Knowledge Management in an Organization of the Poor

The Thetrai Union Federation in northern Bangladesh

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With help from

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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.

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

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ASA	Association for Social Advancement, a micro-finance provider
BRAC	BRAC (formerly Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), a development NGO and micro-finance provider
CARE	CARE, an international development NGO
DSW	Department of Social Welfare, Government of Bangladesh
IGA	Income-generating activity
LWF	Lutheran World Federation
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PKSF	Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation, a micro-finance wholesaler
RDRS	Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service
USD	United States dollar
VGD	Vulnerable Group Development

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.

We 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 over 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 are too simplistic. They portray benevolent facilitators meeting the local community to harness pre-existing knowledge to the betterment of one project at a time. By contrast, the Thetrai Federation deliberately created knowledge that nobody yet possessed. It engaged in a mêlée of variable, opportunistic, yet goal-oriented information behaviors. They suggest that what gets collected, processed and shared is a function of the autonomy that the players in the aid chain enjoy. Among these players, the local associations manage knowledge for the survival of poor people, 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.

Acknowledgement

[Background:] RDRS Bangladesh

The Thetrai Union Federation, the main actor in this story, is one among over 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 over 23,000 sq km, spreading across 76 sub-districts with 540 Union Councils. Among an estimated population of 20 million, 2.7 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 20 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 2008, RDRS was working with over 25,700 organized groups, with members drawn from 485,000 households. It had a total staff of 2,935, of whom twenty-two percent were women, and administered resources worth US$ 13.9 million[1]. 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]

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[1] This information has been compiled from the 2008 Annual Report.

THETRAY UNION IN ULIPUR UPAZILA

Bangladesh

Durgapur

Begumganj

Daldalia

Pandul

Buraburi

Saheber Alga

Ulipur

Dharanibari

Hatia

Thetray

Dhamserni

Gunaigachh

Tabakpur

Bazra

DHARLA

DHARLA

TEESTA

TEESTA

TEESTA

TEESTA

JAMUNA

JAMUNA

JAMUNA

JAMUNA

JAMUNA

N
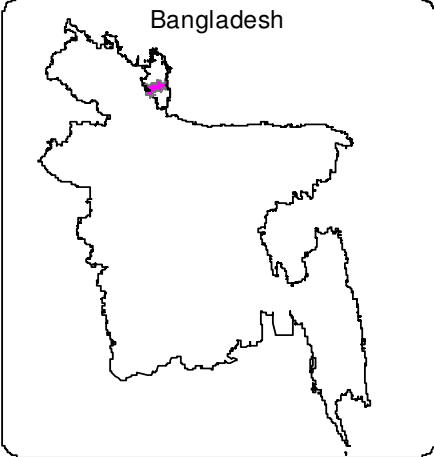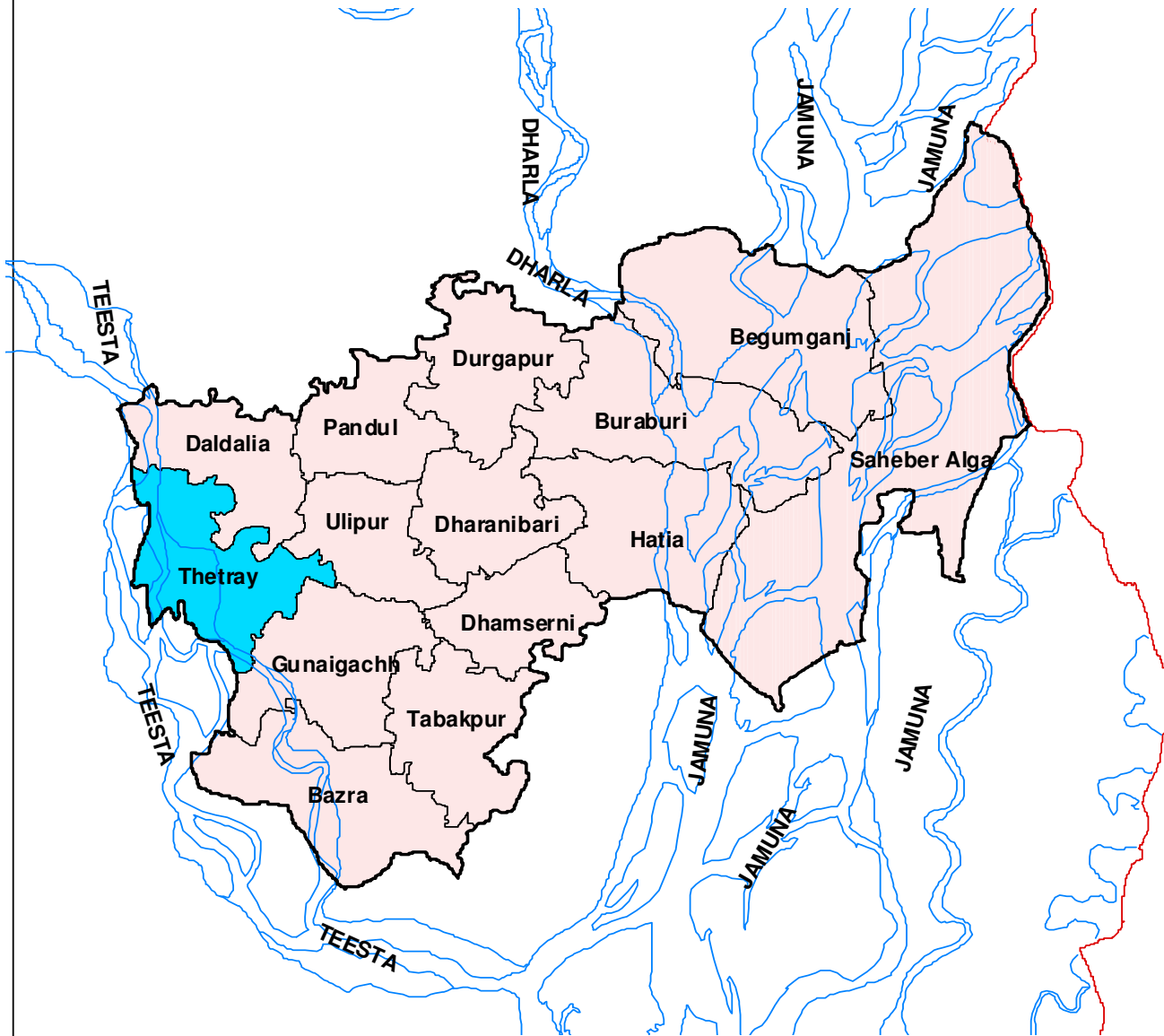
Upazila Boundary of Ulipur
River
Thetray Union
Union Boundary
Bangladesh Outline

0   5   10   Kilometers

9

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 study 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 it 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 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 <u>know</u>";* 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 <u>manage</u> 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 <u>knowledge</u> 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 latters' 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 are overseeing outside the gate. The chairman offers to go and watch 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 points out that a "focus group discussion" is going on, but refuses to join the fray.

A federation for a disaster-stricken community

We are 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 wards[2]. 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 estimated 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 home-spun. The loveless pinning and gluing of posters atop each other, prevalent in

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[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.

