



JESUIT WORLDWIDE LEARNING  
HIGHER EDUCATION AT THE MARGINS

## Research Report

#02.6 / September 2021

# A Journey towards Empowerment: The impact of Liberal Studies on graduates and their communities

## Community empowerment



This chapter analyses how through advocacy, the interconnected elements of the community, and a willingness to address community challenges, graduates empower communities. This analysis of graduates' accounts demonstrates how developing a sense of community can result in a snowball effect whereby their community members are inspired to become agents of change themselves, and this process leads to the empowerment of graduates and their communities.

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“Let me say empowerment is when you enable someone to do something for himself. [...] teach someone how to fish and give him the hook to go and fish for himself; that is empowerment.”

– KK\_A13\_G

## 1 Applying graduates’ sense of community: working towards community empowerment

Graduates’ experiences reveal their willingness to work towards the empowerment of the community. Supported by the literature findings, the role of advocacy, the importance of the interdependence of the community, personal wellbeing and the willingness to address community problems are the main factors which allow graduates to achieve this collective emancipation (Ersing, 2003; Persily and Hildebrandt, 2003; Gates, 2017; Coulombe and Krzesni, 2019). Ersing (2003) confirms the use of advocacy as one of the principles to promote community wellbeing and eventually empowerment. Regarding the interdependence of personal and community empowerment, Persily and Hildebrandt (2003) developed a community empowerment framework that demonstrates the intertwining of individual and community forces to improve community wellbeing. As for the eagerness to solve community challenges, Kasmel and Andersen (2011) used community problem-solving skills as one factor to measure community empowerment, demonstrating the

importance of interconnecting these two elements.

### 1.1 Advocacy: a tool for improving community’s wellbeing

Framing their new comprehension of community in terms of responsibilities toward the betterment of their society, graduates refer to their engagement in communities through an advocacy approach. This characteristic is particularly salient for Kenya and Jordan as they each represent 29% of the quotes related to the theme of ‘advocacy’.

One Diploma class through which graduates saw their advocacy skills improve is Community Advocacy. This course is understood as having an essential impact in shaping this sense of community. For this graduate in Kenya, this course enabled him “to stand” and get the “heart of the community” (KK\_A3\_R). Moreover, this course was understood as helping graduates to “work hand in hand in the community” (KK\_A3\_JR) and “peacefully” advocate for the needs of the community (KK\_A9\_G). Beyond this specific class, the knowledge and skills gained during the Diploma are seen as enabling graduates “to contribute efficiently to the social changes of the community” unlike prior to joining the Diploma, when contribution to society would have been minimal (KK\_A13\_MZ).



This new knowledge embraced by graduates is applied to support the protection of human rights and advocate for the rights of communities. For example, this graduate in Kenya mentions that:

*"One of the things that I learned in Diploma programme and it's currently helping me so much in my community, it's about [...] human rights." (KK\_A7\_MZ)*

This idea of using one's sense of community to support the betterment of a community is further elaborated by the examples of this graduate in Jordan:



*"I would mostly say when I was back in Jordan, going to UNHCR or maybe representing Somali and community in Jordan, my Diploma education was always the front line of helping me to advocate for my community. That was a good example! But also, for myself too, to advocate for myself and try to get out refugee life, find the resettlement, find a new life."*

– JA\_A4\_A

Therefore, engaging in advocacy can not only be beneficial to support one's community, but also to advance on the road to self-empowerment. This personal growth is reflected in the words of this alumnus from Malawi who presents the Diploma as having "unlocked the potential that was hidden in [him]" (MD\_A3\_R). He explains that this potential:

*"[...] was acting like an effective social change agent [as] social caseworker. Everywhere we work, we advocate, we accompany and we serve*

*people we live together with by respecting their dignity." (MD\_A3\_R)*

While this new community approach can be empowering for graduates and their communities, it can also signify that graduates realise the limits of their agency as people at the margins:

*"Because now within [...] Jordan I learned about how to be an advocate within my community, within the people I do serve for them. but now also I see the limited of resources, the lack of opportunities, are not giving me chance to do what I want to do." (JA\_A2\_A)*

This reality-check on the extent of refugee graduates' involvement in the community reveals how the strict regime governing refugee's lives in Jordan sets the limits of community engagement. This is particularly reflected in the 29% of the quotes related to the theme "advocacy" mentioned by participants in Jordan, as participants in this country lead in the representation of the quotes related to the 'voice of the voiceless' (43%) and 'resilience' (37%).

