

Consumer Awareness Programme for improvement of overall Standard of Performance in the Distribution Sector in two districts of West Bengal (CAPSOPI)

An interim report of the CAPSOPI project

1. Background of the Project

1.1 *24X7 Power for All*, a joint initiative by the Government of India along with the Government of West Bengal aims at providing reliable power to all electricity consumers in the state by 2019¹. In an attempt to make this endeavour a success, the state power department with the help of the power utilities of West Bengal has electrified all villages² in the state. The state is also the 10th largest consumer of electricity accounting for nearly 4.38% of the total energy consumption in India³. However, it still needs to provide electricity to about 1.28 lakhs households⁴ to achieve the target of 100% household electrification.

1.2 While the state power department is undertaking schemes and programmes to provide access of electricity to all; the state power utilities are ailing with issues such as huge distribution losses and outstanding liabilities resulting in their poor financial health. West Bengal State Electricity Distribution Company Limited (WBSEDCL), the state run power utility and the biggest utility of the state (55% of the total power sold in West Bengal is by WBSEDCL)⁵, had an outstanding liability of INR 9,298 crores (as per the half yearly accounts of FY 16), in addition to suffering from about 29.8% AT&C (Aggregate Technical & Commercial) loss in 2015⁶. In some places, the AT&C losses have reached increasingly alarming levels of 80-85%⁷. Increasing instances of power theft and lower collection efficiencies have been a few of the major areas of concern for the utilities.

1.3 West Bengal has a regulation to define and guide the standard of performance of the electricity supply utilities, which the utilities need to adhere to, in order to render good quality electricity supply and related services to the consumers. While West Bengal is often been hailed as a power surplus state, news of the state suffering from frequent and long duration power cuts with low and fluctuating voltage levels, especially in the rural areas, are also very common. The Chief Minister of West Bengal had also raised

¹http://powermin.nic.in/sites/default/files/uploads/joint_initiative_of_govt_of_india_and_West_Bengal.pdf

²<http://garv.gov.in/assets/uploads/reports/statesnaps/West%20Bengal.pdf>

³http://powermin.nic.in/sites/default/files/uploads/joint_initiative_of_govt_of_india_and_West_Bengal.pdf

⁴<http://garv.gov.in/assets/uploads/reports/statesnaps/West%20Bengal.pdf>

⁵http://powermin.nic.in/sites/default/files/uploads/joint_initiative_of_govt_of_india_and_West_Bengal.pdf

⁶http://powermin.nic.in/sites/default/files/uploads/joint_initiative_of_govt_of_india_and_West_Bengal.pdf

⁷ Source: Primary information as received by CUTS from WBSEDCL under CAPSOPI initiative

her concern over some parts of the state suffering from low voltage issues⁸. Experts also claim that delay on the part of the utilities towards addressing persistent consumer grievances on issues such as overcharging for new connections, disconnection without observing procedural formalities, inflated electricity bills and others have led to a situation where consumers have lost faith on the utilities. However, lack of adequate awareness of the consumers on their rights and responsibilities, pertaining to the electricity sector, have led to a situation where the numbers of grievances filed with the state electricity regulatory commission, viz., WBERC and the ombudsmen in West Bengal, are perhaps not reflective enough of the quantum of grievances which the consumers have. Out of almost two crores electricity consumers in the state⁹, only about ten thousand had filed their grievances in ten years (from June, 2004 till 2014-'15)¹⁰ with WBERC and the ombudsmen. The commission (WBERC) and the ombudsmen are of the opinion that the numbers of complaints filed are only a miniscule representation of the total numbers of complaints which the consumers have.

1.4 With the above background CUTS International and the West Bengal Electricity Regulatory Commission (WBERC) have jointly initiated a programme titled, 'Consumer Awareness Programme for improvement of overall Standard of Performance in the Distribution Sector in two districts of West Bengal', viz, CAPSOPI. The initiative aims to edify the electricity consumers on their rights and responsibilities, as mentioned in the Electricity Act, 2003 and subsequent regulations of WBERC and thereby facilitate to improve the knowledge and capacity of the grassroots consumers on conventional and non-conventional electricity in the districts of South 24 Parganas and Jalpaiguri of West Bengal. The work is a pilot to estimate and understand the major issues which the electricity consumers of the state suffer from and to identify the best possible measures to address them.

