

REPORT OF THE REFERENCE GROUP MEETING (RG- II)

May 02, 2009

KOLKATA, WEST BENGAL



**A PILOT PROJECT ON CAPACITY BUILDING ON ELECTRICITY REFORMS IN
BANGLADESH, INDIA AND NEPAL
RESA (REGULATORY REFORMS IN ELECTRICITY SECTOR IN SOUTH ASIA)
PROJECT**



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HIGHLIGHTS

Meeting had representation from Government, Utilities, Regulatory Commission and Consumer Associations.

Dilip Samajpati, Senior Manager & Customer Relation Officer suggested that CUTS can act as an intermediary whereby it can collate problems faced by different categories of consumers and represent them before the utilities to enhance and better its services and provide satisfactory services to the consumers.

PARTICIPANTS

Reference Group (RG) Members: Ten RG members attended the meeting which are as follows:

- Sunil Mitra, Principal Secretary, Department of Power & National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES), Government. of West Bengal
- Malay Kr. De, Managing Director & Chairman, West Bengal State Electricity Distribution Company Ltd (WBSEDCL)
- Prititosh Ray, Senior Member, West Bengal Electricity Regulatory Commission (WBERC)
- Dilip Samajpati, Senior Customer Relation Manager, Calcutta Electricity Supply Corporation (CESC)
- Anupam Ray, Associate Director, KPMG Services Pvt. Ltd.
- Asish Ghosh, Director, Centre for Environment and Development
- Jayanta Basu, Correspondent, The Telegraph
- Nabinananda Sen, Reader, Department of Business Management, University of Calcutta
- R M Nag Choudhury, Public Affairs Officers, Federation of Consumer Association of West Bengal (FCAWB)
- S K Kundu, Retired Engineer, Public Works Department (PWD)

Members of CUTS Centre for Competition, Investment and Economic Regulation (CCIER) - Implementing Organisation

- Udai Singh Mehta

Members of CUTS Calcutta Resource Centre (CRC) - Partner Organisation

- Keya Ghosh, Prithviraj Nath, Mrinmoy Dey and Sumanta Biswas

OBJECTIVE

The objective of the RG Meeting -II was primarily to finalise the strategy of implementation of Grassroots Interphase Meeting (GIM) Phase-II and to share the systemic problems identified from GIM-I so as to initiate the process of finding practical solutions to the problems.

PROCEEDINGS

I. Opening Session

At the outset, Keya Ghosh (KG) welcomed the RG members and briefly touched upon the main objective of the RG Meeting-II. She then updated the RG members on the development and activities undertaken so far under the RESA project, acknowledging the valuable contribution and guidance of the RG members in the successful completion of the activities in Phase I.

The RG group was then informed that a *Perception Survey* would be undertaken to assess the impact of this project on the local partners and the consumers targeted for the grassroots interface meetings.

Discussion

- Ashish Ghosh (AG) expressed the desire to know what kind of impact the project has made in the state and whether the second phase of the project would extend to districts other than the initially selected ten districts of West Bengal. KG clarified that the present project does not have the scope to cover more than the specified ten districts. She said, however efforts would be made to further extend the project to cover new districts and States in India to further strengthen the RESA initiative. She informed the members that a focussed presentation on SLOT analysis would cover the impact the project has made in the state.
- Nag Choudhury (NC) raised the question as to what benefit the consumers would get as a result of the project and whether the project was able to provide solutions to consumer problems. Responding to this query, KG mentioned that as a result of the various activities and territorial trainings conducted under the project, has been successful in creating close to 20 trainers at the local district level who in turn will replicate the learning and take necessary steps towards building awareness of the grassroots consumers in their respective districts. The trainers are now better equipped to deal with the problems being faced by them.
- Dilip Samajpati (DS) CESC, wanted to know that whether the project covered the urban consumers as well. Udai S Mehta (USM) explained that the project principally concentrated on the rural consumer. KG pointed out that the slum-dwellers of Kolkata were included in the project survey and their problems are similar to the problems being faced by the rural consumers. Most of the slum dwellers are indirect customers of CESC. It was suggested that the certain activities targeting the urban consumers should have been undertaken, so that they are also better equipped to articulate their problems. Thus, they should also be covered if the project is further extended.



