

## How RDRS Defines “Union Federation”

Forming people’s organization and providing an ‘agency’ to the disadvantaged and marginalized rural people helps to ensure effectiveness of development intervention. This action contributes to achieve sustainability of the results that have been gained through the work. The “Union Federation” is a unique community empowerment process where RDRS has invested hugely to develop people’s agency to raise the voice of the ‘unheard’ groups of the marginalized and disadvantaged section of the rural people. It involves creating a democratic space – one in which everyone’s voice is given equal weight. This needs to be actively constructed, as it does not naturally exist. As such it is counter-cultural – challenging the power relationships and stratification that have created inequality. RDRS believes that it is never easy and may never be perfectly achieved, but it should be a constant focus.

RDRS Federation approach aimed at encouraging community members to come together, deliberate, and propose solutions to issues of community concerns. The process is intended to result in communities taking ownership over their development by creating their own organization. After various experiments in its first 15 years of the organization’s inception, RDRS started promoting a ‘Federation model’ since 1989 and widely since 1993. RDRS has deliberately taken a low-profile indirect nurturing role to avoid distorting the process from the beginning. Federation has become a central element in the overall RDRS Development Strategy.

One of the purposes of the Union federation is to do advocacy to strengthen participation in decision making at local Union Parishad, ensure fair share of resources allocation for the poor and disadvantaged, attain membership in the lower tier of the power structure and act as god negotiator for the disadvantaged segment of the community as Active Citizen. RDRS has used a wide range of methods and structures in the process- of federation formation, not just to alleviate poverty but to ensure that the poor do participate in their own advancement. RDRS and the people still face a long journey ahead before they can be assured that the voices of the poor will be listened to by the powers-that-be.

There is a uniform consensus among Federation observers that social development is the realm in which they have performed best. However, the members define this in language entirely different from that of the development experts. In many guises, “social development” is described in terms of the unity and dignity of the poor.

In the social justice semantics that we have overheard in the Federations, three elements recur constantly. The Federation is a space free of bribery. It is where the poor have learned to speak out in the face of more powerful community members. And the Federation is the force that helps them to obtain justice. This finding has been consistent throughout nine years of Federation research; these goods, which in large part are public, out value tangible benefits.

For poor people, finding a place where they are not continuously made to wait until all those of higher status have been served first, where they are not asked to pay for services meant to be free, and where they are not routinely silenced, and insulted or even physically aggressed in disputes, is liberating by itself. There is a tremendous goodwill, particularly among women, for leaders and RDRS staff who have shown to be honest and sympathetic with the poor. One has the impression that this goodwill is hardly dented by actual defeat or lack of resources as long as leaders are not compromising core values of honesty and dignity.

Research showed that one of the areas of progress is the reported decrease in violence against women in the areas where federations operate. To what extent this is attributable to the work of the Federations, and to what it is happening as a result of broader societal trends, is difficult to determine. However, it is credible that the Federations have taken very proactive role to raise awareness and combat child marriage. While the Federations' social development record seems strongest in value-laden behavior changes like freedom from bribery and freedom of speech, much of this is underpinned with simple technologies that RDRS helped them understand and practice.

## Increasing diversity within Federations

In the Federations founded before 2008, efforts were continued to boost their membership among the local poor. There was a realization that in many Federations the bulk of the active members were living close to the center of the Union. Several thousand members were trained specifically for reaching out to the more distant villages, in order to reactivate dormant Primary Groups and to find new neighborhood groups.

The escalating diversity was manifest also in the activity profiles, with some important commonalities. RDRS kept supporting the Federations with a great variety of assets, trainings and networking. RDRS has been aware of the growing disconnect between leaders who advanced to be part of the village nomenclature and the majority of members without regular personal involvement. It has tried to mitigate the problem by creating and supporting special groups centered on common social traits or functional areas.

## Major Impacts Made to List Few among Many

### **Federations as economic actors**

Most Federations during their history have experimented with a considerable variety of businesses, sometimes in very creative ways. Economically more successful Federations do attract more mediation cases, but women's access to executive committee seats becomes limited in many cases, presumably because business wealth makes these more attractive for upwardly mobile male members which are a concern. RDRS eventually developed women led federations and bring women representation in the leadership of federations dominantly through the by-law.