2. Overview of Project Activities

2.1 The project is being implemented in the above mentioned two districts of West Bengal, where 240 meetings would be conducted over a period of six months with an estimated reach out to about 6,000 to 7,000 electricity consumers. In each of the two districts 120 meetings are to be conducted.

2.2 CUTS has engaged four district partners, two in each of the two districts, for organizing the grass roots meetings. They have been trained by officials from WBERC, WBSEDCL, the West Bengal Renewable Energy Development Agency (WBREDA) and CUTS International to organize and conduct the meetings. The idea is to create a sustainable group of civil society organizations, in each of the two districts, which can cater to the consumers as the primary knowledge centres.

2.3 During the grass roots stakeholders meetings the following are discussed in details:

⁸<http://www.asianage.com/metros/kolkata/130517/west-bengal-cm-pulls-up-civic-power-officials.html>

⁹<http://wbpower.gov.in/organization-utilities/>

¹⁰<http://www.wberc.net/wberc/Annual%20Report%20-%202014-15/Annual%20Report%20-%202014-15.pdf>

Rights and responsibilities of an electricity consumers, specifically pertaining to issues such as how to get new connections, how to interpret electricity bills, how and where to lodge consumer grievances and the perils of power theft and how it affects the legal consumers are discussed in details in the meetings. In addition to these, specific topics on benefits of conserving energy and the advantages of using renewable energy systems, especially rooftop solar are also discussed.

2.4 CUTS has also developed *Vidyut Quick Guide*, a collation of relevant regulations by the state electricity regulatory commission, in simple vernacular language and is distributing it to the participants during the meetings for their better understanding of their rights, roles and responsibilities, pertaining to the electricity sector.

2.5 An extensive database of the electricity issues faced by the consumers, in these two districts, is being developed, maintained and analysed. Remedial measures, based on the inputs from the grass roots, are being ideated and shared with the commission for their necessary actions.