Consequently, advocacy appears as a major tool for graduates to engage in serving the community, whether it is used to claim rights, support communities, or challenge restrictions on refugees' lives.

## 1.2 Interdependence between graduates and the community

Drawing from this selfless approach to leadership, graduates raise the idea of interdependence between them and the community to illustrate their willingness to give back what they were given and work toward the betterment of the community.



This alumnus encapsulates this notion of interdependence by highlighting the links of the community and individuals:



“The importance of the community is that [...] remember nobody is an island. We are interdependent human beings, and for that reason [...] when people live together, they can achieve more in the community; when you live individually, you will achieve less so that is what I want to say that creating a sense of community is very, very crucial in human life because that is one way of achieving the goal or objectives of the community”

– KK\_A13\_MZ

As a driver to achieve goals, community engagement can help to improve the conditions not only in the community, but also of one’s personal life. This graduate in Malawi demonstrates this point through his reflection on his community involvement after his JWL journey:

*“I was like, kind of isolated. [...] So when now [I] get the education, it was like a mental shift. I*

*moved myself from that isolation and now learn to be to make myself important in the community.” (MD\_A4\_L)*

As he has become engaged by advocating for the rights of single mothers and widows in Dzaleka, he explained that “being a man of others” is more than simple words:

*“There is a kind of bond between community members and the love that overflows from us is what help us to keep this place more safe. [...] I’m not sure if Dzaleka would be [a] welcom[ing] place like today. So [...] the programme helps not only me but the whole community to be a better place to live.” (MD\_A4\_L)*

This mutually beneficial impact of one’s engagement in a community demonstrates the consequence of graduates’ new consciousness of the interconnectedness of the community and individual. This new understanding is used to promote opportunities and transfer knowledge to the upcoming generation. This graduate in Kenya illustrates how, in order to give back for what she has benefited from, she became involved in promoting education for orphans in the community:

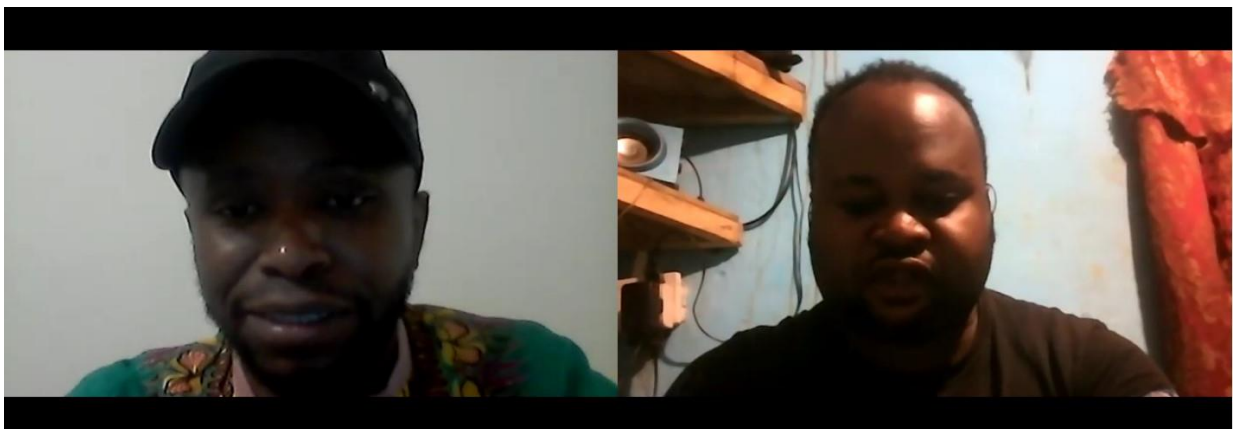


Figure 1: Online interview connecting a graduate in Canada and JWL research assistant in Dzaleka, Malawi



