

Consumer Assistance Cell for Electricity Consumers at Grassroots [CONASC] Project Completion Report



CUTS Calcutta Resource Centre
3 Suren Tagore Road, 2nd Floor, Kolkata-700019
Phone: 91 33 4068-3154/ 2460-4987
Website: www.cuts-international.org
Email: Calcutta@cuts.org

Contents:

Chapters	Page No.
Backdrop	1
Inception Seminar	1
Activities	2-9
• Training for Partners	2
• Awareness Generation Camps	2
○ Analysis of feedback collected during awareness generation workshops	2-4
• Partner Quiz	4
• Special Interim Training	4
• Capacity Building Workshops	5-6
○ Change in Reachout Strategy during Capacity Building Phase	5
○ Use of Graphics	6
○ Skits & entertainment	6
○ Consumer Quiz	6
○ Analysis of Consumer Quiz	6
• Informal Pocket Meetings	7
• CCCO meetings and Progress Review Meetings at Regional Office	8 -10
○ Analysis of cases discussed in Regional Meetings	8 -10
• Dissemination Workshop	10
Assessment Survey	11- 16
• Objective	11
• Methodology	11
• Major Findings	12-16
Success Stories	17- 20
CUTS's analysis of the major reasons behind consumer problems and specific Action points / Recommendations for WBSEDCL	21 - 25
Overall Recommendations and Conclusion	26
Annexure	27 - 32
• Questionnaires of Final Assessment Survey	27-31
• Feedback format for WBSEDCL Officials	32

Backdrop:

CUTS International has been working on energy issues, particularly electricity, with an aim to bring about pro-people change in the regulations and also in the service focus of the utilities. One of the earlier projects that CUTS had implemented on this issue titled “Capacity Building on Electricity Reforms in Bangladesh, Nepal and India – RESA Project” had West Bengal as one of the project territories and findings from the project clearly indicated that there was very little awareness on regulations, procedures, etc amongst the common electricity consumers. The RESA experience also helped understand that in the spate of recent developments and changes in the electricity sector towards making it more transparent and participatory, it is imperative that consumers and consumer groups play a much active role than they had been playing. The main hurdles, as it emerged, were firstly, lack of capacity of common consumers/groups to understand & follow procedures, secondly, the absence of appropriate & active forums or channels via which the grassroots concerns & issues could be conveyed to authorities/policy makers, thirdly, a lack of access and also faith in the utility’s existing mechanisms/ procedures for consumer grievance redressal and fourthly, the lack of capacity participate to understand, participate and intervene on relevant issues by the common consumer and civil society organisations (CSO)

With this backdrop, CUTS and WBSEDCL came together to implement a project titled Consumer Assistance Cell for Electricity Consumers at Grassroots (CONASC). The principal objective of the project was to improve the service delivery and grievance redressal system of the utility through capacity building, ground level assistance and facilitation for the grassroots consumers. In the process, the project also aimed to capacitate grassroots CSOs to assist & guide grassroots consumers with all issues pertaining to electricity and empower these organisations to be able to take up issues & concerns that grassroots consumers face at appropriate forums. The overall outcome expected were a more transparent & accountable service delivery system, formation of educated & empowered consumers and better relationship between the utility & consumers.

Inception Seminar

Prior to the official start of the project, an Inception Seminar was organised jointly by CUTS & WBSEDCL in Bidyut Bhawan on September 10, 2010. The seminar aimed at introducing the idea, objectives and strategy of the project to key officials both at the Headquarter and Regional Levels. CUTS made a presentation on the project rationale, methodology and expected outcomes and invited comments & suggestions from all officials. The discussions were enriching and helped fine tune the project methodology before kicking it off at the grassroots. The specific Customer Care Offices (CCCO) to be covered in each district was also discussed with inputs from the officials of the respective Regional Offices. Officials from all the nine regional offices handed over a list of the names of the CCCOs that they wanted to be covered under the project. This list was later fine tuned and finalised in consultation with Officials of CRM Cell, WBSEDCL.



WBSEDCL Officials at the Inception Seminar, Bidyut Bhawan, Kolkata

Activities:

I. Training for Partners:

The CONASC project took off with a 2 day training seminar for the local partners on electricity regulations held at Rotary Sadan on the 8th and 9th of October 2010 with active participation from WBSEDCL officials. The principal idea was to train CONASC staff on the relevant regulations & processes and also to explain the roles they will have in implementing the project. It also had simulation exercise for partners to better equip them to handle the practical situations/issues they were to face at the grassroots.



Keya Ghosh, CUTS, Gauri Mukherjee and Binoy Sen, WBSEDCL during the Training Programme for partners, Kolkata

II. Awareness Generation Workshops at the CCCO level:

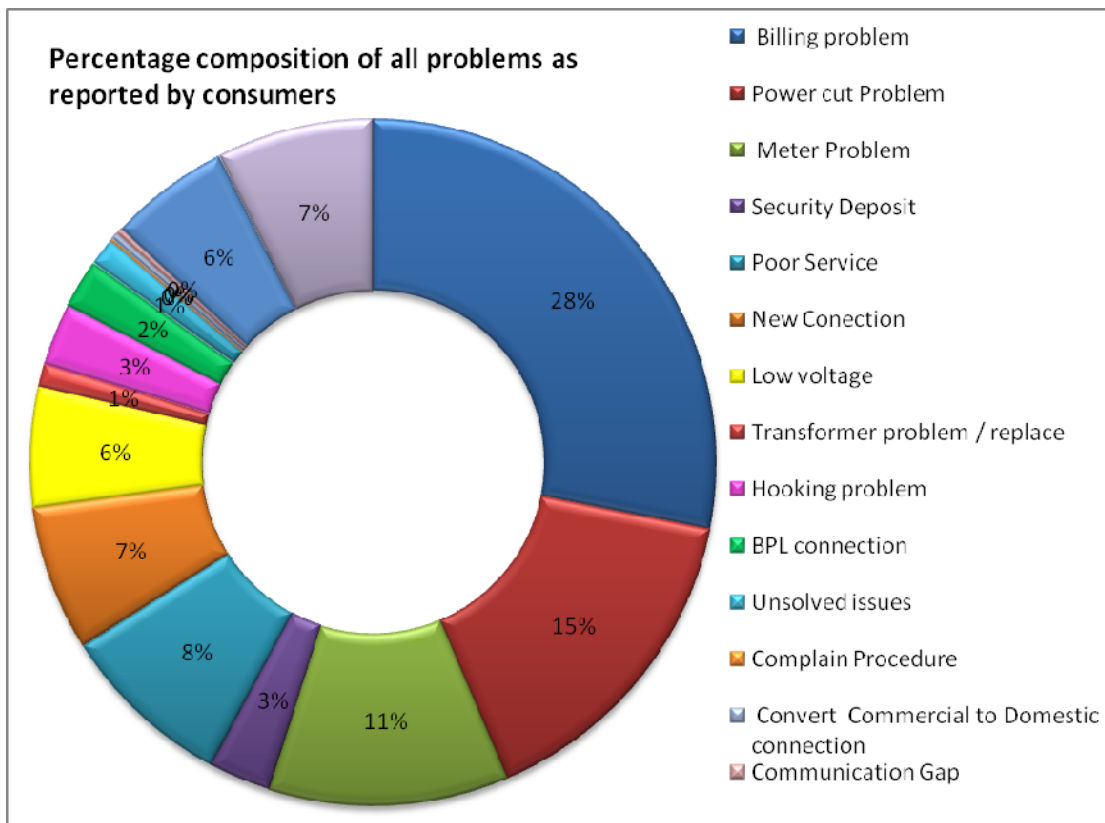
Awareness Generation Workshops were organised in each of the selected CCCOs to generate awareness and interest about the CONASCs. The first Awareness Generation Workshop was organised at Chanchal, Malda district on the 30th of October 2010. Subsequently 44 workshops in total were organised in 9 districts, one for each of the CCCO areas selected for the project. The total consumer reachout under this activity was roughly 3500.



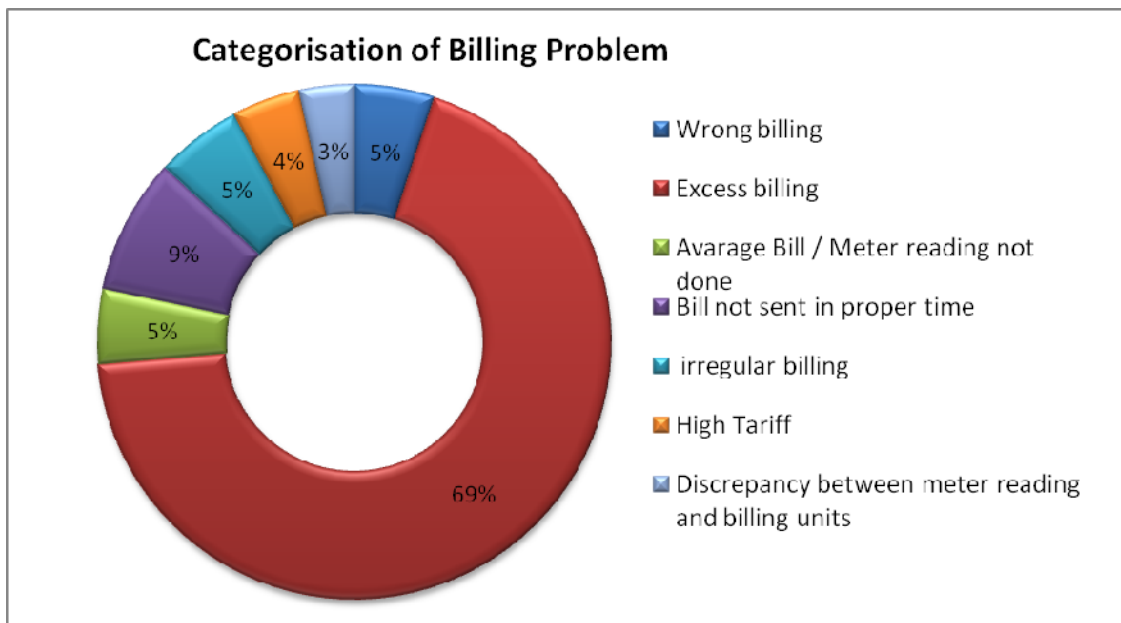
Awareness Generation meeting with consumers, CONASC, CUTS & WBSEDCL representatives, Purulia

