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Shared Prosperity Dignified Life



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Background note

Consumer protection policies for sustainability/achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

1. Introduction

The concept of sustainable development, which was first introduced in pioneering initiatives in the 1980s, such as United Nations General Assembly Resolution 38/161 and the Brundtland Commission report “Our Common Future”, has transformed into a cornerstone of international policy. Along with its three pillars of economic development, social equity and environmental protection, sustainable development has become a guiding principle for global development efforts. At the heart of this shift lies the recognition that consumer choices significantly influence the pillars of sustainable development.

A crucial turning point took place in 1992 during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, which introduced the concept of sustainable consumption to the global policy dialogue. The conference led to the establishment of Agenda 21, which firmly asserted that the unsustainable practices of consumption and production, especially in industrialized countries, significantly contributed to the degradation of the global environment. Agenda 21 emphasized the urgent need to tackle this issue, drawing attention to its negative consequences in terms of exacerbating poverty and generating socio-economic disparities.

As the discussion on sustainability expanded to include economic and social dimensions, the rising significance of sustainable consumption became increasingly prominent, highlighting the crucial need to incorporate sustainability into consumer protection policies to serve as a pivotal link that aligns individual choices with broader developmental goals.

Consumer protection policies are now seen as instrumental in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a particular emphasis on SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production). While their direct influence on other SDGs, such as SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) and SDG 13 (climate action), may not be explicitly documented in current literature, their contribution towards creating sustainable market practices is clear. Consumer protection policies do not only defend consumer interests but, when infused with sustainable consumption policies, also foster a

sustainable and equitable economic environment, aligning with the broader objectives of the SDGs, especially in promoting sustainable development at the national level.

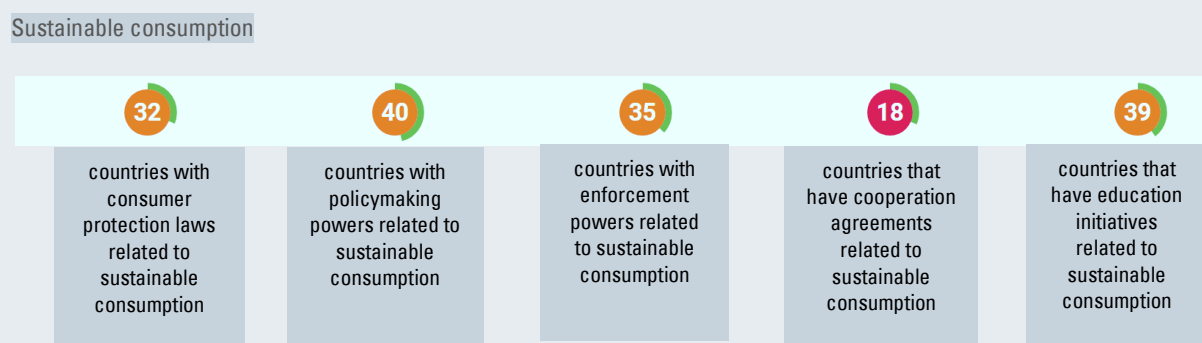
Building upon this recognition, the present background paper explores the critical intersection of consumer protection policies and sustainable consumption, to shed light on the evolving dynamics of consumer behaviour and the importance of developing robust policy frameworks to support a sustainable future.

2. Global perspective

The global landscape has witnessed a remarkable shift in consumer behaviour towards sustainable choices in recent years. Global trends, especially in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, reflect an increasing emphasis on sustainability in purchase decisions, with McKinsey and NielsenIQ studies highlighting the substantial growth of products aligning with environmental, social and governance (ESG) principles. Over the past five years, figures from the United States showed that products with ESG-related claims achieved an average cumulative growth rate of 28 per cent, outperforming products without sustainability emphasis, which stood at 20 per cent.¹

However, the legislative and policy frameworks for consumer protection have not been updated to accommodate new market trends towards more sustainable outcomes. The World Consumer Protection Map of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), shown in figure 1, reveals that only 32 of 106 countries address sustainable consumption in their main consumer protection law, and only 40 consumer protection agencies have some kind of policymaking power related to sustainable consumption. To put the achievement of SDG 12 back on track, there needs to be an urgent reconsideration of sustainable consumption at the national level, engaging all stakeholders involved.

