

A MONITORING SYSTEM FOR NUMEROUS LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS OF POOR PEOPLE: A CASE FROM BANGLADESH

Aldo Benini
Independent Researcher
abenini@starpower.net

ABSTRACT

This is a case study of the monitoring system that a rural development NGO has been using for over ten years to track the progress of a large number of commune-level organizations of the poor. "RDRS Bangladesh", the NGO supporting 260 federations of neighborhood groups, has been the intermediary in an aid chain that mobilized considerable funding for social organization in the northwestern region of the country. It has used a highly standardized monitoring tool to demonstrate good project management as well as for internal decision-making. This bureaucratically administered system co-existed for many years side by side with participatory arrangements of federation governance.

There does not seem to be much accessible research on monitoring systems suitable for the collaboration between intermediary NGOs and numerous grassroots organizations with their own internal complexity and diversity. Around this case study, I briefly review the importance of collective organizations of the poor, and then give a more detailed account of the structure and performance of these 260 federations. In assessing this experience I believe that neither the monitoring nor the participation literatures are as yet adequate to guide research into the monitoring of such large and complex collaborations. The concept of systems of mutual observation in which the supporting NGO and the participant local organizations observe each other continuously, although by different means, may be more appropriate.

The challenge is to encourage interpenetration between the two sides for greater validity and innovation while at the same time maintaining simplicity and coherence. Our specific case suggests, perhaps counter intuitively, that less data should be collected so that more time and energy are left to analyze it and to disseminate findings into the organizations of the poor. More generally, this article is written as an invitation for researchers and practitioners to join in the effort to strengthen the information management support for social movements of the poor.

Keywords: Program Monitoring, Organizations of the Poor, Bangladesh, Participation, NGO

1. INTRODUCTION

This article investigates the monitoring system created to follow a large-scale experiment in organizing poor people. Interest in this subject is justified by two considerations. Recent years have seen an increasing volume of research into the efficacy of collective organizations of poor people (Crowley et al. 2005). Most of the empirical studies, however, look at individual organizations or at relatively small samples thereof. As such, they are free from the challenges that larger populations of poor people's organizations present, particularly to other entities such as development NGOs that need to keep track of the progress of these organizations in the course of their normal work, i.e. without large research budgets.



Members of the Thanahat Union Federation, Kurigram District, line up to cast their ballots in the executive committee election in February 2006. In the Bangladesh context, the number of women elected to the nine-seat governing body of these poor people's organizations has been a valid and reliable indicator of female empowerment, which the supporting NGO has continuously tracked as part of its federation monitoring system. - Photo by the author.

Figure 1: Election Day in a Union Federation

Second, over time, poor people's organizations each develop their own internal complexity, and between them, their diversity will grow. The conceptual, data management, and analysis-for-policy challenges that monitoring systems for large numbers of such organizations must overcome are significant. Moreover, both the organizations of the poor and the entities monitoring them may be part of the same aid chain (Bornstein 2001; Bebbington 2005), whose competing rationalities impinge on the ways the latter observe the former (Epstein and Gang 2005). Good validity and reliability of the monitoring information cannot be taken for granted.

On the other hand, the character of formal organizations may mitigate the monitoring challenge in its own ways. As members of aid chains, organizations of the poor will observe other members, particularly government departments or NGOs with which they regularly interact through support programs. These observations will not be random, but will develop their own systems of categories, updating and exchange. Some of them will be recorded such as in financial accounts, others may be informal, yet systematic such as from conversations in frequent training programs. Some of the category systems that the organizations of the poor develop and utilize and the accounts that they offer of their members' knowledge may facilitate the monitoring task to a degree that communications from less formally organized program participants may never accomplish. It may then be more appropriate to talk of systems of mutual observation (Luhmann 1995; Dittrich et al. 2006) rather than of one-way monitoring.

2. THEORETICAL RESOURCES

In this basic situation, characterized by formalized grassroots organizations, a larger than usual number of them supported by one NGO, which also carries out the progress monitoring, and by an aid chain of several levels, it is not obvious which of the social science literatures that speak to program monitoring may be the most pertinent. Several come to mind and need to be reviewed, at least briefly, and novel syntheses may be needed to inspire the theoretical and practical way forward:

- Neoinstitutional perspectives, centered on principal-agent problems and the cost of monitoring
- Participatory development as a normative and pragmatic approach to strengthen the voice of the poor, and its discontents over cost and cooptation
- Organizational learning alternatives to numerically focused monitoring
- Aid effectiveness and the demonstration of impacts in an econometric framework

The necessity, cost and effectiveness of monitoring is a key preoccupation in the neoinstitutional school of economics, rooted in transaction cost concepts and the assumption that one of the relationships that rational actors optimize is between the uncertainty of contract fulfillment and the cost of monitoring agents and environments (Swedberg 2003: 79-85 and 98-102 for the intellectual pedigree). In the rural development field, these perspectives have been carried over to common-pool resource situations (Agrawal and Goyal 2001; Ostrom 2005) such as in communal forest management. They appear fertile also in research settings where there are substantial property rights at stake, or where relationships between partners are formalized in contracts that remain vulnerable to exploitation, or where massive information asymmetries in vital informal arrangements create similar risks. Agarwal, for instance, developed a formal game-theoretic model elucidating the relationship between nomadic pastoralists and their leaders in India, and the role of monitoring and sanctioning leader behavior (Agrawal 1997).

However, the basic principal-agent constellation applies to development NGOs and grassroots associations incompletely and in degrees that vary over time and across collaboration areas. These partners may or may not hold assets in common, may struggle for access to, and defend, common-pool resources of very variable importance, and may be tethered together in nets of mutual incentives without the necessity of (or even with a clear aversion to) formal contracts or overlapping membership. Monitoring may, as we will see in this case study, be done more for the benefit of internal work planning and reporting to third parties and less for motivating desired behavior on the part of the associations monitored. The neo-institutional framework, therefore, may be most useful as a reminder that monitoring comes at a cost, and the ensuing limits to monitoring exercise pressures towards franchise-like standardization of the supported associations, without creating enforceable contracts (Lafontaine 2006).

From a very different angle, and with a positive premise of “agency” that emphasizes the resourcefulness, valid knowledge and cultural struggles of local participants, the literature on participatory development offers insights into the ability of poor communities to affect the information management side of development programs (Alsop and Heinsohn 2005; Chambers 2005). However, most explicit applications to monitoring are comprised of relatively few participants or are of short duration (one-time “assessments” rather than periodic “monitoring”). I have found very little accessible research on monitoring large numbers of organizations of the poor affiliated with a supporting entity. Morgan (1999: 28)

stresses that capacity building programs “need to be supplemented by much greater attention to process consultation, piloting, phasing, incremental planning, learning, reflection, experimentation and adaptation. This, in turn, implies different kinds of monitoring, without elaborating. Bennett et al. (2004) describe an experiment in Mongolia that relayed information collected with “community driven tools” to 1.2 million people, but primarily to rural businesses among them rather than to organizations of the poor.

In recent years, there has been an ideological backlash against participatory development (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Williams 2004), motivated by recurrent observations that the poorest do not have the social capital prerequisites to be effective association members (Cleaver 2005), that participation of the poor is less voluntary than self-interested NGOs advertise, that meetings and other events that association members must attend carry opportunity costs and personal risks, and that participatory programs may result in co-optation into sheltered decision mechanisms of a few members at the expense of most others (Dichter 1992). Some of these criticisms seem overwrought, but they usefully extend the monitoring perspective to issues of holding association leaders (and program staff) accountable to the constituencies for whom they claim to work, and touch on NGO governance issues on which the traditional program monitoring literature has largely been silent (Brett 1993).

A variant of this criticism takes aim at the preponderance of numeric concepts in program monitoring and its cost, in terms of lost learning opportunities, at all levels of the aid chain. The pioneer of an alternative, story-based, monitoring system initially tried out in a Bangladeshi development NGO, Davies (1997; 1998; Davies and Dart 2005) has taken the debate far beyond the “Tyranny of Numbers” charge (Boyle 2000). From an evolutionary and organizational learning framework, he argues that numeric indicator-based systems impair learning by focusing on the typical, retrospective and trivial; while stories expand the edges of novelty, serendipity and collective exploration. Practically, his work demonstrated how the fundamental evolutionary scheme of variation, selection and retention itself can be marshaled between the NGO and its program participants for the benefit of meaningful program reporting in the flow of “most important change” stories. Conceptually, story-based monitoring promises a greater fit with the reality of heterogeneous epistemologies across donor agency – national NGO – local community boundaries and among different professionals collaborating in multi-sectoral programs (Maruyama 2004; Noe et al. 2005)¹.

However, as the ups and downs of this experiment in its first test-bed NGO (Sarker and Bloem 1996; Davies 2007) have driven home, the aid business, as it exists, may not be receptive to monitoring systems that stray too far from the normative “logical framework” formats with their, largely numeric, “objectively verifiable indicators” (Bakewell and Garbutt 2005). Two more objections arise to the greater pertinence of story-based monitoring in the context of numerous NGO-supported grassroots associations. First, stories are told chiefly by individuals even though ultimately many persons may join hands and voices in elaborating and transmitting them. Stories about organizations and the struggles of poor people within them certainly are numerous and can be meaningful in a monitoring context, but the “life change” format elicits personal biographies rather than accounts of associational life. Second, despite the infiltration of NGO culture with an amount of mixed-methodology lingo (“triangulation”, etc.), few rural development NGOs have the intellectual resources, or management support, to engage in sustained qualitative research. Rather, they use stories

¹ An anonymous reviewer suggested to explore also potentially related phenomenological approaches from the evaluation field, such as the work of Introna and Whittaker (2002), who applied them to information system management. However, the evaluation literature is beyond the scope of this article.

primarily for illustrative and public relations purposes, within carefully honed larger scripts that are popular with stake-holders, notably donors. Ahmed (2002) made a similar point with regards to those stories that are elaborated into drama scripts and performed by “folk theater” troupes under Bangladesh NGO auspices.

The – ultimately unhelpful – selectivity of NGO monitoring, whether number or story-driven, extractive or participatory, is one of the implicit targets of efforts to demonstrate aid impact in poverty reduction. Pressures to demonstrate true impact have been mounting on donor agencies, and they are rapidly being passed on to grantee NGOs. Conceptually, NGO monitoring systems have been strong at output reporting and have not been designed to provide robust estimates of program effects as distinct from confounding selection or context effects, a subtlety left to external evaluation specialists. Health programs may be the exception to the rule, with a tradition of internalizing epidemiological knowledge and concerns also into monitoring formats. Among other sectoral programs, the discipline of impact measurement is newer. In Bangladesh, the micro-finance revolution has facilitated greater adoption of econometric approaches to NGO program evaluations, which in turn may have heightened an awareness of the importance of selection effects (e.g. the excluded “ultra-poor”) for both program design and impact evaluation beyond this particular program type.

The econometric and epidemiological literatures – so vast that they defy even highlight referencing in this article – have several limitations for the subject at hand. While epidemiology ties in with ongoing surveillance (and thus almost naturally with monitoring in NGO health programs), econometrics, in the day-to-day business, consorts more readily with program evaluation than with monitoring. Practically, much of the needed data is collected through dedicated sample surveys, in which NGO monitoring units play limited roles such as for interviewer manpower and in determining sampling frames. The substantive theories used in micro-level impact research are most elaborated on the household, and the largest surveys are part of long-running international research programs such as the World Bank and UNDP-led Living Standards Measurement Surveys that replicate the household level as the primary methodological focus (Grosh and Glewwe 2000), with only a slowly growing supplement of community attributes taken into account.