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 a 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 and the history of Thetrai

The federation movement

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 72 federations in adjacent areas. As of June 2009, the 332 federations counted 209,000 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, one of us conducted a detailed re-study (Benini 2006). The then 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.

Organizational form

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
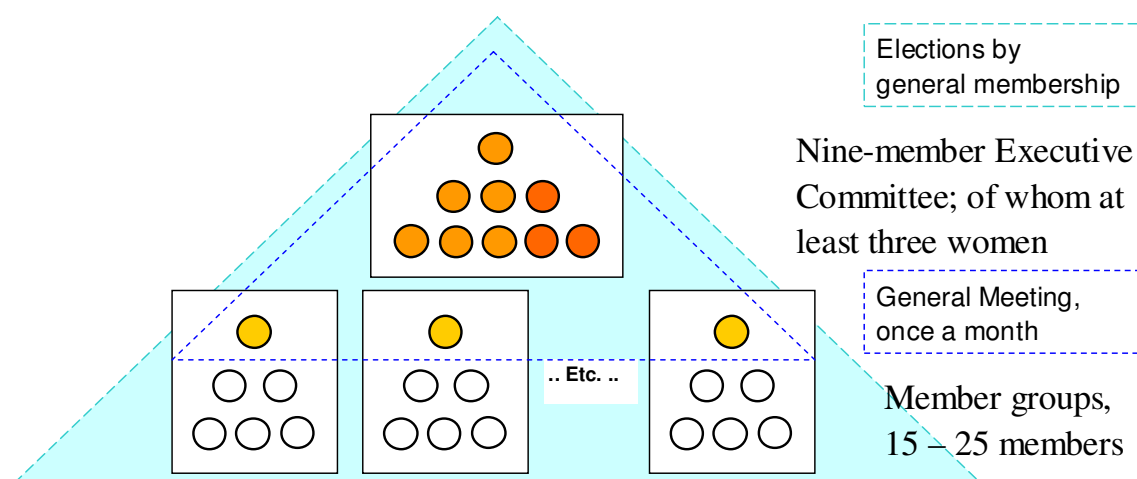
The basic structure of a Union Federation has two levels. Some of the local terminology is counterintuitive. At the base, we find neighborhood groups called "secondary groups" because they were derived from earlier unfederated "primary" ones. A secondary group has between 15 and 25, either all-male or 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 percent[3].

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.

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[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 growth of the Thetrai Federation

The Thetrai Federation was founded on 10 February 1993. Initially, it brought together nine women's and eight men's groups, totaling 325 members. The fledgling federation owned no land, buildings or other important assets.

Paradoxically, its local standing improved the following year, as a result of a disaster. A flood devastated the main market of Thetrai Union. RDRS contracted the federation to rebuild 125 structures. The influential market committee wanted the federation to have a permanent presence and donated a tenth of an acre land. The local member of parliament mobilized a food for work scheme to raise the plot above flood level. With its income from construction, the federation bought some more land and erected a first semi-permanent structure.

Over the following years, the federation repeatedly leveraged its participation in RDRS programs in order to strengthen its financial base, physical infrastructure and community standing. Its strength encouraged some membership growth although this remained modest and dependent on the RDRS credentialing of new groups. In 1995 a grain store and tree plantation were added; in 1996 the federation started operating a ferry boat (which since has employed four ferrymen permanently and has been used in flood rescue); in 1997 RDRS co-funded a training center; in 1998, under a post-flood employment creation scheme, 16 km worth of roadside tree plantation was taken up.

Some projects were temporary, and not all gave the federation the level of autonomy that it sought. Between 1998 and 2000 it earned commissions on collecting overdue loans from RDRS micro-loan borrowers. Between 1999 and 2003 it leased part of the very market that it had helped reconstruct, and eventually acquired a building there as a permanent endowment. Under the Rural Infrastructure and Community Development program, RDRS invested some Tk. 1.6 million (approx USD 23,000) in machinery and raw material for a production and training center housed by the federation. It employed eighty women, but was de facto managed by RDRS staff. It has not been sustained except for a small embroidery and weaving operation. Other types of income earning projects – the ferry, two fish ponds started in 2001, the roadside plantations expanded to 10,000 trees – have proven more congenial to Thetrai's management and ambitions.

In 2004, through registration with the Department of Social Welfare, the Thetrai Federation became a local NGO in its own right. The initial registration application was signed by 71 members only. The new legal status enabled the federation to reach out to such donor organizations as the Bangladesh NGO Foundation, but it initially slowed down the growth of membership. The number of members in November 2008 was still what it had been in 2004 - 512. A grant by the Foundation in 2008 was immediately used to support textile training for a first batch of women from households identified in the ultra-poor survey, with a second batch entering training in summer 2009.

In 2005, some members of the executive committed started contemplating a survey of all poor households in the Union. Its conceptual evolution and gradual implementation are detailed in the main body.

The survey of ultra-poor families

One of us (Benini) had visited the Thetrai Federation in March 2005. The chairman volunteered 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 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

At the time, this was an extraordinary initiative, unheard of from any of the other federations. RDRS was not associated with this survey project, nor was any association expected. Our question what help the committee would seek for this undoubtedly major undertaking was met with indifference; and in Rangpur this unusual project utterly failed to rouse any enthusiasm among the federation support staff. Three years later, one of the directors volunteered that Thetrai had completed its survey, in a tone that suggested that its progress had always been watched in great suspense.

What is so special about it? At first sight, it seems trivial and almost in violation of good research principles. We have selected on the dependent variable – "Federation X conducted its own survey" – and now cannot pretend to have detected anything special – we just went to the place where we already knew what was awaiting us.

However, during a visit on 18 November 2008 visit, as we struggle to decipher the nature and effect of this survey, it becomes anything but trivial. Let us take the reader back to our meeting with the executive committee:

