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Contribution of Consumer Protection to Sustainable Consumption

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Contribution of Consumer Protection to sustainable consumption

Introduction

Economic growth is vital to eradicate poverty, to protect planet and share prosperity. Economic growth largely depends on consumers as consumption contributes to economic growth. Since everyone consumes, consumers have a huge role to play in achieving sustainable development. They hold the power to influence production decisions, based on what goods and services they purchase. So if consumers prefer to buy sustainable products and services, it would result in a higher demand for such products and services. Rise in demand consequently put pressure on firms to see that they produce sustainable products and services in order to stay in business. So choices and decisions made by each and every individual will make a real difference to the fulfilment of meeting these goals and have significant social, economic and environmental implications.

So, even a small step to ensure their protection and empowerment will contribute significantly towards achieving sustainable development. But too often the poor and most vulnerable do not have access to basic goods and services and are exposed to dangerous practices and lack a voice in the market place. So consumers need to be empowered to ensure that everywhere they are treated justly and with dignity in the marketplace, and have access to safe and healthy products and services. This is particularly important for poor and vulnerable people who are often amongst the most exploited. They need to be made aware of their rights and privileges, be equipped with skills to make informed choice and negotiate for their rights and have access to resources for their development.

The problem triad of population, environment, and development is now being joined by consumption¹. In an increasingly consumption influenced world, rising population and purchasing patterns, where many admire the Western culture (especially in developing countries), producing and consuming less is a challenge which demands massive behavioural change from individuals and strategic approach in the form of policy change from Governments.

Sustainable Consumption (and Production) promotes social and economic development within the carrying capacity of ecosystems, raises efficiency and ensures sustainability in

¹ Myers, N. (1997). Consumption: challenge to sustainable development.... *Science*, 276(5309), 53-55.

the use of resources and production processes, reducing resource degradation, pollution and waste².

Patterns of consumption and production (including the efficiency with which resources are used) and numbers of people (population) influence demand for and pressures on natural resources. In this way, both population (consumers) and consumption are key underlying drivers of environmental change and key to humanity's capacity to achieve health and well-being for all, within planetary boundaries.

The unsustainable patterns of consumption are not just harmful for the planet but have direct relation to consumer well-being, health, and standard of living in long-term. Saving the consumers from unsustainable and harmful products and processes and reducing the demand for such productions, can be thought as an efficient backdoor way to tackle the problem and see the positive impact.

Sustainable Consumption and UN Guidelines on Consumer Protection

According to UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection, Right to Healthy Environment, which is one of eight consumer rights, has following elements:

- The right to live and work in an environment that is neither threatening nor dangerous and which permits a life of dignity and well-being.
- The responsibility to minimise environmental damage through careful choice and use of consumer goods and services.
- To reduce waste, reuse products and to recycle whenever possible.

Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) has emerged as an important part of the SDGs, with one of the 17 goals, Goal 12, devoted to SCP. While SDG 12 is said to be built upon 10 Year Framework of Programmes(YFP) on SCP made by member states at Rio+20 conference on Sustainable Development in 2012, the world needs to visualise other perspectives to achieve SCP that is beyond Goal 12.

In fact, an important and critical aspect is to look at SCP and SDG 12 in the background of UN guidelines on Consumer Protection and Right to Healthy Environment.

Consumer Protection and Sustainable Consumption- Perspective from Developing Countries

The vast majority of future population growth is projected to take place in the world's developing and poor countries, where per capita consumption rates are many times lower than the developed world. Despite these much lower consumption rates, higher population growth rates will inevitably exacerbate the challenges these countries already

² <http://ris.org.in/sdg/india-and-sustainable-development-goals-way-forward>

face when seeking to alleviate poverty, ensuring food and water security, and provide adequate health and education services for all.

The advantage with developing countries with dominance of traditional ways in the lifestyles of people is that the increasing pattern unsustainable consumption can be stopped or at least the pace can be reduced with proper protection measures. While the developed countries which have exhausted the safe limits and are trying to reverse the trend will find it more difficult than developing countries.

