

**Grassroots Reachout and Networking in Rajasthan through Consumer Action
(GRANIRCA)**



State-level Feedback Roundtable Meeting

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Submitted by



Consumer Unity and Trust Society

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About the Project

Lack of consumer access to adequate information, improper understanding about the redressal mechanism/procedure as well as other socio-economic vulnerabilities of individuals and households are the reasons that the under-privileged classes are not getting justice.

To address the problem, CUTS is partnering with the Department of Consumer Affairs, Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, Government of India, under the Consumer Welfare Fund (CWF), the implementation of the project entitled 'Grassroots Reachout & Networking in Rajasthan through Consumer Action' (GRANIRCA) in 12 districts of Rajasthan. The purpose of this project is to enhance the strong consumer movement at the grassroots in seven divisions of the State by ensuring an enabling environment for protecting consumer interests, which will, in turn, contribute to national interest.

Specific Objective

The objective of the project is to build a strong consumer movement by equipping consumer activists with skills and creating zealous grassroots activists through intensive training, capacity building and orientation programmes on consumer protection issues. More information about the project activities can be viewed at <http://www.cuts-international.org/CART/GRANIRCA/index.htm>

Project Activities

- State launch-cum-orientation of district partners;
- Research activities that include identification of NGOs, diagnostic survey of consumer protection, needs assessment, field study, data collection, compilation/analysis of relevant consumer issues;
- Public interfaces and outreach meetings on consumer issues;
- District-level training workshops in each of the 12 districts;
- State feedback roundtables to share the learning from various districts and build and strengthen the network;
- Media sensitisation workshops in each of the 12 districts and at the state level;
- Advocacy with the government agencies in identified divisions and Central and State governments;
- Complaints Handling and Information and Advisory Services (CHIAS) through a dedicated cell; and
- Publication of reports, briefing papers/newsletters and creation of a programme website and a collective communication device for wider outreach.

Duration and Coverage

The project is for a period of three years, i.e., January 2010 to December 2012, covering all seven divisions of Rajasthan, comprising 12 districts, namely, Tonk, Chittorgarh, Kota, Bundi, Alwar, Banswara, Jodhpur, Jalore, Churu, Sikar, Dholpur and Dausa.



Expected Outcomes

- *Empowerment*: People will be assertive consumers to uphold their rights and fight for justice.
- *Questioning Society*: Civil society organisations (CSOs) will act as “watchdogs”.
- *Enforcement*: Better service delivery areas and efficient redressal mechanism.
- *Enabling Environment*: Protecting consumer interests, which will ultimately create an enabling environment for protecting the state interest.
- *Good Governance*: It will contribute to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).
- *Replicable Model*: It will result in a model of empowering consumers through networking and thus offer a model for further expansion in the identified districts and elsewhere.

Stakeholders Feedback Roundtable 2011

The objective of conducting Roundtable Feedback in every year of the project period was to consolidate and share the key learning gained from various districts with various stakeholders and to identify the points for advocacy. Another objective of the event was to critically review the activities carried out under the project during the year for effective implementation of the project activities in the coming years. The first year’s project activities were evaluated on December 15, 2010 and this year’s, i.e., 2011, activities were discussed and critically evaluated on November 29, 2011 with all the stakeholders.

Participation

More than 57 representatives consisting of all the stakeholders, which included representatives of CSOs, print and electronic media, the judiciary and the government were present. Twelve project district partners also participated in the roundtable.

Proceedings

Introductory Speech

After Deepak Saxena welcomed all the guest speakers on the dais and presented them bouquets, George Cheriyan, Director, CUTS, and Head, CUTS CART, commenced with the introductory remarks and highlighted the purpose of the meeting. George spoke on the importance of this year being the silver jubilee year of the enactment of Consumer Protection Act, 1986. However, the sad part is that still a majority of consumers are still not aware



of their rights. He was referring to the findings of the latest survey carried out under the research as part of the project. George mentioned few other related issues such as non-existence or non-functioning of State and District Consumer Protection Councils in Rajasthan, poor infrastructure of food testing laboratories in the state, etc., which apparently is a necessity now in our day

today life and lethargic attitude in filling the vacancies in the consumer fora, as takes very long to fulfil the vacancies, whereas, it should start a little before it gets vacant.

Presentation about Project Progress and Issues



Deepak Saxena presented a brief overview of the project, the activities conducted so far, including the key findings of the research conducted in the year 2011, and recommendations as advocacy points derived from the research and the overall activities.

The other points included in the presentation were a brief introduction of the organisation, the centre and the project, the geographical area, partners, the project activities as envisaged in the project and the outcome of the project so far.

Keynote Address

“COPRA was enacted with a clear objective of giving speedy and economical redressal to consumers, but the overall objectives are not met due to non-implementation of its provisions”, said Rajendra Prasad Bora, a senior media person and also an active CUTS CART advisory board member.



Bora remarked that there is urgent need to improve the consumer protection mechanism in the free market economy. He said lack of awareness is the main cause of consumer exploitation, but only awareness, without proper support mechanism, is not sufficient for protecting the rights of consumers.