This may be changing. Recently, Galasso and Yao (2006) have demonstrated how monitoring data on large-scale programs can be used to estimate program effects, but their focus is on geographically delimited sites, not on formalized organizations. Yet many of the more sophisticated impact studies continue to take place in highly stratified expertise systems, in which donor agencies, large NGOs and academia dominate design and analysis (Lera St. Clair 2004), with smaller NGOs lower down in the food chain at best given humble roles in logistics support and data collection. Impact research as a hierarchical social system and the grassroots organizations of the poor are separated by cultural gaps and organizational discontinuities that the monitoring systems of supporting NGOs will not easily straddle.

To my knowledge, there has been very little, if any, overlap between econometrically guided impact studies, NGO monitoring systems and grassroots associations, although it is plausible that some such studies exist in the fields of rural cooperatives, irrigation associations and micro-finance programs that rely on tiered group liability contracts. Similarly, administratively more developed social movement organizations may employ functional equivalents to NGO monitoring systems although motivation and terminology may be different. For instance, Agrawal (2005), in a study of Indian forest communities with a long history of resistance to government intervention, retraces the spontaneous evolution of locally owned monitoring systems known as “forest committees”. Although his methods are ethnographic, his use of game-theoretic concepts and correlations between monitoring types

and community attributes ultimately make this line of research amenable to econometric modeling.

3. CASE STUDY MOTIVATION, METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The purpose of this article is to narrow the research gap on this particular variety of information management in developing countries. I give a detailed account of the scope and evolution of a monitoring system tailored to follow a large number of poor people's organizations. I highlight some of its challenges and accomplishments, emphasizing those that may recur in other contexts of NGOs working with numerous organizations of the poor².

The material that I employ is from an in-depth study of 260 local associations in Bangladesh (Benini 2006). These organizations, locally known as "RDRS Federations" (after the supporting NGO) or "Union Federations" (referring to "Unions", local government entities), have carved out a space in civil society for the poor in a large poverty belt in the northwest of the country. Their 130,000 members are active in every rural commune of their region and are increasingly interacting at higher administrative tiers. Most of these organizations were founded between 1987 and 1993 and thus have been in operation for more than ten years.

I had been the RDRS program coordinator 1983 – 1986, before any of the federations existed. I came to know about them through private contacts in the mid-nineties and became convinced that their growth should be documented in a social-movement perspective, and that their contiguity and complete coverage of an extreme poverty area made for an attractive research opportunity. Together with my wife, who, as an emergency manager, was particularly interested in RDRS's work with flood-prone Brahmaputra river communities and in their federations, I conducted a first detailed study in 1997 (Benini et al. 1997).

As a result, RDRS invited me to become one of its "strategic advisors", a largely volunteer position with considerable freedom to define my own research agenda. During eleven 2 – 5 week stays in the northwestern working area of RDRS that I managed between the publication of the two federation studies, I visited an unrecorded number of federations and met with some of the field staff working directly with them. My main exposure, however, was through repeated data management workshops that I taught at the RDRS coordination office in Rangpur, and in which staff members from the federation support unit with monitoring and reporting briefs would participate. While my visits were not frequent enough to contribute more than marginally to federation support policies, those workshops gave me access to the regularly updated monitoring data (some of the quarterly spreadsheets were used also as training data). Also, with the involvement of monitoring staff from other RDRS departments, I was able to create an integrated data set merging the data used in the 1997 study with monitoring data from subsequent years as well as with some external data (population census, poverty estimates, federation audits by an independent firm).

² By contrast, I do not elaborate on definitional issues of monitoring systems. A classic text of program evaluation (Rossi et al. 1998: 192) defines monitoring as *"the systematic documentation of key aspects of program performance that are indicative of whether the program is functioning as intended or according to some appropriate standard. It generally involves program performance in the domain of service utilization, program organization, and/or outcomes. [...] In addition to these primary domains, program monitoring may include information about resource expenditures that bear on whether the benefits of a program justify its cost. Monitoring also may include an assessment of whether program activities comply with legal and regulatory requirements."*

After 2000, I started noticing a renewed interest among rural development researchers in membership-based associations of the poor (see Section 4 below), of which the RDRS Federations are a variety. By autumn 2005, the scope of the database was significantly enriched with the addition of data on the success of federation candidates in local council elections and on the audited financial positions of all 260 federations. By then, eight years had passed since the first study; from outside RDRS, small-area poverty estimates and 2001 population census data had also become available. This created an opportunity for a re-study focusing on the sustainability of such associations operating within the social ecology of the northwestern poverty region and with the support of an NGO subject to donor market and aid chain dynamics. The theoretical framework and the empirical results from this unique “natural laboratory” situation are presented in a book-length report (Benini 2006), which readers interested in formal organizations of the poor are invited to consult.

My motivation to write this article was started during the statistical analysis in 2005 and 2006. In reviewing possible models, I was distressed to find out that it was not possible to work with time-series approaches. Apart from a computer crash in the Rangpur office that entailed the loss of the year 2000 federation monitoring data, I noticed that definitions of key variables had been changed over time. For example, the apparently simple question “How many members do the federations have?” had no straightforward answer; member counts over the years were not directly comparable. This was a problem known in 1997 already; but I had ignored how much it had become more serious in subsequent years for defining and tracking active membership (as opposed to defunct or dormant member groups).

There were two consequences of this realization. First, while the reliability and completeness of the data generally were satisfactory (moreover, because the data resulted from full enumerations, sampling variance was never an issue), problems of validity became much more important (and fascinating). What did the variables for which the monitors supplied regularly updated values actually express about the federations?

Second, the organizational dynamics in which the monitoring system was embedded became a key prerequisite for understanding the limits of the analytical potential that the data so produced offered. This dictates the sequence in which this article proceeds. I will first discuss theoretical elements, then the organizational context of the monitoring system in point, including the federations themselves, and finally, against this backdrop, problems of data quality.

For the 2006 study, I chiefly used monitoring data that RDRS collected from its 260 federations on a quarterly basis between 1997 and 2005, as well as federation audit report data for the audit year 2004-05. This data had been created by support staff, respectively by external auditors working with the federation committees, and had been transferred to spreadsheets by the federation support unit staff in Rangpur. In addition, interviews with RDRS staff and federation members and case study-writing workshops were conducted, mostly in spring 2006 by two research assistants, some by me over several visits. Readers who wish a more detailed description and discussion of this information than is feasible in this article will find it in Benini (2006, *op.cit.*: 148 – 159), together with the descriptive statistics of a sample quarterly monitoring report. The statistical models used are documented *ibid.*, 159-184.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: Sections 4 and 5 recapitulate the relevance for organizations of the poor within poverty reduction strategies in general as well as some of the basic parameters of the NGO sector in Bangladesh. Section 6 offers a nutshell description of the Bangladeshi NGO that has founded and supported the 260 local organizations in focus. This is followed in Sections 7 and 8 by a detailed explanation of their

structure and achievements and some reflections on their likely long-term viability; hurried readers may want to skip these sections. Section 9 describes the RDRS Federation monitoring system, first in a historical and organizational perspective (9.1.), then regarding its contribution to decision support (9.2. and 9.3). Section 9.4 speaks further to participatory tools; Section 9.5 turns tables around by asking how the federations monitor RDRS. Section 10 discusses issues of relevance and validity in this data. Section 11 discusses how some of the findings might be generalized.

I will use lower-case spelling of “federations” for the generic organizational term, and will capitalize the “RDRS Federations”.

4. THE IMPORTANCE OF ORGANIZATIONS OF THE POOR

The federations of poor people that are the focus of this study are collections of neighborhood groups that a mid-sized rural development NGO in Bangladesh has been forming and supporting for over 25 years. As mentioned earlier, there are currently 260 such federations, each active in one local commune – or “Union” in the country’s administrative denomination - with a combined membership of 130,000 households and with a contiguous working area in the northwest.

Federations of the poor have been noticed, aided and investigated in numerous contexts, rural and urban, in Bangladesh and other countries, under this and other, unrelated names. The basic structure of the RDRS Federations – neighborhood groups with 15 – 25 members as primary building blocks, formalized central organs with committees, constitution and by-laws, annual work plans, and some physical infrastructure – is by no means universal. For example, in natural resource management contexts, entire village communities or watershed areas may figure as the basic units to be federated. I would be hard pressed to draw up a list of the most important dimensions in which federations of the poor vary their organizational structures.

What makes poor people’s federations, in this and other cases, so fascinating are their multiple personalities. They combine aspects of interest organizations, development associations, and resource-pooling cooperatives. These distinctions, borrowed from the Esman-Uphoff research tradition into local associations (Esman 1984; Uphoff 1992; Uphoff 1993; Krishna et al. 1997), however, consider federations largely as entities in their own right. In this perspective, organizations of the poor are regarded, by friends, foes and neutral observers alike, chiefly as instruments of empowerment. They run programs that improve the condition of the poor in more dimensions than individual choice opened by growing household incomes – they do so notably for the ability to influence collective decisions.

Since Esman’s seminal work (Esman 1984, op.cit.), perspectives have been expanded by a keen interest into the position and functions of federations within larger networks. Even under social network approaches (as increasingly discussed, for example, in the literature on risk sharing and informal insurance in rural communities; see e.g. Fafchamps et al. 2007), the multiple-personality metaphor is fruitful. Federations of the poor may simultaneously be local nodes of social movements, implementation conveniences for development projects, and budget-maximizing competitors in the aid chain. In fact, in the case of the RDRS Federations, I found that they were all of the above, although in highly variable mixtures.

From this wider perspective, these federations are a special case in the study of membership-based organizations of the poor. A conference that Cornell University, Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), and Self-employed

Women's Association (SEWA) organized in 2005 testified to the grown interest in multi-layered associations of the poor (Crowley et al. 2005).

These authors find membership-based organizations attractive for poverty reduction, chiefly for two reasons. The poor "need to derive returns from participation, and these usually take the form of capacity building and empowerment to run their own organization, access to productive or financial capital, or increased influence, negotiation power, and links to other organizations" (ibid.: 4). Second, governments and development agencies use these organizations in order to "improve the sustainability and effectiveness of development projects" (ibid.: 15).

The evolution from small organizations to larger federated ones is not automatic. Only three of the 17 conference papers used the term "federation" for the organizations that they described (d'Cruz and Mitlin 2005; Roever 2005; Theron 2005). Significantly, all of them were situated in urban milieux, in which "organizations of the poor more commonly grow to a larger-scale than they do in rural areas" (Crowley et al. 2005: 14).

Federations of the rural poor earlier did elicit considerable interest. Bebbington and Carroll (2000) studied those of the Andean regions in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador in a social capital perspective, stressing the importance of outside support. Similar to their study, ours is a case of a large rural initiative, in the region of Bangladesh (Rajshahi Division) with the highest persistent poverty rates. Large federated networks of organizations of poor people in rural areas exist elsewhere as well, even if they often go by other names. In India, for example, the "Sangha" association form, going back to Buddhist roots (Otis 2005: 6), has been used by several rural NGOs as building blocks in multi-tier federations. As is the case with primary organizations, federations are open to contrasting interpretations. They serve the poor as a defense mechanism, "a space of resistance" (Townsend et al. 2004); they can also be evaluated against more conventional criteria of the performance, inclusiveness and sustainability of the programs that they mediate (Prakash and Selle 2003).

5. THE NGO SECTOR IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is well known for the size of its NGO sector. It boasts some of largest rural development NGOs, with international name recognition and a record of sustained innovation. BRAC, together with Grameen Bank (technically not an NGO), is one of the leaders of the so-called micro-finance revolution, a sector in which hundreds of smaller NGOs, banks and quasi-government programs in the country are also active, including the NGO of this case study.

The literature on this organizational field is vast, covering political-economy (surrogate service providers in a weak state), performance (participant and location bias, program impact) and many other aspects. A recent World Bank study (Zaman et al. 2006) gives an authoritative overview, although primarily from a strategic impact and service delivery perspective, estimating the number of active development NGOs to be in the neighborhood of 2,000 (ibid., ch. 1, p.2).

