

Bangladesh Grassroots Interface Meetings (GIMs): Phase I

A PILOT PROJECT ON CAPACITY BUILDING ON ELECTRICITY REFORMS IN
BANGLADESH, INDIA AND NEPAL (RESA)



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1. Introduction

The Grassroots Interface Meetings (GIMs) constitute a very important component of the RESA project. In fact, much of the success of the project depends on how effectively the GIMs are conducted. The GIMs are planned to be organised in two phases. In Bangladesh, the first phase of the GIMs was successfully completed.

One of the main objectives of the GIMs was to reach out to involve the stakeholders at the local level in the process of electricity reforms by making them aware of the role that they need to play in regulatory reforms, and by transferring some of the key advocacy skills to them. In the first phase, meetings were designed to disseminate the required information to relevant consumers such as farmers, commercial users, distribution companies, etc. at the grassroots on the present scenario and register their problems, needs and challenges. In addition to the current consumers, those who are not consumers but reside in the same locality were also included in these meetings to capture the views of those who do not have electricity as provided by the mainstream mechanism.



GIM at Rajshahi on November 15, 2008

In the first phase, a total of eight GIMs were held in eight different locations (a map is annexed). The GIMs were attended by roughly 539 participants from 13 districts plus officials from the electricity and other relevant government departments, media, etc. All the GIMs were attended by at least one person from Unnayan Shamannay (in fact, the nodal person attended and facilitated seven out of the eight meetings). All the meetings were hosted jointly by local RESA partners with support from the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB). Table 1 presents the locations of GIMs with the information on districts and number of participants that were covered.

Table 1: Information about the GIMs

Sr. No	Location	Date (2008)	Districts Covered	Number of Participants	Local Organisations
1.	Rajshahi	November 15	Rajshahi Chapainawabganj Gaibandha	110	Shefa Society
2.	Jessore	November 17	Jessore Khulna Meherpur	109	Susamaj Foundation
3.	Barisal	November 22	Barisal Bhola	74	People's Development Organisation
4.	Comilla	November 24	Comilla	32	United People's Trust
5.	Cox's Bazar	November 27	Cox's Bazar	50	Wait N C
6.	Khagrachari	November 30	Khagrachari	37	Ujjibok
7.	Gazipur	December 03	Gazipur	77	AREED
8.	Sirajganj	December 05	Sirajganj	50	Social Work Centre

2. Structure of the GIMs

A common structure was developed in consultation with the RESA team across the territories for organising the GIMs. While a plan was developed in advance in consultation with CUTS International, most of the GIMs required minor adjustments in the process of implementation given the local needs.

2.1 Sessions

The GIMs started with an inaugural session, which was followed by technical (thematic) sessions and open floor discussions. However, in few cases, the open discussion was integrated into the thematic sessions. Since high level officials and policy makers from Dhaka attended almost all the GIMs, time was dedicated for their interactions with the grassroots consumers. The thematic sessions constituted the main part of the GIMs. Three separate sessions included discussion on three thematic issues:



Unnayan Shamannay Chairman Dr. Atiur Rahman speaking at the GIM at Sirajganj on December 05, 2008

- i) Electricity reforms and regulatory processes;
- ii) Complaint redressal mechanisms; and
- iii) Energy conservation and role of consumers in the prevention of power theft.

2.2. Resource Persons and Facilitators

While the local partners of RESA facilitated most of the sessions, distinguished resource persons from Dhaka attended most of the GIMs. A list of external resource persons is attached (Annexure II). However, the thematic sessions in most cases were conducted by either the local partners or resource persons from Unnayan Shamannay (the nodal person or the project coordinator). The external resource persons included university professors, high officials of the electricity authorities and one of the members from the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC).



