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## Sri Lankan consumers seen as powerless

March 18, 2015, 7:45 pm



by Sanath Nanayakkare

Consumer Law was first enacted and given necessary teeth in Sri Lanka in 1979, yet Sri Lanka is still far from seeing an organized consumer lobby flexing its muscles to demand its due place in society, Satya Sharma of Consumer International said in Colombo on Monday.

Sharma said so while speaking at the World Consumer Rights Day Forum 2015 held at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) organized in collaboration with Consumer Affairs Authority of Sri Lanka and Consumer International.

"Consumers are the largest economic group affected by almost every public and economic decision so they have to coordinate their voice and action to raise awareness about consumer rights and obtain the best trade practices from business organizations, Sharma said.

"This year the world consumer movement has chosen the theme 'Healthy Diets' to mark World Consumer Rights day. Unhealthy diets are linked to four of the ten biggest causes of death worldwide. Overweight and obesity, high blood pressure, high blood glucose and high cholesterol are among them. Obesity alone is estimated to cost US\$ 2 trillion per year, he pointed out.

"The availability and affordability of unhealthy foods, the marketing practices of large international food companies and the lack of information to consumers make it increasingly hard to choose a healthy diet. Despite a growing international consensus about these concerns, the response from the government and industry is far too slow.

"In this context, Sri Lanka's forum on Consumer Rights should be formally organized with the objective of raising awareness and should initiate a policy dialogue among key stakeholders across the government, NGOs and the private sector to ensure an environment where healthy food is increasingly made accessible and affordable to the greater masses of Sri Lankan consumers, Sharma said.

Dr. Saman Kelegama, Executive Director IPS said, "Unfortunately in Sri Lanka consumerism and consumer activism is less organized, developed and less powerful. It's a moot point whether in Sri Lanka and Asia consumer is the king or at least aware of the power of their force. It's time for the civil society, NGOs and other organizations to come forward at this hour of need to save and protect the consumer against exploitation and unhealthy trade practices of trader, manufacturer and ineffective regulation.

Minister Rishard Bathiudeen speaking at the forum said the government's food security programme would focus on consumer wellbeing in terms of making healthy foods available at affordable prices.

Sarath Wijesinghe, former Sri Lankan ambassador to Israel and UAE and former Consumer Affairs Authority Head said, "Consumers are sandwiched between manufacturers and suppliers and it's the duty of the regulators to enforce the law."

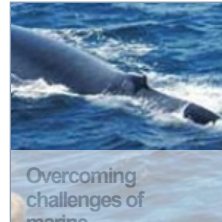
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