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A. PROJECT OVERVIEW

Skills for Unemployed and Underemployed Labour, in short SkillFUL, aims to reduce poverty through sustainable training leading to increased income for the poor and disadvantaged youth. Between March 2011 and August 2014, Swisscontact implemented the project in collaboration with the Centre for Mass Education in Science (CMES), with joint funding from the European Union (EU) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). The project focuses its activities towards the poor and Differently Abled Persons (DAPs) in six districts of Bangladesh - Dhaka, Kurigram, Bogra, Jessore, Sunamganj and Nilphamari.

Bangladesh has an economically active labour force of about 57 million; about 83%¹ of them are employed in the informal economy² where lack of skills hinders improvement of services, productivity and wages. In this backdrop, SkillFUL promotes short term training to impart skills that are in high demand primarily in the informal economy, and have the potential to enhance employment, increase income and reduce poverty among its beneficiaries. By facilitating improvements in skills of labour in the informal market the project further aims to improve services and increase productivity in specific sectors and occupations.

Besides the classic but nevertheless necessary interventions, such as Training of Trainers, capacity development of Training Service Providers (TSPs), development of demand driven training courses, supporting the provision of training to the beneficiaries, among others, SkillFUL also tested, within the context of Bangladesh, innovative approaches to encourage skills training that is more market oriented and less subsidy driven. Although the brevity of the project did not allow all the innovations to have a long lasting impact, some initiatives—Placement Counselling and Marketing Units (PCMU) at TSPs and local level Skills Development Forum (SDF), for instance—have shown early signs of sustainability through adoption and continuation by project partners.

This booklet provides a glimpse of the work areas addressed, the work undertaken and the actual results achieved by the project. It also pays tribute to the orchestra of project partners, funding agencies and other stakeholders for their sustained commitment and efforts to achieve challenging goals, and to their openness for allowing the project to test initiatives towards transforming the heavily subsidised skills training landscape into a more inclusive market-oriented mechanism that allows disadvantaged youth to access skills training.

¹Bangladesh Labour Force Survey 2010

²The informal sector or informal economy is that part of an economy that is not taxed, monitored by any form of government or included in any gross national product (GNP), unlike the formal economy

Fact Finding Study-The Informal Economy, Sida, Kristina Flodman Becker, 2004, <http://www.rojasdatabank.info/sida.pdf> retrieved on 17th September 2014.

B. MAIN AREAS OF WORK

i. STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITY OF TRAINING SERVICE PROVIDERS

SkillFUL started with the ambition to foster a market-oriented skills training approach and, therefore, engaged more privately owned TSPs and fewer NGOs and government supported ones. Moreover, there was a lack of NGO and Government based TSPs in locations outside Dhaka, which is project's main field of work. Through a careful selection process, the project selected 22 partner TSPs (from 217 applications) - 17 private and 5 NGO based. All the selected TSPs needed strengthening of their capacities to various degrees in order to deliver training according to the requirements of the project and to improve their overall training business. Capacity development was provided in the following areas:

a. Infrastructure, equipment and tools

The project contributed a portion of the total cost of investment in infrastructure development and equipment required to conduct quality training courses of the project. Considering the long term business prospects from the infrastructural changes, the TSPs were happy to contribute the rest of the costs. Though the investments supported more effective training delivery primarily at the main training centres, equipment were also used at over 93 outreach training³ centres established by the TSPs to bring training closer to beneficiaries who were remotely located.

b. Training for trainers and other TSPs' key staff

Besides training of trainers (see iii below) the project facilitated 32 training courses for other key staff of partner TSPs and, occasionally, for staff of other training centres whenever possible. The courses covered subjects such as organisational development, entrepreneurship, financial management, procurement, proposal and report writing, business plan development and human resource management among others. As a result, 343 TSP staff benefitted from the above courses facilitated by the project team, local experts and international specialists.

c. Job placement support for graduates

Ensuring employment of graduates was one of the main focuses of the project. Realizing that greater employability of SkillFUL supported graduates will make training offers more appealing to other potential trainees, the TSPs agreed to ensuring jobs for graduates and monitoring their employment status for at least 6 months. SkillFUL subsequently instituted Placement, Counselling and Marketing Units (PCMUs), to reinforce job placement capabilities of TSPs. Since this intervention required commitment and additional financial engagement by training partners, only 6 financially solvent TSPs took part in the pilot scheme. However, for greater promotion of placement services, all partners—regardless of their participation in the PCMU initiative—were given training on PCMU management.

