

Knowledge Management in an Organization of the Poor

The Thetrai Union Federation in northern Bangladesh



Aldo Benini

With help from

Md. Abdul Matin Shardar
Md. Nashiruddin
Julfikar Ali Hanif
Mozammel Haque

Mst. Rawshan Rahman
Nirmala Rani Das
Taposh Kumar Goshwami
Md. Akramul Haque



April 2009

Cover photo:

In 2005, Mr. Abdur Rashid, chairman of the Thetrai Union Federation, Kurigram District, announced his intention to conduct a survey of all poor households in this local government area. In the photo, taken during a visit in November 2008, he points to the final count of the listed households, posted in the executive committee room.

© Aldo Benini and RDRS Bangladesh 2009. Photos by Aldo Benini

The views and facts expressed in this report are entirely the author's. Neither RDRS Bangladesh nor the Thetrai Union Federation (legally known as the "Thetrai Union Samaj Kallyan Sangstha") are responsible for any errors or omissions.

Author e-mail address:

aldobenini@gmail.com

RDRS contact details:

RDRS Bangladesh

Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service

In association with LWF/World Service, Geneva

House 43, Road 10, Sector 6, Uttara

Dhaka-1230, Bangladesh

Telephone +880 2 8954384-86 Fax +880 2 8954391

E-mail: rdrs@bangla.net, Website: <http://www.rdrsbangla.net>

Suggested citation:

Benini, Aldo (2009). Knowledge Management in an Organization of the Poor. The Thetrai Union Federation in northern Bangladesh [Version 16 April 2009]. Rangpur and Washington DC, RDRS Bangladesh.

Contents

Summary	4
Acknowledgement	6
[Background:] RDRS Bangladesh	7
Why knowledge management of the poor?	9
[Sidebar:] Knowledge management.....	11
The Thetrai Federation.....	12
[Sidebar:] RDRS federations	14
The survey of ultra-poor families	16
Thus, where is your survey?	18
[Sidebar] Kopiron: Portrait of a poor woman of Thetrai	19
Relations with other information bodies.....	21
[Sidebar:] Formal membership in civil society bodies	22
Using survey information for rights advocacy.....	24
Interpretation.....	26
More than just information	26
A success story of the rights-based approach?	27
[Sidebar:] Which literatures speak to this case?	28
Conclusion	30
References.....	31
Beneficiary survey form	34

Summary

The organization of development cooperation in the shape of projects imposes heavy information burdens on the lower tiers of the aid chain. Despite the incessant participatory rhetoric, most of the collection proceeds by one-way extraction, through numerous surveys and reporting arrangements known as “monitoring systems”. Typically, data is collected at the grassroots, and from it knowledge is created and shared higher up, in stratified expert and donor communities.

Organizations of the poor that are supported by NGOs are not exempted from those regimes. The fact that many survive and even thrive makes it plausible that they have their own effective ways of processing information on their task environment. Exposed to demands from multiple stakeholders, some may carve out a sphere of autonomy in which they reconfigure and innovate beyond the subordinate roles assigned them in the aid chain. Little, though, is known of such counter-worlds.

I present a case study of the survey that a federation of poor people in northern Bangladesh took, by its own initiative and design, of extremely poor families in the local government area. The Thetrai Union Federation is one of nearly 300 grassroots organizations that RDRS Bangladesh has founded and supported since 1991. It collected, amid river floods that devastated a good portion of the community, information on 1,700 households.

It is the unexpected and ingenious use of that information that credits the Thetrai Federation with a “knowledge management” competency worth this name. Its concept and conduct of the ultra-poor survey fly into the face of orthodox methods. Yet, the leverage that its involvement in that and other data collections built in the local arena is significant. It can be appreciated also in a rights-based framework. However, the courage to claim rights for the poor may be weakened by legitimacy issues and by attrition from resistant bureaucrats.

It is not obvious which of the more commonly familiar development literatures can meaningfully frame a detailed narrative of this case. The 1990’s efflorescence on participation focused on improving the aid chain in its link with local communities. More recent extensions explore rights and political spaces. Neither deals centrally with autonomous knowledge production. There is an incipient literature on knowledge management for development. But doing justice to the local adaptation of an external template (“survey”) may call for other theoretical tools. It may be fruitful to step

outside development studies and forage in such outlandish fields as cognition within and between organizations.

Meanwhile, the Thetrai experience suggests that associations of the poor are solicited for, and may by their own choice engage in, a multiplicity of informational activities. If this is the case by and large, then the stylized images of participatory assessments in which benevolent facilitators meet the local community to harness pre-existing knowledge to the betterment of one project at a time are too simplistic. They do not render the mêlée of variable, opportunistic, yet goal-oriented information behaviors. What gets collected, processed and shared is a function of the autonomy that the players in the aid chain enjoy. They – among them the Thetrai Federation – manage knowledge in order to survive, in a struggle that is as untidy as it is creative.



On the way back from an interview with an RDRS group member who was washed out by floods twice in her life. In this season, the Teesta river presents only as a remote thin line, but during the monsoon the open terrain makes most of the farms and homes easy prey. Five of the nine wards of Thetrai Union are on the bank opposite of the headquarters. River erosion is responsible for much of the poverty.

In theory, the river provides a natural experiment for the rights-based approach to poverty reduction. The geography of the poor who come to enjoy, or not, rightful benefits as a result of federation efforts is open to observation. If the approach works, the poor on either bank should find themselves included to similar degrees. If benefits are gravely unbalanced, one may infer that traditional patronage remains more powerful. The RDRS federation monitoring has not yet seized this opportunity.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Mr. Azizul Karim, Director, Program Coordination, RDRS Rangpur, for pointing out the completion of the survey in Thetrai and thus the opportunity to do a brief study of this remarkable grassroots initiative.

The persons that accompanied the one-day visit with life-course interviews are mentioned on the title page, together with those who interpreted in various places and arranged the meetings with ultra-poor borrowers. The chairman of the Thetrai Federation, Mr. Abdur Rashid, and his fellow committee members were key to understanding the subject at hand.

Mr. Md. Abdul Matin Shardar, Rangpur, and Mr. Md. Jainal Abedin, Kurigram, added substantial information on rights-based initiatives in which RDRS supported numerous federations, including Thetrai. Mr. Faruque Ahammed, also in Rangpur, updated me on membership and civil society participation statistics for all 310 federations.

[Background:] RDRS Bangladesh

The Thetrai Union Federation, the main actor in this story, is one among nearly 300 local associations of poor people in northwestern Bangladesh that are locally known as federations, often as “RDRS Federations” or “Union Federations”. They were all founded and supported for many years by the same NGO, RDRS Bangladesh. Their operation and context are better understood once RDRS has been properly introduced.

RDRS was established in 1971 as a field program of the Geneva-based Lutheran World Federation (LWF) when Bangladesh was an emerging nation and the vast majority of its population lived on the edges of starvation. Its first task was to provide relief and rehabilitation for refugees and those left destitute after the War of Independence. RDRS derives from “Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service”, named after the Rangpur and Dinajpur region in north-west Bangladesh.

During the period 1976 to 1990, RDRS completed its transformation from a relief agency to a multi-sectoral rural development NGO, retaining its regional identity and focus in the northwestern poverty belt. Its working area nowadays comprises almost 10,000 sq km, spreading across 59 sub-districts with 511 Union Councils. Among an estimated population of 13 million, 2.1 million are involved in the RDRS development programs.

During the late 1980s and through the 1990s, a radical shift took place in RDRS’ philosophy and field activities towards a group-based delivery system, with Union Federations and other community-based organizations emerging as the medium for the message. In this decade, RDRS, like many other Bangladeshi NGOs, built up a large micro-credit program.

