

# Baseline Assessment Report

A base extent of access, delivery and quality of information related to public schemes/entitlements



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Digital Empowerment Foundation

## **DEFINITIONS**

*Chowkidar/Kotwal*-A person responsible of maintaining law and order at the village level, the lowest rung of the hierarchy of the police force

*District Collector*-An official of the Indian Administrative Services cadre deputed by the government to serve for a given period of time as the chief administrator of the district

*Gram Panchayat*- An institution of self-government at the village level constituted under article 243B of the Constitution of India for the rural areas

*Gram Sabha*- A body (assembly) of all adults, who live in an area under the jurisdiction of a Gram Panchayat (GP). Anyone who is 18 years old or more and has the right to vote is a member of the Gram Sabha (GS). The GS exercises such power and performs such functions at the village level as the legislature of a state may, by law, provide. It plays a key role in ensuring the GP functions responsibly

*Gram Swaraj*- A vision of a decentralized government wherein each village is responsible for its own affairs. It originates from Mahatma Gandhi's concept of self-governance through community building, not through a hierarchical government

*Janpad Panchayat (Block level)*- Part of the PRI system, an intermediary level of government operating between the panchayat and district levels of governance. It has administrative and fiscal powers over the panchayats and villages in its jurisdiction

*Munadi*- A method of beating drums to make public announcements to the villagers

*Panchayat ghar/Bhavan*- Official Panchayat building used for all routine work of the Panchayat and for holding meetings

*Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)*- Elected self-governing bodies at various administrative levels (district, block and village) which meet regularly to discuss economic and social justice issues in their area of governance Elections for PRIs are held every five years, with seats reserved for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and women

*Patwari*- A government official, who maintains records of land ownership, including which crops are grown at every harvest, and any factor that has a major effect on the growing of crops, such as droughts or flooding

*Sachiv*- The government official placed in Panchayats to assist the Sarpanch.

Samasth Gram Vasi- All inhabitants of a village.

Sarpanch- The person elected to serve as the head of a Panchayat by the villagers.

*Zila Panchayat (District)*- A body of elected representatives for governance at district level. It is the highest tier of governance under the PRI system

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Digital Empowerment Foundation initiated the SOOCHNA SEVA project with an aim to facilitate dissemination of information of public schemes & services and enable the deserving groups to derive benefits from them. European Union funded the pilot program in five backward districts in five States chosen from the BRGF list (Guna-MP, Tehri Gharwal-Uttarakhand, Barmer-Rajasthan, Ranchi-Jharkhand, West Champaran-Bihar). Six key areas have been identified - education, health, livelihood, employment, financial inclusion and social security – for operational focus in a period of 5 years. The program seeks to incorporate a multifaceted approach in order to make the overall process operational with the involvement of citizens. The three main information delivery channels are Soochna Seva Kendras (information centers), Soochna Sevaks (fellows) and Soochna Vahans (information vehicles).

Baseline evaluations were conducted at the household level in the initial phase of the project to provide indicative estimates of the situation on the ground. This evaluation would help in drafting the plan of action and assessing the key impacts and outcomes of the program. A quantitative cross-sectional digital survey (Open Data Kit) was designed for the study and it was carried out by Soochna Sevaks on android tablets. The study covered a total of 2602 individuals across the 5 blocks, and it has revealed that a significant percentage (67%) of the population owns a mobile phone. An analysis across districts shows that the Barmer district has the highest (59.29%) rate of feature phone ownership whereas Guna distinguishes itself by having the highest rate of smartphone users (15%) across the 5 locations. Apart from background information the data has been analyzed across three parameters– Need, Access and Barrier.

The Need parameter primarily focused on an assessment of needs of the community in terms of issues prevailing in the area. Health has been cited by 60% of the population as a major issue. However a large rate of acquisition of schemes can also be seen here i.e. 70 % avail single or multiple government entitlements. The highest number of respondents, who avail schemes, do so in the focus areas of Food, Water and Education. In terms of Access of information, (Access analysis basically refers to the understanding the nodes and flow of information) word of mouth accounts for how over 69% of the respondents gain information. Whereas leaflets and kiosks (2% & 1% respectively) lie at the lower edge of being a source of information, calls are the third most important node to gain the information. In this case, the use of an IVR based 'Call Centre Model' will be an effective source to disseminate information. Complementing this is the indication that 100 % mobile users use it for making & receiving calls. Alignment of RTI in the action becomes a crucial factor as 90 % of the respondents do not know anything about the Act.

The Gram Panchayat is supposed to play an important part in the information flow at the village level. However, it is disappointing that the validity and reliability of information is acting as a barrier to the community. The lack of information access in local languages/dialects can be seen as another barrier. In addition to this when we talked about the difficulty faced by respondents during the stages of applying for a scheme, they have cited difficulty in gaining information about the forms. 60% of respondents found it a tough task to fill forms due to complicated format or language.

Hence the overall study findings indicates the need of having 'Public Scheme Information Framework' in place by adopting a multi-pronged approach in information services delivery and access at district and block level. And this framework will help to identify and set up channels of information and communication on public schemes and information services which will enable to reach the target groups and beneficiaries with government entitlement benefits with minimum hurdles.

## **BACKGROUND**

Socio-economic indicators paint an abysmal picture of the condition of women, Schedule Castes and Tribes, minorities and other marginalized groups. The process of empowerment of these sections has not sufficiently contributed to India's internationally-lauded development rate. The problem does not necessarily lie with the policy framework of the country or government initiatives aimed at improving their condition, but with the lack of awareness about the public schemes amongst the poorest strata and inept and corrupt implementation machinery. In addition to being deprived of other basic amenities, the poorer sections of the society also suffer from a severe dearth of information.

Accessibility to information is restricted primarily by the lack of effective and public-centric governance structures and limited portals for its dissemination. The first step towards active removal of barriers to the flow of information is systematic capacity building of all the stakeholders. These capacity building initiatives will also play a key role in promoting accountable and responsive panchayats and other government bodies. All of these levels of governance need to work in close coordination for improving accessibility of information about public schemes and successfully delivering their benefits to those who are most deserving.

Program like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Universal Education Mission) and Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act 2009 make education a constitutional right for all citizens of India, yet India has the largest population of illiterate adults in the world. Poverty alleviation programs such as National Rural Livelihoods Mission and Acts like NREGA have not been making a major difference because of mismanagement of funds and lack of awareness amongst the expected beneficiaries. Therefore, there is a dire need for a program that can bridge the information gap by integrating multiple modes of communications. Digital Empowerment Foundation initiated the SOOCHNA SEVA project with an aim to facilitate dissemination of information of public schemes and services and enable the deserving groups to derive benefits from them. In order to ascertain the exact conditions that we have to work with and establish a baseline, we have conducted surveys in our target locations.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Good governance is vital to viable and sustained socio-economic development. Keeping up the spirit of a social democratic country, Indian policymakers have designed several policies and programs to make its governance more accountable, inclusive and responsive to the needs of its citizens. Free flow and accessibility of information is one of the main factors that foster transparency of the governing structures. Right to Information Act was based on the premise that citizens have a sovereign authority on the government. Section 4 of the same act calls upon all governance bodies (state and central) to provide information to the public at regular intervals through various means of communication. In addition to planning and budgeting social welfare schemes, different sections of the government are also responsible for actively promoting these schemes. Unfortunately, the current state of affairs indicates that mere lip service has been rendered to the provisions of RTI.