- DS further suggested that CUTS should function as a *link* between the consumers and the utilities, as utilities have limited time for interaction with consumers. CUTS could collate problems faced by different categories of consumers and represent them to the utilities so that utilities get the benefit of knowing their consumers and be able to provide them satisfactory services.
- Prititosh Ray (PR) agreed and opined that CUTS should operate a “**Consumer Assistance Cell**”. To this, KG responded that CUTS has already drafted a proposal, where it is proposed that consumer assistance cells could become functional in all the ten districts covered under RESA, with CUTS CRC as the nodal centre. She requested the utilities and the regulatory commission to extend their support, in terms of cooperation and finance for such initiatives.
- USM requested DS to consider the option of consumer assistance cells with CESC, to which DS replied that CUTS could certainly approach CESC with clear indicators of how it will help CESC to enhance and better its services and gain consumer satisfaction. He further informed that organisations from some other states have already approached CESC with similar proposals. Thus, it was decided that CUTS will approach CESC and WBSEDCL with the proposal.
- Nabinananda Sen (NS) wanted to know if the partner organisations conducted any internal assessment of the district level trainers to assess their level of capacity that was achieved through the territorial trainings. He suggested that simple tools could be used to test their understanding. KG mentioned that CUTS was taking the suggestion on board and will come up with a suitable assessment mechanism/tool for the trainers. She added that the perception survey would cover the trainers also and therefore it may be considered as a tool for assessing their capacity. USM informed the members, that select trainers would also be involved in undertaking certain sessions during the second round of the GIMs. It’s a mechanism adopted to assess the district level trainers.
- There is a need to further the movement and move towards setting up of the same.
- Sunil Mitra (SM) said that the Department of Power & National Centre for Education Statistics (department) realised that CUTS was trying to raise the awareness level of consumers and educate them on the redressal mechanism and other issues of reforms through this exercise. He felt that such an initiative would go a long way in solving, certainly not all, but many of the problems of this sector and therefore the Department is supporting this initiative. He further added that a structured consumer perception survey was carried out by IMRB for the distribution company (WBSEDCL) and a separate study is being carried out by KPMG to evaluate the perception of the consumers. He explained that this was more of a baseline survey which would be revisited year after year to see if the perception of the consumers is changing and improving.
- Malay K De (MKD) elaborated said that the IMRB survey was undertaken to assess the level of awareness and satisfaction among the consumers and employees of WBSEDCL. The survey revealed that the employees of WBSEDCL were more satisfied with the organisation than the consumers. The satisfaction index for consumers and employees worked out to be 38 and 74 respectively. He added that though the sample sizes for WBSEDCL’s consumer survey and CUTS’ baseline consumer survey were different,

yet there were no significant variations in the findings of the two surveys. He informed that the final report would soon be put up on the website and action points will be chalked out from the findings of the consumers' perception survey.

- DS informed the group that CESC undertakes consumer perception survey every two years and the findings show that the urban consumers of CESC were comparatively well aware about the regulatory commission, how it operates, the regulatory system, the grievance redressal mechanism, etc, when compared to other metro cities. This is in sharp contrast to the almost negligent awareness of the rural consumers of West Bengal where the distributor is WBSEDCL.
- MKD said that it has been commonly observed that awareness and satisfaction in consumers are directly proportional. The more the awareness level in a consumer, the more likely are the chances of his getting the right kind of services and redressal. USM agreed and added that as the urban consumers have been known to be more aware, CUTS concentrated on the rural consumers under the RESA project, to help build the capacity at the rural grassroots level.
- Responding to DS, Jayanta Basu (JB) pointed out that out of the 45 lakh people residing in the Calcutta Municipal Corporation area, one-third live in the slums, who being indirect consumers of CESC are left out of the CESC surveys. If that one-third portion is also included then the findings of the survey will not be as positive as they are now. The RESA survey covers the slum dwellers and it reflects the awareness level of the people inhabiting in slums as well as rural consumers. KG intervened that CUTS has taken due recognition of this fact and has included this section of urban consumers under the project activities. DS agreed that since slums dwellers, as pointed out by JB, were not the direct consumers of CESC, they were mostly left out of the CESC surveys.