A mid-sized NGO among 13 million people

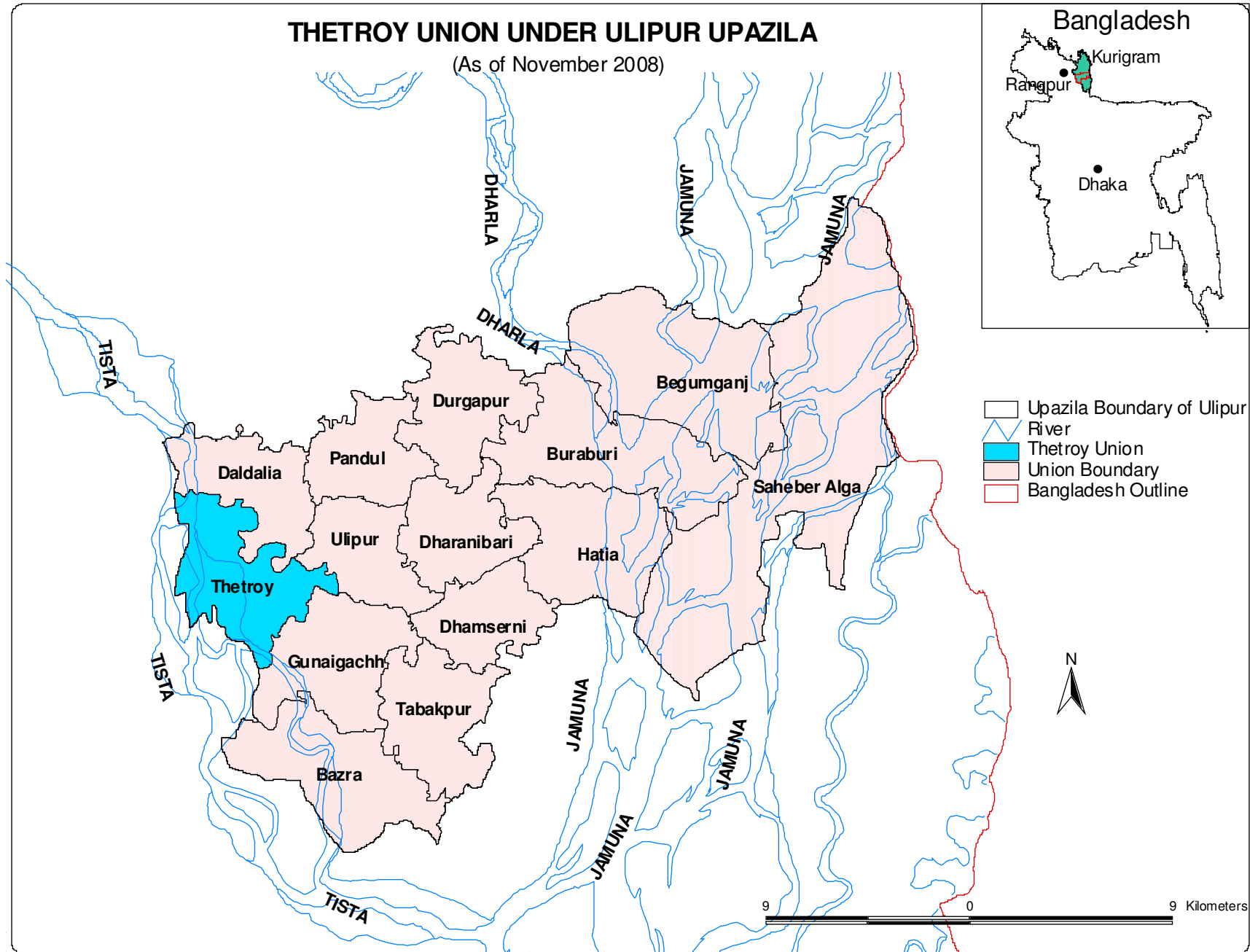
In 1997, after 25 years as a field office with expatriate senior administrators, RDRS became an autonomous, national development NGO, governed by a board of trustees and run by Bangladeshi managers. The supportive relationship with LWF and its partners continues, with aid agencies in Nordic countries and in Holland as its long-term core partners. In 2007, RDRS was working with over 22,400 organized groups, with members drawn from 392,000 households. It had a total staff of 2,424, of whom twenty-four percent were women, and administered resources worth US\$ 11.4 million¹. Field coordination of the three dozen projects that RDRS administers in a normal year is done through four substantive departments, “Micro-Finance”, “Livelihoods”, “Social Empowerment”, and “Health”. The first three are headquartered in Rangpur, the major city of the working area. In terms of size, RDRS is a mid-field player in the Bangladeshi NGO population, much smaller than the brandname giants BRAC, Proshika and ASA (Grameen Bank, technically, is not an NGO), yet larger than all but 10 – 15 other NGOs.

Figure 1: Thetrai Union in Ulipur sub-district; major rivers [next page]

¹ This information has been compiled from the 2007 Annual Report.

THETROY UNION UNDER ULIPUR UPAZILA

(As of November 2008)



Why knowledge management of the poor?

The aid chains in which development NGOs form links between donor agencies and poor populations have produced their own variety of information activities. These go by terminologies and organizational forms that have scant parallels with the information behaviors of administrative and commercial organizations in the richer world. “Logframes”, “monitoring systems” and “impact surveys” are some of the mainstays in this particular information world. It has created its own language, occupation (the “monitoring officer”) and connections with adjacent subsystems such as the program and budget cycles of the donor agencies that mandate such systems for the lower ranks of the aid chains.

Aid chains are regulated by market forces to a small degree only. Above the bottom layer of target population households, they are composed of formal organizations of several kinds, some of which follow budget maximizing strategies in uncertain aid markets. The scope, scale and quality of their information activities are equally opportunistic and subject to changes in their resource and policy environments. For example, increasing pressures to demonstrate aid impact send demands down the aid chain for types and quality levels of information that many NGOs and their allied grassroots organizations find hard to produce.

Aid and its stratified expert industry

The financial stakes that go hand in hand with more or less demanding collection and analysis forms have caused a highly stratified expert industry to take care of the various elements of the system. For simpler products such as project activity reports, data collection may be left to low-cost local workers and volunteers, and the analysis may take place at higher levels of the intermediate NGOs. For more demanding types, such as impact evaluations on which future funding depends, greater effort may be invested in the data collection; the data may then be shipped out and analyzed in capital city or overseas headquarter offices, academic institutions and consultancy firms. The collecting organizations may not retain copies of the data, not be consulted in the analysis, and not be invited to the policy tables at which the findings are translated, possibly with serious implications for their future and that of their clients.

These information activities add to the considerable transaction costs of aid. A significant part of the burden can be imposed, as part of project agreements, on the intermediary NGOs and grassroots organizations. Their cheap labor permits the collection of information at a scale that networks in high-cost countries would never afford, typified by full enumeration approaches in situations where sample surveys would make economic sense. These, too have increasingly been diffused along the aid chains, often though at a low quality level. There are rare, but prestigious exceptions, in the major international survey traditions such as the World Bank-led Living Standards Measurement Surveys as well as in leading national research institutions.

Although the aid world brims with the noise of its participatory rhetoric, most of the formatted information activities in aid chains happen as one-way extraction. This does not mean that information is not flowing downwards, and that little or none of the downward flow is useful. In fact, even the most extractive project monitoring systems

expose both sides to mutual observation; this is by necessity so at every level of the aid chain, from rich-country government to the sponsored school in the village.

Thus, in a very abstract sense, the information activities can be conceived of as special cases of self-observing systems. Practically, most of them are simple adjuncts to aid contracts, causing disbursements to be stopped if the lower partner deviates too far from the agreed information flow. At the same time, most participants are aware of the stark information asymmetry problems that plague these systems - the local re-interpretations introducing unwanted heterogeneity, the egregious measurement errors that exceed the sampling errors, the uncontrolled selection effects – all of them nightmares whenever somebody cares.

Information flows between NGOs and the poor

Among the poor and the NGO field workers, at the base of the pyramid, zones of indifference to the exotic information requests of the higher echelons border on areas of direct interest and personal involvement. Distinctly from colonial days, these populations have had time to learn that counting your cows rarely results in higher taxation, but often determines the chances to reap subsidies of one kind or another. Moreover, information shared for particular projects interacts with information flows of the commercial, family or local government kind. The poor widow, rain-proofing her hut with the help of a micro-loan, buys tin sheet in the local market. This is a commercial transaction for which she has compared prices, prices that inform also the size of her loan. Later she may be re-classified as “moderately poor” by another NGO doing a rapid assessment that considers aspects of dwellings. Her son, a rickshaw puller, meanwhile is making some money carrying vaccinators of the district health service who benefit from his intimate knowledge of the families that their lists tell them to visit.

Sandwiched between the poor and NGOs working for them are the grassroots organizations of the former, often initiated and supported by the latter. When formatted information activities are to happen, their personnel may be variously press-ganged into collection drives, completely sidestepped in favor of direct approaches to households, or requested to lead more consultative and participatory events.

The diversity of their involvement may be considerable, but ultimately it is a trivial aspect of the aid system’s own oscillations. A non-trivial stage, however, is reached whenever such organizations assume new types of information activities out of their internal excitement and initiative. That they will eventually do so is in line with evolutionary theory. With increasing complexity and lengthening histories, the organizations of the poor will be obliged to mediate between diverse information environments. The very same complexity gives them a degree of autonomy that permits rationalization and response unprompted by any dominant outside force. The welfare committee and disaster committee of a village council, to invent an example, overlap and cooperate. But the former takes its clues from the welfare network, the latter from emergency services. Yet, together they formulate an action plan that none of their partners can entirely anticipate or control.

Information autonomy of a poor people’s organization

It may be a result of their poverty that the information autonomy of poor people’s organizations is rarely described by participants at levels higher than those

immediately working with them. There are, of course, proxy indicators that can be communicated across tiers fairly reliably. For example, in the world of the federations that RDRS Bangladesh supports, the number of women among the nine executive councilors is routinely monitored. One of the assumptions is that greater female representation will change the internal flow of information, allowing the female constituents greater expression, but also creating more bonding points for outside programs meant to empower them. This may very well be so – for example, RDRS’ Legal Education and Gender-Aware Leadership program works closely with the federations - and may in turn have sharpened the sensitivity of RDRS to fathoming out more dimensions of organized empowerment. But one has never yet heard of cases where more female councilors changed the way in which the federations complied with the quarterly reporting demands from RDRS. Changes in information behavior, if they do occur, fly below the radar of NGO monitoring offices.

This paper is about an information initiative of a grassroots organization that did depart from habituated behavior in the aid chain, and has been noticed for it. Not surprisingly, given RDRS’ wide exposure to such organizations, it was taken by one of its supported federations. The case that we will describe and interpret in the next sections is a survey of extremely poor families in a local government area, started and conducted by the local federation. Significantly, the federation in point embarked on the survey without RDRS’ involvement or help, yet in the process redefined its objectives when RDRS signaled to the federations new opportunities for which this and similar data collections could be exploited. It leveraged its survey into further initiatives while being involved, to very differing degrees, also in other information streams.

This case study offers a rare glimpse at the information autonomy of a poor people’s organization and has the potential to yield suggestions of empowering yet others in this area. Ambitiously, we have titled it “knowledge management”. The federation leaders stressed that “*we did this survey because we wanted to know*”; and this endeavor has had to wend its way, with difficulty, through other bodies of knowledge. In contrast to the stylized scenario of the participatory assessment literature in which better methods and partnerships bring pre-existing community knowledge to fruition, we emphasize the turbulent, fragmented and improvised ways in which a local association of the poor navigates the information landscape.