A minority chorus of critical scholars (Hashemi 1995; Jalali 2005) has lamented that NGOs have de-facto served to domesticate social movements and to depoliticize the poor. How much the recent growth of so-called advocacy NGOs has reversed this trend, assuming it existed, is unclear. Occasional contestation between high-profile NGOs, government and local players along party-political lines does not change the basic picture that many NGOs have hybrid personalities blending social mobilization, service provision, as well as business endeavors. If the micro-credit programs continue to feed controversy on the left and right side

of the political spectrum (Margolis et al. 2007), certainly they have given millions of poor people choices to demand better service and, literally, mobile phones from which to call NGO offices when they face illicit demands and other emergencies. After a decade of private sector driven strong economic growth, there is also a humble recognition that NGOs were essentially adjunct forces in wider societal changes that have left progress very uneven across institutional realms (Blair 2005).

Many of the same larger secular changes are affecting the parameters of NGO monitoring. Moving with the deeper administrative penetration of Bangladeshi society at large, NGO micro-finance programs have increasingly created individual customer identities, beneath the neighborhood groups that historically were the loan guarantors and who continue to serve as delivery convenience for some other programs. This is happening in extension of similar processes that, twenty years earlier, enabled health programs to overcome coarse village-level immunization targeting and administer complete courses to individuals (Benini 1986). The brutal truth of financial ratios has begun to inject realism also into the monitoring of other program types, and micro-finance rating agencies may be trail-blazing what ultimately will become third-party monitoring of other NGO programs as well, with the thousands of NGO-run schools a likely next candidate.

Capacity to monitor programs and to analyze impact has grown across NGOs at very different paces. English language command, data management skills and advanced survey expertise command high wage premiums, and smaller and less well resourced NGOs find it hard to attract and retain the kind of personnel that might help them graduate from the minimum program monitoring that donors require to credible impact studies. Larger NGOs have research departments with long-standing national and overseas collaborations that earn them a seat at the policy table. My anecdotal impression is that even among these privileged few, the collaboration between in-house project monitoring and research departments is tenuous, and run-of-the-mill project monitoring data is not widely used by the research and policy staff, who like to stay in control of their own formats and data collection ability.

My knowledge of NGOs' monitoring capacity specifically targeted at grassroots organizations in Bangladesh is similarly anecdotal. Few NGOs are known to vigorously promote organization building among the poor, beyond those making their service delivery more efficient. Caritas, who in the mid-nineties was operating an ambitious sub-district level federation program, has since folded it. BRAC, despite an early recognition of the importance of local power structures (Lovell 1992), does not appear to have given a consistently strong role to its village organizations (Rafi et al. 1999) as part of its extremely successful corporate scaling-up. In fact, when I listened to a group of their researchers in 2005, including a student of "BRAC Federations" (Alim 2004), I came away with the impression that "federation" was chiefly a placeholder in donor market scanning, to be further pursued in advocacy strategy discussions, for which an amount of field experience of sorts needed to be maintained, but not a key tool of BRAC's poverty reduction strategy. FIVDB, a mid-size NGO with a regional focus, has a tradition of growing "community learning centers" out of its highly reputed adult literacy program, with an unwitting affinity to the participatory epistemology of the Davies – Maruyama line sketched above (see page 4). Its staff were outspoken about the difficulty to adequately describe the dynamics of those centers at a time when other, more lucrative service delivery contracts were absorbing FIVDB's monitoring resources (Godden et al. 2006). These leads are incomplete, but taken together make it unlikely that I have overlooked the existence of highly developed monitoring arrangements targeted at grassroots associations in Bangladeshi NGOs outside this case study.

6. THE SUPPORTING NGO

The context of the organizations monitored – the 260 “Union Federations” – can only be understood once the NGO that has been supporting them since their foundation has been properly introduced. This organization, now known as “RDRS Bangladesh”, is also the monitoring entity in my focus. I use “RDRS” and “the supporting NGO” interchangeably, with the latter expression emphasizing RDRS’s function in the aid chain that leads from international donors to the federation members and back.

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 comprises almost 10,000 sq km, spreading across 37 sub-districts with 307 Union Councils. Among an estimated population of 8 million, 1.5 million are involved in the RDRS development programs.

During 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.

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 2004, RDRS was working with over 17,500 organized groups, with members drawn from 281,000 households. It had a total staff of 1,958, of whom twenty-nine percent were women, and administered resources worth US\$ 6.6 million³. 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 the major city of the working area, Rangpur, a place to which I shall refer frequently (see map) as the center of various RDRS monitoring units. Organizationally, federation support resides within “Social Empowerment”, in what the organigram marks as “Social Organization Unit”, alongside the “Women’s Rights Unit” and some education projects.

Until 2002, federation support was administered through approx. fifty staff of mixed departmental extraction. Then 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”. For four years, this project bore the cost of ninety staff although not all of them worked full-time on federation matters. Overall, this corresponded to a ratio of staff to beneficiary units (the federations) of roughly 1 to 3. The ratio of the frontline workers with direct responsibility (the “Social Organization Managers”) to the federations was 32 to 260, thus close to 1 to 8.

³ This information has been compiled from the 2003 and 2004 Annual Reports.

An important piece of background information concerns the number of staff devoted to monitoring duties in this set-up. The Social Organization Unit counted five such persons, three working out of Rangpur, and two posted in the field, although all of them shared their time, in variable degrees, with other administrative tasks. This characterization is incomplete, however; in Rangpur, too, RDRS has built generic monitoring and evaluation capacity nowadays embedded in a small affiliated training and research institute, the “North Bengal Institute (NBI)”; the half dozen or so NBI workers in this function have supported the federation monitors in ways that will be detailed further below. Similarly, the staff in the Micro-Finance department who feed and analyze its database may legitimately be considered monitoring staff.

Right away, two characteristics need to be appreciated in the context of monitoring 260 affiliated organizations of the poor. First, as a regional Bangladeshi NGO, RDRS has found it difficult to attract and retain qualified personnel in monitoring functions, and even more so for in-house research that uses monitoring data. It does not have the well-endowed monitoring and research departments that produce the kinds of studies for which the internationally known, Dhaka-centered, large Bangladeshi NGOs such as BRAC and Proshika and the larger international NGOs are noted. By way of illustration, CARE Bangladesh, for its programs in the northwest, enjoys a monitoring intensity, defined as ratio of monitoring specialists to field staff, between five and ten times higher than what RDRS can afford.

Second, the 260 federations cover a contiguous area within the 307 Unions in which RDRS was active in 2006. This is different from the interregional patchwork that the working areas of Bangladeshi NGOs typically form. It makes it easier to tell neighborhood effects from direct program effects, and the interaction of the two. Reinforced by formal sub-district-level committees and by the RDRS fieldwork structure, significant learning among staff and elected office bearers serving neighboring federations takes place. Whether any of the formal tools employed in these exchanges should be considered monitoring tools is a matter of choice.

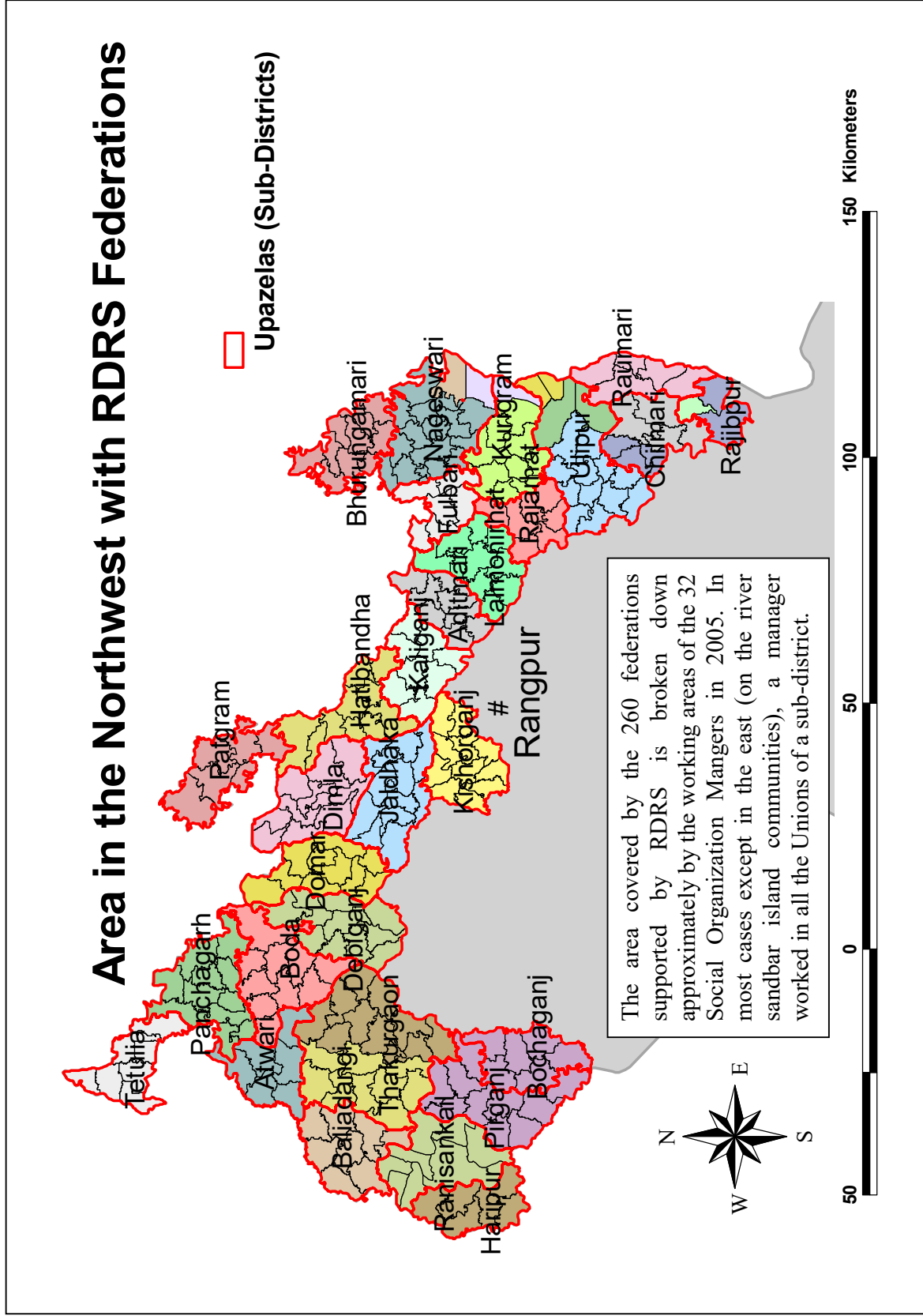
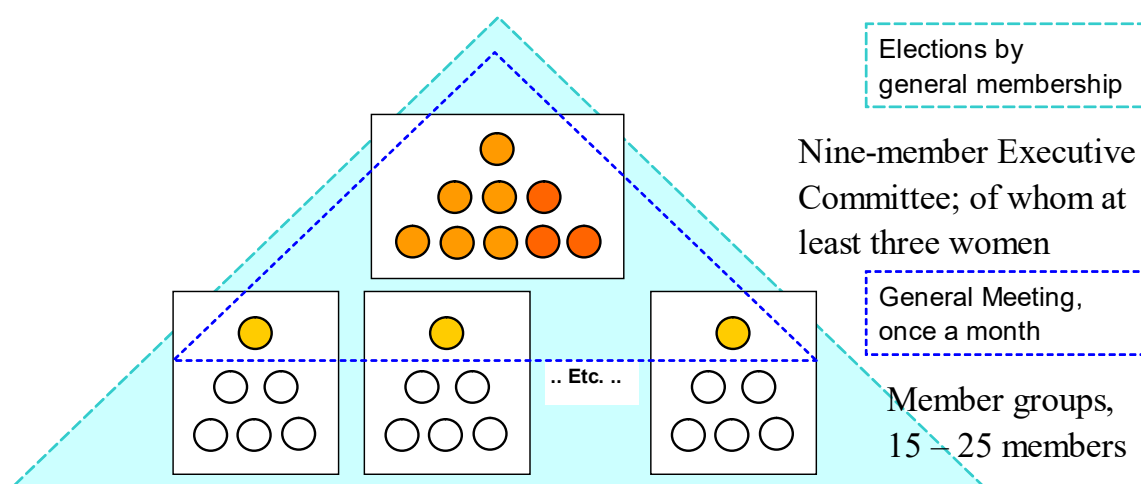


Figure 2: Overview Map of the Federation Working Area

7. THE RDRS FEDERATIONS: STRUCTURE AND PERFORMANCE

7.1 Size, Recruitment, Inclusiveness

In quick summary, each of the 260 federation areas is defined by the local Union, the smallest⁴ unit in the administrative and local government denomination. The 130,000 members relate to their federations through 8,000 neighborhood groups, which send representatives to monthly General Meetings. The typical (median) federation has 460 members. The range is from 120 to 1,200. Sixty percent are women.