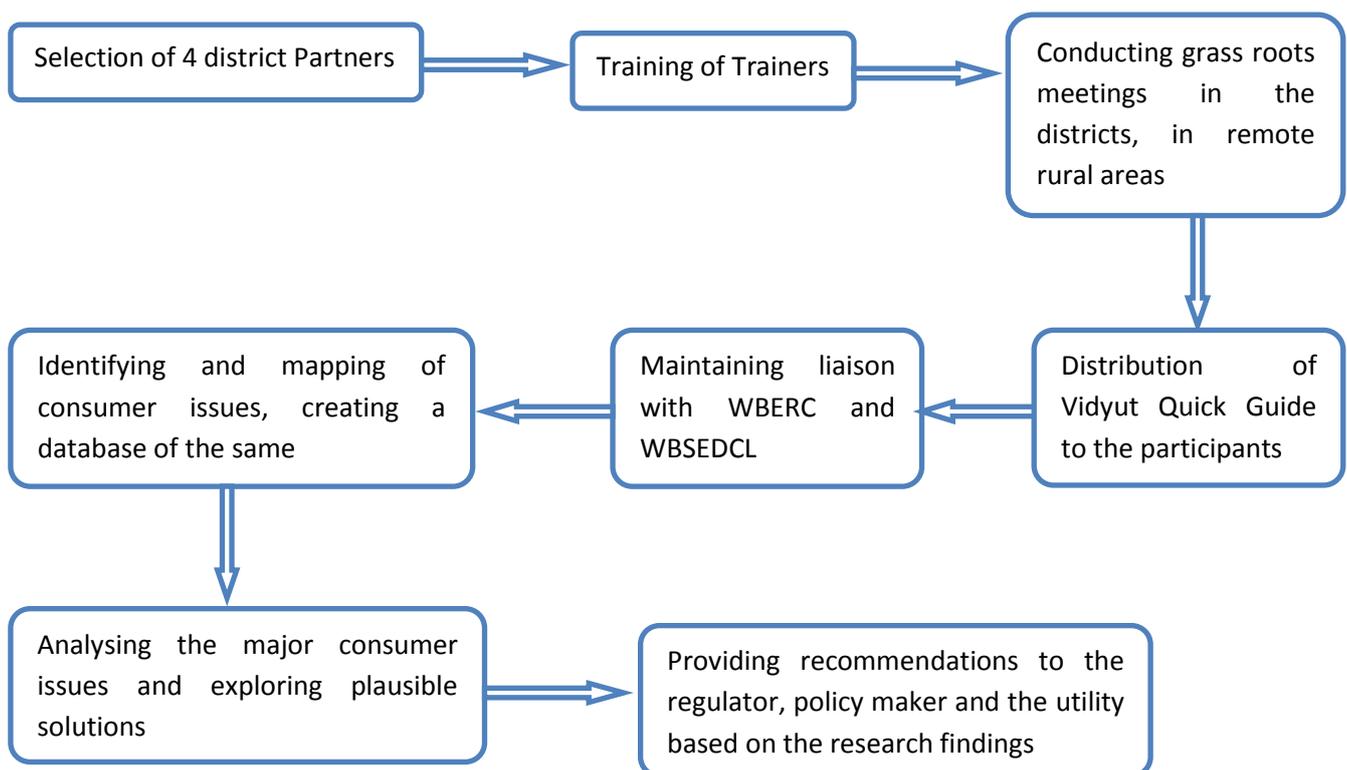


Figure 1: Flow of activities under CAPSOPI

3. Impact of the project and key findings

3.1 Till date, in three months, **118 meetings** have been conducted, with a reach out to about **3,810 consumers** in **18 Blocks** and **103 Gram Panchayats**.

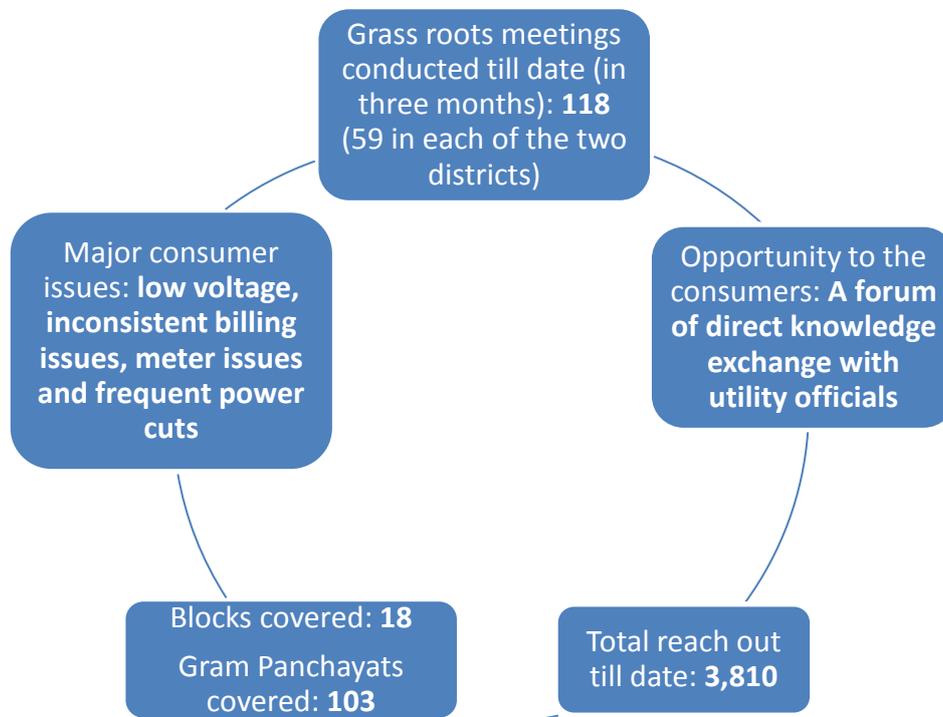


Figure 2: Impact and key findings from the project

3.2 Grass roots meetings are being conducted majorly in remote places of the two districts along with a few meetings being conducted in municipal areas. Consumer issues have been collected and collated from the remote villages of the Sunderbans in the south (South 24 Parganas) as well as those from the interior fringes of the localities near the tea gardens of Dooars in the north (Jalpaiguri). While issues pertaining to low voltage, frequent power cuts and inconsistent and inflated billing are of prime concern to the electricity consumers of north (Jalpaiguri), the people from south (South 24 Parganas) are primarily concerned with the utility delaying to replace faulty meters and billing them inconsistently and of extravagant amounts. Figure 3 illustrates the same¹¹.