[Sidebar:] Knowledge management

Knowledge management, as defined by Wikipedia, “*comprises a range of practices used in an organization to identify, create, represent, distribute and enable adoption of insights and experiences*”. While the academic discipline by this name was recognized only in the 1990s, its two components – knowledge and management – have always been together in practical life. Individuals manage their affairs, and organizations are managed by people with authority, and both attain objectives by applying knowledge. However, while the existence of some knowledge is taken for granted, the need to manage it is not trivial, and it is no accident that formalized knowledge management has been an explicit function primarily in large organizations. Yet, even before the Internet and Google search, ordinary citizens participated in knowledge management when they used, for example, the yellow pages of the phone directories. The notion that knowledge management necessarily relies on advanced information infrastructures is not universally valid. Of course, a pharmaceutical company screening tens of thousands of new chemical compounds for efficient searches of candidate

drugs will use computers. But librarians in medieval monasteries or, as in our case, local associations in poor countries, while using simpler media, can still be knowledge managers.

When we place the emphasis on knowledge rather than management, knowledge management can be understood as a tool to facilitate the progression from data to information, hence to knowledge and ultimately to wisdom. The idea that wisdom can be managed is not plausible, regardless of the sprouting of “wisdom management” sites. But if knowledge management helps to reduce overload and condense information into useful knowledge, the space for wisdom too should grow. In this case study, a survey is creatively managed so as to collect information sparingly and to create knowledge in a decision-making perspective.

The Thetrai Federation

Visitors entering the sizeable brick-built center of the federation that is the main player in this piece, however, would be puzzled why we speak of knowledge management in a poor people’s organization. If, inside the massive iron gate, they chanced into the room directly across the inner yard, they would find trappings of knowledge management - a recently acquired computer, but no survey information stored in it, nor hardly any document of great value to the work of the federation. The survey information in point would be found, after suitable introductions with the executive committee members, firmly locked up in the *almirah* (steel cabinet) in the latter’s meeting room. There the visitors would be bound to notice also that, judging by their dress, weight and comportment, the committee members present appear to be solidly village middle-class, without the worn physique that marks many of their survey subjects. These are individuals who, if RDRS once recruited them from the bottom ranks, have ascended to a self-assured, respected, well organized leadership level.

The focus group at the gate

A smallish young man is commandeered around to fetch this and that paper file for our inspection. Noises keep rippling into the room, from a weaving center and a one-room school inside the compound, and occasional shouting from a meeting of social welfare claimants that a Union Councilor and a federation executive committee member see fit overseeing outside the gate. The chairman offers to go see this “focus group”, as he calls it, for five minutes, but seems in no hurry to involve himself personally in sorting out a disputed listing of welfare card holders. We do give in to curiosity, only to find that the meeting is almost over, with a small group of poor women with babies standing apart, and men pushing the Union Councilor and calling out to us “*If RDRS selects the people, we have more confidence.*” The Councilor resignedly folds his list, without anyone explaining what exactly the issue is. Every one leaves, we slip back into the federation office.



Outside the federation compound, a member of the local government body, the Union Council, defends his list of Vulnerable Group Member card holders in front of RDRS staff members and of disappointed applicants. The atmosphere is charged; some of the men call for RDRS to take over the process. The federation chairman pointed out that a “focus group discussion” was going on, but refuses to join the fray.

A federation for a disaster-stricken community

We are – on this 18 November 2008 - in the premises of the Thetrai Union Federation or, as it has been known since its legal registration in 2004, the “*Thetrai Union Samaj Kallyan Sangstha*”. Founded in 1993, this federation embraces poor people that RDRS organized in small neighborhood groups throughout Thetrai Union. This lowest-tier local government area is part of Ulipur Sub-district within Kurigram District. Home to 22,400 residents – an estimate that the chairman volunteers -, Thetrai is subdivided into nine electoral wards². The river Teesta, a contributory to the Brahmaputra (Jamuna), cuts it into two spheres. The federation center lies to the east, towards Ulipur, but five wards are on the other side. In case one should miss the significance of geography, the chairman reminds us that in 2008 alone 1,200 of the 5,000 families were displaced by river erosion, the main cause of renewed extreme poverty. The federation has – as of November 2008 – 512 members. Thus about one in every ten households belongs.

The executive committee room walls are cluttered with mementos and messages of development inspiration, several supplied by RDRS. But an independent volition transpires, if chiefly in a meticulous order and in ornamental arrangements that are

² If so, Thetrai must have seen substantial out-migration, perhaps as a result of river erosion (see below). The official 2001 census reported a population of 25,043.

home-spun. The loveless pinning and gluing of posters atop each other, prevalent in federation offices bombarded with awareness materials, is strictly absent. The kindly face of Begum Rokeya, an early 20th century advocate for women's rights from Rangpur, holds a respectful place, and so do the two chief Bengali poets. Nothing suggests subservience or inability to create order by the committee's own pleasure.

The chairman, in the presence of a foreign visitor, is at a temporary loss with the English NGO lingo with which the RDRS staff member sprinkles his contributions. But later he will explain that the federation has had a checkered relationship with the NGO. There have been highlights and low points: the withdrawal of project funds that the federation considered its own, ambitious enterprise plans that were canceled – but also the center built by RDRS, all sorts of trainings and, in the solemn apex, Thetrai Federation chosen to welcome the Swedish crown princess. He can call the coordinator in Rangpur, if and when he likes, on the mobile phone that the federation empowerment project purchased for every RDRS federation. The committee has since registration with the Department of Social Welfare successfully filed for grants from the NGO Foundation, the department itself, and from the local member of parliament.

[Sidebar:] RDRS federations

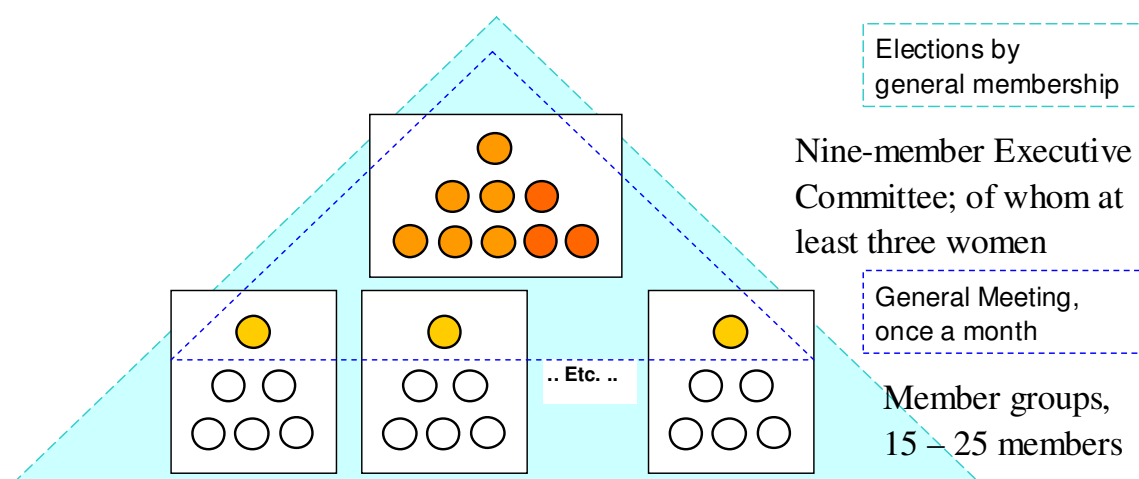
The RDRS federation movement was initiated by a charismatic staff member, A.H. Bhuiyan, who, in the late 1980s, convinced initially reluctant field coordinators to let him experiment with associations of small groups of landless laborers, marginal farmers and poor women. The demand to federate came from two opposites, from top management and from groups in high-density small-scale irrigation areas adopting tens of thousands of RDRS treadle pumps. These users wanted to leverage their grown incomes and social influence beyond their local hamlets. The experiment was rapidly generalized across the entire RDRS working region. Most federations were set up between 1992 and 1993. Until 2007, there were 260 federations filling a contiguous area in the northwest (These 260 formed the population of an in-depth study, Benini 2006). The contiguity contrasts with the interregional patchwork that the working areas of Bangladeshi NGOs typically form. RDRS has since founded another 50 federations in adjacent areas. By the end of 2008, the 310 federations counted 192,000 members (Karim 2008; ; Ahammed 2009).

In 2002, RDRS won a Euro 2.5 million grant from the European Union (EU) for what has been called the "Federation Capacity Building and Social Mobilization Project". Since January 2008, the EU has supported RDRS under a new project, "Empowering the Poor through Federations", with a grant of the same size.

Each of the federation areas is defined by the local Union, the smallest unit in the administrative and local government denomination, hence the term "Union Federation" synonymous with "RDRS federation". In 2005, the 129,000 members related to their federations through 8,000 neighborhood groups, which would send representatives to monthly General Meetings. The typical (median) federation had 460 members. The range was from 120 to 1,200. Sixty percent were women.

The structure of the federations is heavily determined by their historic relationship with RDRS. RDRS organized and supported neighborhood groups, including thousands that have not yet joined the federations, throughout the eighties and nineties as well as, in a more focused micro-finance approach, in recent years. In periodic reviews, it "graduated" (a term borrowed from an education perspective) successful groups and asked them to join the federations.

Figure 2: Basic structure of a Union Federation



The basic structure of a Union Federation has two levels. Some of the local terminology is counterintuitive. At the base, we find neighborhood groups called “secondary groups” because they were derived from earlier unfederated “primary” ones. A secondary group has between 15 and 25, either all-male or all-female, members. The second level is made up of the nine-member executive committee. Once a month, secondary groups each send one member to attend a meeting with the executive committee, known as the “General Meeting”. Executive committee members are elected by all individual members. Beyond this diagram, the federations within each sub-district form a coordination committee for mutual help and to plan larger activities. District committees also exist.

