



Let's "Fix Our Phone Rights"

On 15 March 1962, President John F Kennedy gave an address to the US congress in which he formally addressed the issue of consumer rights. He was the first world leader to do so, and the consumer movement now marks 15 March every year as a means of raising global awareness about consumer rights. World Consumer Rights Day was established on 15 March 1983 to promote consumer rights around the world.

Today, (15th March), consumers and consumer bodies across the globe are celebrating the World Consumer Rights Day (WCRD) to promote consumer rights.

This year, the theme for this global event is "Fix Our Phone Rights".

Like elsewhere in the world, Fiji, too has joined the mobile telephony revolution and for many of us, mobile phones have become almost indispensable - a necessity

To mark WCRD, Consumers International (CI) will be launching a new Consumer Agenda for Fair Mobile Services.

The agenda sets out the issues that most effect consumers including the need for access to a reliable service, the security of their data and fair contracts and billing.

CI will submit the Agenda to the World Telecommunications Development Conference, held by the International Telecommunications Union, where CI will be calling on phone regulators and companies to take action to stop these issues undermining the success of this new technology.

Here, at home, the Consumer Council of Fiji is calling on consumers in Fiji to highlight the consumer issues that are undermining and frustrating the success of mobile phone services.

Why Phone Rights are important

The Telecommunications Authority of Fiji (TAF) estimates mobile cellular subscriptions in 2012 to be 822,000 and subscriptions per 100 inhabitants to be at 92.35. Based on TAF's figures Fiji's mobile cellular subscriptions have grown by a staggering 814% during the 10-year period of 2002 to 2012. According to TAF, 20% of subscribers have dual subscriptions where customers have subscribed to two or more operators to take advantage of short-term promotions in the absence of number portability.

Mobile services have not just enabled consumers to talk and text, but it has transformed into mini computers giving access to information and services that are crucial to our livelihoods.

They are not just convenient, but increasingly important tools that help to empower citizens and consumers. Having access to mobile connectivity is a necessity.

However, with the success of mobile telecommunications, consumers are confronted with number of challenges and concerns that have gravely afflicted their rights. The quality, reliability, accessibility, fairness, and even integrity of mobile services have come increasingly under the Council's spotlight.

Consumers feel ripped-off, misled, and ignored by those eager to charge them for their unreliable phone services. There is a need to drastically improve services, Terms & Conditions, contracts and data protection for mobile phone customers in Fiji and around the world.

CI's agenda for Phone Rights

CI's Consumer Agenda for Fair Mobile Services addresses the issues that affect mobile consumers across the world. Some of the issues to be addressed are:

1. Provide consumers with access to an affordable, reliable service

Consumers want to be able to have access to affordable mobile services in order to communicate and to access information. It is only reasonable that they then expect those services to be consistent and of a high quality without drop outs in service.

2. Provide consumers with fair contracts explained in clear, complete and accessible language

Consumers often feel cheated by their mobile provider, either because of unfair contract terms and conditions or because they didn't understand what they had signed. Telecom providers should always provide consumers with fair contracts with all relevant information explained clearly so that consumers can exercise their right to make informed choices.

3. Provide consumers with fair and transparent billing

Consumers shouldn't be billed for services they didn't request. We demand fairness and transparency in our bills, and protection from billing fraud.

4. Provide consumers with security and power over their own information

Telecoms providers and regulators alike must protect the personal data that consumers give up in order to use mobile services. Whilst giving consent to use personal data can enhance the experience of using a mobile phone, it can also compromise the consumer's right to safety.

Consumers must be able to set the terms of how this data is used.

5. Listen and respond to consumer complaints

Telecom providers should have effective complaints systems and if consumers are not satisfied there should be redress mechanisms to ensure a fair outcome. We must be able to penalise providers for abusive and unjust business practices.