*"The motto is like you and you are given a chance to do something. So give a chance to the upcoming generation that if I was given this opportunity I should not sit on it, but at least create more opportunities for the rest that are coming so that they can reach your level."* (KK\_A16\_MZ)

This willingness to give back to the community through favouring opportunity and education for others is also shared by graduates who became teachers. For example, this graduate in Afghanistan explains her motivation to become an English teacher:

*"As a girl, I should be able to serve my people. So, in Diploma [...] it helped me to improve my English. Right now, I'm giving back that one to my community. I'm a teacher and I'm serving my people."* (AB\_A9\_H)

As the principle of "giving back" appears as integral to the Diploma (MD\_A14\_T), graduates manifest their willingness to transfer knowledge to the community and apply it throughout one's life to seek to improve the living conditions of oneself and the community. This perspective is seen as framing an approach to life:



**"I think the Diploma will help me to get maybe what I need, in making my lifestyle change. I can't change my life without changing my community or environment so since I got the skills on how I can live [a] better life or how I can live with people, [...] I can say that it will help me to get along with my life in my future."**

– MD\_A13\_T

Hence, the understanding of this interconnectedness between the wellbeing

of oneself and one's community emerges as life-changing for graduates, realising the mutual benefits implicated when seeking to give back. While their engagement might not be benefitting them directly, the interdependent aspect of community and their willingness to give back build a virtuous circle whereby their implications in the community lead to an overall improvement of the community's living conditions, including their own. Consequently, graduates utilise this mutually beneficial approach to the community as a driver to engage in the community

### 1.3 Addressing problems in the community

Lastly, with this strong sense of community, graduates illustrate how they use their knowledge and skills gained during the Diploma to address challenges in the community. Many of them shared examples of community engagement whose impact was to keep people away from drugs, prevent early pregnancy, disease, address issues related to access to health care, and reduce conflict and violence. For instance, this community graduate explained how he used his dancing and music skills to support the wellbeing of his community:

*"So in my community, [...] the population in the camp, 70% is made of young people, and when you look at the number of young people, most of them are going astray, and most of them are not even going to school, [...] so I thought it twice to create a dancing group and also create different youth art where I would be talking about morals, I facilitate young people on different topics about social reproductive health, rights, [...]. Another thing that I do is that I train young people how to dance, and I also find opportunities for them to [...] join bigger dancing groups, in order for them not to be idle, not to involve in drug substance*



abuse, unwanted pregnancies and many other related things.” (MD\_A15\_T)

This involvement reflects this graduates’ motivation to tackle core challenges in his community by employing his talents as methods to build a greater sense of community and improve its wellbeing.

Whereas this example targeted diverse health issues, among others, this graduate in Kenya demonstrated his sense of community through his support to his community during the COVID-19 pandemic (KK\_A1\_MZ) by launching a campaign that reached more than 250 people.

## Gender perspective

Graduates’ sense of community engagement is articulated differently based on gender. As 55% of the quotes related to community are attributed to male, it seems that community involvement may be more salient for male graduates. Particularly, male alumni are leading for excerpts regarding the topics of advocacy (64%) and giving back relating to the idea of interdependence between the community and its members (73%). This stronger presence of male quotes regarding advocacy and community interdependence suggest a stronger willingness for males to work toward the empowerment of their communities through their community engagement approach which often implies an advocacy approach to community mobilisation. The willingness to work to contribute to community empowerment seems to be reflected in a different manner for females, stressing topics such as resilience (as female participants represent 58% of the quote mentioning the idea of ‘resilience’) and respect (as female participants represent 56% of the quote mentioning the idea of ‘respect’). Therefore, male participants seem to be more vocal on advocating issues in community stressing the importance of the giving back to the community, whereas female participants emphasise a community empowerment approach based on resilience and respect.

