

Launch Event Report

CAPACITY BUILDING OF ELECTRICITY CONSUMERS

March 28, 2019, Jaipur



Introduction

CUTS International and Bask Research Foundation with the support of the Shakti Sustainable Energy Foundation (SSEF) organised launch event of the project entitled 'Capacity Building of Electricity Consumers' at Jaipur on March 28, 2019. The event witnessed attendance of Discom officials, active consumer stakeholders of the power sector and a number of consumer activists working at the grassroots in Rajasthan. The project was introduced to the participants and eminent members present expressed their views on the status of consumer engagement in the power sector of Rajasthan and importance of the project. A panel discussion was also conducted on increasing consumer participation in regulatory affairs and consumer advocacy in the electricity sector. The details of proceedings are presented and the list of participants is provided in Annexure I.

Inaugural Session

Project Introduction

Speaker: Anurag Mishra, CUTS International

The inaugural session commenced with a brief introduction of the project by Anurag Mishra of CUTS to participants. During the session, participants were familiarised with project design, research and objectives.

Session: Electrifying Rajasthan: Beyond Political Will and Technical Solutions: Focus on Consumer Participation and Engagement

Chair: Bipul Chatterjee, Executive Director, CUTS International

Speakers

- Vivek Sen, Programme Manager, SSEF
- A K Bohra, Former Managing Director, Jaipur Vidyut Vitran Nigam Limited (JVNL)
- V P Raja, Former Chairman, Maharashtra Electricity Regulatory Commission (MERC)
- Suresh Chouhan, Director - Technical, JVNL

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The session discussed various issues faced by consumers and Discoms in maintaining mutual trust and participation in the regulatory process. It was highlighted that in order to make electricity sector sustainable and commercially viable in the long run, it is important that two key stakeholders – Discoms and consumers should work in tandem. While it is imperative to have a Discom that is responsive to the demands of consumers, it is equally important that consumers pay for electricity they consume. In this regard, it was suggested that Consumer Assistance Cell at Grassroots (CONASC) cells would be beneficial for Discoms, working as a bridge to provide information about grassroots issues and helping Discoms to raise awareness about their consumer-centric initiatives. On the other hand, CONASC cells should be instrumental in creating a consensus against power theft and help improving collection efficiencies for Discoms.

It was pointed out that the Electricity Act, 2003 was instrumental in providing provision for the promotion of consumer participation in framing regulations and ushering transparency and competition in the sector. However, owing to state interventions and interference from various vested interest groups, the policy is yet to achieve the desired outcome. The issue of open access was particularly emphasised in this context, especially how state governments are blocking it to protect the interest of state Discoms and continue to enjoy monopoly in the sector. It was suggested that the consumer and consumer organisations would need to take up these regulatory issues by raising them in appropriate forums.

As a way forward, it was suggested that while the CONASC cells would need to ensure continuous consumer engagement, it would also be important to guide and handhold aggrieved consumers in getting their grievances redressed. In addition, the need for designing programmes to effectively address awareness gaps was also emphasised. It was suggested that a separate strategy needs to be adopted to build capacities of different calibre and institutions. The need for leveraging internet and various social media platforms (like Facebook and Twitter) to register consumer complaints was also highlighted.

It was acknowledged that improving consumer participation shall require addressing various political economy, governance, societal and behavioural challenges. While CONASC is an important initiative and addresses one aspect of the issue, various concerted long-term interventions are required to tackle challenges related to governance.

Long-term challenges, such as the intensive integration of renewables into the grid, which is envisioned to happen by the next decade, need to be taken into account while

planning strategies in the electricity sector. Other macro-environment issues also need to be considered.

Roundtable Discussion

Session: Consumer Advocacy and Regulatory Engagement in the Electricity Sector: Bridging the Gap between Consumers and Discom

Chair: Ashok Pendse, Consumer Group Representative, Maharashtra

Panellists

- Manabika Mandal, Research Associate, Prayas Energy Group
- Hari Prasad Yogi, Founder, Consumer Legal Help Society
- Y G Muralidharan, Former Consumer Advocate, Karnataka Electricity Regulatory Commission
- V P Raja, Former Chairman, Maharashtra Electricity Regulatory Commission
- Rama Shankar Awasthi, Director, Energy Mantra
- George Cheriyan, Director, CUTS International

Proceedings

The session focussed on discussing experience of consumers and consumer organisations in Rajasthan and other states with regulatory institutions. Subsequently, various strategies to bridge the trust deficit between Discoms and improve regulatory participation of consumers were also discussed. A primary point made was the importance of institutionalising consumer engagement into the processes so that such initiatives could continue even when key officials are retired or transferred.