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 15 and 25 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.

Figure 3: Basic structure of a Union Federation

These figures, from mid-2005, take meaning in historic context. 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.

This credentialing has made RDRS the effective intake agent for the federations. The nature of membership has changed; earlier, it was through groups. Individual membership has been created recently, complete with flashy identity cards. Executive committees are nowadays elected by members at large whereas many of the more frequent interactions, including the monthly General Meetings, continue to be sustained chiefly by group representatives.

This intake mechanism may be unusual. It has led the monitoring of membership to operate with 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

⁴ Not considering recent village government initiatives or special-purpose small units of lesser consequence.

criteria, including regular savings deposited with RDRS. About a third of the members were rated active in 2005, with a strong upward trend since 2003. Among the active ones, the proportion of women was even higher, 66 percent.

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.

Estimates of the member density depend on the choice of enumerator and denominator. An estimated 3.5 percent of all households in the 260 Unions were home to an active federation member in 2005; this gives a lower bound. Admitting all affiliated members, and working with the relatively low Union poverty estimates from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and World Food Program (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2004; for a brief introduction, see Hollema 2004), one arrives at a more favorable ratio of one member to every four poor households. In between is the ten-percent figure to which the estimates of executive committees interviewed in spring 2006 converged. By all estimates, the federations have enrolled a minority of the poor even where they speak for all of them and render service to non-members as well.

The quality aspect is clearly seen also in the income situation of the members. Their annual incomes are one third higher than those of a reference population. This is a program effect, not a selection effect, in the sense that members improved skills and incomes after coming into the RDRS fold. The differences typically are larger for executive committee members, most of whom have longer participant careers with RDRS. Many have worked up their way to village middle class positions. This enables them to give unpaid time and labor, in exchange for social capital used to solidify their fragile ascension.

For the supporting NGO, the insertion of group and federation layers between its field staff and individual program participants has produced a vast multiplier effect in reaching out to poor people. Thirty years back in RDRS history, an extension agent would deal with, at the high end, 50 contact farmers. With the help of 90 federation support staff, RDRS is nowadays relaying development messages to 130,000 participants.

7.2 Community Standing

In most of the 260 Unions with RDRS Federations, there are no other unified grassroots associations matching them in size or influence. Plausibly, the combined strength of the borrower groups among the various micro-finance competitors outnumbers the federation members – but these groups do not coalesce widely. Market and mosque committees are fairly universal, but their focus is either narrow, or they operate each in a hamlet only. More important, the elected Union Council (“Union Parishad”) sits on top of the organized structures, representing the entire population.

By contrast, the federation executive committee is elected by people mobilized by one local association. But the federation may often speak for all the poor in the Union, and will do so particularly in advocacy work and on issues that transcend its membership.

How does the wider community respond? Two indicators help to answer that question. Twice in their history, federations sent candidates into Union Council elections and won seats. In recent years, federations have increasingly been solicited to mediate disputes outside the courts. The election success and the willingness to have federations settle disputes have varied widely from one Union to another.

The 1997 Council election results were considered a sweeping success for the federations, with 375 of their candidates elected. The density of RDRS-formed groups (both inside and outside the federations), the strength of female membership, and the financial commitments of members all made a positive difference. Under less favorable circumstances in 2003, fewer federations ran candidates, and only 221 were returned. Greater member density again was helpful, and so was previous success. Interestingly, the women turned away from federation candidates, presumably preferring women from elite families (although they were not fellow members) to men staged by their own federations. For the first time, however, eight federations went out of their low political profile and competed for the powerful Council chairmanship. Three of them won it.

Dispute mediation caseloads provide another relevant indicator on which the federation monitoring collected usable data. During the period June 2003 through July 2005, after intense training support from RDRS, the federations attracted more than 3,000 disputes for mediation⁵. On average, this is not much, about one new case every two months per federation. Yet, as a social innovation causing communities to accept federation verdicts in most cases, it was a breakthrough.

Election and mediation success are very weakly correlated⁶, suggesting that federations build specialized reputations. In neither field have these been strong enough to provoke more than a sporadic, localized elite backlash. The fraction of seats taken by federation candidates – about 7 percent – is not too far from the proportion of members in the population. Most of the disputes brought before federations concern family matters in which the elite families rarely have a stake.

All in all, the federations have settled into a niche in which they are not seen as a threat to fundamental power relations, but are a force to be reckoned with, as voter blocks, protectors of women, or as suitable partners in consensual projects of various kinds. The elite know that in highly combustible issues – say, justice for an acid-throwing victim – non-members may rally to the federation. They respect this unpredictable popular support as one of the federation's power sources. The other source is the affiliation with a large NGO, RDRS. This regularly leads communities to overrate their federations' ability to provide economic aid to destitute persons.

As in any power equilibrium, this one makes the insiders comfortable – RDRS with the demonstrated patronage of its programs, federation leaders with a seat at the table of the local elite, and ordinary members with an insurance of sorts against some of the more extreme risks of life. Under the impression of solid progress, RDRS helped 140 of the 260 federations, generally from among the stronger ones, to register with the government as their own legally independent NGOs. Some of them have attracted direct funding from small-NGO support vehicles while continuing their close cooperation with RDRS and in the sub-district coordination committees.

I will put some flesh on these abstract claims by way of a small case study once two more performance components have been touched upon – social development, and income-earning projects.

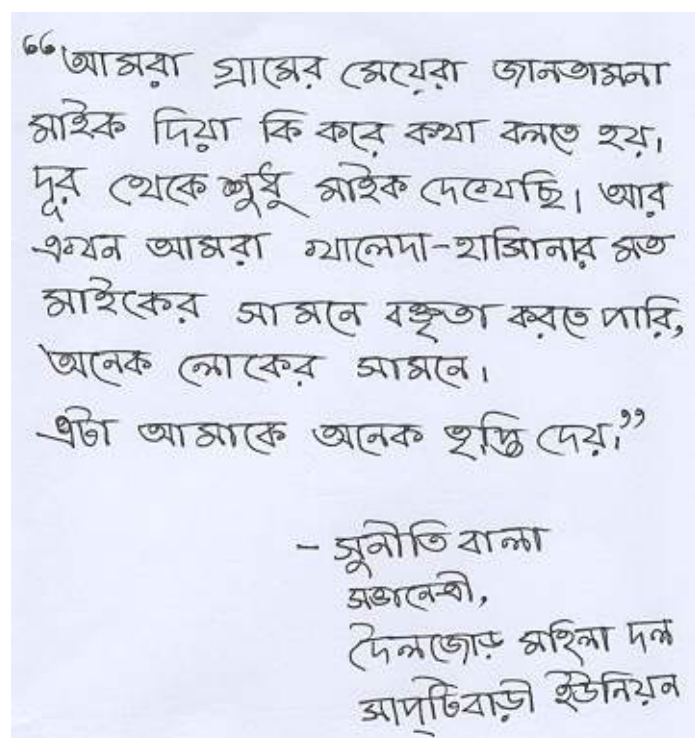
⁵ The eight quarterly monitoring reports for this period carried statistics for disputes that the federations formally agreed to hear. 3,228 disputes were formally admitted; in addition, federation committee members may have become involved in an unknown number of other disputes informally, perhaps as neighbors of disputing parties.

⁶ Spearman's rank order correlation coefficient between federation candidates elected to Union Councils in 2003 and disputes heard during the period June 2003 through July 2005 is a mere +0.07.

7.3 Social Development

There is a uniform consensus among federation observers that social development is the realm in which they have performed best. However, the members define this in language entirely different from that of the development experts. In many guises, “social development” is described in terms of the unity and dignity of the poor. Dimensions like reduction in mortality do not figure in their discourse although federations do cooperate with programs – immunization, sanitary latrines – that they understand very well are improving public health.

In the social justice semantics that I have overheard in the federations, three elements recur constantly. The federation is a space free of bribery. It is where the poor have learned to



speak out in the face of more powerful community members. And the federation is the force that helps them to obtain justice. This finding has been consistent throughout nine years during which I visited RDRS Federations; in the minds of most members these goods, which in large part are public, outvalue tangible benefits.

“I as village women never knew how to speak through the loudspeaker. I saw the loudspeaker from far. But now I can deliver my speech to large audiences, using loudspeakers just like Khaleda and Hasina [the main political figures of the country at the time]. This gives me immense satisfaction.”

Sunitee Bala, President, Doiljore

Women’s Group, Saptibari Union Federation, Hatibandha Upazela, interviewed by Bhabatosh Nath and Ayesha Siddika, 8 March 2006

Figure 4: "Using loudspeakers just like Khaleda and Hasina"

One of the areas of progress is the reported decrease in violence against women. To what extent this is attributable to the work of the federations, and to what it is happening as a result of broader societal trends, is impossible to determine with the data extant. Much of the violence is dowry-related. It is entirely credible that the federations deter some of this violence. But their influence is not strong enough to help reduce the practice of dowry in the first place, despite repeated “awareness campaigns” and some highly publicized dowry-free marriages⁷.

While the federations’ social development record seems strongest in value-laden behavior changes like freedom from bribery and freedom of speech, much of this is underpinned with simple technologies that RDRS helped them adopt and practice. Appropriate accounting and audits make for transparency and trust in leaders, para-legal

⁷ This happens against the backdrop of escalating dowry payments in the wider Bangladeshi society, as some researchers (e.g. Rozario 2004) have documented.

training forms mediation skills, and megaphones let poor women address a crowd, giving them that power experience of which the testimony above speaks.

7.4 Federations as Economic Actors

In the multiple personalities of the federations, there clearly is a business side, too. Almost all federations pursue some business activity. Yet, if these income-generating projects are commonly judged as less successful, a caveat is needed. RDRS's ability to monitor and analyze the federation accounts has remained modest, despite several years' worth of employing its own support accountants and of arranging external audits for each federation. Only during the audit year 2004-05 did it unify accounting frames enough to collate analytic data across all 260 federations.

In mid-2005 the federations owned \$ 1.7 million in property and assets, excluding the value of one million trees that they were growing on leased land, their main business line⁸. Most of the audited value was in buildings donated by RDRS. The preponderance of property in the balance sheets accounts for the major part of the variation that spanned more than two orders of magnitudes, from US\$ 80 in the poorest to \$ 19,000 in the wealthiest federation⁹. Three quarters of the federations reported a gross profit for the audit year; the profits typically were tiny, with a median value of \$ 50 only.

