of gender-oriented PWPs

In the past few decades, PWPs have gained currency among governments in low- and middle-income countries as a tool to address high poverty and unemployment rates in their countries. It is important to note that while there is evidence these PWP interventions reduce poverty among women, across these programmes this section shows that this is not enough to change gender dynamics, pointing to the necessity of additional interventions that go beyond cash or income generation.

For this paper, we reviewed around 21 well-known public works and social protection programmes,³ many of which have a programmatic focus on gender and women. In this section, we examine three of the world's major PWPs, which also focus on women's empowerment: the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in India, the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) in Ethiopia and the Temporary Income Support Program (PATI) in El Salvador. A list of all programmes reviewed is attached in the annexe.

MGNREGA

The MGNREGA is the world's largest PWP (Times of India 2015). Launched in 2006, the programme aims to guarantee at least 100 days of paid employment to every rural household whose adult members are willing to do manual work to build assets (Tushar Das 2016). In terms of its focus on gender, the programme mandates a 33 per cent reservation for women, and has special provisions for women's inclusion in decision-making structures, as well as provisions such as creches, work sites being closer to women's homes and so on.

In the past 5–6 years, the proportion of women workers has always exceeded men (more than 50 per cent of the workers are women). However, critical analysis of the programme shows that an exclusive focus on increasing women's participation does not serve an agenda of promoting 'women's empowerment' (Chopra 2019). By ignoring the dynamics and processes of unpaid care work, both the making and implementation of the act fall short of the goal of women's empowerment (*ibid.*). Analysis by Bárcia de Mattos and Dasgupta (2017) found that while the programme had positive and significant effects on women's control over household decisions, there was not enough evidence to suggest a transformative impact in terms of breaking the cycle of disadvantage for women.

PSNP

In Ethiopia, the PSNP is a large national social safety net programme that responds not only to chronic food insecurity among poor people, but also to shorter-term shocks, mainly droughts. The programme has a gender focus, recognising the gender-specific vulnerabilities that women face because of family composition, sociocultural gender roles and lifecycle factors (World Bank 2013). For example, there is provision for community creches to enable women with small children to be able to work. Furthermore, there are provisions for the inclusion of female-headed households in public works activities, given their higher concentration among the poorest people, and recognition that these households need greater flexibility in terms of working times so that women can accommodate their domestic work and care responsibilities (*ibid.*).

However, a review of the programme by Jones, Tafere and Woldehanna (2010) found that the PSNP had limited emphasis on addressing unequal gender relations in food security and agricultural productivity at intra-household level. Furthermore, in male-headed households, men typically had absolute control over income management and the programme had limited impact on this gender dynamic (*ibid.*).

³ A full list with a table is attached in the Annexe. We chose 18 international PWPs for our review. The selection criteria focused on: (a) the popularity of the programme and its impact; and (b) programmes that have a focus on gender and increasing women's participation. Not all programmes satisfied both criteria, but most did.

PATI

Between 2010 and 2015, the El Salvadorian government implemented the PATI, which aimed to guarantee a temporary minimum level of income to extremely poor urban families, as well as providing beneficiaries with experience in social and productive activities at municipal level (Acosta and Monsalve Montiel 2021). During this period, the programme served 43,000 beneficiaries, most of them women (75 per cent) and young people (44 per cent), targeting extremely poor urban settlements in 43 municipalities. A qualitative evaluation of the programme (FUSADES 2015, cited in Barca 2019) and quantitative experimental impact evaluation (Beneke de Sanfeliú 2014, cited in Barca 2019) found that while the programme had changed some women's attitudes about work (e.g. their willingness to be more proactive in searching for jobs and taking on 'male' jobs such as brick-laying), it did not and could not address the broader barriers to employment women faced. Furthermore, participants also declared feeling significantly more 'ready' to search for employment or start their own business, though these effects were only visible in the short term. Finally, no significant impact on participants' self-esteem or agency were detected (*ibid.*).

In addition to the individual reviews of the PWPs, an extensive literature review of gender-oriented PWPs globally by Barca (2019: 35) found:

there is an increasing awareness of the need to explicitly address women and girl's interests, needs and priorities into social protection design and implementation, [and] there is still a strong risk of such measures being primarily 'cosmetic' and 'tokenistic' – to tick boxes with regards to pressure by donors and the international community, as well as gender-focused branches of Government or civil society.

These reviews and evaluations indicate that while PWPs that have gender-specific guidelines or provisions for women are well intended, their 'success' is mainly measured by an increase in the labour force participation of women and increased income in their hands. The common underlying argument among all gendered reviews of these PWPs is that they do not – or cannot – address the structural issues and hierarchical power structures that disadvantage women institutionally. In other words, these programmes mainly focus on a liberal empowerment approach (albeit with mixed success, depending on the context and the programme), rather than a liberating empowerment approach (Sardenberg 2016).

