

Report on Training of Trainers E-Workshop for CONASC Partners

August 13, 2020

Introduction

CUTS International and Bask Research Foundation are implementing an initiative on consumer awareness to improve the overall standard of performance in the electricity distribution sector in Rajasthan. As part of the initiative, a half-a-day long e-workshop was organised through video conferencing on August 13, 2020, with grassroots partners running Consumer Assistance Cells (CONASCs) in four districts of the state.¹

As the second phase of the initiative is approaching the completion in September 2020, the workshop focused on discussing the impact, learnings, and experiences from the project and ways to sustain civil society participation and capacity building measures in the state.²

The highlights of the discussion during various workshop sessions are provided below.

Key Discussions

Experience Sharing and Learning from Partners

As part of the session, grassroots partners shared their learnings and experiences acquired during the implementation of various activities on the ground as well as based on engagements with the Ombudsman, Rajasthan Electricity Regulatory Commission (RERC), and distribution companies. Hari Prashad Yogi, CONASC Manager, Sawai Madhopur, Rakesh Parmar, CONASC Manager, Dholpur, Madan Giri Goswami, CONASC Manager, Chittorgarh, and Dipak Gode, Dholpur, provided insights from their respective implementation areas. Some of the key discussion points are highlighted below:

- **Proactive Approach:** Apart from implementing minimum activities stipulated by the project team, grassroots partners tailored the initiative based on local needs and proactively used suitable tools and mechanisms to achieve impact.
- **Early Impact:** CONASCs were able to reap some early successes due to sustainable efforts in the identified focus areas. Sawai Madhopur CONASCs were able to solve issues related to the issuance of connections in the wrong consumer category for government schools, incorrect billing, and errors in the printing of bills. The

¹ For more information about CONASCs, please visit: <https://cuts-ccier.org/capacity-building-of-electricity-consumers-in-rajasthan-cbec/>

² Detailed workshop agenda available in Annexure I.

CONASCs in Chittorgarh achieved success in solving cases related to unsafe infrastructure and winning the trust and confidence of local distribution companies for collaborative participation. Dholpur CONASCs made the impact in a short time by shifting government schools to correct the consumer category and using RTI as a potent tool for evidence collection. Bikaner CONASC achieved success in the resolution of complaints through the electricity ombudsman.

- **Effective Tools and Instruments:** Grassroots partners realised the importance of identifying effective tools and instruments to achieve the intended objectives. Sawai Madhopur team recognised the utility of the *Bijali Mitra* App and its low awareness among consumers. Subsequently, it conducted massive awareness drives and, as a result, was able to increase its awareness amongst the consumers. Additionally, they were also able to generate consumer awareness about the replacement of faulty meters within the stipulated time duration as well as reasons behind inflated bills during and after the imposition of lockdown during the COVID crisis. Chittorgarh team effectively used interactive awareness initiatives such as puppet dance, etc., to grab the attention and the interest of consumers. Dholpur CONASC focused on collecting data related to service quality and various related issues in the electricity sector from local discom offices through RTIs and grassroots surveys.
- **Gender Balancing:** Each CONASC adopted a suitable strategy to ensure a balanced representation of stakeholders across gender and age. Chittorgarh centre ensured representation of women and farmers by conducting awareness workshops in the evening, generally a relatively unoccupied time for the rural populace. Bajju CONASC in Bikaner conducted specific workshops dedicated to women participants. Sawai Madhopur CONASCs undertook specific awareness drives targeting government schools in the district. Such a unique approach helped in pervasive penetration of the initiative in the target district.
- **Importance of CONASCs:** It was unanimously agreed that the initiatives have gradually gained popularity and recognition within consumers and local electricity officials. In the beginning, the grievances were mainly received during awareness generation workshops; however, consumers have now been coming directly to consumer assistance cells for their grievances. The initiative has helped in engendering accountability within local officials of the Discoms.
- **Sustainability of CONASCs:** The partners suggested that, due to an increase in interest and expectation of consumers after the establishment of CONASCs, its sustainability needs to be ensured. The grassroots partners expressed the intention of finding mechanisms to operate the consumer cells beyond the implementation tenure of the project. Chittorgarh CONASCs expressed that it will make efforts to sustain the initiative with the help of its networkers and the local community in the area.