³Outreach Centres- Temporary training venues established away from the main training centre

⁴Training duration ranged between 61 and 539 hours.

ii. DEVELOPING COMPETENCY BASED TRAINING MATERIALS

From the outset, the project promoted Competency Based Training (CBT), which develops the competencies—skills, knowledge and attitude of a graduate—to perform according to expectations of the workplace. This enhances graduates' chances of finding rewarding employment. The following activities enabled greater penetration of CBT within the project:

a. Development of Curricula

Noticeably, occupations requiring skilled workers—posts which trained graduates could easily fill—severely lacked training materials. In response, the project facilitated three market assessments and identified 30 potential occupations for training development. Accordingly, competency profiles were developed and training needs-analysis conducted for the potential trades as a base for further training package development. The analysis resulted in the development of 21 curriculum guides and 20 manuals (training plans) for trainers to conduct short-term training⁴ for technical and non-technical occupations. The guides, closely conforming to the requirement of the workplace, were subsequently translated to Bengali for wider application at the TSP level.



b. Development of Training and Learning Material

The TSPs interested in working with SkillFUL were desperately short of Teaching and Learning Materials (TLM), which they were unable to produce themselves in light of the newly introduced CBT approach. Therefore, in coherence with the curriculum guides, the project oversaw the development of 21 TLMs in English and Bengali. The content of these materials can be used very flexibly and focus primarily on practical work, with some consideration on theory for key areas of the work.

Apart from training in classrooms, the project also facilitated training at workplaces, otherwise known as Workplace Based Training (WBT). The scheme was piloted to address the needs of some progressive employers who were willing to contribute towards upgrading skills of their existing workers. Accordingly, the project produced WBT learning manuals (in English and Bengali) for Lacquer Polisher, Upholstery Worker, Lathe Machine Operator and Welder.

iii. TRAINING OF TRAINERS'

CBT requires trainers to restrict their traditionally 'dominant' role in training rooms, and to act more as facilitators and guides of the learning process. In order to equip trainers of partner TSPs with the required competencies, the project supported Training of Trainers (TOT) in 3 areas:

a. Development of a Training of Trainers' (TOT) Programme

By involving regional experts and project staff, SkillFUL aided the development of a TOT programme for instructors, which was preceded by a competency gap analysis of the trainers at various TSPs. Materials from national and international sources were judiciously used to make optimal use of the time allocated to develop the training programme. The final version, based on the CBT approach, comprised of 7 modules spread over 40 hours of training.

b. Training of Trainers on instructional skills

The project arranged capacity development of 255 trainers on instructional skills using the basic training modules developed for this purpose. This number included instructors from the partner TSPs, WBT centres and trainers invited from other Government and non-government based training centres.

In addition, the project targeted development of 40 Master Trainers who would eventually train other instructors in the long run. 40 candidates were selected from a pool of 255 trained instructors (see iii. b. above). By the end 38 instructors successfully attended all the 7 training modules (see ii. a. above) and are now being referred to as Master Trainers.

c. Training of Trainers on occupational (trade) skills

Many trainers lacked thorough vocational training and work experience, especially in technical trades. The project researched the required occupational competencies to conduct courses for the project on Motorcycle Repair and Electrical House Wiring. The findings showed that 17 trainers needed significant improvements in this regard. The project facilitated training of 14 out of the 17 trainers, who later developed their occupational skills considerably. However, due to limited resources and time the project could not address this important issue with other occupations.

iv. DEVELOPMENT OF COMPETENCY STANDARDS

The project envisioned the linking of short-term training courses, jointly developed with industry, to the formal Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) so that courses were more credible, attractive and widely available nationally. Such linkage would have to conform to the requirements of the Bangladesh Technical Education Board (BTEB). SkillFUL jointly with the furniture industry pursued the initiative with four training courses through the following interventions:

Make it iii



a. Establishment of an Industry Skills Council

Any new training course must be based on Occupational Standards and endorsed by the Industry Skills Council (ISC⁵) before being approved by BTEB. The existence and functioning of an ISC is therefore crucial. The project facilitated formation of an ISC in the furniture sector, and its registration as a legal entity with the Registrar of Joint Stock Companies and Firms. ISC is now also registered with the National Skills Development Council (NSDC) which is the apex body for TVET in Bangladesh.