Indian government, at both Central and State levels, acts as the largest service delivery provider in India with multitude of schemes, benefits, plans and services. However, India's massive population size and chronic socio-demographic disparity make service delivery process like maintaining a free flow of information regarding available public schemes, extremely perplexing. Implementation of these schemes, especially from user citizen's perspective (distributing entitlements) presents an even bigger challenge. Shortage and mismanagements of funds have stunted the benefit from even some of the best laid development plans. For instance, more than two crore families (out of 10.6 crore

applicants) have been denied work in the last 8 months under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme because of shrinking funds.

DEF launched the 'SOOCHNA SEVA' program in January 2014 with an aim to spread awareness, using ICT/non-ICT tools, about existing public schemes amongst the deprived sections and enable them to derive benefits from the same. In addition to empowering the masses with information, SOOCHNA SEVA has set its focus on capacity building of the local communities, groups and citizens and advance cooperation between the stakeholders and local administration to develop an operative framework for public scheme information dissemination and entitlement.

As a part of this program, SOOCHNA SEVA Kendras would be set up as sustainable access points and as one-stop shop for information empowerment. The program will introduce tools based on ICT-enabled service delivery, access and entitlement model. The approach taken by SOOCHNA SEVA focuses on generating demand for the public schemes on the beneficiaries' side. The level of operation for the program would be at the district administration level and below (blocks and Panchayats).

SOOCHNA SEVA was founded with an intention of strengthening the RTI act and to address larger issues of poverty, rural development, social exclusion and inequity of marginalized groups through information empowerment. The action-plan of this program also aims to help India meet its Millennium Development Goals such as eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, reducing child mortality rates, and improving maternal health. The program will deploy and run an integrated information services delivery and citizen entitlement framework in 5 backward districts in India in 6 key areas of - education, health, livelihood, employment, financial inclusion and social security. This initiative is further expected to strengthen the governance structure at district administration level and below.

## **BASELINE ASSESSMENT**

A baseline study is conducted at the beginning of a project or a program, in order to analyze the ground conditions in the target areas. Baseline study can be defined as a descriptive study that mostly provides quantitative information on the current status of a particular area, with respect to relevant parameters for a given population. For this project, Open Data Kit (an android application) surveys were conducted on the ground for a quantitative assessment of the development status of the areas of operation.

### **Objective and Scope**

The primary objective behind the design of the questionnaire was to establish the base extent of access, delivery and quality of information related to public schemes in the target locations. The ultimate use of this baseline assessment will be to serve as a reference point for measuring change initiated by the SOOCHNA SEVA project on completion of five years.

The objective of the study can be listed as:

- To ascertain the level of access of information regarding public schemes in individual households
- To assess the quality of information received by them
- To understand the level of delivery of these schemes and problems faced with respect to it
- To recognize the major concerns faced by the target population
- To establish a control group against which impact analysis can be carried out at the end of the year

## Tools Used

This baseline study was conducted with the help a close-ended questionnaire designed to consolidate information at the individual household level

For the program baseline, the digital surveys contained general questions related to a household; socio-economic status, household assets, and awareness of public schemes in the family and some observations to be made by the interviewer.

## Methodology

A quantitative cross-sectional approach was adopted for this study. A cross-sectional study is observational in nature and can be categorized as descriptive research. Information is merely recorded at the time of the survey. The researchers on the ground do not attempt to determine cause-and-effect relations between the variables. Household surveys were carried out by SOOCHNA SEVAKs deployed in the areas.

The questionnaires were designed in English by the core team and translated in Hindi by the SOOCHNA SEVAKs. They were pretested before the fieldwork was commenced. The SOOCHNA SEVAKs underwent vigorous 2 day training prior to undertaking the survey. Data was collected via ODK android application on the tablets provided to the SOOCHNA SEVAKs in a time period of 30 days. Quality assurance protocols were implemented, including on spot checks and validity checks.

## Summary Analysis of Households

### Background Information

- i. Age
- ii. Gender
- iii. Occupation
- iv. Household Size
- v. ICT Ownership
- vi. Email
- vii. Mobile Ownership and Type
- viii. ID Card
- ix. Education Status
- x. Disability Status
- xi. Housing

The variables have been analyzed with three parameters– Need Access and Barrier.

### Need Analysis

- i. Major Issues identified across the 5 areas
- ii. Availing Gov. Scheme (Yes/No)
- iii. Theme of Scheme availed (

### Access Analysis

- i. Modes of access to information
- ii. Uses of mobiles
- iii. RTI
- iv. Preferred mode of information communication

### Barrier Analysis

- i. Quality of Information from Panchayat
- ii. Language Preference
- iii. Contact point for complaints

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

We covered a total of 2602 individuals across the 5 blocks, with a total of 2061 male and 541 female respondents. The mean age of the respondents was 41.2 years with the youngest respondent aged 15 and the eldest, 87 years. The most common age of the respondents was 30 years. Figure 1 depicts the age ranges with the corresponding frequency.

We had initially covered a sample size of 2982 persons. However, 380 responses were discarded due to data corruption in the online database.

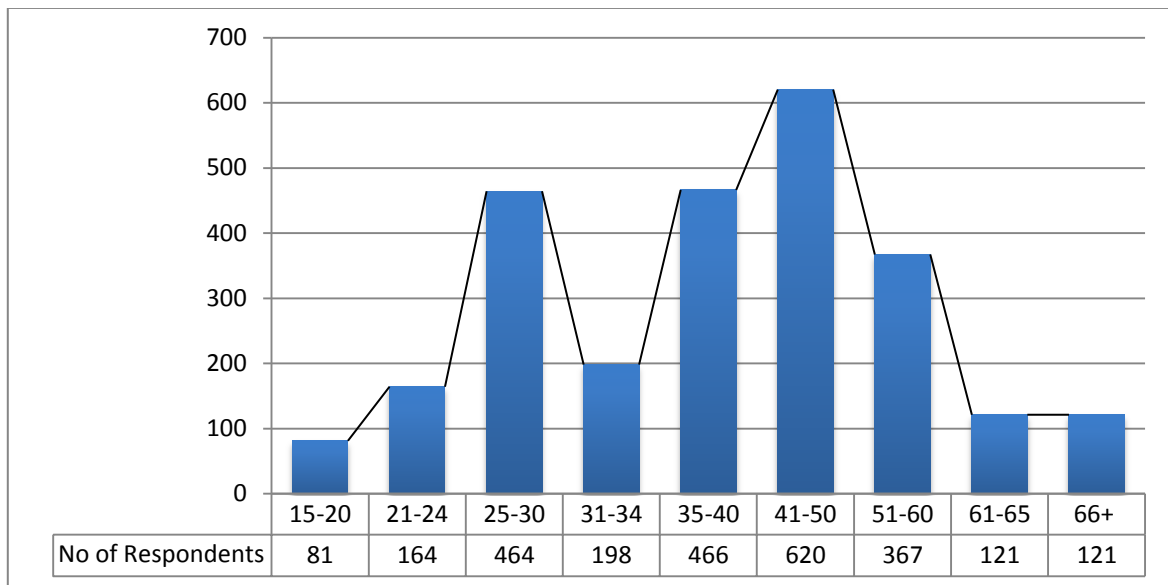


Figure 1: Age of Respondents

**Employment**

Our study also revealed that most of the population is engaged in farming with over 52% of the population engaged in farming. Unorganised labour was the next most common occupation accounting for about 29% of the respondents. Figure 2 also shows us that there is a considerable percentage of the population that is unemployed (8.3%) which is higher than the overall Indian unemployment rate of 4.9%.