Development and growth cannot be hindered in case of developing and poor countries that are far behind the developed world, but this growth can be sustainable, eco-friendly, healthy and safe for the citizens. For example, many countries around the world are finding it difficult to go back to traditional methods of farming without chemicals which have been entering the food chain and deteriorating the human health along with environment. The unsustainable and excess use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides can be restricted to safe level in developing world to save the consumers and avoid the situation the developed world is facing today. But one also needs to understand that Sustainable Consumption is not just organic food. It is a concept much broader than its literal sense and have the potential to target the problems of poverty, inequality, increasing burden of disease, infact most of the goals under SDGs.

The excess intrusion of electronic gadgets, especially mobile phones has created a huge problem of electronic waste globally, which is a big challenge to deal with. It is well known that developing countries like India are seen as the major emerging market for electronic products, irrespective of safety standards.

Recently, National Green Tribunal of India has found Volkswagen, German automobile maker guilty of intentionally programming its diesel engines with cheat devices to meet US regulatory standards but actually emitting upto 40 times more of NOx in environment. The automobile industry in India is on the move, and the country could grow into the world's third-largest passenger-vehicle market. The case highlights the immediate need to promote sustainable consumption in the sector and at the same time protect consumers from such fraudulent practices by multi-nationals in all the developing countries acting as potential markets.

Another trend which is reaching heights exponentially is the penetration of Air Conditioners (along with GHG). In the U.S., nearly nine out of 10 homes are air-conditioned. But in developing countries, ACs are still a rarity in many countries but as the temperature rises, populations increases and their economies grow, an unprecedented number of people will be opting for this luxury. Not just air-conditioners but the developing countries will attract many such products in near future, making the need of consumer protection an area of immediate attention.

How Consumer Protection can help in Sustainable Consumption

The current patterns of consumption are excessive, wasteful, and undoubtedly unsustainable. On another end, the debate on sustainable consumption between developed and developing countries is far from settled.

Consumer protection and policy can empower consumers for changing lifestyles by reducing personal constraints and limitations. Policies that increase a feeling of empowerment may also have a positive effect on consumer's motivation to make an effort and amplify the effect³.

Consumer movements have come up all over the world to redress fundamental imbalances in the society for the consumer's benefit and to make society more responsive to the consumer's needs and interests. The main lobby tool has been the UN guidelines on Consumer Protection which strengthen the link between consumer interests and sustainable consumption. Assuring better quality of life, well-being and happiness for all people should be incorporated in sustainable consumption planning, to witness its holistic success.

As contain in UN Guidelines, the governments in partnership with business and relevant organisations of civil society, should develop and implement strategies to promote sustainable consumption through a mix of policies that could include regulations; economic and social instruments; sectoral policies in such areas as land use, transport, energy and housing; information programmes to raise awareness of the impact of consumption patterns; removal of subsidies that promote unsustainable patterns of consumption and production; and promotion of sector-specific environmental-management best practices.

Some suggestions

- Consumer education and information campaigns hold the key to achieve this. While developing such programmes special attention should be given to the needs of disadvantaged consumers, in both rural and urban areas including low income consumers and those with low or non-existent literacy levels.
- A very strong partnership between international institutions, governments, corporate, consumers, and civil societies are very much vital. Of all these, the civil society's role is imperative as they act as the connecting link between the various other stakeholders. Furthermore, they can play a major role in awareness rising, information dissemination and guidance, research, campaigning and the popularisation of sustainable goals.
- Political commitment is a precondition for policy and institutional changes and therefore essential for an effective strategy. For instance, from a consumer viewpoint,

³ Thøgersen, J. (2005). How may consumer policy empower consumers for sustainable lifestyles?. *Journal of consumer policy*, 28(2), 143-177.

development of policies to promote fair, efficient, transparent and impartial mechanisms to tackle consumer complaints through administrative, judicial and alternative dispute resolution is crucial to ensure sustainable development.

- There is a need to integrate sustainability into consumer protection legislations and thereby aid in to promote economic and social development, better environment and poverty reduction.