Figure 1. Legislation on sustainable consumption



Source: UNCTAD World Consumer Protection Map.

3. The role of stakeholders in transitioning to sustainable consumption

The United Nations has continuously stressed the role of consumers in protecting the environment and in achieving economically, socially and environmentally sustainable development. The United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection (UNGCP),² hereinafter referred to as the *United Nations Guidelines*, play a pivotal role in helping countries develop and enact laws related to sustainable consumption. These guidelines assign responsibilities to a spectrum of stakeholders, including Governments, international organizations, businesses, civil society, consumer groups, and individuals

deemed as “informed consumers”. This inclusive approach acknowledges the influential role that informed consumers play in shaping the actions of all other stakeholders.

A. Governments.....

As policymakers, Governments have various avenues at their disposal to promote sustainable consumption and production. As stakeholders, they play a crucial role in shaping the legal and policy landscape, providing incentives, and establishing regulations that guide businesses and individuals towards a more sustainable and environmentally-conscious approach to consumption.

The United Nations Guidelines advocate for integrating “specific priorities for consumer protection” within national policies while emphasizing their alignment with the economic, social and environmental context. This is essential for meeting the population's diverse needs while considering associated costs and benefits (guideline 4). Additionally, the Guidelines highlight the significance of consumer education programmes as a strategic tool for Governments to foster sustainable consumption. These programmes play a decisive role in informing the public about the environmental impact of their choices, as well as their rights, obligations and cultural considerations, as emphasized in guideline 42. The Guidelines are also designed to address the legitimate needs of consumers, encompassing protection from health and safety hazards, access to sufficient information for informed choices based on individual preferences, consumer education, and the encouragement of sustainable consumption patterns (guideline 5).³

In adhering to these guidelines, Governments employ a mix of essential tools such as policy development, legislation and enforcement mechanisms. This multifaceted approach ensures that sustainable consumption principles are not only integrated into national policies but also actively enforced.

Policy development

Promoting consumer education and raising awareness: Policymakers are encouraged to establish comprehensive consumer education programmes to raise awareness of the environmental and social impacts of products and services. This involves emphasizing the importance of accurate information through transparent eco-labeling programmes, detailed product profiles, and comprehensive environmental reports. In this regard, diverse channels, including schools, e-learning platforms and community outreach activities, become essential for spreading information and fostering an enlightened and empowered consumer base dedicated to sustainable practices.

Governments must also ensure the broad accessibility of information and education programmes to all consumer groups, placing particular emphasis on reaching vulnerable and disadvantaged groups such as children, older adults, populations in remote areas, and individuals with disabilities. This inclusive approach aligns with the United Nations Guidelines' emphasis on education as a fundamental strategy for advancing sustainable consumption. In this context, different countries have already started to recognize the importance of consumer-oriented education campaigns and started implementing these types of programmes to foster long-term behavioural changes, especially in promoting sustainable consumption habits.

For a robust strategy to empower consumers, various methods must complement education. This includes deploying diverse communication strategies, leveraging cutting-edge technology, and gaining a profound understanding of the intricacies of consumer behaviour.

Promoting sustainable consumption patterns: By promoting programmes related to sustainable consumption, Governments actively encourage consumers to make choices that prioritize

environmental and social sustainability. This involves endorsing products with eco-friendly certifications and supporting companies known for their strong sustainability practices. Such an approach goes beyond individual purchasing decisions, and fosters a collective effort to mitigate environmental impact and promote ethical business practices.

Communication and engagement strategies: In championing sustainable consumption patterns, Governments strategically deploy communication and engagement strategies, including advertising, marketing and social media campaigns aimed at informing and engaging consumers in sustainable practices. These strategies actively bridge the “intention-action gap” by emphasizing the importance of public commitments and utilizing nudging techniques grounded in behavioural biases. Governments integrate communication efforts with sustainable consumption patterns to empower individuals to make informed choices and contribute to a more sustainable and ethical marketplace.

Box 1. The innovative initiative of Egypt to reduce plastic bag consumption

In 2017, the Ministry of Environment in Egypt launched a national initiative aimed at significantly reducing plastic bag consumption. Operating under the slogan “No More Plastic Bags”, the campaign focused on mobilization and awareness to mitigate the environmental impact of single-use plastic bags.