b. Development of Occupational Standards⁶ and Course Accreditation Documents

The project oversaw the development of four standards for Level 1 National Technical and Vocational Qualification Framework for Carpenter, Lacquer Polisher, Upholstery Worker and Wood Working Machine Operator trades. The standards were developed under the guidance of regional and local specialists, expert workers, TSP instructors, BTEB representatives and project staff. The project also drafted four Course Accreditation Documents⁷ (CADs) for the standards developed.

c. Review and approval of Occupational Standards and Course Accreditation Documents

For BTEB's approval, standards and CADs have to be reviewed and endorsed on two different levels (project-ISC and ISC-BTEB levels). With help from ISC, the project facilitated the formation of four Technical Sub Committees and organised a workshop to review the standards and CADs. After endorsement by the ISC, the project submitted the documents to BTEB. Meanwhile, BTEB and the ISC jointly formed four Standard and Curriculum Development Committees (SCDCs). The project facilitated 2 workshops to review the standards and CADs at BTEB, which were subsequently endorsed by the SCDC.

Finally, the project submitted the documents to BTEB on behalf of ISC for final approval, which would ensure consideration of the standards and CADs as nationally valid training documents.

v. ENABLING ACCESS TO FINANCE

In the past, TSPs had very limited access to finances for upgrading their infrastructure and to procure new equipment. Insufficient funds further prevented potential trainees from enrolling into courses and posed difficulties for graduates looking to start a business. With this in mind, the project took various initiatives to facilitate easy access to finance for the targeted TSPs, trainees and graduates in the skills training market⁸.

Exploring options to promote access to finance and continuous advocacy created a platform for disseminating information and linking Financial Institutions (FIs) with the target group. As a result, some FIs and Microfinance Institutes (MFIs), including BRAC, has already started financing the target group. So far, 6 TSPs, 7 members of a Skills Development Forum⁹, 101 trainees and 26 graduates have received loans for expanding their businesses, paying training fees and for starting-up businesses respectively.

The FIs' continual interest in providing loans to the target group will depend largely on the extent of the recovery of the abovementioned loans.



⁵An ISC is a network of members consisting of representatives of enterprises and industry bodies of a particular sector who are concerned primarily with skills development issues and represent the sector on a national level.

⁶An Occupational Standard (OS) is a formal document describing the tasks a worker must be able to carry out in a particular occupation under certain conditions. The document shows how the task is measured.

⁷CADs are formal documents describing justification for a course, conditions that apply for training institutions that intend to conduct this course, curricula and as reference also the OS.

⁸Skills Training Market - An arrangement where the employers/individuals purchase skills training from the TSPs where the prices are determined by the factors of demand and supply and it is fully financed by the market actors. The market also includes stakeholders such as Government Bodies, Financial Institutions, Testing and Certification Agencies, Labor Market Information System providers that support the operations and sustainability of the market.

⁹Skills Development Forum - A local network for skills development, initiated by SkillFUL.

vi. ADDRESSING SOCIAL ISSUES

a. Gender Mainstreaming

A Gender Equality Mainstreaming (GEM) approach led to encouraging more women to participate in skills training. With a focus on non-traditional trades, women learned of the opportunities to explore better employment options and increased income. Moreover, the project emphasised the importance of GEM to its partner TSPs as well as project staff. This has been further enhanced by the development of Gender Guideline for the TSPs and inclusion of GEM in the Training Implementation Guideline. Finally, a Monitoring Results Measurement (MRM) toolkit diligently monitored the progress on GEM within the various activities of the project.

From the onset, a target of 40% females of the total beneficiaries was set to address the gap in skills development opportunities between men and women. Additionally, TSPs owned by women were deliberately partnered with to cater more effectively to the skills need among females.

Care was taken to involve female instructors to make the learning environment conducive for female trainees that are usually uncomfortable interacting with males. Linkages with organisations like BRAC and Bangladesh Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BWCCI), were fostered to facilitate access to loans (for training and business start-up)

and to provide job placements for successful female graduates. By the end of the project period, women comprised a staggering 65% of the training graduates with more than 60% of them successfully employed. In addition, women comprised more than 40% of master trainers and instructors. 5 out of 22 TSPs partnered were run by females who also offered courses for females who could be suitably employed once graduated.

b. Differently Abled Person

The project attempted to break the cycle of poverty and social exclusion for DAPs by equipping them with skills that lead to jobs, income and, hence, a dignified life. The project has developed a guideline for TSPs on mainstreaming DAPs in skills training, which led to enrolment and graduation of 89 DAPs. Some TSPs went further by providing additional benefits such as extra classes and travel allowance.