The participants and resource persons at Jessore GIM on November 17, 2008

3. Issues Discussed

Issues varied across the GIMs based on the existing situation in each districts. However, a number of issues commonly emerged from almost all the GIMs, which helped in understanding the overall concerns of the consumers of electricity across the country. The following are brief but broad discussions covering common issues that emerged in the GIMs.



3.1 Shortage of supply

Shortage of supply of electricity emerged as an overarching concern for all consumers participating in the GIMs. Shortage was manifested in different ways: load shedding, frequent outages, duration of outages, and lack of electricity connections as compared to

demand. The local electricity officials present during the GIMs invariably expressed their inability to address these problems since they are depended on the supply as allocated from the grid, which is limited. It was clear from the discussions that the shortage in electricity generation is the one of major problem in the electricity sector in the country. Thus, a unanimous recommendation that emerged from the GIMs was that one of the key priorities of the electricity sector in Bangladesh should be focussed on increasing electricity generation.

3.2 Quality of Services

Issues related to the quality of services were discussed in almost all the GIMs. Two key dimensions of the quality were discussed: technical and service related issues. Low voltage was one of the common issues, as reflected by the consumers. Also, there were discussions on the quality of metering, wiring and other physical attributes of electricity supply. Concerns were raised regarding the quality of services, such as delay in getting new connections, corruption and misconduct by the officials and lack of support from the service centres (e.g. one-stop service centre), etc.

Power Theft

The issues pertaining to power theft was another common problem that emerged from the discussions. In the GIMs, consumers and the resource persons reached to a consensus that power theft can take place only if both the parties i.e. the provider and the consumer supports each other. The local electricity officials contributed substantially in the discussions on power theft.

4. Systemic Problems

The following is a list of problems discussed in the GIMs.

- Inordinate delay in electricity bills; as a result most of the consumers were unable to pay within the stipulated time.
- Transmission lines are outdated and needs to be replaced with new ones.
- Relevant steps needs to be taken to ensure reliability of supply of the electricity.
- Load shedding, which causes a lot of inconvenience to the consumers
- Improper installation of meters and issues pertaining to meter reading
- Customers have to pay for the theft of transformers. It is big problem for agriculture subscribers.
- Delay in providing electricity connection is one of the major problem.
- Power theft is common problem
- Frequent power outages hamper daily life. Most of the day, it takes up their important time.
- Low voltage is a common problem.

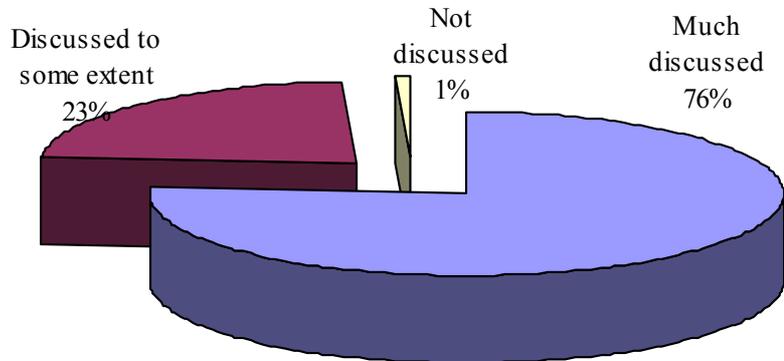
5. Evaluation: Opinion of the Participants

Out of the 539 participants, 369 gave their opinion in a formatted and coded questionnaire. They opined on different aspects of the meetings and provided a few suggestions for further improvements in such meetings.