The key strategies employed included:

1. National mobilization: The Ministry took a proactive role in mobilizing the public, and emphasized the collective responsibility to curb plastic bag usage.
2. Targeting women as advocates: The campaign recognized the influential role of women, and considered them pivotal in educating families, friends and the broader community about the risks associated with non-recyclable plastic bags.

The impact of the initiative was as follows:

- The initiative contributed to raising awareness about the environmental consequences of plastic bag usage.
- Engaging women as advocates fostered a multiplier effect, extending the reach of awareness efforts.

Source: UNCTAD, [Competition and Consumer Protection Policies for Sustainability](#), 2023.

Legislation and enforcement mechanisms

In this dynamic landscape of sustainable consumption, transformative change hinges on legislation and enforcement mechanisms. Legislation acts as the cornerstone, defining and regulating sustainable practices, while robust enforcement mechanisms breathe life into these laws, ensuring their effective implementation and holding stakeholders accountable. Together, legislation and enforcement mechanisms shape consumer behaviours, guide businesses, and steer societies towards a more sustainable trajectory. The following list outlines major legislative measures and enforcement mechanisms that Governments can employ to propel and solidify the paradigm shift towards sustainable consumption.

- **Taxes and other fiscal measures:** These are cost-effective tools that provide a financial incentive for businesses to align their products or services with sustainable practices. Such measures include the use of taxes to influence consumer behaviour towards sustainability by raising prices on less sustainable products. Provision of subsidies and incentives is another tool to encourage consumers to make more sustainable choices.
- **Heightened enforcement against misleading environmental claims:** This represents increased effort by regulatory authorities and governing bodies to rigorously investigate, penalize, and prevent instances where businesses or products make deceptive or inaccurate statements about their environmental impact.
- **Targeted policy tailoring:** Governments should recognize the diversity in consumer needs, preferences and potential influencers, and tailor policy tools and instruments to different types of

households, individuals or groups, considering variable factors such as income, age, biases, attitudes and gender.

- **Establishing avenues for dispute resolution and redress:** Governments can enhance consumer protection laws by creating accessible dispute resolution mechanisms to provide recourse for unfair practices. This empowers consumers and boosts their confidence in the legal framework, fostering a fair and accountable marketplace conducive to sustainable consumption.
- **Enforcement actions by regulatory agencies:** Regulatory bodies can take enforcement action against businesses that make inconsistent claims with established guidelines to ensure compliance with sustainable practices.
- **Regular reviews and updates of legal frameworks:** Governments can initiate regular reviews and updates of legal frameworks to align regulations with market changes, reflecting a dynamic response to the evolving landscape of sustainable consumption.

Box 2. National Integrated Waste Management Strategy of the United Arab Emirates: enforcement in action

The National Integrated Waste Management Strategy of the United Arab Emirates underscores the commitment of all stakeholders to environmental protection and the circular economy. With initiatives led by the federal government, local governments and the private sector, the strategy aims to enhance waste disposal mechanisms, intensify recycling efforts, adopt extended producer responsibility, and raise awareness in the Emirati society. Strategic directions focus on promoting sustainable production and consumption, implementing circular economy practices in waste activities, ensuring proper disposal systems, and fostering research and innovation.

Legal framework: advancing waste management practices

The legal framework, consisting of Federal Law No. 12 (2018) and Cabinet Decision No. 39 (2021), regulates waste management processes. Aligned with best practices, these legislations specify responsibilities for waste producers, promote waste sorting, and set standards for sewage treatment facilities and hazardous waste management, and environmental controls for landfills. The regulations also enforce fines for improper waste disposal, discouraging littering and inappropriate waste handling. These legal measures embody the commitment of the United Arab Emirates to reducing environmental risks and promoting sustainable waste management practices. The United Arab Emirates has reported positive improvement over the last two years after putting these legislations into force.

Source: Towards Osaka Blue Ocean Vision, [United Arab Emirates: Action and Progress on Marine Plastic Litter](#), 2023.