Although enrolment of DAPs was short of the project's expectation, a change in TSPs' mind-set has been noticed. TSPs are now more sensitive to the needs of DAPs and have come to believe in their abilities to acquire skills training. Further investment in resources and time is necessary to build on the early signs of success in this sustainable practice.



C. PILOT INTERVENTION

Pilot interventions are unique activities in the skills development context in Bangladesh, initiated and facilitated by the project.

I. PRIVATE SECTOR LED SKILLS TESTING AND CERTIFICATION

Holding a certificate that is credible among employers confirms the graduate's competencies and enables him/her to find jobs quickly. Since no certification system existed for non-formal skills training, the project explored a private sector led testing and certification system.

Given the project's previous involvement with the furniture sector, it appeared sensible to pilot such a system within this sector. Hence the initiation and facilitation of the following interventions:

a. Development of assessment instruments

In line with the Occupational Standards (see footnote 6) the project assisted the development of testing instruments for Carpenter, Lacquer Polisher and Upholstery Worker trades. The development work was conducted under the guidance of a regional expert in collaboration with expert workers, trainers from TSPs and project staff.

b. Development of assessment guideline

A testing and certification guideline was developed by a regional expert working jointly with the Industry Skills Council (ISC), Akhtar Furnishers Limited (AFL) and project staff. This guideline describes the process, roles and responsibilities of those involved in testing and certification. The guideline can now be used by other private sectors that require a testing and certification scheme.

c. Assessor training

Before conducting testing of graduates, assessors need to be familiar with the occupations, the assessment instruments and the procedure. The project selected 15 Industry experts and trainers from various training centres. Subsequently, the project arranged training of the selected assessors by regional experts.

d. Testing and certification

To make testing and certification easily accessible to graduates, the project conducted skills testing in Dhaka, Bogra, Jessore and Kurigram. 500 graduates (421 males and 79 females) from SkillFUL project and from the Furniture sector were tested. A certificate of competence was issued to the successful participants, signed jointly by Industry Skills Council (ISC), Akhtar Furnishers Limited (AFL) and SkillFUL.

The piloting of the private sector led testing and certification scheme met the project expectations. Processes and tools are now defined and can be replicated in other industry sectors. Of crucial importance for success was the strong commitment and leadership of key stakeholders in the sector. AFL had a key role and has been a very reliable and strong partner in this respect.

II. VOUCHERS TRAINING SCHEME FOR SKILLS TRAINING

Not all interested participants of skills training have access to training programmes, whether regular or donor-supported. The project therefore explored alternative access to skills training through the Voucher Training Scheme (VTS). The VTS intended to allow target youths to take training for only 15% of the total cost at any of the partner TSPs under VTS. The remainder 85% would be paid by the project. The project selected the slum areas of Kollanpur, Mirpur, Mohammadpur and Demra in Dhaka to test the scheme.