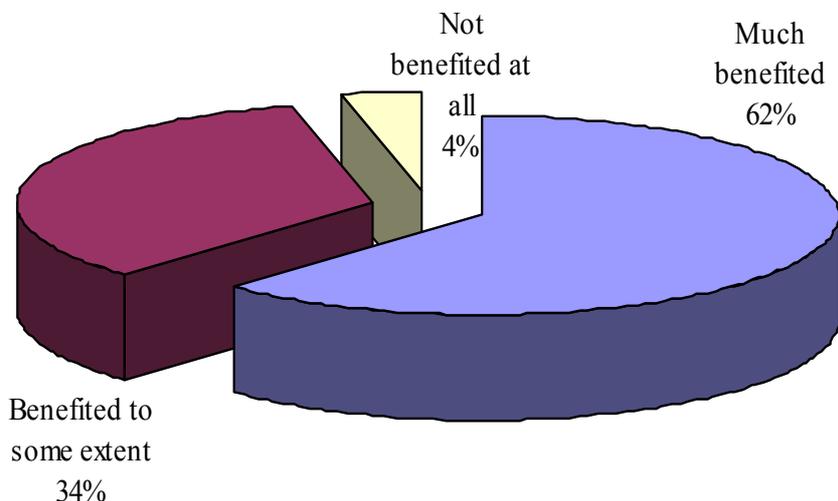
The participants reported the major problems of electricity that they face in their area. The problems are more or less covered in the list of systemic problems as mentioned above.

However, it is important to note that more than three-fourth of the respondents were of the opinion that issues/problems being faced by them, were adequately covered in the GIMs as compared to only one percent, which were of the opinion, that their problems, were not properly discussed in the GIMs.

Opinion of Participants Regarding the Extent of Discussion on their Problems



Extent of Being Benefited from GIMs: Opinions of the Participants



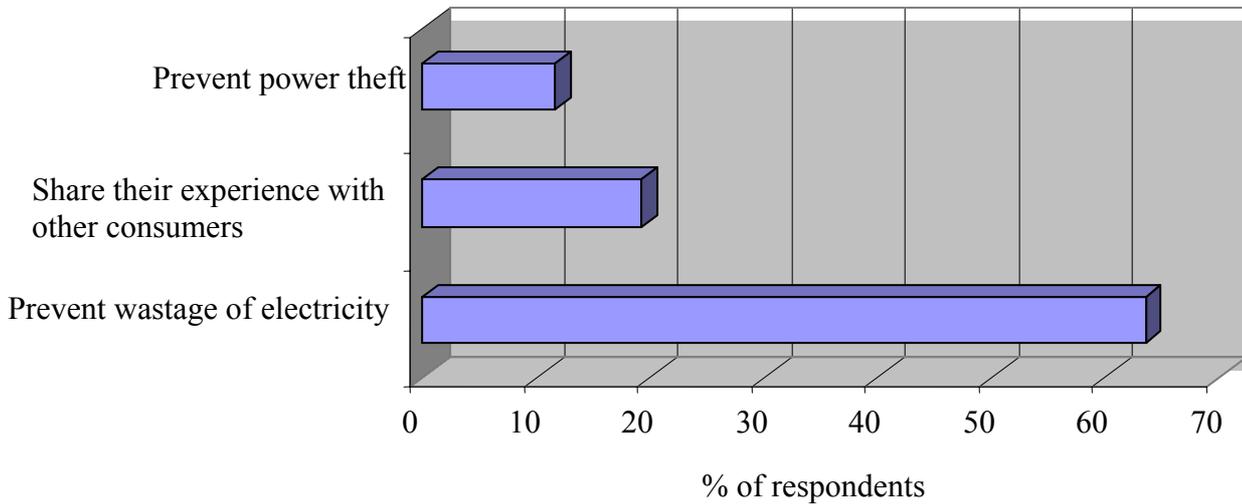
More than 60 percent of the respondents were of the opinion, that they found the GIMs to be useful and had benefited from attending the GIMs. Only about four percent of the respondents thought that they were not benefited at all from the discussions. The respondents were also asked to classify the benefits that they received from the GIMs (Table 1).