Thus, having reviewed these gender-oriented PWPs, it becomes important to understand and assess the MUVA Assistentes project in terms of its objectives and outcomes, and what differences and similarities there are with other PWPs.

4. The MUVA Assistentes project: objectives, theory of change, and outcomes

Launched in 2017, the MUVA Assistentes project⁴ worked with disadvantaged young women who graduated from secondary school to become classroom assistants to primary school teachers for a period of one academic year. The project collaborated with the municipality of Maputo, where these young women were given training and guaranteed work placements as classroom assistants in primary schools.

The project aimed to address two major challenges in Mozambique: unemployment among young women and poor educational outcomes due to high pupil-teacher ratios. At the national level, Mozambique had a high pupil-teacher ratio of 52 pupils per teacher in 2017, which increased to 55 in 2018 (World Bank 2023a), compared with the world average of 23 (World Bank 2023b) pupils and sub-Saharan Africa average of 37 (World Bank 2023c). In some areas, however, ratios are much worse. For instance, in the northern province of Cabo Delgado, the ratio is 120 pupils per teacher. Furthermore, data from the most recent census shows that over one third of young people are likely to face social exclusion as they are ‘neither in education, employment or training’; this figure is 46 per cent for young women in urban areas compared with 28 per cent for young men (INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE ESTATISTICA 2017).

The project used a three-pronged approach, providing: (1) four weeks’ training to the young women at the teacher training institute (IFP); (2) individual and collective mentoring for them to develop and hone their soft skills; and (3) their first career experience in a respected professional institution. Thus, the project focused on developing the women’s soft assets, while working to improve educational outcomes: a common public good. The MUVA Assistentes project tested an approach to women’s economic empowerment that encompassed three dimensions: **technical skills, opportunities and soft skills**, a combination of interpersonal skills and the sense of personal power and self-efficacy.

Figure 1 shows the MUVA Assistentes project’s theory of change.

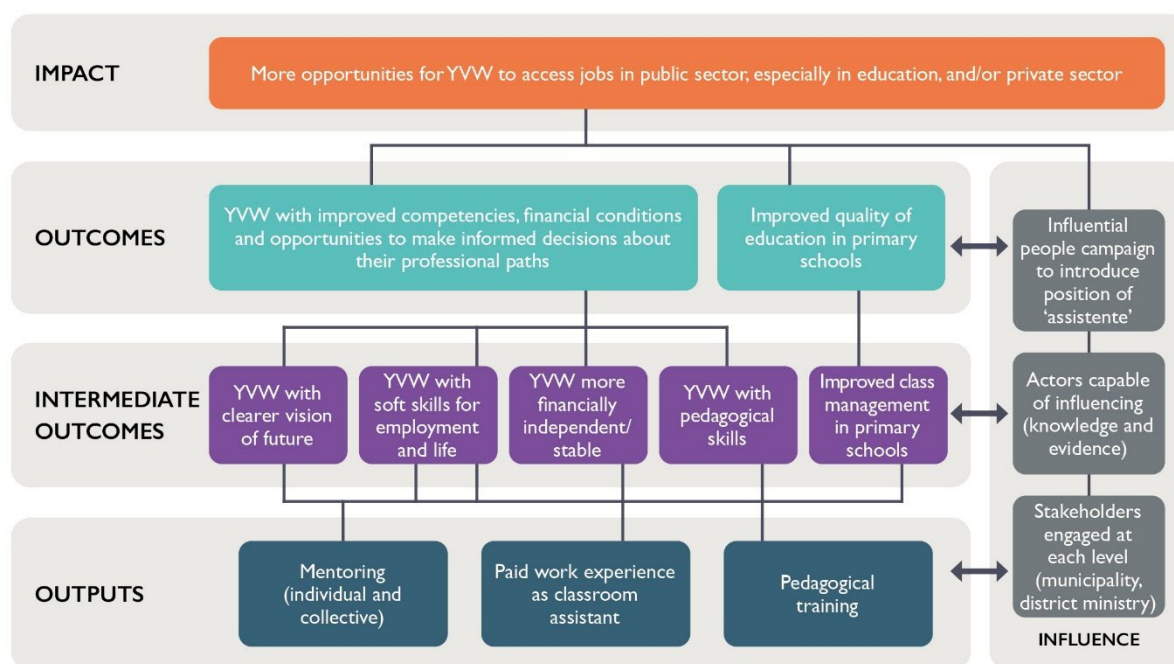
The theory of change was based on the belief that providing paid classroom assistant experience to YVW, and complementing it with pedagogical training and mentoring, would equip these women with greater competencies, improve their financial conditions, and provide them with social and material resources to make informed decisions about their professional goals. Additionally, these women would provide a critical public good by working towards improving the quality of classroom outcomes in government primary schools. Furthermore, the project’s structure (including cost per participant and community targeting principles) was designed in line with Mozambique’s national social protection and PWP policy, the Programme for Productive Social Action (PASP).

