

**A Pilot Project on Capacity Building on Electricity
Reforms in Bangladesh, India and Nepal
(RESA Project)**

**Report of
Media Workshop**

30th May, 2010

Chanchal, Malda, West Bengal

A Media Workshop was organised by CUTS Calcutta Resource Centre in Malda, West Bengal on May 30, 2010 in collaboration with district partner Chanchal Jana Kalyan Samity (CJKS) under the RESA Project.

Objective of the workshop: The main objective of the workshop was to share RESA outcomes with regional media vehicles and deliberate on the road ahead with specific focus on the roles that Civil Society & Media needs to play.

The workshop started off with the local partner organisation welcoming the participants followed by CUTS's presentation on RESA project. This was followed by the Panel discussion titled "Present Challenges in the Electricity Sector: Role of Civil Society & Media". Thereafter the floor was opened for discussions. The local utility official present answered some of the queries of the participants during the open floor discussions.

Dipak Chakrabarty Secretary, Chanchal Janakalyan Samity (CJKS): In the inaugural season Dipak Chakrabarty, welcomed all participants to the workshops and highlighted the need for the media to actively engage themselves to take forward what the RESA project has started. He stressed that unless the media gets involved, large scale awareness generation amongst common consumers will be difficult to attain and the reforms will continue to be on papers only.

Overview of the Electricity sector, recent change & Reforms, CUTS initiative (RESA project)- Brief Introduction, Objectives, Activities & Outcomes

Prithviraj Nath, Programme Officer, CUTS Calcutta Resource Centre: Prithviraj Nath, began with a few words introducing CUTS and the RESA project. He highlighted the recent reforms in the power sector since the enactment of the Electricity Act 2003. He then briefly dwelt on the outcomes and achievements that the project has had in the course of the past two years of its implementation. He explained that the main objective of the workshop was to discuss & deliberate on the plan of action for the days ahead and to understand what role civil society & media can play in this process.

He added that it is important to build a consortium of sorts and a common platform with involvement from regional & local civil society organisations & media to

reachout to the common consumers of electricity. Sustained efforts towards their capacity building can only ensure that the consumers & the sector as a whole are able to actualise the benefits of reforms.

Challenges and opportunities at the grassroots: The RESA Learning & Success Stories - Local CSO

Dipankar Rakshit, Representative of CJKS and Uttarbango Sambad : Dipankar Rakshit shared the experience of CJKS of implementing RESA project in Malda. He briefed the participants about the different activities that they had undertaken during RESA implementation. He pointed out that the Baseline Survey undertaken at the beginning of the project involving different electricity stakeholder groups like domestic, commercial, industrial and agricultural consumers brought out that the awareness on reforms was rather low. Neither are the consumers knowledgeable on their roles & responsibilities. It also identified the systemic issues that faced the consumers like delay in connections, frequent power cuts, irregular meter reading, wrong billing, low maintenance of equipments, time taking repair services, existence of middleman, low awareness and faith on grievance redressal system, etc. Peoples are not quite interested in lodging complaints even when the service falls short of the expected standards because of difficult & time taking process. Middlemen take advantage of such lacunae. Lack of accountability among utility staff is one more problems that face this sector.

He pointed out that the Grassroots Interface Meeting (GIM) that were organised under the RESA project involving utility officials, CSOs and grassroots electricity consumer were very helpful towards creating a platform for consumers to directly interact with utility officials and raise their problems. He said that the GIMs has been successful in turning around the scenario towards the positive local electricity authorities now acting more proactively and giving cognizance to the consumers' voice. He shared a few of the success stories of consumer advocacy undertaken by Chanchal Janakalyan Samity, after their capacity building through the RESA project, notable among them is the case of Azad Hossain, who recently approached the Ombudsman's office and got Rs. 77000/- in compensation for negligence on part of the utility. He concluded by adding that the RESA project in its limited capacity has started a process towards better

efficiency, transparency and consumer empowerment. It is extremely important to be able to continue this positive trend that the project has created with proactive involvement from the media's side, which should give better coverage to power sector developments and continue to flag relevant issues facing the locality & region. He requested CUTS to further the cause of consumer empowerment in the electricity sector through sustained efforts similar to that of RESA.

Panel Discussion on “Present Challenges in the Electricity Sector: Role of Civil Society & Media”

The panel discussion was then started and media representatives were requested to provide their take on the matter under consideration and what they perceive as the role of civil society & media in the process.

Bapi Majumder, Anandabazar Patrika, Bengali Daily: Das pointed that the media tries its best to highlight issues in the power sector that affects the common people. However he also said that media faces some challenges in the process, the mindset of people being the most important. He said that people are skeptical and are afraid to complain against the service provider fearing that it might lead to discontinuation of their services. They prefer depending on middlemen to resolve their problems rather than a legitimate process of complaining to the relevant authority. He further said that there have been cases when the media vehicles had found anomalies in service delivery and involvement of malpractices, but in absence of consumers who could bear witness to such practices, they could not pursue the case further since they did not have enough evidence. He however accepted the fact that it is a vicious circle and more awareness and empowerment can only lead to consumers giving up “secondary” sources and prefer legitimate ways. In this context media has a big role to play to convince people to stay away from such practices and it is already pitching in some efforts in that direction. He added that local CSO and utility officials also have an equally important part to play to root out corruption in the system.

Bapi Saha, Sabar Khabar, Local Electronic Media: Saha claimed that the local media always tries to flag all consumer issues through their platform. He said that they frequently communicate with divisional engineer of the local electricity supply

office on issues like power cut & theft. He added that they also highlight the perils and disadvantages of power theft, the need for conservation, etc. amongst common consumers. He observed that gradually people are becoming aware about the problems and adverse impacts of power theft. They are more conscious now and have also started raising their voice against such practices, he concluded.

