

**8th United Nations Review Conference on Competition and Consumer Protection**

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**Speech by**

**H.E. Mr. Christian Kastrop, Secretary of State,  
Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection, Germany**

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Speech by Professor Christian Kastrop,  
State Secretary at the Federal Ministry of  
Justice and Consumer Protection,  
for the Eighth UN Review Conference on  
Competition and Consumer Protection,  
19 October 2020:

“Leaving no one behind in the post  
COVID-19 world: the contribution of  
competition and consumer policies –  
UNCTAD’s role in promoting competition  
and consumer policies as a tool for  
economic growth and inclusive and  
sustainable development”

Mr Chair/Madam Chair,

[to be elected at the Conference]

Ministers,

[Ms Victoria Hernández Mora, Minister of Economy, Industry and Trade, Costa Rica

Ms Peggy Serame, Minister of Investment, Trade and Industry, Botswana

Mr Bakhyt Sultanov, Minister of Trade and Integration, Kazakhstan]

Secretary-General,

[Dr Mukhisa Kituyi, Secretary-General of UNCTAD]

Secretary of State,

[Mr João Torres, Secretary of State for Commerce, Services and Consumer Protection, Portugal]

Professor Jenny,

[Professor Frédéric Jenny, Co-Director of the European Centre for Law and Economics at the ESSEC Business School, Paris, and Chairman of the OECD Competition Committee],

ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to be invited to address the Eighth UN Review Conference on Competition and Consumer Protection today.

Before I begin, may I also express my special thanks to the conference organisers, who, in spite of the dreadful circumstances of the present pandemic, have made it possible for us to gather together today, whether physically or virtually.

Ladies and gentlemen, the COVID-19 pandemic presents all of us – as an international community, as national governments and as citizens of our countries – with unprecedented challenges. These relate first and foremost to the protection of our health but are also political,

social and economic in nature. We can only meet these challenges by working together. And we shall not meet them unless we have all the members of our societies on board.

It is, of course, a fact that many businesses are suffering very hard in this crisis. Economic recovery, however, is inconceivable without a very high level of protection for consumers, particularly the most vulnerable of them. What is more, strong consumer protection that creates trust is a crucial driver of competition, innovation and inclusive economic growth. We want to ensure that the pandemic does not lead to greater inequality within society.

First of all, I would like to deal briefly with the way in which Germany has responded to the crisis. The Federal Government began by taking measures to **make it easier to access income safety nets**. This was intended to protect consumers whose incomes had fallen drastically because of the restrictions to economic activity from having to spend their savings just to survive or from losing their homes. Consumers also received help, for example, to ease the burden of

regular direct debits for essentials such as electricity bills, rent or loan repayments.

Germany also acted to **stop unscrupulous business practices**. Individual online traders have been exploiting people's fears during the COVID-19 pandemic to sell products such as face masks or disinfectants at hugely inflated prices or to market them on the basis of untrue or unverifiable assertions. We took this action together with other member authorities of the Consumer Protection Cooperation Network of the European Union.

Close cooperation within the EU is indispensable for us. My fellow panellist, Mr Torres, whose country, Portugal, is part of the Presidency Trio with us, will no doubt be able to confirm that. But even beyond Europe's boundaries we depend on the assistance of partners in other parts of the world. With the aid of the International Consumer Protection and Enforcement Network (ICPEN), we have been able, and remain able, to share valuable information and experience with consumer authorities throughout the world. Germany, moreover, is a member of an ICPEN

working group that has devoted itself during the coronavirus pandemic to identifying misleading online advertisements and to making both platform operators and traders more aware of sharp business practices.

The third pillar of consumer protection during the pandemic that I would like to highlight is **information policy**. In times of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers have a particular need for quick, comprehensible and trustworthy information. Particular importance attaches in this context to new digital communication channels.

And lastly, I would also like to stress that easing the pressure on consumers was one of the main aims of the recovery package we launched to kick-start the economy. The package includes a reduction in value-added tax for six months, which will cost the government some 20 billion euros, and a cap on electricity costs for consumers.

So much for the measures we have taken in Germany. As I indicated before, it is impossible to guarantee a high level of consumer protection in today's globalised economy without close cooperation, based on mutual trust, with global partners. This is why I believe that now is the right time to step up **technical cooperation** in the field of consumer protection. Protecting consumers should not be regarded as an obstructive barrier to business or an obstacle to development but rather as a driving force for a sustainable, innovation-based economic recovery that gives everyone access to a stake in the market and can lend a competitive edge to companies which attach particular importance to consumer interests.

The developments of recent years in the sphere of corporate digital responsibility, or CDR for short, in which the focus is on voluntary commitments and social engagement on the part of businesses in the digital society, point in this same direction. In the CDR initiative of my ministry, participating companies are committed to going beyond legal requirements and helping

to shape the digital transformation for the benefit of society.

Particular significance attaches to UNCTAD in the context of technical cooperation. As a permanent body established by the General Assembly, UNCTAD provides the international community with an ideal forum in which to jointly identify challenges, set research priorities and devise new solutions to existing problems. Germany can look back on a long history of successful cooperation with UNCTAD.

At this point I would like to **draw on Germany's experience** to provide a brief outline of **some of our joint projects in the realm of technical cooperation**. Although all of these were devised and, in some cases, launched before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, the present circumstances make us all the more determined to press ahead with them at full steam together with our partners.

First of all there is the **Protect** project, which is designed to reinforce consumer protection in the **ASEAN region**. This project, supported by the



German cooperation agency Deutsche Gesellschaft für International Zusammenarbeit, is based on a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, there are measures to promote exchanges among the member bodies of the ASEAN Committee on Consumer Protection; on the other hand, various pilot projects are being conducted in an attempt to create a 'pro-consumer culture' through cooperation with public and private stakeholders in areas such as food and product safety and e-commerce.

Following on from earlier exchanges with China and Brazil in which we compared our legislative provisions on customer data protection and consumer group litigation, another new project, launched in May of this year, is now being implemented with **China, Brazil and Indonesia**. Its purpose is to strengthen consumer protection by developing innovative joint digital approaches to the enforcement of consumer rights, and this project is likewise being implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit.

These projects clearly show how much we can learn from each other through intensive dialogue and close cooperation, and we should now continue and increase these exchanges, for the current pandemic, like the digital revolution, does not stop at national borders.

Ladies and gentlemen, as I said at the start, these are particularly challenging times. Sometimes, however, particularly formidable challenges may present particularly great opportunities. I believe that we can and should regard this crisis as an opportunity too, an opportunity to further improve consumer protection, not only in our own separate countries but also globally. As today's conference shows, UNCTAD offers a unique and particularly important forum for this purpose, and so we are surely all very eager to hear the contributions and engage in the discussions of the coming days.

Thank you for your attention.