Research Brief

Training of Union Parishad Representatives: Needs Assessment for Social Security Programme Implementation

Introduction

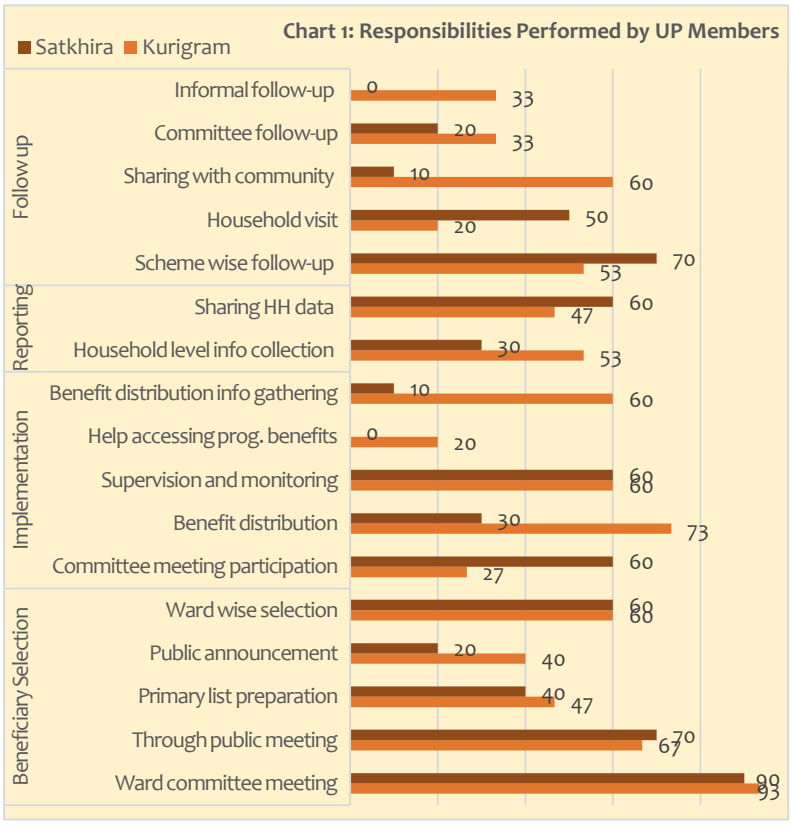
Social security is important not only for addressing vulnerability, but also for solving the problems of entrenched poverty and reducing marginalization. Bangladesh's latest initiative in social security — the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) — takes up the challenges through an inclusive, focused and coordinated approach to poverty reduction. The successful implementation of the NSSS will provide a strong basis for Bangladesh to extend proper social security to its poor and vulnerable population.

The Union Parishad (UP) is the main gateway and implementing authority of social safety net programmes at grassroots level. The capacity building and training of UPs and their representatives is very important to ensure quality to implement and strengthen the management system, including those of finance and monitoring. In order to implement a successful capacity building and training programme, it is, however, important that we undertake correct diagnosis of capacity gaps based on assessment of individuals' training needs, which will primarily be related to organisational needs of UPs, and identify and address the capacity gaps by targeting training contents designed and conducted in conformity with best practices, with an emphasis on interactive learning.

The objectives of the training needs assessment (TNA) are to: (a) map the capacity gaps of elected UP representatives and officials pertaining to social security programme and suggest the capacity enhancement required; and (b) assess training needs to enhance the capacity of UPs representatives and officials to support the implementation of the NSSS. The study was carried out in the project areas of the SWAPNO project in Satkhira and Kurigram to determine the perception of the UP representatives and Secretaries on various areas of implementation of social security programmes.

Social Safety Net Programme Responsibilities

At the local level, the Union Parishad is the main gateway and implementing authority of social safety net programmes. Amongst, 145 social safety net programmes implemented by 23 ministries/divisions in the country, the local level in Kurigram and Satkhira administers numerous programmes at Union Parishad and Upazila levels. The representatives at the Union Parishads perform various tasks including targeting, benefit delivery, approval process, monitoring, supervision, financial management, reporting, grievance handling and coordination. The tasks for different social safety net programmes vary; nonetheless, the beneficiary selection, programme implementation including handling grievances, coordination, reporting and follow-up responsibilities are overwhelmingly carried out by the UP Chairmen, members and Secretaries (Chart 1).

