



## **SPEAKING NOTES**

FOR AMBASSADOR WIEPKE VAN DER GOOT  
EU HEAD OF DELEGATION FOR THE PACIFIC

AT THE CELEBRATION OF THE 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF  
CONSUMERS INTERNATIONAL,  
FNU RAIWAQA CAMPUS, SUVA, 1 APRIL 2010.

[CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]

- The CEO of the Consumer Council of Fiji, Mrs. Premila Kumar
- The Head of Consumers International – Asia Pacific Office, Dato  
Indrani Thuraisingham
- Distinguished Guests
- Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you very much for your kind invitation to join you in the celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of Consumers International, of which Fiji's very own Consumer Council of Fiji is a very active member. Even in our own individual life span, Ladies and Gentlemen, 50 years is quite a long while, it is half a century, and

here I talk out of experience. For an organisation to last this long and to manage continuously keeping up its voice for effective consumer protection, is, in my view, an achievement in itself. So congratulations are indeed at its place for not only the world's consumer movement, but also for its vibrant and vocal national members like the Consumer Council of Fiji. Therefore, allow me to say Happy Golden Jubilee Consumers International!

I must admit that I feel a sense of pride and gratitude when I recall that Europe played a decisive part in the formation of Consumers International, some 50 years ago. At that meeting in The Hague in March of 1960, the five founding members gave the organisation the name, International Organisation of Consumers Unions.

Of the five founding members, three were Europe-based, namely the Consumers Association in the UK, the Nederlandse Consumentenbond in the Netherlands and the Union Belge des Consommateurs (Tests Achats) of Belgium. The remaining two were consumer organizations from the United States and Australia.

I was told that the current president of Consumers International, Mr Samuel Ochieng, said that the organisation began in 1960 “on a wing and a prayer.” If that was so, then I would humbly suggest, Ladies and Gentlemen, that the founding members must have embarked upon a ‘gigantic sort of wing and prayed a lot,’ for they have truly come a long way. With their prayers being answered!

True, the name of the organisation may have grown shorter over the last 50 years, but membership has only increased, growing in leaps and bounds to a total 220 members today, who are active in 115 countries worldwide. That, Ladies and Gentlemen, is a splendid achievement which is worth celebrating.

On reaching milestones such as the one today we have an opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved, absorb the lessons learnt and then to move forward with renewed vigour and vision.

From attaining observer status at the United Nations in 1963, then gaining UN general consultative status in 1977, to being the official NGO partner to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development in 2009, Consumers International has indeed accumulated an impressive record of achievements of which you can truly be proud.

Ladies and Gentlemen, consumer policy and consumer rights is a matter that is also central to the European Union. We believe that consumer rights form an integral part of our fundamental economic, social and cultural rights. As was rightly said by Commission Vice President Ms Viviane Reding during her Consumer Day speech in Madrid on the 15th March this year, "in this time of economic crisis, it is more important than ever that we work hard and fast to bring to consumers their rights. Until consumers feel that their rights are protected, their ability to exercise those rights will be severely limited."

Here in Fiji, the European Union is supporting the Consumer Council in its efforts to strengthen consumer rights through advocacy and enforcement of consumer protection laws. The EU-funded project aims to empower and protect consumers, and especially the ones that form part of the disadvantaged and marginalised sections of society, by bringing about legal and institutional reforms. The ultimate goal of the project is to establish a single consumer body ("one-stop-shop") for Fiji, to ensure a coherent and powerful voice in consumer matters for the population.

One of the activities undertaken by the Consumer Council and financed by the EU which is still fresh in my mind is the ongoing campaign "Insurance in Fiji: Who pays, Who profits, Who loses". This initiative is one of the topics that Ms Premila Kumar and her staff worked on over the past months and it is indeed gratifying to see how much public discussions and debate on the matter took place.

In addition, some of you may have heard about other recent projects of this organisation, such as the one which is looking into the real cost of motor vehicle insurance. The Consumer Council of Fiji has also been a key player in dispute resolution between consumers and corporations, and in calling for improved redress mechanisms.

To illustrate that, let me mention a figure from the organisation's consolidated complaints analysis for 2009, which I just received. During 2009, a total of 1530 consumer complaints were received and registered by the Consumer Council of Fiji. Out of these, a total

number of 1055 cases, i.e. nearly 70% of all complaints filed, could be resolved. I think these numbers show very well the importance and efficiency of the work of the Consumer Council in Fiji.

So, in the light of this impressive record of initiatives to protect and empower consumers, you may ask yourself: which achievement of the Consumer Council of Fiji do I attach most importance to? Well, I do not think that single initiatives alone can give an account of the relevance of this institution. Rather, apart from these various initiatives, it is the empowering of the ordinary consumer, including you and me, with the knowledge of our rights and responsibilities, with information that is vital to our economic and social wellbeing as it not only protects us as consumers but also provides checks and balances, an essential element in any democratic society.

So to you Premila, and to all of your hardworking staff at the Consumer Council of Fiji, and indeed to all members of Consumers International worldwide, allow me to say: vinaka vakalevu, dhana bhad, and thank you very much!

Let me leave you with the words of European Commission Vice President Reding, who, when talking about drafting a good piece of consumer legislation had this to say, and I quote: "By removing barriers, we should not have to choose between business and consumer interests. We do not have to look at each measure and toss a coin to see who should benefit the most. A well-crafted legislative text will work in the interests of both!"

With that, Ladies and Gentlemen, I invite you to join me in wishing Consumers International a very Happy Golden Jubilee celebration and many more happy years in return.

Thank you for your attention.