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").
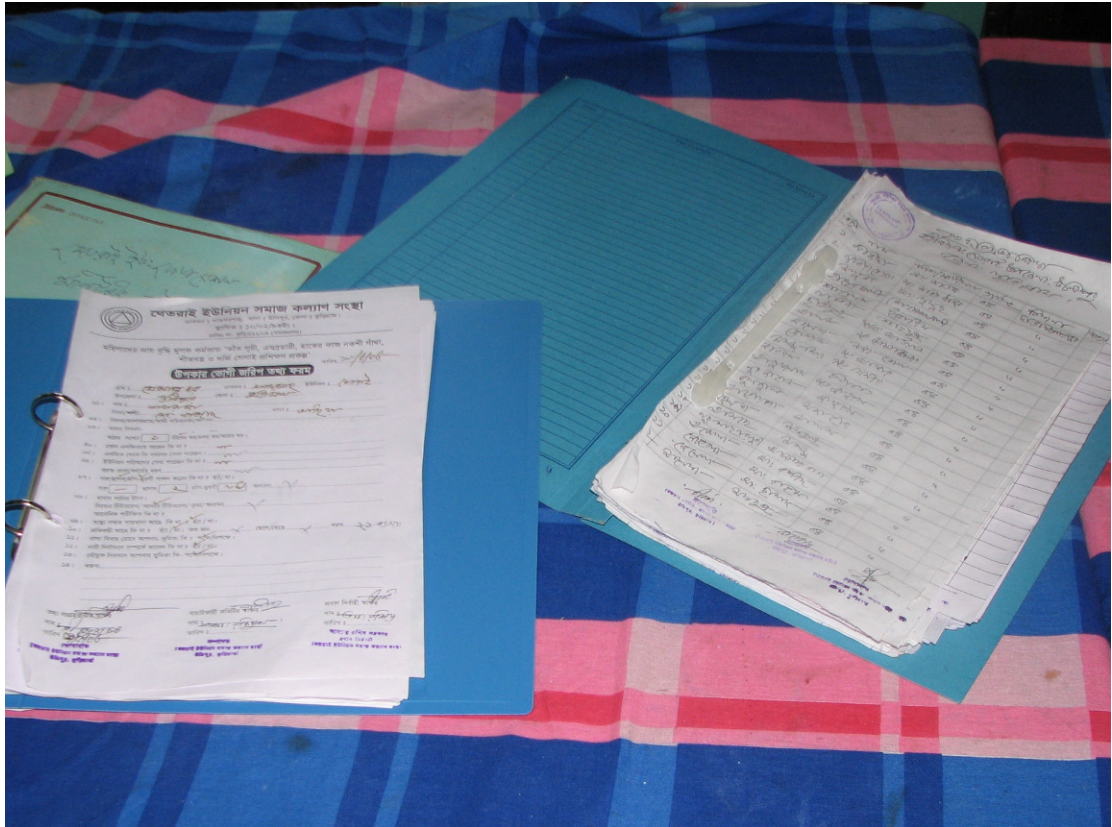
Misled by the appearance of the printed survey form (left), the visitors believe that the federation volunteers administered a 14-question assessment form to every potentially ultra-poor household that they visited. However, it turns out that households were only summarily listed (right); and the fifty 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 (some of whom were among the 28 VGD card recipients), 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 for an outsider. 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 NGO.

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 ("prodhan 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. We 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 in the federation income-generating 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, a member of the federations "Information and Advocacy Committee",

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. As the information came in, every month during the data collection the General Committee would discuss the additions. The final 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

One of the 1,700 households listed by the Thetrai Federation volunteers was Mrs. Kopiron's in West Hokdanga Village. Her life story encapsulates the disaster and drama of being ultra-poor in Thetrai.

Kopiron was born in 1960 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 wheat and 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
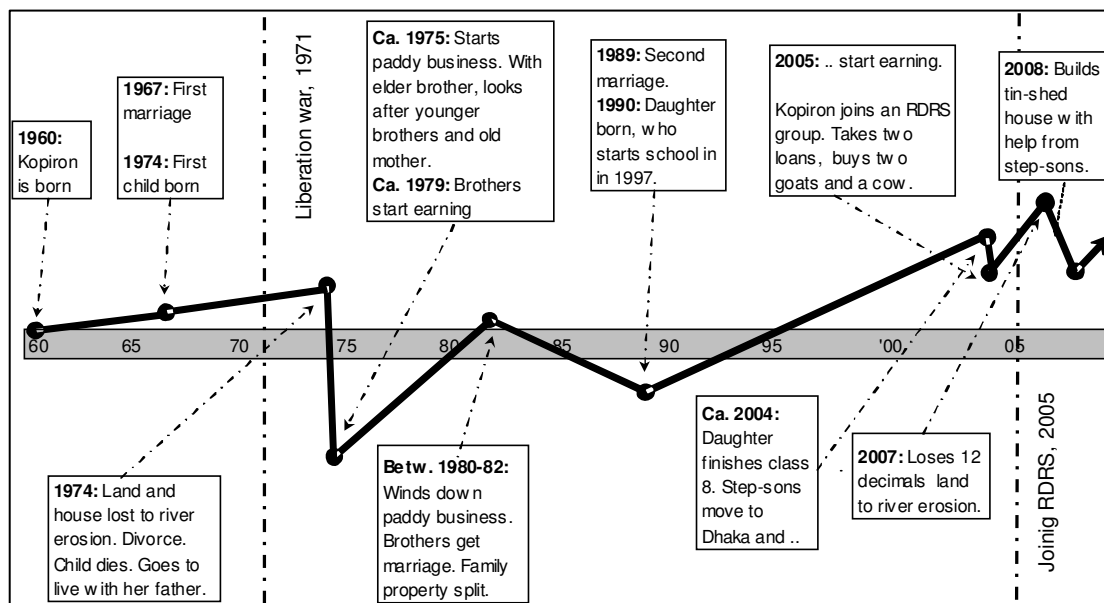
The ups and down of Kopiron's life, as diagrammed during a life-history interview. The x-axis conveys years from her birth to the present. The y-axis does not represent a set metric. Rather, the relative changes in welfare and happiness can be guessed from the gradient of the thick line and the length of intervals between mapped events.

In 2005, Kopiron joined a women's group that RDRS had formed among ultra-poor women in West Hokdanga. 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 19 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.

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Kopiron is not a member of the Thetrai federation because her group did not join. However, her husband, through his group, does belong. Kopiron says that the federation is for the poor people, but that she is aware only of some of its specific activities. Among her husband's group, some attend the monthly meetings, and all go when the leaders call. The group received Tk. 300 as a dividend from one of the Federation's project. The federation offers various trainings for members, in her words: "to lead their lives well." It solicits assistance from the government, in the form, for example, of VGD cards and three-months' worth of lean season ("Monga") support.

Kopiron was interviewed in her home by RDRS staff members Nirmala Rani Das and Rawshan Rahman in November 2008. This narrative is by Rahman; the diagram is by Das. Nath visited Kopiron in May 2009 and asked her questions about Thetrai Federation and its ultra-poor survey.

A different understanding of surveys

As we leave the meeting with the executive committee members, one thing stands out starkly: This 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 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.

Also, in an entirely pragmatic orientation, focused on cases and potential benefits rather than on analysis and summaries, the federation used the survey information as a support in pressing the rights of poor people to land that the government allocates to landless families. In December 2008, federation volunteers surveyed another 120 ultra-poor households, using the same job application format and bringing the number up to 170.

The next two sections describe the multiple and variable involvements in data collections by other agencies and the use of the survey in a rights perspective.

Relations with other information bodies

The ultra-poor survey, while long in gestating, was not the first significant data collection exercise by this federation. In fact, its executive committee members and volunteers have been harnessed to a variety of surveys that other agencies led. These undertakings were of different scale – from small sets of cases treated with the local Council to massive rapid assessments driven by national agencies -, and the federation's involvements varied greatly in responsibilities, overlap with its own concerns and re-use of the data it helped collect.

Mixed workforces for data collection

Thus, in 2006, 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. Federation volunteers helped collect data on the ground, but we received contradictory indications as to whether other NGOs were part of the survey workforce. Our interviewees did not volunteer statistics, but the chairman believed that it was during this exercise that his volunteers became acquainted with many of the households that they were to list in the federation's own survey later in 2007 and 2008. What is important to note 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.