Table 1: Classification of benefits

Classification of Benefits	Respondents (%)
Awareness about the problems of electricity	86.2
Knowledge about the solutions to their problems	78.6
Awareness regarding ill effects of power theft	77.5
Knowledge about the regulatory decision making process	61.8
Awareness on the importance of electricity conservation	78.3
Increase in awareness about the power sector	24.4
Knowledge about the BERC	65.9

Having attended the GIMs and derived benefits from the same, the respondents were asked how they would be using the knowledge/awareness that they had gained i.e. what steps would they take. In response, the consumers came up with different action points, however, three most common action points, that emerged were: prevent waste of electricity and power theft and share the experience/learnings from the GIMs, with other members of their family and community and build their capacity too.

Action to be taken by the Participants of the GIMs



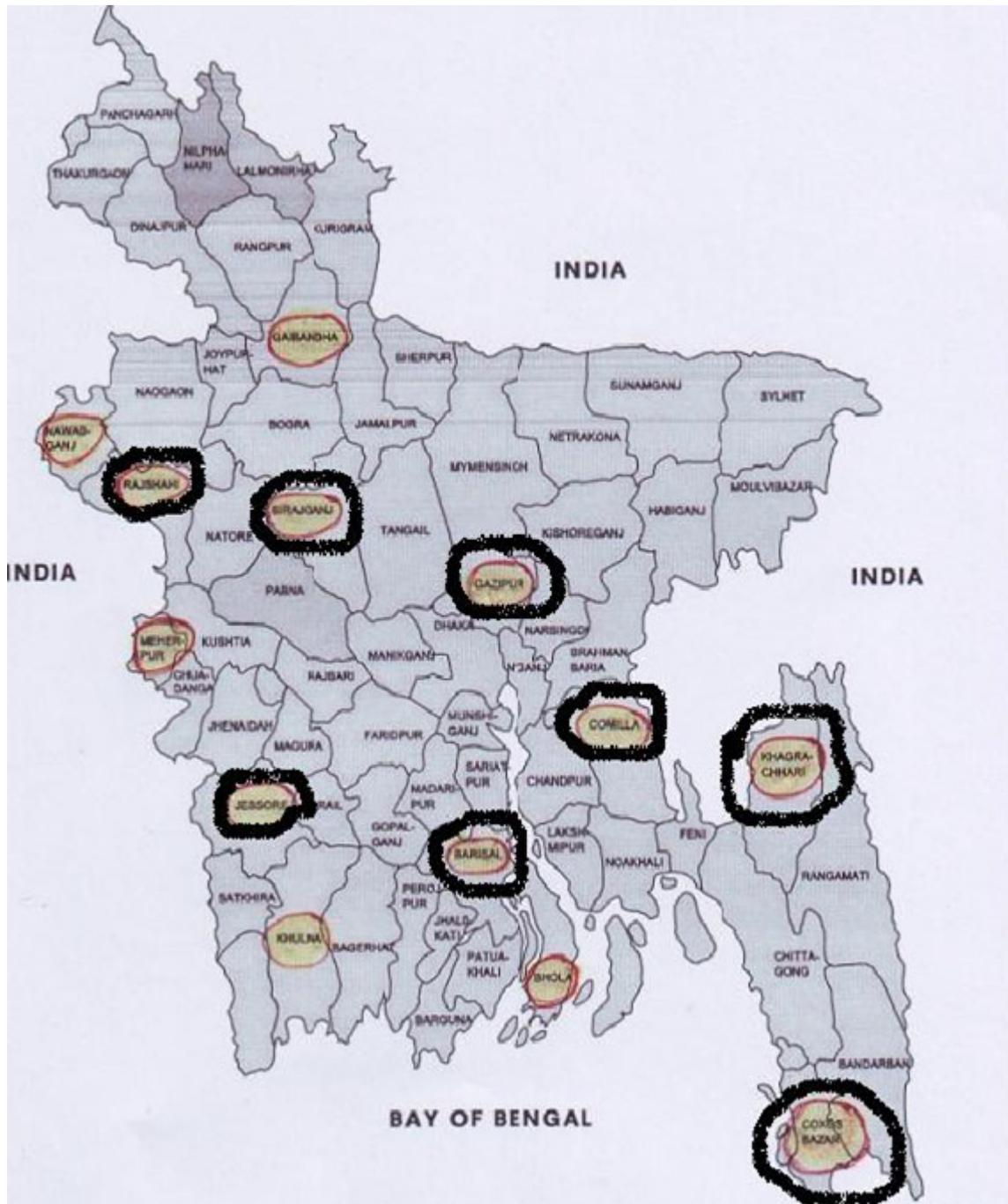
6. Way Forward

In each of the GIMs, the participants were asked to form consumer committees in their respective localities to hold the local electricity providers accountable to people, work as a group to prevent power theft in the locality, encourage consumers to conserve electricity, and thus enhance the overall quality and efficiency of electricity at the local level. The participants responded positively to this proposal. This gives the RESA project an opportunity to work further with these consumers in more innovative ways. It depends on how much support we can provide to these committees once they are formed.

Annexure I

Locations of GIMs