### **Federations as Local associations and the supporting NGO**

Extrapolating from an older tradition of working with small groups in a social development agenda, RDRS succeeded in nurturing the democratic procedures and transparent management that have earned the Federations member motivation and public legitimacy. It created frameworks rather than uniform solutions, thereby encouraging the growth of the diversity that we observe in the Federations today. It supports them as multi-objective organizations, seeing them through challenging transition.

### **RDRS, the Federations and the 'Partners'**

The Federations are a very special achievement in RDRS's 50 years' history. They have been good for their members, their community where they operate and good for RDRS, which is very widely known and admired for its Federations. This study brought out three key messages:

- The poor value their Federations as a space of honesty, freedom and dignity; and this should remain the paramount concern of Federation support policies.
- RDRS and the partners have linked the Federations to global movements; the struggle for justice and against violence has benefited poor women in particular.
- The long-term viability of the Federations is a property of all members of this partnership; relatively small investments can keep them going.

### **Federations as mediators in local disputes**

RDRS began a legal education and support program in 1995. It worked through two administrative lines in the field. The coordination unit, under the Social Empowerment Directorate (together with the Federation support unit), created a network of para-legal volunteers in the Unions. Simultaneously, each Federation created a mediation cell, and RDRS arranged for a considerable number of Federation leaders to be trained in dispute mediation techniques. Many of the federation leaders now become a trustworthy point for the rural people to resolve the disputes locally. They also function as a parallel power structure of the union councils by creating access of the rural disadvantaged.

### **Federations in Social Development**

Of all the customarily distinct realms of development, it is in the fuzzily defined “social development” that Federations have done best. On this consensus is strong among members and outside observers alike. It does not necessarily mean better than in the institutional development of Federations, which many members see as part of social development itself, and which leaders, naturally, tend to think of as fairly successful. The members themselves rate as some of their top priorities in social development the ability to live unmolested by bribery and to speak out freely, even in front of powerful neighbors and office holders. Social development has a dimension inside the Federations too. The strength of women in decision making, indexed by executive committee positions, has slowly built on earlier achievements.

### **Federations as Normative change and causal attribution**

RDRS and Federation people both point to impressing advances in certain prominent topics of social development, for example the reduction in violence against women, and in the increased protection of poor people’s individual identities by an almost universal birth and marriage registration practice. Federations have worked long and hard, in public campaigns and individual casework, on such issues.

One of the successes of the Federation movement is to improve the status and raising voice of poor people relative to the powerful individuals and institutions such as the Union Councils. Less successful areas of change are also acknowledged in their own language. Public vows of dowry-free marriages are celebrated in affirmation of an ideal from which practice, if anything, increasingly deviates. Federations help to keep the public discourse against dowry alive and to give prominence to exceptions – notwithstanding that they have remained exceptions, including among members.

### **Federations as Development forum**

Federations, like most organized groups of the poor in the country, are at the receiving end in the “dissemination of development messages” (RDRS 2004: 13). In turn, they form an internal forum in which they actively debate these messages and refract them through the members’ own lenses. “Rights-

based” is still percolating chiefly within the RDRS staff whereas “advocacy” is already firmly rooted in Federation executive committees.

### **Federations that promote women leadership in its “Executive Committee”**

The Federations as a development forum for the poor have expressed this quality by increasingly electing women to their executive committees. The bye-laws written by RDRS require them to have a minimum of three women in the committee, one of them vice chairperson. Women started to take executive committee seats above the statutory minimum many years back, and already in 1997 a quarter of the Federation exceeded the minimum.

### **At a glance of Federation Information**

❖ Total number of Federation:	406
❖ Total district Coverage:	09
❖ Total Upazila Coverage:	53
❖ Total Union Coverage:	402
❖ Number of women lead federation:	136
❖ Number of federations registered from (DSS):	247
❖ Federation own center:	342
❖ Grain store :	87
❖ Social Service Centers:	244
❖ Jano tatthay kendra (JTK):	50
❖ Cultural groups (Peoples Theater, Folk Song Troupes) :	137
❖ Community Libraries:	353
❖ Number federation with own land:	320
❖ No. o fBNF fund received	60

### **Group & Members Information**

❖ Total Group	:	14,841
❖ Male Group	:	4,207
❖ Female Group	:	10,634
❖ Total Members	:	3,61,414
❖ Male Members	:	100,474
❖ Female Members	:	260,940
❖ PWD Member	:	4469
❖ Indigenous People	:	4392
❖ Excluded Members	:	14229