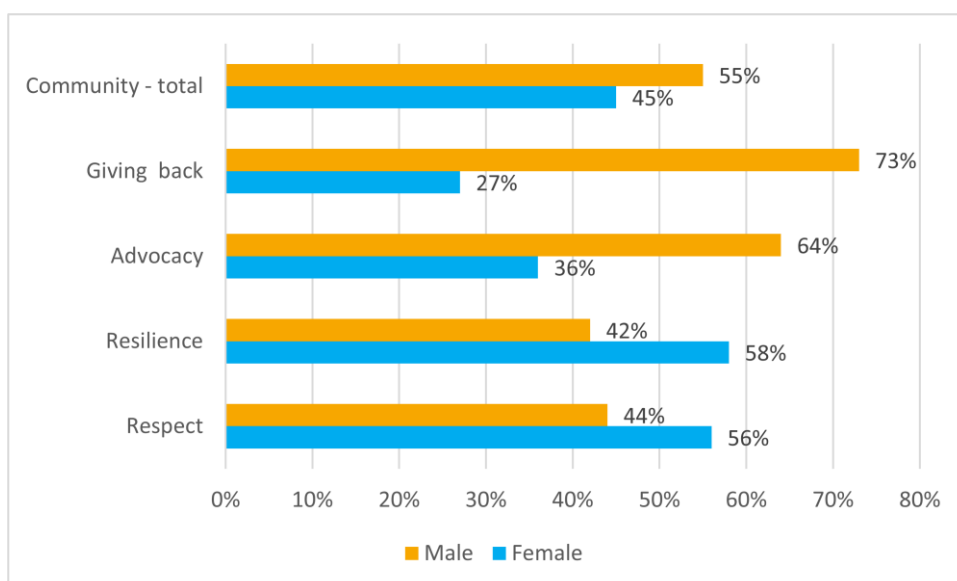


Figure 2: Analysis of some of the quotes related to community empowerment by gender





He and his team went from door to door to sensitise the community about the risk of COVID-19, teaching the community how to wash their masks and protect their children in addition to providing food for the most vulnerable families during lockdown (KK\_A1\_MZ). Other graduates have also contributed to addressing COVID-19 challenges by providing free soap, masks (KK\_A8\_R) and education for children in the community (KK\_A12\_MZ). This strong community mobilisation reflects graduates' willingness to support the wellbeing of their community and provide solutions to existing challenges.

In addition to this large-scale community engagement, graduates articulated a sense of community based on individual initiative to support the community. For example, this graduate demonstrated a willingness to address gender-related issues by mobilising her family as agents of change:

*"When I was in Afghanistan, there was a girl whose family was trying to force her to get married. This girl did not want to get married with that man. So, I ask my family to go to her family and talk to them. When my father [and I] went [to] her family to try to convince them [...] how it can*

*damage her future and it was a good achievement for me."* (AH\_A8\_N)

This example demonstrating servant leadership characteristics reveal the willingness of graduates to provide solutions based on one's individual initiative to problems in the community. This individual contribution of graduates in a collective environment is considered as a key strategy to address the community's challenges. For instance, this graduate in Kenya explains how his singular mobilisation to talk to people involved in drug abuse and unhealthy activities has contributed to transforming these community members:

*"I explain to [people involved in drug abuse and unhealthy activities] the effects of [...] drugs and [...]. And of course, I've been doing such things. I have some of the friends that are transformed from what they were doing. Some were smokers, just idols, were not doing anything because they did not know where they are going but after explaining to them now even some of them applied last year in [the] Diploma programme and they were accepted. That progress is now they are going and that was another good way of helping. Some of them have joined other activities like [...] local training and other things."* (KK\_A11\_MZ)