The project’s conceptualisation was based on the following assumptions:

- The training and paid post of a classroom assistant would be attractive to YVW who have completed at least the 10th grade of education;
- The presence of a classroom assistant in primary schools with few resources would not harm the education of students in these classes; and
- Influential people at the level of the municipality and the education sector actively supported the project’s hypotheses and theory of change.

⁴ The project was implemented in partnership with the pilot primary schools, the municipal education department, local non-governmental organisation Horizonte Azul, community leaders of the *bairros* (neighbourhoods) and the teacher training institute (IFP of Manica).

Figure 1: MUVA Assistentes project theory of change



Note: YVW = young vulnerable women

Source: MUVA Assistentes project documents.

As seen in the above figure, the project aimed overall to provide more opportunities for YVW to enhance their employability and access to work opportunities in the public sector.

During the academic school year of 2017 the project recruited, trained and deployed a cadre of 72 young women as classroom assistants in three primary schools in the municipality of Maputo. To ensure that the project reached YVW who satisfied the minimum criteria, it followed a dual and distinct targeting approach:

1. **Community-based targeting** – local authority figures were contacted to provide a list of individuals from disadvantaged households. To narrow the list down, three filters were added in agreement with the authorities: (a) gender (only women were included); (b) age (participants had to be aged between 18 and 24 years) and (c) educational attainment (between 10th and 12th grades). These filters were added so that the chosen participants had a better chance of graduating out of poverty compared to participants in other PWPs internationally.
2. **Poverty-based targeting** – household visits were conducted to ascertain the poverty status of these individuals. To implement this, the MUVA Programme used a simple poverty scorecard, which facilitated an assessment of the probability of households being below a specific poverty line based on easy-to-measure household characteristics. This approach is similar to the World Bank's proxy means testing approach (Grosh and Baker 2013). The poverty-based targeting approach was an important component as the targeting process during the pilot project showed that community-based targeting did not necessarily identify the most vulnerable households in a community. Overall, 34 per cent of the women in the cohort were from female-headed households, 64 per cent lived on less than US\$2.50 a day and 28 per cent did not have access to basic sanitation facilities.

After receiving their training, the women were recruited as classroom assistants to cover one class period in the morning or afternoon (in effect, working part-time or four hours per day).

Their classroom responsibilities were to support but not replace the teacher. Their duties included: ensuring that pupils attention during the lesson; supporting the teacher to correct pupils' homework; identifying students with learning difficulties and ensuring they got additional attention; and preparing materials under the teacher's guidance to support the lessons.

4.1 Project evaluation, outcomes and impact

The MUVA Assistentes project has been operational for the last six years (since 2017). It was initiated in Maputo and has expanded to two other cities (Pemba and Nampula), enrolling over 600 classroom assistants in total, working in 15 schools and with over 48,000 students. It was also operational during the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, when the assistants supported teachers in setting work for home learning and liaising with pupils' families. This paper looks at data from the first cycle of the project, evaluation of which was done through a unique participatory methodology called the photovoice method (Wang and Burris 1997). This is a qualitative method, which uses the immediacy of visual images to furnish evidence and to promote an effective, participatory means of sharing expertise and knowledge (*ibid.*: 369). This method was used to track changes among the classroom assistants over the course of the intervention.

For the evaluation, three framing questions were designed in accordance with the women's economic empowerment principles mentioned in section 2. Each of these questions was explored with the participants at baseline, midline and endline (this was an exception as for every other cohort of the MUVA Assistentes project, evaluations were only done at baseline and endline):

- a. Where are you now?
- b. Where do you see yourself in the next three years?
- c. Considering where you see yourself in three years, how does this work experience (classroom assistant) influence your ability to reach your objective?

Each of these questions and their findings are discussed below.

a. Where are you now?

The data tracked for the question 'Where are you now?' found that at the baseline women participants reported being mainly confined to domestic and household work, being economically dependent on husbands or just staying at home. However, these participants expressed dreams and goals they wanted to pursue, but did not know how to realise them and lacked the resources (social and material) to work towards them, as the following comments show:

Currently, I am in a complex situation. My husband is unemployed, and I have been working hard and have been learning how to be a true woman. I have been fighting to achieve my dreams. This photo I took at home and in it is me, my husband, and my daughter. I took the picture in my room because it is there that I feel good. This sight is from someone that has been through difficulties and how they see life. Even with all the problems we continue together and strong.
(Minelia, Baseline, August 2017)

This picture shows my dream which is to work in a bank. I did not have this dream before – it is sudden to me. Before, I wanted to study law, but I saw it was impossible because of the course duration and I also saw I needed to study more. The picture is at the Millennium Bim Bank because it was the closest one, but I can work in any bank. Trying to pursue my dreams, I applied to a Training Institute, but I could not get

in. After that I stayed at home without a clue of what to do. I also would like to continue my studies. I do not want my future to be myself at home doing nothing but cooking.
(Almina, Baseline, August 2017)

As seen in the above quotes, Minelia and Almina had certain dreams, but they lacked the resources and agency to be able to pursue those dreams. While Almina's dreams were a little vague, she mentioned that she had tried pursuing careers in law and banking; but after not being able to get admission to a training institute, she said she did not have any clue how to realise her dreams (i.e. because of lack of resources), so stayed at home.