This credentialing has made RDRS the effective intake agent for the federations. It has produced a double definition of membership. *Affiliated* members are those on the books of the Federation. *Active* members are counted as those groups that meet certain behavioral criteria, including regular savings deposited with RDRS. About a third of the members were rated active in 2005, with a strong upward trend since the EU project was started in 2003. Among the active ones, the proportion of women was even higher, 66 percent³.

More consequentially, the particular recruitment mechanism has produced a trade-off of inclusiveness for quality. RDRS has made sure that only experienced and (at the time of graduation) active groups would join, and that wealthy and influential community members could not infiltrate. The price of this “managed participation regime” is that the Federation members have remained a minority among the local poor. On the upside, capture by local elites was eluded. The desire of the Thetrai Federation to survey the ultra-poor in the Union was initially motivated by the recognition that its membership basis was too narrow and too dependent on RDRS.

The federations combine multiple personalities, as area-based development associations co-extensive with the local government areas, as special-interest associations of the poor, and as cooperative-like structures that pool resources for common business or social ventures. The range of activities and local initiatives is extremely wide. Large tree plantation projects on the business side and dispute resolution on the social represent activity types that are frequent and semi-standardized. Surrounding them are a host of sundry and temporary initiatives that, despite a fairly good monitoring system (detailed in Benini 2007), may never be fully known to the central support unit in RDRS.

³ After 2004, RDRS abandoned the practice of group graduations. Members of RDRS-organized neighborhood groups, but also other poor people have since been encouraged to enroll in their local federations on an individual basis.

The survey of ultra-poor families

In fact, we are here because word of the federation's own survey, completed in late 2008, had reached Rangpur. I had visited Thetrai in March 2005. The same chairman then announced that the federation was planning to take a survey of all the poor households in the Union. The intake of new groups had come to a halt because RDRS had ceased its annual group graduation practice in 2004. The committee in 2005 felt that its membership base was too lean for the kind of influence it sought in the local society, and that it needed to know where exactly the poor lived, and how many potential members it might solicit among them. With the new Department of Social Welfare oversight, an orderly recruitment process was again needed, and candidates had to be properly known. A household survey was a first step in the process. Note that the survey was to list all poor households for member recruitment purposes; at the time, there was no mention of the "extremely poor" or of linkage to any specific welfare or development programs of the people that the exercise would bring to the fore. Widening the membership base was the initial motive.

Initially motivated to recruit more members

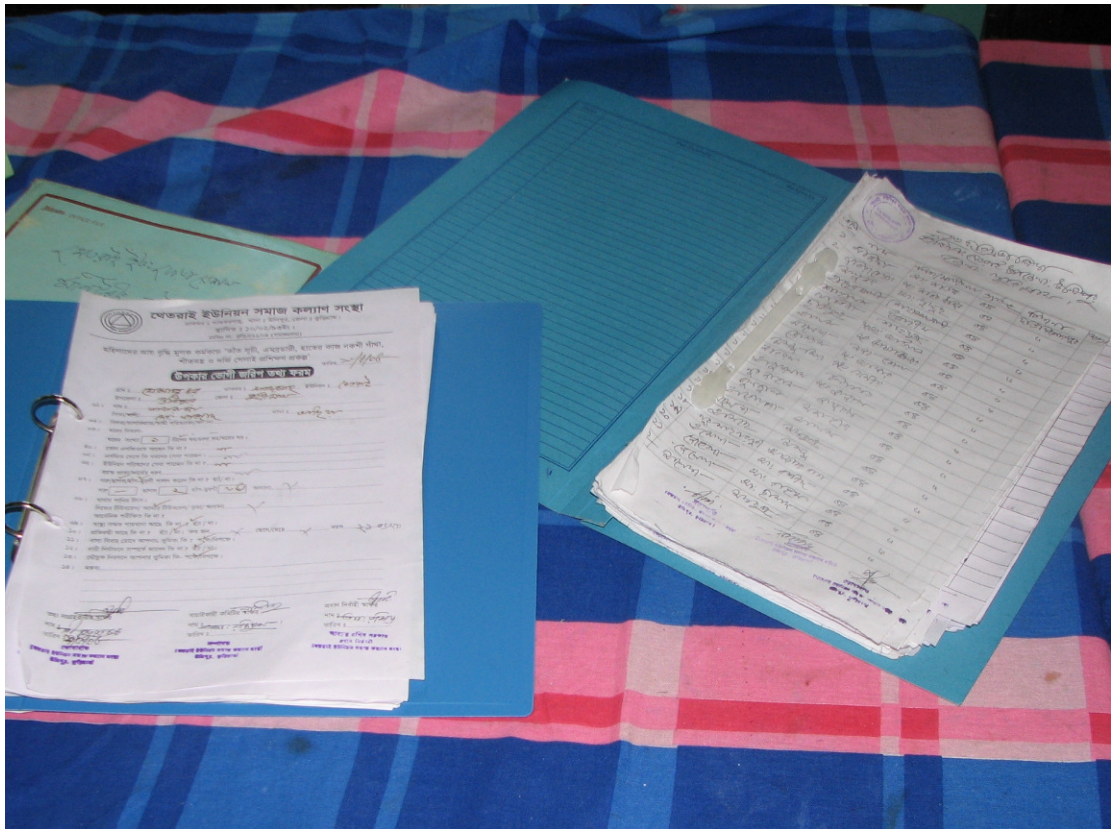
I found this an extraordinary initiative, unheard of from any of the other federations. I recall that RDRS did not seem to be associated with it, nor was any association expected. My question what help the committee would seek for this undoubtedly major undertaking was met with indifference; and in Rangpur I utterly failed to rouse any enthusiasm among the federation support staff to whom I mentioned this unusual project. Three years later, however, in my very first conversations, one of the directors volunteered that Thetrai had completed its survey this year, in a tone that suggested that its progress had always been watched in great suspense.

Thus, again, things seem trivial. We have selected a case on the dependent variable – "Federation X conducted its own survey" – and cannot pretend to have detected anything special – we just went to the place where we already know what is awaiting us. In the next two hours, as we struggle to decipher the nature and place of this survey, it becomes anything but trivial.

The confusion takes over right away when files, taken from the *almirah*, are spread on the long table, are opened under our eyes, and are all but one closed again when the committee members understand that we seriously want to discuss the ins and outs of their survey, not their financial statements or anything else. The open file holds completed one-page questionnaires, about fifty of them. There are more, we are told, "but the others are in the *almirah*". No need to see them, we just want to understand how it was built and administered, and, of course, "what you found out".

The survey questionnaire as a job application form

From parallel conversations, some of which are translated, it gradually emerges that the questionnaires are essentially multi-purpose application forms enriched with an amount of personal, administrative, socio-economic and even attitudinal information. As one may see in the attached English version (translated in Rangpur for the purpose of this note), the template was created to give the surveyee access to income generating activities. These are enumerated as part of the project, and are for women. The survey (Bangla: "jorip") form is about intended beneficiaries ("upokarbhogi").



Misled by the appearance of the printed survey form (left), the visitors believe that the federation volunteers administered a 14-question assessment form to every potentially ultra-poor household that they visited. However, it turns out that households were only summarily listed (right); and the fifty most needy were determined by informal volunteer or committee judgment. These were revisited, and the more detailed information was noted on a beneficiary form that was used in a federation project, and also in applying for jobs and welfare benefits. Notice the multiple signatures affixed to both types of documents, underlining the importance of the certification function that the federation exercises in the lives of the local poor.

The same applications, we are told, were used to apply to the Union Council for benefits offered under existing safety net laws, of which the Vulnerable Group Development cards (VGD) are the best known. The Council entertained 28 of them. For 20 applicants (whether there is overlap with the ones accepted by the Council I don't know), the federation arranged trainings in its own project. For the two batches the RDRS Legal Aid Project is said to have released Tk. 51,000 (approx. US\$ 730), which the Federation topped with Tk. 54,000 of its own money. For eight others, it arranged jobs with the NGO *Terre des Hommes* in Kurigram.

The survey questions are in part expected, in part surprising. After the usual identifiers, a small number of poverty indicators are collected, interrupted by others establishing whether the interviewee household was already being helped by the Council or by any NGOs.

However, starting with question no. 11, three attitudinal questions are asked, on issues that are high on women's empowerment agendas: child marriage, domestic violence, and dowry. Their function on an application form is not obvious; it is hard to imagine that someone approving of dowry would want this stated on a training or welfare

benefit application. Here the federation, under the guise of interview questions, may actually be speaking about itself and its own preferences (which, of course, is true in a sense also of the other questions even when these elicit “real” attributes of the interviewee).

Finally, the pragmatic nature of the document as a benefit application is underlined by the signatures affixed. The data collector’s is standard on an interview form. There is space for a director’s signature (“proadhan nirbahi”). It is unclear whether this simply is the federation chairman, or the authority of the granting institution.

1,700 interviews, so why only 50 questionnaires?

At this moment, we are still under the illusion that this form was used for all the families interviewed. We learn that there were 700 interviewed in 2007, and another 1,000 in 2008. I want to know whether the second wave was prompted by the recent massive river erosion, but someone this falls by the wayside in the cross-conversation in which several try explaining the survey at the same time. Another approach:

“How did you analyze the information?”

“It is here, the 50 that were accepted. We found about 45 very poor families that nobody had known they existed in our community. They are included. All women.”

“Yes, I see. I mean, for example, how many persons with disabilities did you find all in all? In the entire Thetrai. You asked this in question no. 10.”

“There were three hundred some. We knew this already. We had the figure from the Department of Social Welfare. They had done their own survey of such persons.”