Analysis of feedback collected during awareness generation workshops:

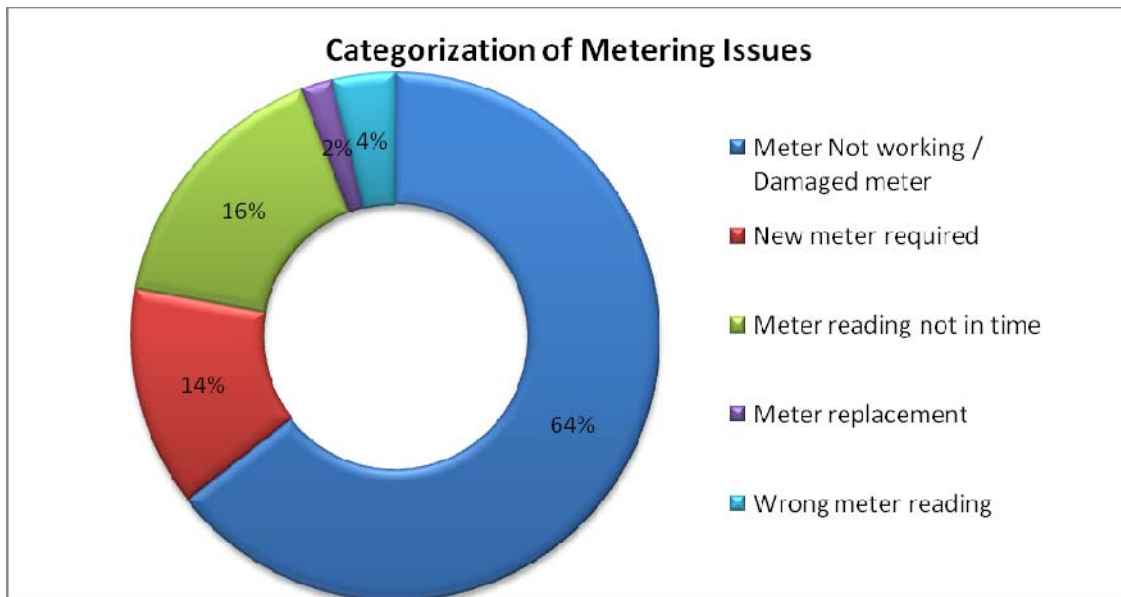
Feedback was collected from consumers during these Awareness Generation Workshops. An analysis of the feedback forms was done to identify and better understand the issues/problems faced by the grassroots consumers. The issues were categorized under different heads. The major heads were issues with Billing, Power Cut, Meter Replacement/non-functional, New Connections, Low Voltage, Transformer related, No electrification, hooking, etc. The charts & graphs below capture the findings based on feedback received from a total of 1934 consumers. The rest of the consumers either did not give feedback or did not have any issue/problems.



As evident from the chart above, Billing, Power Cut & Meter Problems were the three most recurring issues reported by consumers, constituting more than 50% of the total problems cited, followed by issues with service and new connections. Billing and metering issues were further segregated under different heads for better understanding of the problems. As shown in the chart below Excess billing (69%) and late delivery of bills (9%) were the main complaints with billing, followed by issues like Average billing, Irregular billing, etc.



The main issue cited with regards to Metering was of Non-functional and Damaged meters (64%). This is followed by issues such as Irregular meter reading (16%), New meter required (14%), etc.



II. Partners' Quiz:

Following the Awareness Generation workshops, a Partners' Quiz was organised involving all CONASC staff to gauge and reinforce their level of understanding on relevant issues. Partners were initially asked to collate all queries that they had recorded during the awareness generation workshops from consumers and send their inputs for questions to be asked in the quiz. This was done to make the questions realistic and prepare them to face real life problems of consumers. After collating questions sent in by all partners, CUTS compiled them and added a few more to the bank and finalised the questionnaire for the quiz. The format of the quiz was so that partners were grouped as teams and one team was asked to pose questions to others. It saw enthusiastic participation by partners and helped in clearing doubts/queries that they had. Prizes were also given to the winning & runner up team as encouragement.

III. Special Interim Training:

A special training was organised for the partner of North 24 Parganas, since they came in later and could not participate in the original training that was organised for partners. Also, representatives from other partners were included in this training, based on their interaction/performance in the Inter-Partner Quiz. This was meant as reinforcement for those representatives who were found to be relatively lagging in knowledge and understanding.



Partners during Special Interim Training, CUTS Office, Kolkata

IV. Capacity Building Workshops:

Capacity Building Workshops were organised in each of the selected CCCOs to build capacities of consumers on regulations and processes for new connections, metering & billing, grievance redressal procedure, etc. It saw active involvement and participation from both WBSEDCL officials and consumers. Participating consumers expressed that it was the first time that they got to know clearly about the regulations and processes. The vernacular handout “*Bidyut- Quick*



Cross section of participants at a Capacity Building Workshop in Howrah

Guide” which was distributed during these

workshops was an instant hit, not only with consumers but also with WBSEDCL officials. The booklet talks about regulations regarding new

connections, metering & billing, grievance redressal, etc. in simple language in a Q & A format. This was meant as a reference material for consumers so that

they could refer back to the regulations and its important information whenever required. Both consumers & utility officials opined that it effectively demystifies relevant regulations. In total 45 Capacity Building Programmes were organised in 9 districts reaching out to 2596 consumers and almost all of them received encouraging response from grassroots consumers.



Consumers calculating bill at a Capacity Building Workshop in Purulia

Change in reachout strategy during Capacity Building phase:

While implementing the project, certain changes were incorporated into the implementation plan to make it more attractive and effective. During the Capacity Building Workshops it was observed that regulations being a difficult subject, consumers were finding it difficult to understand and relate to them at times.

As an effort towards making the content more user friendly and attractive, graphics, stories, skits, etc. were introduced as part of the sessions and presentations.



Cartoon on perils of power theft

Use of Graphics:



As they say that a *picture* is worth a *thousand words*". The **introduction of pictures and cartoon characters** made the presentations not just look attractive but also helped the consumers better understand the regulations and also relate to the issues on which the presentations were focused on.



Jhumur Gaan (local folk form) was used to convey key messages, Purulia

Skits & Entertainment:

Skits based on electricity were performed during the workshops to give the consumers a break as well as to refresh the issues in their mind. In many cases, this was done using local folk art forms like *Gambhira* in Malda and *Jhumur Gaan* in Purulia. In other places dramas were scripted and staged in the local language like in Murshidabad and Uttar Dinajpur. These forms of communication helped to reach out to consumers with the key messages in a capsule of entertainment.

Consumer Quiz:

The CRM Cell officials suggested including a quiz at the end of each workshop and accordingly a consumer quiz was organised to gauge consumers' understanding of the issues after the Capacity Building sessions. It saw very enthusiastic participation from consumers. It had questions on general issues like name of distribution utility, on new connection procedures, metering, different charges, etc. in a multiple choice form. Based on their answers, the highest three scorers were given token prizes. Utility officials were requested to hand over the prizes to the highest scorers.



Prize being given away to winner of Consumer Quiz by WBSEDCL official

Analysis of Consumer Quiz:

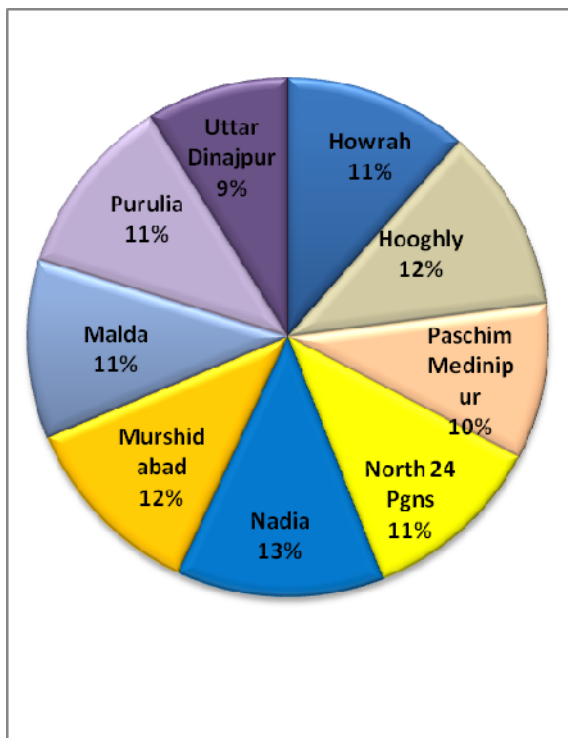
A total of 786 consumers participated in these quizzes. The questions for quiz were so framed so as to cover four heads, viz. General (about the electricity sector and general issues surrounding it) Grievance redressal mechanism, New and temporary connections and Metering- billing issues. In total 16 questions were framed after incorporating suggestions from WBSEDCL CRM cell officials. The questions were in a multiple-choice format and mostly asked about procedures, charges for different services, names of authorities, etc. An analysis of the

scoring patterns of consumers reveals that immediately following the capacity building exercise a majority of the consumers could correctly remember the answers to almost 50-60% of the questions. It is seen that about 42 consumers scored high marks between 13-16. A majority of the consumers scored in the ranges of 9- 12 (334 consumers) and 5-8 (317 consumers) out of the total 16. Around 93 consumers were seen to have been low on the awareness factor scoring in the range of 0-4. The analysis indicates that more of such workshops & exercises will go a long way in creating a pool of informed and aware consumers.