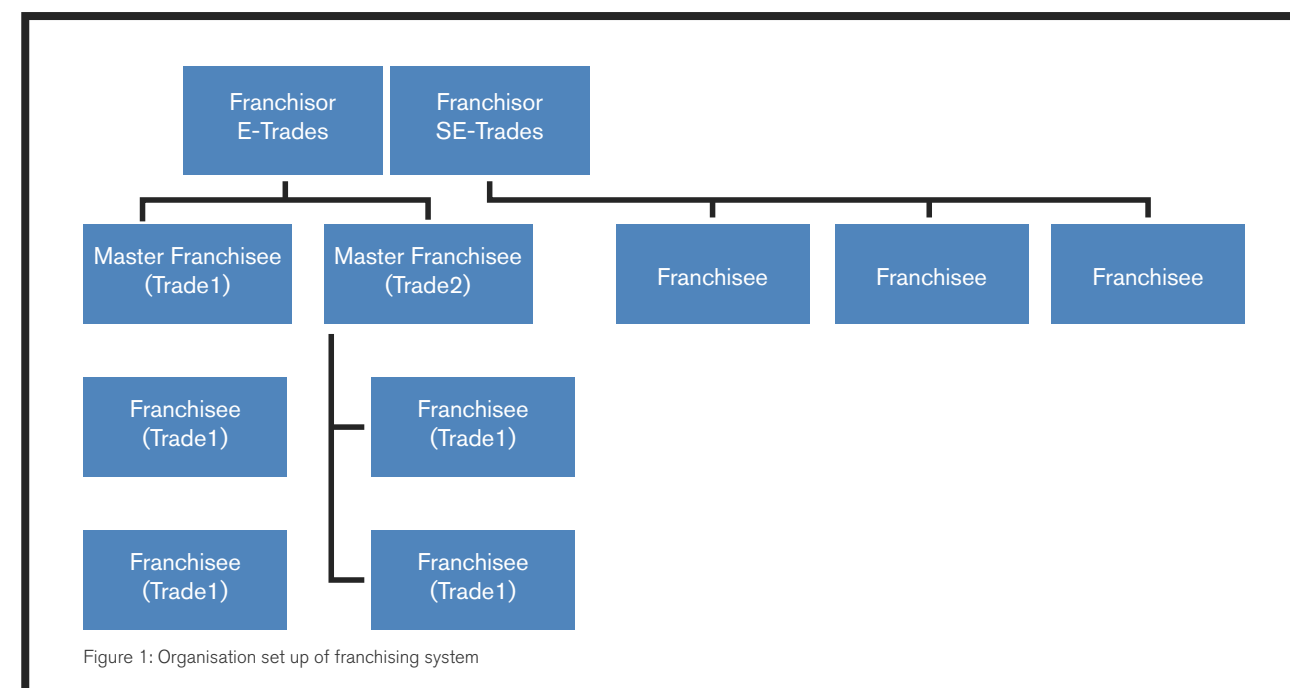
The scheme was piloted between January 2013 and June 2014. Although more than a thousand vouchers were picked up, only 356 candidates took up the offer, of which 70% were females. The distorted training market arising from rampant free training projects funded by various donors was pointed out as a major reason behind the stagnant response from the potential trainees. Although it was decided to also pilot the scheme in Jessore, where provision of free training is not a major hindrance, due to political turmoil it could not be implemented.



III. EXPLORING OPTIONS FOR FRANCHISING SKILLS TRAINING SERVICE

In line with the projects' mandate, efforts were undertaken to expand skills training models and courses. Due to its success in other educational contexts, franchising¹⁰ was chosen as a possible business model. The project undertook its own assessments on franchising in 2012. Findings of a leading

consulting firm from India (engaged in early 2013) came up with the recommendation to use two different franchising training schemes: one for trades mainly suitable for Employment (E-Trades) and the other for trades with a high likelihood for Self-Employment (SE-Trades).



¹⁰Under franchising the Franchisor owns the business and enters into legal agreements with Franchisees and grants them the right, against payment, to use its systems, brand and other intellectual property to operate an identical business. Franchising is typically used where a great deal of control over the quality of a product/service is required, where continued innovation is driven from the Franchisor, and where Franchisees are provided extensive support by the Franchisor to market the products/ services.

The analysis concluded that the financial self-sustainability of training for the SkillFUL target group might be likely only for E-Trades. There was interest expressed for franchising, in particular by a large local enterprise in the power and renewable energy sector. However, after initial enthusiastic exchange with the project the enterprise decided in October 2013 not to pursue the venture. As the project was nearing its phase-out period it was not meaningful to lobby new partners to venture into franchising of skills training because there would be insufficient time left to provide worthwhile support on the project's part.

IV. LABOUR MARKET INFORMATION SYSTEM FOR BLUE COLLAR JOBS

Linking blue collar job seekers with employment remains a major challenge in Bangladesh. Most existing employment services for the domestic market cater for white collar jobs and formal employment. However, the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) options used in this context, such as Bjobs and ProthomAlo Jobs, may also be a viable option for blue collar jobs in the informal sector. Similar systems combined with mobile phone technology seem to be successful in India (babajob.com) and Pakistan (KamtaPakistan).

To assess the business case of such a system in Bangladesh the project commissioned a study in 2014. The findings show that the business opportunity is viable in the blue collar job information market in Bangladesh, provided the Labour Market Information System (LMIS) service is based on the availability of mobile internet technology. The estimated start-up cost of establishing the LMIS service in the country is around BDT 15 million for the first year, and breakeven could be reached in about 4-5 years' time. Although several private sector partners are interested in the business venture, effective marketing remains a crucial and costly matter.

V. SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FORUM

The project envisioned that the skills development actors at the local level enhance their understanding of skills development issues and become capable of addressing the concerns of the sector independently.

Skills Development Forums (SDFs) were formed in Kurigram and Jessore in 2012 and 2013 respectively. Membership of the SDFs consists of around 30 representatives from private sector enterprises, TSPs, financial institutions and graduates. The SDF in Kurigram is well established and functions well while the one in Jessore is currently in its initial phase.

It was expected that more SDFs would be formed in other target areas. However market actors, especially the employers, showed little interest. Since the benefits of participating in the SDF do not manifest in the short run, many entrepreneurs were unwilling to invest time and

resources for the forum. It was also difficult to form an Executive Board as most employers have little cooperation between them.



D. PROJECT MANAGEMENT

i. PROJECT ORGANOGRAM

The project was implemented jointly by Swisscontact (SC), as the lead agency, and CMES. SC had a project agreement with the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB), Government of Bangladesh, and separate agreements with each donor - EU and SDC. The project was also answerable to the local District Councils with regards to its activities at the district level and, hence, the progress reports were submitted to the Government bodies and to donors as contractually agreed.

In total 12 Project Steering Committee (PSC) meetings were held to discuss the project's progress and tackle critical issues. Through a consensus of all the members the PSC would take key decisions on the direction of the project. In addition, the committee was also responsible for approving all yearly reports and plans.

The organogram shows that the Project Management Unit had played mainly a facilitating role. All of the training interventions for youth were conducted through the TSPs, and most of the activities addressing the intermediaries—such as TSPs, MFIs, SDFs and others—were delivered through regional and local experts.

Intermediaries also started to provide services to the beneficiaries and to each other, e.g. MFIs not only provided loans to trainees but also to TSP and SDFs. SDFs, on the other hand, started establishing linkages with employers that would enable the former to easily place trained graduates in jobs in various enterprises.

ii. MONITORING AND RESULT MEASUREMENT SYSTEM

An elaborate Monitoring and Result Measurement (MRM) system was put in place to adequately check changes at Activity, Output, Outcome and Impact level. In line with Swisscontact's overall approach to MRM, the project team, with support of international experts, developed a Results Chain (RC), MRM plan and a SkillFUL Information Management System (SIMS). RC and MRM plan enabled tracking of interventions from activity to impact level and, hence, taking corrective actions when necessary. SIMS, on the other hand, allowed storage and analysis of a large influx of data from trainees, graduates and TSPs. The overall system was regularly reviewed and updated by the project team, which led to an effective progress tracking at the grassroots level.