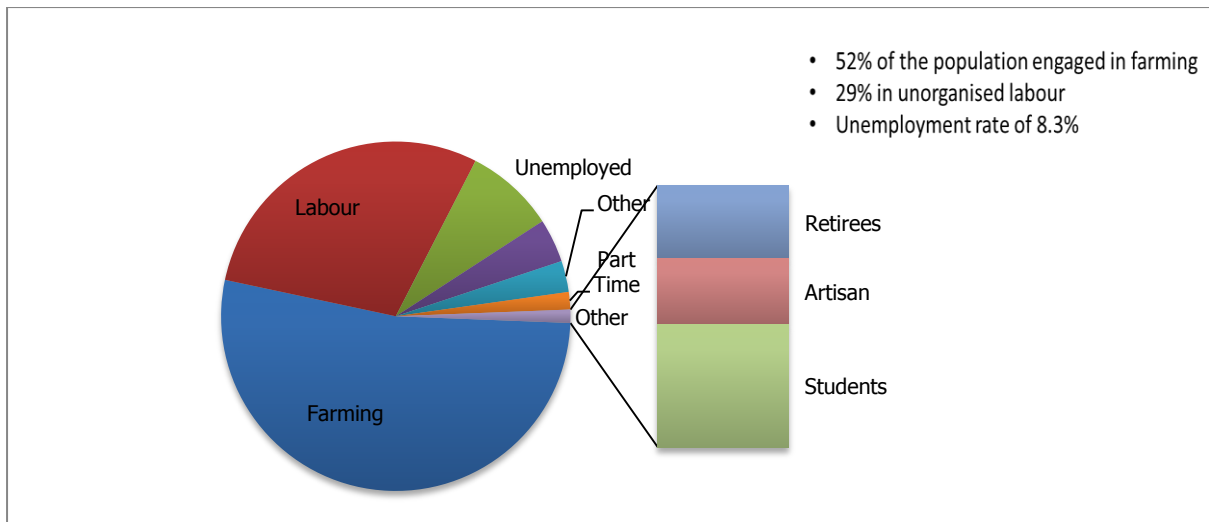


Figure 2: Employment Snapshot

### Household size

The size of the households in the study regions were quite diverse, ranging from single person households to very large households of over 11 persons. Figure 3 demonstrates that a majority of respondents hailed from households of 1 to 3 persons and the least number of respondents came from households of 11 persons or more.

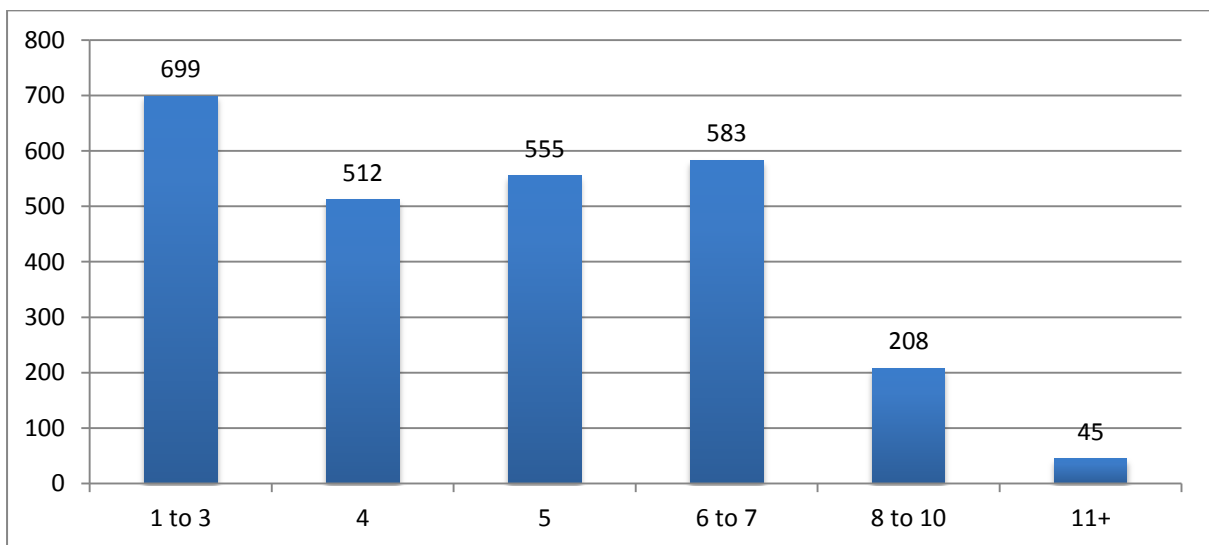


Figure 3: Size of Households

### ICT Ownership

ICT Ownership across the respondents showed a very high percentage of respondents who own mobile phones, followed by radio and TVs. Figure 4 shows that computer ownership is limited to only 2.7% of the population. Mobile ownership rates are almost similar to those in the Census 2011.

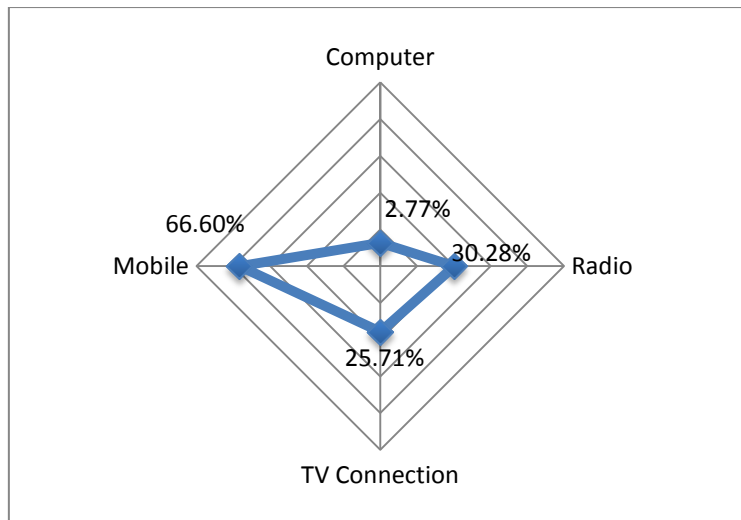


Figure 4: ICT Ownership

### Mobile ownership by Type

A significant percentage (67%) of the population owns a mobile phone. This value is in line with the statistics in the Census of India, 2011. A type-wise break up of mobile ownership reveals a trend towards feature phones, with over 50% of the population owning one. Feature phones with a camera are the next biggest share (13%) and smartphones garnering the smallest share at 4%. (Figure 5)

It is clear that feature phones, with their low price are the preferred device of choice for a majority of the population. There exists a tremendous untapped growth potential among the mobile users. However, at the current time, the chance of a mobile application being adopted for use is low due to the low penetration of smartphones.