“But how many did you find?”

“We asked this only of the families of the beneficiaries for whom we had decided to fill in applications. You see, we printed this form only this year. We didn’t have it for the beneficiaries of 2007. We used it for these 50 only, whom we then interviewed each of them to obtain this detailed information.”

Thus, where is your survey?

It must have taken the visitors a couple minutes to let the full weight of this revelation sink in. Yes, the chairman reconfirms, there exist only these fifty filled-out questionnaires, used for benefit and job applications, and as background information on trainees that are working, now from their second batch, in the federation IGA project itself.

So, how were these fifty selected from the 1,700 poor or ultra-poor households?

With slight irritation, the chairman has one of the files recovered from the *almirah*, one of those that we had not wanted to see earlier. It contains a stack of neatly hand-written sheets, a listing of households, one line for each. One volunteer in each of the nine wards was responsible to write down the names of the poor households. The

executive committee oversaw their work. The motivation was to make sure that ward residents would not push for benefits of their own people only, a behavior implied for the Union Councilors. The counts of the ultra-poor (“hotodoridro”), by ward, have been posted prominently in the executive committee room. There was no other written analysis done.

So, how were the 1,700 listed as ultra-poor, and how then the 50 from among them? *“We gave criteria verbally – people selling their labor, those without income, widows, old people without support, separated women. The volunteers visited all. They listed the ultra-poor. They got to know the worst cases. We re-visited fifty of the worst and included them in the programs.”*

[Sidebar] Kopiron: Portrait of a poor woman of Thetrai



Kopiron was born in 1960 in Thetrai Union in Ulipur Upazila, Kurigram District, as one of eight children of a day laborer. Their home was located 3 km from Thetrai Union bazaar, near the Teesta river. The family owned no wealth other than their homestead.

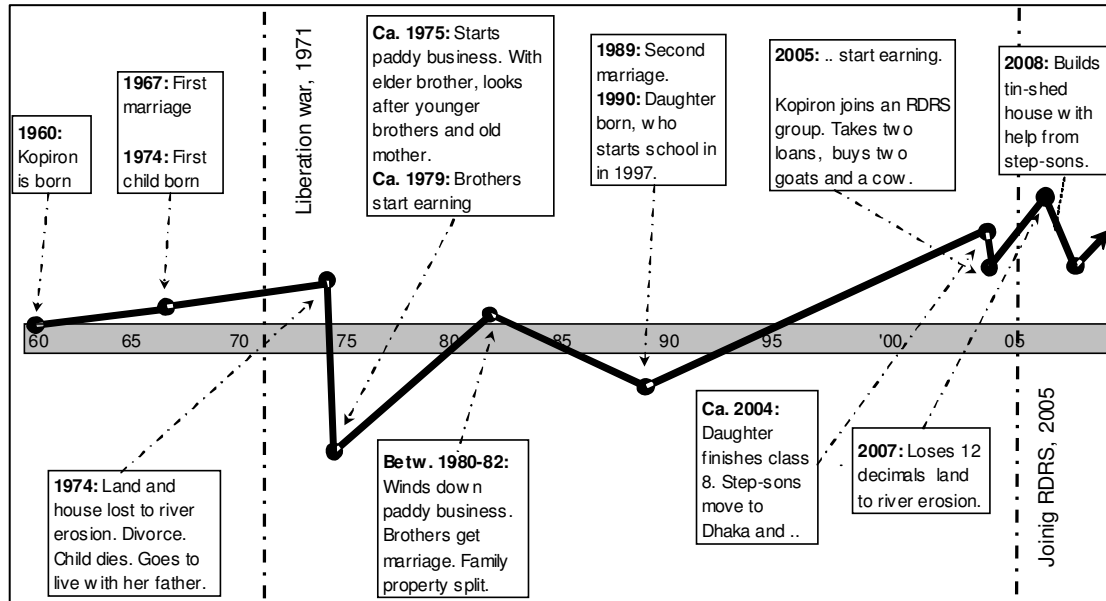
Kopiron was married when she was seven years' old, to a man in a nearby village. She notes that hers was a dowry-free marriage. Besides being a day laborer, her husband owned a piece of cultivable land. Their conjugal life was happy, and after six years, in 1973, their first daughter was born. Their lives took a turn for the worse when they lost everything to river erosion. Their child then was barely six months' old. Kopiron, together with their baby, found shelter in a neighbor's house, but the husband had to stay elsewhere. Unable to bear this situation, he divorced Kopiron. Three months into the divorce, the child died. Kopiron went to live with one of her brothers.

Her life would continue to be a struggle. Her guardian brother, after the death of the father and division of property, grew increasingly helpless. Her elder siblings took to separate lives, and Kopiron was the one left to fend for her mother and three younger brothers. She started a paddy stocking and husking business on seasonal credit. In the off-season, she would work as a maidservant.

This arrangement lasted for about eight years until some of her brothers were grown enough to start earning. Between 1980 and 1982, Kopiron wound down the paddy business. Her brothers married. For Kopiron, this brought more family quarrels, and again she went through a household separation. However, she felt less able to look after herself all alone and asked her brothers to arrange a marriage. This was in 1989 and also was a dowry-free marriage.

Her new husband, from the same village, already had two sons. He was a day laborer and at the time of their marriage owned between 20 and 25 decimals of cultivable land. Kopiron gave life to a daughter in 1990.

Figure 3: Kopiron's life-course diagram



The ups and down of Kopiron's life, as diagrammed during a life-history interview. The x-axis conveys years from her birth to the present. The y-axis does not represent a set metric. Rather, the relative changes in welfare and happiness can be guessed from the gradient of the thick line and the length of intervals between mapped events.

In 2005, Kopiron joined a women's group that RDRS had formed among ultra-poor women in West Hokdanga, one of Thetrai's hamlets. This gave her access to two loans, a first of Tk. 3,000 that she spent on two goats and on "family affairs". The second, of Tk. 5,000, bought her a calf.

Kopiron is illiterate. But she has seen to it that her daughter would study up to class eight. Her two stepsons moved to Dhaka. One drives a rickshaw, the other works as a mechanic. Their help proved critical in 2007 when Kopiron lost twelve decimals of farm land to the river. In the same year, they built a tin shed house for her.

Her daughter is now 18 years' old. Kopiron hopes to marry her off to a good family. Unlike in her own case, she does not think that anyone will take her daughter nowadays without an attractive dowry.

Kopiron was interviewed in her home by RDRS staff members Nirmala Rani Das and Rawshan Rahman. This narrative is by Rahman; the diagram is by Das. We do not know whether Kopiron was included in the list of ultra-poor families that the Thetrai Federation drew up during 2007 and 2008; and nothing indicates that she is a member. We comment on this ignorance further below under "mutual indifference" among programs and units.

A different understanding

A major finding that springs to the eye is that the federation has a radically different understanding of the survey concept. What *we* would call the survey consisted of a simple initial listing. What *they* called by the name of survey was an additional data collection on a very small segment identified in the decision phase following the initial household listing and informal determination of the poorest among the listed ones. But before we lose ourselves too far in interpretations, it is necessary to draw the relations with some of the other organized information processing activities in which the Thetrai Federation has been involved. Only then can we speak of its knowledge management.

Relations with other information bodies

Prior to the ultra-poor survey, the federation was asked by the Social Welfare Department to produce a listing of all persons with disabilities. How exactly the federation carried out this assignment, we did not discuss. However, the chairman felt that theirs was the first such documented list made in the Union. He was adamant that the Department, not the federation, had established the statistics based on the listing. The number he shared was the Department's, not their own. We did not understand what prompted the distancing from the official figure, and the refusal to advance their own count or estimate. What seems certain is that the data collection was done by the federation, upon instruction by the Department.

Similarly, the federation was solicited by the Land Office in Ulipur to help draw up a list of all landless families in Thetrai. The scope of the federation's responsibility and involvement in this is not entirely clear. The federation was represented on a local committee overseeing the enumeration, and its executive committee played a role in certifying lists. We did not understand whether the copies of the lists in its files were about families seen by federation volunteers, or about all the landless, including those surveyed by other organizations. What is important to know here is that it is with the Land Office that the federation has since attempted to take its ultra-poor survey to the next level, that of rights advocacy. We return to this below.

Variable involvements

This brief account of involvements in formatted information activities and in the certification, but apparently less so in the analysis, of the resulting lists and cases is not complete, as the "focus group" meeting held in front of the federation gate testifies. Obviously, the federation has a hand also in adjudicating some of the activities that the Union Council statutorily administers. This account is not only incomplete, but it is probably also incorrect, in the sense that the sequence, rationales, decisional consequences and interrelationships among these various big and small involvements are far from being exhaustively described here.

We know also that in some of the major data collections invading Thetrai Union the federation is no more than tangentially involved. This was the case, for example, in the massive household survey that the microcredit wholesaler PKSf conducted in 2006, under the banner of addressing the "*Monga*" problem. *Monga*, a seasonal semi-famine condition, had burst into the political arena in 2004, sending the government and NGOs into a flurry of activity to show they were doing something about it. In Kurigram and Lalmonirhat Districts, and thus in Thetrai, field workers of PKSf-

funded credit providers, including RDRS', were scrambled to conduct over a hundred thousand household interviews. There were focus group meetings called in the affected Unions, and the Thetrai federation committee attended one. But the speed of data collection, and the adherence to the given template, expected by PKSF was such that federation volunteers were not invited to participate.

Mutual indifference of the good kind?

