



CUTS GLOBAL WEBINAR With the Support of UNCTAD

THE G20 CHAMPIONING THE CONSUMER MOVEMENT

Date: 23 August, 2023 Wednesday
Time: 05:30PM - 08:30PM (IST)

EVENT REPORT

INTRODUCTION

The report focuses on discussions that happened during the CUTS Global Webinar, held collaboratively with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) on August 23, 2023. The webinar served as a resounding call to action, underscoring the pressing need to prioritise consumer protection within the G20 framework.

Notably, the event garnered active participation from over a hundred participants worldwide, engaging in discussions through both the Zoom platform and YouTube Live streaming. The event provided a platform for comprehensive discussions on global consumer protection and advocacy efforts. Participants including representatives from civil society, media, industry experts, policymakers, and consumers contributed to advancing consumer rights and overall well-being on a global scale.

WELCOME ADDRESS & OPENING REMARKS

Pradeep S Mehta, Secretary General of CUTS International, and Rebeca Grynspan, Secretary-General of UNCTAD, delivered the opening remarks, setting the stage for an evening of insightful discussions and the exchange of ideas.

Pradeep S Mehta in his talk highlighted the dynamic evolution of the G20, originating in 1999 as a platform for financial discussions, gradually expanding its scope to encompass various global issues, including consumer well-being. The financial crisis of 2007-08 spurred the elevation of the G20 to a forum for international economic cooperation, shaping the global response to financial vulnerabilities. The inaugural G20 Consumer Summit in 2017 marked a significant step, emphasising consumer trust in the digital realm and prompting discussions that led to the second summit in 2018, focused on diverse consumer issues such as internet-connected product safety and food waste.

Mehta emphasised the growing importance of consumer protection within the G20 agenda, charting its journey from initial discussions to subsequent initiatives. He acknowledged the vital role of consumers in economic systems, with the adoption of United Nations Guidelines

for Consumer Protection (UNGCP) in 1985 and its later amendments influencing global discussions on consumer rights and fair practices. Highlighting India's history of advocating for consumer protection, including landmark acts and recent legislations, Mehta affirmed India's position as a leader in fostering ethical marketplaces and empowering consumers. He underscored the significance of prioritising consumers as a means to achieve equitable access to goods and information while fostering global unity and shared responsibility for consumer well-being.

Rebeca Grynspan in her audiovisual message reminded the audience that when it comes to 2030 agenda and its Seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) the world is moving backwards on multiple fronts such as eradicating poverty, addressing hunger, promoting women's rights, and fostering development. In fact, only 12% of the SDGs are currently making the expected progress. Beyond being mere set of targets, the 2030 agenda on SDGs are a promise made to ourselves and future generations. This promise signifies a collective responsibility to work towards a better world, and consumer protection is a part of fulfilling that responsibility.

She also underlined the significance of G20 Consumer Summits as a way to address consumer protection issues within broader discussions on challenges like digital transformation and green transitions. She highlighted an achievement from the G20 digital ministers' declaration of 2021, which includes a chapter on consumer awareness and protection in the global digital context. She also mentioned India convening a meeting for G20 global food regulators, underlining the importance of consumer protection in areas like food safety. The call to remain ambitious and continue organising G20 Consumer Summits is also emphasised, with the hope that all participants will work together to make it a reality especially during the Brazil's upcoming Presidency. Before concluding her message, she stressed the significance of consumer protection within the G20 framework and the need to continue advocating for and addressing consumer-related issues on a global scale.

INAUGURAL SESSION - THE EVOLUTION OF CONSUMER PROTECTION ON THE G20 AGENDA: FROM PAST TO PRESENT

The inaugural session of the event moderated by **Shirish Deshpande**, Chairman, Mumbai Grahak Panchayat (MGP) delved into the evolution of consumer protection within the G20 agenda, spanning from its inception to the contemporary landscape. The session shed light on the journey of consumer protection discussions within the G20, highlighting key milestones and reflecting on the challenges and successes encountered along the way.