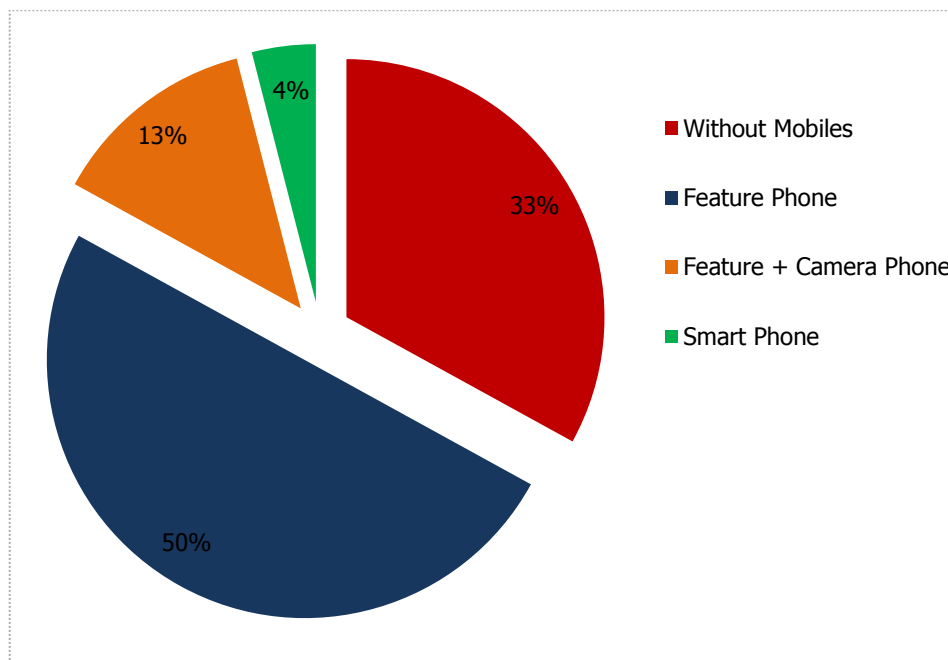


Figure 5: Mobile Ownership by Type

### Mobile Ownership across Districts

However, when we look at the ownership of mobile types across the various districts, we see that Barmer, Tehri and Guna stand out as outliers. Over 78 percent of the population of Barmer owns a cellphone. This is in contrast with Tehri, where only 60% of the population owns a mobile phone. Guna distinguishes itself by having the highest number of smartphone users (15%) across the 5 locations. See Figure 6

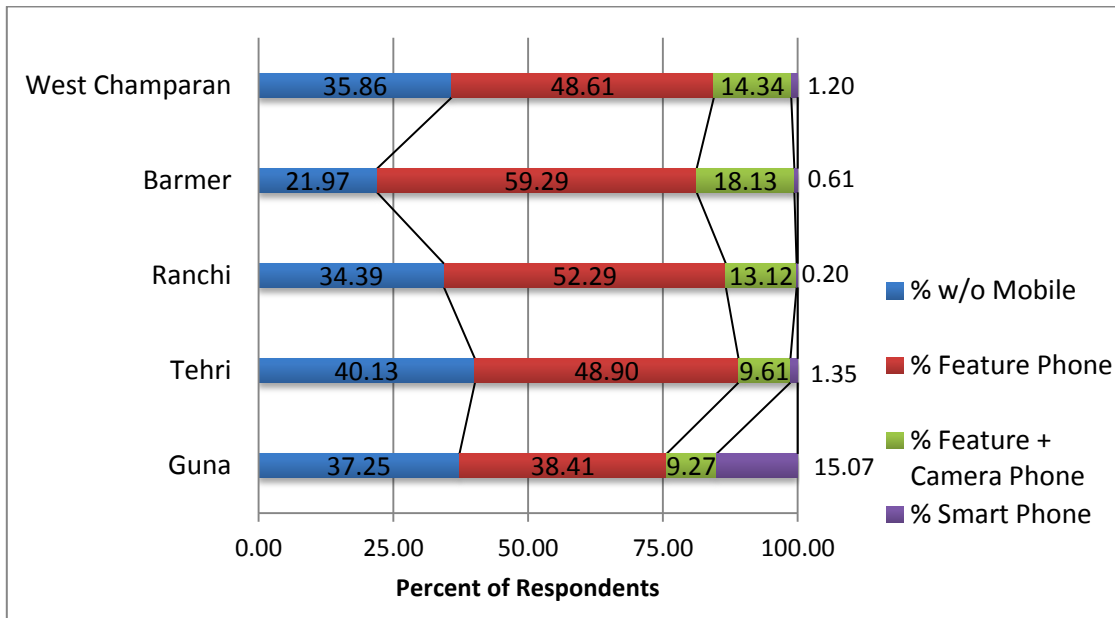


Figure 6: Mobile Ownership by Type across Districts

### ID Cards

An ID card is a proof of residency and citizenship, whereas Voter ID card serves as both, a proof of residence as well as photo identification. A majority of the respondents possessed a valid ID card. An ID card is a proof of residency and citizenship. The ownership of such allows individuals to access government entitlements, programs and services that they may be eligible for. 14% of the population may not be eligible for access to these programs and entitlements. Figure 7 & 8.

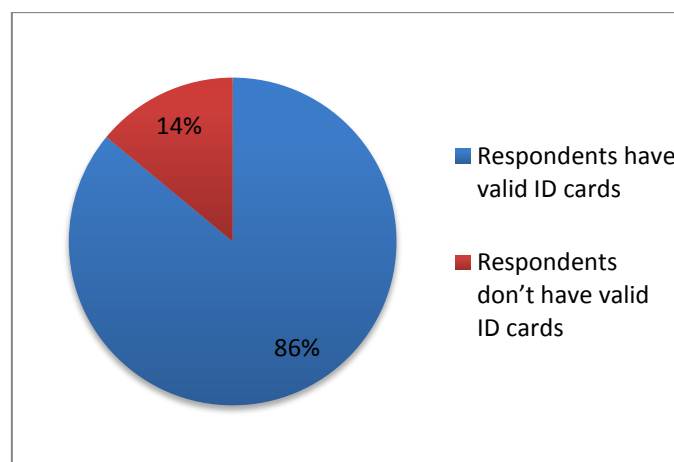


Figure 7: ID card Ownership

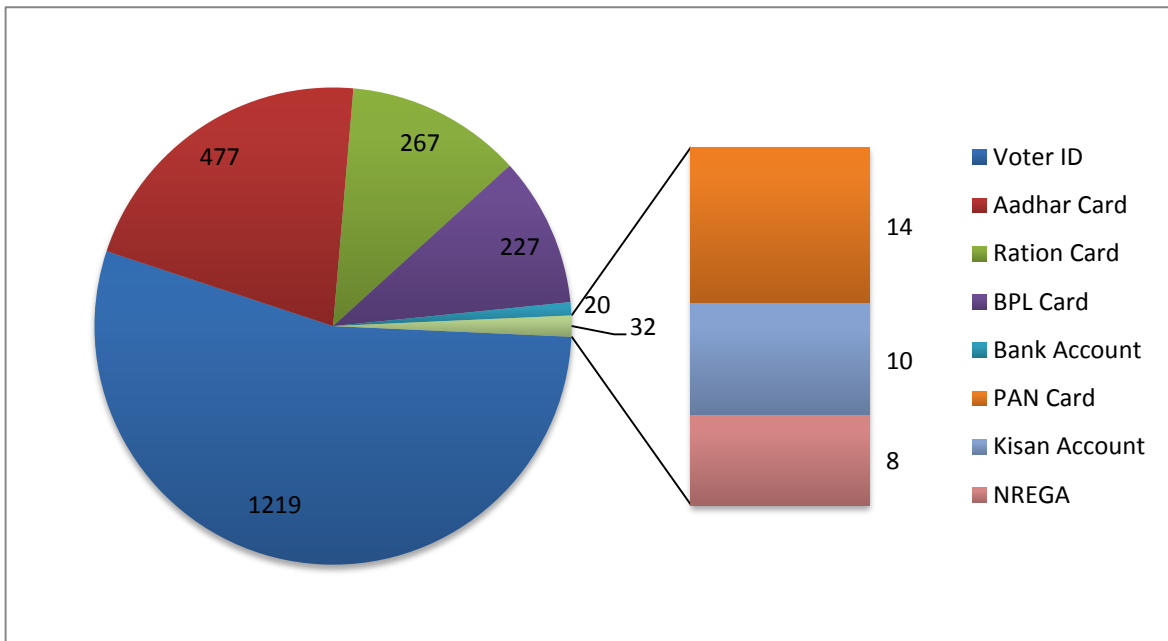


Figure 8: ID card ownership by Type

### Education

28% of the respondents have basic literacy (1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> Grade). Only 5% of the population has any tertiary education.