The relationship is similarly ambiguous in a combined effort to enumerate persons with disabilities. In June 2007, federation volunteers started to list some of them in two of the nine wards of the Union. The motives have not been well explained, but we understand that this was a first practical take on identifying some ultra-poor, perhaps a kind of informal pre-test. Progress was slow, and eventually the effort was merged with the survey of the 170 ultra-poor households. In 2008, the government carried out a disability survey of its own. The concerned Department of Social Welfare officer in Ulipur, who apparently knew of the federation's initiative, was all too happy to connect with it[4]. The federation list extant was summarily copied; other areas and households were scoured in December 2008, it appears, by DSW personnel and by federation volunteers some in mixed teams, some separately. The ultimate list of 312 persons with disabilities was a kind of consensus result. The chairman was adamant, in conversations with us, that the analysis was done by the Department, and the federation was not responsible for the results. He felt that the combined list was the first ever made of persons with disabilities living in the Union.

The rates of disability based on the Department count for the entire Union population (312 persons in perhaps 6,000 households[5]) and on the federation's survey (43 persons in 170 households by end of December 2008) differ greatly. Plausible reasons include under-enumeration of households in the general population, incentives to over-report disability in the ultra-poor survey, or the fact that disability is causal to extreme poverty and thus a higher rate in this sub-population is expected.

Variable involvements

The two examples of involvements in formatted information activities and in the certification, but apparently less so in the analysis, of the resulting lists and cases are not exhaustive. As the "focus group" meeting held in front of the federation gate testifies, the federation has a hand also in adjudicating some of the activities that the Union Council statutorily administers. For example, the Council received help from the federation in securing birth certificates to all children born in Thetrai.

At times major data collections invade Thetrai Union. In such large undertakings, the federation may be 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-

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[4] The Department appears to have relied for this work on other RDRS Federations too. In Ulipur, we know that at least the Tabakpur Federation lent a hand.

[5] For 2005, we used an estimate of 5,919 households in Thetrai extrapolated from earlier census data and district-wise population growth assumptions in the data used in Benini (2006). Later migration may have changed that to an unknown degree.

famine condition (Elahi and Ara 2008), 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 initially not invited to participate. In the late stages only, when the PKSF enumerators were running against deadlines, did they accept their assistance.

Mutual indifference – efficient, or missing opportunities?

On the scale of variable involvements, the separation between the federation and microfinance activities in Thetrai is even more extreme. It provides a classic example of mutual indifference in an organizational field.

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-poor[6]. 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. For example, we learned from the life history of Kopiron (pages 21-23) that she was an RDRS borrower, and that her husband was a federation member. But there are no statistics of how many federation members ever took an RDRS loan[7]. Nor is it known how many of the microfinance customers are currently active in the federations. A significant number of the 170 ultra-poor households surveyed have received benefits through the Union Council; others received participated in trainings co-funded by the RDRS Legal Project or were employed by *Terre des Hommes*. But none of these households has been able to obtain RDRS loans. As the chairman explains, none of them was listed during the PKSF survey because they were considered too poor to repay loans.

This opens an interesting perspective on extreme poverty and the organizations addressing it. If the chairman is correct then the federation has identified, and has advocated for, a group of ultra-poor that live in a blind spot of official programs. We will revert to this.

In fact, neither the federation nor the RDRS credit organizers see much of 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. A local RDRS credit worker whom we met in Thetrai knew nothing of the federation's work. An isolated incident was related in which an irate borrower had taken a credit worker's bicycle. RDRS requested the Federation to mediate; a posse of members visiting the borrower extracted it. But the days in which executive committee members used to collect defaulting loans for a commission are long over; and the Federation does not make loan recommendations. While the prospect of *khas*

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[6] 40 from the RDRS' own ultra-poor line, and 864 out of PKSF Programmed Initiatives for Monga Eradication (PRIME) funds (Source: RDRS Micro-finance Dept., Rangpur). A PKSF survey database holds 2,841 household records from Thetrai, presumably defined by high *Monga* vulnerability.

[7] Nath's interlocutors in Thetrai in May 2009 had a vague notion that perhaps ten percent of the federation members currently had received PRIME loans.

land allocation was a key incentive in the ultra-poor survey, loans were never a consideration.

Whether such mutual indifference is ultimately productive for poverty reduction is difficult to assess. Certainly, indifference can be efficient; it keeps coordination burdens light. To stay with the example of micro-credit, neither would the federation want to be seen as recommending some households for loans (assuming an implicit liability for these while being seen as *not* recommending many others), nor would RDRS want to complicate its quest for efficient loan operations with additional stakeholders.

On the downside, indifference may cause opportunities to be missed. 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 programs. This initiative gained BRAC not only an implementation advantage, but also reputational benefits in donor and government circles[8].

A two-tier system of ultra-poor support – slightly better-off, who qualify for loans, and the absolute bottom poor, for some of whom the federation ekes out benefits – would belie the mandates of poverty reduction. RDRS credit workers have generally not encouraged their borrowers to join federations, perhaps because they feared countervailing powers. On balance, indifference is likely to be the result of both different concerns and of different knowledge. None of the outside agencies that at times were helped by the federation in their data collections know the community as well as the volunteers do. Conversely even the best-connected federation leaders at most have a dim overview of the policies and mechanisms under which the outside agencies operate.

[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.

Positions in school management committees (602 federation members serving), market committees (447) as well as mosque, *madrasa* 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.

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[8] 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.

Figure 4: Civil society committee seats held by federation members

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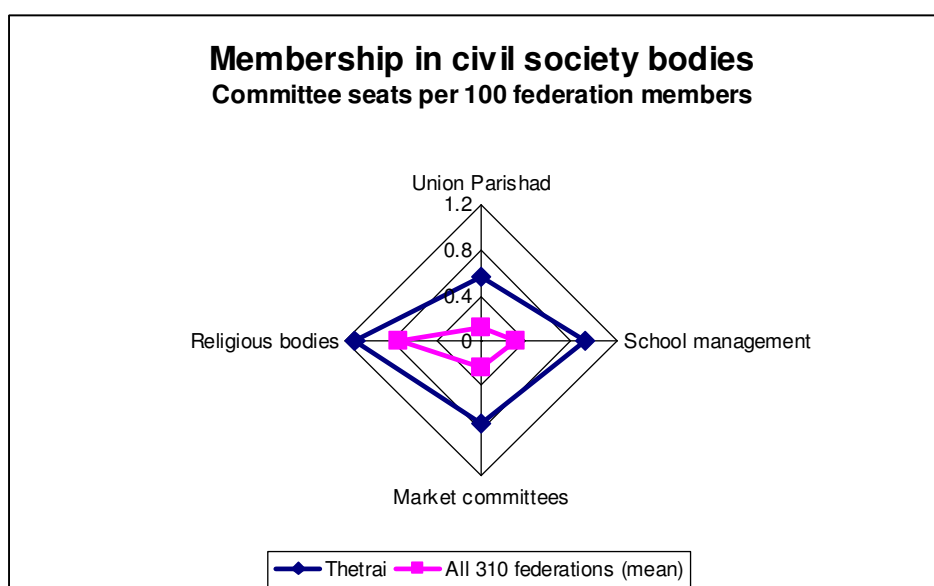
The Thetrai Federation has been well represented in local committees, holding 18 seats, or 3.3 for every 100 of its 539 members at the end of 2008. This rate is almost 2.5 times higher than the average federation's although, as the graph shows, the relative configuration over the four domains is similar.

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 the least that must be said is that it has slowed down member recruitment.