During the midline review, which was conducted four months into the MUVA Assistentes project, changes to women's everyday activities due to the project were observed in the photos. Most participants shared pictures of themselves in classrooms, conducting activities with students, cleaning the chalkboard, speaking in front of the class and so on. They spoke about the change that being part of the project had made to their own sense of wellbeing and inner confidence, despite the difficulties they faced. As one of the participants explained:

Now I am at Maguiguana School assisting the students and in this picture I am helping a student who is preparing for next week's assignment. If anyone sees the picture, they will think I am a teacher, not an assistant. I am also learning. I have previous experience and teaching them reminds me of my past, when I was learning the modules. I am acquiring more experience on how to deal with kids... it is rewarding to meet them in the street and see they are calling me 'teacher'. This picture was taken in our break because I did not want to bother the teacher in class, as I bond with her. I am friends with the kids.
(Alina, Midline, November 2017)

Specifically, comments by Alina – 'they will think I am a teacher, not an assistant' and 'it is rewarding to meet them in the street and see they are calling me "teacher"' – demonstrate the sense of immense pride and prestige (of being associated with a socially respectable profession) that she feels being part of the project.

The endline photo evaluation revealed that most participants took pictures of themselves in the classroom that showed them actively engaging with pupils in the school, or in the classroom without pupils. In most cases, they spoke explicitly about how strongly they identified with the assistant role, feeling happy and proud of the work they had been doing in the classroom and their experiences. Alina's response below encapsulates the sense of pride and expansion of future dreams that all the participants felt:

I want to show I am helping the kids in solving the assignments and I am also proposing better classes. This photo shows that school is not [just] any place – it is the environment where I work now and where I have been for the past year and a half. The uniform I am wearing inspires me, it is not just a uniform. I am in love with the job and I intend to have a licence to be a teacher. I want to teach my students and I can have one assistant to help me.
(Alina, Endline, November 2018)

The endline review also noted the palpable sense of change in the women's confidence and attitude, alongside tangible benefits that the MUVA Assistentes project had helped them achieve. As one participant said:

When I started in the project, I was living with my parents-in-law, but now I have a different mentality and now I live in my own house. It was not easy, because when MUVA started, my husband had no job. It was a difficult year, but with the money the project gives I could buy a sack of cement and pay for my studies, so we started building our house. It is exciting to move to my own residence. I even invited some cousins to my parents-in-law's house to eat a cake because I want to say bye. I am really social,

so one day I was talking with a man in the hospital and I told him I was a classroom assistant. He asked about my husband, and I told him he was unemployed, so he said he would get him a job. After one week, they called and my husband got a job.
(Minelia, Endline, November 2018)

As the above quote shows, Minelia had moved out of her house to live her own independent life. This is a clear indication that she had acquired the financial resources, as well as the agency, to build her own house, which can be categorised as an achievement. Her emphasis on her 'different mentality' is noteworthy in terms of her increased agency, while an expression of her increased confidence levels and achievements can be seen from her ability to speak with an outsider regarding her husband's unemployment.

Thus, working as classroom assistants has allowed the women participants to transition from primarily being involved in domestic work, depending on their husbands and lacking agency, to acquiring the ability to make independent decisions and having claims to their possible future achievements.

b. Where do you see yourself in the next three years?

This question mainly relates to the women participants' future aspirations, especially in terms of how these might have changed over the duration of the project. The data tracked over eight months captures the changes among these women, from just having professional and personal aspirations to acquiring the capabilities to work towards achieving those aspirations.

At the baseline, evaluation of this question found that most participants anticipated being trained in three years' time and ready to be the professional of their dreams. Accordingly, many photos gathered as part of the photovoice methodology were a simulation of those professions, such as wearing a white jacket and pretending to administer a vaccination, or writing on a chalkboard, being with children and so on.