39% of the respondents in the study areas are illiterate, with little or no formal schooling. 28% of the respondents have basic literacy (1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> Grade). Only 5% of the population has any tertiary education. See Figure 9

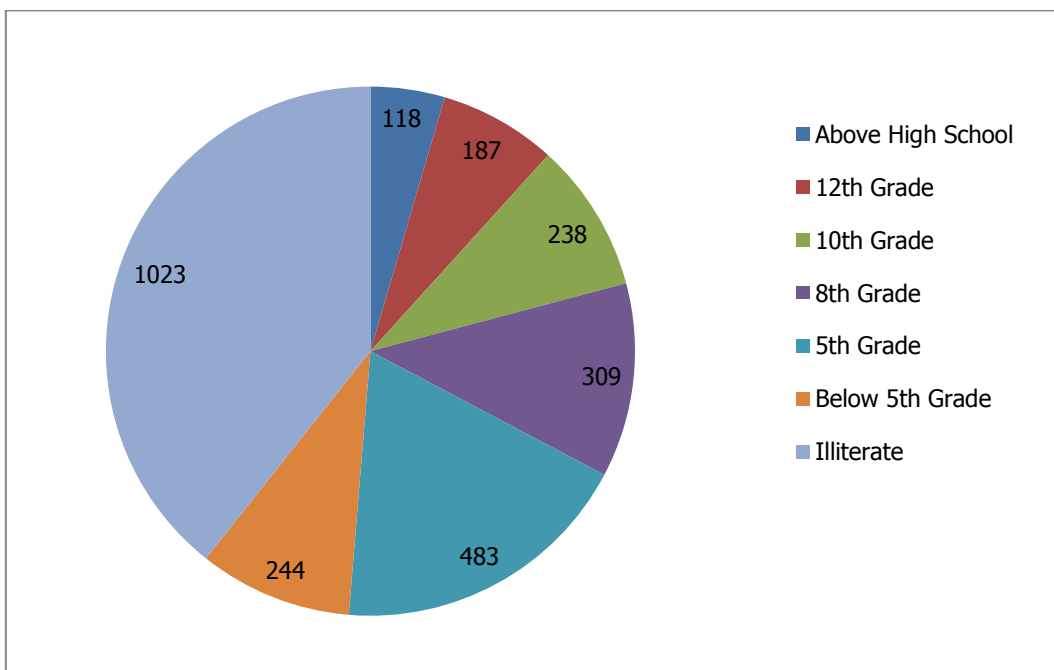


Figure 9: Education Levels of Respondents

### Disability

Physical disabilities are the largest type of disabilities in the survey regions. Dependent on the specific type & extent of their disability, individuals may be able to engage in various livelihood activities. All individuals may be eligible for schemes by the government targeted towards differently abled individuals. (Figure 10)

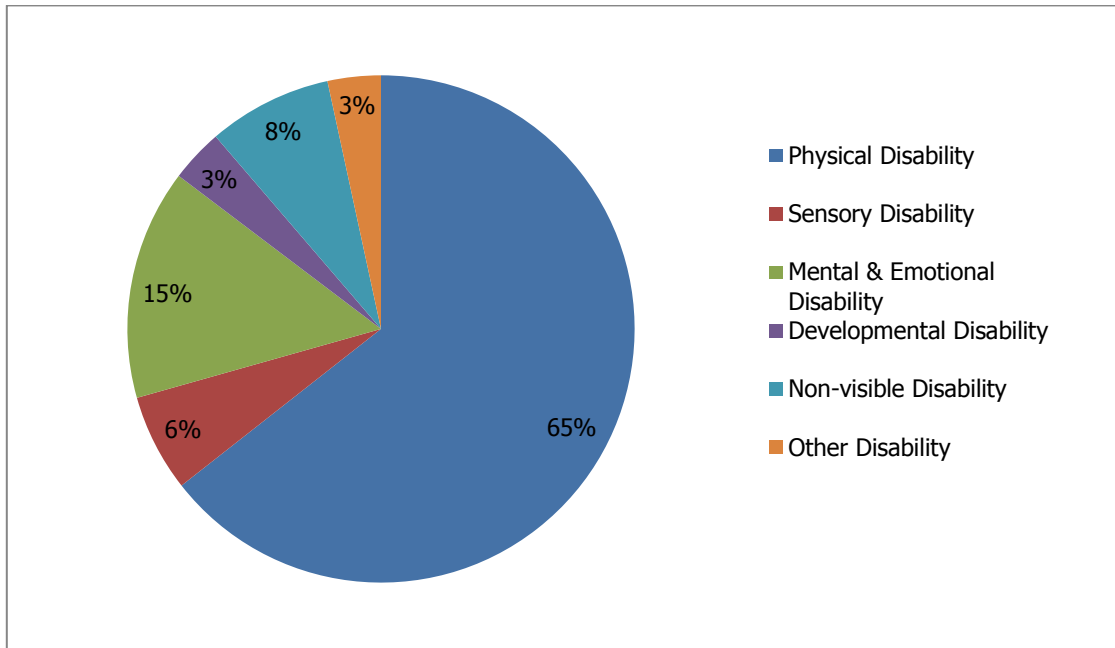


Figure 10: Disabilities by Type

### Housing

97.6% of the respondents lived in housing that was owned by them. This may point to the previous rollout of schemes like the Indira Awas Yojana that aids rural inhabitants with financial assistance to construct their own housing. The 1% that avails rent-free housing may do so under personal connections or under government schemes. A very small percentage of the population (0.19%) lives in informal settlements. Given the high precedence of owned housing, it would be prudent to understand the reasons behind why these individuals do not have access to better quality housing. Additionally, further study should be conducted to see the access to proper water and sanitation facilities within the houses.

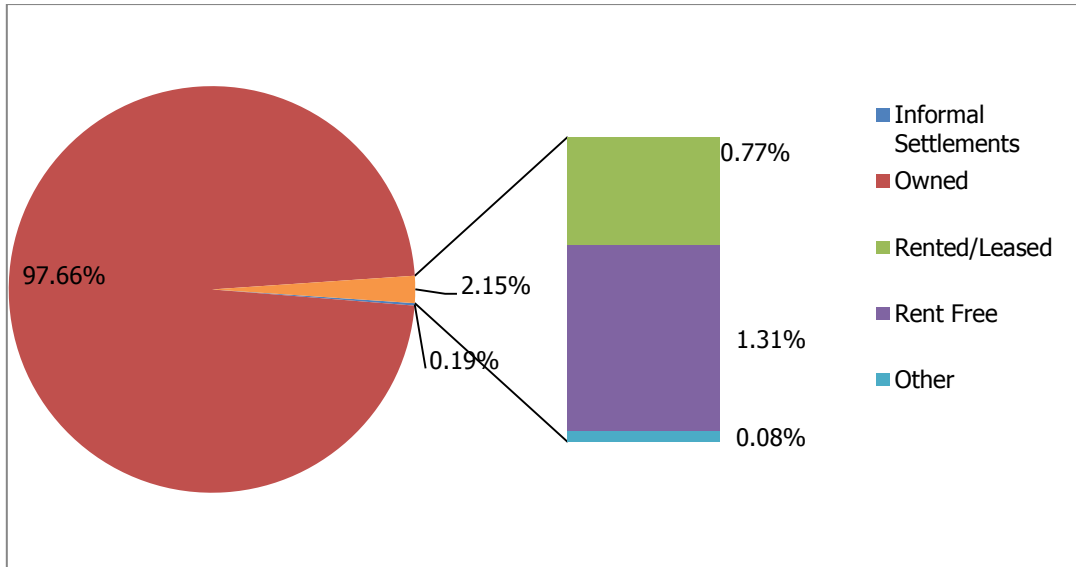


Figure 11: Types of Housing

## NEED ANALYSIS

### Need Perception

Figure 12 shows that respondents feel gaps across varied issues. Health is the biggest challenge identified by the respondents, with over 65% of the respondents citing it as an issue. General developmental issues along with education and employment were identified as the other big issues in the state. Safety & security and transport related issues were identified, however, by a relatively small percentage of the population.

