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Public Understanding and Participation in Karnataka



Consumer group capacity building for effective public representation.

In just six months, the efforts of Consumer Rights Education and Awareness Trust (CREAT) a non-profit organization, and its partner organizations in the other parts of the state of Karnataka, have been recognized by the Bangalore Electricity Supply Company (BESCOM) as valuable and credible. This USAID-funded project, sponsored by the Energy Team and implemented by Academy for Educational Development (AED), focused on building consumer capacity through consumer groups by providing training on the key issues for consumer intervention in the power sector reforms. Now, BESCOM has offered to cover the costs of all outreach programs that CREAT plans to conduct in all of the BESCOM areas. It may be expected that the other three state ESCOMs may follow suit and similarly support the initiative.

The Karnataka project gained significant visibility and credibility in Karnataka and had tangible impacts on consumer involvement in the state's

power sector reforms. Consumers have been struggling to participate effectively in the reform process and to communicate with the Karnataka Electricity Regulatory Commission (KERC). To achieve this goal, several activities and events were conducted in Bangalore and eight other districts within the state of Karnataka, reaching over 400 people. This has built capacity among local NGOs to help consumers voice their concerns to KERC.

The project also published significant outreach material, including 14 newspaper articles in both English and Kannada, pamphlets and flyers, vernacular translations of important documents, and conducted an independent consumer survey. CREAT and its partners met with all four of the state's ESCOMs.

In the short period of this project's implementation, CREAT and its partners achieved measurable success. Once the project began to hold workshops, news of the workshops spread and more people attended each than had been invited, showing how the high level of interest among consumer groups in Karnataka about participating in the power sector. Karnataka's consumer groups have not previously had an opportunity to voice their concerns about power issues, nor did they have sufficient understanding of the issues to participate effectively.

CREAT held four communication and outreach programs in Mysore, Shimoga, Thirthahalli and Sagar, with measurable results: two new payment counters in Sirsi and one in Mysore were set up, as well as a mobile counter in Shimoga. When a local consumer group intervened with the utility, compensation for an accident was paid within fifteen days. In Sagar, Irrigation Pump (IP) set

owners were made aware of a 2% discount for which they were eligible if they used a capacitor. The utility had previously ignored this provision in this area, but once the consumers brought it up, the utility began to offer the discount to eligible consumers. A toll-free telephone was installed in Sagar to handle consumer complaints. And in Magadi, where meter readers previously would ask customers to collect their own bills from the local utility office, the utility now delivers the bills after intervention by CREAT and its partners.

In Puttur, the consumer group has obtained a commitment from the utility to have its officials remain in their offices one scheduled day a month to meet with consumers to address their

problems. The utility that serves the Hospet area has set aside space in its offices for the local consumer group. The consumer group representatives facilitate resolution of complaints and problems and guide them through the utility procedures.

One of the program's challenges was to gain sufficient momentum, credibility and visibility in a short span of time to be able to project itself as an initiative that may be supported by other agencies that will provide funds and publicize their support. BESCO's initiative in this area is a clear indication that CREAT's efforts have made a perceptible difference in the energy sector's attitudes towards public involvement.

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