However, despite talking about their dreams, there was little mention of how the women planned to reach their goals – what actions they would take and steps forward – as the following quote demonstrates. While Alina states that she wants to be a doctor, she does not speak about the next steps towards becoming a doctor:

In 3 years, I wanna be a doctor. I am wearing white because doctors wear it... in the picture the kid has one injury to his foot and I am healing it, as a doctor... I believe I am not lacking much to achieve my goals, I just need to work hard and believe in myself. As the picture shows, education is what I need to achieve my dream.
(Alina, Baseline, August 2017)

The midline evaluation found that the participants expressed gratitude to MUVA and strongly connected their classroom assistant experience to their current aspirations. Further, they shared how this experience was helping them structure a clear path towards their dreams (or had changed their aspiration to wanting to become a future teacher), as well as redefining their confidence levels, as recounted by Almina:

In 3 years I want to be a teacher working to fulfil my duty to the world and society. I want to be a great woman. I want to be a woman who has a job that [she] likes and achieves what she intends to. This photo is because in 3 years I want to be inside of a classroom like this one. I will be a new Almina because I will [be] in a place full of kids and with a dream achieved. Before I wanted to work in a bank, but working as an assistant with MUVA I found out that the teaching area is easy. In some time, receiving more training, I will be better at it. If everything works out fine, I will continue to be a teacher.... After some time being a teacher, I can start a university degree and with my salary I can pay my studies to work in the bank later.
(Almina, Midline, November 2017)

As can be seen from the quote above, Almina was expressing a newfound interest in pursuing teaching as a career (as opposed to expressing an interest in banking earlier) because becoming a teacher now seems like an achievable goal, with very clear steps towards realising this goal. The midline evaluation found that others maintained their original dreams and goals of being a doctor or other professional, requiring a university degree. At the same time, they also recognised that graduating as a teacher could possibly be a step on the path to entering another profession. The main reason given for this was to be able to earn a salary from teaching that could help finance their studies in other disciplines.

The endline evaluation for this question found that the classroom experience helped women participants solidify their dreams and aspirations, and helped them take actionable steps to reach those dreams, as can be seen in the following quote:

I took the photo in the school because I believe that is my last year here and next year I can apply for IFP [National Teacher Training Institute]. I want to study more... I want to learn everything I need in one or two years so I can achieve my goals. In 3 years, I want to be a teacher and if I could come back to work here it would be even better. The school is not the structure, it is the kids – without the kids the school would not have a meaning.

(Zuhura, Endline, November 2018)

Zuhura, who during the baseline had broadly talked about working in a school, now talks about IFP, which is the institution responsible for the schoolteacher certification exam in Mozambique. This experience also made her realise that she needs 1–2 years of training to become a teacher and return to teach at the school. Thus, between baseline and endline, she has acquired the capabilities (Sen 1985) to work out her future functionings ('next year I can apply for IFP'; 'in 3 years, I want to be a teacher'). This is also seen in the case of Minelia:

I am in love [with] psychology and my focus is working with kids that have special learning needs. I took the photo with this girl... because it shows the love I have for kids that have any psychological difference. Hence, in 3 years I see myself studying psychology to work with them.

(Minelia, Endline, November 2018)

During the baseline, Minelia had stated her love for psychology and pursuing it academically, but this endline response demonstrates a more concrete ambition of working with children with 'special learning needs'. This can be attributed to Minelia's classroom experience furthering her passion for psychology and the importance of working with students with special needs. Her statement 'in 3 years I see myself studying psychology to work with them' is indicative of her ability to make connections between her dreams and potential implementation of those dreams, thereby making claims to future functioning achievements (*ibid.*).

c. Considering where you see yourself in three years, how does this work experience (classroom assistant) influence your ability to reach your objective?

While the women participants reported the positive impact of classroom teaching experience on their lives in the previous questions, this question brought out direct linkages between the MUVA Assistentes project as envisioned by the participants, their new sense of confidence, self-esteem and pride, and their enhanced capabilities to achieve their goals and objectives.

At baseline, many girls focused on the opportunity the MUVA Assistentes project gave them to get out of their household to gain professional experience and learn how to work with children. The participants explained that their photovoice images illustrated how the project was opening doors to the future and allowing them to dream again, simply through their participation in the project:

This assistant training means hope and opportunity to me because I do not want to be only a doctor, I want to have opportunity to know people as well. I have another dream of opening a food store where I can make cakes and savouries. People will be able to evaluate my work so I can achieve this dream in the future. I believe this project is the beginning of everything. It represents a door with opportunity and hope. I took the photo in my house because it is the only door that I could take the picture [of] without any problem. The picture represents opportunities, as I am meeting new people and showing what I have been cooking at home. Being an assistant at MUVA will also open doors, as it will enrich my curriculum vitae.
(Alina, Baseline, August 2017)

Four months into the project, at the midline, the participants continued to mention the professional experience they were gaining and new technical skills they were learning, but focused much more on how they had developed soft skills and self-confidence. The women explained that the training and support they received from the mentors had helped them to be less shy and more assertive, to have higher self-esteem and confidence, and to gain skills to work with people:

