

# **‘Empowering the Poor through Federations’ (EPF) project: Process, Progress & Prospect (The Final Evaluation Report)**

The Final Evaluation Report of the Empowering the Poor through Federations project,  
Implemented by RDRS Bangladesh, co-funded by the European Commission & DCA, FCA,  
CoS, NCA)

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## Abstract

**Aim:** This paper is a final evaluation report of the EPF project of RDRS. It presents findings on the changes that RDRS Bangladesh implemented EPF project brought in the lives of the poor, and in their capacity to challenge their exclusion and subordination. It also identifies those processes through which changes have taken place in the context of disadvantaged systems of power and unequal social relations.

**Method:** Based on performances and activities, the Federations are divided into three categories (Grade A, B and C). The evaluation team chose 27 Union Federations of all three grades from eight project districts as their research area. Twenty-seven case studies were conducted spanning 27 Federations. A series of key informant interviews and in-depth interviews were held with the government officers, Union Parishad chairs and members, civil society members and the local elites. In each union, Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were conducted with the Federation leaders and members. A quantitative survey on 825 households in 27 villages within the catchment areas of 27 Federations was carried on for triangulation. The qualitative data was analyzed thematically in line with the principles of grounded theory. Pseudo names were used for people and places while writing the report.

**Findings:** We recognize the significance of Federations for the well being of the poor populace in northwestern Bangladesh. Our research reveals that the Federations' led activism and programs have brought affirmative changes in the lives and cognitive horizons of the poor, and in their capacity to challenge their exclusion and subordination. The Federations have been instrumental for numerous poor individuals in gaining of more direct access to government resources and services. Most importantly, the Federations provided the poor with the opportunity to experience their unity in claiming and establishing their rights, which reignited their belief in the 'power of the collective'. The majority of Federations as they exist today is manifested by a strong sense of ownership and renewed spirit of the members, particularly, in the backdrop of the success in recent Union Parishad elections. The study reveals while some of Federations have gained financial autonomy to some extent and the majority of them attained decent infrastructural capacity, but the relational dependency of specially the newly formed federations on the implementing agency RDRS Bangladesh is high . On the basis of identifying two most crucial themes of the project, the stronger empowerment prospect of the poor and marginalized and relatively long time for them to achieve self-reliance, we propose a programme design based on a new linkage approach.

## **Executive summary**

The Union Federations (UF), backed up by the technical and financial assistance of RDRS, have had deep influence on the wellbeing of numerous poor and marginalized individuals in north western Bangladesh, perceived widely as the poorest region of the country. The project injected awareness, at least, among the Federation members on the various forms of exclusion and marginality starting from basic services, citizenship claims to universal human rights provisions. The firm conviction among the poor on the 'power of collective', which has been built upon their long-standing engagement with the Federations and tested during the Union Parishad (UP) elections, is the highlight of the history of this project.

### **An organization with an admirable reputation**

The results of a quantitative survey spanning 825 randomly chosen inhabitants of 27 Unions show that the majority of the populace in the operation areas is aware of the Federations' activities. Often the people seem to have satisfactory opinions on Federations' activities with particular references to corruption and governance. The democratic practices that exist in the Federations, especially, in relation to their Executive Committee elections drew much attention from the local bureaucrats, NGOs and politicians. In a number of instances the Federations' leadership, made up of the poor people themselves, showed ample signs of efficiency in managing and running their organizations. The organizational culture and practice of the Federations reflect a series of newly built institutional practices. The regular practice of record keeping is the salient practice among them.

### **Influencing the local government institutions**

The success of the Federations in demanding and claiming the rights of the rural poor greatly depends on their ability to influence the local government institutions in their favor. The Federations learned how to make use of the number of their memberships in the local electoral bodies as 'vote banks' and thus influence the institutions. Besides playing this strategic but indirect role as a group, scores of individual Federations members stood in the 2011 UP election as candidates. To everybody's surprise, as many as 559 Federation members were elected in the Union Parishad election as UP members, while 27 were elected as UP chairmen. It was a silent revolution, which did not enjoy much attention from the mainstream media, but significantly changed the class based demographic character of the Union Parishad committees across the eight districts in northwestern Bangladesh.

A number of case studies show that the growing influence of the Federations was critical in the gaining of more access to government safety net programs (VGD, VGF etc.) by of the poor. However, after all these achievements, the Federations actually could do very little in establishing the right of the landless on those *khash* lands which had been occupied by the influential local elites. This not necessarily points to the limitation of

Federation *activism* but does expose the fact as to what a tumultuous task it is to challenge the core of the class establishment. The Federations members, however, did not give up their hope. They have kept the practice of identifying and listing the *khush* lands and the names of their illegal occupiers. When the time is right they will enforce their claim again. The capacity of the Federations to engage in the processes of electoral politics critically has the potential to change the structure to a significant extent, a structure that perpetuates poverty and powerlessness in rural Bangladesh. However, through the same process, the 'democratic model' of Federations can be stunted by existing corrupt political culture as well. Though only revealed in one case it calls for close attention to the dynamics of relationships between the UP and UF committees.

### **The impact of the EPF project**

The Federation Resource centers, built on the Federation owned land on a cost-sharing basis with RDRS, should be seen as a solid impact of the 'Empowering the Poor through Federations' (EPF) project. In their early days the Federation did not have a fixed place to hold their meetings and to run their activities. At present most of the Federations have in their possession solid infrastructural bases comprising of office buildings, training centers, warehouses, *Jono Tottho Kendros* and so on. These infrastructural arrangements have helped the Federations in achieving a serious institutional capacity and earning an important recognition in the community. On the other hand, this infrastructural establishment was critical for the Federations getting registered by the Ministry of Social Welfare.

As regards to financial solvency, among other things, the roadside tree plantation program of the Federations will offer some financial strength to the Federations in the future. Besides, the Federations run a number of income generating programs (e.g. fish pond, computer centre, renting out of the training centre and warehouse etc.) in order to achieve economic sustainability of their organizations. These income-generating programs also create some employment for the unemployed poor. However, the resource and the financial capacity of the Federations can hardly match the huge need of employment of the rural poor. The Federations also run a series of job orientated training programs on tailoring, goat rearing, fish cultivation etc. A number of case studies demonstrate that these training programs have some positive and long-term impacts especially on poor women both in enterprise development and employment. Some case studies also reveal the fact that learning was not always the best appeal for the poor to attending the training programs, but rather the attendances fees. The introduction of the Youth Forum as a wing of the Federations incorporated the children of the poor people into the Federations framework. The activities of the Youth Forum in preventing child marriage and dowry are very visible in the community. They also run a series of campaigns on human rights provisions and so on, participate in celebrating the major days (e.g. Women's Rights day, Independence Day etc). The impact of these awareness-building activities is not always assessable but through these activities the Federations raise their profiles in the rural community and the youth learn about various social issues.

Case studies show that the Federations members especially the women who have been elected in the Union Parishad election often stood out as informed and outspoken individuals in claiming the rights and provisions of the poor. In a number of key informant interviews with the UP Chairs, it has been revealed that these trained women sometimes pose a serious challenge to the prevailing unfriendly policies directed towards the poor and activities of the local government. Perhaps the most significant achievement of the EPF project is these outspoken and trained politicized poor people.

### **The critical question of sustainability of the Federations**

The majority of Federation leadership may not be mentally prepared for the post-project reality on a long-term basis but apex bodies of federations have been established and it is likely that if they grow in strength, federations will be more sustainable in the future. While many lack capability to see the feasible paths in the future and the navigational tools to make informed and independent choices, there are several UFs that have the potential and have undertaken many actions independently. They exhibit remarkably limited 'capacity to aspire' for self-reliance when the project terminates but this may have as much to do with the culture as a UF Chairperson described as a relationship between a father and a son where independence and break-away is not the desired aspiration.

The concern of the end of aid allocation generates certain anxieties among the Federations' leadership. The Federation leaders identified a number of areas in their organization, which could be affected by the absence of RDRS. While some showed concerns about payment of the agreed salary of the volunteers, others feared that the termination of aid will deprive them from having income generating projects from RDRS as well as to continue splendid rallies to mark international days. However, many of these projects are signed partnership between the UFs and RDRS and independent of this project so the fears may not be significant. Also, there are several UFs that have the ability to pay for volunteers out of their funds while others have decided to divide the volunteers tasks amongst themselves so that the UFs activities are not hampered. Some felt that without the support of RDRS they will fail to replicate the much talked about executive committee election process, which has been identified as 'democratic model' because it requires high expenditure. However, budget analysis shows that for this activity RDRS only gave limited amounts for elections (BDT 4000 = 40 euro per UF) and even if voter education and post election training is included the total costs are less than BDT 5000 or 50 euro which is not a very high amount and most federations would be able to raise this sum. Besides, in 2007, UFs had continued with elections so it is likely that they will manage this activity without RDRS aid.

RDRS is a prominent and influential NGO in northwestern Bangladesh. The exercise of voice and agency by the Federation members are often inspired by the support and back-up of RDRS. The development history analysis of the Federations reveals the long lasting relationship between RDRS and the Federations. Over the years, Federations

have gone through significant institutional and organizational development under the consecutive development projects activated by RDRS. In many occasions with the active support of RDRS the Federations have challenged the system of brokerage of traditional intermediaries (elites, politicians, goons etc). Hence the Federations gradually developed some degree of reliance on the technical linkages, human and resource routes of RDRS. Through such processes Federation members often began to think and identify RDRS as a *supporter* who could be trusted in their fights against the exploitative traditional social relations and abusive elites and but, importantly, not as an equal *partner*.

### **Recommendations**

Our research reveals that the Federations' led activism and programs have brought affirmative changes in the lives and cognitive horizons of the poor, and in their capacity to challenge their exclusion and subordination. However, although the EPF project has had a significant impact on the empowerment of poor people, the project couldn't generate among them the essential 'capacity to aspire' to rely on their own means in running their organization independently from the assistance of aid and importantly RDRS. While we are conscious that this was not part of the project design, it is still a desirable way forward. Therefore, we emphasize on the need of innovation on the part of RDRS and DanChurchAid in designing a new strategy with the goal of turning the Federations into self-reliant organizations. We assume an important role of RDRS in the prospective development project, within which the frame of relationship between the Federations and RDRS will be reconfigured. The majority of Federations have gone through consecutive development projects activated by RDRS. The current EPF project is built on a 'Rights Based Approach'. Prior to this project the EC Co-financing project was based on a 'Capacity Building Approach'. We propose a future program design, which incorporates certain elements of both of these projects but is fundamentally based on a new 'Linkage Approach'. The proposed Linkage Approach aims to revolutionize the idea and the potential of social capital in the empowerment project of poor people. The linkage approach would expand the potential of linkage generation both vertically and horizontally with other NGOs, the Social Welfare Ministry, the local government institution, the local elites and civil society members etc. Within the linkage approach, the Federations will enhance intra-group networking and exchange of information. This process will expose the organizations of poor with different resource, human and technical routes of the NGOs. As a result, we suggest, they will have more freedom to choose from, more negotiating power and more agency over their actions.

## **Introduction**

Poverty alleviation is one of the most important crosscutting issues in all policies of government of Bangladesh. Strong and efficient local government may be the most important agency for implementing the poverty alleviation agenda of the government. However, in Bangladesh local government is generally inefficient, unable to deliver adequate social services, uninformed about its responsibilities, and ill-managed by the central government. Especially, when it comes to providing services for the poor, the local government fails to address their needs. Improving government accountability could alleviate many of these problems. But, there is a real absence of social accountability of local government (the Union Parishads). Due to lack of social capital and networks, the poor suffer most to extract services from the authorities. To fill these gaps, many NGOs have turned to service delivery models and continue to dominate the NGO culture in the country.

To overcome these limitations, some NGOs have undertaken programs to lead general awareness campaigns that concentrate on reforms to existing state policies. They promote direct civic engagement with the state. These rights-based programs increase demand-side pressure on relevant public authorities. The principal strategy involves developing local level collective institutions and provide effective representation for the poor and extreme poor of the local society. These institutions are comprised of representatives of the poor and extreme poor and authorized and legitimized by the local community. RDRS Bangladesh is the pioneer organization in Bangladesh to initiate such rights-based programs. Its union-based federations started in early 1990s and have been able to create pro-poor grassroots organizations in northern Bangladesh. By 2011, RDRS established 357 such federations with funding mainly from EU through two consecutive projects. This report evaluates the accomplishments and learning of the EPF project.

## **EPF Program: brief description**

According to the project documents, the overall objective(s) of the project is: “to empower the rural poor to claim their rights by way of critical engagement with local government, through representative, effective and well-governed community based organizations.” The specific objectives of the project are:

1. Expansion of the constituency and increased intensity of collective power of the poor by strengthening old Federations and the formation of new Federations (in new Districts), alongside regional and national promotion of community-based organizations.
2. Increase in Union Federations adopting and complying with an agreed constitution and democratic practices while establishing and promoting diversity and gender equality

3. Improved organizational accountability and transparency, through capacity building of leaders and
4. Enhanced activism and engagement with duty bearers on various social and related vulnerability issues especially women's rights, among Federation membership and the wider rural community

The location of the project is Northern Bangladesh. The project has been implemented in 51 Sub-districts (upazilas) of eight Districts (Panchagarh, Thakurgaon, Dinajpur, Nilphamari, Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Rangpur, Gaibandha) in Rangpur Division and one district in Dhaka Division (Jamalpur) Northern Bangladesh, which forms the current RDRS Bangladesh working area.

The main target group of the project was 353 Union Federations and their membership in nine Districts. There are 199,245 female members in the union federations and 19,391 are also women forum member amongst them. All interested youth can be a member of the youth forum between the ages of 12-18. There are 19,656 members in the youth forums.

The main activities of the project included forming 83 new UF federations; strengthening federations by developing action plans with UFs to expand and engage membership; facilitate Federations to establish and support youth wings and women's forums; arrange construction of low-cost multi-purpose UF Community Resource Centers; convene national and regional workshops to promote democratic CBO movement; establish NGO-CBO Support kiosk to track, support CBOs, small NGOs, intermediaries; facilitate regular, democratic elections to Federations executive committees; promote good governance by orientation of elected leadership, constitutional compliance, regular committee meetings and trainings; train the newly elected UP chairs and members on good governance; establish information advocacy units and; promote advocacy campaigns.

The expected results of the project include new Union Federations established with increased membership; increased active membership of Union Federations; established CBO support cells; increase in Unions Federations having regular elections and practicing good governance; increase in women's leadership in Federations; a majority of Union Federations will establish and maintain management performance, record- and book keeping to a satisfactory standard; enhanced transparency and accountability of UF finances; enhanced networking and co-ordination of the Federation movement; inclusion of marginalized and poor in federations; increased active role and influence on local rights and development issues by Federations, local NGOs; increased knowledge and understanding of pro-poor issues by local decision-makers, other civil society actors; stronger practice of local democratic processes and decision making; enhanced access to public resources by UF and their members; increased involvement of UF members in local elected government and other community bodies and; increased budget allocations towards the poor.



## **Methodology**

This study aims to evaluate the performance “Empowering the Poor through Federations” project by assessing its implementation techniques and achievement of its stated objectives. Specifically, the evaluation concentrated on the following specific objectives:

- i. To assess the effectiveness of the project (i.e., the extent to which the project stated objectives are being achieved or can be achieved).
- ii. To assess sustainability of the project (i.e., the likelihood of the project continuing after donor support);
- iii. To assess the relevance of the project (i.e. appropriateness of the project in relation to the needs and situation in its context);
- iv. To assess the efficiency of the project (i.e. availability and use of input, cost-effectiveness, timeliness); and
- v. To assess democracy and governance practices.

