

1 April 2022

**Report of the UNCTAD webinar “World Consumers Rights Day:  
Empowering consumers for sustainable consumption”**

Held on 15 March 2022

## **Introduction**

The webinar “World Consumers Rights Day: Empowering consumers for sustainable consumption” was held online on 15 March 2022. There were 110 attendees.

## **Summary**

In celebration of the World Consumers Rights Day, the webinar gathered panellists from international organizations and public and private sectors to present their experience in promoting sustainable consumption and production. They discussed examples of successful information and education campaigns to raise awareness among consumers and the role of standards, businesses and consumer policies in empowering consumers to make informed choices. The discussion highlighted the need for a multi-pronged, multi-stakeholder approach.

## **Opening statement**

The Secretary-General of UNCTAD, Ms. Rebeca Grynspan called upon a move away from the old notion seeing consumers as passive receivers of goods and services. Instead, she stressed the new notion that “citizen consumers” were the actors of change. She cited survey findings showing that consumers were demanding more ethical and sustainable products. Sustainable consumption is not a luxury only for developed countries; consumers in developing countries also commit to sustainability. To promote sustainable consumption across the world, she highlighted that the United Nations Guidelines on Consumer Protection provided concrete and actionable advice for governments. As ecosystem degradation poses catastrophic risks for the global economy and trade, action is urgent. She reminded that the newly updated UNCTAD BioTrade Principles and Criteria helped guide towards more sustainable production and consumption patterns. Finally, she pointed out the need to empower consumers and recognize them as the greatest allies for achieving sustainable development.

## **Panel discussion**

### **1. International standards and information flow**

Several panellists recognized international standards were powerful tools that could shape consumer choices. UNECE recently updated their portal on standards for sustainability. International Standards Organization (ISO) has new focuses on climate action and inclusion of all voices. The panellist highlighted ISO’s work to engage consumers and other stakeholders in making standards in areas related to sustainable consumption, such as the circular economy and second-hand goods. Voices from people in developing countries, disadvantaged groups and all age groups need to be heard. She also mentioned developing technical specifications to help organizations make ethical claims that consumers could understand.

All panellists agreed that information was key for consumers to act upon responsibly. Several panellists stressed the importance of information flow throughout the value chain, which was also related to production.

UNECE panellist presented their sustainability pledge project, tracing environmental and social impacts of garment and footwear production at every stage, helping buyers along the value chain to make informed choices. She recognized success factors, including piloting in sectors with more awareness, being adopted by governments and having wide partnership. In addition, this project has a blockchain component, showing the potential of advanced technologies, also acknowledged by other panellists.

The panellist from Union for Ethical Biotrade (UEBT) highlighted research findings on what information consumers wanted. Consumers desire more information on sourcing, including impacts on the environment and the producers. Many companies have not yet provided that.

Several panellists recognized the need for credible information to combat greenwashing. They suggested potential solutions such as standards, certifications, labels, or other external validated sources of information, which would increase consumer trust.

## **2. Incentivizing businesses to produce sustainably**

All panellists recognized the importance of engaging and incentivizing businesses. UBET expert emphasized ethical sourcing in bio trade, encouraging companies to protect sources of raw materials and fairly treat producers to secure sustainable supply and production. Companies should also work on fully understanding the entire supply chain and managing risks. Moreover, consumers increasingly believe that companies have the moral obligations to respect biodiversity, which could motivate companies to meet those expectations. The panellist called upon both voluntary mechanisms such as trusted labels and mandatory policies such as due diligence requirements. These measures could encourage or require companies to provide information that consumers wanted and make changes along the supply chain.

## **3. Incorporating sustainability into consumer policies**

Dr. Laura Best presented three findings from her research under the UNCTAD Research Partnership Platform and practices in South Africa. First, the policy landscape needs to be multi-faceted, involving multiple policy domains and collaboration between government agencies at all levels. Second, policymakers need ecosystem thinking, engaging all stakeholders particularly businesses, as they are key drivers of behaviour change. Third, policymakers should expand consumer protection definitions to incorporate sustainability.

Echoing recommendations from other panellists, the research has informed a policy framework featuring four key drivers:

- Stating sustainability as policy goals and defining terms
- Examining every stage of production and consumption
- Setting principles and encouraging sector-driven initiatives
- Designing policy with deliberate and specific measures

Dr. Best concluded that incorporating sustainability into consumer policies needed a long-term plan. Policymakers should consider the potential economic gains from sustainable production and consumption.

#### **4. Maximizing the impacts of awareness raising to change consumer behaviour**

Panellists reiterated all the elements mentioned above, calling upon a multi-stakeholder approach. Information is key to empowering consumers, and consumers have the right to transparent information. Consumer-facing brands are active in educating consumers with creative campaigns. Both voluntary mechanisms and mandatory policies need to be in place. It is critical to foster public-private partnership to bring about greener products through standards and technical solutions so that consumers have alternatives to choose from. Consumers should also take self-accountability when they buy, considering long-term costs to the globe and future generations.

#### **Closing remark**

The Head of the Competition and Consumer Policies Branch of the Division on International Trade and Commodities at UNCTAD, Ms. Teresa Moreira concluded the event by calling upon:

- Consumers can and should play a key role towards sustainable consumption; we need information and education campaigns from all sectors to build an encouraging framework and enabling environment for consumers to do so.
- We should target different groups of consumers, including the vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers.
- We need public measures, combined with international standards and business voluntary commitment.
- Regional trade agreements can enhance sustainable consumption and production patterns.
- Consumers need to have a choice of environmentally sound products.