

CONSUMER BROADBAND LABELS – FOR GREATER TRANSPARENCY & INFORMED CONSUMERS

01st PROJECT PARTNERS MEETING

Date: Thursday, April 6, 2017

Venue: Committee Room, IIT Delhi campus

Proceedings of the Opening and Session on Project Overview

OVERVIEW

The 1st Project Partners Meeting was organised at IIT Delhi campus on 6th April 2017. The meeting started with self-introduction of all participants (enclosed herewith list of participants). Udai S Mehta (Deputy Executive Director, CUTS International) welcomed all participants and briefed them about the project.

He apprised the participants about the inception of the project idea, with reference to the meeting on Consumer Protection with Ford Foundation in 2013. Later in 2014, Consumer Unity & Trust Society (CUTS) with the support of the Ford Foundation organised a one-day seminar in New Delhi on ‘Resolving access and quality constraints in broadband services: consumer organisations need to come forward’ bringing in relevant consumer organisation representatives from pan-India. One of the key outcomes of the seminar was the need for Nutrition Labels for broadband services in India.

Against this background, CUTS proposed to implement a pilot project on ‘Consumer Broadband Labels: For Greater Transparency & Informed Consumers’. During the course, CUTS and IIT Delhi together conducted a study titled “Mobile Internet Services in India: Quality of Service” where the need for adoption of a nutrition label for Quality of Service (QoS) was underlined.

The first presentation was made by Rohit Singh from CUTS International, where he explained the entire project to participants along with their specific roles.

The next presentation was delivered by Mr Aaditeshwar Seth from IIT Delhi that revolved around the technicalities associated with the whole working of Broadband services and how labels can be used to assess credibility of those services. The talk also captured various technical glitches that currently prevail; which may be further brought to limelight, post the enactment of labels.

The next presentation was taken up by Mr. Pramod Dev, DEVM Knowledge Ventures Ltd that mainly revolved around importance of an animation film and how it may be used as an instrument for spreading awareness among consumers.

SESSION I

PROCEEDINGS

Presentation 1: Project Overview, Roles and Responsibilities of Partners, etc
Presenter: Rohit Singh, Policy Analyst, CUTS International

Rohit Singh, in his presentation, explained various issues like definition and benefits of broadband; overview of broadband services in India and key challenges; project overview and relevance; role of partners; outputs; outcomes and way forward. According to the presentation, one of the key challenges faced by broadband services in India, is complex form of information dissemination by services providers to consumers. There is no standard format and the information is either too much or too less or too complex/technical for consumers to comprehend. Likewise, mismatch between QoS advertised and the actual QoS experienced by consumers, issues of mis-advertisement, mis-selling and false promises do exist. Overall the broadband service offered doesn't justify its price paid by consumers. Further, use of misleading terms that do not reveal the actual terms of contract and absence of tool to compare broadband services adds to further distresses of consumers.

There were discussions on several issues related to project implementation. One of the participants, while praising the initiative, claimed that consumers require a standard format for information disclosure of broadband services. The participant stressed that while service providers are complying with existing rules and regulations, available information is confusing consumers.

The participant also underlined the importance of networking and opined that an animation film should be supplemented by other tools like a simple consumer booklet. The participant was ready to take this message forward via publication/magazine. This was supported by other participants as well, who readily agreed to reach out to consumers through their publications.

One of the participants was sceptical on the possible stance of the regulator and service providers on the initiative. The participant suggested that there might be some resistance from both. Another participant shared an idea of organising a national campaign by consumer organisations. Most of them agreed to the idea of developing an animation film for consumer outreach and stressed that media can play a pivotal role in the success of this initiative.

There was also a discussion where such information should be provided by service providers. Some participants suggested that service providers may accept this initiative as labels may help to instil competition on QoS among them. The group unanimously agreed that packaging of the initiative and approach towards service providers is critical in adoption of labelling for broadband services.

In addition, all participants highlighted the importance of designing targeted labels for different set of consumers like rural, urban, metro etc.

CONCLUSION

CUTS summed up with the following points –

- Convince TRAI to come up with a consultation paper.

- Writing regional-level opinion/editorials by partners is vital.
- Location of label is critical and needs more deliberation. Whether it should be on the bill, website, mail or popup?
- Content for training module will be designed using a bottom-up approach.
- CUTS will come out with a simple document in English on the topic “what is a broadband label?”. The same shall be translated in local languages by respective partners.
- Email group should be created for partners for further discussions on the subject.

SESSION II

PROCEEDINGS

Presentation on: Broadband Label Design

Presenter: Aaditeshwar Seth, Associate Professor, IIT Delhi

Aaditeshwar, in his presentation, addressed the design component for a broadband label. He pointed out that there is enough data available on TRAI website, which may be used for research on prospective label components. During the presentation, a very important issue about spreading awareness among consumers using such reports was raised. The presentation specifically highlighted the development of an application (app), which can showcase actual QoS of Broadband providers and enhance transparency and competition in the market. The suggested app would use publically available data and accordingly determine the QoS which will help consumers to decide the best broadband service. The presentation also included various anomalies that persist in the existing framework and are affecting Broadband QoS. To address these anomalies, Aaditeshwar suggested some solutions, such as use of fine grain mapping, improvement of measurement methodology and mandate for information disclosure requirements.

The presentation led to a number of questions and concerns raised by participants. Few of them requested to define the project scope. There was also a debate on the ex-ante or ex-post mechanism for information disclosure on QoS. The discussion also highlighted the need to develop an app which would further assess the QoS being delivered to consumers.

Participants also suggested to involve media extensively to spread awareness about the initiative across India. Suggestions such as adopting eco-label format were also suggested; so that better analysis could be done on effectiveness of labels on consumers and their corresponding service providers. Discussions also highlighted that labels need to be localised, for even the local broadband service providers to comply with.

Further discussions also highlighted that mere implementation of labels wouldn't help unless sufficient measures for consumer empowerment through awareness drives are addressed. Lastly, for consumer benefit, it was highlighted that a simple and uncomplicated label system should be adopted to transform consumers into “informed consumers.”

Presentation on: Animation Film

Presenter: Pramod Dev, Director, DEVM Knowledge Management Pvt. Ltd.

In last presentation of the meeting, Pramod discussed on the role and impact of an animation film in raising awareness of different stakeholder groups. He described how an animation film

is more impactful than reports and pictures. The presentation highlighted that the animation documentary would mainly include three components:

- Highlighting the issues
- Flagging out the need to address those issues
- Introduction of the concept of label.

Various positive aspects of an animation documentary were emphasised such as its ease in connecting with to larger group, having longer shelf-life, easily shareable, which makes it essential for this initiative. Various dissemination techniques of the animation documentary film were also discussed, especially via social media.

A detailed work on storyline was proposed which may revolve around daily issues faced by consumers. It was also suggested to adopt a dissemination strategy to make the right impact . There was a suggestion to have a voice-over in the animation film, which the CUTS team and partners will work together and reach to a decision soon.

CONCLUSION

- Scope of the project needs to be specifically crafted so as to achieve desired objectives.
 - More detailed analysis of pre-existing label system needs to be conducted so as to use similar strategy for this initiative.
 - CUTS team will prepare a storyline for the animation documentary that consumers may understand.
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