The separation between the federation and the RDRS microfinance activities in Thetrai is a classic example of mutual indifference of a kind that ultimately may be desirable. Between January and October 2008, RDRS disbursed 1,018 loans to residents of this Union. As many as 904 were recorded as loans for the ultra-poor⁴. Although, from the days of group graduation, the microfinance database has been holding a field for groups supposedly incorporated in the federations, the overlap between the program and the federation memberships is an area of almost complete ignorance. Nobody knows how many of the federation members ever took an RDRS loan. Nor is it known how many of the microfinance customers are currently active in the federation. The list of 50 ultra-poor with detailed information was submitted to the Union Council and used in the training program co-funded by the RDRS Legal Project and for jobs at *Terre des Hommes*, but these households were not recommended, as far as we know, for RDRS micro-loans. Neither the federation nor the RDRS credit organizers see a need to interact with each other. Out there in the homesteads, borrowers are blissfully unaware whether deep inside an RDRS database they are listed as federation members or not. Without mutual concern, indifference is efficient; it keeps coordination burdens light.

Others may object to this interpretation and see a missed opportunity. The large NGO BRAC, for example, made the leaders of its microfinance groups responsible to produce lists, within their villages, of ultra-poor households left out by NGOs. The initial lists were then reviewed and finalized together with BRAC field workers, and the listed households were approached for inclusion in new programs⁵. However, this collaboration is comparable to that between RDRS and its federations within narrow limits only. BRAC's microfinance groups are much smaller than the federations, and the initiative to reach out to the underserved ultra-poor came from the NGO. Our point is the limits of program integration and, in this light, the benefit of selective indifference.

[Sidebar:] Formal membership in civil society bodies

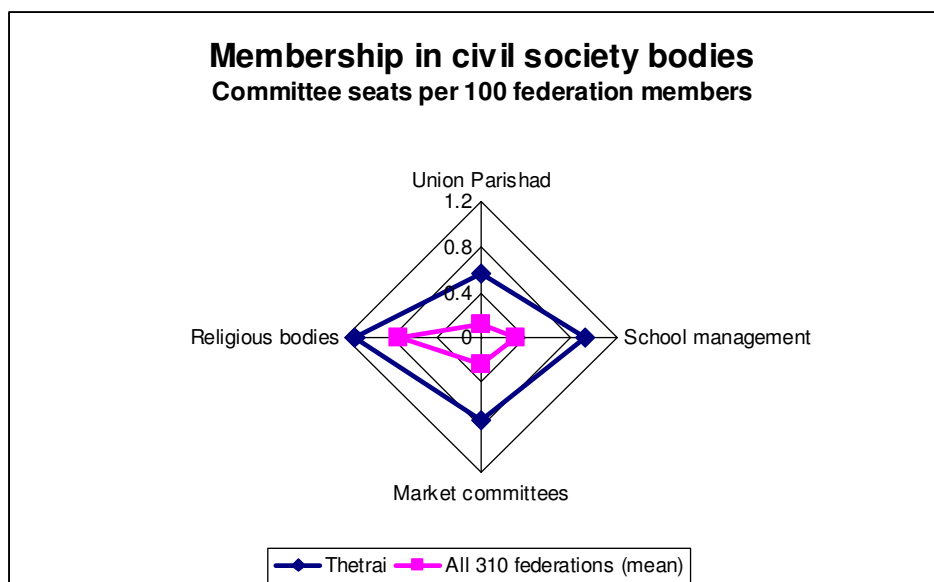
The way how federations manage different knowledge bodies is underpinned by their participation in civil society organizations, most of which are strictly local (the exception being the federation coordination bodies at the sub-district and district levels). Federations have repeatedly fielded candidates in Union Council elections, and by the end of 2008, 224 elected members were serving on the councils of the 310 federation areas. Only in three, however, was a federation member elected council chairman, the position that wields the by far largest power in Union politics.

⁴ 40 from the RDRS' own ultra-poor line, and 960 out of PKSF Programmed Initiatives for Monga Eradication (PRIME) funds. A PKSF survey database holds 2,841 household records from Thetrai, presumably defined by high *Monga* vulnerability.

⁵ This observation was made by Bhabatosh Nath, an external program auditor for RDRS. Nath stressed that this initiative gained BRAC not only an implementation advantage, but reputational benefits in donor and government circles (personal communication, 27 December 2008).

Positions in school management committees (602 federation members serving), market committees (447) as well as mosque, *madrassa* and temple committees (1,395) are easier to obtain; federation members may get appointed rather than elected to them. In addition, federations run a variable gamut of specialized committees and fora strictly of their own, concerned with dispute resolution, disaster management, advocacy, youth, women's affairs, popular theater and folk song.

Figure 4: Civil society committee seats held by federation members



The Thetrai Federation has been well represented in local committees, holding 18 seats, or 3.3 for every 100 of its 539 members at the end of 2008. This rate is almost 2.5 times higher than the average federation's although, as the graph shows, the relative configuration over the four domains is similar.

In terms of coordination with information collections initiated by external agencies, one may surmise that the involvement in the Union Council provides the federation with the most relevant networking capital. We do not know how these informational activities move through the network of concerned bodies - for example, in what situations government offices and NGOs other than RDRS contact the federation directly, as opposed to a first sorting out in the Union Council. It is unlikely that the council had any role in the jobs that the federation arranged with *Terre des Hommes*, but government social safety net data and resources travel through, and in large part are allocated by, the council.

Within the Union, other committees play roles of significant, though not well known importance. During 2008, the Thetrai Federation was called to mediate in 36 disputes, all of which concerned family situations, particularly violent ones. One may assume that it was mostly women who appealed for help, and that many cases resonated not only with the nine mediation committee members directly involved, but also with the 102 women's forum members and beyond. The federation manages information on dispute resolution to the point where case outcomes are documented in resolution sheets signed by the consenting parties; at the end of every quarter the number of cases resolved (27 out of the 36 for the year) is reported to RDRS field staff. Other committees do not seem to routinely leave an information trace crossing into other organizations' formal memories, but one may assume the federation's sporadic involvement in activities such as the Department of Education's enrolment surveys, in which school management committee members may assist.

A question of considerable interest – it takes us back to the ultra-poor – is how registration with the Social Welfare Department fashions the behavior of the federations, including in the

informational domain. Thetrai registered in 2004. We have heard conflicting claims as to the consequences. Membership lists have to be approved by the department. Apart from imposing a bureaucratic burden, the approval process was said to be intransparent, but it is unclear whether this has effectively stopped recruitment. Prior to registration, membership in Thetrai had fluctuated. In 1997, there were 543 members. By 2003, the figure had dropped to 291. Under the first phase of the EU federation capacity building project, membership grew appreciably in many federations, and in Thetrai it surged to 512, probably from the last graduated groups that RDRS released in 2004. 512 was still the figure repeated in November 2008, and the small increase during the remainder of the year – to 539 – may reflect an opening to individual applicants. Whether the four years of stagnation were caused by the lack of encouragement from RDRS, strictures imposed by the Social Welfare Department or by internal blockages in the Federation cannot now be determined. The Federation was able to update its voter list in May 2008 and conduct an executive committee election in July – among the 512 already approved.

Using survey information for rights advocacy

Emboldened by its success with the fifty, the Thetrai Federation then proceeded to using the ultra-poor survey more aggressively. It demanded, from the same Land Office in Ulipur for which it had provided data collection support earlier, a list of all “*khas*” land plots, government owned land parcels that existing laws mark for redistribution to the poor, but which in most places are securely exploited by richer quarters in the village.

This orientation towards land rights was not accidental. For some years, a small number among the 260 federations had been agitating for land rights. Federations in Ulipur sub-district apparently were not prominent in the early initiatives, but some of the success stories became more common knowledge through RDRS and presumably also in the federation district coordination committees. In 2007, RDRS reviewed what it knew of these dispersed movements and adopted a more coordinated advocacy role. In 2007 and 2008, it held a series of workshops with district and sub-district government officers on “*Khas* land distribution policies in Bangladesh”. In parallel, it conducted trainings for federation leaders in land rights and attendant practical processes (246 leaders, among whom 100 women, attended in 2008). 112 federations each received a small subsidy (Tk.1,200, approx. US\$ 18) for *khas* land application-related expenses, some of it specifically for materials needed for data collection. All the federations of Kurigram District, Thetrai included, were thus supported. This was the first direct link between RDRS and the survey in Thetrai⁶.

The chairman of Thetrai, alongside his colleagues from other federations, RDRS staff, government and media people, attended one of the first workshops. The event in Kurigram, in December 2007, was fairly high-profile, with the then Deputy Commiss

⁶ Personal communication, Md. Abdul Matin Sharda, Coordinator, Empowering the Poor through Federations Project, RDRS Rangpur, 18 February 2009. - Notably, as in Thetrai, in some of the early local initiatives, federations were confronted not only with land rights issues, but also with the situation of persons with disabilities. Thus, in 2006, Golkunda Union Federation in Lalmonirhat District adopted the case of a physically impaired landless person who had been allocated 2.5 decimals of *khas* land, but could not take possession from a retired paramilitary person who occupied the plot illegally. The federation prevailed. – The momentum from linking advocacy themes that initially were separate may be a galvanizing force that can give direction to the information management in associations of the poor. The social movement literature may offer useful leads, under “framing strategies”.

said they wanted to see what would happen after the elections: “*From our side, we are ready*”⁹.

Interpretation

The survey that this organization of poor people conducted, entirely by its own initiative and scarcely aided by its long-standing supporter RDRS, has little in common with orthodox social survey methods. It is a pragmatically inspired information activity, for which the federation has troubled to create written documentation only to a minor extent. What it did share in documented form was meant to promote favorable decisions by consumers of this select data.

In several aspects, the federation economized on information costs. Its volunteers may have visited all but the most conspicuously wealthy homes. But only those judged ultra-poor on first inspection were entered into the initial list. The list was hand-written, and the cost of printing forms limited to the small number that the federation judged the worst cases and expedient for inclusion in various programs. Only on this pre-selection of fifty was the more detailed information collected.