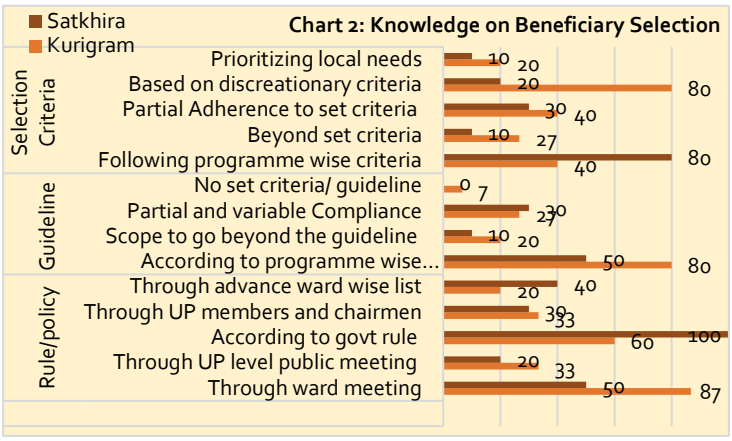


UP representatives consider their roles in local level social safety net programme implementation, including coordination, reporting, follow-up and grievance handling, to be burdensome. There is widespread discontent on the low honorarium they receive as local

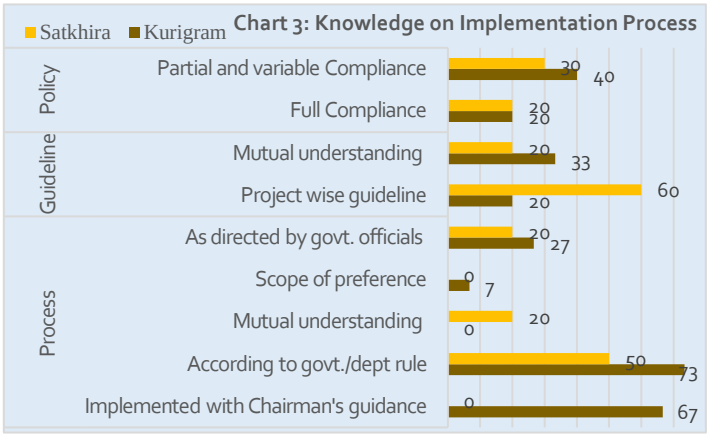
government representatives. The small amount of social safety net cash benefits, and the often poor quality of in-kind benefits, aggrieves beneficiaries, the burden of which is disproportionately borne by UP representatives, leading to further demotivation for them to carry out their responsibilities.

Capacity and Constraints in Programme Implementation

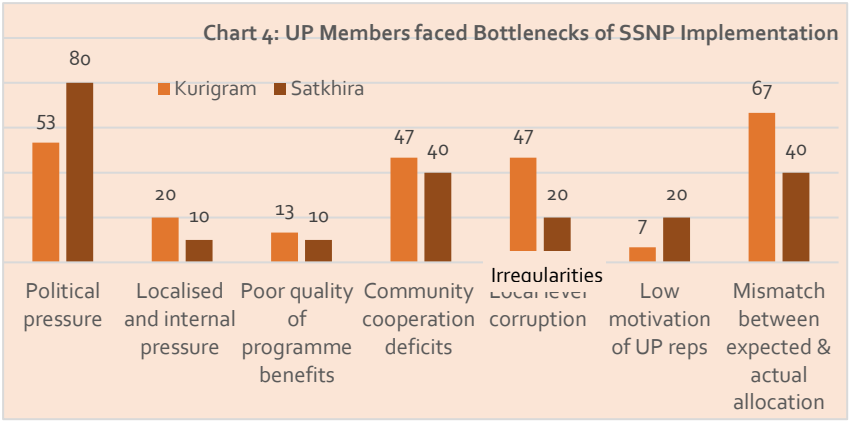
The elected representatives claim to have the capacity to select the social safety net programme beneficiaries by maintaining government prescribed rules and processes. In carrying out the safety net responsibilities at local level, it is found that the capacity of the UP representatives is partial with variable compliance to the government policy for each of the safety net programmes (Chart 2).