The session's speakers included esteemed voices in the field:

- *Vijay K. Nambiar: Principal Coordinator (Sherpa), Civil20India.*
- *Fernando Blanco: Former National Director for Consumer Defence, Argentina.*

Key Points Raised by Vijay K. Nambiar:

- ~ Described C20 as an engagement group of the G20 representing civil society that is positioned between the state and the market to ensure public accountability, participatory governance, and inclusive development policies. C20 aims to build consensus on social goals and prevent society from being atomised by the state.

- ~ Whether consumers are the only *raison d'être* of all economic activities, he stressed the need for acknowledging broader goals of production, sustainability, and quality of life improvement and proposed focusing on system enhancement for widespread access to goods and services, while highlighting the dynamic role of producers, traders, and consumers in a thriving market.
- ~ Recognised global asymmetries, inequalities, and vulnerabilities in the market system and highlighted the necessity of consumer protection due to issues beyond simple demand and supply.
- ~ Stressed the importance of consumer protection within the G20 agenda and highlighted the far-reaching consequences of economic decisions, especially wealth concentration among the privileged at the domestic level, impacting social cohesion and economic well-being. Therefore, he urged the G20 to prioritise principles of equity and distributive justice.
- ~ Discussed the focus of consumer protection in previous global summits and highlighted the significance of digital transformation and its risks and opportunities. While there is a need to utilise digitalisation for consumer empowerment through information, simultaneously there is a greater need to ensure the protection of consumer privacy and guarding against unwarranted traceability and related risks.
- ~ Addressed issues related to negative externalities caused by businesses, for instance air and water pollution as well as health impact due to consumption of various products. Called for taxing businesses based on externalities to prevent profiteering at the expense of people's health and the planet; and thereby advocated for environment-friendly food choices, sustainable lifestyles, and circular economies.
- ~ Highlighted the importance of financial and digital literacy for consumer protection and spoke about challenges related to digital public infrastructure (DPI) in cross-border transactions.
- ~ Emphasised the need for accessible and efficient dispute resolution mechanisms and recognised resource constraints for regulatory agencies in enforcing consumer protection measures.
- ~ Emphasised that consumer protection strategies need to consider ground realities, including lack of consumer awareness leading to exploitation. Challenges included balancing consumer protection with business innovation and addressing complexities in global supply chains.
- ~ Stressed the need for a multi-faceted approach involving education, strong enforcement, collaboration, and technological advancement. Mentioned the role of G20 in the wider context of global supply chains, advocating for precise information on product origin and impacts.
- ~ Expressed concern about concentration of power in E-commerce platforms and their implications for democratic practices.
- ~ Stressed the importance of considering these points in future G20 meetings.

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Key Points Raised by **Fernando Blanco**:

- ~ Highlighted the significance of initiatives like the webinar, uniting authorities and specialists from both governments and civil society.
- ~ Noted that the G20, as a political construct, has evolved to address various challenges, especially those stemming from financial crises. The initial agendas focused on financial issues, with subsequent growth to include topics like consumer protection. He emphasised Germany's 2017 presidency, which marked a significant milestone with the inclusion of consumer protection in the agenda, achieved through diplomatic efforts.
- ~ Underscored the importance of diplomatic continuity and systematic work to ensure inclusion of consumer protection in subsequent presidencies.
- ~ Discussed the impact of globalisation and the challenges of unequal societies, advocating for unified product quality standards and regulatory frameworks in areas like digital economy and AI.
- ~ Highlighted the distortion of consumer opinions on digital platforms and proposed discussing a model law for reviews within the G20 framework.
- ~ Expressed that though the consumer protection law has been widened for decades, however there are still many countries around the world that fail to recognise the contributions of their local consumer organisations. We need to change this.
- ~ Also emphasised food loss and waste, the need for strong and sustainable consumer movements, and the establishment of consumer defence jurisdiction. He concluded by expressing hope for the G20 to continue addressing these challenges in future presidencies, such as Brazil and South Africa.