In Thetrai, even after repeated conversations, the story is not entirely clear. Prior to registration, membership 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,

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membership grew appreciably in many federations. 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. 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 could not be determined. The rationale given sounds Byzantine:

In the initial registration in 2004, the Department accepted only two names from each of the 35 member groups (plus one "president", a position that did not exist in real life). Thus, officially Thetrai existed as an association of 71. It took the federation until May 2008 to have an updated voter list recognized by the Department – of exactly 512 members, as requested four years earlier! In July, it conducted an executive committee election – among the 512 sanctioned members, of whom 252 were persons recruited individually after the registration, to replace old members lost from earlier RDRS-credentialed groups. In January 2009, the General Committee approved a list of 200 candidate members. Their list and a small supplement in June were submitted to the Department district office, but indications are that new members will be approved in 2010 only.

The larger issue is outreach towards the poorest vs. expansion in civil society positions. The Thetrai Federation has obviously done very well in the latter realm. It also, as this survey demonstrates, has taken pains to involve the poorest households in the Union. In fact, it has managed to identify, and create benefits for, a very lowly segment of that poor, one that was excluded even by the PKSF's official program for the "ultra-poor".

Yet, the shape of this involvement is ambiguous. During the three years from concept to practical use of survey data, the emphasis shifted from recruiting members to mobilizing benefits for the poorest. As such, the poorest were recognized and supported, but not included to be voting members of the federation. With a new list of 200 submitted to the Department, the pendulum may now be swinging back somewhat closer to enlargement.

Using survey information for rights advocacy

Emboldened by its success with the 170, 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. The executive committee in Thetrai discussed *khas* land issues once in 2004, concluding that the time was not ripe to become engaged. From elsewhere some of the success stories became more common knowledge throughout 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".

A list of *"khas"* land plot numbers, obtained from the Land Office in Ulipur. Lacking maps, the Thetrai Federation had to find the locations through informal interviews with land owners. It has matched each plot to one or several of the nearest ultra-poor residences.

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 Thetrai[9].

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 Commissioner and the Assistant DC, Revenue, pledging their support for an active role of the federations in the *khas* land application process[10].

However, pledges made in the district center do not automatically entail action at lower levels of administration. Thus, when the Thetrai Federation approached the Land Office in Ulipur for a list of *khas* land plots in the Union, the concerned sub-district officers at first were not forthcoming. It took an instruction from the Assistant

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[9] Personal communication, Md. Abdul Matin Shardar, 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 was occupying the plot illegally. The federation prevailed.

[10] Personal communication, Md. Jainal Abedin, Program Coordinator, RDRS Kurigram District, 2 March 2008. The sequence of workshops, representations and administrative instructions is not entirely clear. The list of land plots shown in the photo on the next page is dated 20 April 2008, four months after the Kurigram workshop.

DC in Kurigram to release the information. On 24 April 2008, finally, the federation obtained a list, with parcel numbers and sizes, of the *khas* land in Thetrai. The plots added up to a total area of 72.6 acres, about 4.5 percent of the 1,600 acres of arable land estimate in the Union[11].

Armed with a parcel list, but lacking maps, the federation figured out their locations informally. It matched each plot to one or several of the 1,778 ultra-poor families on its survey lists. When it re-enquired into the application procedures to have plots reallocated to the lawful target group, the Land Office referred to an instruction by the District Commissioner suspending all reallocation under caretaker government rules[12]. The federation doubted the veracity of this circular, but apparently did not want to challenge the Ulipur office before the elections on 29 December 2008"[13]. The elections ushered the Awami League into power; in March, the new government announced it would resume *khas* land distribution, initially on a small scale of twenty landless families in each sub-district (BNNA 2009).

But by this time, attention was redirected to the local arena; in January already, the Thetrai Federation endorsed in the Ulipur sub-district Council elections a candidate that it perceived as pro-poor, and who was then elected as its chairman. The chairman of the Thetrai federation offered an optimistic comment that aimed beyond land rights:

> *"Now we have our own people in the Upazila office. The new Upazila chairman was elected with direct support from us and the poor in the area. He is pro-poor. From now on, we will be able, through his support, to do a lot of things for the benefit of the poor."*
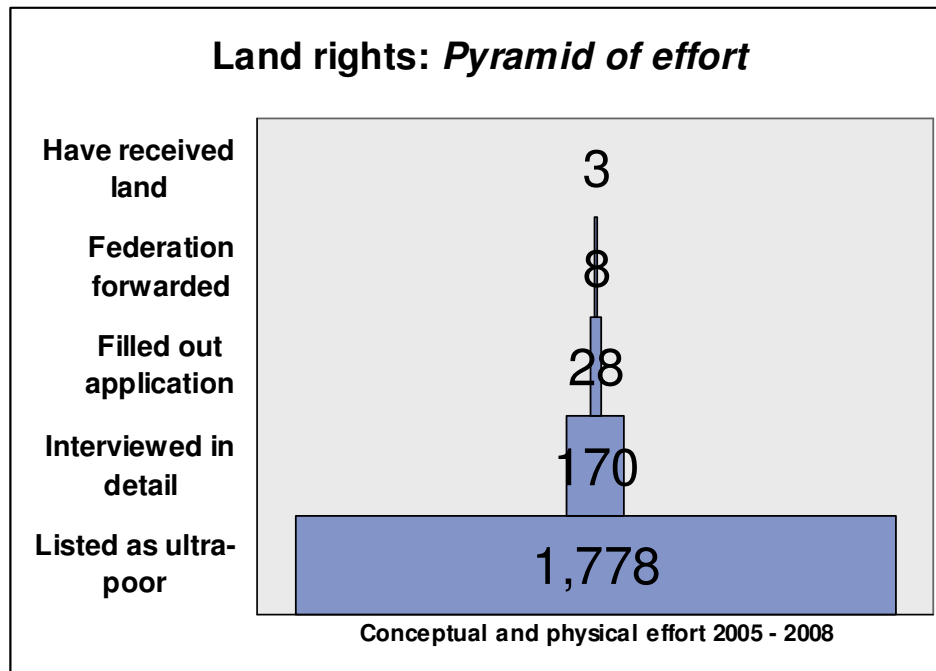
What practical changes the new politics will yield for the people on the ground remains to be seen. In the four years since the federation conceived of its poverty survey, the pay-out in terms of *khas* land actually obtained has been meager, as the following graph brings home.

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[11] In the minds of some in the federation, this amount is short of the real amount of land owned by the government. They feel they were given an incomplete list, concealing substantial amounts of *khas* land taken by powerful community members. Nationwide, a survey in 1998 estimated *khas* land to account for approx. three percent of all arable land (Piyal 2006), also stating the problem of under-reporting.

[12] Caretaker governments are a constitutional peculiarity of Bangladesh. After an elected government finishes its tenure, power is handed over to a non-party cabinet, led by a chief advisor, with the intent of overseeing free and fair elections of a new government. The latest such government, which held power from October 2006 to January 2009, prepared the elections of 29 December 2008, which ushered the Awami League into power.

[13] 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, ibd.). We have no information whether anyone from the Thetrai Federation attended; the chairman made no mention of the event.