The absence of strong businesses in the majority of federations has to do with the quality of the support that RDRS has been able to render to income-generating projects, with managerial conflicts within the federations, and with weak incentives to start and expand businesses, given the flow of subsidies. The federations enjoy comparative advantages over private producers in very few lines of business. One such line is tree plantations, historically an outgrowth of RDRS's success in reforesting the Rangpur - Dinajpur region. With nearly 14 km worth of roadside plantations per federation, this is one of the areas where the federations make good money.

Technically, most federations during their history have experimented with a considerable variety of businesses, sometimes in very creative ways. For example, the Federation that is the object of the case study presented further below is operating a student coaching center as a business. Yet any business is quickly liquidated when more profitable opportunities arise. All in all, however, the federations' business activities are insignificant for the livelihoods of the average member; they pay wages and dividends annually per member equivalent to 2 – 4 days' unskilled labor wages only.

Averages like that are misleading. One function that I became gradually aware of during this study is that federation businesses can be crucially important in providing emergency employment, chiefly to women fallen into destitution. More research is needed to shed light into how federations weave together business and social protection, including selective aid to non-members in distress. An obvious question is: If "emergency employment" is indeed an important function of the federations, why has the monitoring system not acknowledged it with any specific categories, so that by now I would have more precise information on its extent and impact? I will revert to this question in the discussion section.

The business aspect sits awkwardly with every member of the aid chain. Within the federations, the distribution of incomes between wages for members and profits for the

⁸ Based on the July 2004 – June 2005 external audit reports for each of the 260 Federations, as compiled by RDRS Rangpur monitoring staff and tabulated in Benini 2006: 78, table 12. The other quantities cited in this para were calculated from the same audit data.

⁹ All Bangladesh Taka figures in this article are converted at the rate of US\$ 1 = Taka 70 and suitably rounded.

organization demands negotiation and consensus; members and needy non-members expect discounts on paid-for services. RDRS has had a poor record, outside tree plantations, in supporting federation businesses with appropriate finance and technical expertise. Cultural and interest conflicts continue to burden this aspect of the partnership. In recent years, donor philosophies gravitated towards stronger advocacy, governance and rights-based approaches; they did not favor support of economic projects. The pendulum may have begun to swing back, with large donors engaging in massive income and asset transfer programs for the elimination of extreme poverty¹⁰, but, as of this writing, these endeavors have not yet significantly touched the RDRS Federations.

7.5 Case Study: The Social Economics of a Center for the Poor¹¹

Kachakata Federation in Nageswari Upazela, Kurigram District, embodies the kind of synthesis between business acumen and social commitment that many would consider an ideal for federations. Founded in 1993 in a Union frequently ravaged by floods and river erosion, this federation grew to have 429 members by 2005.

What makes Kachakata so attractive is its own ways of combining diverse and creative income generation with a focus on employing poor persons. Moreover, its projects are financed to a high degree from member subscriptions and recycled earnings. It has also been its own micro-finance outfit, gathering savings and giving out loans.

Its brick-building center is regularly rented out for social functions and training events. Similarly, the Federation uses its kitchen and banquet equipment to cater to numerous outside events, for which it offers tenting and decoration services as well. In 2005, the Federation earned \$ 180 in this business line. Members and very poor non-members enjoyed large discounts or, in exceptional cases, were served for free. This made it affordable for poor families to host dignified receptions at weddings and other occasions. In 2005, 96 poor families availed themselves of this facility.

In the same year, the Federation helped 22 poor women with loans worth Taka 75,000 to run small income earning projects. The repayments were such that the Federation made a profit on those loans. It earned good money also from the sale of trees, using it to reward the tree caretakers, whose standard of living noticeably improved. Most of these projects did not run continuously; the loan program, for example, was suspended in early 2006 in order to use the fund (\$ 400) for stocking 1.5 tons of wheat, to be sold when the price went up.

¹⁰ Among others, as promoted particularly vigorously by the British aid agency DFID, for example in poverty reduction programs aimed at vulnerable riverine and coastal communities (Batkin et al. 2006: 13).

¹¹ For this case study, I drew on work by Mobasher Hossain Khondokar, Manager, Social Organization, Nageswari Upazela, as translated by Nurun Nobi Shanto, in March 2005. Shanto and Ekramul Kabir, both with the Social Organization Unit in Rangpur, visited Kachakata in April 2006. Their notes as well as Federation monitoring data are also used here.



Over 150 students are sharing space in the coaching center that the Kachakata Federation operates in its premises. Assuming that a large fraction of the students are from non-member families, this is a significant daily occurrence that links the member organization to the larger community. – Photo by Nurun Nobi Shanto, Social Organization Unit, RDRS Rangpur.

Figure 5: The Kachakata Federation Student Coaching Center

The Federation's financial position in 2005 was solid enough to build two tin-roofed huts. In one of them, a cow fattening project was started. Three of these cows were then given out to very poor women. In the other hut, academic coaching began in June, initially for 85 local students. When the Federation was convinced of its success, the first hut was also converted to a classroom, and by April 2006 the number of students had gone up to 174. Thirteen teachers from different schools of the Union were looking after grades one through ten. Student fees varied from \$ 0.70 to \$ 2 while teachers each drew \$ 7 per month. When all was said and done, including expenses for an office helper, a night watchman, classroom materials and even the occasional cultural activity, the Federation would make a profit of not more than \$10 on a monthly average, but provided a valuable service to the community.

The Federation center was used as a training venue by the Union Council, RDRS and some other NGOs such as BRAC. In 2005, the Federation drew \$ 140 in rental income.

All in all, these projects have been keeping 12 poor persons in more or less continuous employment (in addition to the self-employed borrowers). They are the result of small sums saved, collected and smartly invested by poor people. Even if they keep workers employed, the individual projects are not continuous; they ebb and flow with opportunities, and are swiftly liquidated for other, more promising lines. Profits are modest also because members and some non-members receive discounts. More members expect loans, and successful borrowers expect larger ones. There are obvious economic conflicts built in that have to be managed by social consensus mechanisms, of which I know little. For example, while the monthly "General Meetings" are assemblies of poor people, the day-to-day

presence in the center of a dozen teachers may over time create the public perception of a middle-class institution, and the weight of the coaching operation may throw up its own dynamic.

The community has noted those endeavors with approval, is using the services and facilities eagerly, and has recognized the Federation with a measure of influence in other arenas. But its standing in the Kachakata community is still modest and far from growing continuously. Back in 1997, this was one of the federations that sent a resounding number of victorious candidates to the Union Council – it took six out of 13 seats. In the 2003 elections, the Federation did not raise any candidates; it had concluded that Council politics threatened its unity too much. The Federation did start mediation services, but the number of cases brought before it during my two-year observation period was modest, and of these ten cases it was able to resolve three only.

In 2004, the Federation obtained registration with the Social Welfare Department. As a result, it had to change its name to “Kachakata Polli Unnoyan Sangstha” (Rural Development Association) and to do away with the three executive committee seats reserved for women. By 2006, two women sat on the committee, neither of them in the powerful positions of chairperson, vice-chairperson, secretary or cashier.

RDRS, over the course of the years, changed its evaluation of Kachakata Federation several times. Considered dysfunctional prior to the 1997 election victory, the Federation worked its grades up to an “A” by 2001 (the grading system will be explained in detail further below). Then went through a dip during the next two years – RDRS gave it a “B” – to be reinstated in “A” grade in 2004. In a participatory assessment exercise in 2005 to which all federations were invited, Kachakata rated itself as the equivalent of an “A”.

8. LONG-TERM VIABILITY

Before I turn to the description of the federation monitoring system, the reader may expect to find some extrapolation, however speculative, into the future. Given their achievements and limitations, what are the longer-term prospects for the federations to remain dynamic and actively working for the poor? The answer requires me to resolve a paradox: the federations have been growing because of the supporting NGO, and at the same time despite it.

The first basic observation is that RDRS has kept the entire portfolio of federations going. The association between federation performance in 1997 (the first year all of them were graded) and more recent evaluations is weak. Only faint echoes can be heard from the early years – particularly in terms of women members, success in Union Council elections, and even overall performance as rated by RDRS. This is another way of saying that few federations have consistently been high performers, and few have stayed in the bottom ranks. RDRS saw to it that none of them went out of business and resolved paralysis where it occurred, particularly over loan issues. Over the years, both RDRS and the federations built additional competencies simultaneously and employed them in programs that benefited the poor and were recognized by their local communities.

Yet, the federations have not attained social and financial self-sufficiency. With recruitment limited to members that RDRS supplies from graduated groups, the federations have not built their own recruitment skills; their leaders may have weak incentives to invite more poor people to join. For their recurrent institutional costs, most of the federations are not self-reliant. In the 2004-5 audit year, for every Taka raised locally, they drew eight Taka in subsidies from RDRS, other NGOs and from the government. Their local incomes did respond to higher subsidies, but sluggishly so.

This state of affairs is reflected in staff opinions that only one third of the federations would survive if RDRS ended its support. But this is a misconception of the aid chain; the federations enhance RDRS's reputation in the donor market; it is implausible that RDRS should ever want to stop supporting the federations. Rather, the two sides have co-evolved; and sustainability ought to be conceived of in terms of an ongoing relationship rather than of separate entities. Financially, the combined loss from continuing operations of the 260 federations is surprisingly slight (it totaled approx. \$ 15,000 in 2004-05); offsetting it is a small burden for RDRS and its donors, but it does take a willingness to do so.

How to move the non-financial balance is trickier; there is little doubt that RDRS will have staff to support routine operations, but not many competent ones to assist federations with larger responsibilities. Similarly, RDRS may be supplying enough new groups to offset member attrition, although never enough to significantly boost the proportion of poor households in local Union Council areas who are members of federations.

Recast as a property of the entire partnership between donors, supporting NGO and local organizations of the poor, long-term viability takes a different meaning. The history of the last ten years suggests an equilibrium between outside contributions, local programming and member motivations. Good and poor federations oscillated in a kind of "regression to the mean", and at the same time local factors grew stronger, relative to global programming factors, in determining performance. Federations overall have become more diverse, as, for example, the very weak association between success in the 2003 local council elections and dispute mediation caseloads attests.

For RDRS, then, the long-term viability of federations it supports becomes a matter of its own capacity to manage diversity. Over half of the existing federations have become formally independent and are looking for additional sources of funding; at the same time, plans are afoot within RDRS to found federations in more districts. The management of diversity will certainly place shifting demands also on its monitoring systems, to which I now turn.

9. THE FEDERATION MONITORING SYSTEM

9.1 History and Cooperation with Other Monitoring Units

The beginnings of the federation monitoring system – in the sense of collecting standardized information on every federation, organizing it in spreadsheets and producing descriptive statistics for periodic reports - can be traced back to a summary table in September 1994. This table provided totals for 241 federations in terms of membership, savings and investments, and even of social projects, though of undefined nature. The constituent database has not been preserved.

By 1997, a quarterly system of standardized data collection was in place. Its 37 fields were focused on membership, buildings, loans (from RDRS to the federations, known as "seed money", as well as from them to their member groups), member equity and the total financial situation. While the system was no longer tracking social projects, it was still possible to approximately apportion liabilities to member equity, donated equity and debt. Member equity, an important indicator of member commitment, became unobservable in subsequent years; RDRS lost its ability to track undistributed earnings, shares paid in for special projects and the value of loans to member groups within the federations.

As mentioned earlier, other programs were also pursuing monitoring activities or even had formalized monitoring cells in Rangpur. The Social Organization Unit was largely out of touch with them, not least because they were housed, until 2001, in separate office buildings.