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SESSION 1 - EMERGING ISSUES IN GLOBAL CONSUMER PROTECTION

Under the moderation of the session, **Teresa Moreira**, Head of Competition and Consumer Policies Branch at UNCTAD, the audience embarked on an exploration of the emerging issues that are shaping the landscape of consumer protection worldwide. The session aimed to identify these challenges and illuminate potential avenues for fostering dialogue, collaboration, and coordinated action.

The distinguished panel of speakers engaged in thought-provoking discussions:

- *Athayde Motta: Executive Director, Brazilian Institute for Social and Economic Analyses (IBASE).*
- *Thezi Mabuza: Acting Commissioner, National Consumer Commission, South Africa.*

Key Points Raised by Athayde Motta:

- ~ The concept of consumer protection extends beyond economic considerations; it's about recognising consumers as citizens with rights that should be respected. This perspective emphasises that consumers contribute not only to the economy but also to society, and their rights should be upheld for their well-being.
- ~ Consumer protection practices vary widely across countries, particularly between the Global North and Global South. Practices considered unacceptable in developed

nations might still be prevalent in developing countries. This inconsistency raises questions about fairness and equitable treatment of consumers worldwide.

- ~ The example of banned pesticides highlights the critical issue of product safety and its connection to sustainability. The use of such harmful substances, especially in developing countries, not only jeopardises consumer health but also impacts the environment and overall sustainability. This demonstrates how consumer protection is intertwined with broader ecological concerns.
- ~ The idea of consuming better rather than more reflects a shift towards responsible consumption patterns. It's not just about quantity but also quality and the environmental impact of products. This approach encourages consumers to be mindful of their choices and their impact on sustainability, demonstrating the potential for consumer behaviour to drive positive change.
- ~ The sequence of troika presidencies (India, Brazil, South Africa) provides a unique opportunity for these countries to address global issues related to consumer protection, fairness, and sustainability. This collaborative approach enables them to bring their concerns and proposals to the global stage, potentially influencing policy discussions.
- ~ Involving businesses in conversations about consumer protection is vital. Encouraging open dialogue ensures that companies understand the importance of adhering to high consumer protection standards. Additionally, incorporating consumer protection into trade agreements recognises the role of trade in shaping consumer experiences and allows for the establishment of common standards.
- ~ The connection between consumer protection and inequality emphasises the social dimension of consumer rights. Addressing disparities in consumer protection can contribute to reducing overall inequality. Cooperation among countries, especially through regional economic organisations and trade agreements, becomes a tool for enhancing consumer protection practices and addressing broader economic and social challenges.

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Key Points Raised by Thezi Mabuza:

- ~ In crafting policies for consumer protection, a primary aim is to achieve fairness in markets and reduce disadvantages experienced by consumers. This includes preventing suppliers from excluding certain individuals or groups from accessing goods and services, promoting a more inclusive marketplace.
- ~ In South Africa, consumer rights are intricately tied to human rights, particularly those outlined in the Constitution's Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act. This connection reinforces the idea that ensuring consumer protection is part of broader efforts to address social disparities.
- ~ Within the G20, there's a need for discussions that enable countries to exchange best practices and strategies for addressing inequality. Learning from one another's experiences can lead to more effective interventions that target the most vulnerable segments of society.
- ~ The increasing gap between affluent consumers and those with fewer resources highlights the importance of regulators taking proactive measures. Ensuring that

vulnerable and marginalised groups are not left behind is a critical aspect of consumer protection. Legislation should be designed to make access to redress more accessible, particularly for those with limited abilities to comprehend complex transactions.