MUVA influenced me. It was with MUVA that I found out about the teaching area. This photo shows what MUVA does for me. It influenced me by the opportunities it has been giving me. After the project, I do not know what will happen, if MUVA will facilitate my entry into the Institute or not, but I know it will help me to enter there. MUVA gave me training and a certificate that can help me in the interview that happens after the exam for being approved by the Institute. Besides the Institute, MUVA influences me in [my choice of] profession. I was shy, but after the individual and collective sessions I can talk and connect with people.
(Almina, Midline, November 2017)

The final reflection, at the endline evaluation, mentioned all three aspects of women's economic empowerment principles in the MUVA approach: (1) the experiences and knowledge the participants gained by being in the classroom; (2) the discovery of a new passion and dream for the future, or the fact that the subsidy received over a continued period had enabled participants to pay for school or inscription fees and to take the first step towards pursuing their dreams; and (3) the individual and collective mentoring sessions, which helped participants become more confident, see themselves as protagonists of their own lives and challenge social norms that would otherwise keep them from pursuing their dreams.

Minelia recounts:

I was reserved and now I am friends with everyone, friendly. My house is where I look for inspiration and MUVA taught me that it is never too late to dream. This is the leisure space I see in my future. How did MUVA help me? With the mentorship sessions. Every time I talk with my mentor, I learn something new. Once, my mentor said that in the beginning I was reserved. But now, anytime there is something to do, I do not think twice, I raise my hand. This face is the face of a winner.
(Minelia, Endline, November 2018)

As the above quote shows, Minelia says that the MUVA Assistentes project transformed her personality – she was able to make friends and was confident about speaking up.

In addition to evaluating the impact of the project over three periods, it is also important to note that there were post-intervention effects, which were captured by a follow-up survey in May 2019 with the first MUVA Assistentes cohort. The MUVA team managed to contact 90 per cent of the participants to find out how they had progressed in two aspects: (1) economic activity and/or access to further study; and (2) agency (in terms of autonomous decision-making and action, and making social connections). Compared with a statistically similar

group of young women, a higher percentage of the MUVA Assistentes participants were earning an income (53 per cent compared with 34 per cent). The survey results also highlighted that a higher proportion of MUVA Assistentes graduates were doing work that required a greater level of technical skill than the comparison group.

In relation to ‘agency’, the survey observed gains for MUVA Assistentes graduates. In all aspects of decision-making, they reported having greater autonomy and being more involved in household decisions than their counterparts. In the realm of social networks, which are critical in achieving a liberating notion of empowerment (Sardenberg 2016), all MUVA Assistentes graduates reported being a member of a social group compared with only 56 per cent of the comparison group. This finding demonstrates the women’s establishment of an important resource (in this case, a social network), which is instrumental in influencing life outcomes. Furthermore, this finding is noteworthy because the project’s theory of change and programmatic objectives focused mainly on these women achieving liberal empowerment, whereas their membership of a social network reflects moving towards liberating forms of empowerment.

4.2 Comparison of MUVA Assistentes to gender-oriented PWPs

Drawing on this analysis, it is evident that the MUVA Assistentes project is unique, differing from other gender-focused PWPs internationally. Most gender-oriented PWPs mainly focus on increasing women beneficiaries’ income and labour workforce participation rates. However, the MUVA Assistentes project is the only one that has not only taken an empowerment approach – focusing on building young women’s agency, as well as providing them with resources – but also builds their soft assets. Even among the few PWPs that have tried to focus on generating soft assets for participants, none has managed to do it at the scale of MUVA Assistentes. Furthermore, MUVA Assistentes is distinct from other PWPs in its conceptualisation, theory of change and targeting of beneficiaries.

Below, we list the seven major differences between MUVA Assistentes and other PWPs:

1. MUVA Assistentes took a nuanced view of women’s empowerment that was closely aligned with Kabeer (1999)’s empowerment framework of agency, resources and achievements. It had a clear focus on enhancing women participants’ agency, and building their resources (financial and social) and soft assets, which is visible in its theory of change.
2. Unlike other PWPs, the project’s motive was not just to provide paid work and demonstrate a token increase in labour force participation and income levels. Rather, it aimed to use paid work as a pathway to train, mentor and empower women to independently focus on achieving their aspirations, goals and dreams.
3. While some smaller PWPs⁵ have tried to generate soft assets in terms of developing participants’ skills (Hodges 2022), the MUVA Assistentes project’s interventions were done at greater scale. Further, these skills were targeted at young women participants and were all members of a household.
4. Both the beneficiaries and the wider communities where they resided and worked considered the paid work the MUVA Assistentes project provided to be socially respectable and aspirational (in the context of low-income countries and other similar contexts), while also serving a critical public good.

⁵ These examples include: Ghana’s Teacher Community Assistant Initiative; South Africa’s Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP); Mozambique’s Inclusive Public Works (TPI) project; Rwanda’s Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme (VUP); and a labour-intensive PWP in Burkina Faso.