The study objectives mentioned above have been achieved through triangulation of different research methods (quantitative and qualitative) and data received from these sources such as 1) Secondary documents review 2) RDRS and DCA staff reflection workshops 3) Qualitative studies including KIIs with different stakeholders and FGDs 4) Quantitative house hold survey covering all nine districts.

The objective of this study methodology is to collect enough information so that the evaluation of the EPF project can be done using the following DAC criteria: quality of design, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability.

The research was carried out at 27 federations in eight of nine districts covered by the project. Three federations from each district were selected for the study based on their **performance** and **age** – one good performing federation, one average performing federation and one struggling federation. Half of these 27 federations were selected from old federations (that existed before the initiation of this specific project) and the remaining 50 percent were selected from the federations that were established during the lifetime of the present project. The federations were selected in consultation with RDRS staffs. I tried to implement an appropriate sampling technique to capture the information covering all types of representatives of the target groups. By critically studying every type of federations mentioned above, we assessed the implementation techniques of the project and achievement of its objectives and also determined the key factors and actors that make a difference in a federation’s efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability.

The **qualitative** research involved 27 case studies (nine case studies for good practicing federations, nine case studies for average practicing federations and nine case studies

for struggling federations). For each case, we conduct one FGD comprising of federation members. We also conducted in depth Key Informant Interviews. Key Informants included key staffs of the federations including project director and coordinator, UP Chairs and members, UNO, Upazilla Social Welfare Officer and donor representatives. In Depth Interviews will included local NGO staffs, local elites and general public. Number of interviews was decided in consultation with RDRS and DCA staff members.

**The quantitative survey** included one village in each of the study federations' catchment area (27 in total). Through assessing the ordinary household level effectiveness and impact of different initiatives taken by federations, this research tried to discern what works and what does not work for the poor in terms of collective actions taken by the federations. The survey provided an opportunity to evaluate and compare the efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability of Federations from a wider community perspective.

A two-stage random cluster sampling has been used to select sampling units. The first stage was the random selection of villages from the study federations' catchment area and the second stage was the selection of ordinary household members in the villages systematically. The village was chosen randomly to assess the village level effectiveness and impact of the federations. From each randomly chosen village, 30 households were randomly included in the survey. Equal number of male and female respondents was interviewed during the survey to capture the gender-based differences of perception regarding federations.

The main objective of the survey was to obtain a representative sample of respondents from federation catchment areas to estimate measurable indicators with desired precision and to allow comparison of the federations' performance.

Considering the importance of the study and the limited time, a team of 21 researchers were involved in conducting the field work over a period of two months (November-December, 2011)

## **Main Findings and Analysis**

In this chapter we present the major findings and analysis of the study emerging from the numeric, textual and empirical data collected through a range of techniques and tools. The chapter is divided into five sections.

1. **Appropriateness and relevance:** The first section very briefly assesses the appropriateness and relevance of the 'Empowering the poor through Federations' (EPF) project in terms of project objective, stakeholders need, project design, and policy relevance.

2. **Representativeness, efficiency, governance and effectiveness:** The second section evaluates the representativeness, efficiency, governance and effectiveness of the Union Federations. The objective of this section is to evaluate these aspects of Federations based on their records of performances and achievements. In addition to that, this section captures the opinions and perceptions of a range of external social actors about the Federations in an attempt to comprehend the reputations of Federations in their operation areas.

3. **Development process, outcomes (effectiveness) and Impact:** The third section demonstrates the impact of both planned and unplanned outcomes of the project. Here the objective is to illuminate those aspects of change that RDRS run EPF project have brought in the lives and cognitive horizons of the poor, and in their capacity to challenge their exclusion and subordination. Focus is also placed on demonstrating those processes through which the changes have taken place in the context of disadvantaged systems of power and unequal social relations in rural Bangladesh and also on identifying the challenges that are encountered in the process.

4. **Sustainability:** The fourth section discusses the critical question of sustainability of the Union Federations in the absence of development assistance. The study reveals while some of Federations have gained financial autonomy to some extent and the majority of them attained decent infrastructural capacity, overall the relational dependency on the implementing agency RDRS Bangladesh is high, specially for the newer federations. We analyze the aspirational capacity of the poor people's leadership for self-reliance in the backdrop of dominant form of NGO/CBO relationships in Bangladesh.

5. **Recommendation:** On the basis of identifying two most crucial themes of the project, the stronger empowerment prospect of the poor and marginalized and relatively slow movement of them for self-reliance, we propose a programme design based on a new

linkage approach. The exploration of the higher potential of 'social capital' both vertical and horizontal forms the core of the proposed linkage based approach. This approach particularly emphasizes on the explorations of multi-lineal bridging links for the Union Federations with a set of intermediary development organizations rather than solely depending on the implementing agency. This process will expose the organizations of poor with different resource, human and technical routes of the NGOs. As a result, we envisage, they will have more freedom to choose from, more negotiating power and more agency over their actions. This can plausibly create more enabling environment for them to experience and appreciate a changed equation with RDRS- one towards greater self-reliance and equal partnership.

Moreover, the issues of gender, governance, horizontal coordination etc have been discussed in all the sections as relevant.

## SECTION ONE

### **The 'Empowering the Poor through Federation' (EPF) project: appropriateness and relevance**

#### **Poverty and power in rural Bangladesh**

The rural population accounts for about three-fourth of population in Bangladesh, one of the world's poorest countries. Although the intensity of poverty has been arrested to some extent, social disparity and inequality remained persistently the same (Afsar 2010). There is now broad agreement among scholars and practitioners alike that poverty cannot be adequately defined by very low income alone. The mainstream poverty research now increasingly view persistent poverty and inequality as a consequence of the exclusionary and expropriating aspects of boarder socio-economic and political structures and processes (Bank 2006).

In Bangladesh, the rural poor (comprise at least 40% of Bangladesh's total population) are not only economically marginalized but they are also remarkably excluded from access to resources and social and political power (Khan 2009). A considerable number of recent poverty scholarships demonstrate how the rural poor are still being marginal from basic services (health, education, water etc), labor market, citizenship claims, and agreed-upon human rights provisions. Amongst the rural poor, women, the ultra-poor, landless, people with disabilities and members of other ethnic groups experience particular dimension of social and cultural exclusion.

The local government institution (e.g Union Parishad) is assumed to be the most important agency of the government for responding to the 'poverty traps' situation and securing economic and social justice in rural Bangladesh. A significant number of development initiatives and social protection programmes directed to the rural poor are delivered through such mechanism. However, in Bangladesh, the Union Parishad, the only elected local institution, is often characterized by inefficiency, patron-client relationships with widespread corruption and predominant practice of political clientalism (Aminuzzam 2007). The national newspapers bring on ample evidence of direct appropriation of state funded development schemes by local powerful elites and everyday's injustice and violence towards the poor, specially the women, in rural areas. The mainstream political parities, on the other hand, are largely marked by elite capture, facilitates organizing the interest of the poorest out of politics. Identity, affiliations, and access to resources continue to be defined by one's place within a social order that is largely constituted by the ascribed relationships of family, kinship, and community in rural Bangladesh (Kabeer 2010).

The situation leads the poor to continue depending on the informal system of power and governance through seeking patronage of the upper class intermediaries in order to access resources, public services or to mitigate risk. The rural studies explore the traditional local patrons have themselves shifted from the land based patronage to the brokering of links to state, market or justice as an easier and more lucrative route to political power and financial gain (Wood 2003). Studies also explore that the increasing dependency of the poorest and most vulnerable people on such intermediaries. The exploitation that improvises is thus reproduced through the same social processes. Exploitation and injustice also persists because of the effects of power within wider political system that render them invisible. The poor find it hard to understand the complex social equation that determines their alienation from the socio-economic and political structures and processes. They also lack democratic space and support structures to claim their rights and challenge their subordination and exploitation.

### **The appropriateness of 'empowerment' objective of the EPF project**

It is in this context of poverty and asymmetrical power relations in rural Bangladesh into which the EPF project seek for reconnecting people to formal systems by mobilizing popular demand for services, accountability and justice. The objective of this right-based project is 'to empower the rural poor to claim their rights by way of critical engagement with local government through representative, effective and well-governed community based organizations.' The project has been activated in a region in Bangladesh (North Western Bangladesh) with the highest rates of poverty. There is not the slightest doubt that the project echoed to the real problem and need of its target group. Moreover, the demand for such initiatives was originally felt from the local poor people themselves. The project complements the EU priority focal areas of the Bangladesh Country Strategy 2006-2011 regarding good governance and human rights.

### **The relevance of the project design**

The project has been implemented at the grassroots by RDRS Bangladesh, a prominent NGO in Northern Bangladesh. Notably, RDRS Bangladesh is one of the few NGOs committed to promoting a social development alternative to the prevailing microfinance orthodoxy. The DanChurchAid (DCA) is another important actor crucially involved in the planning and to some extent in the implementation of the project.

The already activated Union Federations formed the core in the EPF project design underpinned by an explicit right-based approach. The main inputs of the EPF projects were training, facilitation, capacity building, awareness generation and networking. The Union Federations are the collections of neighborhood groups that RDRS Bangladesh has been forming and supporting for over 25 years. By 2006 there were already 260 such Federations under the Federation Capacity Building Project, each active in one local Union – country's administrative denomination – with a combined membership of 130,000 households in the northwest Bangladesh. The EC monitoring reports rated the

Federation Capacity Building project highly. It emphasized the significant impact of the Federations on the membership and community in general, their successes in promoting self-empowerment. The evaluation report thus recommended the replication of the ongoing activities of Federations.

Within the current EPF project the Federation membership grew substantially and they progressively incorporated the ethnic and religious minority groups and the 'excluded' peoples. Besides, the number of Union Federations also has increased to 357 from the initial 260 under the previous project. Our research reveals that The Federations have admirable reputation in their respective constituencies. The wider community usually identifies them as corruption free and native institutions. The external actors identify the executive committee election process as a 'model democracy'. The decision making process and the activities of the Federations are also found to be structured around the Federation Charter. The deliberate gender sensitivity of the project has led to the feminization in the Federation leaderships. The inclusion of the local youths through the Youth Forum formed under the EPF project framework has noticeably reinforced the Federation led public will campaign and social activisms. The EPF project successfully meets its specific objectives.

## **SECTION TWO**

### **The Federations: Records, Local People's Knowledge and Reputations**

In the EPF project discourse the representativeness, efficiency, governance and the effectiveness of the community based Federations have been attained the centrality as these features are identified as critical in achieving any success in the empowerment of poor. Focus has been also placed on the expansion of Federation memberships and on the creation of more leadership from women.

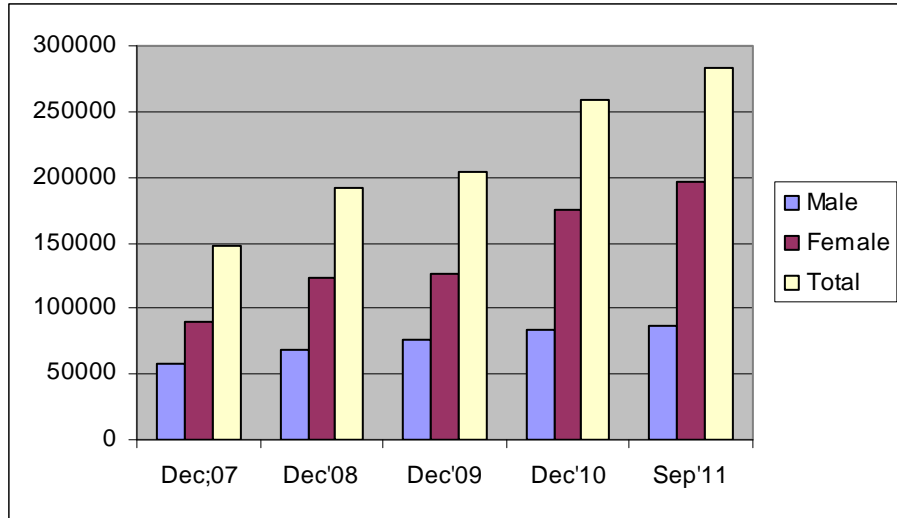
The objective of this section is to evaluate these aspects of Federations based on their records of achievements and performances. In addition to that, this section captures the opinions and perceptions of a range of external social actors about the Federations in an attempt to comprehend the reputations of Federations in their operation areas. This section also identifies what people actually know about the Federations.

#### **MEMBERSHIP GROWTH AND TRENDS**

The Federations have most often reached the poorest of the poor, most of who comprised of women, and progressively incorporated the ethnic and religious minority groups and the 'excluded' peoples. The number of Union Federations has increased to 357 from the initial 260 under the EPF project. They are spread into nine districts in northwestern Bangladesh, which includes Dinajpur, Thakurgoan, Panchagar, Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Nilphamari, Rangpur, Gaibandha and Jamalpur. The number of Federations pleasingly meets the project's goal of establishing 80 new Union Federations. The total number of Federation membership has reached 2,83,371. This, however, does not include the number of people who are already involved with the women and youth forums, two new wings added to the Federation within the EPF project framework. The chart 1 gives a picture of the steady growth of membership, particularly the women, during the project time. The results of a quantitative survey spanning 810 randomly chosen inhabitants of 27 catchment areas shows 18% of the total number of respondents is directly involved with Federations. The survey outcome approves the data of expansion presented by RDRS.

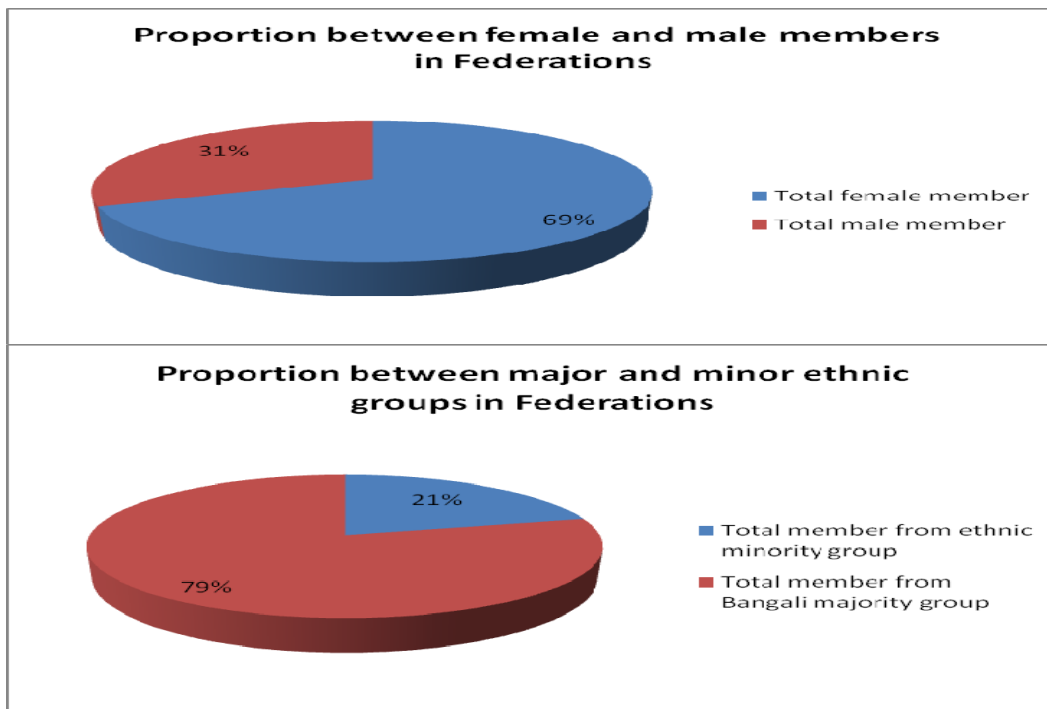
The old Federations in their early stages were largely male dominated. Women were not permitted by their parents and husbands to participate openly in the public sphere. However, as prejudices against women changed to some extent over time, coupled with the project's special focus on gender, the number of female membership has increased sharply in recent years.