Figure 5: Survey effort and land redistribution results 2005 - 2008

Land rights: *Pyramid of effort*

Have received land	3
Federation forwarded	8
Filled out application	28
Interviewed in detail	170
Listed as ultra-poor	1,778

Conceptual and physical effort 2005 - 2008

To these results have to be added the benefits that the federation secured for other households among the 170 surveyed. All in all, by the time of Nath's visit (May 2009), close to 120 very poor persons, most of them women, had received tailoring and embroidery training, social welfare (VGD) cards, and jobs with the NGO *Terre des Hommes*. In other words, and assuming some overlap in beneficiary counts, in a bottom tier of extreme poverty that is not usually reached by services such as micro-finance, about half of the families that the federation screened received something.

The diversity of those achievements, which dwarf the specific land rights record, are in tune with the multiple demands that the poverty environment makes on the federations. New opportunities arise (political connections in Ulipur), old ones close (RDRS has not carried the *khas* land campaign into 2009). You win some, you lose some. Thus, in July 2009, after a long effort, Thetrai finally obtained a copy of the *khas* land *map* (not just the plot list) from the Land Office[14]. Almost concurrently, in dealing with the Department of Social Welfare, it came to recognize that its new members would probably not be approved until 2010.

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.

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[14] This is from a telephone conversation that Nath had with the chairman in early August 2009. We have not seen the map.

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 initially 50, and later 120 more, households was detailed information collected.

Change of purpose

The information on the other 1,608 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 1,778 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. It was to this particular end that it regarded a survey of all poor households in the Union as a suitable, if unfamiliar means. 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 what a Geographical Information System expert would do with two separate layers: a nearest-neighbor matching.

Similarly, in the early stage of the ultra-poor survey, the federation took time with conceptual experimentation between different groups of disadvantaged persons. It began, somewhat insecurely it appears, by listing persons with disabilities. This remained a narrowly circumscribed initiative and subsequently was reorganized into two different data collections. The Department of Social Welfare grafted its local implementation of a government-led disability survey on the federation's early experience. Internally, the federation absorbed its search for persons with disabilities into its more widely defined ultra-poor survey.

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,

Figure 6: Timeline of surveys and land rights advocacy

Timeline 2004 - 2009:
Surveys and land rights advocacy

Obtains khas land map

Trains first 39 women with BNGOF money

Wins land for one more family

Swedish Crown Princess visits

Receives Bangladesh NGO Foundation grant

Forwards land applications, 8 out of 28 received

Registers with Dept. Social Welfare

Obtains khas land plot list

Debates land rights, decides not to engage

Land rights workshop in Kurigram

Sub-district council elections

Wins khas land for two families

Parliamentary elections

Jan-04   Jul-04   Jan-05   Jul-05   Jan-06   Jul-06   Jan-07   Jul-07   Jan-08   Jul-08   Jan-09   Jul-09   Jan-10

Debates survey of all poor households in Thetrai Union

Forms ultra-poor survey committee, prints 300 survey forms

Trains volunteer basic spreadsheets, enters some survey data

Other surveys: Land Office landlessness

Begins listing 700 poor households

Other surveys: PKSF monga baseline assessment

Lists another 1,078 households

Lists 43 persons w. disabilities in 2 wards

Surveys 50 out of 1,778 HH listed

Other surveys: DSW disability (312 persons)

Surveys another 120 ultra-poor HH

Note: For visual convenience, external and advocacy events are displayed above the x-axis. Survey-related ones are below.

has been put to use for the survey only incidentally and late – after RDRS arranged a training for volunteers of federations to which it had donated computers. 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 emigrated before they could receive any practical benefits from the federation's survey. The *khas* land, assuming some more will be allocated in a not too distant future, may no longer exist on dry land. The federation volunteers took eight months to visit and list

the 1,778. 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 in irregular intervals. The effort, implications, benefits, but also the potential for conflict, in involving itself in them remain unpredictable for a grassroots organization. In the changing legal and policy environment, the federation is recruiting members, albeit slowly (new members have to be approved by the Department of Social Welfare). Meanwhile it has spotted new opportunities to support livelihoods for some people, most of whom are not yet members.

On the way, the "ultra" was added to the "poor". The federation's "survey of the ultra-poor", although adopting a piece of current development lingo, in fact identified a group of very poor that other ultra-poverty reduction programs have tended to omit.

What knowledge?

Despite the presence of a computer on its premises (and a person who received some training to use it, even to enter survey data), the knowledge that the Thetrai Federation gathered through its survey (and through participation in other surveys) is not computerized knowledge. It is still essentially based on personal acquaintance with each of the households that were listed and surveyed, as well as on hand-written analysis. The federation vouches for those that it recommends to government agencies and to NGOs. The survey forms are conceived of as documents to attest need and worthiness. The knowledge so gathered is knowledge typical of a society largely built on interactional concepts (Luhmann 1997: 812-826). Trust in persons, frequent mutual presence (or at least the possibility to meet at short notice), recognition of good character and morals are key elements.

At the same time, the ultra-poor survey was undertaken because the federation itself realized that the informality of personal acquaintance with many of the poor was not enough. No one in the federation could claim a full overview of the poor in a 25,000-population community, or even an overview of what other leaders and volunteers knew of them. At some point of accumulating more knowledge about the poor, the federation passed a cusp between individual and institutional knowledge (Hardin 2009: 122). The survey was chosen as the tool to overcome the limitations of individuals in knowledge acquisition. But the transition did not go very far. The additional knowledge remained couched most of it in lists and cases, and in small measure only was transformed into summaries and statistics. Where this has happened, recourse to personal acquaintance is sometimes seen necessary for credibility. The chairman might say: *"I know personally that among the 80 girls that our textile project employed in 2003, 12 are working in small local garment factories, 22 have moved to Dhaka (where some work in textile factories), 20 are not currently employed, and the rest are making hats for outside merchants"*[15]. One may characterize the result of the ultra-poor survey as oscillating between individual and institutional knowledge.

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[15] Conversation with Nath, May 2009.

During one of our conversations with executive committee members in May 2009, Mrs. Fatema Begum, a completely landless widow, visited to turn in her application for *khas* land. While the persons in the room may have arranged themselves ceremonially for the photo, it captures a basic relationship between the applicant and the federation leaders. The latter are seated, with the chairman signing the document, and the widow standing deferentially in front. The power differential results from, among other things, the certification function that the federation fulfils for the poor in their dealings with government and other service providers. Conversely, the poor may accept the relationship because they observe that, through the federation, targeted benefits actually reach them. It is *their* federation.

There is, of course, overlap with the informational work of the outside world. In terms of functions that knowledge acquired through surveys renders to other agencies and their programs, one may think first of all of micro-targeting (Galasso and Ravallion 2005). The federation helps to translate abstract beneficiary definitions into local case determinations, for which it uses its knowledge and personal contacts. We also mentioned the credentialing function. Whether the federation could do much more, is doubtful. While it helps to collect data in surveys designed and led by others, it does not contribute to their analysis. For example, the chairman was adamant that the count of all persons with disabilities in Thetrai was made by the Department of Social Welfare, not by federation volunteers. It is unlikely that the federation would confront agencies with coverage or leakage statistics on targeted programs (with the possible exception perhaps of the local Union Council). Three factors would discourage this kind of activist posture: scant analytic capacity, limited power vis-à-vis outside agencies, and fear that debate on who was included or excluded in a program might trigger local conflict.

[Sidebar:] What do other federations survey?

