

A Brief Write up

On

Consumer Awareness programme for improvement of overall standard of performance in the Distribution sector in two districts of West Bengal (CAPSOPI)

A collaborative initiative of CUTS International and West Bengal Electricity Regulatory Commission

Background & Rationale: *24x7 Power for All (24x7 PFA)*, a joint initiative of the Government of India (GoI) and the State Governments aim to provide 24X7 reliable electricity access to all households, industrial, commercial and all other electricity consuming entities by the end of Financial Year 2019. To live up to the expectations the power utilities of West Bengal, with support from the state government, has added nearly 80 lacs consumers over the past four years¹. While the utilities as well as the government are taking initiatives to electrify all the villages as well as the households, there have been several challenges towards the successful implementation of the same. The national scheme of rural electrification aims at providing basic infrastructural facilities such as distribution transformer and distribution lines in the inhabited locality in addition to electrifying public schools, panchayat offices, health centres, Dispensaries, Community centres etc. A village will be deemed electrified if in addition to meeting the above criteria, at least 10% of the total numbers of households in the village are electrified. However, this would mean that, there would be several households which could remain un-electrified. Thus, the power supply utilities have taken up intensive electrification of villages, which aims at providing access to electricity to the left out un-electrified households in an electrified village.

In West Bengal, there are about 138.13 lacs rural households, of which 1.28 lacs households are still un-electrified (as on 30 April, 2017)². A state wise summary of the *Deendayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana (DDUGJY)*, indicates that while 5 villages of West Bengal are un-electrified till date, intensive electrification of 270 villages are still to be done. In addition to this, 2,73,990 BPL households have no access to electricity (as on 30 April, 2017)³. Despite that fact that the Power Distribution Companies (DISCOMs) are taking significant measures to provide electricity access to all, supplying quality and reliable power has been a major challenge for many of them. While the last mile consumers are often discontented over the quality, availability and reliability of the power supplied to them, the DISCOMs also face issues relating to commercial losses and lack of awareness amongst the end consumers. This has often led to strenuous relationship between the service provider and the end consumer.

Consumers often suffer from lack of awareness pertaining to the presence of forums and processes which can help get their grievances redressed. The Annual Report 2015-16 of the West Bengal Electricity Regulatory Commission (WBERC), highlights that, the Ombudsmen had received 9,100 grievance cases against the West Bengal State Electricity Distribution Company Limited (WBSEDCL) till 2014-15 (from June 2004). In 2015-16, the total cases of grievance filed with the Ombudsmen in West Bengal were 354⁴. Majorly the cases narrate the grievances of the consumers pertained to incorrect electricity bills, disconnection without observing procedural formalities, overcharging for new connection, non-functioning of meters, delay in providing services, delay in giving new connection, and other miscellaneous issues. However, it is often felt by experts that, the total numbers of grievance cases being filed in West Bengal are not reflective enough of the amount and volume of grievance, which the end-consumers have. This might be due to the lack of awareness among the grass roots consumers.

In this context, CUTS International and WBERC perceived it to be important to engage with the grass roots consumers and build their capacities on their rights and responsibilities as electricity consumers, laid down in the Electricity Act, 2003 and the relevant regulations framed by the Commission. CUTS International and WBERC have jointly initiated the programme titled, *'Consumer Awareness programme for improvement of overall standard of performance in the Distribution sector in two districts of West Bengal'* (CAPSOPI), which aims at organizing 240 grass roots stakeholders meetings in the districts of Jalpaiguri and South 24 Parganas, to improve the knowledge and capacity of grassroots consumers on conventional and non-conventional electricity.

Objectives: Broadly the programme aims to achieve the following:

- To edify the consumers, about the various Standard of Performance (SOP) Regulations of the WBERC, especially on Complaint Mechanism, New Connections, Metering and other relevant issues and corresponding formats
- To make them understand the ill effects of power theft
- To make them aware about the necessity of maintaining healthy metering system at the consumer premise
- To educate them to comprehend the electricity bills and also make them alert about the various electricity safety rules
- To make them understand the Grievance Redressal Mechanism, the role of different Grievance Redressal Officials of the DISCOM as well as that of the Ombudsman
- To make them aware of energy conservation system and the benefits of using rooftop solar photo voltaic systems

Programme Design: CUTS has engaged four district partners, two each in each of the districts of Jalpaiguri and South 24 Parganas to organize the grass roots stakeholders meetings. The grass roots meetings intend to build consumer capacities towards their

rights and responsibilities; address the major issues pertaining to the electricity distribution service faced by the consumers and also appraise the same to the Commission as well as to West Bengal State Electricity Distribution Company Limited (WBSEDCL), the DISCOM of these two districts. An initial Training of Trainers (ToT) programme will be conducted for three days at the office of WBERC, where trainees from district partner organizations as well as from CUTS will participate. The key resource persons and experts will include officials from CUTS, WBERC, WBSEDCL and WBREDA. After the ToT programme, the grass roots stakeholders meetings at the two districts will commence. 240 such meetings are to be organized, 120 in each of these two districts, of which CUTS has acceded to participate in 120 meetings. The aim is to reach out to the end consumers, educate and aware them in addition to comprehend the issues faced by the consumers as well as the utility towards providing reliable and quality power supply. CUTS and WBERC together will develop and distribute *Consumer Quick Guide*, a comprehensive information booklet, on various electricity issues, written in Bengali to the end-consumers at the grassroots stakeholders meetings, towards their better understanding of the processes as mentioned in the Regulations of the commission.

While CUTS has been working for more than three decades now towards an inclusive growth and development of the consumers and has become a leading South Asian voice and face of consumer empowerment, the organization has always been supported for its endeavours either by the governments or by the multilateral and bilateral agencies. However, in this programme, CUTS and WBERC are jointly supporting the work in its initial phase in the districts of South 24 Parganas and Jalpaiguri. CUTS and WBERC are equally sharing the project implementation cost.

Provided the programme becomes successful and is appraised to be beneficial for the end consumers, CUTS and the Commission might appeal to relevant bilateral and multilateral agencies to further support the programme towards its implementation across the state.

Expected outcomes: In addition to educate and aware the electricity consumers on their rights and responsibilities, the programme is expected to help the end consumers have a better understanding of the processes and procedures towards availing quality and reliable power supply. It has been often been blamed on the lack of proper service being rendered by the utility and the lack of clear understanding by the end consumers as the primary factors leading to a strenuous and declining relationship amongst the two primary stakeholders in this service. The programme aims to bridge the gap between these two stakeholders, increase the exchange amongst them using the platform of the grass roots stakeholders meetings and thereby develop a cordial and healthy relation between the two. The district partners are also expected to get trained through these meetings and can serve as primary knowledge dissemination centres pertaining to electricity service issues. CUTS also aims at identifying the issues and

challenges which acts as the impediments towards providing healthy service by the utilities and will come up with policy level recommendations to address the same.