The Government's role in promoting sustainable consumption policies extends beyond providing policies to consumers and businesses; it involves actively ensuring collaboration among diverse stakeholders, which is key to developing comprehensive sustainable consumption policies. It also involves creating synergies among firms, consumer groups, and government organizations, emphasizing a holistic and inclusive approach. Engaging these key stakeholders allows policymakers to encourage ethical conduct throughout the entire product lifecycle – from design to production and distribution.

Box 3. Global initiatives for sustainable consumption: guiding Governments in policy development and consumer protection

Governments can receive valuable guidance on policy development and consumer protection enforcement from regional and global initiatives. A notable example is the UNCTAD working group on consumer protection in electronic commerce, led by the Superintendence of Industry and Commerce of Colombia. The group's report, compiling experiences from 18 countries, highlights the importance of enhancing legislation, especially in digital markets, to address misleading environmental claims.

Another initiative by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in collaboration with UNCTAD, resulted in a toolkit on sustainable consumption, which offered relevant insights for States beyond the association. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is also actively engaged in a comprehensive global policy review and empirical studies to understand consumer attitudes and evaluate the effectiveness of green claims and digital methods in promoting sustainable consumption.

Source: UNCTAD, [Competition and Consumer Protection Policies for Sustainability](#), 2023.

B. Businesses.....

Businesses represent the second major group of stakeholders involved in helping consumers achieve sustainable consumption. The United Nations Guidelines on Sustainable Consumption specifically target businesses, and set benchmarks to improve their practices and meet consumer needs. They urge the private sector to actively engage in safeguarding consumers through fair treatment, ethical commercial behaviour, transparent information disclosure, privacy protection, and effective complaint-handling mechanisms (guideline 11).

Businesses can exercise significant influence in advancing sustainable consumption through strategic initiatives such as:

- **Life cycle approach:** Encourage businesses to consider the full life cycle of products or services in making environmental claims. The aim is to encourage businesses to prioritize sustainability in the design, production and distribution of goods and services.
- **Product design:** Innovate and market products with a sustainability focus, incorporating eco-friendly materials, energy efficiency and recyclability.
- **Supply chain management:** Implement sustainable sourcing practices and collaborate with suppliers committed to ethical and environmentally responsible operations.

Box 4. ESG-driven growth: a catalyst for sustainable consumption and business success

In the rapidly evolving landscape of global consumption, the consumer packaged goods (CPGs) sector, which contributes trillions of dollars to the United States economy, plays a pivotal role in promoting sustainability and inclusivity. Despite consumer preferences for environmentally and socially responsible products, CPG companies grapple with generating ample demand. A comprehensive McKinsey and NielsenIQ study spanning five years (2017 to June 2022) unveils compelling insights. Products featuring ESG claims achieved an average cumulative growth of 28 per cent, outperforming non-ESG counterparts, which stood at 20 per cent. Significantly, these ESG-related products contributed to 56 per cent of overall growth, establishing a clear correlation between consumer spending and sustainability claims. The study found that products with multiple ESG-related claims grew twice as fast as those with a single claim, emphasizing the potential of conveying authenticity through a comprehensive ESG approach.

These findings underscore the critical role of incorporating ESG commitments into business strategies, and of aligning moral imperatives with compelling business-driven reasons. Key strategies include prioritizing ESG actions across product portfolios, effectively communicating these actions through product label claims, investing in ESG for existing and new products, integrating benefits across categories, adopting sustainable design with cost efficiency, and acknowledging category-specific dynamics. Embracing the interconnected nature of ESG and offering products that address multiple concerns emerges as a potent strategy for fostering sustainable consumption and achieving substantial business growth.

Source: McKinsey and NielsenIQ, [Consumers care about sustainability—and back it up with their wallets](#), 2023.

Integration of economic, social and environmental aspects

Businesses are also increasingly urged to embrace sustainability by integrating economic, social and environmental considerations into their models. The "triple-bottom-line" concept underscores the significance of people, profit and the planet, and encourages businesses to extend their considerations beyond mere financial gains. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development plays a pivotal role in globally engaging businesses, and redefining aspects like profit, loss and value creation within the context of sustainable development. Businesses are called to adhere to government measures targeted towards them.