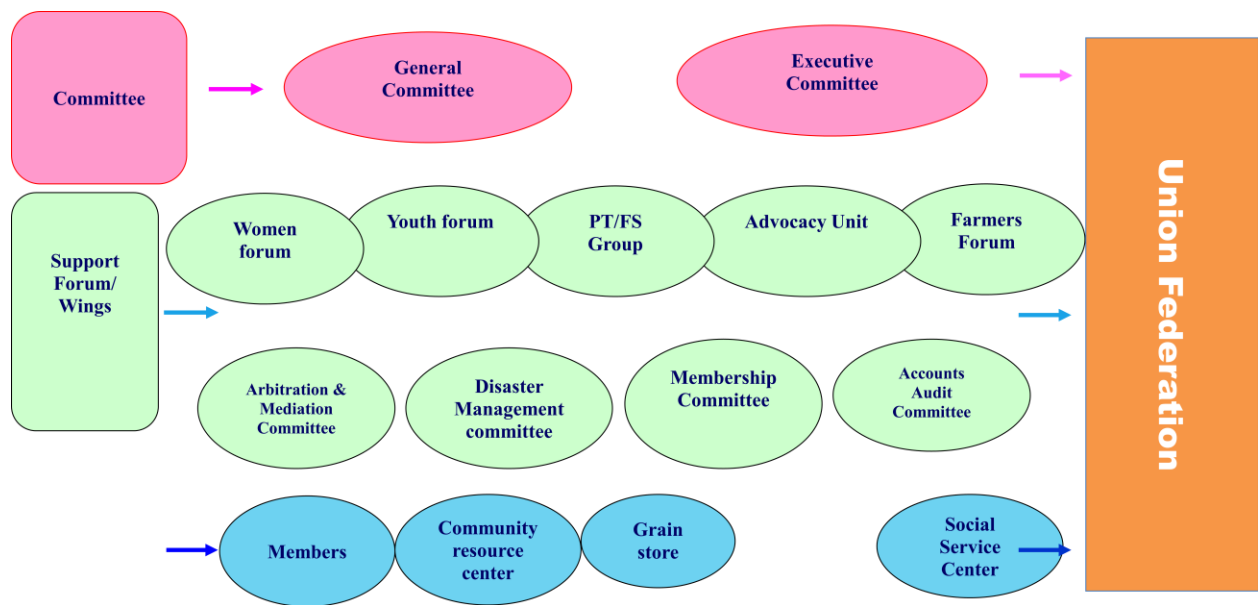
### **E.C & G.C Members**

❖ Total E.C Members	:	3654
❖ Male E.C Members	:	1403
❖ Female E.C Members	:	2251
❖ Total G.C Members	:	14841
❖ Male G.C Members	:	4207
❖ Female G.C Members	:	10634

### Youth & Women forum Members Information

❖ Total Youth forums Members	:	27628
❖ Boys Members	:	16098
❖ Girls Members	:	11530
❖ Total Women forums Members	:	21656

Name of District	Upazila	Union Federation
Gaibandha	7	49
Kurigram	9	79
Lalmonirhat	5	44
Nilphamari	6	55
Rangpur	6	31
Dinajpur	9	52
Thakurgaon	5	51
Panchagarh	5	43
Jamalpur	1	2
Total	53	406



## RDRS Experience in Community based organization

RDRS has 385 grass-root levels CBOs named Union Federation. A Union Federation is a development-oriented non-political local organization established and led by the landless, small and marginal farmers, poor, extremely poor, and disadvantaged people including the indigenous people living in the respective union. Youth and Women Forum are two vital wings of each Union Federation. Women Rights Unit in collaboration with the Social Organization Unit is facilitating these two wings to implement activities at the grassroots to combat violence against women, gender, and child issues. Out of 406 Union-Based Federations, 247 were registered with the Social Welfare Department of Bangladesh. RDRS is operating a rehabilitation center for girls & women survivors of different violence and mainstreaming them by promoting marketable skills and self-help income generation activities. Many violence-affected women and girls have been rehabilitated in mainstream society with the help of the Federation. Through these efforts, RDRS has been awarded the “Good Practice” award 2012 from the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and UNFPA in the area of reducing violence against women.

## Concluding Remarks

If social development is the realm in which Federations have performed best. Federation members, like other organized poor people in Bangladesh, have been the addressees of “development messages” meant to foster behavioral changes that will advance social development. However, very little is known about how leaders, ordinary members and non-members close to Federations have assimilated these messages into their cognitive systems and use them to negotiate their internal processes when NGO staffs are not present.