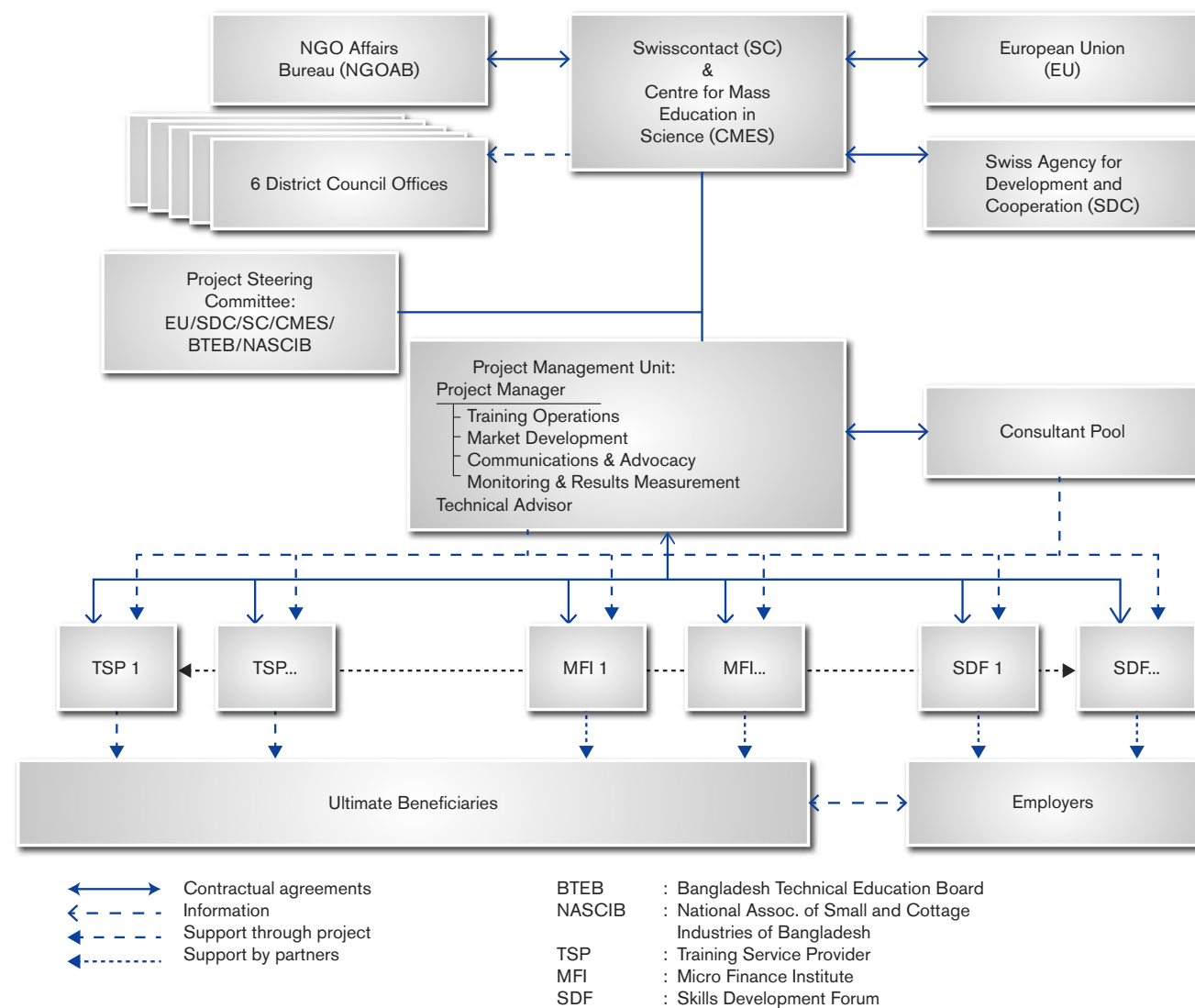


Figure 2: Simplified Project Organogram

E. LESSONS LEARNT

The number of Training Service Providers (TSPs) able to deliver good skills training and in particular Competency Based Training (CBT) is very limited. Although all partner TSPs found the CBT approach relevant, they lacked the infrastructure, instructors and management expertise to implement it. Enhancing the capacities of training providers to conduct CBT based courses, therefore, required more time than expected.

There is enthusiasm among (selected) industries for a private sector led testing and certification system. This is true for industries that show great interest and leadership to develop the capacity of its workforce. The project has already partnered with Akhtar Furnishers Limited to pilot industry led skills testing and certification system in the furniture sector. As a result 500 applicants including 79 women have been successfully tested and certified.

Positive changes in the perception of employers about the benefits of skills training is taking place gradually. During the first SkillFUL Tracer study, 56% of the sample employers informed that SkillFUL supported graduates perform better tasks than average workers. There are also cases where enterprises have invested massively in skills development of its own sector. Additionally, the enthusiasm of enterprises to develop Skills Development Forum (SDF) also serves to emphasise employers' interest to contribute towards skills training.

