



AN INTRODUCTION TO OFFICE OF CONSUMER ADVOCACY

Unlike in other countries where the concept of Consumer Advocacy is in existence for many years, it is new in India. The Government of Karnataka has taken the initiative of introducing Consumer Advocacy in the power sector. Section 8 of the Karnataka Electricity Reform Act, 1999 provides that the Karnataka Electricity Regulatory Commission (KERC) shall have a senior officer to represent the common interest of the consumers in all matters, hearings and proceedings before the Commission.

To give effect to this requirement the Office of Consumer Advocacy (OCA) was established as an independent unit of the KERC in September 2001. Thereby the KERC has earned the distinction of being the first electricity regulatory Commission in the country to have a full-fledged office for consumer advocacy.

OBJECTIVES

The following are some of the objectives with which the OCA has been established:

- Assist the Commission in review of policies, programs, and regulations that govern consumer protection
- Advocate for appropriate credible, and equitable consumer protection rules and standards
- Advocate for specific performance standards for utilities
- Ensure standards for quality and reliability of service to customers are met
- Ensure that energy policies, programs, and regulations consider consumers' interests and needs
- Ensure disclosure of rules, regulations and environmental standards
- Ensure that high quality education and information is made available to consumers
- Represent consumers in formal proceedings before the Commission
- Serve as a clearing-house for consumer complaints, concerns and information
- Encourage consumers to act responsibly in their use of energy
- Empower consumers with the tools they need to advocate for themselves
- Monitor compliance with consumer protection rules and standards

- Provide mediation services for consumer complaints that are not satisfactorily addressed by the utility, bring any unresolved complaints to the Commission for resolution
- Bring continued violations of consumer protection rules and standards to the attention of the Commission
- Bring valuable public input to the Commission
- Provide a voice for stakeholders that otherwise would not be heard

FUNCTIONS AND ACTIVITIES OF OCA

The following are the important functions and activities of OCA:

Grievance handling

Empowerment

Information

Representation

Monitoring Consumer Protection Rules and Standards

GRIEVANCE HANDLING

Consumer Grievance handling is one of the major function of the OCA. The Grievance Redressal Officer attached to the OCA is in charge of consumer complaints. At present the OCA is facilitating consumers by receiving their complaints and forwarding it to the concerned distribution licensees. The reply received from them is sent to the consumers. Violation of the Rules, Regulations and Code of Practices are identified and brought to the notice of the Distribution Licensee and to the Commission.

The OCA is holding Customer Meets in various parts of the State. These meetings are organized with the assistance of local civil society organizations, Chambers of Commerce, Electricity Contractors' Associations, consumers' and farmers groups. Interaction with the public and the officials of the Licensee are held as part of these meetings.

EMPOWERMENT

The OCA believes that the benefit of electricity reform can reach the consumers only when they participate effectively in the regulatory process. Given the nature of electricity, consumers need to be educated and empowered by way of information to play their role. Hence OCA has been conducting workshops, seminars and other educative programs for the benefit of electricity consumers.

A series of workshops on 'Consumers Role in Power Sector Reform' was organized in several locations of the State. Capacity building workshops on Tariff was arranged for the benefit of consumer groups, non-governmental organizations, farmers groups etc. A training Module prepared for these workshops is available in the KERC website.

Regular customer meets and briefing sessions are being held to inform and educate consumers about the recent developments in the power sector. The OCA is also supporting the Electricity Consumers Network (ECON) an independent organization working exclusively on power sector. Several interactive sessions are being arranged on the various regulations issued by KERC under the Electricity Act 2003.

INFORMATION

Access to technical as well as general information about the power sector enhances the quality of consumer intervention. The OCA in its endeavor to provide information to consumers has taken up several initiatives. The OCA is bringing out a bilingual newsletter 'Consumer Power' and 'Vidyut Balakedara'. These newsletters contain informative articles, facts and figures, news clippings, orders issued by the KERC, events held by OCA and also reports about accidents, complaints handled etc. The newsletters are mailed to over 200 consumer groups and individuals, besides to licensees, Government departments and other State Regulatory Commissions.

The OCA periodically publishes leaflets, brochures, and consumer guides to inform and educate consumers. They are also made available in the KERC website. A separate page for Consumer Advocacy is included in the website. The OCA is also acting as an information clearing house. Copies of Rules, Regulations, orders and other circulars issued by the Commission, which are of interest to consumers is mailed to consumer groups. Drafts of these Regulations are also sent to elicit their opinions, suggestions, objections etc.

REPRESENTATION

Representing on behalf of the consumers before the Commission is another activity of the OCA. The OCA tries to put forth the views of the consumers before any decision is taken by the Commission. The OCA will file petitions on subjects of interest to consumers. The OCA represents consumers in Rule making and tariff setting.

MONITORING IMPLEMENTATION OF RULES AND REGULATIONS

The OCA monitors implementation of the rules and regulations by the Licensees, issued by the Commission. By periodical visits to the Licensees' offices, the OCA studies the extent of implementation and takes up any lapse with the Licensee and the Commission.