Change of purpose

The information on the other 1,650 families was not thrown away. It was leveraged into a more ambitious (and politically risky) approach to claiming rights for the poor. From a government office that it had supported earlier, the federation extracted, in spite of initial resistance, information that may pave the way for an unknown fraction of the 1,700 to enjoy some of their rights - the right to be allocated government land, given certain conditions.

The initial impetus for the survey had been purely local. As we know, the federation was seeking a way to recruit new members after RDRS had ceased to supply them regularly and regarded a survey of all poor households in the Union as a means to this particular end. This purpose was displaced when Thetrai was seized in the expanding RDRS advocacy for land rights. How this re-orientation occurred internally – whether the committee debated it, whether RDRS support staff prodded it to bring the federation in line with an evolving policy, or the federation simply resigned to the difficulty of adding members under Social Welfare Department rules and was glad to find a new usage for an information collection already begun– this we do not know. However, it is important to note that between 2005 and 2008 the project of surveying the poor in Thetrai underwent a distinct change of purpose.

More than just information

It is the creative and assiduous combination of its survey data with land ownership data from another source that is so special. It entitles us to call the Thetrai Federation executive committee members knowledge managers in a true, if entirely unorthodox sense. They did, in countless informal conversations and manual comparisons, exactly

⁹ A few days before our visit in Thetrai (18 Nov 2008), RDRS conducted another workshop with district government and federation representatives in Kurigram (11 Nov), of which land rights were one topic among many: “*Poor People’s access to Government Services: The Present Scenario*”. By this time, the Deputy Commissioner and the Assistant DC, Revenue had been changed (Source: Matin Shardar; Abedin, *ibid.*). I have no information whether anyone from the Thetrai Federation attended; the chairman made no mention of the event.

what a Geographical Information System expert would do with two separate layers: a nearest-neighbor matching. Similarly, we may suspect, the federation members concerned with surveys may occasionally have matched lists of this and that category of persons, say, between those with disabilities and the landless. But we know as yet nothing of this sort of endeavor if it indeed has happened beyond the *khas* land initiative.

A cynic might object that the absence of any documented survey analysis, other than the counts of ultra-poor by ward, disqualifies the information activities that this federation has so far developed from the predicate “knowledge management”. It is true that the computer, locked away ten meters from the executive committee room, was not being used for any data entry, let alone analysis. It is equally true that the committee was superbly indifferent, sometimes apparently hostile, to any other counts or correlations, tables or diagrams with which the modern survey industry carpets its reports. And while the advocacy and rights language has started to percolate into the committee, the academic survey lingo made no impression save a nonchalant reference to “focus groups”.

Slow surveys and rapid change

Yet, in an evolutionary perspective, the strictly pragmatic, parsimonious survey approach of this grassroots organization may be the more adaptive. For one thing, the complexity of any locally controlled surveys is narrowly circumscribed by the turbulence of the organizational environment. In plain English: The Teesta river will always be faster and stronger than the federation. The 700 families that it listed as being poor in 2007 were soon intermingled with the 1,200 displaced by the 2008 floods. And among the 1,000 added to the lists in 2008, some may have to emigrate before they can receive any practical benefits from the federation’s survey. The *khas* land, assuming some will be allocated in a not too distant future, may no longer exist on dry land. The federation volunteers took a year and a half to visit and list the 1,700. This was not the kind of rapid assessment that disaster professionals prescribe. The river is ahead in the race.

Turbulence also comes down the aid chain. Large surveys, ordained by big players such as PKSF, descend on Thetrai like locusts. You don’t see them until you are totally covered. The effort, implications, benefits, but also the potential for conflict, in involving itself in them remain unpredictable for a grassroots organization like the Thetrai Federation. In the changing legal and policy environment, the federation lost the freedom to recruit (new members were not approved by the Department in 2008), but spotted new opportunities to secure better livelihoods for some people. On the way, the “ultra” was added to the “poor”.

A success story of the rights-based approach?

Within three years, the story of the Thetrai Federation’s survey advanced from an odd-ball idea, incomprehensible to RDRS, to an achievement that has the potential to sell as a success story of the rights-based approach. It is undeniable that the federation grasped something of the rights discourse and was ingeniously translating it to the local opportunity structure. However, any serious rights advocate should pause before calling success:

The federation operates on a thin popular mandate. Elected by perhaps ten percent of the poor in Thetrai, the committee has taken initiatives and decisions that – like it or not - redistribute life chances in this community. Its legitimacy rests on the fiction that other organizations, including the official Union Council, are doing a worse job. One cannot blame the federation for the absence of any of the participatory assessment paraphernalia – wealth ranking, etc. -, but there remains an uneasy feeling being told “we know the poor, we chose the worst cases”. Is this a benevolent village *nomenclatura* graciously working for the poor? Or really an organization of the poor that controls the actions and decisions of its officers and volunteers?

Power in numbers

The second problem with associating this federation with the rights-based approach is in the numbers. The 1,700 ultra-poor listed are a considerable segment of the local community. By comparison, 50 included in various programs is a small number. Where is the fight for the right to admit new members, in other words, for the right of the poor to associate freely? Why did the empowerment strategy choose a legal form that locks the federation into its current 512 members? The poor have power in numbers; limiting those numbers will curtail the enjoyment of other rights as well.

It is perhaps premature to evaluate these trade-offs. Many social movements have found out that engaging in procedures that the law prescribes demobilizes members, and this may happen to Thetrai and to other federations if the effort to obtain *khas* remains disproportionate to popular expectations. On the other hand, a significant success, helped by the well-funded RDRS federation support project and by new political climates, would make the federations more attractive to the unorganized poor. The impact of a stronger rights orientation on the federations seems indeterminate.

Luckily, the Thetrai survey experience offers an almost natural experiment to test the rights-based approach. The Teesta river cuts the community into two halves. The rights that the actions of the federation cause the poor to enjoy should be unimpeded by geography. If the rights-based approach confers energies that are morally and politically superior to traditional patronage, the distribution of benefits will reveal it. A survey of the poor on the far right bank (the Rangpur side) ought to report inclusion and benefits not greatly different from those found in the area of the federation and Union Council headquarters (the Ulipur side). As yet, this is another area of our ignorance. We do not know, for example, where in Thetrai the fifty who received jobs or training live. For a test of rights vs. patronage, we have not even begun a serious talk with the federation.

[Sidebar:] Which literatures speak to this case?

This article grew out of an opportunity that arose during a stay with the RDRS Bangladesh field coordination center in Rangpur in November 2008. It would be dishonest to present the interview in Thetrai and the assembly of contextual elements as flowing from a pre-existing theoretical framework. That said, it is important to suggest bodies of theory and experience to which this particular case of local knowledge management can be anchored.

The literature on participatory development seems to be a natural candidate for such a framework. One of its strong rationales has been that participation brings rich local knowledge to fruition. The emphasis may have been less on the creation of knowledge (which was

assumed pre-existing in local communities) and more on its sharing with other actors in development, notably with designers and implementers of projects. Knowledge sharing took place in participatory appraisals and assessments, for which a considerable variety of tools and methods were developed, catalogued and used flexibly (Ruggeri Laderchi 2001). However, much of the participation idea and practice remained instrumental to aid chains, so much so that by the new millennium a philosophical backlash was felt. Its essence was captured in the book title: "Participation: The New Tyranny?" (Cooke and Kothari 2001). Recent debates have reverted to a more positive appreciation, associating participation with rights-based approaches, an advocacy-driven shift from projects and beneficiaries to policies and citizens, and its institutionalization in the prescriptions and practice of large donor agencies (Hickey and Mohan 2004).

Neither school of participation speaks centrally to the autonomous creation and management of knowledge that the Thetrai Federation exemplifies in its survey of the ultra-poor. The Federation's uninhibited, creative adaptation of an external template (the survey concept) requires different theoretical perspectives.

Where else can one look? There is a young literature on knowledge management for development. An online journal in this name (<http://www.km4dev.org/journal/index.php/km4dj>) was started in 2005. As one of its contributions pointed out (Ferreira and Neto 2005), the field has two very distinct audiences: development professionals in institutions and social actors at the grassroots. The World Bank's efforts to build a knowledge bank are exemplary of the first. For a variety of reasons, including the needs of advocacy work, international development NGOs too are investing in knowledge management. Schueber (2003) studied its use in the Swiss NGO Helvetas and in its Nepal program, but one comes away with the impression that it was being favored for its promise to mitigate problems of headquarter-field relations rather than as a tool for local capacity building. The "knowledge fairs" organized by CARE International are meant to give platforms primarily to local audiences, and to build bridges between them and the professionals. In Bangladesh, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation has sponsored some village-based fairs. None of this speaks to the difference between the way the Thetrai Federation created knowledge and traditional "expert" survey notions. The organizational learning models may help to bridge this gap. Thus Ebrahim and Ortolano (2001) analyze the growth of an irrigation and forestry-focused NGO in India, using a circular model of knowledge generation, knowledge routinization and further information acquisition. This NGO created irrigation cooperatives and federated 40 of them, an opportunity that in similar form had driven the formation of RDRS federations in the late 1980s.

"Community-based research", sometimes called "community-led research", provides a point of convergence between the participatory schools and knowledge management at the grassroots (Mayoux and Chambers 2005). Of particular note is the oft-remarked trade-off between local ownership and conceptual simplification, a characteristic that may also apply to Thetrai if one holds the federation to professional survey quality standards. For example, Thomsen (2003), in a study of research participation among citizen groups in Australian water catchment areas, observed that the more enterprising ones would take to their own water testing, using a fraction of the recommended tests only. Their interpretations of limited results would estrange them from outside experts. A similar tension between very detailed agro-ecological knowledge and the inability to expand this knowledge significantly without external assistance has been observed in peasant communities of poorer countries (Kunzi, Wiesmann et al. 2002: esp. 232-234, with a case study from Kenya). In Bangladesh, community participation in arsenic water mitigation (Sultana 2007) and in new "total community sanitation" approaches (Deak 2008) may help to open wider perspectives on the Thetrai experience.