1.1 Expectations and Focus of the Meeting

Before elaborating on the expectations and focus of the meeting, USM informed the RG members that the mid-term review meeting, which was attended by all the territorial partners and Dag Larsson, representing the funding agency, NORAD, was very successful and that Dag Larsson was very happy with the progress of the project so far. He acknowledged the guidance and immense support that CUTS has received from the RG members, without which successful implementation would not have been possible. USM then shared the main expectations and focus of the meeting as under:

1. **Working out a Strategy and Plan for Implementation of GIM II:** He shared that the principal objective of the GIM Phase II is to go back to the consumers with practical solutions of the systemic problems that they had raised during GIM Phase I. He continued that this is an area where inputs, suggestions and guidance from the RG members are vital and necessary.
2. **Inputs regarding the Advocacy Seminar:** He requested the RG to provide their inputs to help CUTS strengthen its advocacy efforts. He mentioned the most important issue will be to reach out to the polity in an effective manner and added that the RG members' suggestions and inputs in this direction would be very

helpful. He also added that CUTS looks forward to their active involvement and participation in the advocacy meetings.

3. **Inputs on the Synthesis Base Paper (SBP):** He said that the SBP, which was distributed to the RG members in advance, is a synthesis of the territorial base papers from all the territories, *viz.* Bangladesh, Nepal, Rajasthan & West Bengal. He requested for comments on the same from the RG Members.
4. **Showcasing the RESA Documentary:** A documentary on implementation of RESA in Rajasthan has been prepared focusing on the GIM-I. USM mentioned that the format and content of the GIMs have been very similar in all the territories. The documentary was shown during the meeting for comments from the RG members.

Discussions

SD was of the opinion that small skits which are very popular and effective with grassroots population should be tried out in GIM-II, in addition to structured meetings. He also informed that WBSEDCL has made an audio CD on power theft, which is played in melas, etc as a strategy to disseminate information to the consumers. He felt that such unconventional methods should be tried out to reach out to the consumers.

1.2 Implementation of Project Activities: Phase II

KG shared the strategy that was chalked out by CUTS and invited critical comments and suggestions from the RG members:

1. form and format of the meetings, i.e. the mode of delivery, what innovative means could be adopted to catch the imagination and attention of the participants;
2. Resource persons and how to reach out to the right person who will be able to deal with all queries, whether there should be more than one resource person for each GIM, etc.; and
3. number and content of sessions.

Discussion

- About the format of dissemination, DS suggested that skits can be used for this purpose. JB pointed out that the format should be such that it can catch the imagination of the people, which is to be supplemented by some supportive services. For e.g., he said, there could be a *Vidyut Bichar* kind of a set up, where somebody from the regulatory commission could take a hearing of the complaints and if possible, offer immediate solutions/redressal to 10–20 percent cases. He laid stress on the fact that resource persons should preferably be regulatory representatives to ensure that the complaints are actually being redressed.
- PR said that skits could act as a catalyst, but there has to be proper educative sessions as well.

- SM said that the *Vidyut Bichar* idea is unique but since the GIM is basically a platform to educate the consumer, it may not be a good platform to have a parallel grievance redressal mechanism.
- Pointing out that the project has so far covered almost 1200 consumers, KG said that performing skits may not be possible everywhere, but in some of the places recordings of similar performances could be shown, whereby a CD recording/short film show may be arranged to convey the message to the grassroots. Thereafter, a theoretical session would educate the grassroots consumers in more details about the relevant issues. KG suggested a mix of theoretical sessions and skits/performances for the meetings.
- JB suggested that since lodging a complaint is proving to be problem for grassroots consumers, redressal support system from local NGOs could be considered. DS said that such kinds of mechanisms already exist in Bhopal and also in Mumbai where NGOs represent consumer cases/problems with the utility. KG informed the panel that CUTS has already drafted a proposal on Informal & Parallel Grievance Redressal Mechanism and will shortly be submitting the proposal as suggested by the members.

1.3 Presentation on Systemic Problems

After the discussions, Prithviraj Nath (PN) briefly presented the systemic problems. He informed the panel that the problems have been categorised into four broad heads, *viz.* policy/government related, procedural/utility related, regulatory related and consumer/community related. He clarified that though for each category, a number of problems have been identified, due to paucity of time only two problems from each category were highlighted for discussion in the meeting. He added that after incorporating comments from the RG members, a booklet would be prepared in vernacular languages that will work as a ready reference for consumers. This booklet, he continued, will also contain phone numbers/contacts of the concerned officials so that the consumers could continue their dialogue with the respective authority on their own.