Box 5. Etisalat campaign: fostering sustainable consumption through business leadership

The Envirofone campaign, led by the United Arab Emirates telecommunications service provider Etisalat, underscores the crucial role of businesses in advancing sustainable practices. Focused on addressing the global environmental issue of electronic waste (e-waste), the initiative has been actively pursued by Etisalat since 2007. By introducing a service that allows people to recycle and trade their old and functional phones, Etisalat aimed to contribute to responsible consumption patterns and has succeeded in collecting and responsibly disposing of tonnes of electronic waste in specialized facilities.

The initiative emphasizes the significance of proper disposal and recycling of electronic devices to prevent the release of harmful substances into the environment. Recognizing the impact of business practices on sustainable consumption, Etisalat's Envirofone exemplifies the vital role of corporations in fostering eco-friendly consumer behaviour.

Source: The United Arab Emirates Government Portal, [Responsible consumption and production](#), 2023.

When businesses align their operations with the principles of sustainability, they contribute to a harmonious coexistence of economic prosperity, social well-being, and environmental conservation. Their collective effort is instrumental in building a resilient and responsible business landscape for a sustainable future. This alignment necessitates transparent disclosure of relevant information to consumers to promote awareness and accountability. In this essence, businesses play a role in the below:

- **Access to information and tools:** Provide consumers with essential information and tools to make choices aligned with sustainability goals.
- **Clarity and transparency in product labeling:** Promote transparency in product labeling to aid consumers in making informed decisions.
- **Environmental impact information:** Offer information on the environmental impact of products to enhance consumer awareness.
- **Supporting educational initiatives:** Support initiatives that educate consumers about sustainable choices, fostering a sense of responsibility and informed decision-making.

Arming consumers with knowledge fosters a sense of responsibility and informed decision-making, and contributes to a more sustainable and ethical consumption landscape.

Box 6. Qatar Airways: pioneering sustainable practices in aviation

Qatar Airways is actively committed to addressing climate change by implementing measures to reduce energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions across all its operations. One of the airline's notable initiatives is the carbon offset programme, which allows passengers to offset the carbon emissions of their flights during the booking process. In collaboration with the International Air Transport Association (IATA), the programme ensures the verification of purchases and the swift utilization of emissions tokens for offsetting. Qatar Airways has achieved the highest-level accreditation in the IATA Environmental Assessment Programme, making it the first airline in the Middle East to do so. Additionally, its hub, Hamad International Airport, is on track to become the first airport in the region to achieve a 4-star Global Sustainability Assessment System (GSAS) rating. These initiatives align with Qatar Airways' broader plan to expand capacity and set a benchmark for sustainable business practices in the aviation industry.

Source: US-Qatar Business Council, [Qatar Sustainability Report: A Leader in Green Initiatives](#), 2021.

C. Other consumer groups.....

The United Nations Guidelines also emphasize civil society organizations' role in collaborating with Governments and businesses to actively develop and promote sustainable consumption. This involves employing a comprehensive approach that combines various policies such as regulations, economic and social instruments, and sector-specific policies (guideline 51). These concerted efforts identify best practices to encourage sustainable consumption, production patterns, and effective environmental management. They include the establishment of recycling programmes to encourage

consumers to recycle waste and choose recycled products. The Guidelines also advocate for adopting new environmentally sound goods and services and integrating technologies that meet consumer needs while minimizing pollution and the depletion of natural resources (guidelines 52 and 57).

Achieving sustainable consumption relies on the collaborative efforts of all pertinent stakeholders. The United Nations Guidelines emphasize the need for coordination and consider consumer surveys essential for soliciting consumer input and feedback. Sharing the results of these surveys among respective government bodies, civil society organizations, and businesses will facilitate ongoing adjustments and improvements in the pursuit of sustainable consumption.

Beyond the above-mentioned key stakeholders, others can significantly contribute to promoting sustainable consumption. Educational institutions play a crucial role by integrating sustainability into curricula and conducting research. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) advocate for sustainable practices, monitor entities for environmental and social impact, and raise awareness. Media outlets are influential channels for creating societal awareness, while international organizations foster global collaboration for sustainable consumption. Additionally, financial institutions encourage investments in sustainability-focused ventures and integrate environmental and social considerations into risk assessments. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of stakeholders, the concerted efforts of Governments, organizations and businesses alongside consumers are instrumental in shaping and advancing sustainable consumption policies.