Bora started with calling himself a consumer who is unaware, but wants to know more and more about consumer protection. However, the problem rests not only with him, who is not aware even after 25 years of the enactment of the Act but in the government system also, because when he, as a consumer, visits government departments for seeking some information or some help or courts, then he is not responded to well in the manner as he should have been. Even the public representatives, whom we have elected, become our masters and do not respond in a favourable manner. Therefore, in view of this, the results of the survey are not wrong. But, for this pathetic situation, both consumers themselves and the government machinery are to be blamed equally. He said that even the media has a limitation in not publishing negative stories against the government.

Bora stressed the need to create a pressure group which may encourage consumers to go to consumer courts in more and more numbers and ensure that, with such a fine law, consumers are benefited to the extent they should be.

Poster Release and Gram Gadar Award



On the occasion, four posters, which have been brought out as informative material for generating awareness under the project, were released by the guests. Rajendra Bora and Dr Poonam Pande, Project Associate, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), New Delhi, along with George Cheriyan, released the four

posters on various consumer-related issues, rights and responsibilities, which now appear on GRANIRCA webpage.

Immediately after that, this year's Gram Gadar Award, which is given to the best journalist on a given topic to a rural-based media person, was also given. The purpose of giving this award is to promote and encourage the rural media persons.

Badrinarayan Sharma spoke about the importance of this award and also briefed the participants on the history of Gram Gadar. This year's topic was corruption and the award went to Laxmi Lal Sanghvi, who originally hails from Bhilwara and is currently working as a freelance journalist. The award consisted of a Rs-10,000-cheque and an appreciation certificate.



Brief Presentation on GIZ Project on Consumer Protection and Sustainable Consumption

Dr Poonam Pande, Project Associate, GIZ, Project Consumer Protection and Sustainable Consumption, gave a presentation on the on-going project, which the Government of India is implementing with the support of German Agency GIZ.

Poonam said that Indian consumers are a huge market on account of the sheer size of the population. There are wide gaps in literacy and income levels and the availability and prices of the goods and services. To add to it are the woes of the consumers regarding the rampant



malpractices of the business, thriving primarily because of lack of awareness regarding consumer rights and redressal. There are few organisational redressal systems in place and going to consumer fora for redressal, though not very expensive, is very time consuming. Despite the existence of legislation, its implementation is still not effective and redressal

is not within the reach of the vulnerable, poor and marginal consumers.

In the light of this background, the Department of Consumer Affairs, Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, Government of India has joined hands with GIZ, , in cooperation with PTB, the German National Metrology Institute, to provide technical advice to streamline the system of consumer protection in India, under the project “Strengthening Consumer Protection in India”.

Pande further said that the overall objective of the project is to supplement the on-going efforts of the Department of Consumer Affairs in Consumer protection to safeguard consumer interests in a more effective and efficient manner.

Dr Pande elaborated the key elements of the GIZ project as:

- Organising consumer information and awareness campaigns in three States, targeting particularly the grass-root levels and involving consumer organisations;
- Enhancing comparative testing, contributing to a more effective and an efficient and responsive system of consumer advice and redressal in 15 selected districts;
- Contributing to an effective and easily accessible system of out-of-court resolution of consumer disputes through conciliation, arbitration and mediation processes;
- Helping consumer organisations fulfill their function in consumer protection and supporting the setting up of the National Consumer Protection Authority; and
- Making the system of legal metrology more effective and efficient.

Open Discussion and Vote of Thanks

Participants shared their experiences and grievances which they have faced as common consumers and/or applicants. A few of the questions and suggestions which emerged from the participants are as follows:

1. Dr Laxmi Saxena raised concern about the impact on small retailers due to entry of FDI in retail.
2. Dr K.M. Sharma stressed the need to build a better infrastructure for consumer courts and a need to create benches of district forums at the block level.
3. Tejveer Choudhary and Manju Soni emphasised the need to build an atmosphere where shopkeepers must be compelled to give bills, in whatever manner.

4. Mukesh Sikhwal stressed the need of having a lab in each district for product and food testing.

Besides, participants also suggested various suggestions in order to improve infrastructure and working of consumer forum.

Further, Amarjeet Singh of CUTS CART summarised the proceedings and gave a vote of thanks to participants.

Key Recommendations for Advocacy under GRANIRCA

- The law should be implemented religiously in consonance with the objectives with which it was enacted, i.e., speed, just and economic redressal to consumers.
- Members of consumer fora should be appointed on basis of their qualifications, rather than political influence and connections.
- Retired judges or judges on the verge of retirement should not be appointed as presidents of the district forum, State Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission and National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission. The practice of appointing a person with required legal expertise should be encouraged.
- Members should have some sort of legal background in order to actively participate in the forum's proceedings. Members in consumer fora should be trained and be paid good honorarium for effective engagement.
- Lawyer's presence should be restricted or discouraged in consumer fora.
- Issues pertaining to consumers buying goods for commercial purposes should be simplified.
- Time limit for giving redressal should be strictly adhered to.
- Vacancies of both members and presidents should be filled up immediately prior to retiring of the incumbent.
- Labs for testing of food items and drugs should be set up at least one in each district.
- Consumer Protection Councils should be made fully functional.
- Departments should work in a proactive manner to protect the interests of consumers, not merely fulfilling the minimum targets.
- There should be an active Consumer Directorate for better coordination within concerned and link departments.