- ~ With the rise of global e-commerce, vulnerability has extended into the digital realm. As consumers engage in online transactions, there's a need to provide robust protection measures, especially for those who may face challenges in navigating digital platforms or understanding online processes.
- ~ The transition from traditional brick and mortar markets to online platforms has brought about a significant shift in consumer behaviour and economic growth. Emerging network technologies have redefined convenience and become essential, particularly for the growing global population.
- ~ The rise of cross-border trade poses challenges for regulators. Jurisdictional boundaries blur when consumers engage with businesses beyond their own countries. Regulators often face difficulties in protecting consumers when dealing with businesses located outside their jurisdiction.
- ~ The United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection emphasise the need for transparent and effective consumer protection policies, especially in the realm of e-commerce. The aim is to ensure that consumers receive consistent levels of protection, whether they are transacting locally or internationally. It is important for consumer rights to be upheld irrespective of the geographical location of the supplier.
- ~ Addressing cross-border challenges require regulators to work collaboratively. Sharing skills, expertise, and information is crucial for developing innovative means of consumer protection. This cooperative approach allows regulators to tackle emerging practices that pose risks to consumer interests.
- ~ Regulators need to cooperate and collaborate in order to address cross-border issues effectively. By sharing information about investigations and practices, regulators can collectively protect the interests of consumers and ensure efficient access to remedies. The cooperation among regulators is essential not only to protect consumers within their own jurisdictions but also to safeguard the interests of consumers who engage in transactions across borders. This global approach ensures that consumers can transact confidently and securely regardless of the geographical location of the business.

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SESSION 2: THE CONSUMER MOVEMENT AND THE G20

Moderated by Pradeep S. Mehta, the session explored the current state of consumer protection within select G20 member countries. The focus was on comprehending the vulnerabilities consumers face when protection mechanisms are inadequate. Moreover, the session illuminated the multifaceted benefits of placing consumer protection at the forefront of the G20 agenda.

The session's speakers included esteemed voices in the field:

- *Saroja Sundaram: Executive Director, Citizen Consumer and Civic Action Group (CAG), India and Member, General Council of the Consumers International.*
- *Igor Rodrigues Britto: Director, International Relations, Brazilian Institute for Consumer Protection (IDEC), Brazil.*

- *Dr. Nava Subramaniam: Dean, School of Business, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Coimbatore.*

Key Points Raised by Saroja Sundaram:

- ~ Integrating consumer protection into the G20 agenda fosters international collaboration to improve and standardise consumer protection practices. Sharing guidelines and best practices across countries can lead to better enforcement of consumer protection regulations in an increasingly interconnected world, especially in the context of digital advancements.
- ~ Addressing sensitive issues like grievance redressal and data protection at forums like the G20 is essential. Strengthening Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) and Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) mechanisms can enhance consumer confidence by ensuring efficient resolution of disputes and safeguarding personal and financial data.
- ~ Incorporating sustainability and climate change considerations into consumer protection policies aligns with the global efforts to address environmental challenges. Promoting sustainable production and consumption practices can be discussed, highlighting how each member country is combating climate change and contributing to a greener economy.
- ~ Emphasising consumer protection not only enhances consumer confidence but also showcases a country's commitment to ethical business practices and responsible governance. This, in turn, can improve a country's international reputation, attracting investment, trade opportunities, and fostering economic growth.
- ~ By prioritising consumer protection in the G20 agenda during its hosting of the summit, India could have played a pivotal role in shaping a more secure, inclusive, and prosperous global economic landscape. Such a proactive approach highlights India's commitment to ethical practices and responsible engagement on the international stage.
- ~ Various government departments often work in isolation, leading to missed opportunities for holistic solutions. Breaking down these silos and fostering collaboration between departments working on environment, consumer protection, and other relevant areas is essential for effectively tackling complex challenges like climate change.
- ~ Having high-level support from leaders, such as the Prime Minister, can significantly accelerate the integration of these interconnected issues. When leaders emphasise the importance of sustainability, it can create a top-down push to break down barriers and promote collaboration among various departments.
- ~ International forums like the G20 provide an excellent platform to advocate for holistic approaches that address interconnected challenges. By bringing together leaders, policymakers, and experts from various fields, these forums can encourage cross-sectoral dialogue and action.
- ~ Including sustainable consumption and production, climate action, and consumer protection in official declarations and agendas, such as the G20 declaration, can raise awareness and commitment among participating countries. This inclusion highlights the significance of these issues and encourages governments to consider them as part of their policies.
- ~ Promoting public awareness about the link between sustainable consumption and climate action is essential. Consumer education campaigns that highlight the environmental impact of various consumption choices can drive behaviour change and encourage individuals to make more sustainable choices.