Our claim is that, through its survey and subsequent *khas* land investigation, the federation *managed* knowledge. Thus, borrowing from management literature distant from development may be fruitful. All the more so when we look at this association as a member of an aid chain in which it exchanges not only bits of information, but also new concepts to vehicle it. The organizational cognition literature is a likely candidate in this situation (Meindl, Stubbart et al. 1996). It has been advanced primarily in the world of multinational corporations (Cohendet, Kern et al. 1999; ; Antonelli 2006) and as such is suspect, when transferred to development

and participation, of spreading “globalized managerialism” (Reiter 2006: 8). It would nevertheless be worth an effort to glean it for lessons that the knowledge collaboration among managerially integrated, yet culturally diverse capitalist firms and networks holds for organizations of the poor. One may seek parallels between global strategies and local knowledge creation. For example, surveys may be understood by most participants of an aid network as a tool for “evidence-based policy”, a sense shared even by some grass-roots associations competing in aid markets. Locally, such as in Thetrai, the survey concept and practice may be peculiar, with some ordinary competences lacking, and some unexpected ones applied to opening unorthodox opportunities, as we have seen. These cognitive aspects have not been widely studied in participation and empowerment contexts. Van Vlaenderen’s (1997) study of problem solving among South African community activists is a rare exception.

If the social and political history of richer nations provides any guidance, it warns us that control over poverty knowledge moves in pendulum swings between local community action and outside forces (O’Connor 2001). The fact that a country can afford an elaborate poverty research industry does not *per se* ensure progressive policies, and the work of experts can be hijacked and re-interpreted by powerful groups. Poor communities’ own knowledge management efforts add weight to larger alliances that advance anti-poverty, rather than anti-poor, knowledge.

Conclusion

This case study opened with a reflection on the burden and inequality inherent in much of the informational activities that take place along aid chains. It is obvious that some measure of data collection, transmission and analysis is needed and is, as a principle, in the interest of all participants. However, the bulk of current practices are costly, low-yield and even stultifying. Not surprisingly, at the higher tiers, program evaluation and strategic planning generally make little use of project monitoring data. At the grassroots and in the field staff of supporting NGOs, this work sphere is often seen as a mere cost, borne in order to keep benefits and jobs continuing, but with little hope for any kind of positive feedback. Yet, even progressive donor agencies have scant notion of the opportunity cost of these activities. They may recommend participatory forms of planning and evaluation, but are not in a position to rein in the far-reaching reporting demands that their back-donors make.



An embroidery practice piece, coming to perfection in the Thetrai Federation premises. The trainees, adolescent girls, had reportedly been selected as a result of the survey of ultra-poor households.

The circular pattern, with its segments, is reminiscent of the survey volunteers criss-crossing the nine wards of Thetrai Union and eventually meeting in the community center. It symbolizes the particular survey process better than the square data table displayed in the executive committee office.

The Thetrai Federation has demonstrated that the organizations of the poor have information needs of their own, and the resolve to pursue them, that were not scripted into any logframe or monitoring template. While its technical ability to organize information may be modest, its social concern and networking creativity are strong. Its ultra-poor survey connects the dots between knowledge and rights, between the factual and the normative.

The survey is but one of numerous informational activities in which the federation is involved. Balancing these efforts is an important aspect of its autonomy. It modulates its engagements with actors with whom it is loosely coupled – say, offices concerned with land or disability – and does so opportunistically. It admits greater and steadier influence from the supporting NGO. Finally, it avoids the embrace by tightly coupled systems such as transaction-based micro-finance. All this is meant to keep the federation the center of a flexible network – and as well informed about it as a small association of poor people can be.

Initiatives like the Thetrai survey may be rare – we do not know. If ten percent of the energy spent on traditional project information could be diverted into supporting more of them, considerable synergies might result within larger programs. At least, we would all share the joy of learning together.

References

- Ahammed, F. (2009). Federation information [Spreadsheet for A. Benini, 8 February 2008]. Rangpur, RDRS Bangladesh.
- Antonelli, C. (2006). "The Business Governance of Localized Knowledge: An Information Economics Approach for the Economics of Knowledge." Industry and Innovation 13(3): 227-261.
- Benini, A. (2006). A Shelter for the Poor. The long-term viability of NGO-supported local associations [Field research support by Bhabatosh Nath and Ayesha Siddika, Responsive to Integrated Development (RIDS), Dhaka]. Rangpur and Washington DC, RDRS Bangladesh and North Bengal Institute.
- Benini, A. (2007). "A Monitoring System for Numerous Local Organizations of Poor People: A Case from Bangladesh." Electronic Journal on Information Systems in Developing Countries (EJISDC) 31(8): 1-41.
- Cohendet, P., Kern, F., Mehmanpazir, B. and Munier, F. (1999). "Knowledge coordination, competence creation and integrated networks in globalised firms." Cambridge Journal of Economics 23(2): 225-241.
- Cooke, B. and Kothari, U. (2001). Participation : The new tyranny? London ; New York, Zed Books.
- Deak, A. (2008). Taking Community-led Total Sanitation to Scale: Movement, Spread and Adaptation (Working Paper 298). Brighton, Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex.
- Ebrahim, A. and Ortolano, L. (2001). "Learning Processes in Development Planning a Theoretical Overview and Case Study." Journal of Planning Education and Research 20(4): 448-463.

- Ferreira, S. D. M. and Neto, M. (2005). "Knowledge management and social learning: exploring the cognitive dimension of development." Knowledge Management for Development Journal 1(3): 6-19.
- Hickey, S. and Mohan, G. (2004). Participation--From Tyranny to Transformation?: Exploring New Approaches to Participation in Development. London and New York, Zed Books.
- Karim, A. (2008). Progress at a glance (Social Organization) [Fact sheet and personal communication with A. Benini, 24 September 2008]. Rangpur and Johannesburg, RDRS Bangladesh.
- Kunzi, E., Wiesmann, U. and Maina, F. (2002). Innovation and Adaptation in a New Environment-Knowledge Management among Peasants in the Upper Ewaso Ng'iro River Region, Kenya. Local Environmental Management in a North-South Perspective: Issues of Participation and Knowledge Management. M. Flury and U. Geiser. Amsterdam, IOS Press: 225-236.
- Mayoux, L. and Chambers, R. (2005). "Reversing the paradigm: quantification, participatory methods and pro-poor impact assessment." Journal of International Development 17(2): 271-298.
- Meindl, J. R., Stubbart, C. and Porac, J. F. A. (1996). Cognition within and between organizations. Thousand Oaks, Calif., Sage Publications.
- O'Connor, A. (2001). Poverty knowledge : social science, social policy, and the poor in twentieth-century U.S. history. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press.
- Reiter, J. (2006). The intractability of information: non-governmental development organizations and the uses of knowledge. London, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies.
- Ruggeri Laderchi, C. (2001). Participatory methods in the analysis of poverty: A critical review (QEH Working Paper Number 62).
- Schueber, M. (2003). Information Management Strategy Formation in Northern Development NGOs [Development Informatics Working Paper No. 14]. Manchester, Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester.
- Sultana, F. (2007). "Reflexivity, Positionality and Participatory Ethics: Negotiating Fieldwork Dilemmas in International Research." ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies 6(3): 374 - 385.
- Thomsen, D. (2003). Community-Based Research: An Opportunity for Collaboration and Social Change, Griffith University, Australian School of Environmental Studies.
- Van Vlaenderen, H. R. M. (1997). Group problem solving among community activists in a South African setting: an everyday cognition approach. South Africa, Rhodes University.

Figure 5: An aerial view of the Teesta river basin near Thetrai



A Google Earth aerial view of the Teesta river area near Thetrai. Ulipur, the sub-district center is about 8 km east of the river, as the crow flies.

THETRAI UNION SAMAJ KALLYAN SANGSTHA

Post: Shatdarga, Upazila: Ulipur, District: Kurigram

Established: 10 February 1993

Registration No.: Kuri/511/04 (Cooperative)

IGA for women (Weave cloth, Embroidery, Nakshikatha, Worm cloth and Tailoring Training Project).

Date:

Beneficiary survey form

Village: Post:..... Union.....

Upazila:.....District:.....

01. Name:
- Father's/ Husband Name:..... Mother's Name:.....
02. Divorce/Widow/Separated from Husband/Others
03. Description of houses:
Number of RoomCI Sheet/Only CI Sheet Roof / Thatched house
04. Do you involved in any NGO?.....
05. What types of service receive from NGO?.....
06. Have you received any service from Union Parishad?.....
- Old age Allowance / Types of Card.....
07. Have you rearing Cow/Goat/Poultry? Yes / No
Cow.....Goat.....Poultry.....Others.....
08. Source of Drinking Water:
Own tube well/Others Tube well/ Ring Well / others.....
Is it Arsenic Tested?.....
09. Do you use hygienic latrine? Yes / No
10. Is there any disable member? Yes / No
How Many..... Boys / Girls Age.....
11. What is your role to protect early marriage? To Support/ Not to Support
12. Do you know about women torture? Yes / No
13. What is your role to protect dowry? To Support/ Not to Support
14. Any others comments:

Signature of Data Collector

Name:.....

Date:.....

Checked by

Name:.....

Date:.....

Signature of Executive Director

Name:.....

Date:.....