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5. The project drew on participants' existing skills and resources (educational qualifications), unlike other PWP's that provide training or paid work via other avenues that – in the main – are not related to the participants' education.
 6. The MUVA Assistentes project followed a distinct targeting approach, whereby it focused on YVW below the poverty line but used additional exclusion filters (age and education) to enhance the chances of participants graduating out of poverty. This is in significant contrast to other PWP's, which do not have these exclusionary filters and have a broad focus on poor and extremely poor households and women.
 7. Finally, while the project's theory of change focuses on achieving liberal empowerment, like other PWP's, a positive unintended post-intervention impact was reported: all MUVA Assistentes graduates who were interviewed many months after the intervention were members of some form of social network, reflecting their movement towards liberating empowerment and demonstrating the long-term impact of the intervention.

In addition to highlighting these major differences, we present a comparison of the MUVA Assistentes project with the three PWP's mentioned in section 3, considering each one's theory of change, outcomes achieved and type of empowerment achieved (or not).

Table 1: A selection of public works programmes globally

Name of programme/ project	Aims	Theory of change (how to achieve these aims)	Outcomes achieved for women (in terms of agency, resources, achievements)	Type of empowerment achieved (liberal vs liberating)
MGNREGA (India)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide social protection for the most vulnerable people living in rural India by guaranteeing wage employment opportunities. 2. Enhance livelihood security of rural poor people by generating wage employment opportunities, leading to creation of durable assets. 3. Rejuvenate natural resource base of rural areas. 4. Create a durable and productive rural asset base. 	Enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.	<p>Agency: women who worked in MGNREGA were more likely to have control over household decision-making (Bárdua de Mattos and Dasgupta 2017).</p> <p>Resources: the programme helped women to have more cash in hand and income support.</p> <p>Achievements: Chopra (2019) argues that the invisibilising of unpaid care work impeded the achievement of women’s empowerment in the programme.</p>	To some extent achieved liberal empowerment (increased income, agency and resources), but remained inadequate as it ignored the dynamics and processes of unpaid care work (Chopra 2019).

<p>PSNP (Ethiopia)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Smooth household consumption. 2. Facilitate investment in human capital and other productive assets. 3. Protect household assets. 4. Strengthen agency of those in poverty to overcome their predicament. 	<p>Provided cash in exchange for participation in labour-intensive public works such as soil and water conservation measures, rangeland management (in pastoral areas) and development of community assets such as roads, water infrastructure, schools and healthcare centres.</p>	<p>Agency: insignificant impact on women’s agency. However, surprisingly, the programme caused a significant reduction in women’s control and decision-making power over agricultural production activities such as cash crop and food crop farming, livestock practices, and non-farm economic activities such as small businesses.</p> <p>Resources: conditional cash transfers improved women’s financial position and bargaining power, thereby improving their ability to borrow and make decisions about credit.</p> <p>Achievements: the programme had an insignificant aggregate impact on women’s economic empowerment and thus was not able to empower women to make any notable achievements.</p>	<p>Directed towards liberal empowerment, but evidence suggests that the programme made insignificant progress in achieving women’s liberal empowerment (Gelagay 2016; Jones <i>et al.</i> 2010).</p>
<p>PATI (El Salvador)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide income support to households affected by crisis. 	<p>Included a minimum of 80 hours of technical training (on topics as diverse as bakery, cooking and cosmetology) and 16 hours</p>	<p>Agency: no major impacts on women participants’ agency and self-esteem were reported.</p>	<p>Intended to achieve liberal empowerment but evidence suggests success was very limited because</p>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Enhance their employability via labour market experience. 3. Build skills. 	of labour market orientation.	<p>Resources: the programme led to short- and medium-term increases in labour force participation, but did not have any impact on women's incomes or poverty.</p> <p>Achievements: the programme did not make any provisions to empower women with additional capabilities to achieve or work towards future functionings. However, evidence suggests there was increased willingness to 'invest' in women as the main breadwinners in households (but within a prevailing patriarchal culture, which remained unchanged) (Barca 2019).</p>	broader gender dimensions were not part of the programme.
MUVA Assistentes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Address barriers young women face, including lack of educational and job opportunities, poor self-efficacy, low aspirations, lack of financial means and limited life skills. 	Provided paid classroom assistant experience to YVW, complementing it with pedagogical training and mentoring, to equip the women with greater competencies, improve their financial conditions and provide them with social and material resources to make informed	<p>Agency: the project increased women participants' self-confidence levels, and their ability to negotiate in the household and job market.</p> <p>Resources: the project helped the women to build their resources (material and social) and soft assets.</p> <p>Achievements: due to their increased agency and</p>	Very significant impact on achieving liberal empowerment and post-intervention effects showed some form of liberating empowerment (even though it was not part of the theory of change).

