

## **Summary of points raised by consumers groups**

### **6 May 2019**

Consumers International convened a meeting of consumer group representatives at the WTO headquarters in Geneva on 6 May 2019 to provide perspectives on how trade and the WTO can contribute to improving consumer welfare. The meeting comprised an opening session, a focused discussion on e-commerce and a closing session with WTO members. The summary of the discussions, as provided by Consumers International, is as follows:

#### **Consumer welfare**

The consumer groups highlighted the importance of WTO members engagement with consumer representatives and expressed appreciation for the WTO's participation in the discussion to ensure consumers' concerns are addressed in trade negotiations and policy making. Governments must recognize the points of view of consumers, who are a key constituency in developing trade rules that work for all.

#### **Support for the multilateral trading system**

Consumer groups expressed support for a strong, rules-based multilateral trading system. International cooperation is the only way forward in the face of ongoing challenges, including those facing the WTO such as ongoing trade tensions and the impasse over appointing Appellate Body members. Governments must be mindful of the impact to consumers when there is a failure among nations to work together. Interest was expressed in general terms on ongoing WTO work on agriculture, fisheries subsidies and the environment.

#### **E-commerce**

Consumer groups voiced their interest in seizing the window of opportunity posed by ongoing discussions on e-commerce at the WTO. There will be more than 2 billion consumers online by 2021 and it is crucial to ensure policies will be in place that make the world fair, safe and sustainable for them.

Transparency in the negotiations is important and consumer groups would like to be informed about the proposals and be included in consultations with their respective governments to ensure their interests are being represented.

In addition to reducing prices and enhancing choice, consumer groups would also like the e-commerce negotiations to address:

- avenues for proper redress and remedies for consumer grievances
- steps to strengthen consumers protection and standards and the provision of information on consumer rights so buyers can make informed choices
- competitive rules for the market to benefit consumers if telecommunications is included in the scope of the negotiations.
- The negative impact of geo-blocking on consumers.

Representatives also sought support and more promotion of "soft law", such as voluntary efforts and guidelines that the private sector and civil society already have in place for upholding labour and environmental standards and consumer protection, in advance of the successful negotiation and implementation of formal regulations.

Some questioned the inclusion of issues such as data protection, net neutrality, AI source code and cyber security, where there is not consensus on these issues or where other organizations are establishing international rules.

The following specific points were highlighted by speakers in their interventions:

- **Speakers expressed great interest in the ongoing discussions at the WTO on electronic commerce** and stressed that any outcome is likely to have a direct impact on consumers worldwide. Given the importance of this to consumers, it is important that the views of consumer groups are taken into account and that these negotiations are conducted in as open and transparent a manner as possible. Consumers must be at the heart of these negotiations. Speakers stressed the need for innovative ways to ensure consumers have a say in the debates.

- **Multi-stakeholder dialogue should be encouraged** nationally and internationally so that consumer organizations and representatives know what is being negotiated and play an informed and active role in the process. Negotiating proposals and consolidated texts should also be made available to the public so that consumers know what is being negotiated on their behalf.
- **The issues of consumer trust in online commerce, consumer redress when problems arise and the absence of cross-border jurisdiction on such matters were raised by many speakers.** Several highlighted the gap in this area and that achieving a minimum level of protection internationally would be a key part of building trust among consumers in any new agreement. The idea of an international dispute settlement mechanism in this area was raised.
- **Several speakers stressed the need to examine more closely issues such as personal data protection, ownership and licensing rights, and competition policy.** Some cited concerns they believe are of greater interest to consumers in developing countries, such as access, education and trust issues.
- **Some speakers felt that an agreement should ensure high standards of data protection and privacy.** Others felt these sensitive issues should not be addressed as part of a trade negotiation but that if they were, the European Union's recent proposal would be a good basis for protection in this area.
- **Several speakers cited the need for local representation requirements for marketing agents above a certain level of revenue to deal with consumer complaints.** Along with this, several speakers also cited the need for negotiations on e-commerce to keep in mind the concerns and needs of small and medium-sized enterprises, which stand to gain the most from opportunities arising from e-commerce.
- **Several speakers highlighted the need to boost involvement and inclusion and address the digital divide** between developed and developing country members.
- **It was also noted that any future agreement on e-commerce should be as business-neutral and technology-neutral as possible.** Participants saw the urgency of this agreement and said that consumers cannot wait years for WTO members to reach a deal in this area.