RDRS paid a significant number of federations a small subsidy to defray the cost of information collection in connection with its *khas* land advocacy in 2007 and 2008. We have not been able to find out how much activism the recipients – and also federations not receiving this subsidy – have developed. Nath visited two neighboring federations near Thetrai and also received some anecdotal information on others. These observations concur to the point that Thetrai is an outlier in its deliberate acquisition of knowledge on the local poor and, in land rights advocacy, of administrative information.

- The Tabakpur Federation collected a list of *khas* land parcel from the Land Office, but apparently has done nothing so far to use this information. By contrast, Ghorialdanga in Rajarhat Upazela exemplifies a federation with strong land rights activism. It encouraged landless household to submit applications for a standard 10-decimal allocation of *khas* land, but did not conduct a household survey. As a result, when 153 applications were turned in, the federation was able to certify and forward 11 only, and by May 2009 none had been entertained. RDRS observers explained that with the poor clerical skills of federation leaders.

- Both the Takakpur and Gunaigacch Federations conducted a small survey required by project grants. Volunteers in Tabakpur, one of the grantees of the Bangladesh NGO Foundation's "Indigenous poultry rearing project", filled out a one-page checklist on household demographics and animal holdings in potential end users, but were unable to analyze the data so collected. Gunaigacch was running a non-formal primary school and, to qualify for a supporting grant, conducted a survey of school drop-outs in five villages. We have no specifics on how the data was used. Of note, in both cases, the donors left it to the federations to design the survey tools.

- In both Tabakpur and Gunaigacch, we were shown inventories of community assets such as roads, canals, ponds, schools, madrassas, mosques, temples. Such documents, often the remnants of NGO-led participatory mapping exercises, are common in grassroots associations. They may go hand in hand with a conception of knowledge that represents the world as an almanac collection of facts worth knowing, and in principle capable of being complete enumeration.

While the almanac form is compatible with claims to assets, representation or particular expertise, it may be indicative also of a dearth of more abstract information concepts. This is probably true across virtually all of the RDRS federations: Years of accounting training as well as the spread of mobile phones and lately computers have increased the information processing capacities, but not the analytic skills that one might expect to see growing apace with them. Thetrai is an exception in deliberate acquisition, not in analysis skills.

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 almost 1,800 households listed are a considerable segment of the local community, probably more than a quarter of all[16]. By comparison, the 170 surveyed and the 100 or so that have benefited are much smaller numbers. Between those magnitudes stood the 512 members, a number that stagnated for years because of bureaucratic strictures. However, while much has been made of distributing land to a tiny number of ultra-poor, we had to painstakingly tease out the fact that fewer than 20 of the 170 were able to join the federation. Given the insurance and protection that federations afford, particularly to women (Benini 2006), why is this not a much talked-about issue? Where is the fight for the right to admit new members, in other words, for the right of the poor to associate freely? The poor have power in numbers; limiting membership 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. This may happen to Thetrai and to other federations if the effort to obtain *khas* land 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.

If we can take the chairman by his word, the federation passes this test somehow. East and West bank communities share population, registered voters, and arable land roughly in 3 to 2 proportion. This holds exactly for the distribution of the five currently pending *khas* land applications (he said nothing about the three already accomplished cases!). Although the totals differ slightly from those given in other conversations, 10 *Terre des Hommes* jobs were split 6 to 4, and 80 textile training slots 58 to 22. If we take into account what geographers call friction (which the federation's own ferry helps to reduce!), these spatial statistics are not indicative of a clientelist pattern. In fact, it is notable that the federation leaders should have off-the-top information as specific as that at all. Thus, at this level, numbers and rights seem to be in harmony.

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[16] Assuming 6,000 households in the Union. See footnote on page 24.

[Sidebar:] Which literatures speak to this case?

This study 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 interviews 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://journal.km4dev.org/index.php/km4dj, soon moving to http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/19474199.asp) 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 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 federation has produced not only technical knowledge ("if you want *khas* land redistributed, procure a plot list – and this is the list for Thetrai"), but also, in the words of other researchers (e.g., Scholtes 2009), "moral knowledge". It deliberately collected information on the poorest and, for some of them, packaged it into a type of knowledge that it was able to use to their benefit. It did so, as the chairman said, *"because this is what we are here for."*

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 at the center of a flexible network – and as well informed about it as an association of poor people can be.

Initiatives like the ultra-poor survey in Thetrai may be rare – we do not know how many have sprouted or even flourished among the organizations of the poor. 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.

Methodological notes

As stressed earlier, this is an opportunistic piece, prompted by an unexpected report from RDRS, the sponsor of the Thetrai Federation. Both of us had been to Thetrai before, Benini in conjunction with his re-study of 260 federations (Benini 2006), Nath four times while conducting program audits in Kurigram District (Nath 2008). However, the intention to write this case study on a local association managing knowledge was formed after the fact. During Benini's visit in November 2008, both the nature of what was billed as the federation's "ultra-poor survey" and the extent to which it had participated in data collections for other agencies came as a surprise.

Although the executive members present supplied a rich narrative of their survey on the spot, inconsistencies and gaps were forbidding. Also, on the same day, teams of the Rangpur-based North Bengal Institute, an RDRS research outfit, conducted life history interviews in several hamlets of Thetrai, primarily in a microfinance perspective. The story of Mrs. Kopiron seemed to illustrate the disaster-shaken lives of poor people in this Union so well that we adopted it for this study. However, information linking her household to the federation and to its survey was not initially collected.

As a result, Nath was commissioned to re-visit Kopiron, the Thetrai Federation and RDRS staff working in the social empowerment line. His initial brief was one of fact-checking. By the time he made it to the area (May 2009), so much had advanced in the survey and the land rights advocacy that one should rather speak of an updating mission. Nath also made an effort to establish the relationships between the various past survey involvements with greater clarity. His conversations in Thetrai added another perspective, one of creating *moral* knowledge, rooted in this federation's concern for the extremely poor, regardless of whether they were members or not, and in actionable data and documents to fetch them benefits and opportunities.

Given the history of our contacts and conversations, the methodological limitations leap to the eye. First, while this is a case study of (an activity of) an RDRS Federation, it is everything but representative. It is an outlier; to the best of our knowledge, none of the other 330+ federations comes even close to the resolve, diversity of information bodies, and their creative use that we have observed in Thetrai. Neither have we found any meaningful comparison cases in the literature of poor people's associations.

Second, our dependence on a small number of key informants, notably Mr. Abdur Rashid, the Thetrai Federation's long-serving chairman, is excessive. We have had to probe into retrospective re-interpretations (such as when the concept of the ultra-poor survey was traced back to land rights advocacy). Not all of the initial gaps in the narrative were closed in subsequent conversations (the long waiting period between initial internal debates and the first practical steps remains puzzling). We have not analyzed the survey data (it existed on paper only), let alone verified the benefits that supposedly have accrued to over a hundred of the surveyed households. Neither have we had a chance to listen to any one in the outside agencies that have sought help from this federation in surveys or survey-like data collection, or which owned some important data that they initially were not willing to share with the federation (notably the Land Office).