Box 7. Eco-Schools in Jordan: promoting sustainable consumption through education

Eco-Schools is a global initiative implemented in over 51,000 schools across 64 countries, which focuses on promoting sustainability within educational institutions. In Jordan, the Royal Marine Conservation Society of Jordan has been the national operator of Eco-Schools since 2009, expanding its reach to schools in Amman, Aqaba, Irbid, Mafraq, Ramtha, North Shouna, and Disi.

The programme follows a “student-led change” approach, where eco-teams consisting of students, teachers and school staff lead the process of transforming their school into a sustainable institution. Through a structured seven-step process, schools choose key sustainability themes, create action plans, and work towards achieving the prestigious Green Flag certification.

The Eco-Schools programme not only encourages students to think and act sustainably but also profiles schools as champions of sustainability. By participating, schools showcase their commitment to working on sustainability, and qualify for the international Green Flag recognition, endorsed by the United Nations.

Eco-Schools emphasizes the “whole school approach”, fostering a transition in education, curricula and the school environment towards sustainability. As such, Eco-Schools plays a crucial role in shaping students' awareness and understanding of sustainable consumption practices, and paves the way for a generation that values and actively participates in responsible and eco-friendly consumer behaviours.

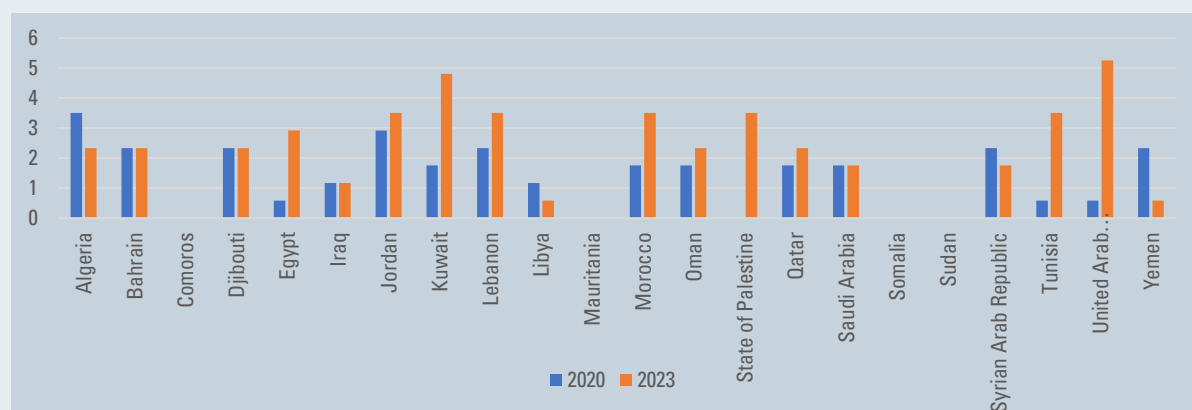
Source: The Royal Marine Conservation Society, [Eco- School Program](#), 2023.

4. Regional perspective

The state of sustainable consumption in Arab countries reflects a mix of progress and challenges. The latest assessment of consumer protection legislations in the Arab region conducted by ESCWA under the Arab Business Legislative Frameworks (ABLF) reveals the need for sustained and collective efforts to promote sustainable consumption in the region.⁴ The findings vary amongst countries, with the United Arab Emirates leading in embracing sustainability through initiatives like the Green Agenda 2030. Other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar, emphasize sustainability through strategic endeavours without concrete legislation. Conflict-affected countries like Iraq, Libya and Yemen exhibit weak approaches, while the State of Palestine stands out with a “moderate” rating for integrating sustainability-focused provisions in consumer protection laws.

Other countries in the region demonstrate varying levels of commitment to sustainable consumption. Morocco and Tunisia showcase commendable efforts with robust legal frameworks that support sustainability. However, countries like Algeria and Egypt are categorized as “basic”, indicating the need to strengthen their efforts. This is despite the increase in the score of Egypt compared with the decrease in the score of Algeria. Jordan and Lebanon have recognized the importance of sustainable consumption within their consumer protection laws but need broader measures for a comprehensive impact.

Figure 2. Sustainable consumption score of Arab countries



Source: ESCWA compilation based on ABLF results.