VI. Informal Pocket Meetings in interior villages:

Informal Pocket meetings were organised in interior pockets of the rural scape to reach out to consumers in interior remote villages. The idea was to disseminate basic information about procedures, rules, etc, through simple entertaining forms of skits and folk art. A total of 225 such informal meetings were organised, with each district organising 15 meeting, 5 each in each of the CCCO areas. A total of 6014 consumers were reached out under this.

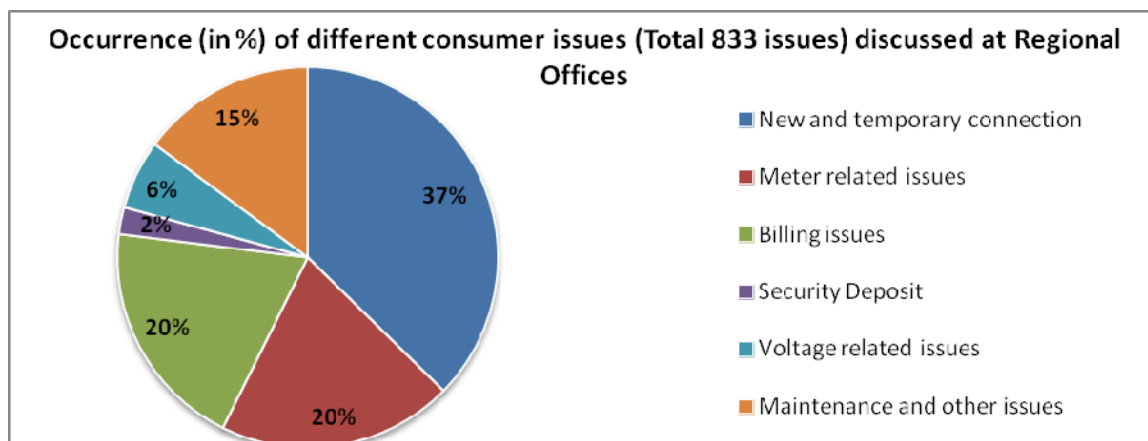
The total reachout under the project including Awareness building Workshop, Capacity building workshops and Informal Pocket meetings was 12146. The table figure below gives the details of the reachout in different districts under these three different heads:



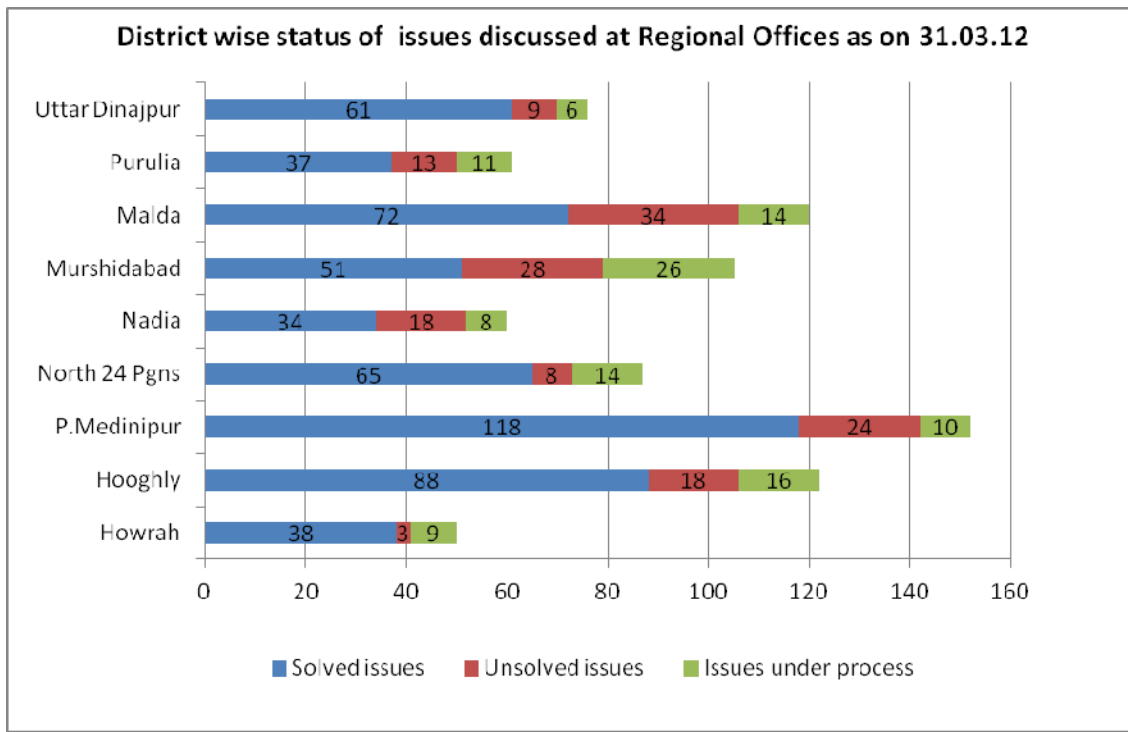
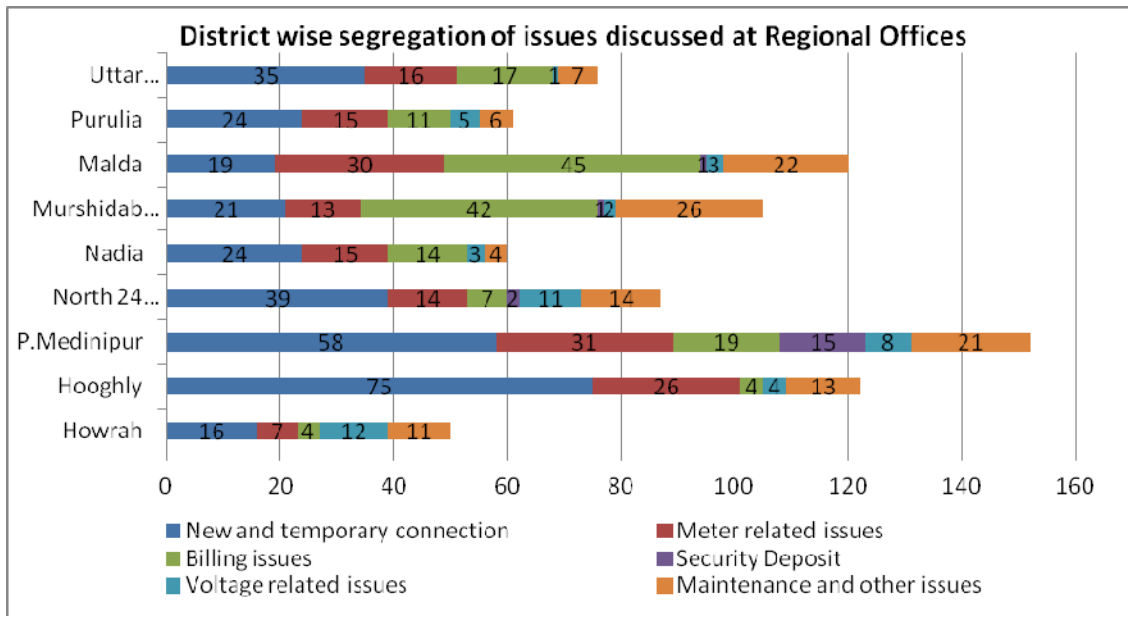
<u>District</u>	<u>A.G.W</u>	<u>C.B.W</u>	<u>I.M</u>
Howrah	405	282	702
Malda	365	334	712
Murshidabad	452	277	658
Nadia	491	362	681
U. Dinajpur	192	276	714
P. Medinipur	302	222	698
Purulia	488	299	649
Hooghly	419	266	598
N24 Pdns	422	278	602
Sub-Total	3536	2596	6014
Total Reachout			12146