- ~ Governments can work toward integrating climate action, sustainable consumption, and consumer protection into their policy frameworks. Developing coherent strategies that consider the interplay between these issues can lead to more effective and comprehensive solutions.

International forums like the G20 provide an excellent platform to advocate for holistic approaches that address interconnected challenges in all areas, including consumer protection.

Key Points Raised by Igor Rodrigues Britto:

- ~ The issues of food safety and sustainable consumption are critical not only for public health but also for environmental sustainability. Promoting healthy diets, reducing ultra-processed foods, and addressing the excessive use of pesticides are essential steps. These issues have global implications and should be discussed in international forums like the G20, where commitments can be made to tackle them collectively.
- ~ Climate change and sustainable consumption are closely linked. Consumer behaviour plays a significant role in resource consumption, waste generation, and emissions. Integrating discussions on sustainable consumption, circular economy, and access to clean energy into the G20 agenda can lead to global commitments and collaboration in addressing climate-related challenges.
- ~ The digital era brings its own set of challenges, including data privacy, artificial intelligence, and misinformation. Ensuring digital governance that prioritises citizens' rights, data protection, and information integrity is vital. The G20 discussions can provide a platform for countries to share best practices and collectively address these digital issues.
- ~ Collaborating with international organisations and consumer protection advocates is key to making our voices heard at the G20. Our efforts to engage with governments, particularly Brazil as the host, can pave the way for these issues to be included in the discussions and documents.
- ~ By aligning consumer protection and sustainable consumption with global priorities such as the SDGs and climate action, one can create a compelling case for their inclusion in the G20 agenda. Highlighting the interconnectedness of these issues and their impact on public health, environmental sustainability, and digital rights can resonate with decision-makers.
- ~ The current environment of increased dialogue between the government and civil society in Brazil presents an opportune moment to influence the G20 discussions. Leveraging this space and engaging with key stakeholders can amplify our efforts.

- ~ By aligning consumer protection and sustainable consumption with global priorities such as the SDGs and climate action, one can create a compelling case for their inclusion in the G20 agenda. Highlighting the interconnectedness of these issues and their impact on public health, environmental sustainability, and digital rights can resonate with decision-makers.

Key Points Raised by Nava Subramaniam:

- ~ Pointed out that the flood of information and data related to sustainable consumption can be overwhelming but not always reliable. The G20 can play a crucial role in establishing standardised criteria and frameworks for reporting on sustainability and environmental impacts. This can include defining materiality and ensuring that the reported information is trustworthy. Developing a robust system of data collection, verification, and reporting infrastructure is essential. This infrastructure would enable companies, governments, and NGOs to provide accurate and comparable information, enabling better decision-making for consumers, investors, and policymakers.
- ~ In the era of misinformation, addressing fake news and ensuring the accuracy of information is paramount. This not only applies to general news but also to information related to sustainability claims, consumer rights, and product attributes. Collaborative efforts involving governments, international organisations, and technology platforms can help combat fake news and ensure that consumers are well-informed.
- ~ NGOs and civil society play a critical role in monitoring and advocating for consumer rights and sustainable practices. Empowering them with resources, support, and access to information can enhance their ability to hold businesses and governments accountable. Collaborative efforts between NGOs, governments, and businesses can create a more transparent and responsible environment.
- ~ Access to high-quality data is crucial for informed decision-making and academic research. G20 nations can work together to ensure that data related to sustainability, consumer protection, and corporate practices is accessible, accurate, and comprehensive. This would aid researchers, policymakers, and consumers in understanding trends and making informed choices.
- ~ As the global marketplace becomes increasingly interconnected, harmonising consumer protection policies and enforcement mechanisms across G20 countries is essential. This can include harmonising penalties for wrongdoers, establishing mechanisms for cross-border dispute resolution, and enhancing cooperation in addressing issues related to sustainable consumption and consumer rights.
- ~ Collaborative efforts between the public and private sectors, as well as civil society, can accelerate progress in achieving sustainable consumption goals. India's innovative approaches and reporting practices can serve as examples for other countries to adopt. Encouraging public-private partnerships can lead to more effective and impactful initiatives that benefit consumers and the environment.
- ~ A vibrant consumer movement is essential for advocating consumer rights and sustainable practices. Governments need to support and nurture civil society organisations to ensure a strong voice for consumers. Vibrant democracies like India and South Africa have the potential to foster such movements.
- ~ The topic of consumer rights and sustainability is of universal concern. Everyone is a consumer, and these issues affect individuals from birth to beyond. Raising awareness and knowledge among consumers is crucial to drive positive behavioural changes.
- ~ Raising awareness leads to behavioural changes, as seen in the shift away from single-use plastics due to increased consciousness. It's important to address different levels of consumers, including individuals, corporations, and the public sector, to create a collective impact.
- ~ The G20 provides a platform for global collaboration and connectivity. By leveraging this platform, countries and organisations can collectively address challenges related to consumer protection, sustainability, and corporate accountability.

