

The Benefits of a Consumer Protection Law to Guyana and the CARICOM Region

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A Consumer Protection Law would be beneficial to Guyana in particular, and CARICOM member states in general. Consumers depend on suppliers to give them quality products. According to Google dictionary, a consumer is defined as “a person who purchases goods and services for personal use.” Google dictionary also defines a supplier as “a person or organization that provides something needed such as a product or service.” A Consumer Protection Law would tell suppliers what is expected of them. It will help us as consumers, particularly in my region of Guyana, to exercise our rights to proper food, goods and services.

In many instances, consumers end up with products that are defective, or they are victims of very poor service. The Consumer Protection Law will help to protect consumers from unfair trade, unfair transactions, substandard food supply and overall substandard goods and services. Since we have one single market, it is only fitting that we have a common Consumer Law dictating standard operating procedures to protect consumers and, by extension, the CARICOM community. Without a standard Consumer Law, a supplier might trade goods that are expired, infested with pests, visibly unclean, prepared in an unhygienic area, or hazardous. The quality of these goods is not what the supplier has led the consumer to believe. A supplier will surely think twice before doing such once the law is enacted.

The Consumer Protection Law will also take into consideration intra-regional trade. Under the proposed law, consumers will be able to demand good products and services and reject substandard products. For example, if one purchases goods not in keeping with what is set out in the law, one has the right to return it to the supplier at his expense as well as receive a refund.

There are several benefits of the Consumer Protection Law in terms of food safety. Illegal repackaging of products, removal of or tampering with expiry dates, illegal slaughtering of animals

for human consumption, and uncovered roadside displays of meat are some of the consumer protections enshrined in the new law.

Some member states already have their own laws to counteract consumer abuse, but a united front on this, a CARICOM Consumer Law, would make it easier for all member states to act with one voice.

Recently, a cargo of expired foodstuff arrived in Guyana originating from Canada. Thankfully, it was rejected upon arrival at the port of entry by the Guyanese authorities. Under the CARICOM Consumer Protection Law, such an act would be punishable and would not likely be repeated or attempted in any part of the CARICOM region. This is why the Consumer Protection Law is important to my region. We are working towards stronger integration among our member states and this is a timely intervention to bring us together on the same level.

Some store owners print “Goods not returnable” on their bills. This is wrong. Goods must be returnable if defective or otherwise unfit for the consumer. A consumer should not have to inspect an item in detail for quality or be fearful the good is defective. Imagine buying a padlock and the whole inside comes out with the key one day after it has been used. A consumer, knowing the padlock is likely to be replaced if returned, will do so. The supplier will surely lose customers if the word spreads that goods cannot be returned. This cannot be good for business. Suppliers are less likely to deceive consumers if there are legal penalties.



The picture above is a great depiction of how consumers can be affected. This is the line outside of Republic Bank (Guyana) Limited after the bank updated its software. Customers were unable to access their accounts and other banking services. What is worse is that the Bank of Guyana has no legal footing to impose penalties on the Republic Bank, which is a Trinidad and Tobago-based bank. Consumers will have to do some wishful thinking if they want to be compensated. The CARICOM Consumer Law is surely the way forward to correct these unregulated deficiencies in my region.

This law also benefits our community in terms of tourism. Tourists will be comfortable visiting all CARICOM countries knowing that they can expect the same food safety and goods and services protection. The number of tourists is likely to increase with the assurance that foods, goods and services are not only protected by strict policies but that there are guidelines attached to the importation, production, and sale of goods and services as well as penalties if they are defective.

The CARICOM Law would also be good for intra-regional travel. As a Guyanese consumer, I want to know that I can travel to one of my sister CARICOM countries and enjoy the same level of safety and protection as I do in my country. Our revenues will increase, our economies will get stronger and the CARICOM community will be a safer, better place.

It is important for us here in CARICOM to note that around the world, best practices are used to standardize operations and gain the trust of consumers. One company, McDonald's, never reuses chicken from the day before. All its food for any given day is freshly prepared. This happens for all its franchises in any part of the world. As such, a consumer in America will not be afraid to eat at McDonald's in Germany because of these policies. Their customers do not have to be afraid of diseases. According to a spokesperson at McDonald's, "We have a product governance process to ensure the quality of our favourite menu items around the world and we are always striving to do better." This is what we need in our region to make our consumers safe.

Our markets are also being flooded with innumerable goods written in languages that are not indigenous to the CARICOM region. This is a disadvantage to the consumer who has to assume what the instructions are saying. The import of products, especially pharmaceuticals, written in foreign languages points to suppliers' ignorance of consumer safety and how consumers are affected when they are unable to read labels. This is another reason why the CARICOM Consumer Law is so important. It caters not only to the consumer but the supplier as well. Suppliers will have clear and strong guidelines about what to import and what standards to demand before purchasing a product to be used by consumers. Suppliers will not see this Law as a threat but to improve their knowledge about best practices and to give them the bargaining ammunition they need within and beyond the CARICOM. This will definitely improve the overall structure of the CARICOM region as we work towards full integration.

Institutions such as the CCJ, CSME, CXC, among others are all major successful visions of CARICOM. Consumer safety is just as important to us and should become our next CARICOM initiative. The Consumer Law will establish standard rules and regulations for trade and will develop best practice policies for importing and selling food, goods, and services. Our citizens and visitors will be comfortable and healthier, and my region will become stronger economically.

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