**Chart 1: the growth of memberships in last four years (male and female)**  
**Source: RDRS Official Records**

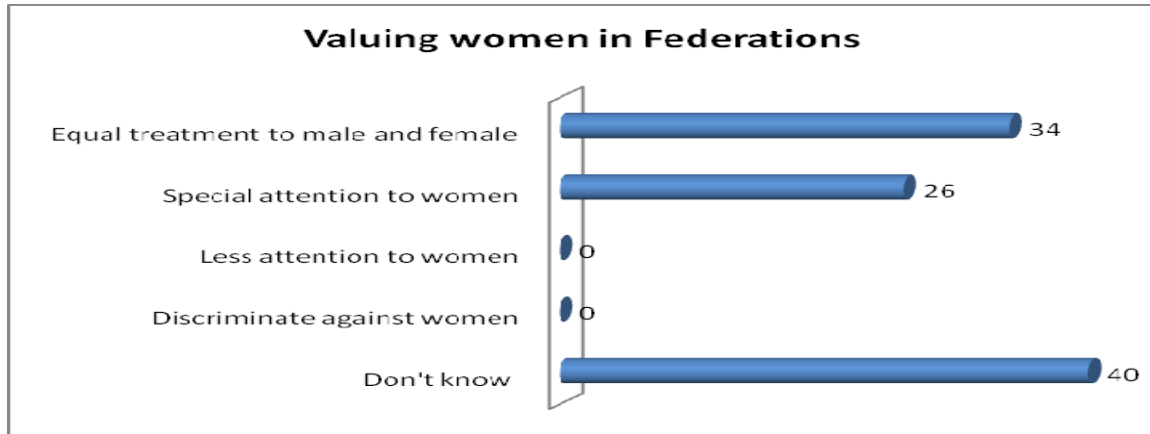
At present, overall, 69% of the membership is comprised of women. A significant portion of the membership (21%) came from various ethnic minority groups.



**Chart 2: proportion between female & male, major & minor ethnic groups in Federations**  
**Source: RDRS Official Records**

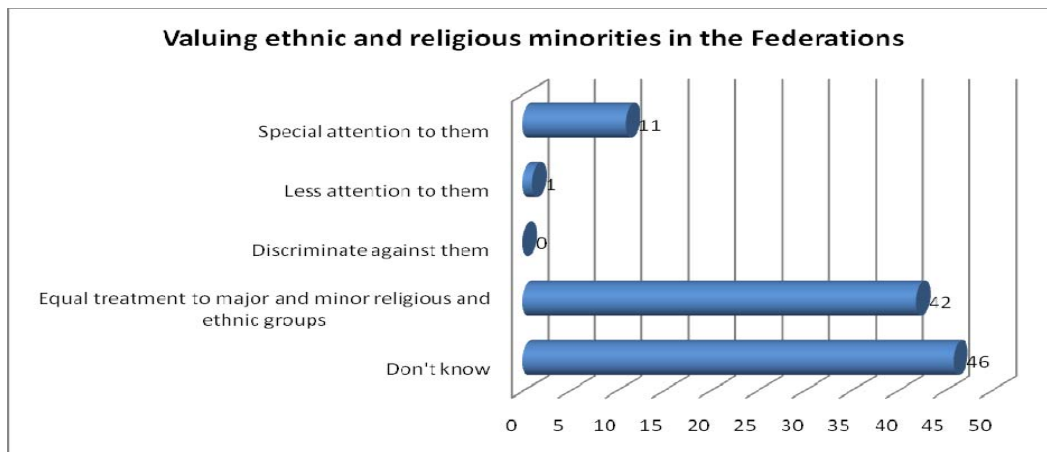
In group discussions Federation members and leaders strongly claimed that men and women are treated equally in Federations. The quantitative survey result reiterates this claim, and shows that the community does not perceive the Federations as discriminating against women either (see Chart 3), instead, according to a significant

portion of the respondents (26%), Federations give special attention to women. The majority of respondents (40%), however, admitted that they did not know how the women were valued in Federations. 34% of the respondents perceived the Federations to treat male and female members equally.



**Chart 3: Community perceptions of the Federation in valuing women**  
Source: Quantitative Survey Results

A number of Federation members coming from ethnic and religious minority groups reported that there was no prejudice and intolerance in Federations against any particular ethnicity, religion and caste in in-depth interviews with them. As we can see in Chart 4, the community also does not think that the Federations discriminate against religious and ethnic minority groups.



**Chart 4: Community perceptions of the Federation in valuing ethnic and religious minorities**  
Source: Quantitative Survey Results

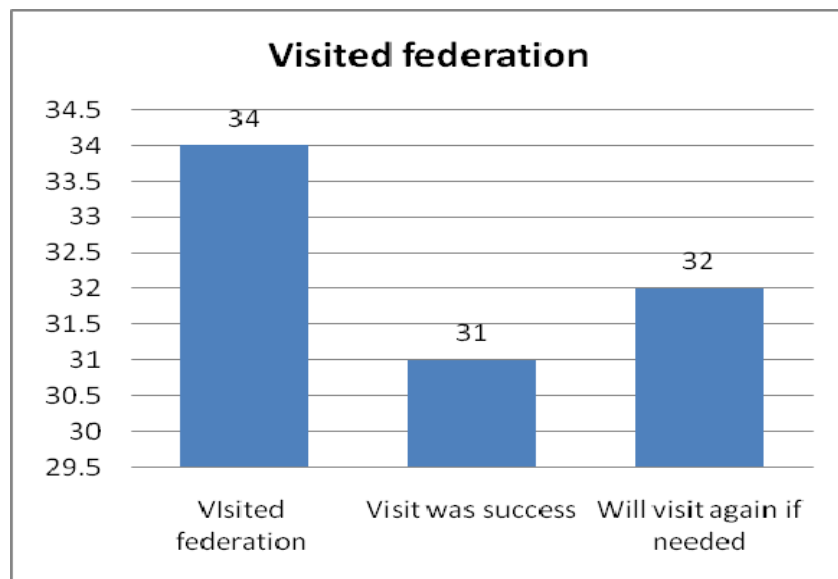
### EFFICIENCY

In most cases the elected executives have proved themselves quite efficient in running and managing organizations. The external actors such as Union Parishad chairmen and government officers admit that the Federation leaders are well versed about the rules and regulations and are articulated in bringing forward their rights. They point to the

skill building trainings under the EPF project, which were critical in enhancing skills and confidence among the Federation leadership. The survey result echoes the testament. Among the 810 individuals surveyed, as many as 275 have visited the Federations to meet their needs. As we can see in the Table 1, their purposes of visit were varied. Nevertheless, most of the visitors were satisfied with the service provided by the Federations and wished to go to them again if needed (Chart 5).

SL	Purpose	% of responses
01	To be a member	12
02	For an arbitration	09
03	For a training	13
04	To have 'Allowance card'	03
05	To get economic help	03
06	Help for agriculture/decorating instrument/ van etc	05
07	To have information	09
08	For help to get govt. and non govt. service	04
09	Help to get <i>khas</i> land	01
10	To attend federation's activities	40
11	Others	01
Total		100

**Table 1: Purposes of visiting Federation**  
**Source: Quantitative Survey Results**



**Chart 5: Visiting the Federation**  
**Source: Quantitative Survey Results**

However, the case studies show that there are few cases of failures with regard to efficiency. A comparative analysis of successful and not so successful Federations reveal

two factors, namely, Federation leadership and Federation duration, which are crucial in achieving high marks on efficiency, transparency and accountability. Based on performances and activities, RDRS divided the existing 357 Union Federations into three categories - Grade A, B and C. Grade A stands for the best. In the field investigations some of the Grade C Federations were exposed as lacking in some competencies. However, most of the C Federations were established recently in new areas under the current project, whereas the more successful and efficient Federations tend to be much older than the project time. It is not an easy business to run an organization of thousands of people effectively. Training and workshop will not create efficient leadership overnight. The poor people need time and also scope for trial and error in order to learn. On the other hand, as it was revealed in the field, much success in Federations' activities was built on the dedication of effective leadership. Consequently, a leadership failure can lead to serious inefficiency in running the Federation, as it was found in one case study. However, these workshops and trainings do contribute to the running of efficient federations and establishment of values for good leadership. The case study below depicts the high energy and altruism of a Federation Chairman. The attributes he possesses, however, are not rare among the leadership of many other Federations that are doing well for themselves.



Overall, there are a few salient achievements, which are apparent in the organizational culture and practice of the Federations. One such achievement is the practice of record keeping. This 'poor people's organization' has shown outstanding meticulousness in keeping records of their activities, expenditures and information on various issues, as was observed by a government officer. This is surprising because the results come from a region where the literacy rate borders around 50%.

Almost all the case study reports attend to the database of poor people produced by the Federations in their respective areas. A Federation Chairman explained, "In order to provide assistance to the most deserving poor in our Union, we have visited door to door, collected information on household income, possessions and assets and created this database. This database is our documentary proof in claiming the rights of poor people." When the Union Parishad runs government safety net programs, the Federation submits a list of needy people to the Union Parishad Chairman. However, the Union Parishad Chairman does not always nominate all the people from the Federation's list as beneficiaries. This is primarily because the number of needy people is always much bigger than the aid allocated. Second, the Chairman tends to distribute some government aid among his own party clients and relatives. However, the systematic documentation is a vital tool for the Federation in challenging the prevailing practices of corruption and nepotism. The other NGOs working in these areas are also found to use the Federation created database in order to select beneficiaries for their development and training programs. It confirms the fact that the Federation has achieved serious institutional capability in terms of record keeping.

**Waiting for the right time:** In Mirpur Union the research team came across a red file where the Federation had kept the records of *khas* land in the Union area. Subsequently they collected the name of the people who had appropriated those lands illegally. The occupiers are hugely powerful in the area hence they could not succeed much in establishing the rights of the landless on those *khas* land. The Federation Secretary states, 'Maybe it is not possible for us to claim our rights at this moment but all the Federation members know about the *khas* lands and their occupiers. We talk amongst ourselves and spread the message to the 'outside'. We will wait for the opportune moment to arrive'. (Source: Qualitative Research Data)

### TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY AND GOVERNANCE

As it is manifested during the field research, the decision making process and the activities of the Federations are structured around the Federation Charter. Any decision to run activities are initially consulted among the Federation members. Then the matter is taken to the Executive Committee. The majority of the Executive Committee Members will pass the plan if only it gets approval. Every month the Federation holds a general meeting. If any Executive Members fail to be present at the monthly meeting three times in a row, s/he can be disqualified from the membership. The Executive Committee determines the plan of action for a year in the Annual General Meeting (AGM) where all the Federation members are expected to be present. In front of everybody the Committee presents the financial records of the previous year, budget and plan of action for the following year. Notably, important external actors such as the Thana Nirbahi Officer (TNO), Union Parishad Chairman are invited to attend to the annual meeting. In several interviews government officers and Union Parishad Chairmen confirmed about this process of public meeting, which was participated by 'hundreds of members', according to them. During group discussions, the Federation members identified the significance of holding a public AGM in ensuring transparency and accountability of their leaders.

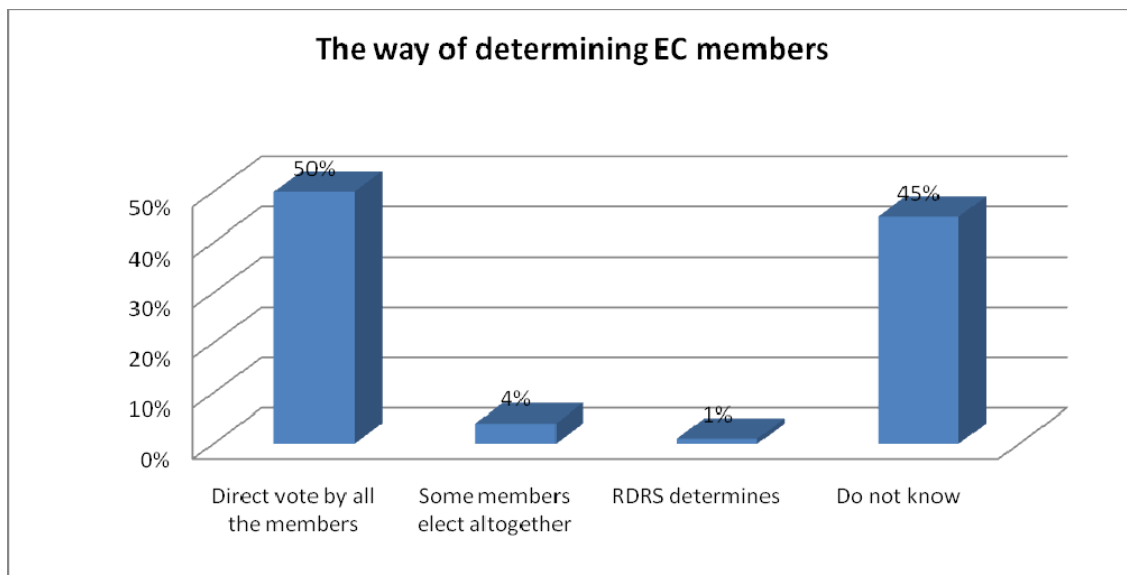
**Corruption free institution:** As a school teacher from a village called Kajla in Debi Para Union observes, 'The practice of bribing is prevalent in every corner in Bangladesh, maybe somewhere more and somewhere less. But I never heard of Federation giving or receiving bribes. The Federation provides goods to poor people, handles money, manages resources but nobody can claim that they stole 10/- or 12/- Taka'. (Source: Qualitative Research Data)

The process through which the Federation elects its nine persons Executive Committee has drawn significant praise from external actors such as local bureaucrats, politicians and NGO leaders during the interviews with them. One social welfare officer rightly opined the election process of the Federation as a 'model democracy'. This election process in question includes a series of arrangements, processes and efforts (such as

meetings, campaigning, *Appayon*, the appointing of an Election Commissioner, Presiding Officer, Returning Officer and so on) and also simultaneously involves with it a range of actors from the local government, NGO organizations and the wider community. All these aspects bring together a real sense of excitement to the process and add a sense of festivity in the community. This helps to significantly raise the profile of this poor people's organization. Most importantly it is this election process which helps create the legitimacy of the elected UF Chairmen and Members, which is crucial in achieving any influence at the Union Parishad (UP) office.

However, case studies also rightfully point to the high monetary expenditures associated with organizing elections in such a manner but with a total cost of 5000 BDT only provided by the project towards this activity and the rest from federation's own resources, there is no cause for worry of this process not continuing.

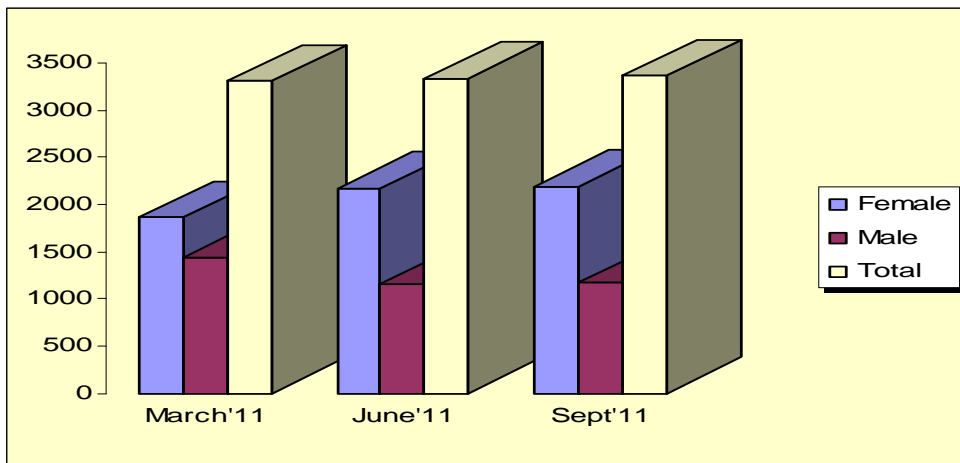
According to the quantitative survey result, the extravaganzas and preparations in Federations' elections, which were captured through the focus group and interview methods, however, could not make the majority of the local populace aware of this crucial democratic process through which the Federation determines its leadership. The survey results show that only 50% of the total number of people, who have already heard of the Union Federation, think that the Federation leadership is determined through the direct vote participated in by all the Federation members, whereas 45% respondents said that they did not know how the Federation leadership was determined. This is linked to the fact that elections are only open for members (and there is 97% voter turnout) whereas federations are there for the entire poor community. Nonetheless, it is therefore, important that the local people are more informed of the Federation particularly about its democratic process in order to enhance the already existing legitimacy of the Federation leadership in their communities.