Experience and Learnings from Activities under the Project

A presentation was delivered by the project team to highlight the experience and learnings from the project. The presentation highlighted the detail of various activities implemented during the project and the progress made in the process. It was highlighted that, in a limited period, some early achievements have been made which included the Rajasthan Electricity Regulatory Commission (RERC) accepting several recommendations made by the project team and grassroots partners during the hearing of tariff petition submitted by state distribution companies. This includes shifting of government schools to the domestic category, directing Discom to devote more resources on consumer awareness and capacity building, organising consumer campaign, and formation of fault removal team in rural areas, among others.

The presentation also sheds light on the activities undertaken to map the standards of performance and efficiency of the electricity ecosystem on key parameters of the consumer-utility interface. In this regard, feeder surveys were conducted in the four implementation areas which highlighted some interesting findings within and across the geographies. For example, the feeder survey in Dholpur suggested that 45% of consumers do not pay their electricity bill to Discom supplying electricity in the area.

The learnings in the initiative suggest that capacitated civil society organisations have the potential to bring significant changes for the benefit of consumers. It was also discussed that engagements in the electricity sector should be conducted with adequate knowledge and awareness about existing institutions, rules, and regulatory frameworks. There are existing institutions such as the office of the electricity ombudsman which is consumer-friendly and accessible; however, it has received sub-optimal representation of rural consumers due to low awareness levels. Thus, it becomes critical for civil society organisations to build their capacity either through self-initiated efforts or projects anchored by other stakeholders and civil society organisations.

Effective Ways and Tools for Continuous Engagement in the Electricity Sector

It was highlighted that consumer and civil society organisations' engagement in the electricity sector is a long-term process. Thus, the momentum created by the project should continue in the future. In this respect, the efficacy and impact of various interventions under the current project need to be assessed to fine-tune and plan future interventions. In the long-term, CUTS International and Bask Research Foundation will provide a sustainable push and act as the anchor for improving the regulatory participation of consumers and civil society organisations in the regulation-making process.

Way Forward

As a way forward, it was recognized that the optimal participation of civil society organisations in the electricity sector is important for creating equitable and impactful policies and regulations. Such participation has become more important with the ongoing disruptions in the electricity sector. Therefore, civil society organisations in Rajasthan should come together to become an active agent in the transition.

Annexure-I
Agenda of the Workshop

Training Workshop for CONASC Partners

13th August 2020

10:00 – 10:15	Session I: Opening Remarks Udai S. Mehta , Deputy Executive Director, CUTS International
10:15 – 11:15	Session III: Experience sharing and learnings from partners CONASC Partners
11:15 – 12:00	Session II: Experience and learnings from activities under CBEC Project Anshuman Gothwal , Executive Director, Bask Research
12:00 – 12:15	Break
12:15 – 12:30	Session III: Effective ways and tools for continuous engagement in the electricity sector Simran Grover , CEO, Bask Research
12:30 – 13:00	Session VI: Way Forward & Closing Remarks Anurag Mishra , Associate Fellow, CUTS International

Annexure II

List of Participants

Sr. No.	Name	Designation and Organisation	Location
1.	Aman Raj	Research Associate, CUTS International	Jaipur
2.	Anshul Ojha	Principal Anchor, Desert Resource Centre	Bikaner
3.	Anshuman Gothwal	Executive Director, Bask Research	Jaipur
4.	Anurag Mishra	Associate Fellow, CUTS International	Jaipur
5.	Deepak Gode	CONASC Manager	Bikaner
6.	Hari Prasad Yogi	CONASC Manager	Sawai Madhopur
7.	Gauhar Mahmood	Head, CUTS Centre for Human Development	Chittorgarh
8.	Madan Giri Goswami	CONASC Manager	Chittorgarh
9.	Mohan Lal Meghwal	CONASC Staff	Chittorgarh
10.	Shyam Lal Taylor	CONASC Staff	Chittorgarh
11.	Simran Grover	CEO, Bask Research	Jaipur
12.	Udai S. Mehta	Deputy Executive Director, CUTS International	Jaipur
13.	Uma Shankar Yogi	CONASC Staff	Sawai Madhopur

Glimpses

