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## South Asia Regional Energy Program Utilities Share Customer Service Strategies



South Asian distribution executives visit the customer service center at CESC Ltd. in Kolkata, India.

Plagued by unpaid and uncollected electricity bills, unreliable service and irate customers, the distribution utilities of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka have come together over the past three years to strengthen their customer service programs by sharing proven/best practices. Utilities have shared innovative ideas in metering and billing practices to increase consumer satisfaction. They have started to develop customer service centers and are retraining staff to provide courteous and prompt services in the handling of customer inquiries and complaints. Enhancing customer service strategies, improve the perception of the utility and enhance in revenue collection.

“The SARI/Energy program brings into focus the relevant issues in the South Asian energy sector and encourages the development of energy in a more efficient and economical way to better serve the people”

**Secretary R.V. Shahi**  
Ministry of Power  
Government

Since 2001, the U.S. Energy Association (USEA), with funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), has

supported the South Asia Regional Initiative for Energy Cooperation and Development (SARI/Energy) through its Regional Energy Partnership Program. The major distribution utilities, a mixture of private and publicly-owned companies, from the South Asian countries meet three times a year to present and share their “best practices”. Additionally, the host country utilities provides site visits to substations, control centers and customer service centers to showcase their new approaches to enhanced service. To date the South Asia Regional Distribution Utilities partnership, one of four regional partnerships funded by USAID under the SARI/Energy Program, has met seven times. One of the primary purposes of this partnership is to establish a long-term cooperative relationship among utilities in the South Asia region to discuss: distribution losses and improve energy efficiency, improved management, and improved financial management of a distribution utility. As a result of these meetings, utilities are realizing the importance of reducing losses through the improvement of consumer services.

At the most recent meeting in New Delhi, India in February 2004, utilities highlighted customer service programs. For example, BSES Ltd / Reliance Energy’s (Indian utility BSES Ltd. that was acquired by Reliance Energy) Customer Support Cell addresses consumer problems and identifies the root cause of non-payment. The Customer Support Cell gives consumers access to a single employee who can provide answers for any of their questions. “Employees are being educated to view the customer as the most important aspect to the utility’s success. They are interacting with the customers and are empowered to help the consumer with any questions they may have,” said Mr. Vijay Agarwal of BSES. Before privatization, it took two to three months to get a customer a new meter connection, now it takes only three to four days to

connect, resulting in an increase in days to collect revenue for energy being used. Reliance Energy Ltd. operates on the principal of customer centricity. Anticipating customer needs and fulfilling them is at the center of its business beliefs, which is reflected in the company's mission statement – "Commitment to high standards of quality, reliability and customer satisfaction."

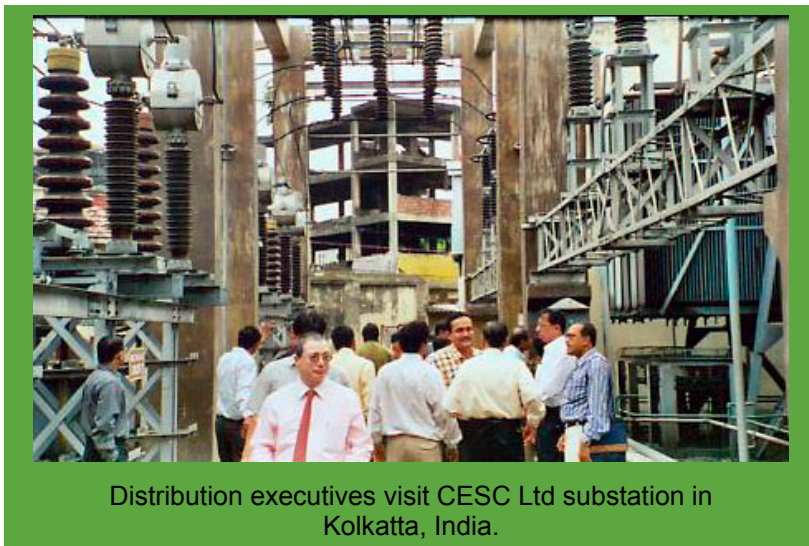
North Delhi Power Limited (NDPL), which distributes electricity in the North & North West areas of Delhi, has surveyed consumers to "get the customer's perspective" on what they expect from their utility. NDPL has implemented a "one point" customer service center where consumers can go and get all of their questions answered after their assigned number has been called. NDPL has also instated several bill payment methods such as 24-hour drop boxes, ATM, internet, and other easily accessible locations to collect payments. Making it easier for the customer to pay their bill is a main objective for NDPL.

USEA also invited the Provincial Electricity Authority of Thailand (PEA) who shared their utility's successful practices with the delegation. PEA's mission is to serve the customer's needs, leading to satisfaction both in product and quality of services. PEA has accomplished this by changing the culture of the utility through the training and empowerment of employees.

Other results from the South Asia Distribution Utilities Partnership are:

- A "Handbook of South Asian Utilities Practices" has been compiled based on voluntary submissions by participating utilities and is set to become a regional repository of best practices for efficient electric power utility management.

- A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed among the members of the regional utility partnership program reaffirming their commitment to share knowledge and explore opportunities outside of the SARI/Energy program.
- Bhutan Power Corporation has adopted billing practices from Southeast Asia, shortening the billing cycle from 90 to 30 days.
- Nepal Electricity Authority spent one week in September with their counterparts at BSES Limited getting hands-on inputs on BSES's customer service and electricity distribution loss reduction techniques.



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For more program information visit the SARI/Energy web site at: <http://sari-energy.org>