Discussion

- Some of the RG members pointed out that the categorisation of the systemic problems needs revision at places.
- Referring to the problem that there are no provisions for consumers to buy metres on their own, PR pointed out that the provision for buying new metre from the market is already there in the Electricity Act, 2003 and also in the Central Electricity Authority (CEA) regulation, and hence the issue needs to be re-categorised as a procedural problem rather than as a policy issue. He said that it is about the absence of enforcement of the provision and not the absence of the provision itself. He further said that the WBERC has already drafted a regulation in line with CEA regulations which deals in details with all issues pertaining to the electricity meter.

- Citing the issue of “Unauthorised” use of electricity by big farmers, as listed under the policy/government related systemic problems, MKD said that the electricity act or regulations does not term this unauthorised per se. PR supplemented his statement and said that the only issue is that at many places agricultural connections are un-metered and the bill is calculated based on an assumption that the farmer will be using the connection for watering his own field for a period of three months. Now when he uses the same connection for watering fields of other farmers, he is using a whole lot of more electricity units than he was supposed to have done, which goes unregistered and hence is not accounted for in terms of payments. He said that “Unauthorised as per the Act” is not a correct phrase and suggested rewording the phrase as “using electricity for generating a commodity which he is selling”. Both he and MKD agreed that if the supply is metered, there can be no objection to his supplying water to other farmers as far as the Electricity Act and regulations are concerned. SM pointed out that the understanding of the people was that it was unauthorised and hence this perception needs to be changed. Consumers need to be correctly advised as to what is authorised and what is unauthorised. KG said that CUTS CRC would work jointly with the WBERC, CESC and WBSEDCL to educate the people about the Act and the regulations.
- In reference to the point “*Grievance redressal is extremely time taking and consumers do not have faith on the system*”, listed under regulatory related systemic problems, PR said that the regulations have clearly earmarked the time limit for each phase of the grievance redressal mechanism and hence this cannot be termed a regulatory problem. MKD, agreeing with him said that it is actually an implementation level issue and basically to do with the utility rather than the regulatory commission. He pointed out the practical problem regarding non-registering of consumer complaints at the local utility level. He continued that once a complaint is officially lodged, it is normally dealt with in time, but in most of the cases the initial registering of the complaint is not happening. SM also agreed and said that if one gets realistic regarding the present implementation status of the GRO mechanism, one has to own up to the fact that in many cases the complaints are not being registered. DS pointed out here that CESC has an online complaint registration arrangement whereby consumers can send in their complaints via e-mail and he further added that all such complaints are replied to within seven days of getting the same.
- KG observed that the systemic problems needed to be revisited and re-categorised. She said that from the discussions, it was apparent that some of the problems listed were perceptual issues while some were real issues. CUTS team would need to re-work on the categorisation and then meet the relevant members on one-to-one basis to find solutions to the problems.
- SM said more intensive discussion would be needed to finalise the categorisation and arrive at practical solutions to the systemic problems. He further added that though CUTS initiative is limited to 1200 consumers, CUTS work is supplementing the state utilities’ work and are reaching out to the same rural consumers. Therefore, after discussions with the respective authorities, CUTS

should consider if there is any need to highlight the issues that have escaped CUTS' notice or have been missed out and include them along with the practical solutions. This may then be disseminated further.

- DS suggested that CUTS should share the draft booklet with the relevant regulatory and utility representatives before finalising the same. KG assured him that it will most certainly be done and all materials to be distributed during GIM-II will first be shared with the RG members for their comments and inputs.
- AG observed that the call centre service of CESC is very helpful and that should be extended to include information dissemination as well. The same model can be replicated in the districts as well, he added. He cited the example of Agricultural Call Centres in eight states of India. He said that these call centres have been franchised out to private parties and they also serve the purpose of dissemination of information to farmers. He further observed that for any kind of dissemination, electronic media, *viz.* Radio and TV are very effective, since they can reach out to a great number of people even in remote areas within a small time. Also the electronic media maybe used more intensively for dissemination and educative purposes.



- SM said that a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) System is under design and that will also address the issue of further expansion of the scope of the currently operative call centres. He also mentioned the draft communication strategy that KPMG has prepared for the department in this context and added that a suitable policy will be formulated by the government in near future.
- MKD informed that WBSEDCL already has a call centre that is operative in the district of Bardhaman and plans are on to start centres for the remaining four zones *viz.* Kolkata, Baharampur, Midnapur and Siliguri by the end of the current financial year. But this service will primarily be for logging in grievances and for obtaining redressal. He said that the e-network thus established can certainly be used in future for other services.