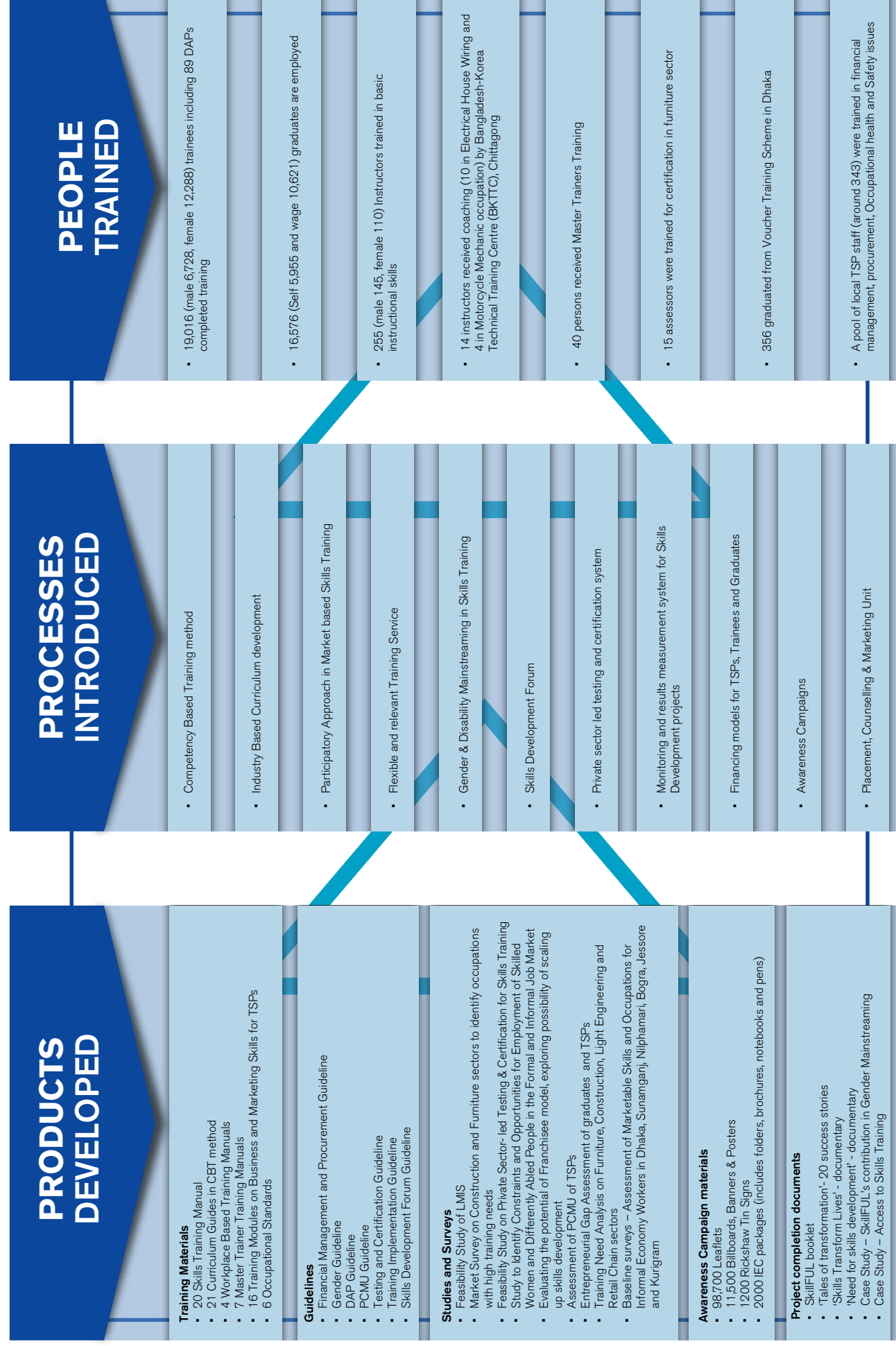
Establishing outreach centres and providing flexible training hours meant greater numbers of the Target Youth were reached. This is especially true for the marginalised and disadvantaged segment of the population.

Results from SkillFUL records show that establishing outreach centres in remote areas where classes were offered in evenings or weekends have increased enrolment for females and Differently abled Persons (DAPs). Even though the project has resulted in a large number of female graduates, it has been a challenge to provide employment for them since many employers are not willing to hire women in certain occupations. Family restriction and social barriers were cited as additional factors keeping women away from employment. Moreover, women's preference for training in traditional occupations is the most common reason why female graduates are not being employed by the industries.

There is interest from a number of Financial Institutions to test the feasibility of loans to TSPs and the target youth. The project managed to convince 10 Financial Institutes to explore the viability of provision of loans. As a result, a handful of loans have been disbursed to TSPs, trainees and graduates. Although some of the borrowers above have already repaid the loans, long term sustainability will depend on the overall loan recovery rate of the pilot intervention.

Trainees' reluctance to pay the training fee is due to extensive availability of free training programmes, apprehension of potential trainees towards investing in training and lack of trust in training offers. As a result, SkillFUL's voucher training programme, which required trainees to pay 15% of the training fee, could not produce satisfactory results. Additionally, lack of qualified TSPs further hinders the implementation of such training schemes in the country.





PROJECT TEAM