**Chart 6: The way the Federation leadership is determined (of those who know about the federations)**  
**Source: Quantitative Survey Results**

**WOMEN LEADERSHIP**

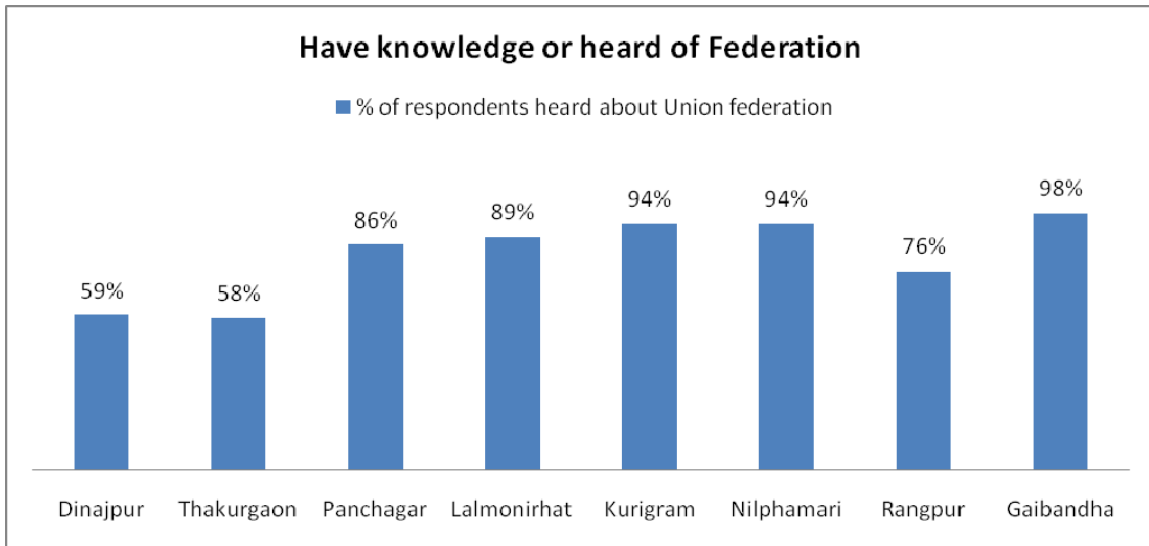
Within the project framework a significant amount of energy is invested in training the executives on women’s rights and issues surrounding gender awareness in order to create leadership that is ‘gender-sensitive’ and also to encourage more women to participate in the ‘leadership creation’ process. The EPF project had a target of ensuring a minimum of 40% seats in the Union Federation Executive Committees for women. Today, the total number of Executive Committee Members of 357 Federations is 3,358. Among them 2,191 are women, which count for slightly more than 65% of the total number of leaders. A recent periodical data gives a picture of an increasing feminization in the elected Executive Committees of the Federations.



**Chart 7: The ratio of female and male members in the UF Executive Committee**  
**Source: RDRS Official Records**

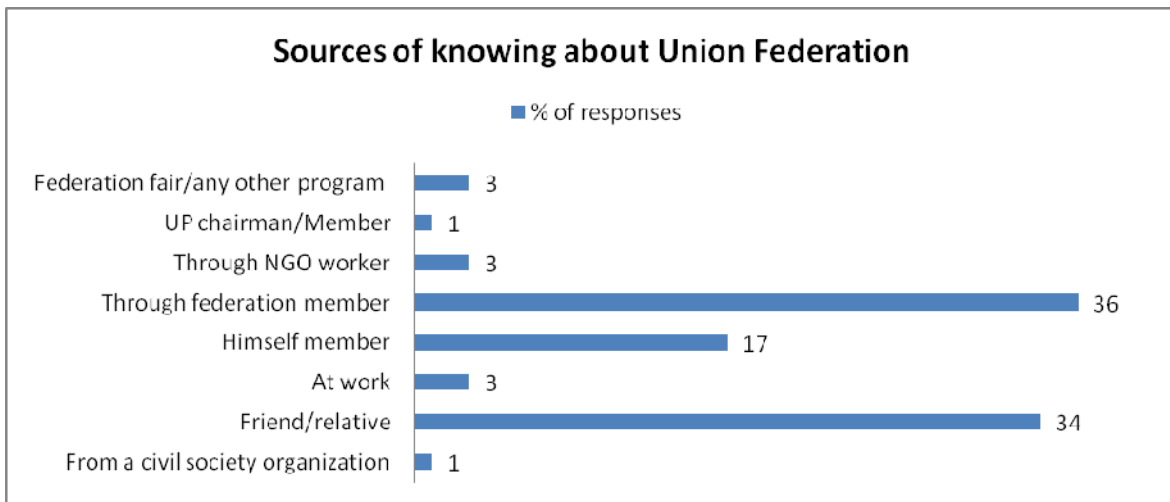
**LOCAL PEOPLE’S KNOWLEDGE ON FEDERATIONS**

The result of a quantitative survey among 810 randomly chosen inhabitants of 27 Unions shows that the majority of local populace (83%) in the operation areas is aware of the Federations. However, as we can see in Chart 8, the degree of local awareness on Federation varies from district to district. In Gaibandha district, almost all the respondents seemed to be familiar with the Federations, yet in Dinajpur and Thakurgoan, just above half of the locals claimed to have knowledge on Union Federations.



**Chart 9: Have knowledge or heard of Federation**  
**Source: Quantitative Survey Results**

The fact that most of the informed people got to know about the Federations through their members (42% responses) and friends and relatives (40% responses), indicates a fairly horizontal and participatory nature of information sharing (Chart 10).



**Chart 10: Sources of knowledge on Federations**  
**Source: Quantitative Survey Results**

However, Chart 10 also indicates the limited role of the local government institutes and civil society organizations in circulating information on Federations.

When the respondents were asked what sort of activities they saw the Federations to be involved in, most of the responses (21%) pointed at the Federations led cultural activism. The second (14%) and third (13%) highest responses went for the Federations' effort in resisting early marriage and their roadside tree plantation programs, respectively. The Federations also fall into the local radar by holding *shalish*, resisting



the practice of dowry and also through organizing their training programs. It is worth mentioning that not many respondents in the survey claimed to witness the Federation carrying out more direct empowering programs, such as establishing the poor's right to VGD program. It is perhaps because these direct empowerment processes involve intimate negotiations that they are not easily evident before public eyes. Federations could benefit from making these acts more open and known to the general community.

When the respondents were asked if they knew about the process through which the Federations identified the problems and needs of the poor, the majority of respondents (55%) claimed that they did not know. Among the informed respondents, the highest portion of people (31%) stated that through consultation among the members, the Federations tend to address local problems and needs associated to poverty. Thus, as we can see in Chart 11, only one third of the local population is familiar with the organizing processes of the Federations.

As we can see in the Chart 12, 28% respondents think that the Federations depend on the donations of its members to meet their financial needs. Seven percent thinks that the money comes from its own assets and funds, while 10% of the respondents identify RDRS as a source of finance. Again, most of the respondents (52%) failed to answer the question.

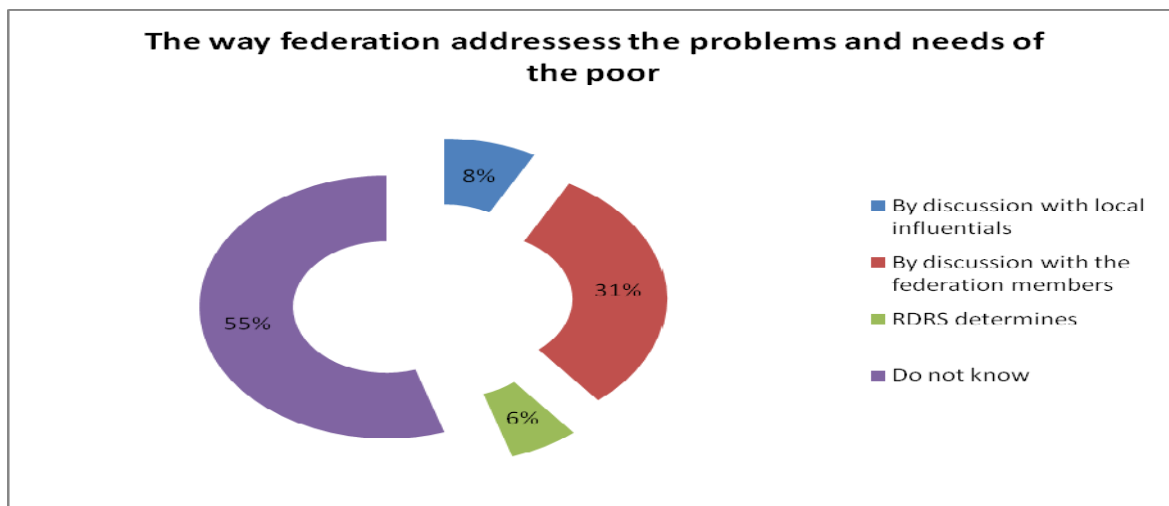
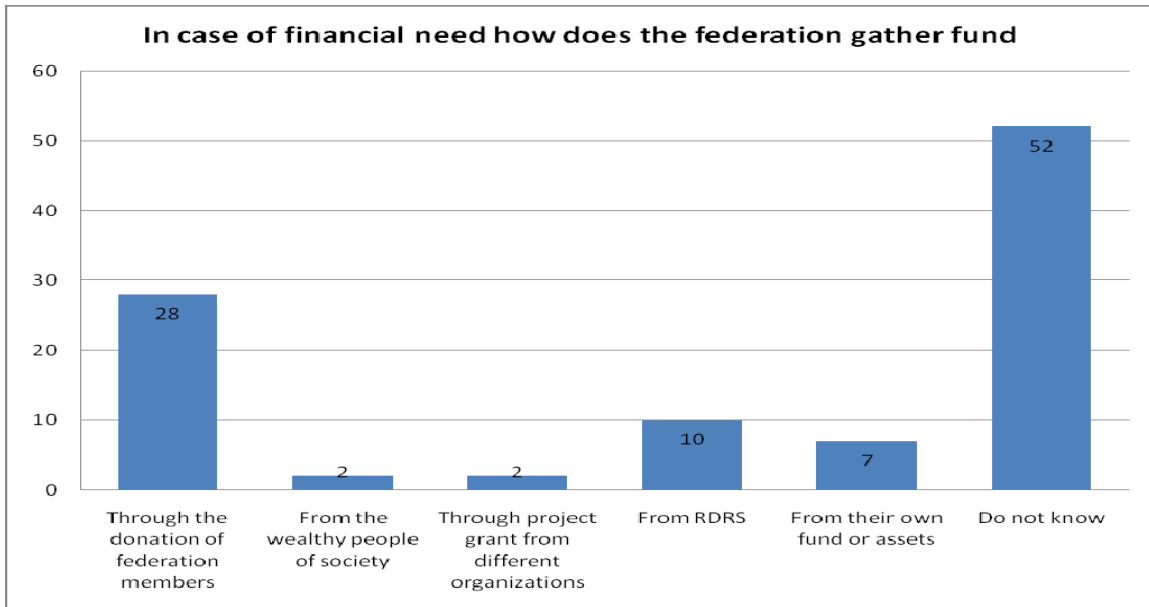
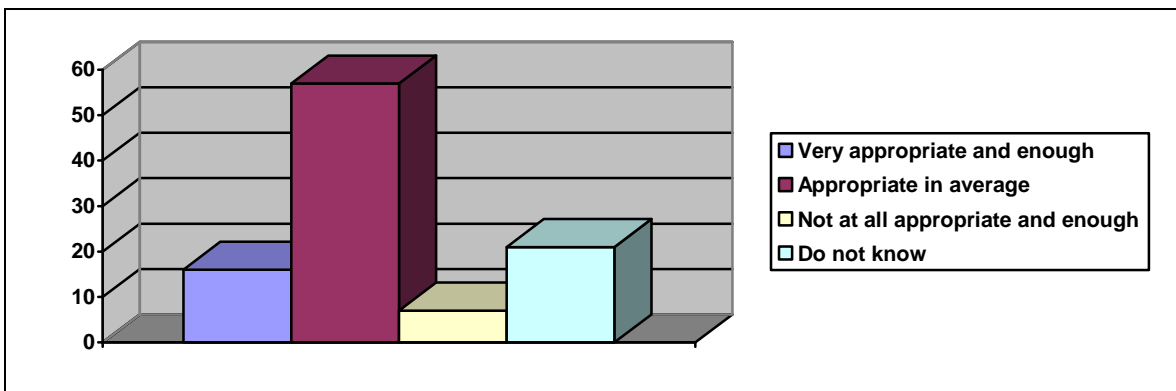


Chart 11: The process through which Federations address problems and needs of the poor  
Source: Quantitative Survey Results



**Char 12: In case of financial need how does the Federation gather funds?**  
**Source: Quantitative Survey Results**

According to the majority of respondents (57%), the activities run by the Federations aiming to reduce poverty through empowerment are appropriate, although, not enough. Twenty-three percent of the respondents think they are quite appropriate and enough. However, nearly 13% of the respondents disagree and they think that Federations’ activities are neither enough nor appropriate.



**Chart 13: The activities that are run by the Federations to reduce poverty through empowering the poor are they appropriate and enough?**  
**Source: Quantitative Survey Results**

**OVERALL COMMENTS**

Based on the findings and analysis in sub-section 4.1, we identify that

- The Federations have reached the poorest of the poor, most of who comprised of women, and successfully incorporated the ethnic and religious minority groups and the ‘excluded’ peoples.

- Overall, the Federations' leaders have proved themselves quite efficient in running and managing organizations.
- Overall, there are a few salient achievements, which are apparent in the organizational culture and practice of the Federations. One such achievement is the practice of record keeping.
- The old Federations have proved to be more successful than the new ones. 'Gaining maturity with time' is an important factor in achieving proper institutional and organizational capacities.
- Dedication and competence of the Federation leadership is crucial in achieving high marks on efficiency, transparency and accountability.
- The democratic election is the driving engine of the Federations and federations show capacity of being able to continue with this practice in the absence of aid.
- The project's emphasis on women leadership successfully feminized the elected Executive Committees of the Federations.
- The Federations have admirable reputation in their respective constituencies. The wider community identifies them as corruption free and native institutions.
- While the majority of people have some ideas of Federations and their activities, not many people outside of federation membership are explicitly aware of those democratic processes, which underline the Federation.
- It is very important that the local people are more informed of the democratic process, organizational values and the empowerment agendas of the Federation. The increase in people's knowledge on Federation will augment the social accountability of the Federation leadership and also enhance their legitimacy.
- 'Elite' institutions (e.g. Union Parishad), non-government and civil society organizations do not contribute much in broadcasting information on Federations. This is understandable as big federations pose a threat to their power, earlier from the accountability perspective but now also from the political perspective.