(The yellow-shaded districts are the ones from which participants came and the black-circled districts are the ones where the GIMs were held)



Annexure II

List of External Resource Persons

Name	Designation	Contact
1. B D Rahmatullah	Chief Engineer Rural Electrification Board (REB), Dhaka.	Phone: 8914569, 8916421 01914880644 (Cell) 01552480511 (Cell) E-mail: bdrahmatullah@gmail.com
2. Professor Shamsul Alam	Chittagong University of Engineering and Technology (CUET)	Mobile: 01713109917 E-mail: msalam@cuet.ac.bd
3. Salahud Din Ahmed	Member Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh	Phone: +880-2-9146377 Fax: +880-2-8155743 Email: din6174@yahoo.com
4. Engr. A M Bhuiyan	Director (Rtd.) Cop. Planning & Design, DESA	Phone: 9133131 Mobile: 01713084053

Media Coverage (Selected)



কুমিল্লায় বিদ্যুৎ খাতের সংস্কার সমতা বৃদ্ধি কর্মশালা অনুষ্ঠিত

কুমিল্লায় বিদ্যুৎ খাতের সংস্কার সমতা বৃদ্ধি কর্মশালা অনুষ্ঠিত হয়েছে। এতে প্রধান অতিথি হিসেবে উপস্থিত ছিলেন চক্কা ইলেকট্রিক সার্ভিস অ্যান্ড ট্রেন্ডিং (ইএসটি) সাবেক পরিচালক প্রকৌশলী এ.এম. কুইয়া। এছাড়াও কর্মশালায় আলোচনা করেন উন্নয়ন সচিব এর প্রজেক্ট কো-অর্ডিনেটর মদন চাঁদ হোসেন, কালের সহ পরিচালিত সোঃ মোহাম্মেদ উল্লাহ চৌধুরী এবং বরিশাল পল্লী বিদ্যুৎ সমিতি-১ এর সহকারী মহা ব্যবস্থাপক এ.এ.এম. ফারুক হক।

কর্মশালায় অংশগ্রহণ করেন জেলা ও বরিশাল জেলার জগমল পর্যায়ে বিদ্যুৎ গ্রাহক। কর্মশালায় বিদ্যুৎ সঙ্কট চরমের জন্য এবং গ্রাহক হিসাবে নানান দুর্ভোগের কারণে সচেতন হওয়ার গণ সচেতনতা আহ্বান জানানো হয়। যখন সোড শেডিং এবং বিদ্যুতের অপব্যবহারে বিভিন্ন সমস্যা নিয়ে গল্প ও অভিজ্ঞতা উদ্বাপন করেন অংশগ্রহণকারীরা। এ সম্পর্কিত বিভিন্ন প্রশ্নের উত্তর প্রদান করেন একেএম ফারুক হক এবং প্রকৌশলী এ.এম. কুইয়া।

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