VII. CCCO meetings and Progress Review Meetings at Regional Office:

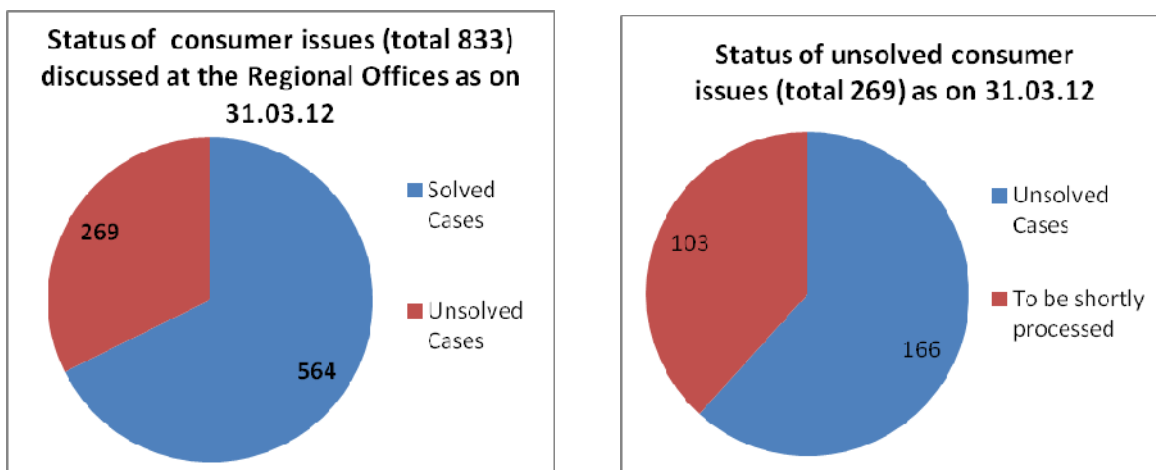
The project had provisions for one CCCO level meeting in each of the CCCO for a period of 5 months. These meetings were principally aimed at creating an opportunity for consumers to interact with the Station Manager so that they can have their problems heard and redressed. The CONASC staff collated consumer issues/ problems from all the identified CCCO areas and wherever possible guided the consumers regarding how to solve the issues, whom to approach, etc. This took care of simple problems without involving the CCCO officials. Problems that were more critical were taken up with the station managers for solution and those that were not solved at the CCCO level were taken up at the Regional Office level. As per suggestions from the CRM Cell Officials of WBSEDCL, the CCCO level meetings and Regional Level meetings were both organised at the respective district Regional Offices of WBSEDCL. The meetings had participation from Regional Manager, HR & A Manager, Regional Grievance Redressal Officer (RGRO), Divisional Managers (in some districts), Station Managers of all the five CCCOs in each of the districts, CONASC and consumers. A total of 833 consumer cases were discussed during these meetings. Out of these 833 cases, 564 were solved, 165 were unsolved and 114 cases were under process as on 31 March 2012. Analysis of the cases discussed in these meeting was done and some of the findings are shown in charts as below:



As shown in the figure above, complaints on new & temporary connection is the most recurring at 37%, followed by meter related (20%) and billing related (20%) complaints respectively. 15% of the complaints were on maintenance & other issues (like theft, etc.), 6% on Voltage issues and 2% were related to Security Deposit. The district-wise segregation also follows a similar pattern with slight deviations for Malda and Murshidabad, where Billing complaints is most recurring problem at 37.5% and 40% respectively.



As evident from the graphs above, Uttar Dinajpur (Raiganj) and Paschim Medinipur were the front runners in terms of effectively addressing consumer issues, followed by Howrah, North 24 Parganas, Hooghly, Purulia, Malda, Nadia and Murshidabad respectively.



The overall status of redressal (as on 31.03.12) of cases shows an encouraging trend with 68% (564) already solved and 32% (269) remaining. Out of the 269 unsolved issues, 166 cases were to be shortly processed (as on 31.03.12). Overall, it was observed that the mechanism of review meetings at the Regional Office, worked well towards speedy disposal of consumer problems & cases. Many consumers opined during the Assessment Survey at the end of the project that they observed a speeding up of the redressal process once their cases were discussed at the Regional Office Meetings.

VII. Dissemination Workshop:

A Dissemination Workshop was organised jointly by CUTS and WBSEDCL on 28 December 2011 at Bidyut Bhawan. The principal objective of the workshop was to share the findings & learning from the CONASC project and deliberate on the future course of action. The Workshop had participation from key players of the power sector in West Bengal including Sunil Mitra, Director, WBSEDCL, Malay Kumar De, Secretary, Department of Power, GoWB, Rajesh Pandey, CMD, WBSEDCL, Anirban Guha, Director (RT & IT), WBSEDCL, General Manager (all departments, WBSEDCL), CRM Cell, Zonal Managers and other Officials of WBSEDCL, CUTS, select CONASC Partners (2) and 2 consumers. The CUTS Team shared findings and recommendations from the project and experts & officials shared their ideas about what more could be done to further the efforts. CONASC district partners and consumers also shared their experience. There were rich discussions and deliberations towards the future roadmap.

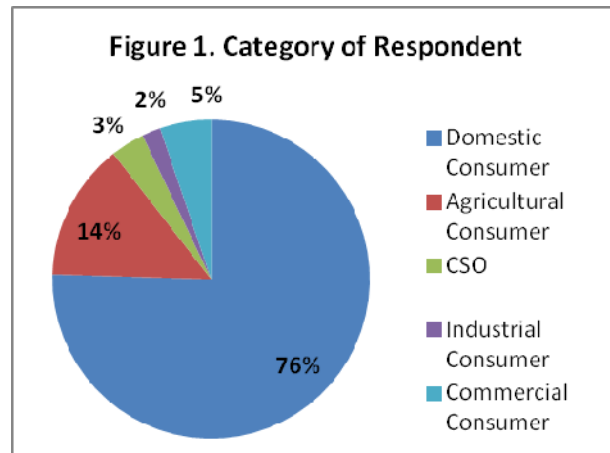


Assessment Survey

Objectives

An assessment survey was conducted at the end the project to understand –

- Change in perception and level of understanding among consumers on various processes and issues in the electricity sector.
- To understand whether the project had succeeded in improving the grievance redressal mechanism of the utility and whether such changes translated into improved quality of service to the consumers at the grassroots



Methodology

The survey was conducted in the 45 CCCO areas of nine districts where the CONASC project was implemented. Further, 50 consumers from each of CCCO were interviewed. Thus a total of 2,250 consumers were surveyed during the assessment survey. However, owing to some inconsistencies in 39 questionnaires (even after repeated attempts to address the same) those were not taken into account. Thus analysis of consumer feedback was based on the responses from 2,211 respondents.

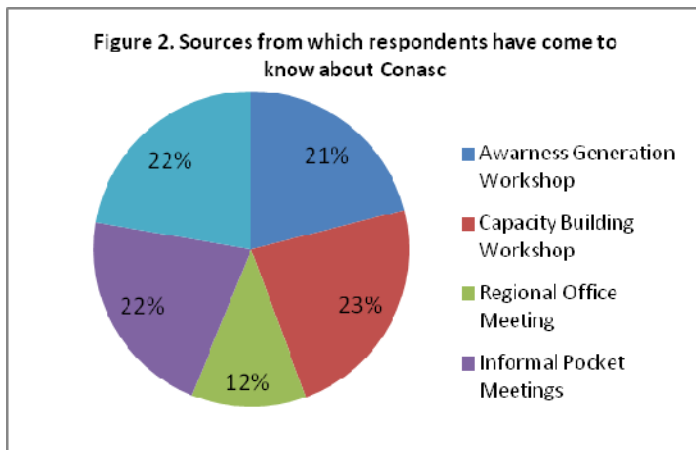
Selection of respondents was done following purposive sampling. The selection was done in such a way so as to ensure that the respondents chosen had at least one of the following activities conducted under the CONASC project –

- Dissemination workshop
- Capacity building workshop
- Informal Pocket meetings
- Regional level meetings

Out of the total 2,211 respondents 76 percent were domestic consumers, 14 percent were agriculture consumers, 3 percent were CSOs, 2 percent were industrial consumers and 5 percent were commercial consumers. Since domestic and agriculture consumers comprised the target group under the project an oversampling of them was required.

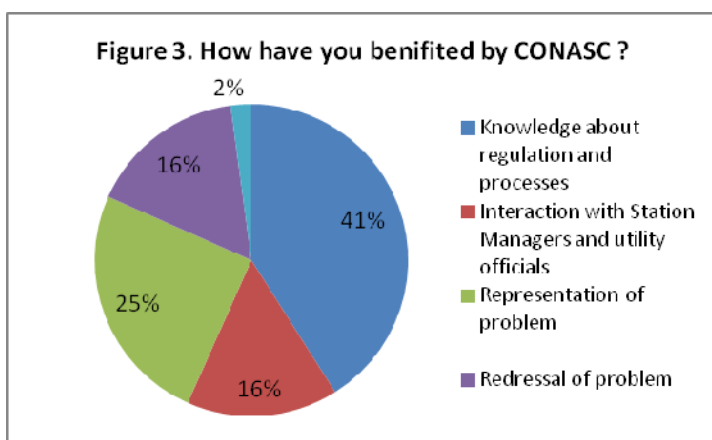
Major findings from the Assessment Survey

92 percent of the respondents told that they had benefitted from the CONASC project



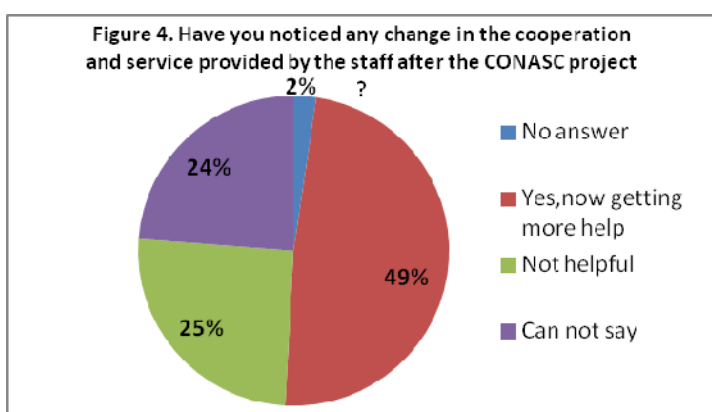
Out of the total 2,211 respondents surveyed across nine districts in West Bengal, 96 percent were found to be aware of the CONASC project. Majority of them had either attended the awareness generation workshop (Figure 2), or the capacity building workshop or the informal pocket meetings. 22 percent of them came to know about CONASC from various other sources viz. from friends,

relatives, and fellow villagers. Other than these, 12 percent of the respondents came to know about CONASC through the Regional office meetings when their problems were taken up by CONASC.