Figure 3: IDP camp in Khanke, Iraq





As he enunciates his contribution by sensitising people following unhealthy activities, he concludes that everyone benefits from his involvement, as he adds that “even women are also benefitting” because he would intervene whenever they have issues and guide them in finding solutions (KK\_A11\_MZ). This individual initiative detached from any organisations depicts the willingness of graduates to be agents of change in whatever context they have an impact. This can also be reflected in the development of graduates’ resilience, becoming change-makers through their actions within their communities. For example, this graduate in Iraq shared how her determination to access school led her to become independent and stronger (IE\_A2\_M). She explained that despite her desire to pursue her studies, she could not complete her studies as she got married very young (at 15) and had children, in addition to the war and her family members being opposed to completing her studies (IE\_A2\_M). When she got the opportunity to join the Diploma, she expressed how she developed her resilience:

*“When I got opportunity to study [...] in the Diploma. Actually, I fight it to [...] study really, I fight it to study and a I studied and everything after that changed it. [...] My mind, my experience, everything will be, has changed it, so I became more and confident I became... I left my shyness and I could get opportunities to work [...], I can now depend on myself. I don't wait to anyone to do something for me. No, I want to do it by myself.” (IE\_A2\_M)*

Reflecting on her experience, she concludes that she does not want to limit this change to herself, and hopes that other women will embrace this tool:

*“So I want all, all women to do the same thing like a to became independent. [...] You can also [...] teach that for your or your children or people you*

*know, so that was very, very important for me.” (IE\_A2\_M)*

Therefore, this form of empowerment illustrates how this individual journey can in turn support a collective one, creating opportunities for other women and encouraging them to join this path. Similarly to this Iraqi graduate who had to overcome challenges emerging from her close community, the resilience of this graduate in Kenya who is currently a businessman providing transportation service for schools, among other activities, exemplifies the strength to challenge his community and pursue his goal:



*“I have another challenge, you can see, I am a disabled person. In my community they always asked me: “why can't you sit down? just sit and relax, you are already disabled” [...]. They tell me: Why are you disturbing yourself? you are already being disturbed by the disability, you can sit and eat” so you know they will never recognise my contribution. It is people like you maybe who meet me in role in the office or in the business market, that sees that I am doing something. But for my immediate community, they will never see. But now gradually they are seeing a different person with different perspectives and this what encourage me.”*

*–KK\_A1\_G*

He continues to explain why it is so challenging for him to gain recognition from his community:



*"Now they have realised in terms of business, I am better, in terms of education I am continuing doing well. [...] it is changing that perspective people when it comes to disabled people, they look at it: "oh this one is dull, of this is also not possible, this is impossible" [...] they cannot allow [...] persons living with disability to school because they see those who did it before are doing better than anyone so there is not exceptional for them, it is possible. It is only us who are limiting, preventing them achieving. This is why I'm a living example for my community but before they have the upbeat, they are not sure, some were asking "can you even reach that school?" (KK\_A1\_G)*

This exemplary form of resilience demonstrates that being a changemaker in one's community does not necessarily mean addressing problems collectively – it can start by challenging a community's misconceptions through one's individual actions and surpassing all community

expectations. Therefore, this graduate's testimony exposes how through strong community engagement and personal success, one is able to become an agent of change in the community, even in a context where the actions are not recognised by one's own community.

Demonstrating an unwavering willingness to address challenges in the community, alumni presented their contribution to the community as beyond collective action, using their individual resources to provide solutions in their communities. Such contributions are understood as mutually beneficial for graduates and the community, allowing alumni to give back to their community.



Figure 4: Interview in Dzaleka, Malawi



## 2 The scope of impact of graduates' sense of community: Dual empowerment

As graduates have demonstrated a strong sense of community utilised for the betterment of the community, a number of consequences emerge from this intense mobilisation.