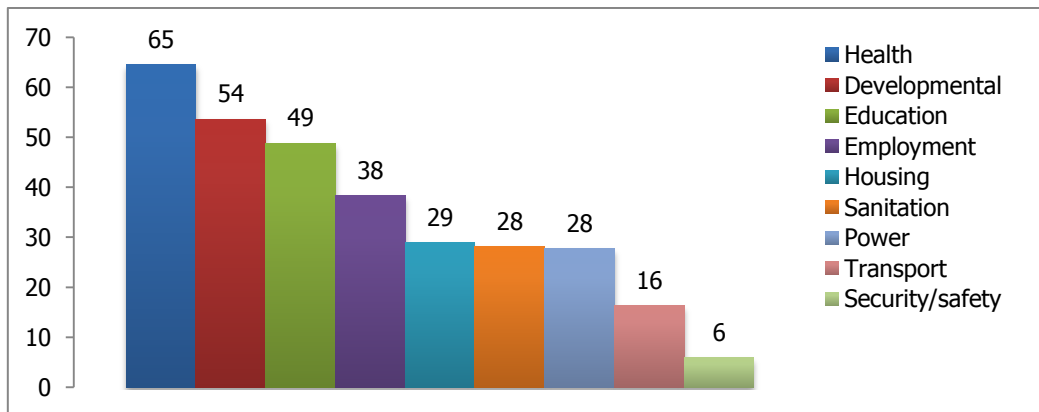


Figure 12: Need Perception of the Region

### Government Scheme by Focus Area

70% of the total respondents are availing single or multiple government schemes (Figure13) This indicates a relatively high adoption rate of government schemes. The areas covered by the study are classified as Backward Regions by the Government of India. The Backward Regions Grant Fund (BRGF), instituted by the GoI and housed in the Ministry of Panchayati Raj is designed to redress regional imbalances in development (Figure 14)

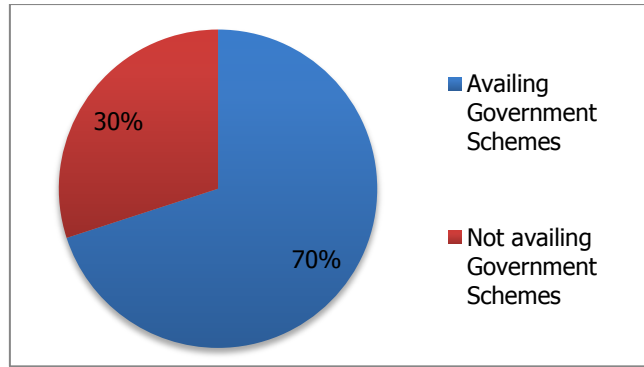


Figure 13: Population Availing Government Schemes

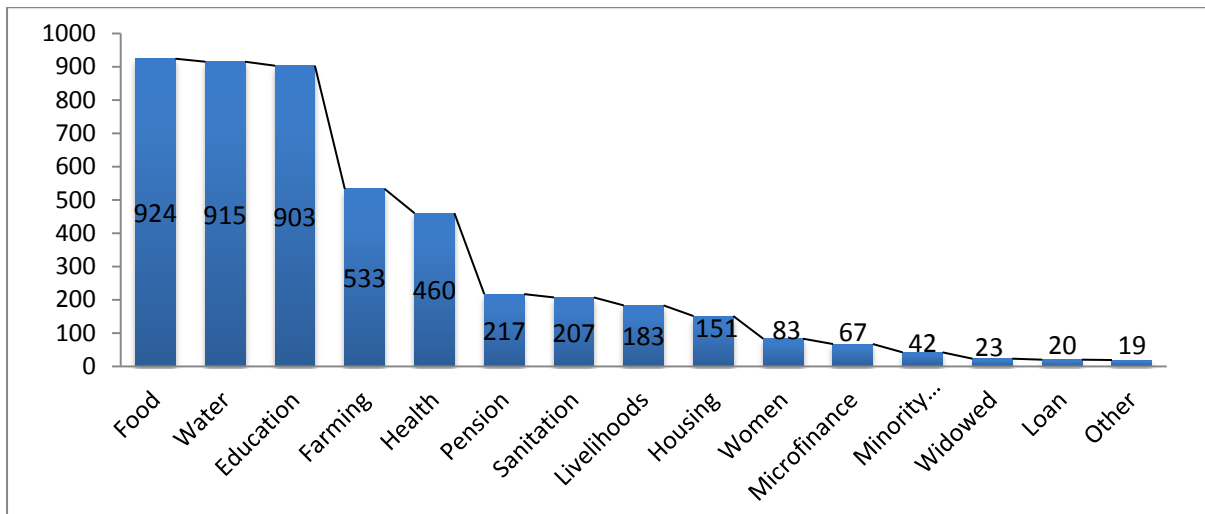


Figure 14: Scheme Availed by Focus Area

## ACCESS ANALYSIS

### Information Flows by Node

Understanding information flows and nodes in rural areas is vital to the design of any intervention that seeks to augment this system. Our study found that the word of mouth/ village grapevine is the dominant source of information accounting for over 69% of the respondents. Gram Panchayats are lacking in living up to the mandate laid down for them in the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment by providing just 44% of the information flow in the study areas. Traditional ICTs like radio and television amount for 34% of the same. This underlies the potential importance of Community radio and broadcasting as a key player in the information flow ecosystem. By far, at the lower edge of being a source of information in the study areas were leaflets and kiosks accounting for only 2% & 1% respectively.

