

Rights and responsibilities of the modern day electricity consumer

World Consumer Rights Day has been held annually on 15 March since 1983. The day was announced by Consumers International (CI), formally known as International Organization of Consumers Unions (IOCU) to honour former US President John F. Kennedy's historic speech to the US Congress 20 years earlier.

Consumers International which was formed in 1960 celebrates its 50th year in 2010. Its vision is a world where people have access to safe and sustainable goods and services, exercising their individual rights as consumers and using the force of their collective power for the good of consumers everywhere – laudable goal that all of us can agree upon.

Life on earth requires two actions. First, it needs to obtain matter and energy from the environment. Next, it needs to release matter and energy into the environment. Life consumes what it wants and releases what it does not want. For life to maintain itself, it consumes orderly matter and energy from its surrounding and releases disorderly matter and energy back into it. This, in a nutshell, is what life process is all about. Both are required – not just one. This is explained in the second law of thermodynamics. Life, in order to maintain its low entropy status consumes low entropy energy (orderly) and releases high entropy energy (disorderly). Human beings are no different and all 6.8 billion of us engage in this give and take in order to exist. As such, we call ourselves consumers.

As there are issues prevailing in the world the two terms 'consumer rights' and 'consumer responsibilities' emerged. It is simple to understand the two terms. 'Consumer rights' indicate the right to have access to quality matter and energy. 'Consumer responsibilities' indicate how the consumer should release waste matter into the environment so that it can be recycled by other organisms living on earth and through them, back to human beings again.

Access to products and services for satisfying basic human needs is the most important consumer right. The consumer should have the right to the satisfaction of basic needs. The basic, essential goods and services of the modern day human being are adequate food, clothing, shelter, healthcare, education, energy, water and sanitation. Above all, we need to recognise the importance of the right to breathe quality air which is rapidly becoming a scarce resource. The present world population should be able to exercise the right to satisfaction of all these basic needs.

Let us look at this in terms of the use of electricity.

Electricity is recognized as a basic need of the modern human being. However, it needs to be recognized that electricity *per se* is not a basic need but rather it is electricity to operate certain appliances. The basic domestic electrical appliances needed for the modern human being are lighting bulbs and television sets. It is an accepted norm that having domestic lighting till late evening and in the early morning, and viewing TV are basic needs modern human needs. In this context all people should have the right to satisfaction of basic electricity needs and the 'Electricity for all by 2011' program is a great initiative geared towards it. Most of the other domestic electrical appliances used cannot be considered as basic needs as the use of such appliances is limited to about 30% of the population in countries like Sri Lanka.

Ensuring the quality of the product/service is the next most important consumer right. Having standardized, reliable power is of utmost importance for the electricity consumer. Lack of interrupted substandard power is not acceptable and it may damage electrical appliances. The right to redress is another important consumer right to receive fair settlement of just claims, including

compensation for unsatisfactory services. Both these rights are not adequately met with respect to the present Sri Lankan consumer of electricity. It is one of the most pressing rights issues that need to be addressed by the newly empowered power sector regulator - the Public Utilities Commission of Sri Lanka (PUCSL).

Price of the product/service is also an important consumer right. There is no choice (to be able to select from a range of products and services, offered at competitive prices, with an assurance of satisfactory quality) for the electricity consumer due to monopolistic nature of the distribution system. Hence it is important to set the power sector tariff by the regulator to protect the rights of the electricity consumers in Sri Lanka. The present government's bold decision to go ahead with power sector reforms and complete the process has created an enabling environment to address this issue. Providing electricity for satisfying basic electricity needs at an affordable, reasonable price to electricity consumers is essential. Additionally, it is also essential to charge the true cost of electricity from the affluent for satisfying their luxury wants. This is not happening in Sri Lanka at present. The affluent is supplied with luxury electricity at a subsidized price while the state owned utility is running at a loss burdening the government and thereby the poor. The PUCSL should conduct a proper energy audit and rectify the situation soon.

The right to be informed, given the facts needed to make an informed choice, and to be protected against dishonest or misleading advertising and labelling is also a consumer right. The right to consumer education to acquire knowledge and skills needed for making informed, confident choices about goods and services, while being aware of basic consumer rights and responsibilities and how to act on them is the other consumer right that should be recognized by all parties. The right to be heard is an accepted consumer right through which consumer interests are integrated into the formulation and execution of government policy, and, in the development of products and services. These rights of the electricity consumer of Sri Lanka have been perennially neglected until recently and the efforts of the PUCSL to establish these rights are commendable.

Consumer responsibilities and consumer rights are two sides of the same coin. There is now global recognition that unsustainable patterns of production and consumption result in grave social and environmental impacts worldwide. It is the responsibility of consumers to release their waste in a sustainable way or else change their consumption patterns. The waste generated by electricity consumers is not directly visible. It is not seen in the backyard of the consumer. Electricity is generated somewhere else and then transported to the point of consumption via transmission and distribution lines. Consumers should keep in mind that waste is generated at the power plant and they cannot wash their hands off completely and keep quiet.

It is the responsibility of the consumer to intervene and decide how electricity should be produced for their consumption. The international consensus is resoundingly clear: climate change is real; it is caused predominantly while generating power and energy, and it will have far-reaching consequences for ecosystems and human lives unless the consumers act swiftly to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHG emissions). Electricity consumers therefore, have a responsibility to be concerned about climate change and about its causes and effects. The long-term solution is energy efficiency and renewable energy.

It is clear that consumer behaviour has enormous potential to reduce climate change and that some consumers already recognise this responsibility. Where consumer behaviour and demands advance, business will move with them. While Consumer impact is critical in a range of areas, its impact is most significant and put to best effect in relation to energy and the role that the use of energy plays in consumption. Consumers have a central place in the roadmap towards a low emissions future that includes radically higher levels of energy efficiency and radically lower use of fossil fuels. Two billion

consumers worldwide need increased access to energy on one hand while on the other hand energy intensive consumption from those who already have access needs to change.

The electricity consumers in Sri Lanka need to organize themselves to look after their rights and responsibilities. An enabling environment is created with the presence of the power sector regulator, for forming a formidable electricity consumer movement in Sri Lanka and it is the responsibility of the consumers to utilize this opportunity to the maximum.