### 2.1 Snowball effect

First, given the significant contribution of graduates to the community, their engagement has inspired others to do the same, creating a snowball effect. A graduate in Kenya explained that this idea of transmitting the inspiration to become agents of change came from his Diploma learning experience, citing two specific examples:

*"There are two things [that] encouraged [...], one is Magari Mathai example, metaphor of that small bird which try to put off the fire that is burning with the drop of water, the second is [...] the first video we learn in the Bridge to learning where it says we start with big rock so, after I went through the Diploma after learning those things I realised professor Magari Mathia said that bird take water trying to put off the burning forest so, for me I took myself as that bird which try to put off the whole fire with the drop so I have to do what is in my capacity as a person. [...] the same Dr. Mark Final which start with big rock, the big rock for me is where I am that mentality of starting small to big [so] that I can solve. [...] those are the two videos ever inspired and encouraged me to [do] what I am doing now and it's helping me to move forward." (KK\_A1\_G)*

This consciousness of collectively building a better tomorrow for this graduate's community by "starting small" encapsulates the mechanics of the snowball effect of the Diploma's impact on

graduates' communities. The increased awareness of the potential of one's action within the community leads graduates to become agents of change, prompting others to engage in similar behaviour and ultimately resulting in the improvement of community members' lives. This amplifying phenomenon is illustrated in the example of this graduate in Afghanistan facilitating a peace reconciliation workshop in his community:



**"[In Sociology] I got this sense that we are human beings, and we are interrelated. [...] The others' problem is our problem. We have responsibilities in the communities. [...] We are not living in this world alone, [...] the other people can help us. For example, all the people want peace [...] and now we are struggling war and injustice in our community. [...] It is my responsibility as a person who have been trained for peace and reconciliation to conduct workshops and help the students to have a better relationship with others, to bring peace for themselves first, their families and communities in greater level. Having this sense of community and knowing it is my responsibility, [...] I am currently conducting workshops for my students and other teachers at my workplace."**

–AB\_A4\_H

By speaking about the interrelation of human beings and shared responsibility to improve communities, this graduate exemplifies the wide range of impact that the Diploma can have on communities.



This transfer of skills and knowledge in the community in order to “transform the world” (KK\_A19\_MZ) is particularly reflected in the impact of giving women access to education. According to this female graduate in Jordan, women empowerment through education can have a snowball effect, as “education is [what they] want, [so they] can change within [themselves] and [their] societies and [their] families” (JA\_A8\_A). Indeed, appearing as role models in the community, female graduates inspire other women to pursue their educational journey and challenge society’s perspective on women accessing education. This graduate in Afghanistan illustrates this contagious inspiration for women’s involvement in education:

*“Studying in this programme help me that I become as agent of change in my community. [...] Before this time, no [one] allows their daughter to study to other province or some other places in [...] my village. So, when I go to Bamyan and I studied about three years Diploma. So, [...] my life changed a lot and when I come back to my community, other said and think that her father allows her to study to other provinces. So, we also should allow our daughters to study to other provinces in order to bring some changes in their life.” (AB\_A2\_H)*

This encouragement to increase women’s access to education through standing as a role model in her community runs in parallel with a recognition of the changes brought to one’s life and community. This phenomenon is also identified in Malawi, as this female graduate’s contribution to the community is acknowledged and welcomed by her community:

*“The Diploma changed me because [...] I can say I’m a role model in my community since today I see the impact of women in education, so, this Diploma brings many changes in my life and my community. So, now people today, people are proud because the way we can see the*

*community now, the community is proud of women, how women are involved in education. They are involved and they are eager to learn, to go to school and to have a good impact in society, in our society we are living, and we hope that if we go far, we can make a good contribution in the society.” (MD\_A2\_F)*

Therefore, the achievements of these graduates inspire other women to pursue further educational opportunities and eventually benefit the community. Consequently, these graduates have demonstrated that the impact of their community engagement goes beyond their direct contribution to the community, as they inspire others to be empowered and become agent of change. This snowball effect of the Diploma makes its impact on graduates’ life and their communities vast and limitless.