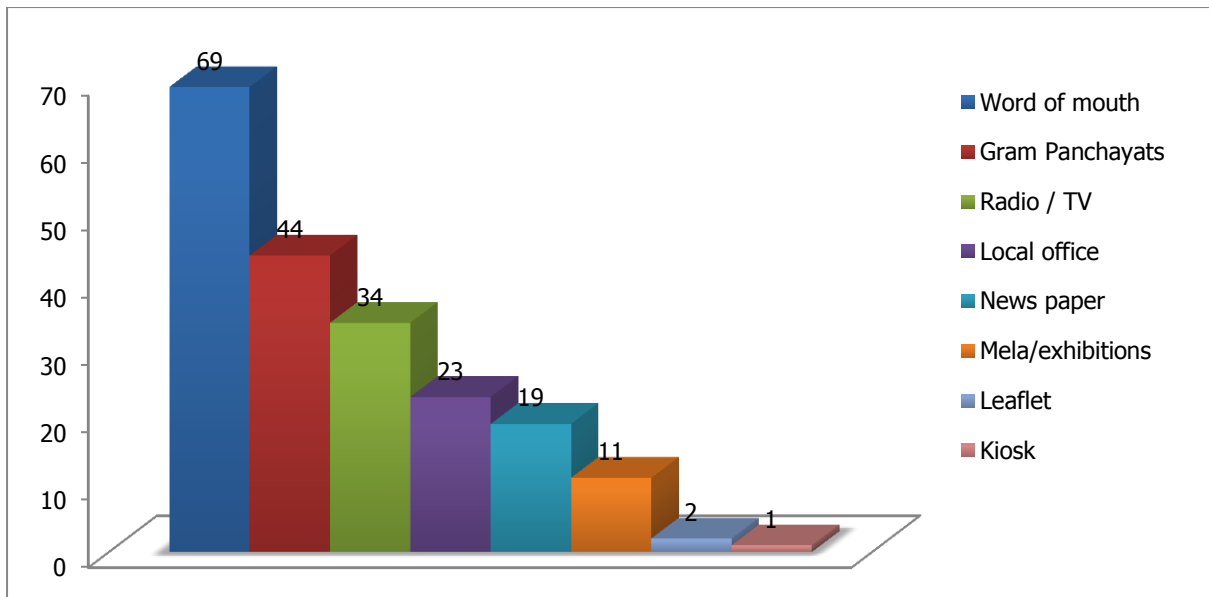


Figure 15: Information Flows by Node

### Preferred Information Flow

As discussed in Figure 15, studying information nodes and flows are critical to effective project design. Thus, apart from understanding the existing information network in the study areas, it was also important to understand which nodes and flows the inhabitants place their preference in and thus allow us a complete picture in which to design the Soochna Seva intervention.

Figure 16 shows us the nodes of information flow that the respondents would prefer to gain their information from. Word of Mouth is the most trusted node of information flow at the village level, followed by information gained from the Panchayat office. Surprisingly, most people would also like to gain information through calls.

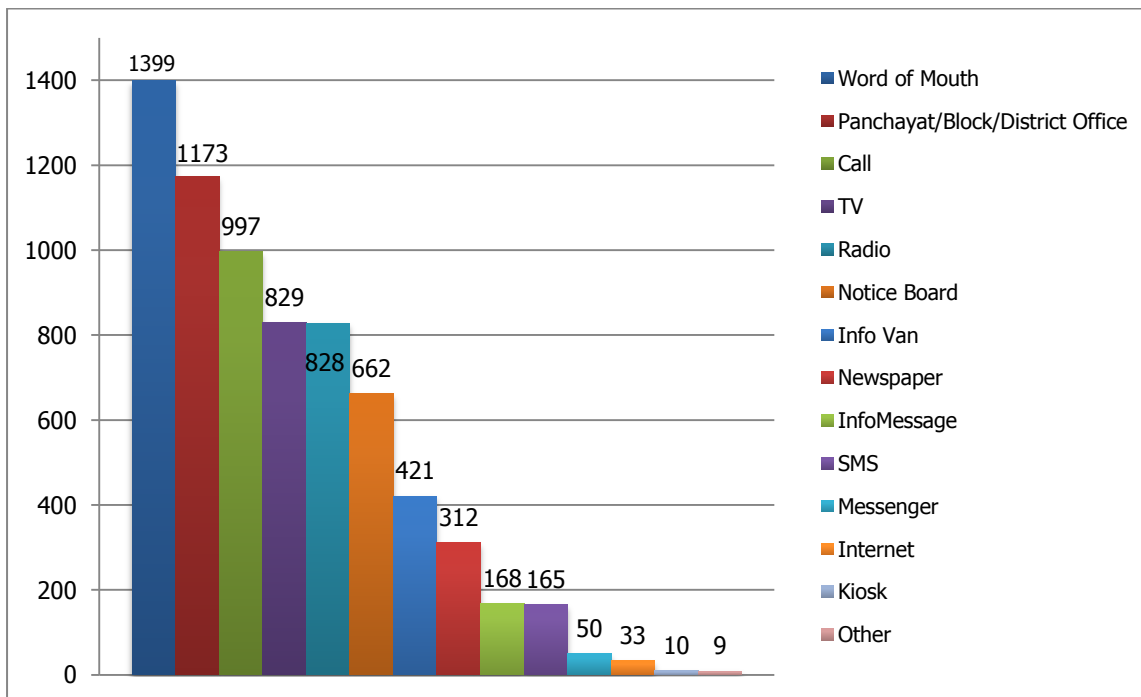


Figure 16: Preferred Node of Information Flow

### Use of Mobiles

Figure 17 indicates that all the mobile users use them for making and receiving calls. SMS and Entertainment purposes make up the next highest uses (23% & 20% respectively). Using mobiles to access internet & social media platforms account for a marginal 1% each.

Any intervention that aims at making information accessible to users would have to take into cognizance the limitations of the feature phone platform and modify its delivery mechanisms to optimize functioning. With phone calls being a unanimous use of the cell phone in the project geographies, the function of the Soochna Sevaks, Soochna Vahans and Soochna Kendras could be augmented by developing an IVR based telephonic system to disburse information.

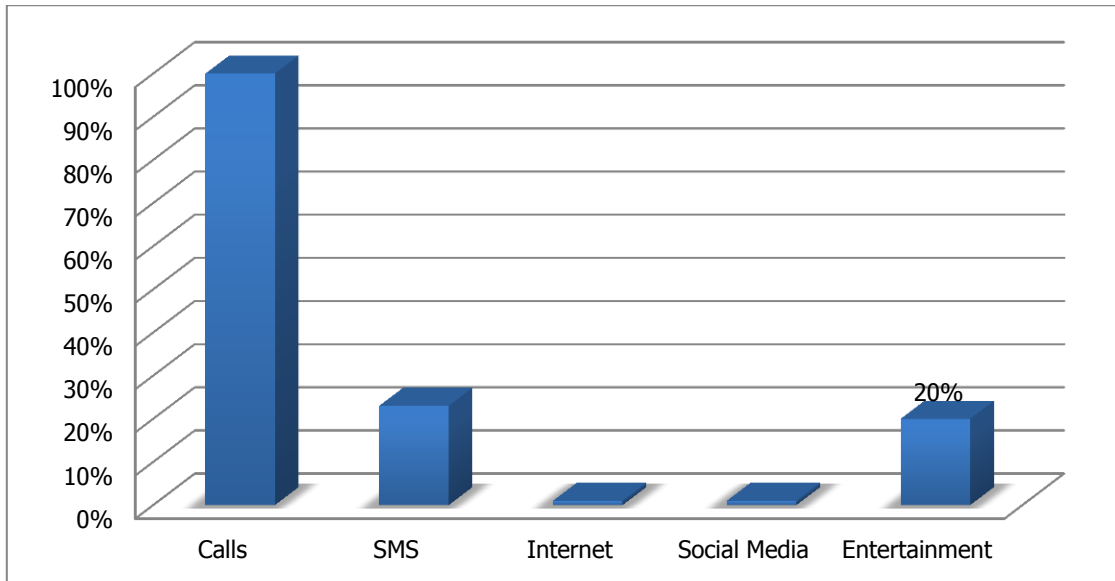


Figure 17: Use of Mobiles

### Aware about Right to Information Act (RTI)

Out of the 277 respondents who knew about the RTI, only 34 had ever used the RTI for any purpose. An alarming 90% (2325) respondent did not know anything about the Act. See Figure 18.

