

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

Held on 15 March 2023

## **Introduction**

The webinar “World Consumers Rights Day: Upholding consumers’ right to water and energy” took place online on 15 March 2023. There were fifty-six attendees.

## **Summary**

In celebration of the World Consumers Rights Day, the webinar gathered policymakers, businesses and international experts to present their experience in promoting consumers’ access to energy and water. They discussed examples of effective initiatives and pinpointed consumer concerns and how to address them. The discussion highlighted the need for robust policy frameworks and a multisectoral approach.

## **Opening statement**

The Deputy Secretary-General of UNCTAD, Mr. Pedro Manuel Moreno stressed the gaps in realizing the basic human rights to water and energy. The current cost-of-living crisis has further pushed up the prices of water and energy, posing financial hardship for many households. Moreover, responsible consumption of resources is important for combating climate change. Then he introduced UNCTAD’s recent reports related to water and energy. To conclude, he acknowledged the efforts by all parties to protect consumers’ rights.

## **Panel discussion**

### **1. Regulation**

Ms. Nancy Atiemo, Legal Director of the Public Utilities Regulatory Commission in Ghana, presented their national experience. Ghana introduced a new regulation in 2020, which aligns with the UNGCP principles and clarifies consumers’ rights in the public utilities sectors. Since the law came into effect, the government has seen improvements in services, such as shorter response time and less unlawful disconnection. She highlighted the strong enforcement (sanction and compensation) as a success factor. Another simple and effective tool newly introduced by the Commission is setting up WhatsApp groups that connect consumers with local utilities officials and assemblymen. She explained the tool gave consumers accessible channels to report issues and helped with local monitoring.

### **2. Civil society participation**

Ms. Bolu Onobolu, President of the Network of Female Professionals in WASH in Nigeria and CEO of WASHMATA Initiatives, presented major findings from an operational research study on sustainability and water supply. Although Nigerian women traditionally bear the burden of managing water, they receive less education than men and have low representation in water supply programmes. When women are not represented, water supply malfunctions are more likely, according to the study. Besides, most public water points need to be more inclusive to the poor and disabled. The study also found that most water schemes broke down before the expected lifecycle. The panellist called for action to promote consumer inclusion, gender inclusion and access.

### 3. Consumer protection concerns

Mr. Robin Simpson, an international consumer protection expert, introduced the UNCTAD publication, titled “[Access by consumers to essential services: energy, water and sanitation](#)”. He highlighted barriers to accessing network infrastructures, equity in access and quality of products and services. He also mentioned that more consumers became concerned about the sustainable consumption of water and energy. To address these concerns, he recommended more investment, connection subsidies, better payment methods, improving efficiency of consumption, and regularizing providers in informal settlements.

### 4. Ways forward

Panellists discussed pressing issues and what needs to be done to improve consumer access to water and energy. One panellist stressed that the initial connection payment should be spread to usage costs to reduce the connection barriers for consumers. Panellists concurred that the public utilities sectors should communicate instead of working in silos. Two panellists mentioned the trend of decentralizing energy production by mini grids and recognized the importance of connecting to the networks and designing a balanced regulatory model. Other critical factors include political will, stakeholder engagement, usage efficiency, and investment in capacity expansion to cope with urban transition. All panellists acknowledged the potential of digital technologies for improving public utilities provision. But they warned digital solutions should not further burden consumers who cannot access the internet or when technologies fail.

### 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:

- Governments should develop a policy framework to enhance consumers’ right to water and energy.
- Governments should review subsidies to target vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers.
- We need to improve consumer protection in public utilities, and the UN Guidelines on consumer protection provide recommendations.
- We need to enhance competition in water and energy markets.