The credit unit (later the RDRS Micro-Finance department) followed its own large group-based loan portfolio, in which loans to federations were a small part. The generic monitoring-and-evaluation unit (nowadays lodged in the NBI), was busy keeping track of the growth and achievements of the so-called primary groups. These groups were not yet members of the federations; the work of this unit initially was of minimal interest to the federation monitors. There was no common nomenclature or common identifiers for Unions, sub-districts, and RDRS district units.

Gradually a dialogue developed. The NBI conducted a number of database management workshops, in which members of the Social Organization Unit participated. A system of common administrative unit identifiers and spellings was introduced in the primary group, federation and micro-finance databases. Although compliance was to be less than perfect (some of the allied programs such as Women's Rights, the entire Livelihoods department and the district coordination offices never adopted it), in Rangpur it started a tradition of exchanging and, where productive, merging data. The Social Organization Unit had an incentive to cooperate: It needed data on program participants organized in groups, and it knew that the most up-to-date data was available in Micro-Finance and in the NBI. From its own field staff, the Social Organization Unit received only membership data aggregated to federations; for finer-grained data it had to tap into other sources within the RDRS family.

Substantively, this cooperation was important in the context of member recruitment. A repayment crisis hemorrhaging RDRS Micro-Finance program in the late nineties led to the discovery of a large number of groups, "primary" (non-federated) as well as "secondary" (federated or recently graduated in order to join the federations), that in actual life were defunct. In 1999 and 2000, a census of the nearly 17,000 groups in the Micro-Finance database was taken; financial transaction data and field staff reports on group meetings were combined to create a classification of active, dormant and dead groups. Lists of active primary groups from this and from subsequent exercises were used in the evaluation of individual groups for Federation membership, a process internally known as "group graduation". The point to retain is that the Social Organization Unit essentially was a consumer of the information that the other units collected and processed, and did not, at the group level, contribute to the monitoring effort.

This arrangement had policy consequences that went beyond the technicalities of group and federation monitoring. By 1999, it was clear that loan recovery from member groups was significantly poorer than from unfederated primary groups. This essentially had to do with the way how the frontline workers, then engaged in both microfinance and extension tasks, were dividing their time between those two types of groups. The reputation of federated groups as loan defaulters set in motion a cycle that disconnected a growing fraction of them from access to RDRS loans. In the following years, until now, this created strong disincentives for primary groups to join federations. The Social Organization Unit was aware of this, but the federation monitoring system did not reach down to individual groups. As a result, the Social Organization Unit has not helped Social Empowerment to build a case vis-à-vis Micro-Finance although the relationship between federations and RDRS Micro-Finance remained a backburner issue.

This finding can be generalized. The Social Organization Unit has rarely been in a position to document the program exposure of member groups, let alone the impacts on the livelihoods of individual members. This limitation was not due as much to lack of opportunity as to lack of interdepartmental vision; the household surveys that the NBI began in 2001 with samples of participant households have been stratified on primary and federated

groups – it would have been easy to add measures of federation participation and correlate them with socio-economic conditions.

Instead, starting around 2002, federation monitoring concepts became more elaborate in terms of organizational capacity, collective social action, and federation-level income generating activities. Examples include the very tight monitoring of the executive committee elections in 2002 and the quarterly reporting of member subscriptions, training days, public events organized on international days, and of the size of tree plantations. The number of fields in the quarterly spreadsheets went up from 40 to 70 (and further to 90 by 2005). Some financial indicators were also included although in the absence of proper financial reports the sum of cash and of investments in income-generating projects remained the sole indicator of the federations' economic standing for several more years.

The situation changed further with the reporting requirements of the large "Federation Capacity Building and Social Mobilization Project", which RDRS won in 2002. The Social Organization Unit focused on forming a reliable picture of the federation membership and on institutional and social development indicators. Criteria to measure active membership were introduced. However, by using savings deposits with RDRS as one of them, it also made the measurement of growth and activism contingent on the smooth functioning of another program (Micro-Finance in this case). This introduced unwanted validity and reliability issues. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the monitoring system gained a firm grasp at least of the demographic side of the federations, and that the growth in active membership that it demonstrated for the period 2003 – 2005 was genuine.

By contrast, federation business monitoring remained weak; the Social Organization Unit did hire an economist and in 2005, by requiring the external auditors to use a common accounting frame for all 260 federations, put this side too on a stronger footing. But the Capacity Building Project had excluded income-generating support from its scope; RDRS had no strong incentives to look into the financial affairs of the federations beyond the governance purpose that the audits served.

9.2 Using the Monitoring Data

The Social Organization Unit has been producing quarterly federation monitoring reports since 1997. From a decision-making perspective, the uses that were made of these reports and of the data which they incorporated appear minimal as far as RDRS's partners were concerned. The information has been distributed widely, both in the original reports and in excerpts copied to other types of reports. It has not elicited much noticeable response. One is tempted to think that the quarterly reports served primarily as evidence, for higher management as well as for donors, that federation support, much like other projects, was being carefully managed, and that RDRS was able to demonstrate progress among these grassroots organizations. There is one exception: Monitoring data, summarized for all federations, was studiously used in project applications, particularly for large grants from the EU in 2001 and 2005, and in reporting on the Capacity Building Project. While the decision processes leading to the 2002-2006 grant (and in 2006, as far as I know, to the rejection of a follow-up grant) relied on detailed documentation, I know of no other use of the federation monitoring data in any external decision context.

Internally, the usage story was different. RDRS had been anxious, since the inception of the federations, to track their quality. To measure it, RDRS created a system of indicators condensed into simple grades. While there are no signs that the Social Organization Unit systematically compared the grades of individual federations over time, differences between RDRS field units (in most cases a district) were widely discussed after each grading exercise.

In coordination meetings, particularly strong and particularly weak federations were pointed out, the strong ones for learning, the weak for special interventions.

Federation grading is a fruitful subject to study the application side of this monitoring system, all the more so because it is here that finally elements of participatory monitoring made a belated and timid entry into what otherwise had been a purely bureaucratic operation. I therefore give it some more space.

9.3 Federation Grading

As far back as 1997, the Social Organization Unit classified all federations into several quality grades, denoted A, B, C, and (later abolished) D, A standing for the best. The information used to inform the grades changed over time, and so were the algorithms used to determine them. The 1997 grades were based on a scoring system that assigned between zero and five points on each of 20 performance indicators. The ratings were done by the concerned field staff, not by any federation representatives. The grade was assigned on the basis of the total points – technically speaking, an unweighted compensatory method (Yoon and Hwang 1995: 17), in which a federation could make good for a shortcoming in any aspect of its management by outstanding performance in other aspects. Statistically, of the twenty indicators only eight discriminated well (Benini 1998). When suitably dichotomized, they resolved to two independent factors, the first explaining 34 percent, the second 17 percent, of the variance.

| Indicator | Component loadings | |
|---------------------------|--------------------|--------|
| | First | Second |
| Management quality | 0.68 | 0.18 |
| Advocacy strength | 0.76 | 0.05 |
| Access to local resources | 0.67 | 0.03 |
| Cultural events | 0.75 | 0.13 |
| Trainings and workshops | 0.40 | 0.51 |
| Training centre use | 0.15 | 0.76 |
| Tree plantation activity | -0.16 | 0.68 |
| Loan management | 0.21 | 0.69 |

Table 1: 1997 Federation grading, select indicators

This historic result¹² is remarkable for two reasons. The perceptions of the assessors were not what we would necessarily expect – the field staff considered those federations well managed that excelled in advocacy and cultural events, not in infrastructure and loan management first. Second, the validity of these items (though not necessarily of the entire rating exercise) was reinforced by the highly significant association that both factor scores showed with member equity. The implication was that field staff were capable of assessing federations succinctly, without involving members in the exercise and with little regard for the financial position. It did nothing to promote participatory monitoring in any form or shape.

By 2000, rating domains were more consistently established, with equal points allocated for institutional, social and economic development as well as for what an explanatory spreadsheet called the “gender perspective”. However, the intra-indicator ratings were difficult – for example, who could reliably establish that a federation had fought out “access to local resources in 100 percent of all cases”, or that the meetings during the reporting quarter ended in “consensus [and were] recorded properly”? These ratings

¹² The analysis is based on Benini (1998).

depended on special data collections and on expert opinion of the field staff; the quarterly monitoring reports filled those needs only partially.

By 2003, the grading exercises were felt to be tedious, and the Social Organization Unit asked the more statistically gifted NBI monitors to develop a system that could make do with the regular monitoring data, and would be less arbitrary. This economized on information collection and produced uniformity across several half-yearly grading exercises. A clear policy was formulated for the scoring of institutional, economic and social development performance.

But its downside was an opaque algorithm that prevented the Social Organization Unit from taking ownership of the process. They simply did not understand it¹³. The formula introduced non-compensatory aspects; a Federation had to score at least 60 percent of the maximum possible point score in two of the three domains in order to be graded A. These maxima were different between domains, with 12 indicators for institutional development (60 points), nine for social (25 points), and only three for economic development (15 points). This system was carried out three times, using the 2nd and 4th quarter 2003 and the 4th quarter 2004 data.

Three results should be brought out at this point. One is that the stability of federation grading could be gauged with greater precision. All in all, about two-thirds of the good and weak federations maintained their respective grades for another six months – a moderate degree of persistence at the extremes.

The second finding was potentially even more important. As one would expect, there were federations that were strong institutionally, socially as well as economically. Trivially, there are also those that were weak in all three domains. Surprisingly, there was yet another group - it counted almost exactly one third of all federations – that, while being economically weak, scored high in both the institutional and the social realms.

This suggested that different development paths might be viable for the federations (at least as long as the RDRS subsidies were flowing). As a concept, this developmental variety was well understood in Rangpur, as conversations over the years gave away, and intuitively must have been clear to field staff as well. There had always been some well-known federations that were economically poor (and even did not care to do much in the way of business projects), yet had feisty social activists.

However, the differences never registered formally in any of the monitoring communications, and never found expression in a differentiated support policy. A number of factors may have blurred them out. The responsibility to produce the grades was delegated to another unit, whom the Social Organization Unit did not want to second-guess. Also, this unit wielded little control over decisions affecting federation income-generating projects, which remained the domain of Livelihoods and Micro-Finance. Thus it neither had an incentive to advance any differentiated support policy along that line nor to fine-tune its monitoring concepts accordingly.

In fact, the impulse to open a mechanistic grading system to a more participatory one came from the outside. In 2004, the director of the RDRS Livelihoods department attended a conference of Lutheran World Service country program representatives in Australia. He brought back a set of forms and instructions that the Cambodia program had been using to

¹³ This became increasingly clear in conversations that the author had with members of the Social Organization Unit, also in data management workshops organized by NBI, in which Social Organization Unit monitor would occasionally participate.

determine phasing-out of aid to village communities. He suggested that the Social Organization unit try them out for federation monitoring.

Surprisingly, this conceptual transfer from a very different context (village communities in Cambodia) and purpose (informing decisions to phase out aid) proved to be creative. The Social Organization Unit created a tool, patterned on this foreign template, that was to enable executive committees to rate their federations on levels of “empowerment” in several domains:

- Institutional development
- Social development
- Civic engagement, and
- Economic development

In a virtual return to the instrument used in 1997, but this time with participatory intent, twenty indicators were selected, five by domain. Each indicator was to have four levels. These definitions proved to be the major challenge, and their clarification in terms of linguistic clarity, precision, likely consensus and independence from other indicators required several revisions. As before, the score ranges that would translate into certain grades were set by RDRS.

But the difference was that this time the tool was carefully translated, pre-tested (in all Unions of one sub-district), and rehearsed with the field staff who would administer it. This was done in the space of a few weeks in all except one federation, with frontline staff instructing the executive committees. The ratings were then proposed in a first session that brought together three of the nine executive committee members, the Social Organization Managers, as well as a member of the sub-district coordination committee to which the federation belonged. They were subsequently validated in a General Meeting, in which a representative of each member group could participate. Reportedly, in most federations committee members and group representatives discussed and argued in bursts of enthusiasm.