A substantial proportion of the UP respondents including elected members, Chairmen and Secretaries claim to adhere to the project wise guidelines for implementing the programme. The responses imply and highlight that discretionary criteria are followed in selecting the beneficiaries of social safety net programmes. Lacking uniformity in the criteria of core selection and implementation of programmes was observed in differential responses amongst UP members. This was also found to be the case not only amongst UP members but from the overall responses of the Chairmen and Secretaries. Elected UP members perceive that scope of going beyond the set government criteria is possible. Accordingly, the selection is in practice done with partial compliance of the set criteria, and often implemented with the sole guidance of either the Union Parishad Chairman or Secretary (Chart 3).



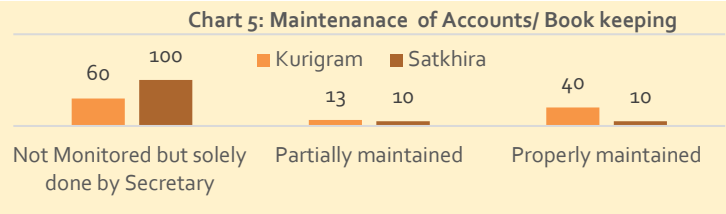
The low level of knowledge and practice of beneficiary selection and the programme implementation process in the Union Parishads across the study districts expose several capacity constraints of the elected UP representatives and officials. The bottlenecks of social safety net programme implementation span from the low motivation of UP representatives to the quality of programme benefits to deficits in cooperation of the community (Chart 4). For social safety net programmes, the UP representatives consider their roles in implementation including handling grievances, coordinating, reporting and follow-up to be heavy.

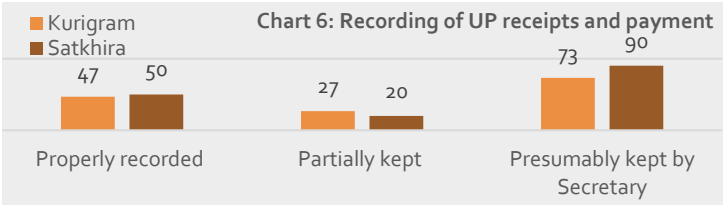


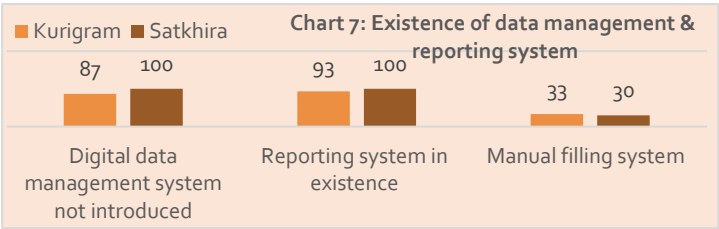
A mismatch between the expected benefits and actual allocation exacerbates constraints since the target group (expected beneficiaries) is bigger in size than the benefit budget allocation for social safety net programmes in each of the Union Parishads. At most times, the representatives are faced with the choice to prioritize local needs, and often bend to both local internal as well as political pressure in the selection of beneficiaries and implementation. Local level irregularities have also been identified as one of the bottlenecks to effective implementation of safety net programmes. The UP members feel that the top most constraint to successful implementation arises out of political pressure and local level irregularities (Chart 5).

UPs regularly resolve conflicts in areas of beneficiary selection, programme implementation, and internal conflicts. A substantial number of respondents revealed that general mis-targeting is a major grievance which citizens have. Another grievance issue which is equally frequent is the political influence led selection. Conflict between members and UP Chairman is also cited as another cause. A few respondents also highlighted the cause of people's grievance due to the authoritarian role of the UP Chairman or UP members. It was amply revealed that UPs have not yet established a system and mechanisms of formally submitting grievances and addressing those grievances. True, grievance redress mechanisms still remain weak. In view of the weakness of the formal system, there are informal means of addressing the process of grievances based on circumstances at the Union level.