Musharraf Hossain, Ekdin, Bengali Daily: Continuing on the issue of power theft Hossain added that the media has limitations in its ability to cover issues like power theft all the time. There is lack of proper and reliable information. He said that due to political and other harassment people are not interested in taking initiative against power theft. He added that it is important for the local level utility administrative to have a more active involvement in the process of curbing power theft. He also admitted that the media lacks holistic understanding of all issues concerning the power sector like regulations, grievance redressal, etc. and welcomed the initiative by CUTS & CJKS to educate media representatives

Debashish Ghosh, RC TV, Local Electronic Media: Ghosh highlighted that political interference and lack of political will to implement reforms and better practices sabotage the process. He cited one such example when a few weeks ago they had come to know from a source that few officials/staff from a particular local electricity office were asking money against issue of new electricity connection in the village. When they informed the divisional engineer of the concerned electricity supply office, no action was taken against the concerned staff. He added that more often than not, these practices are undertaken by middlemen who have political shields with help from utility staff. He requested that proper investigation be done and action taken against such corrupt practices by the utility. He also agreed that media has an important role to play in highlighting such cases and bring it to public notice. He added that in this regard the civil society can play an effective role by building awareness amongst consumers on the rules, their rights and responsibilities. It is only a concerted effort that will help in correcting the system.

Azad Hussain, Consumer: Azad shared his case wherein he faced undue hurdles and demands while trying to apply for an industrial connection for his husking mill. He shared how he refused to bow to pressure tactics and false claims by the utility staff in

an effort to flinch money from him. He pursued his case with help from CJKS and finally got justice after a long one and half years in the form of a compensation of Rs. 77000 that the WBERC ombudsman has awarded him for his loss.

Akhi Maitra, Representative local CSO: She pointed out that electricity has still not reached many of the villages in Malda district. She said that there are cases where people have applied for new connections and got no response from local utility offices even after waiting for very long time spans. Drawing from her experience of working at the grassroots, she said that at times local electricity supply office staff & contractors ask for extra money to release connections. She added that as a local CSO, they have been trying to build consumers awareness on their rights, the relevant rules and complaint registering process. She concluded by saying that more of such efforts are necessary to help consumers get better service.

Zahangeer Alam, Consumer: Alam acknowledged the fact that after the RESA GIMs, a better relationship has developed between the local consumers and the local utility officials and that the service has improved. However, there is still scope for much improvement and as service providers the utility needs to understand and cater to people's needs. He further said that it is also to be noted that consumers have their responsibilities as well in addition to their rights. They need to stop energy wastage and raise their voice against power theft.

Mr. Arun Chowdhury, Station Manager, Group Electricity Supply, Chanchal, Manda: Chowdhury acknowledged the effort by CUTS & CJKS. He also pointed out that the utility also faces certain problems in effective service delivery and cooperation from consumers is vital. One of the principal issues is shortage and that can be in many ways be brought down by conservation practices from the consumer end. However the utility can only advise consumers towards conscientious use of electricity and that there is no such rule whereby consumers wasting energy could be disconnected. He however added that the shortage situation is not only because of that and there is a lot of scope for improvement in terms of T& D losses. He explained that the utility always tries to provide quality services to its consumers, but some times due to technical faults, excess demand and infrastructural bottlenecks, service quality suffers. He said that the utility always suggests agricultural consumers to use electrical

capacitors to prevent equipment damage due to voltage fluctuation, but not many of them use them. In some cases agricultural consumers misuse electricity which also leads to shortage situations. Regarding power theft he observed that mass level awareness needs to be created to curb the menace. He also said that an effective consumer interface is lacking at the grassroots with consumers unable to understand the bottlenecks facing the utility and the utility failing to understand the consumer pulse. In this respect civil society & media has an important role to play by being facilitators for better dialogue and awareness generation. He further added that now consumers have become much more aware than in earlier times and efforts like the RESA project will further the process.

During the closing session **Nath** observed that after so many years of ongoing reform process there is still lack of clarity about the direction the reforms should head towards and such related issues. Consumers, to a large extent continue to be extremely unaware about the sector, recent developments and their roles. A large number of households still continue to be outside the reach of electricity services. While it is heartening to see that the reform process has started, it still has miles to go before it can claim to be a success story. In this direction it is the responsibility of the collective, the utility, civil societies, media and consumer advocates to strive towards higher awareness, better reach, speedy delivery and grievance redressal. The house agreed upon the following roles for the civil society and media for a sustained effort towards reforming the power sector:

Media:

- Increase awareness on Electricity Reforms by publishing articles on the subject by demystifying the issues & concepts for common consumers
- Highlight the need and ways for enhanced consumer participation in decision making and the entire reform process
- Act as a social watch dog for effective implementation of quality of service standards
- Promoting energy conservation
- Highlighting cases of consumer issues at the local level- beyond the power crisis issue

Civil Society:

- Creating awareness on electricity reforms
- Promoting consumer participation
- Discouraging electricity theft
- Assisting consumer in resolving their problems
- Encouraging consumer to save energy
- Raising systematic consumer issues at appropriate forums for advocacy and action

It was observed during the discussions that the issues highlighted were mostly revolving around theft, corruption and shortage. The media admittedly lacks holistic understanding of the power sector issues and events like this need to be organised more often to help give direction to the collective voice for better services and transparency. The workshop ended with vote of thanks by Dipak Chakrabarty of Chanchal Janakalyan Samity and with a promise of organising more of such events in the future.