But overall, the story has enough internal coherence to be compelling. It has a beginning, although half-hidden in the fog of history: the end of RDRS' regulated supply of member groups to the federations, and the felt need to recruit more members to be influential in the local arena. The story has a plot that the main protagonist drives, and that other players modify: the determination to identify potential new members through the federation's own survey, and a shift of goads when RDRS encourages land rights advocacy. It has an ending, if temporary, when the federation, in a changed political landscape, obtains the official cadastral map. We have used the narrative form as much as possible, in the ethnographic present in which we re-live the November 2008 meeting and its starkly contrasting survey concepts, and also in the life history of one of the very poor persons surviving under the inquisitive eyes of the Thetrai Federation – the tough, but ultimately redeeming story of Kopiron.

But while the federation takes pride in its ultra-poor survey, this is not what defines its identity. The conversation in November 2008 was largely preoccupied with clarifying survey concepts; in talking with Nath in May 2009, the executive members retraced a longer and wider story, one that emphasized the mutual growth of capacity to serve and of recognition by the community. The beauty is in the coherence that the account of the survey achieves with the larger identity claims of the federation[17].

The hardest case to make is less methodological than substantive: the case for knowledge management. This concept is foreign in Thetrai and even in RDRS; it exists only as an interpretation that external observers make of certain activities of this federation. We base our claim on these attributes: intent – the federation wanted to know and deliberately decided courses of action; information linkage – information from different sources (survey, land office records) was merged to inform new decisions (strategy to advance with *khas* land demands); organization (division of labor; printed forms).

Critics can point out that weaknesses in analysis, shifting goals, and lack of connections with the information work of other federations undermine the image of the Thetrai Federation as a knowledge-managing organization of the poor. These objections are factually correct. However, they do not alter the fundamentals. The federation leaders, in 2005, wanted to know who the poor were, with a degree of detail and confidence beyond the individual knowledge of any one of them. To obtain such knowledge, they initiated and coordinated activities that we have not seen coalesce anywhere else in the world of RDRS federations. Whatever they know now, they had to manage the process largely on their own wits.

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[17] This is in line with the theory of narrative knowing. Coherence between episode and story is achieved at three levels: *"local, in which the succession of statements is connected to prior statements by syntactic, temporal or causal relations; global, in which the statements cohere with the overall theme or intent of the story; and themal, in which general culture themes or values are expressed"* (Polkinghorne 1988: 165). Examples from this story could be: "After we listed 1,700 households, we interviewed 170 more closely" (local), "Because we needed more members, we considered a survey of all poor households" (global), and "We connected the poorest we found to services and benefits because this is why we have a federation" (themal).

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Figure 7: An aerial view of the Teesta river basin near Thetrai
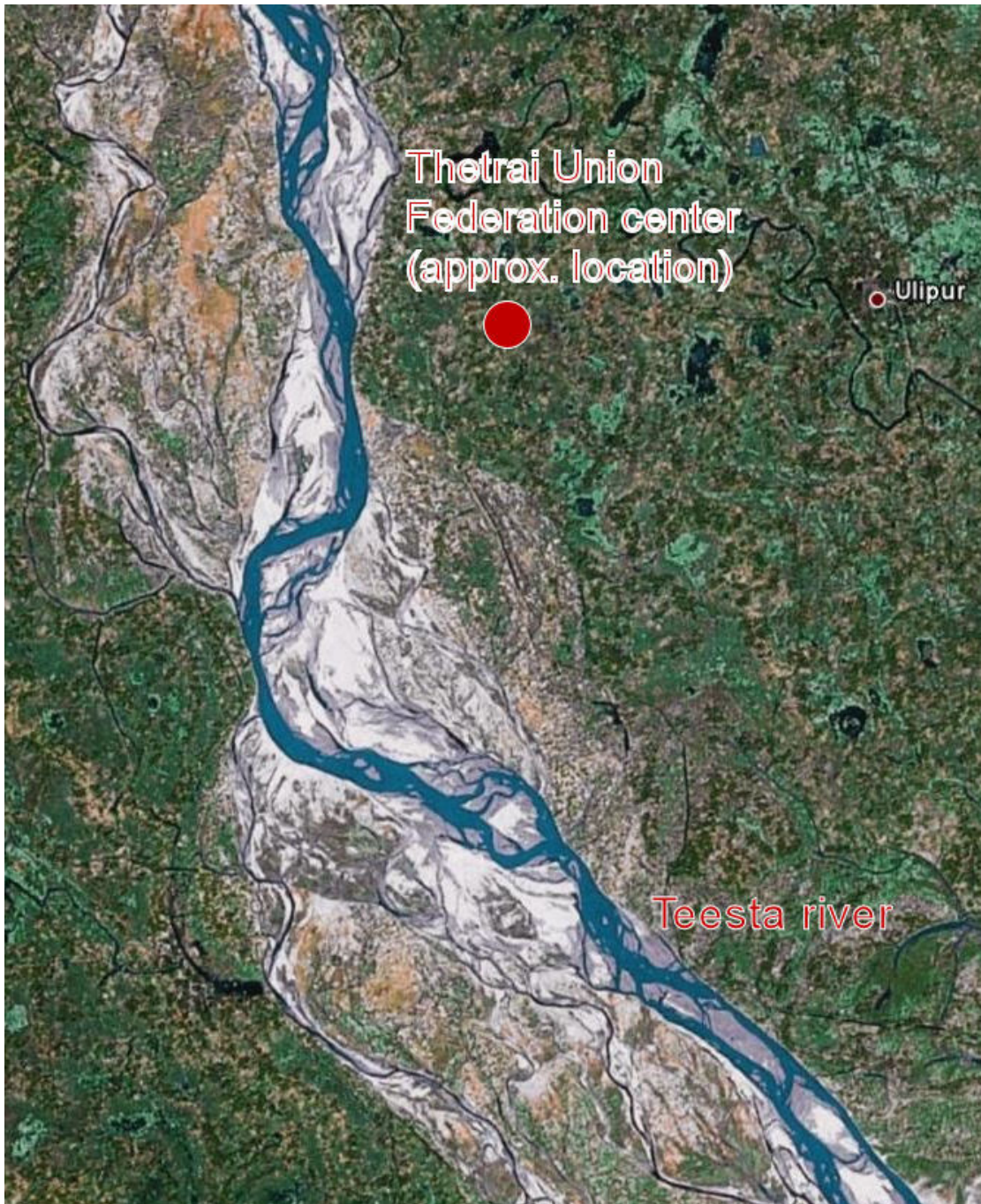
A Google Earth aerial view of the Teesta river area near Thetrai. Ulipur, the sub-district center is about 8 km east of the river, as the crow flies.

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 Room ....CI 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   Checked by   Signature of Executive Director

Name:..................................   Name:..................................   Name:....................................

Date:..................................   Date:..................................   Date:.....................................

Notes

About the authors

Aldo Benini has a dual career in rural development, with a focus on Bangladesh and another on organizations of the poor, and in humanitarian action. In the latter capacity, he has worked for the International Committee of the Red Cross and for the Global Landmine Survey. He has a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Bielefeld, Germany, based on field research in community development in West Africa.

Between 1983 and 1986, Benini was program coordinator of RDRS Bangladesh, the NGO that founded and supported the over 300 grassroots organizations known as RDRS Federations, of which the Thetrai Federation is one. Since 1996, he has assisted RDRS in various advisory capacities.

Benini is a citizen of Switzerland and an independent researcher based in Washington DC.

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