

Roundtable on “RTI and Electricity Sector”

Report

Venue: Sarvodaya Hall, St Pius College Complex, Aarey Road, Goregaon East, Mumbai

Organised by Prayas Energy Group, February 25, 2014

Prayas Energy Group organised a round table on ‘RTI and Electricity Sector’ at Mumbai on February 25, 2014. The objective was to realise the full potential of RTI in the electricity sector so as to improve service delivery and democratise governance. This was to be achieved through sharing experiences and discussing action plans for the better use of RTI in the electricity sector. Invitations were sent out to around 25 people and the event had 19 participants, mostly from Maharashtra and Rajasthan. They were from a mix of RTI activists/trainers, electricity sector officials and civil society organisations working in electricity sector. Agenda and the list of participants are given in the end of this report.

Discussions in the roundtable were on three areas.

- **Existing process in the electricity sector for public participation and grievance redressal:**

This provided an overview of the electricity sector covering institutions and policy framework. Sector has many transparency and accountability provisions. This includes avenues like the annual tariff public hearings, grievance redressal mechanisms (like standards of performance and consumer grievance forums). The possible complimentary role of RTI in terms of gathering relevant information was discussed. This covers information of required granularity as opposed to aggregated information that is often available, information when required rather than having to wait for regulatory processes, information considered not crucial by the authority but crucial for the citizen etc. Other avenues for grievance redressal like Public Grievance Redressal Act implemented in some States and Right To Hearing (RTH) in Rajasthan were also discussed.

- **Using RTI in the Electricity Sector:** Experiences on the use of RTI in the electricity sector was shared in this part. Main experiences in using RTI in the electricity sector included getting critical information related to safety and accidents, material procurement, shutdown of generators during monsoons, RGGVY program implementation and publishing information on Standards of Performance. It was suggested that inspection of files can be done under Section 4 (of RTI act), where proactive disclosures are unsatisfactory. Experiences of Jan Sunwais in Rajasthan under RTH, especially addressing problems in RGGVY were also shared.

- **Improving the use of RTI to improve governance and service delivery in the electricity sector:** In this discussion, ways in which RTI can be effectively used to improve transparency and accountability in the electricity sector were explored. This included increasing the spread and depth of RTI interventions, strengthening pro-active

disclosure and social audit of RGGVY. RTI can be used to get information at a disaggregated and local level which can be then used to increase accountability. It can also be used to obtain information on the benefit obtained from large capital investment projects. Sharing such ideas and introducing the sector to RTI activists will improve the use of RTI to gather information. This information could be used for policy/regulatory interventions to demand accountability of authorities. Lessons from NREGA where use of RTI tools and follow up led to detailed proactive disclosure of all expenditure were shared.

Way Forward

Action ideas were identified in four areas during the discussions. These are given below.

- 1. Development of guides and awareness programs:** Electricity sector is complex with many actors. Guides and awareness programs that demystify the sector and introduce a framework for interventions will help consumers and community organisations to kick start their work. It was proposed to develop two guides. First is a consumer guide, which could be an adaptation of an earlier guide developed by Prayas for Maharashtra. Samta power could adapt it for Rajasthan and we could explore organisations in other States who could also take up adaptation work. Second is an activist guide, which will introduce the sector and avenues for intervention to the grass root activist. Prayas will develop this guide, based on the feedback received. Sajag Nagrik Manch could work with others to develop a web-based FAQ (frequently asked questions) on issues that most frequently impact the electricity consumer. Awareness programs could be organised using these resources.
- 2. Strengthening Pro-active disclosure:** Citizen friendly pro-active disclosure will remove most of the need for getting information through the long process of RTI applications. Data formats should be relevant, easy to understand and presented with some level of analysis to help people to use it effectively. There is a MERC Regulation on Uniform Recording, Maintenance and Reporting of Information (2009), which provides guidelines for all licensees to report information to the Regulatory Commission. Compliance with this could be checked in Maharashtra and this regulation could be adapted for other States. There is lot of scope for improving the current public disclosure by electricity authorities. It was decided to build on the draft approach presented by Prayas to strengthen pro-active disclosure, first in the States of Maharashtra and Rajasthan. Though there are many public authorities in the sector, Regulatory Commission, State owned Distribution Company and Energy Department could be the first focus. Sajag Nagrik Manch and Prayas will work on this and take it forward with support from others.