- DS said that CESC sends relevant information to the consumers through mailers with their bills. He also informed that CESC's fault booking services are manned by personnel who are aware of basic issues in electricity and thus can provide some basic information regarding the same to the consumers. However, with regards to proper dissemination mechanisms, the call centres are yet not capacitated enough to handle that. He also shared that he himself has been a part of a number of such awareness building programmes both on the radio live sessions and on Doordarshan.
- JB observed that some complaints being made are not always very valid complaints, such as complaints made with regards to load shedding, high tariff, etc,. The consumers should also be educated on what constitutes a valid complaint and what does not.
- AR pointed out that the Kolkata Municipal Corporation has started a consumer service station, which is a single point *E-Seva*, whereby citizens can register their complaints for all kinds of services being offered by the corporation. He suggested that a similar service can be thought of in the electricity sector. He said that recording of complaints being a major problem, a single-point complaint registration service, if started by the utilities will have higher chances of registration of problems by consumers.
- Referring to the proposed booklet almost all the members present agreed that it has to be in simple vernacular language and should have minimal number of pages.
- JB suggested that the booklet proposed can also be thought of in the form of a newspaper, which can be pasted on walls. He also suggested that the same can have a detachable counterpart which the consumers can use to register complaints. USM here shared the success of *Gram Gadar* (a poster size wallpaper meant for the rural mass) of CUTS.
- However, some other RG members like PR said that a newspaper format will have very limited shelf value and since this booklet is supposed to be a kind of reference for the consumers, some other format may be more appropriate so that consumers preserve it. KG suggested that a calendar format could be considered for this.

At the end of the session KG summarised the important action points for CUTS that emerged from the discussions, which are as under:

1. To re-work on the categorisation of the systemic problems and segregate the problems into perceptual and actual legal problems through an in-depth study of the relevant regulations.
2. To list out the provisions that are there in the respective regulations.
3. To discuss with select RG members the re-categorised systemic problems and the relevant provisions in the regulations. This discussion will be on a one-to-one basis for their comments and practical solutions.

4. To incorporate the comments and inputs to produce the draft booklet with the most recurring systemic problems; their relevant regulations and the practical solutions.
5. To circulate the draft booklet among all RG members before finalising the booklet.
6. To finalise the dissemination mechanism and format of the GIMs. Recommended format– skit cum an educative session and also distribution of booklet and a wall paper if possible.

II. SLOT Analysis

Mrinmoy De (MD) briefly presented the SLOT analysis for the first phase of the project. He listed the strengths, limitations, opportunities and threats as observed during the implementation of the first phase of the project.

Discussion:

Referring to the envisaged threat regarding participation by the same set of consumers in GIM II, AG asked how CUTS is planning to address this issue. USM clarified that the concern expressed here was chiefly due to the fact that some of the consumers may have moved or migrated temporarily in the time being. However, he continued, considering the fact that the first phase of the GIMs has already covered a total of 1200 consumers, more than double of the originally planned figure of 500, ensuring that at least 500 of them are present at the GIM Phase II should not pose a major problem and that CUTS ensured the same set of consumers for the Phase II.

AR opined that CUTS is an interface between the grassroots and the authorities and the real challenge was how to sustain this initiative once the RESA project was over. He continued that it is essential to maintain this channel of information because that is how consumers can increasingly take informed decisions. JB suggested that corporate bodies can be approached to take up the issue under the umbrella of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities. KG supported his view and said that the corporate sector is a major stakeholder in the power sector and they should also come forward to fund such initiatives. She also mentioned the vital role that electricity utilities and the regulatory commission have to play in this direction.



The RESA Documentary was then showcased. The RG members congratulated CUTS for a very comprehensive documentation and said this initiative should be replicated in all other territories. USM shared that CUTS is planning to prepare video documentation of the GIMs in all the territories for Phase II, probably on the same lines of the one that has been prepared for the first phase in Rajasthan territory. The video will also contain key messages for all relevant stakeholders.

Vote of Thanks

KG thanked all the RG members for their active participation and valuable inputs. She acknowledged and requested their continued support and guidance.

Highlights

- The meeting was a balanced mix of representatives from the Government, Utilities, Regulatory Commissions and Consumer organisations.
- It was very focused meeting and several valuable recommendations emerged from the discussions.
- All the sessions were equally absorbing and enriching.

Lowlights

- Participation of the RG Members – several of them could not be present for the meeting.

Annexure -A

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