A suggestion was made that a beginning initiative for consumer engagement could be primers and simple guidebooks in local languages that educate consumers on various matters, from basic rights and responsibilities to complex matters, such as how to understand the data that Discoms provide and intervene in the regulatory processes which could be useful in bridging the capacity gaps of consumers.

A suggestion was proposed that usage of Right to Information (RTI) law and other legal methods for consumer engagement with the regulatory bodies could provide more paths for consumers.

The point was raised that current platforms for consumer engagement are also not being utilised effectively, for example, RERC's State Advisory Committee has not met on a regular basis.

It was suggested that though agricultural sector is completely dependent on quality electricity for their livelihood, farmers have minimal capacity to gain quality service or access grievance redressal, especially as access to water (and therefore electricity) can be a time-bound affair and require immediate redressal.

It was suggested that electricity consumers are effectively in a monopoly situation with relation to Discoms. In contrast to the vision of Electricity Act 2003 of providing consumer different choices, monopoly in distribution sector prevail leading to difficulties for both Discoms, who are mandated to provide electricity to the last-mile, as well as consumers who may feel that a range of options would allow better services for them. Safety-related issues remain largely unaddressed due to poor distribution of infrastructure, often causing harm and death of human and wildlife.

It was also deliberated that electricity sector requires both political independence as well as effective competition for long-term effective reforms.

Lack of access to appellate bodies in the grievance redressal process (as the Ombudsman sits in Jaipur) makes it difficult for even capacitated consumers to approach and appeal their cases if they are not satisfied with engagement at the local level.

Some issues faced could also be clarified with greater level of dialogue between local officials and grassroot consumers, for instance, confusion as to what consumption category certain consumers fall under (small household level shops for instance, it was suggested they are sometimes charged as commercial entities although they should not be). In this context, it was suggested that consumer engagement could be increased more effectively by gaining Discom's confidence while working with consumers.

Looking at the complex political economy in the electricity sector, issues such as pressure on licensees worsens their financial position. Therefore, consumer-friendly initiatives should be approached, not only with the realisation of lack of true independence of regulatory bodies and their resource constraints, but also keeping in mind the complex political economy of the sector.

Annexure I

List of Participants

S.N.	Name	Coordinates
1	A K Bohra	Former Managing Director Jaipur Vidyut Vitran Nigam Limited Email: bohra_ak@hotmail.com
2	A R Sharma	Awareness Training and Motivation for Action Email: atmango11@gmail.com
3	A.K. Godika	Executive Director Rajasthan Chamber of Commerce and Industry Email: godikaarun@gmail.com
4	Abhishek Kumar	Director CUTS International Email: abk@cuts.org
5	Akshay Sharma	Programme Associate CUTS International Email: aks@cuts.org
6	Anshuman Gothwal	Executive Director Bask Research Foundation Email: anshuman@baskfoundation.org
7	Anurag Mishra	Associate Fellow CUTS International Email: anm@cuts.org
8	Arnab Ganguly	Assistant Policy Analyst CUTS CRC Email: arg@cuts.org
9	Ashok Pendse	Consumer Group Representative Maharashtra Email: ashokpendse@gmail.com
10	Balawant Joshi	Managing Director Idam Infra Email: balawant.joshi@idaminfra.com
11	Bhagwan Lal Sharma	Upbhokta Soochana Evam Paramarsh Samiti Chittorgarh
12	Bharat Bhati	Marudhar Ganga Society Manaklao, Jodhpur Email: bharatkbhati@gmail.com
13	Bipul Chatterjee	Executive Director CUTS International Email: bc@cuts.org
14	D K Jain	