- 3. Increasing structured interactions between Distribution Company, government and citizens at local levels:** Electricity has become important in the lives of all, including the rural and urban poor. But there are many shortcomings in the quality of supply and implementation of programs. Current mechanisms like State level regulatory public hearings and grievance forums are important, but there are many limitations to the use of information available at websites and participation by the majority poor. Hence these need to be supplemented by structured interactions at local levels involving the community, government and electricity officials (mainly distribution companies). These interactions would address many local grievances, consolidate issues and help to plan required policy/program corrections. All actors stand to benefit by this. Civil society organisations like MKSS, Pragati Abhiyan, Samta Power and Prayas will gain insights into electricity sector and address grievances of the community. Distribution Company and State will be get feedback from the community about the prioritisation of issues and strategies to address them. Such activities could be taken up at a local level (say in a district) in Rajasthan (using RTH etc) and Maharashtra (using District Committees set up under Electricity Act, Substation meetings etc) to begin with. Experience gained from these over 1-2 years would help to address many local issues and provide proper inputs at the policy level to improve program implementation and sector operation.
- 4. Working towards Social Audit of RGGVY:** A brief presentation on this was made by Prayas, but it was felt that there are many issues to be addressed before social audit in the true sense can be attempted. RGGVY program design and the legal/policy framework do not have explicit provisions for social audit. But there is a critical need to introduce local level monitoring and correction to this high investment program aimed to catalyse rural development. Preparatory work on this will continue – this includes data collection at local level, learning from social audits in other sectors and discussions with State governments (which provide part funding and take over the infrastructure) as well as Rural Electrification Corporation (which provides majority funding and is the nodal agency). The scope of audit could also later expand to cover all major programs in the sector.

RTI and Electricity Sector – A Round Table

Prayas, Energy Group, Pune

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Date & Time: February 25, 2014, 1000 to 1730

Agenda

Time	Session	Speakers
1000-1030	Welcome & Interactions, Tea/coffee with light breakfast	
1030-1130	Context setting	Prayas
1130-1145	Tea break	
1145-1330	RTI in electricity sector – experiences and suggestions	Vivek Velankar (Sajag Nagrik Manch), Shankar Singh (MKSS), YK Bolia (Samta Power, former SE- RSEB), Prayas
1330-1430	Lunch	
1430-1600	Panel discussion – RTI for improving service delivery and governance in electricity sector	Nikhil Dey (MKSS), SB Kulkarni (Former Member, MERC), Ashwini Kulkarni (Pragati Abhiyan), Jayant Pimpalgaonkar (Registrar - YASHADA), Shailesh Gandhi (Former Member, CIC) – Moderator
1600-1615	Tea break	
1615-1730	Way ahead	Prayas to facilitate

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Mumbai, February 25, 2014

List of Participants

1	Ann Josey	Prayas Energy Group, Pune
2	Ashok Pendse	Consumer Representative – MERC, Mumbai
3	Ashwini Chitnis	Prayas Energy Group, Pune
4	Ashwini Kulkarni	Pragati Abhiyan, Nashik
5	Atul Patankar	RTI activist, Nashik, Maharashtra
6	H.M. Chordia	Samta Power, former AO – RSEB, Rajasthan
7	Jayant Pimpalgaonkar	Yashwantrao Chavan Academy of Development Administration (YASHADA), Pune
8	M.B. Paliwal	SE, AVVNL, Rajasthan
9	Nikhil Dey	Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), Rajasthan
10	Sam Cheriyan	Prayas Energy Group, Pune
11	Shailesh Gandhi	Former Commissioner, Central Information Commission
12	Shankar Singh	Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), Rajasthan
13	Sreekumar Nhalur	Prayas Energy Group, Pune
14	Srihari Dukkupati	Prayas Energy Group, Pune
15	Subhash. B. Kulkarni	Former Member, Maharashtra Electricity Regulatory Commission (MERC), Mumbai
16	Susanna Baria	New Trade Union Initiatives (NTUI), New Delhi
17	Vinita Deshmukh	Senior Journalist, Pune
18	Vivek Velankar	Sajag Nagrik Manch, Pune
19	Y K Bolia	Samta Power, former SE – RSEB, Rajasthan