### SECTION THREE

#### **Mapping the dimensions of impact and outcomes of the EPF project**

The objective of this sub-section is not only to 'measure' the impacts of the EPF project. The impacts of a development project like EPF, aiming towards political and social transformations, are multi-dimensional and are not often easily quantifiable, although some 'numbers' indeed disclose some significances which may be of paramount importance. Here the objective is to illuminate those aspects of change that RDRS run EPF project have brought in the lives and cognitive horizons of the poor, and in their capacity to challenge their exclusion and subordination. Focus is also placed on demonstrating those processes through which the changes have taken place in the context of disadvantaged systems of power and unequal social relations in rural Bangladesh and also on identifying the challenges that are encountered in the process.

The increasing institutional and organizational development of the Federations should be considered as a big impact of the EPF project. The success of the Federations in demanding and claiming the rights of the rural poor greatly depends on their ability to influence the local government institutions in their favor or to hold them accountable. The Federations have emerged as important local actors through using their number of memberships, solidarity and networking in local electoral politics. The growing influence of the Federations was instrumental for the poor in gaining of more and direct access to government services and resources. As a result the Federations pose as a serious threat to the system of brokerage of traditional intermediaries (elites, politicians, goons etc.) in the local government institutions.

A series of capacity building training programmes within the EPF project framework and the organizational experience with Federations produced explicit human capital among several poor individuals, which expanded their cognitive horizons to a certain extent. This process has opened up new opportunities for them to navigate through the world of information and establish direct linkage with various government and non-government institutions in order to advance the specific interests of the disadvantaged populace. By organizing training and income generating programs, the Federations created the prospect of economic and social empowerment for the poor, especially poor women.

The project left a positive impact on behavioral and attitude change among the Federation members on the issues of women and education. These are manifested in the decrease of domestic violence among the members' families and in the increase in the school attainment of their children. The inclusion of the Youth Forum under the EPF project has reinforced the Federations led public will campaign and activism. These helped the Federations in achieving some significant successes in preventing social

problems such as theft, early marriage, dowry etc. In north western Bangladesh where chronic poverty is often directly linked to adverse ecology, due especially to river erosion and floods, the Federation led practical actions and voluntarism is notable in reducing the vulnerability of victims. On the other hand, the Federation initiated *Shalish*<sup>1</sup> played an important role in resolving conflicts between the poor members including family disputes. Through a range of activities and services such as cultural programmes, rallies, low cost social services and so on, the project has carved out a space for the poor in the public domain of rural society which offers them sense of dignity and recognition.

The one area however where the Federations actually could do very little is in establishing the 'ownership right' of the landless poor on the *khas*<sup>2</sup> lands which had been previously occupied by the influential local elites. This exposes the fact that the structural inequality and the broader social mechanisms act as the background engine of durable poverty and powerlessness. In the foreground the micro-politics of the Federations attempt to destabilize the culture of corruption and the practice of exploitation. However, without a significant change in the macro-politics and policies, the mission of establishing the poor people's ownership rights on *khas* lands is likely to be limited. Nevertheless, as our research reveals, this was no reason for the landless poor to give up 'hope' and perhaps it is only institutions like federations that might have success in obtaining *khas* land for the poor in the future.

## POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

We will begin this sub-section with a case study as presented below.

**Regime change:** A female member of the Puspo Bari Union Federation (UF) in Puspo Bari Union complained to her leader, the Federation Chairman, that she had been informed of having a VGD<sup>3</sup> card on her name, despite having not received anything from the Union Parishad (UP) until then. The UF Chairman went to the UP office, investigated the matter and found evidence supporting her claim. As he wanted to discuss the misconduct with the UP Chairman at his office, he received harsh insults and intimidation from the Chairman and his goons. Experiencing so, the UF Chairman encouraged the female member to file a case against the corrupt UP Chairman in the court of law. As they say in Bengal, *'it is a dangerous business to fight against the crocodile when one lives in the*

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<sup>1</sup> *Shalish* is a social system for informal adjudication of disputes by local notables such as *matbars* (leaders) or *shalishkars* (adjudicators).

<sup>2</sup> Land forms the basis of social, economic and political power structures in rural Bangladesh. The contemporary history of land reform is essentially the history of acquisition of *khas* land. This is the most unresolved issue of agrarian reform in Bangladesh.

<sup>3</sup> Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) is a safety net program operating under the World Food Programme (WFP). The VGD cardholders receive food assistance and skill building training from the government. The VGD cards are distributed through the Union Parishad office to those who are supposed to be among the poorest in the Union.

*pond!* However, the grit of the UF chair and the support of the Federation members made it possible for her to file a case against the corrupt Union Chairman. It is worth mentioning that RDRS thoroughly backed the Federations in this matter and its Legal Aid Center provided the plaintiff with the much-needed legal assistance.

The Union Chairman took the local police office to where she was; threatened her alongwith the police officer and asked her to withdraw the case. They also offered 5,000/- Taka as a bribe and tried to pressure her to sign on a blank paper. However, the poor woman declined to do anything without the presence of 'the Chairman', as she mentioned. The other Union Parishad members reminded her that the UP Chairman himself had been present there. Nevertheless, she made it clear that it was not the Union Chairman but the Federation Chairman who actually mattered to her. Therefore, no pressure could make her sign a blank sheet of paper! As the case advanced in the court and it became apparent that the verdict would go against the UP chairman, a local *shalish* was organized by the local notables and the Federation members. In the *shalish* the poor woman and the Federation agreed to withdraw the court case but in exchange the woman was provided 20,000/- Taka as compensation and a *boyoshko vata* (Old Age Allowance card) for her mother by the Union Parishad office. This was a terrific triumph of the poor people's organization against the powerful political elites, something which the Puspo Bari Union had never experienced before! Highly motivated by this success, in the following year the Federation nominated a member as a candidate to fight against the controversial Chairman in the Union Parishad election. To everybody's surprise, a near landless poor farmer won the election! (Source: Qualitative Research Data)

This case study illuminates the complex system of power within the context of local governance where the Federations operate and strive to see through the establishment of their projects of empowerment and set agendas from the grassroots. The case study also demonstrates the apparent success of a Federation in a local government election. One needs to understand the complex power dynamics, which underscores the local government election in Bangladesh so as to understand the significance of this success. Although the Union Parishad election is supposed to be non-partisan according to the electoral law, all the major national political parties in an unofficial capacity nominate their candidates. The Union Parishad elections are often characterized by violent inter and intra-party showdowns and extravagant campaigning by the competing candidates who usually come from the upper echelons of rural society. The poor, on the other hand, participate in the election process mainly as voters.

The Federations have learned an important lesson that the 'number' of their memberships is their main asset in achieving any influence on the local government. However, it has to be underpinned by committed 'group ethics' and active networking. There are scores of evidence that the Federations have successfully converted their social capital into political capital by banking on their solidarity. It helped the

Federations to achieve important recognition from the local power bases as a potential 'vote bank'. In a number of constituencies the Federations have increasingly appeared as important political actors and helped in the winning of candidates of better reputation over the corrupt ones. Besides playing this strategic but indirect role as a group, many individual Federation members stood in the most recent UP election as candidates. To everybody's surprise, as many as 532 Federation members were elected in the Union Parishad elections as UP member, while 27 were elected as UP Chairman in the 2011 Union Parishad election. It was a silent revolution, which did not enjoy much attention from the mainstream media, but significantly changed the class based demographic character of the Union Parishad office in various unions.

**Money cannot always buy voters:** Shorifa Begum, a Federation member and the wife of an agricultural laborer, runs a tiny tea stall in her village market. Shorifa was one of the five Federation members who were chosen by the Fhulpur Federation to participate in the 2011 Union Parishad election as member candidates in five different wards within the Fhulpur union. In her ward Shorifa was faced with some heavy weight opponents including Halima, the sister-in-law of the former Union Parishad Chairman and the wife of a rich businessman. Halima came from such an affluent and politically influential family that at first nobody doubted her victory in the election. However, this challenge hardly held back Shorifa and the Federation members from campaigning. Almost all the Federation members participated in election campaign for Shorifa. They visited the homes of hundreds of voters seeking for support. They did mic-ing for Shorifa in the electorate area using the Federation provided microphones. Many supporters even spent money from their pockets in Shorifa's election campaign. Seeing the growing organization and unity among the poor people, Halima and her family attempted to influence the voters in her favor by disbursing money. It has been heard that Halima and her family spent nearly half a million taka in the election campaign. However, the money could not save Halima from an embarrassing defeat against Shorifa by a land slide margin! (Source: Qualitative Research Data)

This case study above is not an exception. Our research reveals a series of similar cases of success made by the ordinary folks in the last Union Parishad election. Such empowering experiences in the recent election have reassured the poor in the 'power of the collective' in many areas, and it is this which should be regarded as the most important dimension of impacts of the EPF project.

The Table 2 presents the data of the number of Federation members who stood as member and chairman candidates in the 2011 Union Parishad election across the nine districts in north western Bangladesh and the number of Federation members who have been elected. We can see from the table that the Federations have achieved significant success in at least five districts in north western Bangladesh which includes Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari, Thakurgoan and Panchagar.

District	Number of Union Federation	Status of Contestant Federations Leaders						Total	
		Chairman		Reserved women member		General Member			
		Elected	Candidates	Elected	Candidates	Elected	Candidates	Elected	Candidates
Panchagarh	43	4	18	50	110	84	185	138	313
Thakurgaon	51	1	4	42	82	62	122	105	208
Nilphamari	55	6	10	24	88	32	118	62	216
Dinajpur	42	1	3	19	51	10	19	30	73
Rangpur	25	2	3	9	24	2	6	13	33
Gaibandha	15	0	1	4	13	9	19	13	33
Lalmonirhat	41	2	7	27	67	49	109	78	183
Kurigram	79	11	20	43	143	66	205	120	368
Jamalpur	02	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>353</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>579</b>	<b>314</b>	<b>784</b>	<b>559</b>	<b>1430</b>

### THE RISK OF COOPTION OF THE FEDERATION LEADERSHIPS

The capacity of the Federations to engage in the processes of electoral politics critically has the potential to influence the structure to a significant extent, a structure that perpetuates poverty and powerlessness in rural Bangladesh. However, through the same process, the 'democratic model' of Federations can be stunted by the existing corrupt political culture. Though only revealed in one case, it calls for close attention to the dynamics of relationships between the UP and UF committee members.

The case study below sheds light on a particular frame of relationships formed between a Federation leader and Union Parishad office and local elites, which we have identified as problematic.

**Protest movement with the help of hoodlums:** The Federation Chairman of Beribandha union narrated to our research team how successfully he led a protest movement in the Upazilla Medical College. He said, "Before there was a lot of misconduct in the hospital. The duty doctors ignored the poor patients and they were asked to buy medicine from the private pharmacy. Upon hearing this, I went to the hospital to inform the doctors that the diarrhea patients should be given medication for free. However, they did not take me seriously as they counted me as an ordinary person because I am poor. Therefore, the next time I went with some hoodlums from the local Awami League and BNP and threatened the hospital authority. Now the poor patients are no longer being ignored by the duty doctors." The Federation Chairman seemed to maintain very close relations with the Union Chairman and his cadres. He explains, "They need us because we are many in numbers, consequently, we need them because they have the power!" The day when the Federation chairman was interviewed, three Union Parishad members went to the TNO (Thana Nirbhahi Office) to submit their resign letters in protest of an alleged corruption of the Union Parishad Chairman in distributing VGD cards. However, the Federation Chairman, the leader of the poor and landless, surprisingly seemed to show little concern for the issue! (Source: Qualitative Research Data)



It is important to take into account the frames of relations that are formed and re-formed between the Federation leaderships and elites and their institutions under the project framework. The Federation and the elites have some common grounds and it is vital for the Federation leaders to maintain good relations with the Union Office. However, the success of the Federation rests in its ability to manipulate this relationship in advancing the interests of the poor and establishing their rights. The uncritical engagement with Union Parishad office and local elites can absorb the Federation leadership into the existing corrupt political culture. Such process can neutralize the explicit political agendas of the Federation as it is revealed in this case study. Fortunately, in our research, the majority of the Federations leaders did not exhibit many signs of developing such problematic frame of relations with the elites and politicians. However, the dynamics of relations between the Federation leaders and Union Parishad office and elites is an area which deserves close attention from the development planners and project designers, as this area can be prone to cooption by the dominant political culture.

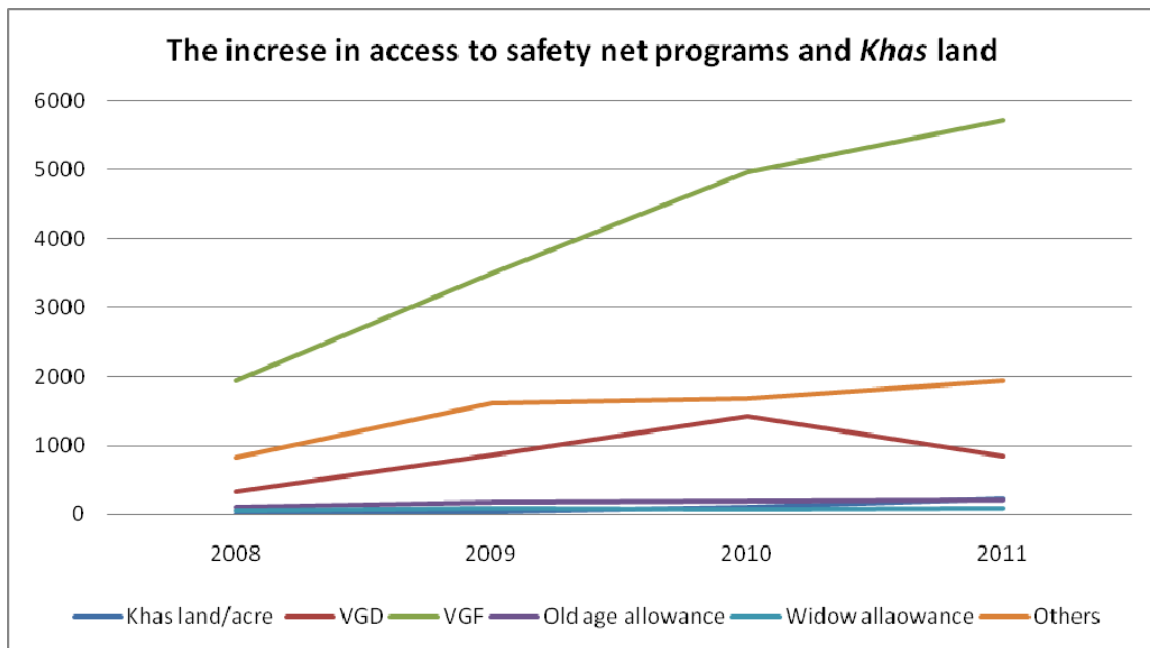
#### **ACCESS TO SAFETY NET PROGRAMMES AND KHAS LAND**

Case studies show that the growing influence of the Federations provided the poor with the real opportunity to participate in the beneficiary selection process of social safety net programmes. It is the Union Parishad office that is primarily responsible for identifying and selecting the deserving poor individuals for the safety net programmes such as Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), Old age Allowance, Widow Allowance and Disability Allowance etc. However, such selection process mediated through the UP office is often marked by corruption, lack of governance and accountability. The UP Chairman tends to select people from his/her political party cadres, client base and relatives. The UP members also engage in selecting their *'own people'* for government safety net programmes. More alarmingly, in some unions the UP chairmen/members are heard of disbursing these aid allowance cards to the poor in exchange of taking a bribe within the 1,000 -3,000/- Taka range.