Given that this was a new idea, the participants accomplished it with surprising bravado. The results showed considerable agreement between the committees’ self-assessments and the grades based on the monitoring data of six months before.

| Grade - Participatory assessment 2nd Q 2005 | | | | |
|--|----|-----|----|-------|
| Grade - Internal data 4th Q 2004 | A | B | C | Total |
| A | 20 | 31 | 0 | 51 |
| B | 21 | 142 | 27 | 190 |
| C | 0 | 11 | 7 | 18 |
| Total | 41 | 184 | 34 | 259 |

Table 2: Federation Gradings - Traditional and Participatory

The finer structure of the ratings by the executive committees confirmed a degree of independence of the economic development vis-à-vis the other domains, as earlier data used for traditional gradings had already delineated. The point to underline is that that none of the federations that RDRS had rated as strong on the basis of internal data was rated weak on the basis of the ratings by their executive committees, and vice versa.

This novel exercise roused much enthusiasm, not only because it actively involved federation members, but maybe also because the traditional exercise had simply become

boring for the Social Organization Unit and field staff, and they, too welcomed the change. But then the Social Organization Unit fell back into its Rangpur-centric reflexes, producing an English-language report several months later. It gave no feedback to the federations, which in many places had expressed their desire to know more about their neighbors' assessments. In summer 2006, a second round of assisted self-assessment was done, reportedly with more thought given to dissemination of results, but I have no further information on how this was done.

9.4 Other Participatory Instruments

It would be unfair to conclude from the very late introduction of participatory elements into the grading exercises that the federation monitoring, as it was done, discouraged participatory elements altogether. Such elements did exist, sometimes under different names that bore no immediate rapport with monitoring, or in a fashion that did not lead to centralized data collection.

For example, for several years the RDRS field staff have been facilitating self-assessment exercises of the federation executive committees. Although not formally an activity of the sub-district coordination committees, these provide the venue for two members of each federation executive committee to gather for the "Annual Leadership Review Meeting". The representatives take there the results of an internal leadership evaluation that was done publicly (in a General Meeting) in each of the federations. Ordinary members would rate their executive following a form devised in Rangpur. The items vary according to the duties of the different office holders as defined in the federation bye-laws. As an example, the following table details the scores given to the chairman of the Gunaigachh Federation, Ulipur Sub-district, in the 2005 exercise¹⁴.

¹⁴ Based on a translation by Mr. Shanti Debnath, Program Manager, Social Organization Unit.

| Item | Chairman | Maximum points | Points obtained |
|--------------|--|----------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Possesses clear knowledge on Federation development | 10 | 9 |
| 2 | Was present in all the General Meetings and Executive Committee meetings of this year and conducted them efficiently | 10 | 10 |
| 3 | Signed the vouchers, resolutions and other relevant papers after appropriate checking | 10 | 9 |
| 4 | In all meetings encouraged discussion and took all the development initiatives after proper debate among the general membership. Supervised those initiatives efficiently. | 10 | 10 |
| 5 | Maintained liaison with government and NGOs and obtained support | 10 | 8 |
| 6 | Did not create any conflict in Federation or in the community; took initiative to resolve other conflicts | 5 | 4 |
| 7 | Introduced process for the development of new leadership in Federation | 10 | 8 |
| 8 | Dues and renewal fees paid by his/her own neighborhood group were regular in this year and encouraged the other groups to be regular in this regard | 10 | 10 |
| 9 | Meetings and savings of his/her group was regular in this year and encouraged the other groups to be regular in this regard | 10 | 8 |
| 10 | Himself or group are not credit defaulters | 10 | 10 |
| 11 | Active in bringing into the Federation newly graduated groups | 5 | 5 |
| Total | | 100 | 91 |

Table 3: Annual Leadership Review, sample scoring

These results are then compared, and possible actions to improve leadership are debated, at the annual review meetings hosted by the coordination committees. Although facilitated by the field staff of the Social Organization unit, these meetings are largely an internal affair. The resolutions are not transmitted to Rangpur. The point of the exercise is not to contribute yet more centralized data, but rather to stimulate, in a face-saving spirit similar to that of the Appreciative Enquiry methodology (Ludema 1993), General Meeting participants, sub-district committees and field staff to exchange ideas and experience of effective federation management. In a similar vein, the external audit reports are presented and discussed in the annual general meeting of each federation whereas Rangpur makes little use of them beyond verifying that they were publicly displayed and discussed.

9.5 How Do the Federations Monitor RDRS?

So far, I have described the Federation monitoring largely as a system geared to extract information from the field, to move it upwards and to condense it for the benefit of the supporting NGO. This one-way perspective is incomplete, and even if the reverse monitoring of RDRS by the federations is much less observable, communications that constitute monitoring, with or without formal systems, flow in both directions.

While much is known about the 260 federations as a result of the RDRS monitoring efforts, I am largely ignorant of the ways in which the federations have perceived RDRS and have communicated these perceptions. In fact, though not formally evaluated, every meeting between federation members and RDRS staff generates perceptions of RDRS as an organization. The assumption that the members talk extensively about RDRS is natural even if ethnographic insight or detailed data is scarce¹⁵.

¹⁵ As a reviewer of an earlier version pointed out, the scarcity of such data is surprising, given the wealth of data *about* the federations. I can only speculate about the reasons for this imbalance. Perhaps by historic accident, while RDRS has been generous in opening its programs to outside researchers, most of these have been agronomists or public health specialists; none among those who stayed for longer periods of time, to my

The executive committee meetings and General Meetings are regularly attended by the concerned RDRS field workers, first of all by the Social Organization Managers. The meeting resolutions, therefore, constitute a track record not only of the internal debates, but also of how the federations absorb communications from RDRS. To that extent, the resolutions books in which the secretaries write the minutes can be construed to form embryonic monitoring documents. These threads are purely local and are less important than the conversations through which members and other local people update each other on RDRS.

There are two types of fora in which the monitoring of RDRS by federations comes closer to its usual meaning. First, the sub-district coordination committees provide for the systematic exchange of experience among neighboring federations. In the coordination meetings, the participants mutually update their perceptions of RDRS, its policies and qualities. These committees have been meeting for only a few years; their collective opinions are not usually documented in ways that RDRS Rangpur accesses, and thus are rarely known to outsiders.

Second, most executive committee members, in their long careers as RDRS program participants, have attended training courses, and most of them have been in more trainings than they can specifically remember. These courses bring together people from different federations. Thus, both officially (through the messages that RDRS aims to convey) and in informal exchanges, they expose RDRS to repeated comparisons. These comparison opportunities should be considered as a surrogate monitoring system even if they do not leave written traces. They are all the better informed because a considerable fraction – Federation leaders estimated between 10 and 50 percent – of RDRS group members, including executive committee members themselves, work with other NGOs as well. Some federation representatives have yet another window to look at RDRS, by participating in coordination meetings that the government's district commissioners and sub-district officers conduct with NGOs.

Substantively, Nath (2005) has uncovered a number of recurrent elements. Members conceive of their federations as highly multi-purpose associations, and they expect RDRS to support them in numerous activities. This expectation is shared by non-member local residents and can make life difficult particularly for executive committee members. The communities assume that the federations have received generous resources from RDRS and as a result impute a large capacity to aid needy non-members.

At the same time, members do not see RDRS as a monolithic body. They are aware of conflicts between RDRS departments. For example, they know that credit workers discourage group members from joining the federations. One may assume that distinctions of RDRS's internal states correlate with experience and positions. This transpires from executive committee members who have come up the ranks of RDRS landless laborer and marginal farmer groups over the last ten to twenty years. They have been to umpteen training courses

knowledge, was an ethnographer or spent extended periods of time with particular federations. Second, and of more general interest, RDRS governance arrangements are typical of Bangladeshi NGOs, with no or very few poor people form their client base represented in formal decision-making bodies. RDRS has not had federation members incorporated into its management structures, let alone governing board (This is reflected in the discussion of the extent of participatory elements elsewhere in this article). Other factors discouraging "perceptions of perceptions" are the standardized monitoring format, which prefigures the way RDRS field staff seek information from federations, and – although I have noticed this mainly in the contexts of RDRS household surveys – a reluctance to openly talk about the quality of their relations with NGOs; many federation members presumably are borrowers from multiple NGO micro-credit programs. In general, they do not wish their membership in programs competing with RDRS's to be known.

and have assimilated an amount of “Banglish” (English and Bangla mixed) development lingo. These cognitive and language acquisitions happen slowly and in layers; for example, the use among federation leaders of the English-language “advocacy” is nowadays almost common-place; the fashionable “rights-based” seems too new to the RDRS culture to put its stamp on their habits – as yet.



Eye camps are one of numerous activities by RDRS programs with which Federations overlap. While this involvement creates benefits for both sides, another, almost unperceived effect is to open RDRS to greater inspection by Federation members. - Photo: RDRS Health Program, Lalmonirhat

Figure 6: Eye camp at Durgapur Federation, Lalmonirhat, 2005

I illustrate the close, if mostly informal monitoring of RDRS by the federations with the experience from a specific program cooperation. In Lalmonirhat District, an estimated half of all pregnant women are seen in RDRS ante-natal clinics. The Health Program director estimated that about one in every ten of these women was referred to the program by the federations. Leaders as well as a good number of ordinary members – often in batches of 50 assembled for a one-day event at the federation center – have undergone orientations in various health-related problems and programs. In about two dozen federation centers in the district, RDRS built an additional room for its eye clinics. The federations may use the eye clinic furniture for other purposes as well, but otherwise have no specialized role in the clinics and the occasional surgical camps held there.

While federations also referred a number of eye patients, including emergency cases sent to Lalmonirhat, as well as leprosy and TB patients, it would be incorrect to consider them the principal intake agents for the program. This role was being filled by 30 Community Health Workers, half of whom are specialized in eye care, the others in TB and leprosy work. The federations’ role remained limited. They offered the program the use of its infrastructure, assumed a diffuse general health education role and performed opportunistic case work.

In combination, this certainly helped to improve poor people's access to health care. But some federation leaders expressed regret that RDRS was not considering the federations more when deciding the location of Health Program activities. One went so far as to suggest that if more satellite clinics were housed in federation centers, some federations could allocate a road front room for a pharmacy and thus gain added prominence (plus some rental income) from this service to the community. The suggestion tells us that the federations scan the RDRS programs for new opportunities of cooperation. Similarly, the decisions taken by federation leaders to refer needy persons to specific RDRS programs, rather than to government services, are the result of long and detailed monitoring from their side.

10. DISCUSSION

The first remarkable finding on the monitoring by RDRS of 260 grassroots associations is the strict regularity with which it has been performed for almost ten years. The series of quarterly reports has continued uninterrupted and with full coverage of the 260. Reports were usually distributed within two months after the quarter-year. The reports were in English; as such they were only partially accessible to fieldworkers many of whom may be able to understand the tables, but not the connecting text. They were not shared with the federations.

This regularity is less surprising when one considers the relatively favorable environment for data collection. The rural parts of Bangladesh benefit from a dense road network, and RDRS has enjoyed good transport and, with its speedboats, reaches federations even on remote Brahmaputra sandbar islands during the flood season. All support staff and the majority of the Federation committee members are literate in the same language. Mobile phone coverage is almost ubiquitous; most of the field staff and, since 2006, all committee chairpersons have had mobile phones. RDRS owned over 170 personal computers in 2006 (von Büнау 2006: 13), or roughly one per every 12 staff persons; the Social Organization Unit in Rangpur used four. All this has provided ample opportunities for cross-checking and follow-up, with modest effort and little cost.

The major challenges that the Federation monitoring has faced, therefore, are not the technical infrastructure of information management or the reliability of the information. They are posed by problems of relevance, validity, analytic skills and usage, and by participatory processes.