Overall, the assessment highlights both progress and areas of improvement in the approach towards sustainable consumption across Arab countries. Policies and laws promoting sustainable consumption practices should be adopted and enforced in light of global environmental challenges. Djibouti, Comoros and Mauritania are among the countries that should intensify their efforts in this direction.

Box 8. Towards a circular economy: the case of the GCC

The adoption of circular economy principles is essential to advancing sustainable consumption. By implementing strategies like waste reduction, material reuse and product recycling, the GCC region can cultivate a more sustainable approach to consumption. Circular economy practices promote resource efficiency, prolong product life cycles, and minimize environmental harm, thereby contributing to the objective of sustainable consumption through responsible resource use and management at all stages of the life cycle. Insights from the GCC reveal significant social benefits in terms of environmental sustainability across various fronts.

Energy efficiency: Choosing low-energy fittings can bring significant benefits. Using light emitting diode (LED) lights can save up to 70-90 per cent in electricity consumption and reduce associated CO₂ emissions. Implementing efficient practices like turning off lights in vacant rooms, adjusting thermostat settings, and disconnecting unused appliances, in addition to using technologies such as light sensors and home automation, can lead to significant energy savings. Research estimates that residential energy consumption in the region could be reduced by 15 to 30 per cent through behavioural changes and good housekeeping.

Water efficiency: Using water-efficient fittings can bring significant benefits to the GCC region as they can decrease water usage by 25 per cent in showers and toilets, and over 60 per cent in faucets. Given the region's reliance on desalinated water, reducing water consumption leads to substantial energy savings and a decrease in CO₂ emissions.

Food and waste management: Implementing measures to reduce avoidable food waste and improve sorting and recycling practices offers significant opportunities for promoting environmental sustainability in the GCC region. Retailers can be compelled to adopt initiatives like right-sizing and smart packaging, thereby reducing the annual disposal of 15 billion United Arab Emirates dirham (\$4.1 billion) worth of food in the United Arab Emirates alone. The region's substantial quantities of discarded plastic, aluminum and paper can be recycled and reused, generating employment opportunities and adding value to the economy.

In order to initiate the shift towards a circular economy and achieve the anticipated advantages, GCC Governments should work towards a comprehensive national framework that ensures that all relevant stakeholders actively contribute to a holistic solution.

Source: Strategy &, [Putting GCC cities in the loop: sustainable growth in a circular economy](#), 2019.

5. Developing a theoretical framework for integrating sustainability into consumer protection: a case study

Within the context of the UNCTAD Research Partnership Platform (RPP), which is designed to foster collaboration among academics, policymakers and law enforcement officials from Member States, a case study was presented by Laura Best from the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in South Africa under a research initiative entitled “Incorporating Sustainability into Consumer Protection Policy”.⁵ The research aimed to compare and analyse some of the best practices for incorporating sustainability into consumer protection policy, particularly in African countries. The comparative research examined legislative frameworks in other countries to identify best practices therein and propose ways in which South African policy could be amended to embrace sustainable consumption practices and, in so doing, begin to steer consumer behaviour towards more socially equitable consumption choices.

The research concluded by proposing a theoretical framework for incorporating sustainability into consumer protection. Four dimensions were identified based on the literature review: (1) clearly defining sustainability as a policy intention, (2) considering sustainability implications throughout the full product life cycle, (3) promoting sector-driven initiatives for self-regulation, and (4) implementing both voluntary and mandatory policy measures.

In the concluding chapter of the research, the study assessed the practicality and feasibility of the proposed policy framework for integrating sustainability into South African consumer protection. Two groups of experts were approached for their insights and critiques on the framework. The results validated the four key aspects of the proposed policy framework:

1. **Definition aspects of sustainability:** The importance of clearly defining sustainability as a policy intention was emphasized, highlighting the need for a precise definition within the policy framework.
2. **Incorporation of sustainability in all stages of the production and consumption cycle:** The framework’s emphasis on considering sustainability implications throughout the entire product life cycle received approval, and was seen as crucial for achieving comprehensive sustainability goals.
3. **Sector self-regulation for sustainability:** The concept of sector-driven initiatives for self-regulation in relation to sustainability was acknowledged as a valuable element of the framework. This approach recognizes the proactive role of industries in adopting sustainable practices.
4. **Instruments and measures to enable and facilitate implementation of sustainability within consumer protection policy:** The inclusion of both voluntary and mandatory instruments and measures within the framework was supported. This balanced approach was seen as practical for fostering sustainable consumption.