The Federations strive for introducing different mechanisms of social accountability into the beneficiary selection process. When the Federation duty bearers get to know of any safety net programme initiatives undertaken by the local government office, they firstly tend to broadcast the news in the community through various ways, for example, by making announcements in the bazaar. A group of Federation leaders and members visit the office and submit a list of the most deserving poor people of their union to the UP Chairman. However, the UP Chairman does not simply allocate aid to all the people listed by the Federation. Rather it increasingly becomes an area of negotiation. Our research shows that the influential Federations get some advantages in such negotiation process because the UP Chairman and members consider them as *'vote banks'*. Besides, the Federations led activism also play an important role in this regard. In an interview, the social welfare officer of Dhorony Tol Union wonderfully captured the nature and effect of the Federation led activism by stating, "... like a group of mosquitoes they

would raid the Union Parishad office and if they failed to find a solution at the local government level, they would take it to the Thana Nirbahi office (TNO).” This relentless act of “mosquito biting” – as he explained – works. It may not function to the extent that is expected but they have no doubt started to create some pressure on the practice of corruption from the grassroots.

Chart 14 below presents the data of the number of people who gained access to various safety net programmes and *Khas* lands in the last four years through the help of Federations. We can derive from the data set that during the EPF project period the Federations helped a significant number of poor people befitting from the government welfare programmes. The data also exposes the limited sign of success in establishing landless people’s rights on *Khas* lands. This is because without a significant change in the macro-politics and policies, the mission of establishing the poor people’s ownership rights on *khas* lands is likely to be limited.



**Chart 14: The access to government safety net programmes and *khas* land in the last 4 years**  
**Source: RDRS Official Records**

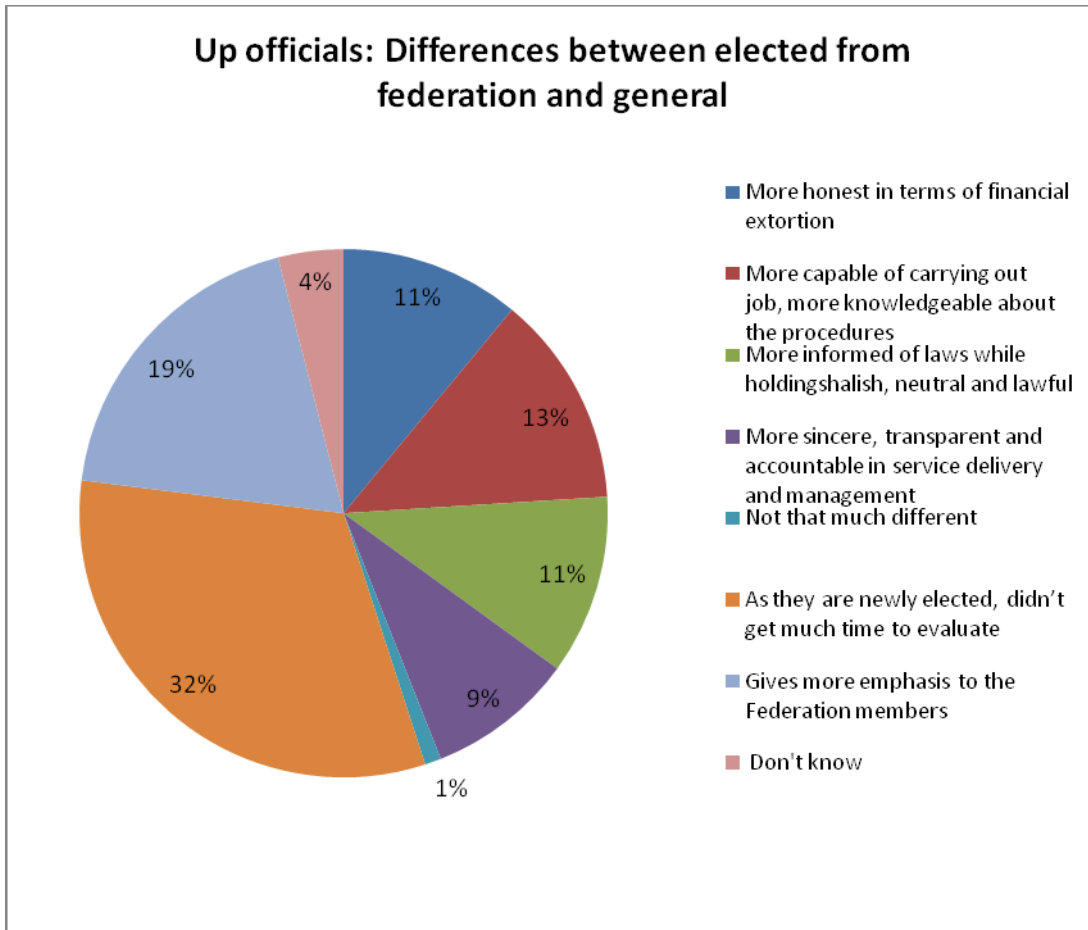
However, our research also reveals the fact that the success in gaining access to safety net programmes was not equally translated into all the Federations. Among the 27 researched Federations, two newly formed C grade Federations were found to have very limited influence on the local government office. The limited ability of the Federation to influence the local government office reflected in their less achievement in gaining access to safety net programmes is due to their being newly established. The case study below reveals the state of one of these underperforming Federations.

**They will vote in exchange of sweets, tea or even a betel leaf:** The research team discovered that locals did not know much about the Federation activities in Jilmari Union. The Jilmari Federation was founded in 2007 and it has its own office building. Some people have heard of them, some have seen them doing rallies and carrying out cultural programmes but overall people lacked clear understanding of what the Federation is all about. The Jilmari Federation had almost no success in gaining safety net programmes for the poor. A Federation member explains the reason, "... the UP Chairman and members are notorious in this union! They don't care about poor people. They charge each person 2,000 – 3,000 in exchange of VGD or Old age Allowance card." Another member adds to the discussion, "... the poverty is extreme in our union. The poor people don't think about the long-term impact of their actions. They will vote the corrupt UP Chairman in exchange of sweets, tea or even a betel leaf."

The case study above demonstrates the fact that extreme poverty frustrates people's ambitions and aspirations. For those extreme poor who have multiple unsatisfied needs on an ongoing basis, any investment for the future involves a significant trade-off with short-term well-being. The outcome of the trade-off tends to be simple: ensure survival today. It serves as an example to understand the baseline of the poor in the community and therefore the success of mature federations.

#### **PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS OF FEDERATION ORIENTED UNION PARISHAD MEMBERS AND CHAIRMEN**

The elected UP members especially the women who have come from the Federation background are identified with attributes, such as 'outspoken' and 'trained up', in interviews with the UP chairmen and members. These are characteristics, which these women possibly attained through their active experiences with the organization. The findings of the quantitative survey confirm the fact that the Federation oriented elected chairmen/members stand out among their peers in local government offices. As we can see in Chart 15, according to the majority of respondents, who have already encountered in their constituency elected UP members or chairmen coming from the Federation background, Federation oriented leaders have made some real differences in carrying out their jobs. Only, one percent of those respondents opposed with such view. However, 32% respondents did not get opportunity to evaluate them as those leaders were elected recently. According to the survey result, the local community at large recognizes the Federation oriented UP leaders as honest, capable, knowledgeable and sincere.



**Chart 15: The differences between Federation oriented and non-Federation UP leaders**  
Source: Quantitative Research Data

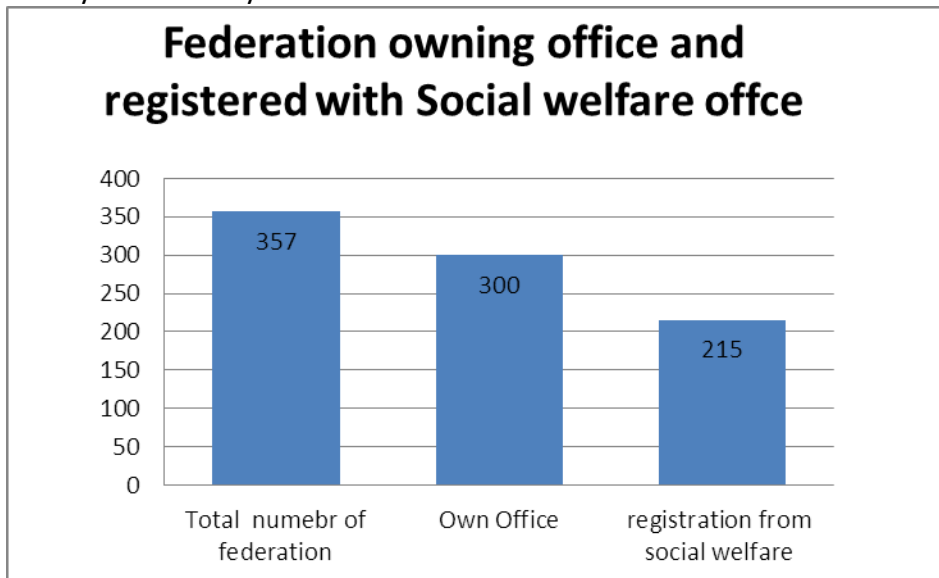
### INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

We will begin this sub-section with a case study as presented below.

**The establishment resembles an 'Old and resilient tree':** The Pora Bari Federation was founded in 1992. At the beginning the Federation did not have any center of operations. The members used to hold their meetings under the shade of a tree or at somebody's courtyard. Over the next few years as their membership grew gradually, the Federation felt the need of a piece of land to build an office. They approached some local philanthropists to donate a plot to them. However, they did not succeed in getting any donation. Failing to get a plot, in 1997, the Federation leased some roadside public land from the Union Parishad where they planted trees with the help of RDRS. After a few years, the Federation raised some funds through selling some trees and used the money (25,000/- Taka) to buy a plot of 30 decimals in 2004. RDRS then offered them to build an office on the plot if the Federation could contribute as much as 50,000/- Taka to the total required amount. Being highly motivated by the offer the Federation concentrated on raising the necessary fund. This time the Federation

leased a few ponds to engage in fishery. They made a profit of 40,000/- Taka from the fishery project and managed to gather the remaining 10,000/-Taka through individual donations from each member. RDRS started building an office building on the Federation owned land. Besides the lump sum investment, the Federation members engaged with the process by providing bamboos, sand from their own possessions and by giving their 'hands'. The first brick built office house was built in 2006, but the growth of the establishment did not just stop there. It continued growing through the profit from its income generating programs and also with the support of the EPF project. Today, the Pora Bari Foundation has in its possession a warehouse, training room, IT centre, library and two office rooms, all of which are brick built. Furthermore, they have also bought another piece of land adjacent to the office, where they have planted new trees. In 2009 the Ministry of Social Welfare registered the Federation. This registration raised the profile of the Federation to a great extent. The establishment of the Pora Bari Federation gives the impression of 'an old and resilient tree', as a local school teacher expressed. (Source: Qualitative Research Data)

The development history analysis of the Federations (it is worth mentioning in this occasion that although the current EPF project is only 5 years old, prior to that the Federations went through some different capacity building projects activated by RDRS) demonstrates a similar trend of hardship, collaboration and establishment in their progression. Some of the Federations, especially the 'Grade A' ones, have already acquired spectacular infrastructural foundations. Among the remaining Federations, the majority of them have in their possessions decent infrastructural bases and also some productive assets, which assisted in a significant number of Federations attaining registration by the Ministry of Social Welfare.



**Chart 16: Federations owning offices and are registered with the Ministry of Social Welfare**  
 Source: RDRS Official Records

The border and scope of Federations' run activities have been manifestly increased since attaining their own centers of operation. On the one hand, the establishment offered the Federations more opportunities for economic self-sufficiency. On the other hand, through organizing training, income generating and educational programs, the Federations could create the prospect of economic and social empowerment for the poor, especially poor women. The Federations have achieved noteworthy success in spreading education among the poor and some success in the area of health. Training programs with the Federations leaders built some technical capacities and expertise among the individuals. Under the current EPF project, two new wings have been added to the Federations structure. They are the Women Forum and the Youth Forum, respectively. The inclusion of local youths assisted the Federations to have an impact on social activism. The Federations have achieved some significant successes in preventing social problems such as theft, early marriage, dowry etc. In northwestern Bangladesh, where the Federations operate, one of the main causes of poverty remains river erosion. The relatively well-equipped Disaster Management Committee of the Federations contributed to the popularity of Federations through voluntary works in the occasion of river erosion, flood or other natural disasters. Over time, the Federations steadily developed institutionally and Federations' membership increased and they earned more recognition from the local elites, local government institutes, government offices, NGOs and the community at large.

## **FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY OF FEDERATIONS**

### **The social forestry program**

With the support of RDRS, the Federations carry out tree plantation programs in the roadside public land. Usually the Federations lease lands from the Union Parishad on the condition that the Union Parishad will receive 20% of the total money generated from the wood sale. The other party, RDRS, will receive 10% and the remaining 70% will go to the Federations. The contractual arrangement brings in these three parties within a legal framework and influences the stakeholders to be more responsible in asset development. A salaried caretaker is appointed by the Federation to look after one-kilometer area of the planted trees. Thus the roadside tree plantation program generates few employment opportunities for the poor as well. RDRS provides the salaries (monthly 1050/- Taka per person) of the appointed caretakers. While asked about economic sovereignty of the Federations, members usually point at these trees. They think that these trees are their biggest assets and will be their sources of sustainability in the future when the EPF project ends.

The roadside tree plantation is indeed a good investment for the Federations. However, in many areas, as it is heard, the program is facing challenges from the local farmers. The local farmers, whose arable lands are situated next to the public road, complain to the Union Parishad that the tree plantation on the road side land affect the agricultural

productivity of their lands. Recently, in a few areas, the Union Parishad Chairmen have refused leasing land to the Federations based on this ground.

### **Success in small and challenge in large scale commercial initiatives**

The Federations are also seen to lease ponds for fishery projects. Many Federation members have previously been trained up in commercial fish farming by RDRS. However, despite the training and considerable efforts from them, the Federations had mixed success in this project. On the other hand, a number of Federations have had some commercial successes in low scale nurseries and poultry farming. Besides, from time to time the Federations were able to earn some cash through stock business of rice and other agro products.

However, as our research reveals, the Federations were not always successful when they had undertaken ambitious commercial initiatives. This was also observed and mentioned by the local elites in several interviews with them. While discussing the issue with a wealthy agriculturalist in Chitrokhola Union, he pointed at some reasons behind the Federation's failure in the dairy project. According to him, "... they don't lack in enthusiasm but in experience, investment and expertise to run such big initiatives. They didn't employ security to guard their cattle at night. Hence some of their cows were stolen. They lost some cattle due to diseases as well. They had lack of preparation for that. They also lacked in money to sustain such shocks." Nevertheless, the Federation Secretary had a different opinion on the matter. He said, "... We knew who had stolen our cows. We gave the name of the main suspect to the local police office. But they thought that we could not produce concrete evidence to substantiate claim. So they didn't take any initiative to capture them." According to the Federation Secretary, the police officer took the side of the suspect, as he was a relative of a Member of Parliament (MP). The local elites also blamed the Federation for having relaxed security in their farms, just to side with the thief. "The rich don't like to see the massive progress of the poor," - the Secretary realized.

### **Renting out resource centers**

The Federations often utilize their resource centers as sources of income through renting them out to the external organizations. Most commonly, they rent out their warehouses to the local farmers who use them to store seeds and agro products. In many places, farmers were benefited from having such facilities in their locality, which saved them from going to the towns for seeds and storage. Federations also rent out their training rooms when they are not in use. Usually the NGOs are the most common clients of them. This sometimes offers the Federations the opportunity of knowing about other development initiatives and establishing linkages with NGOs and CBOs other than RDRS.

### **The immense potential of *jono tottho kendro*:**

The Federations who have their own public information centre (*jono tottho kendro*) earn some cash through providing various services to the local people.