- ~ A united global voice through platforms like the G20 can amplify efforts to drive change. When countries collaborate on policies, share best practices, and hold each other accountable, the impact on consumer rights and sustainability can be substantial.

As the global marketplace becomes increasingly interconnected, harmonising consumer protection policies and enforcement mechanisms across G20 countries is essential.

CONCLUDING SESSION

Remarks by Teresa Moreira:

- ~ Expressed gratitude to the speakers for their valuable contributions to the discussion on the role of the G20 in championing the consumer movement.
- ~ Highlighted the importance of collective efforts involving governments, businesses, civil society, and other stakeholders in addressing global challenges related to consumer protection. The significance of international cooperation in establishing common agendas, standards, and best practices to build trust and protect consumers has been emphasised.
- ~ Acknowledged the effectiveness of G20 Consumer Summits in mainstreaming consumer protection issues and shaping discussions on digital transformation and green transitions. The role of multi-stakeholder dialogues and collaborations to address contemporary consumer challenges has been underlined.
- ~ Hoped the future G20 presidencies, specifically Brazil and South Africa, will convene high-level consumer summits.
- ~ Extended gratitude to Pradeep Mehta and the CUTS International team for organising the global webinar, hoping that everyone has found the event enjoyable and enriching.

Acknowledged the effectiveness of G20 Consumer Summits in flagging consumer protection issues and hope future G20 presidencies will convene high-level Consumer Summits.

Remarks by Pradeep S Mehta:

- ~ Spoke about the importance of organising the next Consumer Summit in Brazil and expressed hope for continued support from UNCTAD, C20Brazil and IDEC for this endeavour.
- ~ Thanked Ambassador Vijay Nambiar for his participation and sterling contributions to the event, highlighting his distinguished background as an international civil servant.
- ~ Also thanked the participation of UNCTAD SG, Rebeca Grynspan and her erudite speech and the call for organising a Consumer Summit in Brazil as part of the G20 celebrations.
- ~ In the same vein he called upon the C20Brazil Sherpa, **Athayde Motta** and **Igor Rodrigues Britto** from IDEC to take the baton forward by enlisting the support of the Brazilian President's Strategic Adviser, Celso Amorim. Mr Amorim is well clued to the consumer movement during his tenure as Ambassador to the UN.
- ~ Following that, Mehta also thanked all the speakers and audience for making the event successful.

- ~ Mehta emphasised India's role as an example of effective consumer protection practices, particularly with innovative steps like the Open Network for Digital Commerce, which provides a democratic and neutral platform for buyers and sellers.
- ~ Also mentioned the importance of sharing innovative solutions to counter challenges in sectors like e-commerce.
- ~ Requested Teresa Moreira to continue fostering cooperation and sharing experiences among institutions and experts.
- ~ Acknowledged the support of various organisations, which contribute to the growth and progress of the consumer protection movement.

Highlighted the need to organise the next Consumer Summit in Brazil and hoped for UNCTAD's continued support.