Superficially, the relevance of the monitoring reports invites cynical comment – the fact that they appear regularly is much more important than their contents; and RDRS has made great efforts, in Federation and other program monitoring, to demonstrate, through stiffly regular report distributions, that its management is on top of the donor-supported programs. Such behavior is widely found in all kinds of formal organizations that care about their public self-descriptions (Feldman and March 1981), regardless of the rapport between the cost and the direct decision-making value of the information.

At a closer glance, the monitoring information is of variable relevance. Some standardized indicators that speak to institutional and social development have clearly been very well chosen in the federation context. For example, the number of women in the executive committee is a valid, simple, easy-to-collect, and mostly reliable piece of data, and one on whose relevance RDRS, the federation constituencies, and the donors agree.

On the other hand, RDRS has been struggling to get a handle on the economic side of the federations. Only in 2005 were the external audits so reorganized that the balance sheets and profit-and-loss statements became comparable across all 260 federations. The quarterly

rhythm of the reporting has contributed nothing extra in terms of useful information on these problems; less frequent, but more analytic reports would have made them more relevant.

A related question concerns the discovery of unanticipated, yet very relevant concepts, and whether the use of standardized indicators has discouraged it. Earlier, I observed that federations, in an unknown number of cases, arranged emergency employment for destitute persons. This transpired from conversations with executive committee members, but the fluidity of federation-provided employment, let alone of short-term employment, was such that it was never picked up for indicator development.

The validity of the measures that the Social Organization Unit defined to express various components of federation performance is equally challenging, given the complexity of these organizations. An example may suffice. Surprisingly, perhaps, to outsiders, there is nothing like a straightforward answer to “How many members do the federations have?” As with other kinds of voluntary associations, e.g. religious groups, there is a basic distinction between purely nominal members, active ones contributing interaction and resources, and formal office bearers. In practice, the line between the first two is left vague, to facilitate reactivation (Luhmann 1977: 300). For its statistics, however, RDRS needed to lay down firm criteria. Some of these are questionable. That a member should have to deposit her savings with the RDRS Micro-Finance program in order to count as active in her federation does not seem appropriate¹⁶.

Over the years, in a bid to adequately reflect the growing diversity of the federations and out of concern for the validity of performance measures – the two, of course, are connected -, the number of variables used in the quarterly data collections went up. To a degree, this was helpful. For example, the federation grading could be based on a wider selection of indicators. Scales and indices could be formed. But this wealth of data – which was usually very complete and, by all accounts, reliable – was not matched with adequate analytical effort. One need not even talk of econometric approaches that some of the support strategies and the rich data might have called for. Already the production of simple descriptive or comparative statistics exceeded the skills of the Social Organization Unit or the cooperation potential among various monitoring units in Rangpur. For example, between 2002 and 2005 field staff and federation leaders reported escalating thefts from tree plantations. These losses were threatening the main federation business. It would have been easy to chart a simple time series of tree holdings, or map hotspots of loss, from the quarterly reports to corroborate the anecdotal information. However, since the reporting mindset was purely cross-sectional – one quarterly dataset at a time -, this was not done.

The inadequacy of analytic resources in intermediary NGOs may be a structural problem in social movements that favor greater organizational density among the poor. The diversity and dynamics of grassroots organizations tend to complicate the monitoring systems, yet ultimately prove too elusive to capture. For example, the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme in Pakistan for a number of years tracked the progress of its village organizations through an “Institutional Maturity Index”. The index incorporated as many as 120 indicators. Eventually, the managers “concluded that capacity development could not be tracked quantitatively given the costs and time required to collect the necessary data and the difficulty of capturing a moving target” (Morgan 1999: 17, footnote 23).

This observation leads on to the question whether participatory monitoring approaches might reduce the burden of data collection and analysis. At the same time greater

¹⁶ Some staff members of the Social Organization unit too have privately expressed this view for several years, apparently without affecting the policy.

participation in monitoring might generate measures that reflect the progress of the supported organizations in valid and relevant terms. It is surprising that RDRS introduced participatory elements to its Federation monitoring only very late – after ten years of support – and rather timidly. After all, the RDRS Federations have been highly participatory innovations, to be rated possibly between “partnership” and “transformative” on the Chambers’ Participation Ladder (reproduced in Chambers 2006: 9).

Yet, the federation members’ participation in monitoring appears stuck somewhere between “induced” and “consultative”. One main reason, in this author’s view, is the managed participation regime (Kanter 1982; Thompson 2005) in which RDRS has kept the supported federations, and which has not allowed them to effectively suggest changes to the monitoring formats. For example, a particularly active and visionary federation chairman, some years ago, proposed a mapping of all poor households in his Union; and some neighboring federations went ahead with other mappings such as of the local flood areas. The Social Organization Unit was not flexible enough to assimilate these initiatives.

Compared to this attitude of an NGO bureaucracy, the participation literature is awash with optimism regarding flexibility and creativity. In another article, emblematic by its title “Participation and Numbers”, Chambers (2005) illustrates how empowered groups of poor people can perform most or all elementary operations used in quantitative monitoring, including counting, calculating, measuring, estimating and valuing. However, the examples that Chambers gives of taking participatory approaches to scale fall short of the numbers or the continuity that a monitoring system like RDRS’ is expected to achieve; most of them concern one-time exercises. In fact, a community sanitation program in Bangladesh that he cites, and which has been using a very creative participatory monitoring (Kar and Pasteur 2005), suffered from methodological dilution as it was being expanded to more and more villages.

I am not as sanguine that the infusion of participatory elements into systems set up to monitor large numbers of internally complex local organizations will by itself help overcome the limitations that indigenous support NGOs face. No amount of participation by members could possibly substitute for the scarce analytical skills that help the Social Organization Unit in Rangpur make sense of the data from 260 federations. What participation does well, however, is to improve on relevance and validity by providing greater cognitive interpenetration between the NGO and the supported local organizations.

The history of the Federation monitoring provides a nice illustration for this process: In the late nineties, during the turmoil and confusion of its micro-finance crisis, RDRS lost the ability to track member equity in the federation accounts, an important financial concept expressing poor people’s genuine commitment to their organizations (Cracknell 1996). However, over the years, and as a result also of involving federation committee members in numerous accounts training sessions, RDRS adopted a simple proxy measure. This is the sum of cash in hand, cash in bank plus estimated (by executive committees) value of investments in income-generating projects. This equity proxy has been available for all federations and in most quarter-years.

In other words, the major limitation of the Federation monitoring system has not been its lack of participation per se, but an imbalance between concepts and the data couched in them, with most of the concepts flowing downwards and most of the data flowing upwards. This cannot be avoided in the reality of aid chains, but it can be mitigated if monitoring is recast as an element of mutually observing systems, rather than a one-way perceptual activity. As I indicated, both the federations and RDRS observe each other constantly and

intensely. If RDRS explained to the federations not only “what” it needs to know about them, but also “why”, the “how” could be worked out more productively.

11. CONCLUSION

This study traced the evolution of a monitoring system for numerous local organizations of the poor. The supporting NGO operates in a relatively privileged environment as far as access and communications go. These findings, therefore, cannot readily be generalized. In a less forgiving environment, monitoring systems of similar intents may have to struggle with more basic challenges of data collection and transmission.

Some findings, though, appear to be of wider interest. I present them here in two parts. First, I highlight a small number of patterns that can plausibly be expected to recur in other contexts. Then I comment on the relevance, in the light of this experience, of the four literatures called upon in the initial theorizing on monitoring grassroots organizations.

The ambition to document the progress of the 260 federations in a coherent manner ran into two constant problems. The hybrid character of these organizations, their internal complexity and dynamics, created a series of validity issues. This bred a tendency to add more indicators, occasionally punctuated by creative simplification. While more data was collected, the supporting NGO was unable to recruit and retain monitoring staff with adequate analytical skills. This limitation is likely to affect local NGOs that compete with better endowed agencies in the same skilled labor market.

Moreover, as we have seen, a bureaucratic approach to standardized, extractive one-way data collection has coexisted with structures of participatory deliberation. Only after many years, and to a modest extent, have the two been connected. Given the functions of standardized monitoring for project funding, and of participation for mobilizing the poor, the co-existence side by side of arrangements with very different participatory content is to be expected in similar contexts.

Practical as well as theoretical consequences ensue. Where an NGO works with numerous organizations of the poor, the monitoring burden has to be kept manageable by limiting the number of variables, investing more in analysis and dissemination, and tackling validity issues aggressively. This last endeavor also means involving representatives of the monitored organizations in the design of data collection and uses. This will require thoughtful balancing between project reporting requirements and the information demands of supported organizations.

Under pressure to demonstrate impact, development NGOs will need to adjust their monitoring systems. This may happen in different, sometimes opposing directions. NGOs wishing to put their stamp on policy discussions will need to enlarge and further professionalize their research and advocacy units, with monitoring systems that support those adequately. Others, content to survive with a portfolio of variable subcontracting projects, may emphasize basic low-cost monitoring that strengthens their reputation as competent implementers, leaving evaluations and policy fall-out to their principals. In the Bangladesh NGO population, this distinction will likely grow sharper over time. NGOs who monitor, among other project entities, also a range of grassroots organizations will hardly escape from these pressures any more than those linked to fewer local partners.

The current literatures on monitoring development programs and on participatory development do not yet provide all the needed elements for an adequate understanding of the monitoring function. The context of the first essentially remains the principal-agent risk in aid

chains and as such fixated on one-way information flows with intent to control. Conversely, while “participatory development at least holds the potential of building a common language community between the architects and recipients of development programmes” (Williams 2004: 572), issues of scale, continuity and coherence in the monitoring function have not been convincingly addressed. The experience of this particular monitoring system offers little to modify such a verdict. Conceptual imports from evolutionary models such as in Davies’ (op.cit.) story-based monitoring may find a rich empirical counterpart in the successes and challenges that field staff and the organized poor have gone through, but transporting this knowledge up and down the aid chain is likely to leave it disfigured in the thorns and thistles of agency scripts, language and cultural barriers, and the logical conundrums of aggregating stories across tiers.

I have vague hopes that the intellectual discipline of econometricians (I am not one of them), with their ability to estimate distinct selection, context and program effects, will increasingly brace up the study of collective organizations of the poor. Their rigor and clarity should be employed to give direction to monitoring systems of the kind studied here. Their results can then be fed into other approaches. For example, model outliers could be used as sample strata to select for in-depth ethnographic studies or for the elicitation of stories that are fewer in number, but can be revisited for longer periods. The harvest from these endeavors would then be fed back to the econometric debates and to the monitoring and survey designs that supply needed data, ultimately perhaps meriting a genuine “mixed-methods” label.

Regardless of such speculations, the experience of RDRS Bangladesh reminds us that monitoring takes place within social systems of mutual observation, that is it always two-ways, and that the extent and quality of interpenetration among the observers will largely determine the value of the information thus produced. Further work on monitoring large networks of poor people’s organizations will require more case studies from practitioners as well as stronger theoretical frameworks to interpret them. Currently, no elaborated theory exists regarding the relationship between systems of mutual observation and NGO monitoring. The need for theoretical development in this area is urgent in the light of NGO governance and accountability pressures, and of the renewed importance that formal organizations of the poor is receiving in development policy. This case study has been written as an invitation for others to engage in this line of work.

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14. AUTHOR INFORMATION

Aldo Benini came in contact with RDRS Bangladesh in 1979 for the first time. He worked as its Program Coordinator 1983 – 86. Since 1997, he has been assisting RDRS as one of its Strategic Advisors, focusing on the reform of its monitoring systems, impact surveys and the Federations.

Benini has a dual career in rural development 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.

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

He can be contacted at abenini@starpower.net.