**Making money from *jono tottho kendro*:** With the financial help of RDRS, The Federation in Purbo Dhola union established a public information centre in its office building. The centre got a computer, internet modem, printer and a digital camera. A volunteer runs the centre. The center proved to be a regular source of income for this Federation. The center earns money through providing a range of services to the local people. They charge about 5-10/- Taka for one page word composing and printing. For every email sent there is a charge worth of 10/ Taka. If somebody wants to apply for jobs online, the charge is 5-10/ Taka. The center has a daily income of 200-250/- Taka on average. However, their income can rise up to 2000/- Taka during the school exams.

All the Federations could not turn their *jono tottho kendro* into commercial successes like the way Purbo Dhola Union Federation did. In the field visits, it is found that technical shortfalls (e.g. lacking a digital camera) and lack of a business plan prevents some Federations from profiting from such a venture. However, our research shows that the usage of *jono tottho kendro* by the local people is growing across the Federations. People have been seen to use its internet facility in order to video chat with their relatives living abroad. Such experiences created fresh enthusiasm among the local community not only about the *jono tottho kendro* but also about the Federation. The farmers seeking information on agriculture also visit the *jono tottho kendro*. Students use them to get information on exams and higher studies. Often the youth use the *jono tottho kendro* for online job applications. The research team came across a few folks who found jobs in the cities through using the Internet facility from *jono tottho kendro*.

Our research estimates that nearly one-third of the 27 researched Federations showed signs of potential that they can sustain themselves depending on their own earnings when the EPF project will run out. While the majority of Federations failed to create regular and stable sources of income, they still continue to do conduct regular meetings and discuss issues amongst themselves. It will be particularly difficult for those newly formed and some C grade Federations to continue their activities without the vital support of RDRS. Nevertheless, they have assets, land and opportunities to increase their earnings, which have been identified as crucial inputs for the attainment of sustainability.

## **UNITY, ENTERPRISE BUILDING AND EMPOWERMENT**

### **The importance of small neighborhood groups**

To provide insight into this issue, a case study is presented below.

**'Our own machine':** There were 16 members in Jorifa's group. In 2010 the group invested 16,500/- Taka from their savings to buy a shallow machine and appoint an operator to run it. The group members can use the machine for free but for



other farmers the machine can be rented at the rate of 20/- Taka for harvesting 1 decimal of land. The shallow machine generates enough income to cover the monthly 700/- Taka salary of its driver and the fuel cost. Although the machine could not pull Jorifa and her peers out from poverty they share a mental satisfaction of having their own machine – a machine they can use in their own terms due to which they don't need to be dependent on others. (Source: Qualitative Research Data)

Our research gathered a bundle of case studies of entrepreneurships like this kind which have been primarily built on the strong unity of small groups. These small groups are the real units of a Federation. A leader who takes the responsibility of collecting monthly endowments from the members usually runs one such group. These small groups usually manifest a strong sense of unity among the members and they also have tendency for saving. There are several examples of small-scale economic initiatives emerging from these small groups' exercises, which play meaningful roles in the economic and social empowerment of numerous poor people. Furthermore, the group based relationships among the peers act as the first step safety net for the poor when they are faced with sudden shock or insecurity (e.g. river erosion, health crisis).

However, during the EPF project RDRS policy on these 'small groups' was found to have changed over time. At the beginning of this project, RDRS wanted to dismantle these groups which had been formed locally long before the project in order to bring all the members directly under the Federation and more importantly to open federation membership to all poor people, including those with no groups. Then at a subsequent phase, RDRS again encouraged the members to form Ward based groups. This was to ensure that new members could be included into groups and the structure could remain manageable. These groups are now functional and provide the first level of support for the members, as described in the case above.

**Innovation into poverty reduction programme ensures joint responsibility:**

The registration from the Ministry of Social Welfare gave the Federations the prospect to apply for the government initiated poverty reduction projects. In our research, several Federations were seen to receive funds from the Bangladesh NGO Foundation (BNF) for 'Training on Goat Rearing for Poverty Alleviation Program'. Within this project each individual coming from the poorest of the poor is entitled to a goat. The Federation nominates needy people from their list for the program. However, the number of needy people is always higher than the goats allocated. Therefore, RDRS introduced a system in the process, which makes sure that the beneficiary offers the first offspring of his/her received goat to another poor. Then under the same system the receiver will offer the first offspring of his/her goat to another poor person. This revolving system makes sure that larger numbers of people are benefited from the programme and also ensures societal responsibility on goat rearing. This is a good enterprise initiative of the federations.

## DEVELOPING HUMAN CAPABILITY

### Training for the Federation executive members

RDRS arranges a series of workshops and training programs for the Federations leadership and members on a range of issues, such as local governance, advocacy, lobbying skills, participatory planning, leadership development, management, record keeping, fund raising, proposal writing etc. Within the project framework a significant amount of energy is invested in training the executives on women's rights and issues surrounding gender awareness.

The impact of these training programs is reflected in the increasing of institutional capacity of the Federations and in their democratic and efficient organizational culture. It is evident in the field that these training programs have built explicit capabilities among numerous poor individuals. Because of their skills and experiences the Federation members often get involved in various standing committees in the Union Parishad office. In the field investigation many Federations members were also seen to be part of a range of local social committees including school, college, *madrasa*, mosque, *mandir*, bazaar committee and so on. Some of the Federation members hold vital positions such as president, secretary, register etc. in those committees.

The research team came across a few Federation duty bearers who had the capability of writing project proposals (PP) thereby obtaining funds for their Federations from the Ministry of Social Welfare and Bangladesh NGO Foundation. The case study below sheds light on the process through which a poor individual with a low level of educational attainment obtained the sophisticated capability of writing PPs.

**Writing the project proposal:** In 2007 Shumon, the then volunteer of the *jono tottho kendro* of Fhulpur Union Federation, saw an advertisement on 'Training on Goat Rearing for Poverty Alleviation' programme of Bangladesh NGO Foundation (BNF). Shumon discussed the matter with the Federation Chairman. The Federation Chairman got to know that as his Federation had been already registered by the Ministry of Social welfare, they were eligible for applying for the project fund. The Chairman appointed Shumon, who was at that time only 20 years old and had recently passed the S.S.C exam, to write a project proposal for the project. Having the responsibility, Shumon collected a PP from a local NGO namely 'Alor Pothe' to get some ideas. He then drafted a six-paged PP containing a cover letter, budget summary, programme design, plan, timeline etc. Based on the proposal the Fhulpur Union Federation was allocated a fund worth of 600,000/- Taka by the BNG in three installments. (Source: Qualitative Research Data)

The case study shows how such capability acquisition by poor individuals directly impact in the expansion of their cognitive horizons. This process has opened up new opportunities for them to navigate through the world of information and meaning and

establish direct linkage with various government and non-government institutions in order to advance the specific interests of the disadvantaged populace.

### **Training for the Federation members**

The Federations often run employment generating training programs for the poor, such as tailoring, goat rearing, fish cultivation etc. A number of case studies demonstrate that these training programs have some positive and long term impacts especially on poor women, both in terms of enterprise development and employment.

**Aleya is known as 'masterni':** In 2009, the Federation in Mirpur Union was offered a training project from RDRS for 12 vulnerable women on tailoring. From past experience the Federation Chairman knew that 'training' only would not always change the lives of the 'poorest'. There were a 25/- Taka allowances allocated for every training participant for the purpose of having lunch. The Chairman decided to save this allocated money and he also encouraged the participants to save some money through tailoring in order to buy sewing machines for everybody. Aleya was one of those trainees. Although she had been trained on sewing in 2005 by another NGO, she could not utilize her knowledge, as she did not have a sewing machine. This time the sewing machine from the Federation came as a real opportunity for her and she was ready to take it. In a year she generated enough money from the sewing machine to buy two extra machines for herself. Then she started offering tutorials to other women on tailoring besides doing sewing jobs for the customers. Her income brought in prosperity to her family. The villagers named her 'masterni'. In Bangladesh, the school teachers are often called as 'masters' – and 'masterni' in this case stands for 'female teacher'. Identifying Aleya with such term demonstrates the respect and recognition she earned through her work. (Source: Qualitative Research Data)

However, as some case studies reveal, learning is not always the best appeal for the poor to attending the training programs, but rather the attendances fees. One female member explains, '... there is a travel allowance worth of 150/- if I attend the training. I do not mind even going to *Rangamati* (a district which is located at the other corner of the country from where she resides) if RDRS arranges s training programme there!'

## **EDUCATION AND INFORMATION HIGHWAY**

### **Changing attitude**

The social transformation through spreading education remains an important objective of the Federations. In various ways the Federations seek to create awareness amongst the local people regarding the need and scope of education. The Federation members visit door to door to motivate the parents to send their children to school. RDRS runs a special education project namely *Shikhon* from the Federation offices aiming to bring back to school those students who have dropped out from the conventional educational

system. Often the talented students from the Youth Forum of the Federation are seen to offer free personal tutorials to the weaker students. In-group discussions, the Federation members claim that their attitudes have been changed with regard to their children's education due mainly to the trainings and awareness programs. In the past the poor parents wanted their children to earn and contribute to the family. They were not at all aware of the need of girls' education. However, the situation has changed, as it is seen in the field, and the children of the Federation members tend to attend school now.

**Here the bicyclist girls come from Kazla:** The principal of Kazi Nazrul Islam Degree College shared an encouraging story in an interview with the research team. A group of female students cycle 11 Kilometers everyday to attend the college from their homes. They all come from the same village namely *Kazla* and all of them are the children of Federation members. As the Federation in this area has become quite influential, nobody dares to harass them. The principal claimed it as a massive success of the Federation activities. The college authority decided to honor the effort of these bicycle girls by waving 25% of their tuition fees.

#### **The unused potential of libraries**

In every Union Federation a library was built for the community under the EPF project. In the library there is a bookshelf containing around 300-350 books of novels, poetry, science, history, biography and children's books which can meet the taste of different age groups. However, often the libraries are found to be empty. When asked the reason of the library of not being properly used, the Federation Chairmen of Purbo Dhola union stressed on the need of keeping more books, specially those books which match the school curriculum. A local school teacher recommended that the library should be kept open during the evening as most local people and the students are often busy during the day time. There is potential for them to be utilized and inform the local community on more issues that could empower them further.

#### **The Information Highway**

The project initiated public information centre (*jono tottho kendro*) can play an important role in poverty reduction. Quite a number of people have been encountered in the field that received the benefits of the centre. A number of people gained access to market information, job applications, and agriculture related information and so on through using the Internet facility in the centre.

### **THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL ACTIVISM AND VOLUNTEERING**

#### **Confronting social problems and violence against women**

The inclusion of the local youths through the Youth Forum formed under the EPF project framework has noticeably reinforced the Federation led public campaign and social activisms. This helped the Federations in achieving some significant successes in

preventing social problems such as theft, early marriage, dowry etc. Usually 12-22 years old unmarried boys and girls are incorporated in the Youth Forum who most often happened to be the children of the Federation members. In field visits our research team came across and got to know about verities of social activism undertaken by the Youth Forums across all the Federations. The youths run blood-testing program in their locals and keep the records of blood groups of the local people so when a patient needs blood they can direct him/her to the right person. The Youth Forum collects donations from the local affluent people in order to buy winter cloths for the poor. The Youth Forum is particularly vocal against early marriage. The case study below demonstrates how the Youth Forum works to prevent early marriage.

**Ratna expresses her gratitude to the Youth Forum:** 16 years old Ratna has just passed her S.S.C exam with a decent result. However, her life could be very different without the interference of the Youth Forum into her marriage that her father tried to set up couple of years back. Upon hearing the alleged marriage of under aged Ratna, the local Youth Forum boys and girls visited Ratna's father, requested him to stop the marriage arrangement. Seeing the adamant father, they involved the principal of the Ratna's school with them to create pressure on on Ratna's father. However, this tactic could not influence Ratna's father either in changing his decision. Then the youths in a big group stormed into the house of Ratna's would be father-in-law. They cited the law of marriage age and threatened him with legal action if the marriage was held. Finally, because of the activism Ratna could avoid the arranged marriage. In an interview she expressed her gratefulness to the Youth Forum. She feels lucky to avoid the marriage and expresses hope for her future.

## OVERALL COMMENTS

- The Federations have emerged as important local actors using the strength of their memberships solidarity and networking to win positions in the UPs through elections, thereby challenging the elite capture of politics. The empowering experiences in the recent election have reassured the poor in the 'power of the collective' in many areas, and it is this, which should be regarded as the most important dimension of impacts of the EPF project.
- In the 2011 Union Parishad election as many as 559 Federation members were elected as UP member, while 27 were elected as UP Chairman. The success of poor people in the local government election significantly changed the class based demographic character of the Union Parishad office in various unions.
- The elected UP members especially the women who have come from the Federation background are identified with attributes, such as 'outspoken' and 'trained up' by the UP chairmen and members.

- The local community at large recognizes the Federation oriented UP leaders as honest, capable, knowledgeable and sincere.
- The growing influence of the Federations has provided the poor an opportunity to participate in the beneficiary selection process of social safety net programmes. This has resulted in gaining increased access to government resources and services and in challenging the subordination and exploitation and the injustice towards the poor.
- The Federations pose as a serious threat to the system of brokerage of traditional intermediaries (elites, politicians, goons etc.) in the local government institutions.
- The Federations has so far limited success in establishing the 'ownership right' of the landless poor on the *khas* lands, which had been previously occupied by the influential local elites. It exposes the fact that the structural inequality and the broader social mechanisms act as the background engine of durable poverty and powerlessness. In the foreground the micro-politics of the Federations attempt to destabilize the culture of corruption and the practice of exploitation. However, without a significant change in the macro-politics and policies, the mission of establishing the poor people's ownership rights on *khas* lands is likely to be limited.
- The Union Parish office and local elites can absorb the Federation leadership into the existing corrupt political culture and can neutralize the explicit political agendas of the Federation. For this, future planners need to be cautious and monitor and support federations.
- The increasing institutional and organizational development of the Federations during the EPF project helped the majority of them attaining registration from the Ministry of Social Welfare which is crucial for the independence and sustainability of the Federations.
- The development history analysis of the old Federations reveals three crucial factors for the success of the Federations - 'gaining maturity with time, solidarity among the members and the indigenusness of the Federations
- The old Federations show signs of potential that they can economically sustain themselves depending on their own earnings when the EPF project will run out.
- The newly formed Federations failed to create regular and stable sources of income. It will be particularly difficult for those newly formed and some C grade Federations to continue their activities without the vital support of RDRS.

- However, the Federations have assets, land and opportunities to increase their earnings, which is crucial for the question of sustainability. This area urgently calls for new ideas and innovations from the project designer and development planners.
- The newly formed Federations are in critical stages of their development, which require different package of development assistance than the older ones.
- RDRS initiated training and income-generating programs have some positive and long-term impacts, especially on poor women, both in terms of enterprise development and employment.
- The unity and the practice of saving in the 'small groups' work as the bedrock for small-scale entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the group based relationships among the peers act as the first step safety net for the poor when they are faced with sudden shock or insecurity.
- Training programs and organizational experiences built explicit capability among the poor individual. Such capability acquisition by poor individuals directly impact in the expansion of their cognitive horizons. This process has opened up new opportunities for them to navigate through the world of information and meaning and establish direct linkage with various government and non-government institutions in order to advance the specific interests of the disadvantaged populace.
- However, the Federations don't show any propensity to grow direct linkages with the mainstream NGOs other than RDRS.
- The project left a positive impact on changing the attitudes of the Federation members with regard to their children's education due mainly to the trainings and awareness programmes. This is manifested in the increase in the school attainment of their children.
- The inclusion of the local youths through the Youth Forum formed under the EPF project framework has noticeably reinforced the Federation led public will campaign and social activisms. This helped the Federations in achieving some significant successes in preventing social problems such as theft, early marriage, dowry etc.