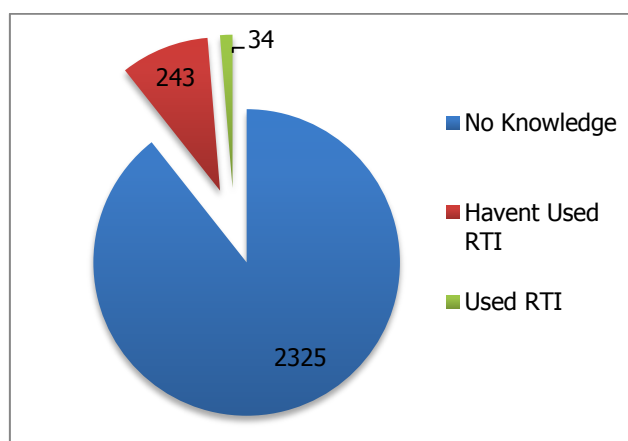


Figure 18: Knowledge about the RTI Act

## BARRIER ANALYSIS

### *Accuracy of Information from Panchayat*

With Gram Panchayats playing such an important part in the information flow at the village level, it is disappointing that the validity and reliability of information originating from this key node is seldom accurate. Only 6 % of the respondents have stated that information from the Gram Panchayat is accurate with 28% finding it vague and 10 % as incorrect. We received no responses or the respondents were unsure about the quality of information originating from the Panchayat for over 56% of the respondents. It therefore stands to reason that without adequate mechanisms in place to verify this information, the beneficiaries of programs / entitlements may not be sure about the information. Proper training and capacity building needs is a need for elected leaders and officials of Panchayats to bridge this gap and allow the Panchayat to play a central role in the development at the village level.

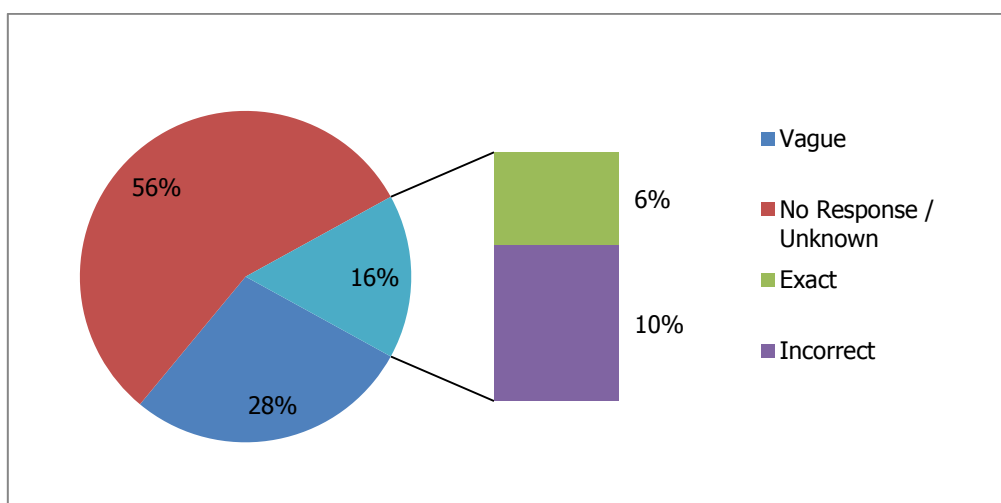


Figure 19: Accuracy of Information from Panchayat

### *Language Preference*

According to our findings, the dominant language for information access is Hindi with 72% of the respondents citing that as their preference. 28% of the population found it easier to access information in the local language/ dialect.

Individuals in the latter category may be lower however, they should not be ignored and steps should be taken to convert the content to be used in ICT tools in that local language as well. This would go a long way in ensuring inclusion on the basis of linguistic grounds.

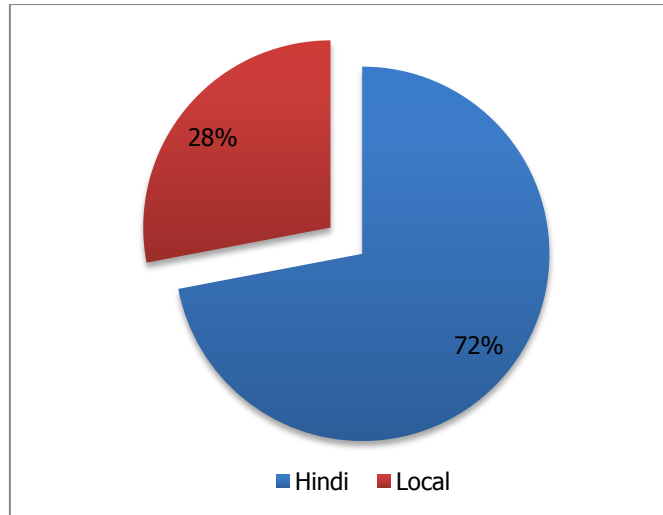


Figure 20: Language Preference

### Stage Difficulty

When asked about the difficulty that individuals face during various stages of applying for different government schemes, a vast majority (73%) said that getting information about a form is usually the most difficult part. 61% claimed that information about how to fill a form is the next biggest hurdle. This may also have to do with the fact that these forms are quite complicated or are in languages apart from those individuals are comfortable in. The linguistic barrier highlights our finding in the previous graph that about 30% of the population preferred local languages as an information carrier. (Figure 21)

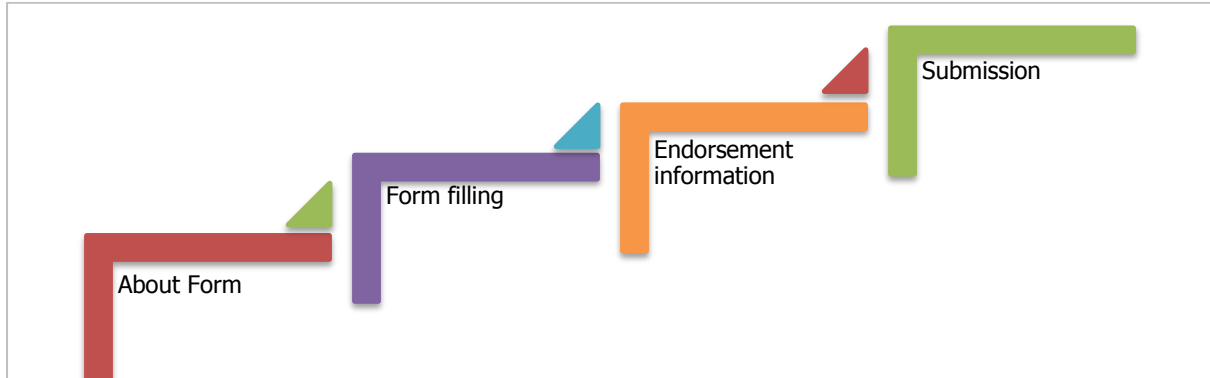


Figure 21: Stage Difficulty in Accessing Schemes

After a form has been filled, endorsement by a relevant person is key to attest the applicant's eligibility for the scheme. Over half (55%) claimed that obtaining information regarding this is a hurdle in the access to schemes. Once, the previous three steps have been completed, a much smaller per cent of the population (38%) face issues in information on where and to whom to submit the form.

This leads us to see that information about the procedures involved in the availing of a scheme are as important as access to information about the scheme itself.

### Contact Points for complaints

1542 number of people contacts the Sarpanch to complain about any issues, who is trusted with these responsibilities. The Mukhiya and Police are the next most trusted contact points for complaint resolution. The key role of the school teacher in grassroots communities is also highlighted with them being in the top 5 for complaint resolution.