	2. Improve educational outcomes in primary schools by addressing the problem of high pupil-teacher ratio.	decisions about their professional goals.	access to resources, women acquired the capabilities to achieve some of their goals or work concretely towards them.	
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Source: Authors' own.

5. Conclusion: situating the MUVA Assistentes project within global gender-oriented PWPs

To conclude, the MUVA Assistentes project worked towards addressing two major challenges facing the country: unemployment among young women and poor educational outcomes due to high pupil-teacher ratios. It provided YVW with paid classroom assistant opportunities, complemented with pedagogical training and mentoring. The project's theory of change was based on the premise that providing paid teaching experience to these women would enhance their capabilities, agency and resources to make informed decisions about their professional goals, thereby alleviating their poverty, which was found to be mostly true (as discussed in section 4).

In addition to improving participants' lives, the project provided a critical public good by working towards improving the quality of classroom outcomes in government primary schools. The most innovative aspect of the project was that it provided an avenue to paid work that was considered socially respectable and aspirational by both the beneficiaries and the wider community in Mozambique, as well as in most low-income countries – again, a goal that PWPs need to build into their theory of change.

In addition to providing social respectability to women participants within their families and communities, it is also important to note that this work drew on participants' skills and resources (educational qualifications), in contrast to other PWPs internationally, whose employment avenues ranked quite low in the social hierarchy of those contexts and regions. The addition of soft skills through training (which was done at scale), combined with the mentoring component of the MUVA Assistentes project, makes this a unique PWP.

The project's evaluation through the photovoice methodology and analysis of women's experiences found that working as classroom assistants allowed participants to transition from primarily being involved in domestic work, depending on their husbands and lacking agency to acquire the capability to make independent decisions and figure out clear steps towards achieving their future dreams and goals, as highlighted in the case studies of Alina, Almira, Minelia and Zuhura in section 4.1.

The overall impact of the project on the women participants can be briefly summarised using Kabeer (1999)'s framework of agency, resources and achievements, which was discussed in section 2:

1. **Agency** – the project increased women participants' self-confidence levels, and their ability to negotiate in the household and job market, and to take independent decisions, which increased their sense of self-worth and confidence levels.
2. **Resources** – the project helped the women to build their resources (material and social) and soft assets, in turn empowering them to realise their different dreams, such as building their own house, saving money for future studies, accruing simple financial savings and so on, as well as finding paid work once the project had finished.
3. **Achievements** – due to their increased agency and access to resources, women acquired the capabilities to be able to achieve some of their goals and dreams or were able to work more concretely towards their professional and personal goals.

Thus, it can be argued that the MUVA Asistentes project avoided the criticism directed at gender-oriented PWPs internationally, which are still at high risk of implementing cosmetic and tokenistic measures to tick boxes on women's empowerment due to pressure from government and donor agencies (Barca 2019: 35).

The project demonstrated that it is possible for PWPs to move beyond achieving goals of increased income or decreased poverty towards: (a) building technical skills; (b) improving opportunities for women's employability in the labour market (while improving public goods); and (c) building soft assets through training and mentoring. Through building these skills and increasing women participants' self-worth, PWPs can build the women's resources, agency and achievements, thereby increasing their empowerment, which extends beyond the programme as well, according to the post-intervention survey results.

However, while MUVA Asistentes performed with respect to women's liberal empowerment through working individually with women, it did not consider working towards liberating empowerment (Sardenberg 2016). This could be considered a gap in the project's theory of change, which focused more on working with individual participants and did not focus on building collectives and networks of women.

However, some consolation on this front can be drawn from the post-intervention survey, which found that all the women participants were members of a social network, a factor that is key to achieving liberating empowerment. This positive unintended consequence and finding makes the case for further research to assess whether theories of change that have a strong focus on moving towards liberating empowerment, in addition to foregrounding liberal empowerment, are more effective and sustainable in the long run.

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Annexe

No.	Name of public works programme	Country
1	Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF)	Malawi
2	Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP)	Ethiopia
3	Employment Generation Program for the Poorest (EGPP)	Bangladesh
4	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA)	India
5	Workplace with Stipend (WWS) Emergency Public Works Programme	Latvia
6	Public Works Project	Yemen
7	Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP)	South Africa
8	Programa de Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados	Argentina
9	Temporary Income Support Program (PATI)	El Salvador
10	Teacher Community Assistant Initiative (TCAI)	Ghana
11	Emergency Public Works Programme	Korea, Repub.
12	Expanded Public Works	Rwanda
13	Trabalhos Publicos Inclusivos	Mozambique
14	Rural Maintenance Program: Cash for Work	Bangladesh
15	Public Employment for Sustainable Agriculture and Water Resources Management II	Tajikistan
16	Prospera	Mexico
17	Bolsa Família	Brazil
18	Juntos	Colombia
19	Improving Livelihood Through Public Works Programme	Malawi
20	Oportunidades	Mexico
21	Karnali Employment Program	Nepal