The capacity constraints at the Union Parishads spread across lacking technical knowledge and know-how of UP rules and regulations and social safety net programmes to monitoring, supervision and financial management. Uniform understanding of the Union Parishad rules and regulations as well as fundamental principles of social safety net programme modalities is lacking among the UP representatives.



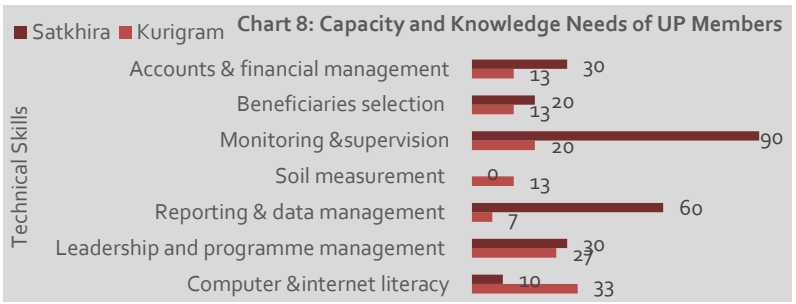


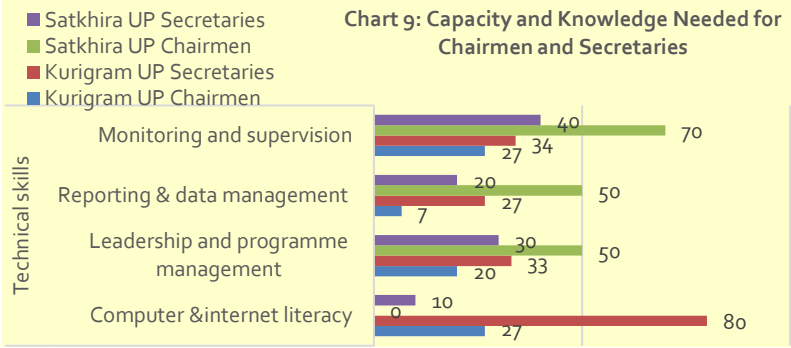


The knowledge on the subjects are drawn from numerous years of experience working with the local government and the representatives did not have any systematic training, neither on the monitoring and supervision nor on the financial management of programmes. As such, the accounts and book keeping at the UPs are mostly done solely by the Secretary without any monitoring from the representatives (Chart 5). Also, members have hardly any clue whether UP receipts and payments are properly recorded (Chart 6). While the elected representatives have a wide responsibility in reporting of the safety net programmes, their role has been mainly to fill the format provided by the line officials in Upazilas. No electronic data management system is yet in existence in the unions (Chart 7), and the current one-way reporting mechanism is drawn from the manual filing system that is presumably kept in order by the UP Secretaries without due monitoring and supervision by local government representatives.

Training Needs

Perceptions of the respondents were assessed in three areas: Technical Skills, Subject-wise Knowledge and Awareness, and Experience. The respondents prioritized Monitoring and Supervision, Reporting and Data Management, Accounts and Financial Management, and Leadership and Programme Management training courses as their most acute training needs (Chart 8). Most UP Chairmen identified 'Monitoring and Supervision' training as their top priority, which is also supported by 40 percent of the Secretaries. While 50 percent of the UP Chairmen identified 'Reporting and Data Management' and 'Leadership and Programme Management' as their second priority, this is 20 percent (3rd) and 30 percent (2nd) respectively for the Secretaries (Chart 9).





In terms of Awareness and Experiences, the highest number of respondents in Kurigram identified 'Climate Change and Disaster Implications' as their priority training need. The highest number of Satkhira respondents (20 percent) wanted to gain exposure to the NSSS

By and large, respondents from both districts were not enthusiastic to get training on social safety net programmes; rather they wanted exchange/cross visits to such programmes. In the area of subject-wise knowledge, about one-third of the respondents prioritized 'Gender and Discriminatory Practices' training. Another one-third of the respondents wanted training on Laws and Regulations on UP and social safety nets. Other training needs mentioned are Poverty and Social Safety Nets and Local Level Governance (Chart 10).