As shown in Figure 3, 41 percent of the respondents appreciated the efforts put in by the CONASC team to demystify various regulations for the grassroots consumers. 25 percent of the respondents felt that CONASC provided the platform where consumers got an opportunity to raise their problems before the station managers and / or their higher officials. 16 percent

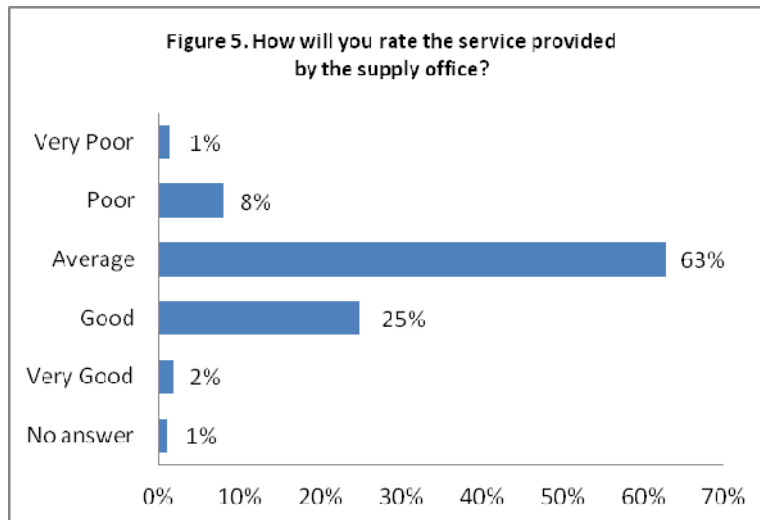
of the respondents also opined that understanding the grievance redressal procedure and interacting with officials of the utility was highly beneficial.



49 percent of the respondents opined that after implementation of the CONASC project officials at the CCCO have become more cooperative than before.

The survey revealed that after implementation of the CONASC project the consumer focus of ground level officials have certainly

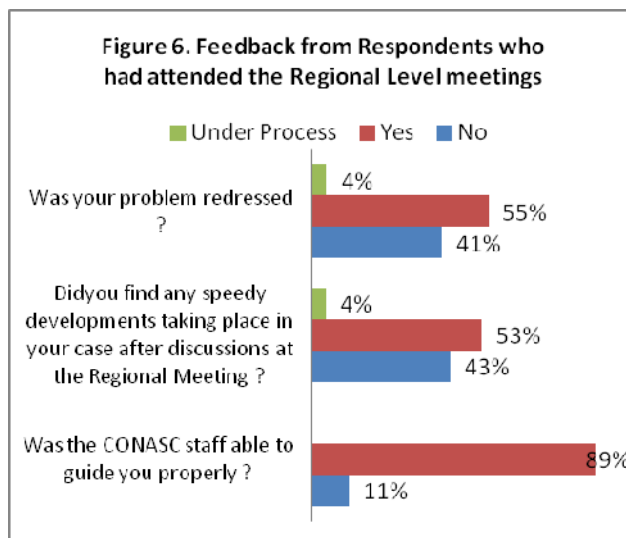
changed for the better. As related by one of the respondents “.....before they never bothered to listen to our problems. Now they give us a patient hearing”. As shown in figure 4, 49 percent of the respondents observed a positive change in the attitude of CCCO officials. However, 25 percent of the respondents opined that there was no change in their attitude towards



consumers. It is interesting to note that out of these 25 percent of the respondents, 87 percent complained that they rarely get required information from the CCCOs. Owing to such gaps majority of the consumers have rated the service provided by the CCCO as average (Figure 5). Few respondents complained that sometimes, during unscheduled & prolonged

outages, they are faced with a situation when neither the toll free number works nor does anyone in the CCCO's answer the phone. This points to the need to strengthen the toll free complaint services and also enhancing the consumer focus of the ground level staff.

The regional level meetings were found to be quite effective in redressing consumer grievances



Out of the total 2,211 respondents the assessment survey had interviewed 361 respondents who had attended the regional level meetings under the CONASC project. Out to these 361 respondents, 55 percent got their grievances redressed from the regional meetings (Figure 6). Further, 53 percent of the respondents (out of the 361 respondents) told that after the regional meetings their grievances were dealt with quickly. While 41 percent of the respondents told that they have not got their complaints

redressed, 4 percent of the respondents told their complaint is under process. Out of the 361 respondents, 89 percent of them told that the CONASC staffs were very helpful. It is however important to mention here that this does represent the entirety of the cases dealt with in the regional meetings, the total numbers for which is 883, out of which 564 were solved, 165 were unsolved and 114 cases were under process as on 31 March 2012.

99 percent of the respondents told that the CONASC project should continue

Out of the total 2,211 respondents 99 percent said that the CONASC project should continue. This is because it not only helped consumers to get their grievances redressed but also educated them on procedures, rights and responsibilities as per the regulations.

Consumers are more informed about various issues in the electricity sector than before

During the assessment survey few questions were asked to the respondents to gauge their understanding on various issues pertaining to electricity service. Overall it can be concluded that feedback received from the respondents during the Assessment Survey at the end of project show an increase in their level of understanding on various issues as compared to those received during the Consumer Quiz conducted during the Awareness building workshops at the initial stage of the project.

The figures (7- 11) below show a comparison of consumer understanding on various procedures & rules as recorded during the Assessment Survey and the Consumer Quiz. A few more figures (12-15) additionally show the level of awareness amongst consumers as recorded during the Assessment Survey regarding issues like the toll free complaint service, new connection rules as per Procedure A, temporary agricultural connection, etc.

Figure 7. Who is your service provider?

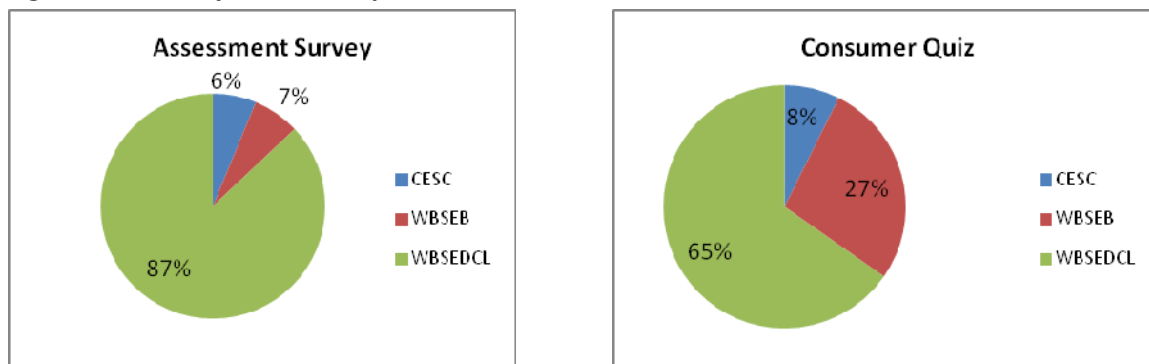


Figure 8. Amount of Earnest Money for Domestic and Agricultural Connection?

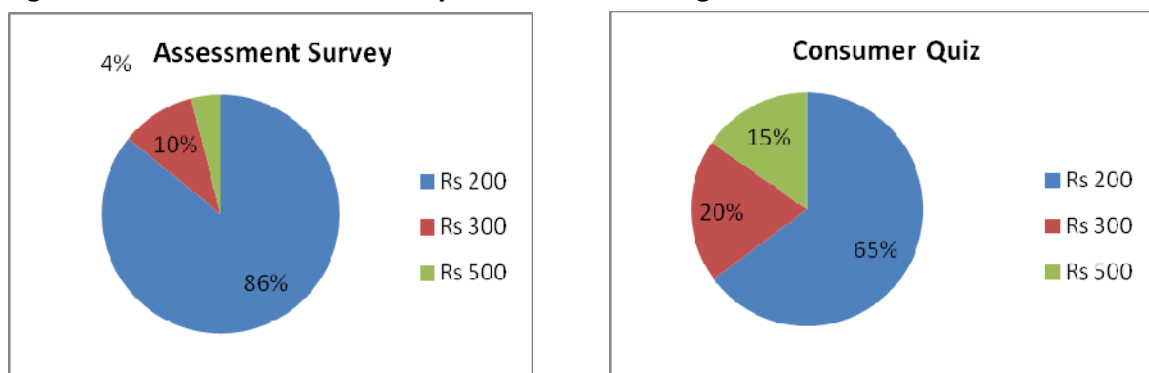


Figure 9. Time for conducting inspection after submitting earnest money?