## 2.2 Community empowerment leads to personal empowerment

The consequences of developing such a sense of community through the Diploma have been identified by graduates as allowing them to build resilience and eventually their self-empowerment. By enabling graduates to think broadly (KK\_A3\_JR) and advocate for their communities (ID\_A1\_HD), the Diploma is seen as a tool whereby graduates can be empowered. “Giving the power to talk more for [one’s] community” (ID\_A1\_HD) through the expertise and knowledge developed in the Diploma is seen as a means to apply graduates’ empowerment to the benefit of the community. The quote from this graduate in Kenya reveals how the Diploma shapes graduates’ empowerment through acting as role models within the community:





“They will always thank this programme for wonderful and amazing transformation they have done to me and the refugees. They always say ‘we need to [thank] JWL [for] the solid foundation they are giving [to] the refugees’. [...] We were two Uganda graduates from JWL, and our achievements become a story of the day. I was breastfeeding by then. The example they would give was ‘look at her, she is a mother of three and she has done a lot no man in this community tried. What about you? You have opportunity here in the camp.’ I became [a] reference and consultant. I feel big.”

–KK\_A7\_G

Another graduate in Kenya presents the Diploma as a source of personal growth through his work for vulnerable members of his community:

*“The Diploma has empowered me a lot, it made me think of something much bigger than what I had before, so I was used to work in the down level especially in the community, I was stepping for the people who could not handle themselves, so like the voiceless in the community, I talk to myself, let me stood up for this, of course we are told that you cannot keep quiet, when you see something, you need to step up, and find solutions, how you can help those who cannot move forward, help change the community in any possible way that you can. So I was really empowered in so many ways, putting it in an example like when I was running the course, I was mostly [...] [trying to] make sure that my students achieve the goal of the course, I really empowered them as well.” (KK\_A3\_JR)*

As for this graduate, empowering others equates to empowering oneself and community involvement is crucial to spark this personal growth. The same understanding of community empowerment applies for this graduate in Malawi, who sees the work of his foundation supporting single mothers, widows and orphans as a source of mutual empowerment, while preventing these persons from engaging in ‘not morally good activities’ [citing prostitution] (MD\_A4\_L).

These mutual benefits of empowering others is encapsulated in the definition of empowerment of this graduate in Kenya, who opened a secondary school in the camp:

*“Let me say empowerment is when you enable someone to do something for himself. [...] teach someone how to fish and give him the hook to go and fish for himself; that is empowerment.” (KK\_A13\_G)*

Therefore, the consequences of graduates’ engagement in the community are not only resulting in the empowerment of the beneficiaries of their actions, but also of themselves. This mutual empowerment depicts the impact of the Diploma as emulating inspiration across individuals and communities. With a snowball effect, the Diploma allows graduates to become role models in their communities that in turn inspire other members to act in the same way, working for the benefit of the community.



### 3 Conclusion

The Diploma is seen as a space in which graduates can not only build an awareness of the community that is rooted in advocating virtues, but also propel them to work toward the improvement of the community's wellbeing. As graduates highlight the interconnected nature of the community, they understand that addressing challenges in the community

profit to the collective betterment of community members' living conditions, including theirs. This involvement serves as a source of inspiration for their peers, creating snowballing effects of the Diploma in the community, which ultimately portrays the Diploma as empowering both its beneficiaries and its agent of change.

#### Key points

- Through advocacy, the interconnected elements of the community, and a willingness to address community challenges, graduates empower their communities.
- Graduates' community members become agents of change in their communities, and this leads to the empowerment of the person and of their communities.
- A sense of interconnectedness between the graduates and the community that leads to personal and community empowerment.
- Graduates are able to conceive creative solutions to address local and ultimately to empower their communities.





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If you want to cite this report:

Honen-Delmar, M. and Rega, I. (2021). *A Journey towards Empowerment: The impact of Liberal Studies on graduates and their communities*. Research Report #02. Jesuit Worldwide Learning