

Consumer Complaints Cells and Consumer Ombudsman: Making a Difference in Northern Bangladesh

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Consumer (Complaints) counseling has been a severely neglected area in Bangladesh. There are no instances where such services exist. So consumers of Bangladesh have no one to turn to for advice and counseling when faced with problems and dissatisfaction connected with their purchase of goods and services.

With globalization gaining pace in the world economy, the opening up of several sectors in the local economy to competition has provided several benefits to consumers in the market place. However, at the same time, they have been exposed to new forms of fraud and manipulation. In the promotion of the free market economy and economic liberalization, the rights and interests of the consumers are often overlooked.

In this context, the BQSP project in collaboration with Consumers' Association of Bangladesh (CAB) aimed at setting up Consumer Complaints Cells (CCCs) at grassroots level. To run and strengthen these CCCs, a National Expert in Legal Affairs and Consumers Complaints (NELACC) was appointed.

The NELACC works as a de facto Consumer Ombudsman (CO). An ombudsman is an official, usually (but not always) appointed by the government or by the parliament, who is charged with representing the interests of the public by investigating and addressing complaints reported by individual citizen. An ombudsman need not be appointed by government; s/he may work for a corporation, a newspaper, an NGO, or even for the general public. In this regard, the BQSP is expected to work for general public, i.e. consumers.



Audience at Seminar on Consumer Rights Organized in Chandipur, Gaibanda

NELACC is thus expected to first set up CCCs in pilot regions and then to help in strengthening their activities in various parts of the country.

Accordingly, since November 2007, the NELACC had been able to establish a number of CCCs in Northern Bangladesh, especially in greater Rangpur district.

Through frequent visits to the pilot area, the NELACC provides independent and impartial facilities for the resolution of local consumer complaints.

The pilot CCCs are working as centers with well trained and dedicated personnel under the leadership of the NELACC who offers guidance and counseling in complaints matters received by them.

A period of 10 months is too short to assess the success of these activities. However, the way the wave of consumerism has touched upon the life of local people in the pilot regions after the intervention, definitely shows a promising start.



CCC at Bamondanga, Shundargonj

The CCCs are currently working as consumer watchdogs. They are entertaining consumer complaints from the local community and organizing their own *shalish* (non-formal dispute resolution) to resolve the disputes. BQSP has been joined by local media, lawyers, teachers, social workers, elites and national research institutes to support the CCC program.



NELACC with CAB Dinajpur District Committee

In her recent trip to the pilot area, NELACC was heavily supported by the government administration and local political leaders for continuing CCC activities in the region.

Most consumers of the pilot area, during the ongoing consumer survey organized in cooperation with LawDev (Bangladesh), commented that CCC activities have changed their lives in many ways. The consumers feel more united than ever before. They know now that there is an active forum which would listen to them, which would stand up on behalf of them. Even the consumer leaders of the region feel that they now have a direction and guidance to carry out a successful consumer movement in their area.



The Chairman of Chondipur Union, Shundarganj declaring his sincere commitment to the Consumer Rights Movement

Consumers participating in the Consumer Training Program organized by LawDev (Bangladesh) to support CCC activities in pilot areas



DC of Gaibanda, MD Abu Yusuf, in a meeting with NELACC assured his sincere support for CC activities in his region