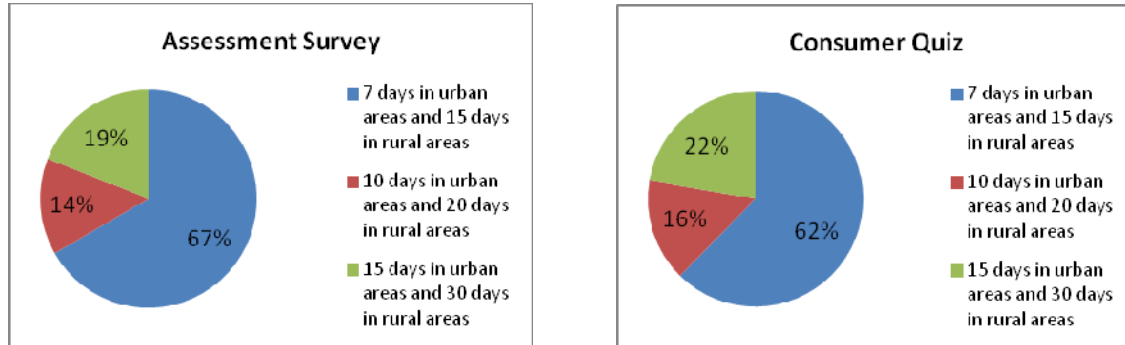


Figure 10. From where do we get the application form for new connection and at what price?

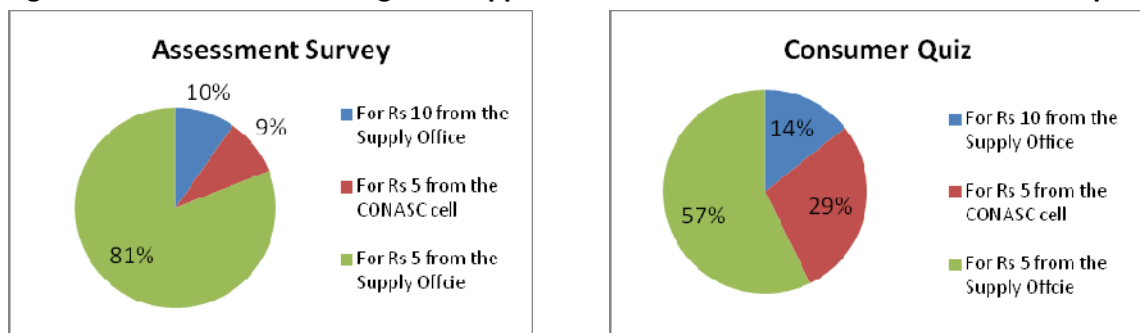


Figure 11. If your problem is not redressed in the CCCO whom would you approach next?

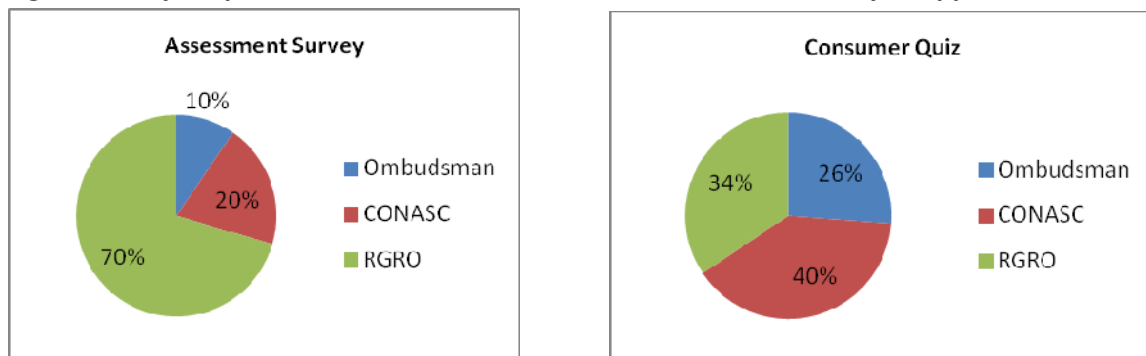


Figure 12. For how many days is the temporary connection in agricultural provided ?

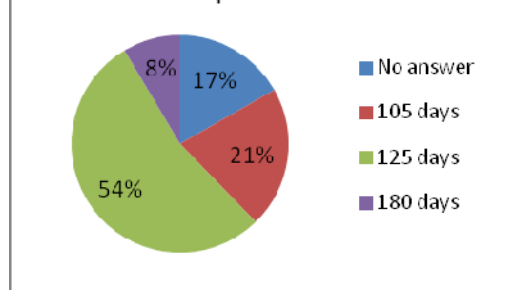
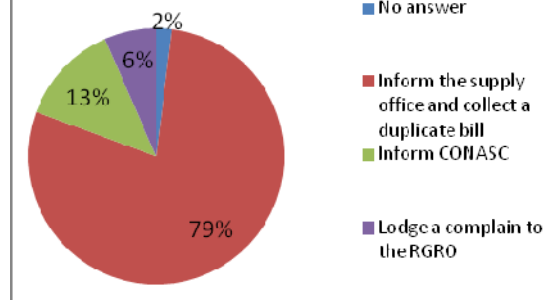
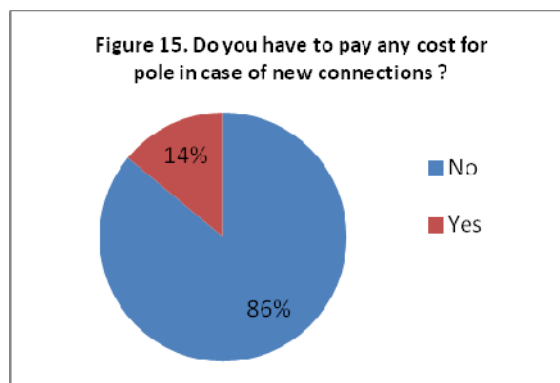
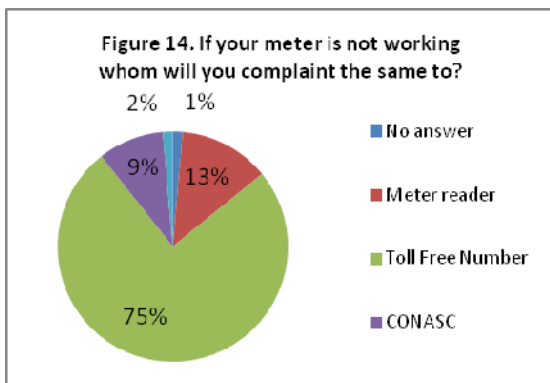


Figure 13. If the bill doesn't reach you on time whom will you complain about the same to ?





The analysis as shown in the figures above aptly demonstrates that initiatives like CONASC can lead to very effective consumer education, which will ultimately lead to more efficient service delivery and better practices in the electricity sector as a whole.

Success Stories:

Ratan Mundra, Kaliyaganj, Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal, India

Ratan Mundra of Kaliyaganj, Uttar Dinajpur district, West Bengal had a very long standing issue with his bill. An amount of Rs. 3300 was constantly showing as outstanding in his bill even though he had cleared all his due. The issue was that the meter reader had wrongly recorded his reading when he shifted house and re-installed his electricity connection & meter. He had approached all possible officials and forums known to him, including the Consumer Court. The Consumer Court had issued an order in his favour and yet his problem did not get resolved. He saw three Station Managers (head of the utility's local office) come and go without any headway with his problem. All of them had promised him assistance and apparently tried to, but without avail. Since the mistake was done a whopping 19 years back and the local offices could not trace his records at their end, the Station Managers kept postponing the issue by allowing him to pay the current bills and asking him to hold on with the outstanding amount.

Mundra, however, has been a very aware consumer and had preserved all his receipts, prayers, orders, et al. when the CONASC team of Uttar Dinajpur came across his case, they requested him to attend one of the capacity building exercises where officials from the utility were present. Mundra recounted his grievance to the present station manager and thereafter attended one of the Regional Office Meetings with higher officials, CUTS & CONASC in hope of redressal. It was during this meeting that he, assisted by CUTS, presented all his papers, orders, bills, etc.

His case was discussed to the minutest details and finally the Divisional Manager, Regional Manager & Regional Grievance Redressal Officer (RGRO) agreed that he need not pay the outstanding amount of Rs. 3300 since the amount cropped up due to an error by the meter reader. To end his woe of 19 long years, CUTS requested the officials that his bill be regenerated on the spot and his case resolved with immediate effect. The officials obliged and a new bill was generated to show that he no longer had any outstanding amount to his name.

The cooperation received from WBSEDCL officials A. Pal, Divisional Manager, S.K. Deb, Regional Manager and Dawa Tamang, Kaliyaganj Station Manager, needs a definite mention here. Mundra, who had lost all hope of redressal and faith on the utility's redressal system, was floored and almost couldn't believe that his 19 year long tirade had finally ended! He thanked CUTS and the officials for restoring his faith on fair play and justice.

Balaigach Village, Karnojora, Chopra Gram Panchayat, Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal, India

Balaigach village is a very remote village under the Chopra gram panchayat and commuting from there to the Panchayat office just one way takes around 3 hours. Putul Singh, Jotin Singh, Bimal Chandra and several other residents of Balaigach village faced a peculiar problem. Around 60 of them had applied for connection under the Chopra CCCO of WBSEDCL in March 2010. They were first approached for electric connections by someone who works as the helping hand of the local contractor engaged by WBSEDCL. This person named Shyamal, promised them connections against a certain amount of money that each of them were to give

him. The village being so far away from the Chopra CCCO (which is near the Gram Panchayat office) and also owing to the lack of general awareness amongst the villages on this, they agreed to his terms and handed over the money to him. What transpired afterwards was a story of long wait and harassment. After almost a year of repeated follow ups with Shyamal, the villagers finally got their connections. They were happy inspite of the long wait, but little did they know the real state of affairs. In the next 6 months, the villagers observed that only 28 of them were getting their bills and that too under wrong names or address. The rest of the villagers got no bill at all.

