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Feature Article

WORLD CONSUMER RIGHTS DAY

Tomorrow is a special day when consumer movements around the world will be celebrating World Consumer Rights Day (WCRD).

WCRD is an annual event that marks the date in 1962 when the US President John F Kennedy in his legendary speech said,

Consumers by definition, include us all". "They are the largest economic group, affecting and affected by almost every public and private economic decision. Yet they are the only important group... whose views are often not heard."

In his speech he defined the four basic Consumer Rights which forms the core of consumer policy:

- **The right to safety**- to be protected against the marketing of goods or services which are hazardous to health and life.
- **The right to be informed** to be protected against fraudulent, deceitful, or grossly misleading information, and to be given the facts one needs to make an informed choice;
- **The right to choose**- to be assured access, to a variety of products and services at competitive prices with an assurance of satisfactory quality.
- **The right to be heard**- to be assured that consumer interests will receive full consideration in the formulation of government policy, and fair and expeditious treatment in courts.

The rights of consumers got the international recognition in 1985 when the United Nations (UN) promulgated the guideline on consumer protection (UNGCP). The UN guidelines quoted that "all citizens, regardless of their incomes or social standing, have basic rights as consumers". Four new rights were added. These were the right to satisfaction of basic needs; the right to redress; the right to consumer education and the right to a healthy environment.

Now, almost 30 years on, Consumers international (CI) and its federation of consumer organisations is proposing amendments to the guideline so they are fit for the 21st century. The proposed changes include extending consumer protection to all consumers recognizing that state-

owned enterprises, as well as corporations, have responsibilities to consumers. Access to essential goods and services should be acknowledged as ‘legitimate need’ of consumers.

CI is also pushing to include provision for safeguarding consumers against the collection, use, disclosure or loss of their personal information without their consent. The guideline will also acknowledge a consumer having equal protection regardless of how a purchase is made, or whether online or offline and to recognise internet as an essential service for consumers, alongside food, water, energy and sanitation.

Similarly, a new consumer need has been identified for inclusion in the guideline. That is unfair contract terms to ensure contracts and terms of service are free of lengthy and complex small print, and contracts do not lock consumers in to unreasonable commitments. Collective legal action against abusive practices is also recommended as an essential tool for seeking redress

The proposed changes to the guideline will also acknowledge health as a cornerstone of responsible marketing. Restrictions should be placed on the marketing of food and beverages to children and bans or severe limits placed on the advertising of tobacco and alcohol

WCRD provides 'platform' for consumers, individually and jointly, to raise concern on various issues such as food, medicines, white products, phone rights, increase in price of food items, financial services, unethical marketing practices, need for proper consumer protection legislations and its enforcement.

This year, the consumer movement around the globe will focus on “*Consumer’s Right to Healthy Food*”.

The need for national concerted action to protect and promote healthy diets has never been more urgent. Unhealthy diets are now a greater threat to health than tobacco or alcohol.

CI is calling for a Global Convention to Protect and Promote Healthy Diets. This would involve World Health Organization (WHO) Member States signing a legal agreement to commit to a framework of policies that would define, promote and protect healthy diets and food. These measures would include responsible food marketing, food and nutritional standards, nutrition labelling, reformulation of processed food to reduce fat, sugar and salt, use of taxes, subsidies or planning controls to support the consumption of healthy food.

A successful World Consumer Rights Day to all consumers. Consumers are a crucial component of the economy; therefore, their voice must be heard.