3.3 Huge outstanding dues and AT&C losses coupled with poor ratio of the numbers of the staffs of the utility to the consumers they cater to are some of the major challenges faced by the utility towards ensuring good and reliable power supply to its consumers. Annexure A provides an overview of the situation in the two districts, where the programme has been undertaken.

¹¹Data from field visits under CAPSPOI initiative

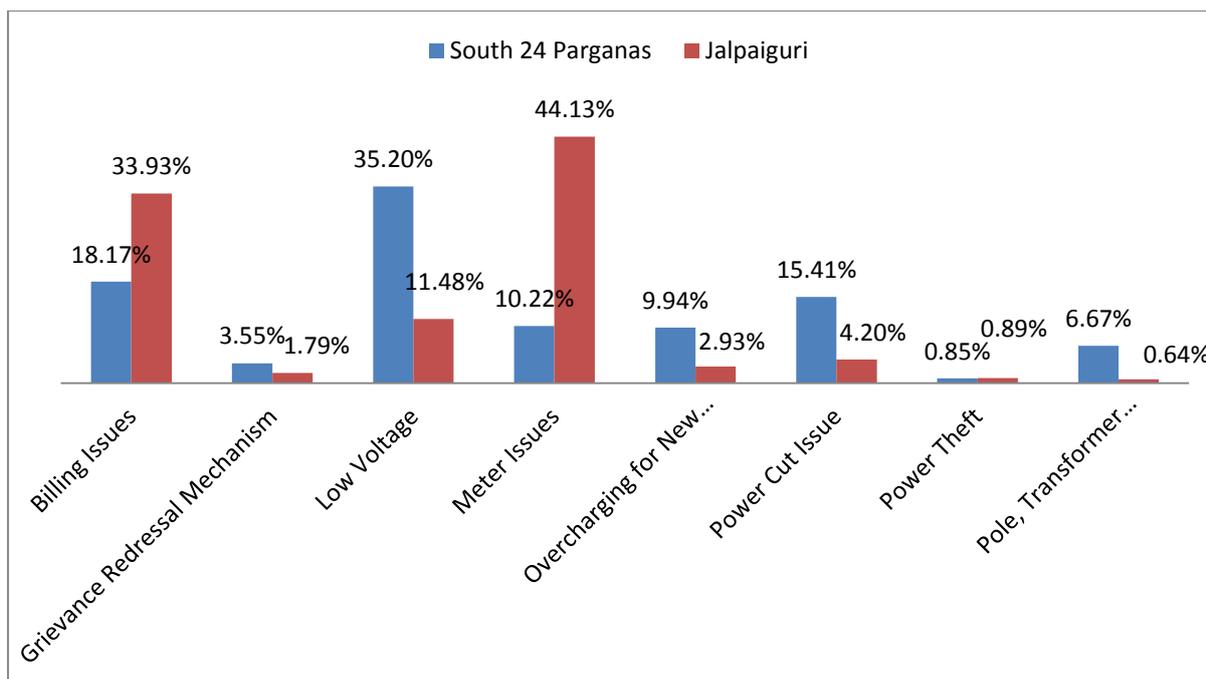


Figure 3: Types of consumer grievances in South 24 Parganas and Jalpaiguri

4. Key Takeaways

4.1 Initiatives to encourage and enable formal platforms of interaction between the consumers and the utility officials, for faster and better redressal of consumer grievances, are required to gain the depleting consumer confidence and trust, by the utility.

4.2 A stricter monitoring mechanism needs to be adopted by the utility so that no third party/agency can deceive the electricity consumers with false hopes. Strict penal provisions need to be implemented, in case of any digression from this.

4.3 The utility needs to improve its service quality for the consumers. Grievances, as and when filed, needs to be dealt with utmost importance and immediate effect. While the consumers are not always aware of the rules and regulations, the utility needs to be more patient in dealing with the consumer issues.

4.4 Timely billing of consumers' need to be maintained by the utility in order to reduce complaints from consumers' end and also to improve the consumer-utility relationship.

4.5 To combat with the persisting challenge of low voltage and power cuts, the utility needs to focus on reducing power thefts as well as identify technical remedial measures such as reduction of unbalanced loads etc.