This made them suspicious and they tried to get to the root of the problem. When they asked Shyamal, he claimed that he had taken money from them and supplied meters against it, which completes his deal. It is during such time that CONASC staff made a visit to their locality and came to know of the problem. Binod Kumar Singh, the village School master explained the problem to the CONASC people and asked for their help. The CONASC cell took up the issue and the case was discussed in the Regional Office at Raigunj in November 2011, where Binod Singh participated and directly explained the problem to the Regional Manager. The Regional Manager instructed the Chopra Station



Station Manager, Chopra CCCO, sharing the report of his investigation in the Regional Office meeting December, 2011

Manager to do an investigation and get back to him with the details. What the investigation came up was quite shocking. Apparently the person who had taken the money had only deposited the earnest money for the 32 people who were not getting their bills, in one word, these people were not legal consumers at all!

To address this issue a Special Camp was organised on 21 December 2012, by CUTS wherein officials from Regional Office, Chopra CCCO, CONASC went to the village and discussed the problem in details with the affected villagers. The villagers realised that they have been duped and lodged a formal complaint against Shyamal. However, since they did not have any receipts against the money they had given, the case was not strong and the only way, as discussed during the camp, was for them to deposit the rest of the money, which amounted to Rs. 330 for each. The villagers agreed to this unfortunate arrangement in the face of no other way out and said that they are going to take Shyamal to task. The CONASC team repeatedly explained to them that in future they should never give money to anyone outside the CCCO or without receipts. The Chopra Station Manager recorded all the details of the villagers, including the meter numbers, connection numbers and names of those who needed to correct the wrong names/addresses in their bills.

What happened after this was quite interesting. The Camp resulted in a lot of publicity and people from all villages in & around Balaigach came to know of the incident. Fearing that this would put him in real jeopardy, Shyamal, went to the Chopra CCCO and deposited the entire money in the names of the people he had taken the money from. Within January 2012, their connections were regularised and the villagers got their first bills by February 2012. When

contacted, Binod Singh expressed gratitude and said that the camp worked like magic. He however pointed out that around 5 villagers still have some problems and they have already applied in writing to the station manager of Chopra CCCO for resolution.

This case highlights how lack of awareness can lead to misery, harassment and monetary loss. It also demonstrates that how such negatives can be effectively addressed through empowerment and appropriate advocacy by the grassroots.

Amalendu Ghosh, Nabagram, Murshidabad, West Bengal, India

Amalendu Ghosh of Murshidabad district under Nabagram Customer Care Centre Office (CCCO) had applied for a new domestic connection and had submitted the required quotation amount for the same. His father was suffering from high blood pressure and cardiac problems. Hence having an electricity connection was very important to him so that his father could get some relief while at home. However, even after six months from the date he submitted the amount, no action was taken by the utility staff.



Amalendu Ghosh, Nabagram, Murshidabad

He participated at one of the Capacity Building Workshops under the CONASC project where he came to know about the procedure for grievance redressal. He accordingly approached the Station Manager of Nabagram CCO with a written complaint. Unfortunately this did nothing for him and continued to do turns of the utility office without any results.

Then his case was taken up by the CONASC Cell in Nabagram and was discussed at the Regional Office Meeting at Bahrapur in presence of the RGRO, who gave required directions to the station manager to immediately effect his connection. Following this, the Station Manager took appropriate action and released the order for effecting his connection.

His woes, however, did not end with that. The contractor's men who were in charge of effecting the connection kept delaying things, probably in the hope of extorting some more money from him, as reported by Ghosh. He called up the CONASC cell when the contractor's men were dillydallying. The CONASC coordinator for Nabagram then spoke to the Station Manager and within the next two hours his connection was effected. He expressed his gratitude and went on record to promise that he will make sure that his neighbours also know about the basic procedures so that they don't have to face similar harassment in future.

Chopra Gram Panchyat of Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal, India

An entire village under Chopra Customer Care Centre Office (CCCO) of Uttar Dinajpur district was suffering from a blackout for three long months due to a damaged transformer. The villagers had approached the local CCCO Station Manager a number of times but were turned away on all occasions due to non-availability of a transformer.

As the delay in procuring a transformer continued, so did their suffering with absolutely no access to a basic need like electricity. It was then that the villagers approached the CONASC coordinator of Chopra area and requested help. The coordinator took it up promptly and requested the villagers to attend the next Regional Office meeting with all papers.

The case was heard in presence of the Divisional Manager, CGRO and Regional Manager. The Station Manager, who was also present for the meeting cited the non-availability of transformers and expressed helplessness on his part. The Divisional Manager & Regional Manager promptly communicated with the supplies department and placed a request to supply the transformer. Following this, the village transformer was soon replaced and the blackout ended. The whole process took about three weeks time.

The case highlights that how a bit of awareness and proper guidance can effectively help common consumers to deal with everyday issues that face them.

CUTS's analysis of the major reasons behind consumer problems and specific Action points/ Recommendations for WBSEDCL:

The CUTS team analysed the feedback, inputs and complaints received from consumers during different activities throughout the project to emerge with an holistic understanding about the key reasons behind consumer issues in the project territories. Across the different districts, the four major areas where consumers faced problems were:

- Delay in effecting new & temporary connections
- Meter replacement/non-functional meters
- Excess & irregular billing
- Maintenance issues (transformer, wires, wire & power theft, etc.).

It is important to point out that two of the major knots in the utility's service delivery machinery **have to do with the contractors and the meter readers, both outsourced agents**. Other factors that affected service were low capacity & lack of consumer focus of the utility staff, lack of consumer awareness, shortage of materials, theft, etc.

CUTS has attempted a detailed analysis of each of these identified problems and also indicated how WBSEDCL may approach the solutions for each of them, as well as how CUTS can contribute towards addressing the issue.

I. Contractors delaying processes, misleading and extorting consumers:

The CONASC cells came across many an instance where the delay in new connection were caused by procrastination by contractors, even when the Station Manager (head of the Consumer Care Centre Offices, the lowest level offices of WBSEDCL) had already released the connection and given necessary orders for effecting connection to the contractor. Since a huge number of the consumers live far away from the CCCOs, the only people that they know are the contractors and his men and take them to be the utility's staff. The contractors and their team members at times act as middlemen extorting excess money for connections from the consumers in the remote rural areas. This leads to substantial harassment for consumers and also extra out of pocket expenditure. This results in major loss of faith on the utility and its machinery.

Message for WBSEDCL:

- Stricter accountability norms for contractors
- Encouraging more contractors to enlist so that there is appropriate competition

What CUTS can do:

- Organise random/ sporadic consumer camps in remote villages to assess and monitor selected sites and Develop a Pilot feedback mechanism model to see if the system can be improved
- Organise capacity building workshops in remote areas replication of initiatives which will help consumers better understand the procedures and gradually shift away from depending on middlemen.

II. Faulty/irregular meter reading mostly responsible for issues with billing:

The meter readers are one of the main reasons why consumers end up with complaints of excess billing, the CONASC project functionaries found out. They are not visiting the consumer premises regularly resulting in fictitious readings and at times extremely high bills when the real reading is taken. The capacity of the meter readers to deliver their job is also doubtful since many consumers said that they are asking the consumers themselves to fill up the reading from their own observation. The Murshidabad cell even encountered meter readers who claimed that they can not read the meter since there was a power cut in the locality. **Overall, a substantial percentage of the billing related issues could be traced back to faulty, irregular or no meter reading for extended periods of time.**

Message for WBSEDCL:

- Training and better monitoring of meter readers
- Develop innovative pre-paid electronic payment systems of smaller denominations , similar to the mobile systems.

What CUTS can do:

- Organise trainings for meter readers on basic meter & bill related regulations, and how to better interact with rural customers
- Develop a consumer feedback mechanism model to monitor and improve the existing faulty system.
- Develop easy to understand vernacular training material on the above issues

III. Procedural delays and Lack of materials delaying new connections and meter replacement:

Meter replacement was another issue that was frequently encountered. There were many cases where burnt/non-functional meters were not replaced for very long periods. Many of the station managers sighted the shortage of “replacement meters” to this end. They pointed out that they did have meters but they come with a directive of prioritising new connections while releasing them and hence meter replacement cases take a backseat. Many a time the delay in effecting new connections is being caused by shortage of materials like meters, poles, wires, transformers, etc. as revealed during the Regional Office Meetings with the utility officials.

It was also reported by some station managers that there are procedural delays at the divisional offices that results in delayed work orders for connections/augmentations.

Message for WBSEDCL:

- Better planning, inventorisation and tracking of materials.

- Specifying a time line for disposal of pending issues at the Division

What CUTS can do: Undertake gap studies/research to identify the existing gaps in the different systems involved and come up with specific recommendations for practice & policy changes needed to bridge the gaps.

V. Lack of capacity and consumer focus amongst utility staff leading to dissatisfaction and grievance:

The utility staff/officials at the grassroots were found to be lacking in knowledge on regulations in some instances. This is more pronounced with the lower level staff. Unfortunately the consumers who did make it to the CCC Offices can seldom meet the station managers and the half baked knowledge of the staff does little to help them. It was also observed that the staff rarely have consumer focus and feel it's the consumers prerogative to reach out to the utility rather than the other way round. Many consumers reported bad behaviour, low willingness on part of the staff to listen to their problems/queries and such issues. Some of the consumers have also alleged involvement of the staff in the extortion rackets.