S.N.	Name	Coordinates
15	D P Chiranya	Retd Chief Engineer Rajasthan Rajya Vidyut Prasaran Nigam Email: dpchirania@hotmail.com
16	Deepak Saxena	Deputy Head and Assistant Director CUTS CART Email: ds@cuts.org
17	Dharmendra	Consumer Legal Help Society
18	Dharmendra Chaturvedi	Programme Officer CUTS International Email: dc@cuts.org
19	Edward Dickinson	India Inspiration Initiative Email: edwarddickinson@gmail.com
20	G L Sharma	Active RERC Petitioner
21	Gangadhar Solanki	Email: gangadharsolanki222@gmail.com
22	George Cheriyan	Director CUTS International Email: gc@cuts.org
23	Hari Prasad Yogi	Founder Consumer Legal Help Society Email: consumer_orgswm@rediffmail.com
24	Kailash Chandra Modi	Former Chief Engineer AVVNL Email: kcmodi2007@yahoo.com
25	Madan Giri Goswami	Senior Programme Officer & Deputy Head CUTS CHD Email: mgg@cuts.org
26	Manabika Mandal	Research Associate Prayas Energy Group Email: manabika@prayaspune.org
27	Megha	Consumer Legal Help Society
28	Mohan Lal Meghwal	Programme Assistant CUTS CHD Email: mlm@cuts.org
29	Mohini Ganguly	Research Associate CUTS International Email: mga@cuts.org
30	Nagendra Mathur	Partner Urmul Email: nagendra.mathur@urmul.org

S.N.	Name	Coordinates
31	Nimra Khan	Programme Associate CUTS International Email: nkh@cuts.org
32	Omprakash Dhaka	Simply Jaipur Email: info@simplyjaipur.in
33	R.C. Sharma	Former Director Rajasthan Electricity Regulatory Commission Email: rccsharma@gmail.com
34	Radhey Shyam Parashar	Chairman Upbhokta Soochna and Paramarsh Samiti Chittorgarh
35	Raghvendra Singh G.S	Ajmer Zila Gramin Upbhokta Sansthan Email: azgusmasuda@gmail.com
36	Rajendra Kumar Sen	SARTHI Sansthan Email: sarthijn@yahoo.com
37	Rajendra Singh Rathore	Leelki Village Development Society
38	Rakesh Kumar Parmar	Samajik Vikas Samiti Email: svsdholpur@gmail.com
39	Rakshat Hooja	Director Ida Travels Pvt. Ltd. Email: rakshat@gmail.com
40	Rama Shankar Awasthi	Director Energy Mantra Uttar Pradesh Email: rsawasthi71@gmail.com
41	Rashmi Dickinson	India Inspiration Initiative Email: rashmidickinson@gmail.com
42	Rohit Bhakar	Associate Professor Department of Electrical Engineering/Centre for Energy Malaviya National Institute of Technology Email: rbhakar.ee@mnit.ac.in
43	S. S. Meena	Additional Chief Engineer AVVNL Email: cecomavvnl@gmail.com
44	S.P. Chandak	Professor Emeritus & Honorary Director Birla Institute of Management Technology Email: suryachandak53@gmail.com
45	Sarfaraz Sheikh	Adivasi Vikas Manch Kotra Email: kas.sansthan98@gmail.com

S.N.	Name	Coordinates
46	Satya Narayan Sharma	Gramin Aarthik Samudaik Puna Nirman evam Vikas Sansthan Email: Recordsansthan@gmail.com
47	Satyapal Singh	Programme Associate CUTS International Email: sts@cuts.org
48	Shyam Lal Tailor	Coordinator Upbhokta Soochna and Paramarsh Samiti Bhadsoda
49	Simran Grover	Chief Executive Officer Bask Research Foundation Email: sgrover@baskfoundation.org
50	Suresh Chouhan	Director (Technical) JVVNL Email: dirtechnical@jvvn.org
51	Udai S Mehta	Deputy Executive Director CUTS International Email: usm@cuts.org
52	V K Agarwal	Executive Engineer AVVNL
53	V P Raja	Former Chairman Maharashtra Electricity Regulatory Commission Email: rajavp@yahoo.com
54	Vinod Kumar	Awareness Training and Motivation for Action
55	Vishal Narula	Bask Research Foundation Email: vnarula@baskfoundation.org
56	Vivek Sen	Programme Manager, Power Shakti Sustainable Energy Foundation
57	Y.G. Muralidharan	Former Consumer Advocate Karnataka Electricity Regulatory Commission Email: ygmuralidharan@gmail.com