The assessment underscored the critical role of consumer education and stakeholder engagement in realizing sustainability policy intentions. Recognizing economic disparities in South Africa, the review highlighted the importance of addressing the basic needs of poor consumers and considering the impact of poverty on sustainability policy objectives.

The assessment also emphasized key factors that would create an enabling environment for the implementation of the proposed framework. These factors included policy harmonization within government domains, a cohesive and coordinated government approach, good corporate governance, and the adoption of shared values that prioritize the needs of future generations and promote consumer education.

Although specific to South Africa, the proposed framework could be used as a basis for developing country-specific frameworks. The insights contribute to the robustness and applicability of the framework in addressing unique challenges and opportunities, and promoting sustainable consumption through effective policy measures.

6. Key challenges in aligning consumer protection with sustainability goals

Navigating the intricate interplay between consumer protection and sustainability goals reveals several challenges that hinder their alignment. A critical obstacle lies in the persistent lack of effective means of implementation, which encompass financial resources, advanced technologies, and capacity development. This constraint poses a substantial barrier to realizing sustainable consumption and production patterns.

The absence of reliable information represents another challenge that impedes the accurate measurement of progress. The lack of clear methodologies, monitoring networks, and robust data management exacerbates the difficulty in assessing initiatives aimed at harmonizing consumer protection with sustainability.

Governance concerns present additional hurdles, characterized by poor institutional frameworks and weak structures. The absence of dedicated institutional arrangements for sustainability targets poses a substantial challenge in the journey towards achieving a balanced and sustainable consumer landscape.

There is, therefore, a need to break the complexities of aligning consumer protection measures with sustainability goals by closely examining these challenges.⁶

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, fostering sustainable development through consumer protection is a shared responsibility between market actors, including Governments, businesses and consumers. Governments play a crucial role in recognizing sustainable consumption as integral to consumer policy and prioritizing it in all government actions. An enabling legal and institutional framework is essential for establishing responsible consumption and production patterns. Policy coordination among relevant public bodies, including consumer-related and social and environmental authorities, should also be prioritized. Governments can leverage their convening power to develop partnerships with businesses and civil society organizations.

As recommended in the United Nations Guidelines, Member States should implement strategies promoting sustainable consumption through various policies, including regulations, economic and social instruments, and sectoral policies. Developing information programmes to raise awareness of the impact of consumption, removing subsidies that promote unsustainable patterns, and promoting sector-specific best practices are essential. Governments should guide businesses in sustainable design, production and distribution through the application of voluntary sustainability standards. Enforcing consumer protection laws against misleading practices, especially false environmental claims, is crucial.

The United Nations Guidelines emphasize the need to ensure consumer protection enforcement agencies have the necessary resources for compliance and redress. Governments should encourage sustainable patterns, including recycling, adopting safety standards, and facilitating safe management

of environmentally hazardous products. Encouraging reliable after-sales service and spare parts availability enhances sustainable consumption.

In the Arab region, recognizing the role of sustainable consumption in economic growth and environmental preservation is crucial. Despite progress, there is a need to enact legislation that protects consumers and promotes sustainability. A multi-stakeholder approach, including robust information campaigns, empowerment, and strengthened redress mechanisms for consumers, is vital. Legislation on the business front, which introduces measures like minimum warranty periods, the right to repair, and accurate product labeling, complements consumer-oriented initiatives. Moreover, enhanced policy coordination between government departments ensures a comprehensive approach to sustainability, fostering positive changes in consumer behaviour. Collaborative efforts among Governments, businesses, civil society and consumers can facilitate a seamless transition to a more equitable and sustainable economy in the Arab region. Additionally, fostering collaboration among different Governments through platforms for sharing best practices and experiences is crucial to enhancing regional sustainability efforts.

Endnotes

1. McKinsey and NielsenIQ, [Consumers care about sustainability—and back it up with their wallets](#), 2023.
2. UNCTAD, [United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection](#), 2016.
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