Message for WBSEDCL: Training CCCO staff on regulations, effective customer handling and customer care.

What CUTS can do:

- Organise trainings for CCCO staff/Officials on regulations, customer handling and better service delivery by roping in experts and good resource persons
- Develop easy to understand vernacular training material on the above issues

V. Manpower Shortage delaying processes:

It was observed that shortage of manpower at the CCCOs is delaying processes like inspections for new connections, replacement of burnt meters, etc. Moreover, at times contractors and outsourced agents are being deputed to do the job of utility staff causing mistakes to creep in.

Message for WBSEDCL: Better man power planning and allocation

What CUTS can do: Undertake studies/research on the existing gaps in the different systems involved in service delivery and come up with specific recommendations for bridging the gaps.

VI. Lack of understanding amongst consumers about processes and regulations causing problems:

There still exist awareness gaps amongst consumers regarding processes and rules - where to apply, whom to apply to, what are the charges, etc. This, on one hand, is hampering & delaying service delivery and on the other making the consumers easy prey for middlemen.

Message for WBSEDCL: Undertake consumer awareness & training with special emphasis on remote rural areas.

What CUTS can do: Organise consumer awareness & capacity building camps through furthering and replication of initiatives like CONASC

VII. Issues with RGGVY:

It was observed in some instances that new connections under RGGVY were causing problems to already existing consumers, in as much that as soon as new connections were charged, there were instances of voltage drop, transformer burning/tripping and the likes. Consumers and in some cases station managers also said that due to improper planning of load of the new connections, proper load allocation and distribution from the existing transformers was hampered causing such incidents. When discussed at the Regional Office level, officials said that a better and realistic load planning for the new connections under RGGVY would have arrested such incidents. Also, consumers are approaching WBSEDCL with problems under RGGVY and since the matter is being handled by the Rural Electrification Department, the utility officials are not always in a position to comment or redress their problems. They also cited delays in charge hand over by the agencies managing the RGGVY work.

Message for WBSEDCL:

- Better coordination between WBSEDCL officials and Rural Electrification Team/Agency
- Involvement of Regional Office Officials in load planning for new/extension of new electrification work

What CUTS can do: Undertake survey of localities/villages to be brought under RGGVY scheme with involvement of community to help in effective load estimation.

Overall Recommendation and Conclusion:

To conclude the report we are listing the overall recommendations in this section. The detailed and specific Action Points are discussed in the preceding section titled “CUTS Analysis of the major reasons behind Consumer Problems and specific Action Points/ Recommendations for WBSEDCL”.

- 1) Continuation and deeper penetration of CONASC project within the same districts to reach out and benefit more number of grassroots consumers --- through their capacity building and awareness generation and improvement of service delivery of the local CCCO offices.
- 2) Initiation and replication of the CONASC project in the remaining districts of West Bengal as the findings of the Assessment survey reveal the effectiveness and positive impact of the CONASC model.
- 3) Training and Orientation of CCCO officials towards better customer service and improved service delivery (both through toll free numbers and in facing consumer queries and complaints) by enhancing their knowledge of regulations and developing skills in consumer handling.
- 4) Special attention of WBSEDCL authorities towards outsourced services to Contractors and Meter readers to find long term solutions to the problems detailed in the previous section.
- 5) To work with CUTS as a long-term ‘Partner for Consumer Issues’ in finding solutions to varied problems through research, networking , capacity building, confidence building and advocacy to improve service delivery and bring about pro-people change in the sector.

Annexure:

Questionnaire for the Assessment Survey under CONASC project covered in 9 districts of West Bengal

Consumer Assistance Cell for Electricity Consumers at the Grassroots

'CONASC'

Section I: Information about the respondent

1	Name of the respondent	
1.1	Address and Contact Details Contact Number (compulsory)	
1.2	District	
1.3	CCCO Area	
1.4	Category of the consumer	1) Domestic 2) Agriculture 3) CSOs 4) Industrial 5) Commercial
1.5	Gender	1) Male 2) Female

Information about the surveyor *(To be filled by the surveyor)*

Name	
Contact Number	

Section II: About Awareness on CONASC

2	Have you heard about CONASC?	1) Yes 2) No
2.1	If yes, from where have you come to know about CONASC	1) Awareness Generation Workshops 2) Capacity Building Workshops 3) Regional Office Meetings 4) Informal pocket meetings 5) Any other source
2.1.A	(Only for those consumers who attended the Awareness Generation/ Capacity Building Workshop or both) Was it beneficial for you?	1) Yes 2) No
2.1.B	If yes, how have you been benefited?	1) Knowledge about regulation and processes 2) Interaction with Station Managers and utility officials 3) Representation of problem 4) Redressal of problem 5) Any other:
2.2	What does CONASC do?	1) Assist helping in understanding processes 2) Helps in submitting complaint 3) Helps in follow up and redressal of complaints 4) Filling up of various forms 5) All of above
2.3	Do you think initiatives like CONASC should continue?	1) Yes 2) No
2.4	Your Suggestions for improvement	

--	--	--

Session III: On Basics of Electricity Regulations

3	Identify your service provider	1) WBSEB 2) CESC 3) WBSEDCL
3.1	What is the price of the booklet for new connection and where can it be availed?	1) For Rs 10. from the supply office 2) For Rs 5 from the CONASC cell 3) For Rs 5 from the supply office
3.2	What is the amount of Earnest Money to be submitted by a domestic consumer / agricultural consumers?	1) Rs. 200 2) Rs. 300 3) Rs. 500
3.3	What is the time period mentioned for conducting an inspection?	1) 7 days in urban areas and 15 days in rural areas 2) 10 days in urban areas and 20 days in rural areas 3) 15 days in urban areas and 30 days in rural areas
3.4	If your problem is not redressed at the supply office then whom to approach as per Electricity regulations?	1) Ombudsman 2) CONASC 3) RGRO
3.5	Short term agricultural connection is available for how many days?	1) 105 days 2) 125 days 3) 130 days
3.6	If the bill doesn't reach the consumer on time, what action should the consumer take?	1) Inform the supply office and collect a duplicate bill 2) Inform CONASC 3) Lodge a complain to the RGRO
3.7	Do you have to pay any amount for the pole in case of new connections as per the new rules?	1) Yes 2) No

3.8	If your meter is not working, who will you complain the same to?	1) Meter reader 2) Toll Free Number 3) CONASC 4) Any other:
-----	--	--

Session IV: On Accountability

4	How will you rate the service provided by the supply office	1) Very Good 2) Good 3) Average 4) Bad 5) Very Bad
4.1	Why do you rate so?	
4.2	Did you notice any change in the cooperation and service of staff at the supply office before and after the CONASC project?	1) Yes, cooperative 2) No, not cooperative
4.3	Do you get adequate information's related to electricity from the supply office?	1) Yes 2) No
<i>(Only for those who attended regional office meetings)</i>		
4.4	Was the CONASC staff able to guide you properly?	Yes No Comments:
4.5	Did you notice any behavioural change or improvement in service delivery from the Supply office staff after the Regional office? <i>(Explain in details)</i>	
4.6	Did you find any speedy developments taking place in your case after it was discussed at the Regional office meetings?	1) Yes 2) No 3) Any other
4.7	If No, then explain in details	

4.8	Was your problem redressed?	1) Yes 2) No 3) Any other, please specify :

Session V: On the present status in the electricity sector

5	Are you aware of the fact that there is a crisis in the state's power sector due to rising prices of coal?	1) Yes 2) No
5.1	Do you think the state is going to face greater power shortages due to this?	1) Yes 2) No
5.2	What do you think is the crisis about?	1) The utility is not able to raise tariff and this is increasing the loss of the utility 2) The coal price is going up. 3) Not enough new generation plants were put in place to meet rising demand 4) All of the above
5.3	What do you think will happen due to this crisis?	1) Tariff will go up 2) Power cuts will increase 3) Both
5.4	How do you think the government should tackle the situation?	1) By allowing to raise tariff further 2) By allowing to raise tariff along with enhancing generation & transmission efficiency 3) By charging more from industries
5.5	What will be a priority to you?	1) No tariff rise, but power cuts increase 2) Tariff rise but power cuts go away 3) No tariff rise, power cuts during specific pre-announced hours (in evening-night)
5.7	Do you feel a shift towards renewable energy (solar, wind, biomass, etc.) driven power will help address this issue in the long run?	1) Yes 2) No
5.8	Do you feel consumers can play any role in this? Please elaborate (such as controlling power theft, adopting	

	energy efficiency)	
--	--------------------	--

*****Thank you for the cooperation and time*****

Feedback Form for WBSEDCL Officials for the Assessment Survey under CONASC project

Consumer Assistance Cell for Electricity Consumers at the Grassroots

'CONASC'

Name: _____

Designation: _____

CCCO/ District: _____

Contact Details: _____

Benefits of CONASC: _____

Suggestions for further improvement: _____

<u>Questions</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>
The CONASC quick guide was pertinent and useful					
Capacity building of CCCO staff is required					
Cases should be taken up at the Supply office before taking up at the Regional office					
CONASC staff were cooperative					
More such initiatives like CONASC should be undertaken					
There has been an improvement in the customer-staff relationship after the implementation of CONASC					
There has been improvement in understanding of the procedures by the consumers					

(Signature)