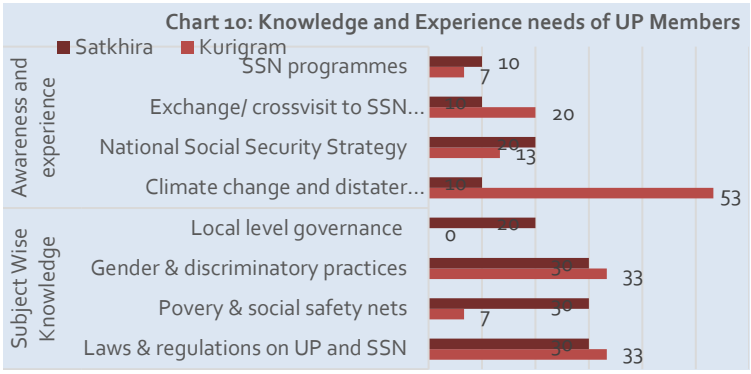


Chart 10: Knowledge and Experience needs of UP Members

While assessing Awareness and Experience, it appeared that highest number of UP Chairmen and Secretaries wanted to participate in 'Exchange visit to social safety net programmes' for learning and wanted to be trained on 'Climate Change and Disaster Implications. As regards Subject Wise Knowledge requirement the UP Chairmen ranked training on Accounts and Finance, Gender and Discriminatory Practices, and Laws and Regulations on UP and social safety nets' as a priority (Chart 11).

In the final analysis, training needs given highest priority are: (1) Regulations on Union Parishads and social safety nets; (2) Poverty and social safety nets; (3) Selection of beneficiaries for social safety nets; (4) Reporting and data management for social safety nets; (5) Monitoring and supervision of social safety nets; (6) Gender and discriminatory practices; and (7) Leadership and project management

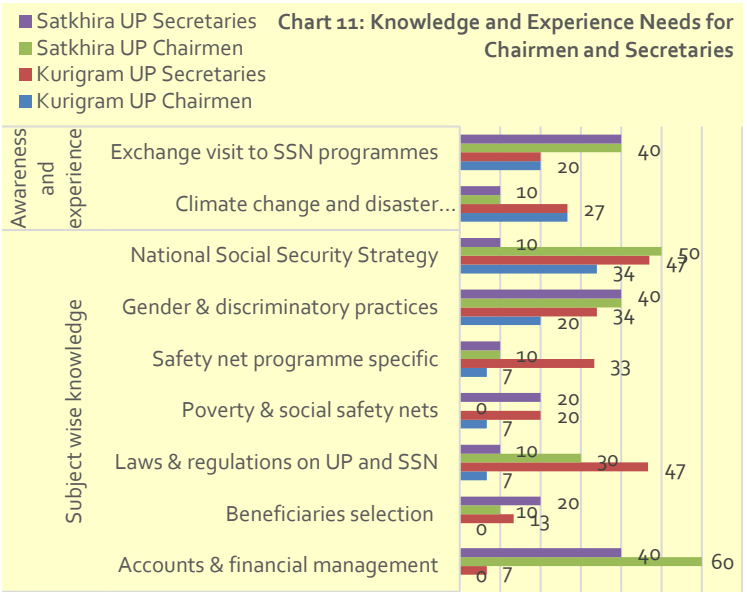


Chart 11: Knowledge and Experience Needs for Chairmen and Secretaries

The TNA has re-iterated the capacity gaps in overall management of UP functions, particularly, dealing with social safety nets/transfer projects. The UP as an organization is carrying a legacy of 'brain drain' since a new group of representatives take office through voting every five years (only 5-8% are re-elected). Institutional memory, best practices and valuable documentation are lost with this change. Another legacy associated with UP capacity development is poor resource allocation of the Local Government Division (LGD) to this area. Apart from the Foundation Course conducted by National Institute of Local Government (NILG) for the newly elected representatives, some development projects and NGOs run training programs as project activity.

Within the given scenario, SSPS training strategy should aim to build a solid partnership with NILG to develop and implement comprehensive training interventions. Since efficacy of the social security strategy will largely depend on implementation of programmes dedicated to different target groups, social security programmes may well be part of the foundation course. Formal training should be complemented by on-the-job training, learning by doing, peer learning and visits to learn from best practices. Only formal training is not enough to develop skills and positive motivation of the UP representatives to support hard-to-reach, marginalized and ultra- poor groups.

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