## SECTION FOUR

### **The critical question of sustainability**

In this section of the findings, we discuss the critical issue of sustainability of the project-induced benefits in the absence of the EPF project. We find mixed results in our study that are described below.

#### **The Federation leaders' limited 'capacity to aspire' for self-reliance**

The Federation leaders often seem a bit uneasy regarding the question of sustainability of their organizations during interviews and discussions with them. A Federation Secretary admitted of knowing about the fact that the EPF project would terminate some day, however, as he claimed, '... RDRS had begun to insist on this concern only for the last one year!' RDRS manager drew from an analogy between childhood and adulthood while informing him and his peers about the post-project reality, "... we gave birth to you. We taught you how to walk. We showed you how to run. Now that you have grown up, try to fly with your wings." However, not many Federation leaders seemed to be confident of flying with their own wings.

The majority of Federation leadership may not be mentally prepared for the post-project reality on a long-term basis but apex bodies of federations have been established and it is likely that if they grow in strength, federations will be more sustainable in the future. While many lack capability to see the feasible paths in the future and the navigational tools to make informed and independent choices, there are several UFs that have the potential and have undertaken many actions independently. They exhibit remarkably limited 'capacity to aspire' for self-reliance when the project terminates but this may have as much to do with the culture as a UF Chairperson described as a relationship between a father and a son where independence and break-away is not the desired aspiration.

#### **The future of Federations in the absence development aid**

The concern of the end of aid allocation generates anxieties among the Federations' leadership. The Federation leaders identified a number of areas in their organization, which could be affected by the absence of RDRS. While some showed concerns about payment of the agreed salary of the volunteers, others feared that the termination of aid will deprive them from having income generating projects from RDRS as well as to continue splendid rallies to mark international days. However, many of these projects are signed partnership between the UFs and RDRS and independent of this project so the fears seems a little misplaced. Also, there are several UFs that have the ability to pay for volunteers out of their funds while others have decided to divide the volunteers tasks amongst themselves so that the UFs activities are not hampered. Some felt that without the support of RDRS they will fail to replicate the much talked about executive committee election process, which has been identified as 'democratic model' because it



requires high expenditure. However, budget analysis shows that for this activity RDRS only gave limited amounts for elections (BDT 4000 = 40 euro per UF) and even if voter education and post election training is included the total costs are less than BDT 5000 or 50 euro which is not a very high amount and most federations would be able to raise this sum. Besides, in 2007, UFs had continued with elections so it is likely that they will manage this activity without RDRS aid.

### **The future of Federations in the absence of vertical social capital**

The roles that the vertical social relations with the development agency play in the actions of the organizations of poor are under-emphasized areas in the developmental research. A young educated Federation volunteer articulates the theme in the following manner, "... the government officers don't value the ordinary folks like us. Seeing the Federation members wearing *lungi* and torn tops, sometimes, the office *peons* tend to deny them from entry into the government offices. The entrance only becomes easier when the Federation members are accompanied by RDRS officers." RDRS is a prominent and influential NGO in northwestern Bangladesh. The exercise of voice and agency by the Federation members are often supported by RDRS. A Federation member who was recently elected as a UP member explains; "... now we can argue with the UP Chairman over proper distribution of government resources as we find the support of RDRS. If RDRS were not standing by us the UP chairman would not give much importance to our words." They also mention the free legal assistance provided by RDRS, which proved to be vital for many Federations in challenging their subordination and exploitation. However, there are several other examples where the poor have shown strength just on their own and with no assistance from RDRS, claimed rights for the poor.

To ensure this vertical support continues, the project created apex bodies of federations at various levels, creating a tier support of system. Though this is relatively new and therefore it is hard to assess the impact of this structure at this stage, these bodies are expected to provide the supportive role that RDRS used to for federations to feel stronger and independently resolve issues. They also have the mandate to resolve conflicts within and amongst federations.

### **The frame of relationship between RDRS and Federations**

The development history analysis of the Federations reveals the long lasting relationship between RDRS and the Federations. Over the years, Federations have gone through significant institutional and organizational development under the consecutive development projects activated by RDRS. In many occasions with the active support of RDRS the Federations have challenged the system of brokerage of traditional intermediaries (elites, politicians, goons etc). Hence the Federations gradually developed some degree of reliance on the technical linkages, human and resource routes of RDRS. Through such processes Federation members often began to think and identify RDRS as a *supporter* who could be trusted in their fights against the exploitative traditional social relations and abusive elites and but, not as an equal *partner*.

When a serious dispute arose among the Federation leaders, which could not be resolved amongst them, the conflicting factions expected RDRS to arbitrate the matter. This mediation of RDRS, on the one hand, is essential for ensuring the power equilibrium and stability in the Federation system. On the other hand, the same process essentialisms the guardianship of RDRS and increases Federation's dependency on their protector. Having recognized this, the apex bodies were formed and very clearly state the resolving of conflicts as their mandate. This is a process of gently reducing the dependency on RDRS by creating structures that can still provide the same support and services. There are already some emerging examples of such interventions by the apex bodies

### **The coping mechanisms of the Federations in the absence of aid and RDRS**

The Federations leaders usually seek inspiration from three sources in the pursuit of being economically self-reliant. First, they draw inspiration from the large number of their memberships. The increase and regular collection of membership contribution can be a steady source of income, however, this alone will not generate enough money to support all the functioning and organizational costs of the Federations. Some Federation leaders identify their social forestry programme as a future source of economic sustainability. Nevertheless, many feel the need of undertaking new asset generating programs through investing the donation money and using their own lands and properties. Federations which are registered with the Social Welfare Department have also been able to attract funds for projects. With 75% of federations being registered through this project, a substantial number have the basic requirement to access such funds in the future. However, for the 20% federations that do not have their office buildings and many substantial assets, self-reliance may not seem so easy and further assistance may be required for these newer/ weak federations.

### **The opinions of the external stakeholders on the future of Federations**

A range of different external stakeholders who get involved with the activities and programs of Federations by some means such as Social Welfare Officer, Union Parishad Chairman, RDRS officers, civil society members and NGO representatives from 27 catchment areas of Federations were asked about their opinions on the sustainability of Federations during interviews with them. They identify three strong features, which will facilitate the old Federations to carry on, on their own. They are: 1. The old Federations are more resilient and better able to deal with changes 2. Federations are native organizations made out of local people 3. Through the experience with Federations the poor people realized the significance of their unity. However, they also emphasize on the need of funds because otherwise the poor will lose confidence on the Federations.

Moreover, some of these external actors point to an important governance aspect, which can risk the sustainability of the Federations in the absence of supervision. They think that now everything is working smoothly as the process is overseen by RDRS. In their opinion, without the supervision of RDRS serious disputes can take place among the Federation members over assets and funds, which can lead to a breakdown of these

organizations. They also point at the prospect of corruption within the Federations if they rid themselves of any institutional accountability. The creation of the apex bodies from the Upazilla level to the District level is expected to take care of such situations and ensure that disputes are settled amicably. While these bodies are still in their nascent stages, there are already examples emerging where they have intervened to resolve such cases successfully. They are emerging as supportive structures for the federations and likely to lead to increases independence and sustainability of the federations in the future.

## **SECTION FIVE**

### **Recommendations**

#### **The importance of Federations' empowerment projects**

We recognize the significance of Federations for the well being of the poor populace in northwestern Bangladesh. Our research reveals that the Federations' led activism and programs have brought affirmative changes in the lives and cognitive horizons of the poor, and in their capacity to challenge their exclusion and subordination. The Federations have been instrumental for numerous poor individuals in gaining of more direct access to government resources and services. Most importantly, the Federations provided the poor with the opportunity to experience their unity in claiming and establishing their rights, which reignited their belief in the 'power of the collective'. The majority of Federations as they exist today is manifested by a strong sense of ownership and renewed spirit of the members, particularly, in the backdrop of the success in recent Union Parishad elections.

#### **The need of development cooperation**

However, we think that the Federations will still require development cooperation after the termination of the current EPF project in order to continue their vital empowerment projects. This is because, ironically, the majority of Federations is neither prepared nor capable to work and survive on their own. Moreover, as our research reveals, the old and the new Federations remain in different stages of their own development as it takes time to build an organization before reaching a position to have any influence on the local power structure.

#### **The need of new development strategy and approach**

As we have already seen in the previous sections, although the EPF project has had a significant impact on the empowerment of poor people, the project failed to generate among them the essential 'capacity to aspire' to rely on their own means in running their organization independently from the assistance of aid and importantly RDRS. Therefore, we emphasize on the need of innovation on the part of RDRS and DanChurchAid in designing a new strategy with the goal of turning the Federations into self-reliant organizations. We assume an important role of RDRS in the prospective development project, within which the frame of relationship between the Federations and RDRS will be reconfigured. The majority of Federations have gone through consecutive development projects activated by RDRS. The current EPF project is built on a 'Rights Based Approach'. Prior to this project the EC Co-financing project was based on a 'Capacity Building Approach'. We propose a future program design, which incorporates certain elements of both of these projects but is fundamentally based on a new 'Linkage Approach'.

It must be noted that the constitution of social capital – intra-group bonding and collective action and external linkages – lies at the heart of the concept of Federation. However, our proposed Linkage Approach aims to revolutionize the idea and the potential of social capital in the empowerment project of poor people. We believe this new Linkage Approach based development process will work in reducing the reliance of the organization of poor on the development implanting agency and external aid, the reliance which has been grown out of the dynamics of relationships which characterized the previous projects. This will achieve such goal through reconstituting the role of RDRS in networking for the Federations and through reconfiguring the frames of relationships between these two parties. The proposed project will continue some major activities of the EPF with regard to training, capacity building, facilitation and awareness generation because the Federations will need them. However, these activities have to be carried out in cost effective ways so that they shall remain sustainable in the future without the help of aid money.

### **The Linkage Approach**

Our research draws on the significances that the Federation’s capability of establishing meaningful linkage with external institutions and actor’s carries in realizing its empowerment project. Inspired by the observation, we propose for initiating a development process, which would expand the potential of linkage generation both vertically and horizontally. The federations have already formed some partnership agreements with local government institution and District government authorities. Here we discuss some cases of already built formal and informal linkages in order to explore the further potentials of these linkages. Then we identify some missing linkages, which are needed to be established. Here the objective is not to make a list of linkages but to give an idea of the proposed linkage approach based development project through analyzing some cases. First, we discuss four cases of external Linkage of Federation with NGOs, local government, government authority and the local elite. Second, we bring in two cases of horizontal social capital regarding intra-group bonding and inter-Federation relationship.

- With the NGOs: As it is found in our research and also will be easily noticed by anybody in the field that the beneficiary landscape in rural Bangladesh is fragmented by some major NGOs. The Federation members usually tend to work with RDRS, consecutively, the BRAC clients tend to work BRAC. The other mainstream NGOs is also characterized by this uni-lineal vertical relationship with their client bases. In our proposed project RDRS will actively work to generate meaningful linkages for the Federations with the other relevant NGO programmes. For example, RDRS will help the Federations to link them up not only with its own legal aid wing but also with BRAC’s legal aid win. Our case studies show the increasing use of the Federation owned training centers by the local NGO organizations. The Federation can form a development center to collect information on the development initiatives in their regions. There much talked about capability

in record keeping of poor households will be very effective in this regard. This process can revolutionize the potential of linkage approach by providing the Federations with opportunity of utilizing different resource, human and technical routes of the NGOs other than depending exclusively on RDRS. Importantly, this process will expose the organizations of poor with a set of multi-lineal vertical relations with intermediately development organization where they will have more freedom to choose and negotiate. We believe this process will pose as a serious threat to the dominant uni-lineal NGO-beneficiary relationship culture and increase the capacity of the organization of poor to aspire for self-reliance.

- With the Social Welfare Ministry: The registration by the Ministry of Social Welfare bears much significance for the Federations. Already the majority of Federations have attained to this valuable registration. However, this linkage with the Social Welfare department has much bigger potential and implication for the Federations in terms of self-sufficiency, governance and other linkage generation. This registration allows the Federations to apply for government development project but also compel them for holding regular biannual executive committee election. The effective monitoring of Social Welfare duty bearers is vital for ensuring good governance and the accountability in the Federations. The Ministry of Social Welfare can formally appoint the Federation in the social monitoring system of the distribution of safety net allocations of the Union Parishad. The Social Welfare department can, on the other hand, get free access to Federation created data base regarding information of poor households and the state of development initiatives in their regions. There is room for mutual dependence and interests between the Federations and the department of Social Welfare. Realizing the potential of this linkage will call for institutional arrangement and legal procedure. RDRS, the prominent social development NGO of northern Bangladesh, is experienced in lobbying and advocacy. Nevertheless, still they can reinforce these mechanisms at the policy level aiming towards strengthening and institutionalizing the linkage between the department of Social Welfare and the Federations.
- With the local government institution: The Federations has had much success in accessing their representatives inside the Union Parishad office across a number of Unions. The increasing representation of the Federations members in the local government institution through democratic elections greatly influenced the capability of the Federations. However, now these elected leaders need to be re-linked with the Federations institutionally, so that they uphold the values of the Federations and are committed to work for the interests of the poor. Moreover, they will need support from influential external actors such as RDRS, Upazilla Nirbahi Office (UNO), Social Welfare Office, civil society etc. as inside the Union Parishad office they are

faced with politicians coming from the elite sections of rural society. They will need further capacity building training as well so as to leave their mark inside the UP office, as they tend to be comparatively illiterate than their elite counterparts.

- With the local elites and civil society members: The Federations can exploit some positive elements in local patronage structures in their favor, rather than in direct opposition to the elites in general. The Federations can approach the educated and conscious youths, for an example, to work with them as volunteers. Their skills could be vital in managing the IT centers (*jono tottha kendro*), maintaining library and teaching poor students and even in writing project proposal. The honor associated with such responsibility and the opportunity of accessing the IT facilities can be vital incentives for the educated youths to take such roles.
- Intra-group networking: The history of current EPF project shows that RDRS's policy on assuming the role of small neighborhood groups in the Federation structure was inconsistent. Our research confirms the fact that the small neighborhood groups are the actual building blocks of the Federations as they form the first step of safety net for the poor in the face of sudden shock and vulnerability.
- The flow of information in inter-Federation communication: Inter-Federation communication, cooperation and alliance have important impacts on the empowerment project of poor in general. However, here we examine an impending impact of the inter-Federation communication on increasing poor's 'capacity to aspire' for self-reliance. Our research identifies the huge potential of the internet service of Federation's *jono totthay kendro* in increasing communication between the Federations. For example, using the internet facility the Federations can open their own facebook page where to upload news on achievements, innovations, new technologies, individual success stories, barriers and so on, they can also take upload photos. The facebook as a simple tool to use and it has already impacted social transformation in the recent world history. The organization of poor needs to draw inspiration and aspiration from the performance, achievement and standard of other doing well organizations of poor who belong in their similar cognitive neighborhood. The pooling of information, of experience, among the poor is of paramount importance in increasing their 'capacity to aspire'. The potential of community radio can be taken into account in this regard.

Here we have attempted to draw a framework of the proposed Linkage Approach based development process for the Federations. It is, however, a work in progress, subject to in-depth research and dialogues. It should be noted that the development discourse is

no stranger to social capital or linkage-based approach. However, the emphasis on the explorations of multi-lineal bridging links for the Federations with a set of intermediary development organizations rather than solely depending on the implementing agency makes our Linkage Approach unique. This process will expose the organizations of poor with different resource, human and technical routs of the NGOs. As a result, we suggest, they will have more freedom to choose from, more negotiating power and more agency over their actions.