4.6 Utilizing mass media tools, such as FM radio stations, television channels and news papers to convey messages and to raise the awareness of consumers on basic electrical issues, might be helpful.

An anecdote from the CAPSOPI field experience

6 No. Kachukhali Gram Panchayat of Gosaba block in the Sunderbans island of South 24 Parganas, is one of the remotest places of West Bengal, where commuting to the nearest customer care centre (CCC) of WBSEDCL located in Basanti block takes around three to four hours and involves a complex process of travelling by boats, vanos (diesel run vans) and autos. During the journey one needs to cross two rivers. The distance from the village to Basanti CCC is however only 30 Kms!

The villagers, who had very little access to electricity, had put faith on a certain person, who was working with a local contractor engaged by WBSEDCL, to get them quicker electricity connection. In an attempt to gain faith, he used to claim that he had been assigned the duty of collecting the money and depositing the same at the Basanti CCC. The local villagers had blindly trusted him and in return the fraudulent person had amassed a colossal amount of money from the local villagers. On an average, he used to charge them more than Rs 1,000 for providing a basic domestic electricity connection (of not more than 0.5 KW load). However, the electricity connections never happened. After deluding the villagers of their hard earned money, the person suddenly fled the village.



Figure 4: Rupamoy Bhattacharya, CUTS International conducting the grass roots meeting at Kachukhali G.P.

When the CUTS officials had met with the local villagers at a meeting on June 5th, 2017, in the same Gram Panchayat, the villagers complained of the misdeed by the middleman. The villagers being deceived of the connection and the money were of the misconception that they have been robbed of their money by the utility. The villagers had also not received any money receipts etc from the middleman. The villagers were unaware of the regulations and acts had also not lodged their official complaint with the station manager of the Basanti CCC. The CUTS officials in their meet with the villagers had advised them to lodge the official complaint and had also reported the same incident with the commission and requested their intervention on such issues for faster disposal of grievances and restoration of consumers' faith on the utility.

Annexure A

Factual representation of the major issues faced by the DISCOM officials in **Jalpaiguri District**¹²:

Customer Care Centre Office	Area (in Sq. K.M.)	Consumers: WBSEDCL staff ratio at CCC Level	Outstanding Dues (Till June 2016) (INR)	Outstanding Dues (Till June 2017) (INR)	AT&C Loss	
					June 2016	June 2017
Dhupguri CCC	631	84000:12	530 Lakhs	330 Lakhs	42%	49%
Matiali CCC	*	22500:6	120 Lakhs	125 Lakhs	28.4%	33%
Maynaguri CCC	535.3	75000:14	90 Lakhs	100Lakhs	43%	40%
Nagrakata CCC	*	21000:7	15 Lakhs	22 Lakhs	26%	28%
Belakoba CCC	*	34000:11	97 Lakhs	125 Lakhs	16%	14.26%
Kranti CCC	36	24000:10	232 Lakhs	254 Lakhs	56.38% (Sept. 2016)**	36.71%
Phulbari CCC	*	18467:8	112 Lakhs	154 Lakhs	16%	19%
Odlabari CCC	*	28400:13	170Lakhs	*	28%	30%

*Data not available

Factual representation of the major issues faced by the DISCOM officials in **South 24 Parganas District**¹³:

Customer Care Centre Office	Area (in Sq. K.M.)	Consumer: WBSEDCL staff ratio at CCC Level	Outstanding Dues (Till June 2017) (INR in crores)	AT&C Loss	
				November 2016	June 2017
Baruipur	-*	32000:9	3.55	53.25%	31%
Basanti	700 Sq. K.M.	69000:12	5.84	83.77%	87.20%
Diamond Harbour	75 Sq. K.M.	37000:15	3.90	65.56%	54.8%
Kakdwip	250 Sq. K.M.	58000:11	8.42	56.39%	59%
Magrahat	136.9 Sq. K.M.	47000:9	2.76	81.49%	80.39%

¹² Source: Data collected during CAPSOPI Project

¹³ Source: Data collected during CAPSOPI Project

Mathurapur	375 Sq. K.M.	60000:11	-*	79.81%	80%
Patharpratima	484.5 Sq.K.M.	34000:8	4.89	76.55%	72%

*Data not available

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