

# Consumer enforcement agencies must strengthen regional initiatives

The acting deputy director-general of Consumer and Corporate Regulation at the Department of Trade and Industry (dti), MacDonald Netshitenzhe, says consumer enforcement agencies should strengthen intra- and extra-cross border enforcement initiatives in order to achieve common consumer protection law and policies.



Image by 123RF

Netshitenzhe was speaking at three-day African Consumer Protection Dialogue Conference in South Africa, this past week. The objective of the conference is to discuss synergies and strategies for the effective consumer protection, competition policies, and laws to better protect consumers.

“Regional inter-governmental group of experts on consumer protection law and policy must build and strengthen capacity, develop norms and standards - but not impose individual standards that may hinder trade among countries,” said Netshitenzhe.

He added that all over the world consumers drive the economy and that consumer issues go beyond the issues of credit and indebtedness. He said countries must collaborate and prioritise goods that are coming into a country not labelled or harmful and must put systems in place to detect goods before they are sold to consumers.

Netshitenzhe encouraged all African countries to adopt the African Peer Review Mechanism on national consumer policies

in order to have a sustainable consumption across board and to review systems on the ground. He said the issue of the Peer Review Mechanism was mainly on governance generally, but should be extended to common policies and laws relating to consumer protection.

The director of the United States Federal Trade Commission, Chuck Harwood, said since their first African Dialogue so much has been accomplished in terms of capacity building to deal with consumer protection issues and help consumers.

African states were also encouraged to act as a collective and come up with tangible ways to strengthen regulatory activities.

“We have also developed a strong communication and support network among African consumer protection officials and agencies as well as laying a stout foundation for sharing complaints, education, legal and enforcement information among African Dialogue members,” said Harwood.

He also said that there were challenges of widening communications channels and using the information sharing foundation constructed to build a strong and lasting structure.

“For example, how do we track and report our successes, what mechanism do we use to facilitate communications and what specific issues and problems do we use to test our ability to collaborate? What the Dialogue has taught us through, is that even in the continent where between 1500 and 2000 languages are spoken, when it comes to consumer rights everyone speaks the same language,” Harwood said.

National Regulator for Compulsory Specifications, CEO, Asogan Moodley, indicated that the conference was necessary in that it provides a platform for organisations in the regulatory environment to come together and discuss a uniform approach to consumer protection in that what is unsafe in South Africa should be considered unsafe in other African countries as well.

“The regulatory burden sits with all of us as regulatory bodies because consumers all over the world are driven mostly by price and not issues of safety in their daily transactions. We should come up as a collective with tangible ways to strengthen our regulatory activities,” said Moodley.

The conference is targeting government, civil society, academic, private sector stakeholders from throughout Africa, as well as regional and international bodies as they play an important role in implementing consumer protection frameworks and civil society initiatives.

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